Duffy, Sir Charles Gavan

by Patrick Maume

Duffy, Sir Charles Gavan (1816–1903), politician and journalist, was born in Monaghan town on 12 April 1816, the sixth and youngest child of John Duffy (d. 1827), a shopkeeper and former United Irishman, and his wife, Anne (née Gavan).

**Formative years** After the premature deaths of his parents Duffy was brought up by a local parish priest; his three elder brothers died in the 1830s. For much of his life Duffy suffered from lung ailments, and as a young man feared that he might have inherited from his mother a tendency to tuberculosis. Duffy's youth was dominated by a sense that he and his fellow catholics were a dispossessed and downtrodden people; he listened to stories of oppression and bloodshed, and witnessed Orange demonstrations, at one of which a catholic was shot dead in broad daylight, the killers going unpunished. This made a permanent impression on Duffy; he later recalled that until he befriended the journalist Thomas Davis (qv) he was 'a patriot of the school of Rory O'Moore', identifying Irishness with the Celtic race and the catholic religion. He maintained a lifelong fascination with the 1641 rising, and at one time hoped to write a history of it. His poem 'The muster of the north', published in *The spirit of The Nation* (1843), was accused by numerous British commentators of justifying the massacre of planters in 1641, if not actually advocating its repetition; Duffy pointed out that it was a dramatic monologue in which the speaker's views are distanced from those of the author.

Duffy was educated at a local 'poor school' run by a teacher called Neil Quin, before becoming the only catholic pupil at a classical academy in Monaghan run by a presbyterian minister named Bleakley. He became Monaghan correspondent for the Belfast-based Northern Herald owned by Charles Hamilton Teeling (qv), and in April 1836 went to Dublin to work as a trainee journalist on the O'Connellite Dublin Morning Register. He was depressed by the cynicism of his journalistic colleagues and the failure of Daniel O'Connell (qv) to measure up to the idealised image he had formed of him. But he seized the opportunities offered by the capital for self-education through libraries, and developed a circle of stimulating friends. He enrolled at King’s Inns in 1839 and was called to the bar in 1845 though he never practised. While visiting London, nominally to attend a legal institution, which all Irish trainee barristers were then required to do, he met Thomas Carlyle with whom he long maintained an acquaintance, which he later recorded in *My conversations with Carlyle* (1892).

**Journalism** In May 1839 Duffy became founding editor of the *Belfast Vindicator*, a populist bi-weekly, which demanded a greater municipal role for Belfast catholics and accused the Ulster liberals associated with the *Northern Whig* newspaper of using catholics for their own political ends while nursing feelings of superiority and
granting them little or no political influence. Duffy pioneered in the *Vindicator* the type of popular political verse later associated with the *Nation*. Its voicing of repressed catholic grievances won the paper a healthy circulation of 1,300; Duffy bought out the owners and became proprietor in November 1839. O'Connell praised Duffy's criticisms of the *Northern Whig* (whose proprietors he described as ‘mongrels’, who, as they boasted descent from a Cromwellian drummer-boy, should ‘go back’ to Britain if they refused to call themselves Irish); he was less amused when Duffy attacked the O'Connellite *Newry Telegraph*.

Duffy helped to organise O'Connell's visit to Belfast in January 1841 to reinforce his claim that all reformers should be repealers; O'Connell had to travel in disguise for fear of hostile mobs and was accused of cowardice when he declined a challenge to debate with Henry Cooke (qv), whom Duffy compared to the serpents expelled by St Patrick (qv). Duffy declared that the mere fact that O'Connell had appeared in Belfast and left safely constituted a triumph; O'Connell was less sanguine. In June 1842 Duffy was convicted of seditious libel for contrasting the acquittal of Downpatrick Orangemen for killing a catholic with the execution of an Armagh catholic for killing an Orangeman; he avoided imprisonment by making a formal apology. During his residence in Belfast, Duffy studied philosophy at the RBAI.

Duffy now formed the ambition of founding a new nationalist paper in Dublin, and his intention was crystallised in the summer of 1842 during discussions with Thomas Davis and John Blake Dillon (qv). In the autumn of 1842 he sold the *Vindicator*, and the *Nation* first appeared on 15 October 1842. It was an instant success. Duffy primarily concerned himself with the managerial side of the new paper, installing Davis as chief leader-writer. They differed on certain issues: Davis supported O'Connell's attempt to form an alliance with the Ulster-based federalist movement, which Duffy publicly denounced as a betrayal of repeal; and after Davis's death Duffy was hurt to discover that his friend had privately believed him to lack the sense of an all-embracing Irish nationality that Davis had found in some of his Trinity College contemporaries. Nevertheless, they became intimate friends and, in his biography of Davis (*Thomas Davis: the memoirs of an Irish patriot, 1840–1846*, 1890), Duffy declared his friend the finest man he had ever known or hoped to know. Duffy's social commerce with his contributors (he had an eye for unrecognised talent) did much to shape the paper's sense of collective identity. Duffy also oversaw the publication of the Library of Ireland, a series of short patriotic works intended for popular circulation.

**Young Ireland politics** After O'Connell called off the Clontarf meeting in October 1843, Duffy was one of the ‘traversers’ arrested with him for seditious conspiracy. He was tried in January–February 1844, sentenced to nine months' imprisonment (from May 1844), fined £50, and compelled to provide securities for good behaviour. However, the traversers were released from their (relatively comfortable) imprisonment in September when the house of lords overturned the verdict. Thereafter, tensions increased between O'Connell and the Young Irelanders, who
looked with suspicion on his growing rapprochement with the whigs and became caught up in the rivalry between William Smith O'Brien (qv) and John O'Connell (qv) over the succession to the leadership. Duffy regarded O'Connell's unrequited love for the young Ulster presbyterian Rose McDowell as evidence of senility.

Davis died in September 1845 and a few weeks later Duffy's first wife, Emily McLaughlin, whom he had married only in 1842, also died; he was almost prostrated by these twin blows, and was also depressed by the ill health of a number of his contemporaries. He recruited John Mitchel (qv) to replace Davis as leader-writer of the Nation. Mitchel contributed to the growing tension between O'Connell and the Young Irelanders by publishing an editorial suggesting that if railways were used in an attempt to suppress the repeal movement by military means, repeal wardens should organise the derailing of troop trains. Duffy (who took responsibility for the article) was prosecuted in June 1846, but the jury disagreed after Duffy's counsel, Robert Holmes (qv), argued that the article referred only to a hypothetical situation in which the people would be entitled to resist an unjust attempt to deprive them of their liberties.

After the final breach between Young Ireland and O'Connell in June 1846 Duffy emerged as principal adviser to Smith O'Brien. In January 1847 he founded and oversaw the growth of a separate political organisation, the Confederate Clubs. Mitchel's support for James Fintan Lalor (qv) in his advocacy of an agrarian revolution (combined with his belief in slavery and hostility to Jewish emancipation) led to a breach in December 1847, when Mitchel departed to set up his own paper, the United Irishman. The French revolution of February 1848 brought about a temporary reconciliation, associated with the hope that the overthrow of the existing Irish ancien régime might be possible. In private, however, Duffy and O'Brien regarded Mitchel and Lalor as potential Robespierres who, in the event of a revolution, might treat the moderate wing of Young Ireland as the Jacobins had treated the Girondins; they hoped to persuade the Irish upper and middle classes to side with the revolution in sufficient numbers to retain control of it.

Despite the intense interest in Ireland and abroad in Mitchel's conviction for treason on 26 May 1848 and his sentence to transportation, Duffy opposed the idea of making this the occasion for a rising, since no preparations had been made. Instead, he attempted to secure arms and get the clubs to drill, while preparing for a possible rising after the harvest. On 9 July 1848 Duffy was arrested for sedition as a result of publishing a manifesto The creed of ‘The Nation': a profession of confederate principles, in which he advocated an independent Ireland joined to Britain only by the crown, and suggested that if this was not conceded peacefully it might be gained by force. Duffy continued to edit the Nation from prison, but handed control to Margaret Callan (qv), who continued to publish it until its suppression on 28 July. Duffy's imprisonment kept him from participation in Smith O'Brien's abortive insurrection, but the prosecution at the trial of the rebel leaders presented him as having seduced O'Brien into treason. Duffy's trial was delayed by changes of venue and uncertainty
over the exact charge to be brought against him. His first trial on 15 February 1849 ended in a hung jury; the jury at his retrial in April 1849 also disagreed, and Duffy was released, though he had to pay crippling legal costs. He thus became the only major Young Ireland leader to escape imprisonment and remain in Ireland.

In September 1849 Duffy refounded the Nation; it never achieved its former circulation, and came under attack from Mitchelite and chartist rivals (notably the Irishman, run by a former Nation employee, Bernard Fullam), which denounced him as a middle-class whig and deserter of the separatist cause. Duffy had decided that under current circumstances repeal was no longer practical politics: indeed, some of his immediate post-famine writings display a bitter feeling that the famine had reduced the Irish peasantry to the lowest depths of degradation and are haunted by the possibility that their failure to rise up in 1848 showed that the country was past saving. In 1852 the publication of Mitchel's Jail journal, which accused Duffy of abasing himself before the government to escape conviction and called him 'Mr Give-in Duffy', led to a bitter journalistic exchange between the two men, in which surviving Young Irelanders were enlisted to take sides. Duffy established that Mitchel had neglected to make preparations for a rising while exaggerating its chances of success and that Mitchel himself was the author of certain Nation articles for whose sentiments he had denounced Duffy; he also accused Mitchel of personal dishonesty in breaking his parole and escaping from Tasmania.

Land reform With the former Young Irelander Maurice Leyne (qv) as his right-hand man, Duffy sought a new route to bringing about Irish reforms. It was his intention to link the tenant-right agitation stimulated by the post-famine clearances to his own project of creating an Irish parliamentary party that would function independently of British parties and use its influence to secure change in Ireland. He acquired the support of some Ulster protestant tenant reformers, notably Sharman Crawford (qv) and James McKnight (qv), and in August 1850 he and Frederick Lucas (qv) were prime movers in setting up a tenant-right conference in Dublin that founded the Irish Tenant League. Duffy hailed the alliance (in retrospect) as 'the League of North and South' and to promote his ends he engaged in such conciliatory gestures as staying at an inn owned by a son of the murderous Orange leader Sam Gray (qv) when he visited Ballybay on League business. Although Duffy hoped that the League would displace existing MPs, it instead allied itself with a group of Irish MPs who had rebelled against the whig government over the Ecclesiastical Titles Act (1851).

In the 1852 general election Duffy became MP for New Ross; however, his speeches made little impact on parliament and he was absent for long periods through ill health. The Ulster wing of the League failed to win any seats. Tensions arose over the decision of Crawford and McKnight to support the decision of John Sadleir (qv) and William Keogh (qv) to take office under Lord Aberdeen, and they finally broke with Duffy and the Independent Irish Party (IIP) after quarrelling with Lucas (to Duffy's regret). Further difficulties were caused by the active hostility of Archbishop Paul Cullen (qv), who equated Duffy with the Italian nationalist Mazzini,
his clerical allies with the Garibaldian Fr Gavazzi, and Young Ireland with the Italian revolutionaries of 1848. Cullen encouraged disciplinary sanctions against priests who campaigned for the IIP and is believed to have prevented John Henry Newman (qv) from appointing Duffy professor of modern history in the Catholic University.

Faced with the ongoing disintegration of the IIP, and suffering from financial and health problems, Duffy decided to resign his seat, sell the *Nation*, and emigrate to Australia. The *Nation* was acquired by a group among whom A. M. Sullivan (qv) – the main spokesman of the younger generation for O'Brien's and Duffy's conservative Young Irelandism – emerged as the leading figure. Duffy publicly praised Sullivan as a worthy inheritor, but a letter published – by inadvertence or otherwise – in Duffy's memoirs shows that he privately believed the paper deteriorated under Sullivan's editorship. The *Nation* of 18 August 1855 published Duffy's final message to his New Ross constituents, stating that until circumstances changed there was no more hope for the Irish cause than for a corpse on the dissecting table. (This famous phrase, quoted out of context, gave many contemporary and later commentators the mistaken impression that Duffy regarded the defeat of Irish nationalism as permanent rather than temporary.) The cessation of Duffy's memoir with his departure gives the impression that the IIP vanished at the same time. In fact it survived until 1859 and historians continue to debate how far he was justified in blaming its demise on Cullen: J. H. Whyte (qv) criticises Duffy's interpretation while Steven Knowlton supports it.

Australia Tired of politics, Duffy went to Australia with the intention of practising law, but he was courted by the Liberal Party and was soon drawn once again into political life. In 1857 he was elected to the first parliament of Victoria on the introduction of representative government. His parliamentary experience gave him an important role in educating his new colleagues on procedure. He was in charge of the land department in the 1858–9 and 1861–3 governments of John O'Shanassay (qv); his 1862 Land Act encouraged small farmers ('selectors') to acquire landholdings, but its impact was limited by poor drafting, which allowed 'squatters' (large landowners) to acquire land by putting up 'men of straw' as selectors, and by Duffy's failure to realise the difference between the land hunger of the Irish peasantry and the speculative outlook of many Australian settlers. His ministerial service qualified him for a pension of £1,000 p.a., which gave him financial security for the remainder of his life. In 1867 Duffy helped to found the *Melbourne Advocate*. He was also a trustee of the Melbourne Museum and Art Gallery, and acquired artworks for it during his later residence in Europe.

In 1871–2 Duffy was briefly prime minister of Victoria in uneasy alliance with protectionist radicals – Duffy himself was a free-trader – but his government fell on the issue of catholic education, which Duffy favoured (his earlier support for the queen's colleges in Ireland had rested on expediency rather than on any principled hostility to denominational education). Duffy served as speaker of the parliament of Victoria 1877–80. He received a knighthood (commander of the Order of St
Michael and St George) in 1873, and a KCMG in 1877. In Victoria politics Duffy had a secure base of support among the Irish (though his position was disputed by the O'Connellite and increasingly conservative O'Shanassy, who even convinced himself that Duffy had been an informer in 1848), but his influence was limited by his catholicism (which aroused vicious and persistent opposition), his adherence to metropolitan liberal principles, and his prickly and self-righteous personality. He was an advocate of Australian federation, and later felt that his contribution to this cause had been overlooked. His sons by his first two marriages made their careers in Australia: John Gavan Duffy (1844–1917) became a provincial cabinet minister and Sir Frank Gavan Duffy (1852–1936) was Australian chief justice.

Retirement, last years, and legacy In 1880 Duffy left Australia for Europe. He lived mainly on the French riviera, making periodic excursions to Ireland and Britain. He resisted being drawn into Parnellite politics, just as he had earlier refused to join the home rule party of Isaac Butt (qv); he was occasionally offered parliamentary seats, and after the Phoenix Park murders (6 May 1882) Parnell (qv) considered resigning his leadership in favour of Duffy. In spite of his withdrawal from active politics, Duffy used his status as an elder statesman and his knowledge of Australian self-government to promote the home rule cause. In 1885 he attempted to persuade the Conservative Party through Lord Carnarvon (qv), whom he had known as colonial secretary, to accept a form of home rule. During Carnarvon’s lord lieutenancy Duffy helped to arrange clandestine negotiations between him and Parnell on the subject; he was dismayed when the conservatives came out in opposition to home rule and annoyed by Parnell's ungentlemanly breach of confidence in revealing that the negotiations had taken place. (Duffy contributed a chapter on the talks to R. Barry O'Brien's life of Parnell.)

The principal achievement of Duffy's later years was the publication of a series of historical works: Young Ireland: a fragment of Irish history (2 vols, 1880, from which a chapter outlining the course of Irish history was produced for popular circulation as A bird's eye view of Irish history, 1882), Four years of Irish history (1883), The League of North and South (1886), Thomas Davis (1890), and My life in two hemispheres (2 vols, 1898). Duffy's reminiscences draw heavily on the Nation, his own manuscripts, and sources such as the diaries of the conservative Evening Mail proprietor Dr Henry Maunsell (qv).

Duffy's work dominates retrospective accounts of the Young Ireland movement; some of his judgments have been challenged by the availability of manuscript material such as the papers of William O'Brien, and later historians have criticised him for ignoring O'Connell's reasons for distrusting Young Ireland's martial rhetoric and for exaggerating the extent of the old Liberator's senility. However, Duffy's position as participant and eyewitness makes his writings an indispensable source for their era, especially as the diminishing status of Young Ireland in Irish historical consciousness means that no comprehensive modern account has appeared. In 1892 Duffy became chairman of the newly founded Irish Literary Society, which
Duffy intended to use to propagate Young Ireland literary ideals. He founded a New Library of Ireland and edited the first volume in the series, Davis's *Patriot parliament of 1689*. Duffy's didactic view of literature brought him into conflict with W. B. Yeats (qv), who wished to promote younger creative writers and received tactical support from younger separatists, who saw Mitchel as their hero and Duffy as his betrayer.

Duffy spent his last years at Nice and died 9 February 1903 at his home there, 12 boulevard Victor Hugo; he was buried at Glasnevin cemetery, Dublin on 8 March. The length of his career, the breadth of his experience, and his voluminous labours as a chronicler make him an important figure in the history of Ireland and the Irish diaspora in the nineteenth century. He also deserves attention as the most prominent and articulate Ulster catholic nationalist of his time. Duffy married three times. There were two children from his marriage to Emily McLaughlin, of whom one son, John, survived. By his second marriage (8 February 1847), to his cousin Susan Hughes (d. 1878), he had eleven children, of whom three sons and three daughters survived. His third marriage on 16 November 1881, to Louise Hall (d. 1889), niece of his second wife, produced three sons (including George Gavan Duffy (qv), signatory of the Anglo–Irish treaty and president of the high court) and one daughter, the educationist Louise Gavan Duffy (qv). There are Duffy papers in the RIA and NLI.