

Davitt, Michael

by Noel McLachlan

Davitt, Michael (1846–1906), radical nationalist, was born 25 March 1846 in Straide, Co. Mayo, to Martin Davitt and Catherine Davitt (née Kielty), small farmers. Martin had been an ardent O'Connellite and Ribbonman. Both parents were pious Catholics who spoke Irish at home, though only the father was literate – in English and Irish. The rich core of affection and high-mindedness Davitt inherited from both parents formed a central part of his own personality. In September 1850 they were evicted for non-payment of rent and their cottage was burned down. Catherine was particularly distraught and refused to go to the poorhouse when she learned Michael would be separated from her. Memories of that terrible day fuelled Davitt's lifelong sense of indignation and his exasperation at the Irish peasantry's abject failure to resist such treatment. Asked much later in a fascinating sixteen-question questionnaire for his idea of happiness, he replied: 'Ignorance of poverty or misery among men' (TCD MS 9344/454).

The Davitts followed neighbours to the small textile town of Haslingden in Lancashire where, aged eleven, Michael lost his right arm in a mill accident. His parish priest agreed to his attending the Methodist school, the town's best. There he flourished, adding evening classes at the mechanics' institute, where he read newspapers and books on Irish history. In 1861 he began working for Haslingden's postmaster/printer, and became particularly skilled at left-handed typesetting. A budding working-class intellectual, he was greatly influenced by a visit to Haslingden of the veteran English chartist Ernest Jones – 'the first man after my father whom I ever heard denouncing landlordism, not only in Ireland but in England' (Moody, 21), and arguing that the interests of Irish nationalism and British democracy were identical.

Fenian and prisoner In 1865, aged 19, Davitt joined the IRB. He quickly became 'centre' of the fifty-strong Rossendale circle, and in 1867 took a squad of young Haslingden Fenians to attack Chester castle; but the plot was betrayed, and they were lucky to get home safely. In 1868, ostensibly a pedlar, he was appointed IRB organising secretary and arms agent for England and Scotland. On 2 April 1870 he sent his parents to join his three sisters at Scranton, Pennsylvania, and on 14 May was arrested at Paddington railway station in London, carrying £153 to buy fifty pistols from Birmingham. He duly pleaded not guilty (as Fenian rules required), and on 18 July, after a widely reported, three-day trial at the Old Bailey, was sentenced to fifteen years' penal servitude for treason-felony; he declared that, if he ever regained his liberty, his services would be placed at Ireland's disposal.

After ten months at Millbank picking rope, he spent six and a half years at Dartmoor prison. Breaking stones and labouring outside in winter severely damaged his health, and he smuggled out a letter complaining of his treatment, which appeared

in Dublin's *Freeman's Journal* on 3 September 1872. Occasionally American papers came his way, and he learned of the amnesty committee, the formation of which he had secretly suggested. On 18 December 1877 he was released on ticket of leave and immediately elected to the IRB supreme council for the north of England. He and three released Fenian soldiers, including Colour-sergeant Charles Heapy McCarthy, were hailed as national heroes when they reached Dublin on Sunday 13 January 1878, and Davitt made his first speech, acknowledging the reception. At a hotel breakfast two days later, Sgt McCarthy collapsed and died. Only the Carmelite church in Clarendon St. would take his body, and the funeral procession to Glasnevin on 20 January was said to be the largest since O'Connell's (qv). McCarthy's death boosted the amnesty campaign; and on 7 March at a crowded meeting at St James's Hall, Piccadilly, to raise money for McCarthy's family and other freed Fenians, Davitt spoke and, despite some shyness, was received rapturously. His speech formed the basis of his first publication, the forty-page pamphlet *The life of Michael Davitt written by himself*. It was now clear he could make a living by political writing and public speaking, and he embarked on a successful lecture tour of England and Scotland. On 26 January he returned to Mayo, accepting the invitation of James Daly (qv) (d. 1911), editor of the *Connaught Telegraph* and champion of Mayo's small farmers, to stay with him at Castlebar. What Davitt saw in Mayo clearly confirmed his prison ponderings that only the land question could unite all shades of Irish nationalist opinion.

The 'new departure' Davitt's claim that he came out of Dartmoor with a plan to found the Land League was really retrospective wish-fulfilment. It was not until he met John Devoy (qv) after landing in New York (4 August 1878), in the first of ten American visits, that he was introduced to the credo of James Fintan Lalor (qv), 'The soil of Ireland for the people of Ireland', to be secured by a general rent strike. Davitt's public lectures for Clan na Gael were so successful that they were extended through New England and the Midwest. On 25 October Devoy published a cable in the New York *Herald*, intended for Charles Stewart Parnell (qv), promising Irish-American support for a more aggressive, non-sectarian parliamentary party embracing self-government and vigorous agitation for peasant proprietary. Davitt saw the huge political potential of this latest Fenian departure from contempt for parliamentary reform, which the Clan executive endorsed. However, Davitt failed to sell his 'new departure' to the IRB supreme council in Paris in January 1879. According to Devoy (there as special envoy), Charles Kickham (qv), the blind and deaf president, exasperated Davitt so much that he burst into tears and left the room (although Devoy's plying the teetotal Davitt with table wine may also have had some effect).

To organise opposition to Irish landlordism Davitt helped found the National Land League of Mayo at Castlebar on 16 August; its manifesto was drafted by Davitt and declared 'the land of Ireland belongs to the people of Ireland'. This followed three months of meetings throughout Connacht organised by Davitt, the largest the Irishtown rally on 20 April 1879, attracting c.7,000 farmers from all over Mayo and

beyond. Davitt persuaded Parnell to launch the Land League at the Imperial Hotel, Sackville St., Dublin, on 21 October. Parnell, the only protestant on the executive, was elected president, with Davitt one of three unpaid secretaries. The seven-man executive bravely blended Fenians and militant home rule MPs, while its committee of fifty-four comprised an imposing miscellany of Irish nationalists, newspaper editors, and catholic priests. From December Davitt organised local branches and addressed meetings. By February 1881, he proudly recalled in 1902, there were 1,000 branches with c.200,000 members – tidy figures but uncheckable. On 14 March 1880 he organised a meeting in Phoenix Park, Dublin, to demonstrate the community of interest between urban workers and farmers, and attracted perhaps 7,000.

In 1889 Davitt told the *Times*–Parnell commission that he had rejoined the IRB in 1878 ‘to convert it into a movement of open and constitutional action’, but he had apparently stopped attending their meetings from autumn 1879 and was expelled from the supreme council on 8 May 1880. Yet there was always ambiguity in his attitude to violence as a last resort. He carefully emphasised the importance of avoiding violence in resisting unfair rents, and, though he did not invent the phrase ‘passive resistance’, he popularised it long before Arthur Griffith (qv) or Gandhi. But he did not disdain secretly resuming the import of arms for hard-pressed tenants, even claiming privately in February 1880 to have directed their use. This was probably to make sure the peasantry had the wherewithal to resist intimidation by police or army rather than to engineer the outright revolution that many Irish and American Fenians hoped for. On 19 November 1879 he was arrested for having used seditious language at a land meeting at Gurteen, Co. Sligo, but the trial was abandoned.

The League's impact was already clear in the triumph of Parnellites in the April 1880 general election, and Davitt also encouraged the League to contest elections for poor law guardians. He believed strongly in the importance of advertising the League abroad. On 10 February 1880, returning from a few days in Paris, he and Patrick Egan (qv), the treasurer, were delegates in London at the first meeting of Charles Bradlaugh's Land Law Reform Association, which expressed warm English sympathy with the Irish National Land League. Davitt's ‘Appeal to the Irish race’ of September 1879 was a manifesto mainly for Americans, and his regular pieces in Patrick Ford's (qv) *Irish World* and John Boyle O'Reilly's (qv) *Boston Pilot* from October 1879 provided both useful publicity and much-needed personal income. From 19 May 1880 he skilfully directed the League's activities on both sides of the Atlantic for six months from his office in Washington Square, New York, as elected secretary of the ‘Irish National Land and Industrial League of the United States’ reinforced by a twelve-week tour as far west as California.

His mother's sudden death at Manayunk on 18 July 1880 left him wracked with guilt, as he had earlier been at his father's death in December 1871: Davitt blamed himself for forcing them into exile. ‘What a miserable life mine has been no one knows but

myself' he told his diary (DN/7, 18–20 July), which he kept fairly regularly from 1878. He paid her funeral expenses and debts, but apparently could not afford to take her remains home to Ireland.

The crisis of 1881–2 Davitt was back in Dublin on 22 November 1880 and full of optimism. On 16 December he boasted to Devoy that the League now virtually ruled Ireland, with league courts, nearly 200,000 members, organisers in all four provinces, and an income of £100 a day. In response, Gladstone's government promised both repression and remedies, and on 24 January 1881 the chief secretary, W. E. Forster (qv), introduced a coercion bill to arrest 'village tyrants' without trial. Davitt proposed a general rent strike and the setting up of a national convention in Dublin by the Irish parliamentary party, but found little support.

With their arrest imminent, on 26 January Davitt induced the executive to create the Ladies' Irish National Land League, despite strong opposition from Parnell, John Dillon (qv) (1851–1927), and Thomas Brennan (qv) (now full-time secretary). One of the first Irish women's political organisations, it was led by Parnell's younger sister Anna (qv). On 2 February, after a speech at Kilbrin, Co. Cork, warning of 'the wolfdog of Irish vengeance' bounding over the Atlantic, Davitt's ticket of leave was revoked, and he was sent to Portland prison, Dorset. However, this time he was given a warm, well-lighted cell in the infirmary, books – even the memoirs of Wolfe Tone (qv) – and writing paper. Here he began drafting on 12 September the 'Jottings in solitary' which grew into *Leaves from a prison diary; or, Lectures to a 'solitary' audience* (2 vols, 1885). Addressed to his pet blackbird Joe, it was his first and most original book, free from passionate polemics, providing an interesting analysis of Dartmoor criminals, rare prison memoirs, and an exploration of social evils.

Not permitted newspapers or letters, he was virtually oblivious of events outside – apparently even of the Land League's suppression on 20 October 1881 and his own election, unopposed, for Co. Meath on 22 February 1882 (overturned because he was a convict). Nor did he hear of the 'Kilmainham treaty' until Parnell, Dillon and J. J. O'Kelly (qv) (1845–1906) collected him on 6 May 1882 with the astonishing news that he could thank the treaty for a new ticket of leave, and that land agitation was to be ended in return for an amendment of the recent land act. Returning to London in high spirits, their joy was shattered within hours by news of the Invincibles' assassination of the new chief secretary, Lord Frederick Cavendish (qv), and the under-secretary, T. H. Burke (qv). 'My God! Have I got out of Portland for this? For the first time in my life I despair' (Henry George, jr, *Life of Henry George* (1900), 373). Davitt immediately denounced this 'horrible deed' in a manifesto signed with Parnell and Dillon. He was interviewed on 11 May by Howard Vincent of the CID, who reported that Davitt declared he was no longer a Fenian and was prepared to assist the authorities by every means in his power; he believed his own life was in danger and that only imprisonment had saved him from assassination.

His campaign to save the Land League failed, despite desperately mustering support in America in June/July for a broader 'National Land and Industrial Union of Ireland'. This carried no weight with Parnell, who took ruthless advantage of Davitt's conversion to land nationalisation, which he had rashly announced in Liverpool on 6 June. This was the fruit of Henry George's *Progress and poverty*, which he read four times, and discussions with George on the land question. Parnell invited Davitt to his Avondale estate in Co. Wicklow, along with Dillon and Brennan, on 13 September 1882 and adroitly engineered the 'Avondale treaty'. It was Davitt's last chance to reassert his old authority, but he was outmanoeuvred by Parnell. Davitt agreed to a new body, the National League, which was supposed to embody a compromise on land policy, but allowed Parnell to define this in the programme. Above all, he failed to have its council made a wholly elected body. The sequel to this phase of his career, however, was not entirely an anti-climax: he was always busy, in five main areas.

Attacks on landlordism These continued for the rest of Davitt's life, even after the arrears act of 18 August 1882 (amending the 1881 land act) enabled the poorest tenants to have their rents fixed by the land courts. An 'inflammatory speech' at Navan on 26 November 1882 earned him another seventeen weeks' imprisonment – his only spell in an Irish gaol, Richmond bridewell – after refusing to pay recognisances of £1,100 for twelve months' good behaviour.

1887 was a particularly turbulent year with 3,869 evictions, and Davitt joined the Plan of Campaign launched by Dillon, T. C. Harrington (qv) and William O'Brien (qv), to force rent abatement on landlords after shrinking agricultural prices increased the burden of land court rents. In December 1886 during his fourth American tour he married Mary Yore of St Joseph, Michigan, 'a nice quiet little girl . . . 24, slightly built, not handsome, but good looking enough for me . . . She is a very religious and retiring girl and I am satisfied she will make me a very good little wife' (8 Oct. 1886, 62/1). Since she was portionless, Davitt allowed her to accept, as a £400 wedding gift from friends, the 'Land League Cottage' at Ballybrack, south Co. Dublin; for the queen's Golden Jubilee she fashioned a banner reading 'Evictoria' to hang over the front door. In intellect and beauty she was no match for his cousin Beatrice Walshe, foundation member of the Ladies' Land League, to whom Devoy claimed Davitt had been engaged. But Mary provided Davitt with the warm nest of catholic home life and affection he had not enjoyed since childhood, together with five children. Occasionally she helped in the campaign. Returning with him on 24 July to distribute medals and money rewards at Bodyke in Co. Clare, where on 2 June he had wished to God 'we had the . . . weapons by which freemen in America and elsewhere have struck down tyranny' (*Freeman's Journal*, 3 June 1887), Mary eloquently rejected the Ennis magistrate's claim that the women he sent to prison had acted in an 'unwomanly' manner: 'Surely women are never more true to the instincts of our sex than when they stand up in defence of the homestead wherein their greatest influence may be said to lie' (*Irish Times*, 25 July 1887).

Davitt's judicious, seven-day defence of himself and the Land League before the 'Parnellism and crime' commission (24–31 October 1889) was outstanding (published as *The defence of the Land League* (1891)). The president, Sir James Hannen, congratulated him on putting his arguments 'with great force and ability'.

On 25 October 1889 he joined the council of the Tenants' Defence Association, formed to continue the Plan of Campaign against organised landlord resistance. This struggle continued during the 1890s, and Davitt joined O'Brien's United Irish League, launched on 23 January 1898 at Westport, Co. Mayo, to redistribute large estates to small tillage farmers. He became one of the League's stalwarts and its president for Connacht. Efforts by Healyite priests to prevent the election of UIL candidates in the first elections under the Local Government (Ireland) Act, 1898, contributed to his growing exasperation with the church. In 1900 he secured the election for Mayo South of John O'Donnell, the imprisoned UIL secretary, ahead of Cumann na nGaedheal's Maj. John MacBride (qv).

Davitt regarded the 1903 (Wyndham) land bill as the latest tory plot for killing home rule with kindness; his last pamphlet, *Some suggestions on a final settlement of the land question* (October 1902), complained it was over-generous to landlords, and that the UIL constitution required *compulsory* purchase for agricultural labourers and town workers (two groups often neglected by the land movement). Yet, always a democrat, he accepted the overwhelming support for the bill at the national convention in April. His last and longest book (752 pages) was *The fall of feudalism, or the story of the Land League revolution*, published in May 1904. In it he warmly saluted Anna Parnell's 'thorough revolutionary spirit' and was astonished when she accused him of 'several wanton, malicious, and impudent libels on me'. But he did not live to see her jaundiced, 70,000-word 'The tale of a great sham', serialised in O'Brien's *Irish Peasant* a year after his death, which rubbished his book as 'one of the greatest acts of treachery known in the published history of the world' (*The tale of a great sham*, ed. Dana Hearne (1986), 23, 25, 27, 32).

Journalism and trade unionism Davitt still depended precariously on freelancing for a living, and in October 1883 added Joseph Winter's Melbourne Catholic *Advocate* to the five American and one Canadian newspaper he wrote for. Despite financial difficulties he resisted all proposals to pay him a tribute, noting in his diary: 'If human happiness is at all attainable in this world, it is by disowning & not receiving favours. Ireland shall owe me – and not me Ireland' (6 May 1884, 9441/2). He set off with Baedeker guidebooks on a two-year tour of the Continent and beyond and, after visiting Louis Kossuth (a childhood hero) in Turin, attended two special masses conducted by the pope in the Sistine chapel, though the British embassy ensured he did not receive a private audience. He got as far as Egypt and Palestine, where he entered Jerusalem on horseback on Palm Sunday.

On 26 September 1890 in London he launched *Labour World* as a sequel to the halfpenny weekly *Democrat* which he, Helen Taylor (John Stuart Mill's

stepdaughter), and William Saunders had published in London from October 1884. *Labour World* was a pioneering penny weekly, which assembled labour news worldwide, and its second issue sold 60,000 copies. Davitt told Archbishop Thomas Croke (qv) that only the Parnell split, which led him to turn it into a strongly anti-Parnellite organ, had ruined it. A devout catholic, Davitt had become alienated from Parnell, who had lied to him about the affair with Katherine O'Shea and his editorial of 22 November, advising Parnell to retire temporarily, went unheeded. On 25 April 1891 H. W. Massingham succeeded him as editor, and in May Davitt tried to get to Australia, taking his family as far as California, but in the end settling for lectures in America and Canada.

He also found time for other interests, such as sport. On 1 November 1884 he became with Parnell and Croke a founding patron of the GAA, and wrote the preface to the GAA rule book (1888). On 20 March 1892 he laid a fresh sod of Donegal shamrocks at the opening of Glasgow Celtic's new stadium, and became a club patron and occasionally an enthusiastic spectator at Celtic Park. He was also active in trade unionism in Ireland and Britain, notably the 1889 Liverpool dock strike, and helped organise the first Irish trade union congress in 1894. He also took the 1898 centenary of the 1798 rebellion very seriously and, when Mary's inheritance arrived, contributed more than half the cost (£100) and the solemn inscription on the memorial to the martyrs of 1798 unveiled outside Dublin's old Newgate prison on 4 August 1904.

In 1895 he was exhausted by an eight-and-a-half-month tour (with his Kodak camera) of Australia and New Zealand. He gave seventy lectures, some to Irish bush audiences as small as 400, in contrast to the tens of thousands he recalled addressing in Trafalgar Square with John Burns. Warmly welcomed everywhere, he was excited by the world's first labour parties in 'the most progressive countries in the world' and by Irish successes in colonial farming and politics.

However, money still worried him, especially after suffering bankruptcy in 1892–4, until Mary's wealthy Californian aunt helped them financially after Davitt's rash attempt to become a London mine agent in 1896–7; in 1904, when he was contemplating migrating in despair to America, Mary's aunt bequeathed her £90,000, though 'the priests' apparently got £60,000. 'Thus all my family are now well provided for, and I feel a free man for the first time in my life' (H. M. Hyndman, *Further reminiscences* (1912), 56).

Home rule and parliament Davitt's parliamentary career began with his maiden speech (at 46) on 11 April 1893 during the second reading of Gladstone's second home rule bill. On 15 February 1886 (the year he also became a Dublin sheriff) he voted for home rule as a member of Dublin corporation, but in 1887 told Wilfrid Blunt (qv) he was keeping out of parliament, not only because he could not hold his tongue about land nationalisation, but because he declined to take the oath of allegiance. That had not, however, stopped him from swapping abuse with Parnell in

two by-elections, having been appointed secretary of the New National Federation (10 March 1891), nor from contesting and narrowly losing on 23 December a bitter Waterford city by-election against John Redmond (qv). Even when he was elected for Meath North in July 1892, he was unseated after costly court proceedings found clerical interference by Bishop Thomas Nulty (qv).

Having taken the oath of allegiance in February 1893 after his election for Cork North-East, he contributed an impressive speech (twenty-one columns in Hansard) to the marathon home rule debate. But his triumph was short-lived. His insolvency in May obliged him to resign from parliament. An undischarged bankrupt until June 1894, he managed to pay debts totalling £1,800, apparently with Croke's help. Compared to middle-class colleagues, his nationalism had already cost him dearly, though he must have enjoyed Edna Lyall's rapt celebration of him in her novel *Doreen: the story of a singer* (1894).

In 1895 he was again elected, while in Australia, to two seats – Kerry East and Mayo South – ‘without my leave’. He sold Land League Cottage (‘this costly white elephant’) and moved his family to 67 Park Road, Battersea, London. Still as energetic, persistent and outspoken as ever, he became virtually the parliamentary conscience of the whole British empire. Justin McCarthy (qv) judged him a very successful parliamentarian, much admired for his ‘sweet and courteous manners and [his] unpretentious disinterestedness’ (*Reminiscences* (1899), 405). T. P. O'Connor (qv) agreed: ‘A soft rich voice, a manner well controlled, a moderation of stating his case, a careful arrangement of all material he comes down with. He is listened to eagerly whenever he rises’ (*T. P.'s Weekly*, cited in *Advocate* (Melbourne), 1 Oct. 1904, 7).

In 1898 Davitt spoke 176 times in the house, usually briefly, with succinct questions on many topics (double the score of the voluble Tim Healy (qv)), including the fate of imprisoned and exiled nationalists across the globe. Dr Sun Yat-sen thanked him (from Tokyo) for asking on 5 April 1898 about his banishment from Hong Kong.

The agreement over the Venezuela–British Guinea border signed in September 1896 evidently owed something to him. But the Anglo–American treaty of February 1897 for compulsory arbitration of unresolved disputes was another matter; in April 1897 Davitt rushed over to America, rousing Irish-American objections and persuading the senate not to ratify it.

In May 1897 Oscar Wilde (qv), who asked Davitt to write a preface to *The ballad of Reading gaol*, thanked him for raising questions about his prison conditions in a letter to the *Daily Chronicle* (27 May 1897): ‘No one knows better than yourself how terrible life is in an English prison’ (Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (ed.), *Complete letters of Oscar Wilde* (2000), 870–71). Davitt's outstanding parliamentary triumph was the 1898 prisons bill. On 28 March he scathingly denounced its ‘small and timid spirit of progress’ (*Hansard* 4, lv, col. 1185). His resolution reinforced by

meeting Irish political prisoners at Dartmoor and Portland over Easter weekend, he persuaded the commons to make several important amendments, including adding a doctor skilled in mental disease to the prison commission. T. P. O'Connor credited Davitt with passing the amended bill, and congratulated him on taking so noble a revenge for many years of suffering, noting that it 'will have the effect of destroying for ever the system of scientific suffering in our prisons' (*Hansard 4*, lvi, col. 55) For once, Davitt admitted satisfaction with his actions.

He supported Dillon's election to leadership of the Irish party on 18 February, and helped him organise the Irish Race Convention 1–3 September 1897, though it failed to cement party unity. In 1898 his *Life and progress in Australasia* was published to mostly rave reviews. In the London *Sunday Weekly Sun* O'Connor hoped that the 'extreme and almost morbid self-distrust' (20 Feb. 1895, 46), which he believed had inhibited Davitt's development and prosperity, would be cured by the book's success but, in the event, its sales were disappointing.

South Africa On 8 June 1899 Davitt delivered a precocious onslaught on British war crimes at Omdurman, claiming that after the battle Sudanese and Egyptian soldiers under British officers had slaughtered women and children in the nearby town. Over the next four months he watched with dismay as the British government prepared for war in South Africa. Finally, when the appropriation bill was debated on 25 October 1899, Davitt announced his resignation from the house in protest, claiming that the war 'would rank in history as the greatest crime of the nineteenth century' (*Hansard 4*, lxxvii, col. 614–22). A member of the Irish Transvaal Committee, at a rally of over 20,000 in Beresford Place, Dublin, on 1 October he had denounced Britain's desire to 'gobble up the two little republics'. Covering the war for Hearst's *New York Journal* and other American papers and the Dublin *Freeman's Journal* from the Boer side, he regularly denounced British cruelty and duplicity. In contrast, he was profoundly impressed by Boer military courage: 'this deep, all-pervading love of liberty and country, and hatred of oppression . . . made the war the most memorable ever fought for nationality and freedom' (*The Boer fight for freedom*, v). Davitt was home in July 1900, writing *The Boer fight for freedom* in response to Conan Doyle's *The great Boer war*. By now his alienation from English society was complete. In 1898 he had already told the *New York Herald* that all his ties, except birth and politics, were American. His parents were buried there, and his wife was American; 'my children are now in America, and my only regret is that my two boys are not old enough to fight for Old Glory' (*New York Herald*, 15 Jan. 1898).

Russia, anti-Semitism, and Tolstoy On 10 May 1903 Hearst's *New York Journal* urgently asked Davitt to investigate the recent massacre at Kishinev in Bessarabia and the recrudescence of Russian anti-Semitism. Davitt's investigations led to his *Within the pale: the true story of anti-Semitic persecution in Russia* (1903). After his arrival in New York with his family in 1904, Hearst immediately invited him to visit Russia again. On 9 June he met Tolstoy, who congratulated him on going to prison for Irish tenants. They found they had much in common – especially

admiration for Henry George and for Australian and New Zealand democracy. They met again six months later when Davitt returned to report on the 1905 revolution. Tolstoy, who admired Davitt's naturalness and honesty, warmly welcomed him and informed him that Russia wanted economic rather than political revolution, brought about 'by sacrifice such as Mr Dayvitt [sic] has made'. Asked by Tolstoy about his religious beliefs, Davitt replied: 'I'm a free catholic, recognising neither the pope nor the priests' (Dusan Makovicky, *Yasnaya Polyana notes*, Literary Heritage Series, xc, book 1 (Moscow, 1979), 139–40). In the last months of his life his relations with the catholic hierarchy were severely strained by his bitter quarrel with Bishop Thomas Edward O'Dwyer (qv) of Limerick over education, and his conviction that universal free and secular education in America was 'the best all-round plan yet devised' (*Freeman's Journal*, 22 Jan. 1906).

His efforts early in 1906 to establish a new paper, the *Irish Democrat*, were interrupted by illness after a dental operation. Blood poisoning set in and he died just after midnight, on 31 May 1906 at Lower Mount St. private hospital, Dublin. He was taken the same day to St Teresa's, the Carmelite church that had accepted McCarthy's remains twenty-eight years previously, and over 200,000 people shuffled past his coffin to pay their respects.

Reputation Davitt died with his dogged optimism about home rule reinforced by the Liberal/Labour landslide in the January 1906 election, when he finally made peace with Keir Hardie (speaking for him at Merthyr), after their long alienation over Parnell, and over Davitt's dependence on the Liberals. But he had also spoken, among many others, for John Burns and Henry Hyndman, who were not in the Labour Representation Committee, even threatening to resign from the nationalist party if it opposed Hyndman. Davitt joined in the great victory celebration at Queen's Hall on 16 February. Hardie called him 'a thoroughly good and great man' and declared that 'the people of Ireland owe more to him than to any of the rebel chiefs of their race'. In the marvellous letter which Arthur Griffith published after the *Freeman's Journal* rejected it, Francis Sheehy-Skeffington (qv) argued that Davitt was in some respects even greater than Parnell: 'Greater in his comprehensive sympathy with the oppressed all the world over . . . greater in the untarnished selfishness of his devotion to his country's cause; greater, above all, is his absolute sincerity and straightforwardness' (*Sinn Féin*, 9 June 1906). The *Manchester Guardian* credited him with bringing 'a great motive force' to Irish politics; his foundation of the Land League 'meant nothing less than the reconstruction of a whole society' (31 May 1905).

In his will (1 February 1904) Davitt left all his property to his wife, and stipulated that he be buried at Straide 'without any funeral demonstration'. That did not prevent a procession over a mile long to the old graveyard, with prayers but no oration and no sign of senior clergy. It was a unique Irish funeral for a unique Irishman. He stipulated that his diaries were only to be published with his wife's permission and that nothing 'harsh or censorious, written in them about any person, dead or alive,

who has ever worked for Ireland, be printed, published or used, so as to pain any friend or relative. To all my friends I leave kind thoughts; to my enemies the fullest possible forgiveness, and to Ireland the undying prayer for the absolute freedom and independence which it was my life's ambition to try and obtain for her' (*Freeman's Journal*, 1 June 1906).

An oil portrait by William Orpen (qv) is in Dublin City Gallery the Hugh Lane, and his black chalk sketch in the NGI. Apart from the diaries, Davitt kept a huge collection of letters, as well as thirty-three volumes of press cuttings and illustrations, added to by Mary, who sought original copies of his correspondence with many people, Dillon included. Their survival is due to three of their five children, Eileen Davitt (1892–1974), a schoolteacher, Dr Robert Emmet Davitt (1899–1981), and Cahir Davitt (qv), president of the high court, who deposited them with TCD in 1978. His other children were Kathleen (1888–95) and Michael (1890–1928), a sponsor of the Irish National Aid Association in 1916.

Davitt papers, TCD; Francis Sheehy Skeffington, *Michael Davitt; revolutionary, agitator, and labour leader* (1908); Valeria Emmanuilovna Kunina, *Maikl Devitt, syn irlandskogo naroda: stranitsy i borby* (Moscow, 1973); T. W. Moody, *Davitt and Irish revolution 1846–82* (1981) (photos); John Dunleavy, *Michael Davitt and Haslingden* (1997); Carla King, *Michael Davitt* (1999); Sean McConville, *Irish political prisoners, 1848–1922* (2003); outline family tree of the Davitt family, 1796–2000, compiled by Patrick M. Davitt; assistance from Fr Thomas Davitt, C.M.