

IRELAND'S HOPE

The “peculiar theories”
of James Fintan Lalor

by

James P. Bruce

Series in World History



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Image on the back cover: James P. Bruce (left) and Kevin Lalor-Fitzpatrick (right) at the former family home in Co. Laois (formerly Queen's County) where James Fintan Lalor spent most of his life.

Dedicated to Brian Cleeve
(1921-2003)
without whom this would not have been possible

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ABBREVIATIONS

DIB	Dictionary of Irish Biography
IHS	Irish Historical Studies
JFL	James Fintan Lalor
NAI	National Archives of Ireland
NLI	National Library of Ireland
ODNB	Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
PL	Patrick ('Patt') Lalor
RL	Richard Lalor
RIA	Royal Irish Academy
UCD	University College Dublin

INTRODUCTION

Settling on the subject of this book was not straightforward. When I applied to become a DPhil student at Oxford University, I had something different in mind: a kind of intellectual history of nationalism during the period between the death of Charles Stewart Parnell in 1891 and the setting up of the Irish Free State in 1922. I was particularly interested in the economic issues that I felt must have occupied the minds of those contemplating self-government for Ireland. It took me a year to realise that the topic was much too big for a single thesis. However, one minor strand of my preliminary research offered possibilities for a new direction.

I was intrigued by the attention paid by a handful of contemporary writers and activists to the subject of land nationalisation. This was a previously exotic concept brought into mainstream discussion by Henry George's book, *Progress and Poverty*, published in 1879. Among those influenced by George's analysis was Michael Davitt, founder of the Irish Land League. He became an ardent advocate of land nationalisation during the early 1880s. Although the concept never gained much political or popular support in Ireland, before or after independence, it continued to arouse interest amongst a handful of thinkers and observers well into the twentieth century. In my reading I found that, while the impact of Henry George's book was evident in the small body of writings on the subject, the influence of another earlier writer was frequently cited. He was a journalist named James Fintan Lalor. Some commentators saw Lalor as having given land nationalisation a uniquely Irish flavour during the Great Famine of the 1840s. So using Lalor's writings as my starting point, I set out to trace the development of this arcane idea, through the twists and turns of Irish intellectual history, up to its most recent expression in the work of the Kilkenny-born economist, Raymond Crotty.

However, at the halfway stage, my revised research project was derailed by illness. Rather than abandon my work completely, I transferred to the shorter MLitt programme. By then, I had completed a detailed analysis of Lalor's ideas on the twin topics of land tenure and Irish independence. So I submitted the results as my final thesis. The analyses and arguments presented in that thesis form the basis of the present book. What is missing, of course, is a detailed examination of Lalor's influence on later generations of activists, land reformers, and politicians of various hues. Perhaps the brief epilogue at the end of this book will inspire someone else to continue the story.

In the last few years of his life, James Fintan Lalor lived through a momentous period in modern Irish history. In 1845 the arrival of potato blight precipitated the Famine that devastated Ireland for the remainder of the decade. Parts of the

country also became embroiled in the revolutionary turmoil that erupted in continental Europe during 1848, although outbreaks of actual violence were rare. During this period Lalor became a leading figure in the Irish Confederation, a group formed by disaffected members of the Loyal National Repeal Association. He is probably best known today as the author of a series of opinion pieces which were published in the major newspapers of the day. These articles have been reprinted and analysed numerous times since then, whether by academics, admirers, or adversaries.

The continuing attention paid to Lalor's writings has not, however, led to any consensus about his political, social, or economic beliefs. There is disagreement on issues such as the extent of his influence on Davitt and the Land League, the degree to which he exhibited socialist leanings, and whether or not he was a proto-land nationaliser. These differences of interpretation extend even to basic biographical details, indicating a level of confusion that seems surprising given how recently Lalor lived and died. The two most significant memorials erected in Lalor's honour illustrate how easily falsehoods about his life are perpetuated.

Inscribed into the headstone placed over his grave in 1948 is an epitaph:

ŠĖΔMUIŠ ƆJONHCΔJH UJ LEΔCLOBAJH
 Δ RYΣΔO ΔH IO ^{MAO} IΔ DE JHΔRCΔ IBOJ.
 JIYUŠ Δ CΔJLLEΔO
 ΔH 27 ^{MAO} IΔ DE JHJH NA NOOΔAΣ I84O.¹

The Irish language inscription goes on to eulogise Lalor's patriotism and his sacrifice for Ireland. However, the implication that Lalor was a "Gaeilgeoir" is incorrect.² There is no evidence in any of the primary sources that Lalor wrote or spoke in Irish, or that he was even familiar with the language. On the contrary, he exhibited a lifelong passion for English literature that was stoked by his reading of authors such as Walter Scott and William Wordsworth. If this first example conveys a false impression of Lalor's cultural background, the second misrepresents his physical appearance. A large bronze sculpture of Lalor unveiled outside Portlaoise County Hall in 2007 depicts him as tall and upright, brandishing a sheaf of documents in his outstretched left arm.³ In fact, Lalor was, according to his Young Ireland colleague, Michael Doheny, a "distorted, ill-

¹ The headstone was the work of the National Graves Association (NGA), a body set up during the 1920s "to save the Irish patriots' graves from oblivion" (*Irish Press*, 11 Sep. 1931). The NGA overlooked the erroneous date of birth in the inscription. Lalor was born in 1807, not 1809.

² An Irish speaker or Irish language enthusiast.

³ *Irish Times*, 17 Dec. 2007.

favoured, hunch-backed little creature".⁴ Other associates corroborated this description of a man whose physical appearance conflicted with the image they expected of such an inspirational writer.⁵

These misrepresentations of Lalor indicate how little importance is attached to the facts of his life, even when such details are readily available. Unfortunately, the same tendency often applies to Lalor's literary legacy. It is not that his doctrines and teachings have been deliberately misinterpreted. The problem arises from a lack of serious engagement by academia with his writings. This omission is underscored in several recent studies of Irish intellectual history, which either barely mention Lalor or ignore him completely.⁶ Outside this specialist field, scholars of nineteenth-century Irish history have usually incorporated Lalor into their analyses of the period. However, setting aside the issue of his stance on property rights, these studies tend to depict Lalor as no more than a catalyst in the decision by Young Irelanders, such as John Mitchel, to take Irish nationalism in a more radical direction than heretofore. Little effort is made to investigate the theories that so entranced Mitchel and his fellow nationalists, or to explore the complexities of Lalor's relationships with them.⁷

While a definitive and comprehensive biography of James Fintan Lalor has yet to be published, that is not the object of this study. Rather the book seeks to address the historiographical lacunae and misperceptions as far as his writings are concerned. Although some biographical information is interspersed throughout the analysis that follows, the emphasis is on Lalor's efforts during the last few years of his life to reinvigorate and redirect the nationalist agenda through his access to leading figures such as Charles Gavan Duffy and the aforementioned John Mitchel.

The first chapter assesses his extant writings in considerable detail in order to clarify their meaning, especially on the land question. In this initial analysis,

⁴ Charles Gavan Duffy, *Four Years of Irish History, 1845-1849: a Sequel to "Young Ireland"* (London, 1883), p. 478.

⁵ *Irish Nation*, 3 Dec. 1881. Duffy, *Four Years of Irish History*, p. 465.

⁶ Maurice Goldring, *Pleasant the Scholar's Life: Irish Intellectuals and the Construction of the Nation State* (London, 1993), p. 96. Liam O'Dowd (ed.), *On Intellectuals and Intellectual Life in Ireland: International, Comparative and Historical Contexts* (Belfast, 1996). Thomas Duddy, *A History of Irish Thought* (London, 2002), p. 289. Séamas Ó Síocháin, (ed.), *Social Thought on Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Dublin, 2009). Tom Boylan, Renee Prendergast and John D. Turner (eds.), *A History of Irish Economic Thought* (London, 2011), p. 99.

⁷ Although scholars, such as F. S. L. Lyons (*Ireland since the Famine* (London, 1973), pp. 108-12), and R. F. Foster (*Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London, 1989), pp. 381-2), provide insightful interpretations of these issues, the space allotted to Lalor in these lengthy historical surveys is insufficient for a full examination of his thinking.

Lalor's communication strategy, i.e. his approach to disseminating his proposals and his choice of target audience, is also examined.

In the second chapter, the possible origins of Lalor's theories are explored. While his interpretation of Irish nationalism was more radical than many of his contemporaries were prepared to accept, it would not have been out of place in the recent revolutionary past dominated by figures such as Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmet. However, his views on land tenure were far more innovative. Not only did Lalor break new ground within Irish nationalism by linking the pursuit of independence with the land question, his vision of how that question could be settled under a local administration was, in the Irish context at least, radical and subversive. The second chapter evaluates the originality or otherwise of Lalor's ideas on landholding and the rights of property by examining the writings of earlier thinkers with views similar to his own.

In the third and final chapter, the impact of Lalor's proposals on his contemporaries is examined. Lalor's audience was diverse, comprising close family members and friends, fellow nationalists whom he encountered after he entered the public arena, and the wider public who read his articles and letters. His activities were also followed closely by opponents of Irish independence, such as the British press. By analysing how Lalor's ideas were received during his lifetime, the extent of his immediate influence can be gauged.

It may be a solitary process, but researching and writing an academic work is not a solo endeavour. Mine would never have seen the light of day without the help and support of numerous people at Oxford University. These include the administrative staff at Wadham College and the History Faculty, who made my regular interactions with the university pleasant and painless. Having access to the treasures held at the Bodleian Library was a particular joy during my time at the university. However, my research took place mostly in Dublin and I spent many fruitful hours exploring the numerous primary sources safeguarded by repositories, such as the National Library and UCD Archives.

From time to time, I was fortunate to receive advice and support from a number of generous academics, especially Dr Carla King of Dublin City University. A constant source of encouragement and constructive criticism was my supervisor, Professor Marc Mulholland, to whom I am very grateful.

I would never have made it to Oxford without the grounding in history I received from the brilliant staff at Trinity College Dublin. My four years as an undergraduate student there were made possible by the education grants provided by Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. I am grateful to both TCD and the County Council for everything they did.

Finally, I could not have done any of it without my family: my wife Margaret, our wonderful sons, Alan, Stephen, and Damian, our daughters-in-law, Louise,

Dorota, and Maria, and, of course, the next generation of Bruce grandchildren: Conor, Cian, Noah, Patrick, Stella, and Adam. Their faith in me has been inspirational. Special thanks are due to Margaret, for her unstinting love and boundless common sense, and to Damian for proof-reading not only a draft of my thesis, but many other essays and papers since I returned to formal education in 2008.

To you, the reader, I offer a big thank you for your interest in James Fintan Lalor and the ideas that preoccupied him during his final years. Although I have tried to find and fix all errors and omissions in what follows, any that made it into print are entirely my responsibility and no one else's.

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