

THE EMANCIPATION DEBT TO O'CONNELL

THOUGH the history of Catholic Emancipation in England is a long one, and though the names of those who helped forward its achievement are many, the actual passing of the Bill was due entirely to one man, Daniel O'Connell. It was his plan that was accepted by the Catholics, his form of Bill that was accepted by the Government and Parliament, and his personal energy and political sagacity that carried the movement and guided it, till its success was attained. To him more than to any single man these Centenary celebrations should do honour.

Born in 1775, he was a humble Catholic lawyer, with a burning enthusiasm and a stirring and inflammatory eloquence; he lived through and watched carefully the events that preceded and followed the troubles of 1798. From his consideration of these, he learnt as his own lesson, a disbelief in physical force, a hatred of the French Revolution, and a distrust of secret conspiracy. Hence, his own methods were founded upon a very different philosophy than that of the heroes of '98. His political plan was to concentrate upon every sort of agitation, as violently as possible, but without bloodshed. His eloquence was able to produce the agitation and his personal dominating power was able to keep that agitation perfectly within bounds.

Moreover, since he was above all an opponent of the Union between Ireland and England, he was in favour of Emancipation almost entirely because it was in his eyes a step towards the repeal of that Union. He proposed to give Catholics their due political power so that they might use it to secure political freedom. Political freedom was to that extent the

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mainspring of his ideals; and judged by that, he failed. His ultimate and real object was not achieved. Indeed, as we shall see, it was Emancipation itself that wrecked his larger hope. By succeeding in his struggle for Emancipation, he actually deferred the Repeal of the Union for one hundred years. The religious freedom of English Catholics was achieved at the price of Irish political freedom. It is curious that the Treaty should have been signed very nearly one hundred years too late for O'Connell's popularity and that when signed it should still leave unsettled the problem as to whether intense political agitation or physical violence were the better method of conducting political propaganda.

But it was to secure the Repeal of the Union that O'Connell prepared his plans. The organisation which he had determined to build up was to consist of the parish clergy of Ireland who were by its means to rule the country, and he himself also by its means was to rule the clergy. Up till his time, incredible as it may seem, the clergy had taken no part in the political life of Ireland, except when under pressure from Pitt they had been induced to speak and write in favour of the Union. In 1798 it seems that generally they were on the side of the Government.

Once he had secured this clerical organisation at his back, O'Connell was next determined that he would wrest the political emancipation of Catholics from the Government and then with a solid majority in his favour proceed easily to disendow the Protestant Church and to restore the Irish Parliament. He does not seem to have had any idea in his mind of 'establishing' the Catholic religion. His speeches were wholeheartedly in favour of religious equality, and his general attitude to State religions confirms the sincerity of these proposals.

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His first difficulty was over the appointment of the Catholic Bishops. His refusal to accept the proposed right of Veto to be invested in the British Government brought him up against the various groups and personalities in England who were in favour of Emancipation. The majority of English Catholics in 1799, and even a strong and influential Irish section, were in favour of offering that Veto to the Crown in order to propitiate it and disarm its opposition. Even Rome itself agreed to the principle (the Roman Court, that is, for it appeared later that the Pope himself opposed it). Even as late as 1815, Cardinal Consalvi was thought to have acquiesced in this compromise. But O'Connell (who feared that Bishops nominated by the Crown would prevent the Repeal of the Union) refused to acknowledge the Cardinal's authority in the matter, or even the Pope's (should he agree) and fought against it with such vehemence and pugnacity that at last hardly anyone in Ireland was in favour of it. But this success meant that, on the point of the Veto, O'Connell, while he triumphed over Grattan, had lost Grattan to his own policy. He had deliberately split the party rather than compromise on what was for him as much a matter of political as of religious freedom. The Repeal of the Union was his ultimate object. Everything had to be scrutinised from the point of view of that political purpose, though, no doubt, even as a Catholic, he disliked the idea of a Protestant Government interfering in ecclesiastical appointments.

In 1806, he founded the General Committee. Here he was met by the Convention Act of 1793, which prevented the formation of any representative or elective assembly of Catholics; whereupon the astute lawyer at once altered the character of his association into a petitioning body, and by so doing enabled it to maintain its status as legal and unproclaimed. By 1808,

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he had organised the association so successfully as to have meetings and branch-associations in every one of the Catholic counties of Ireland. In 1810, he had formed a central body which (again, lest by its having an illegal purpose it might be denounced and suppressed) he called the Committee of Grievances. He formulated its intentions as threefold, to present an address to the King, a remonstrance to the British nation, and a petition to Parliament.

The next year, however, this association was suppressed by the Chief Secretary (Sir Robert Peel); it was immediately reformed by O'Connell under an entirely new name, *i.e.*, the Catholic Board of Voluntary Associations. And under this new name the local meetings and the local committees continued as enthusiastically as ever.

Meanwhile, many of the political leaders of all parties, both in Ireland and England, had come round to accept the general scheme of Emancipation for Catholics. In Ireland Grattan and Plunkett, in England Wilberforce and the majority of the Commons were stated to be in its favour. Lord Liverpool's Government, however, was divided, and would not as a whole support it. It was then, in 1813, that Grattan's Bill was introduced which, while giving Emancipation to the Catholics, safeguarded the Government by securing to the Crown the Veto on the appointment of the Bishops. At once O'Connell denounced it, and the priests followed his lead; and in a fury of disappointment, with the approval of Grattan and the Parliamentary Emancipators, the Catholic Board was immediately suppressed. They resented O'Connell's interference and his throwing over of this long established point of compromise. Even the Catholic landowners seceded from the movement under the impression that O'Connell had gone too far, was an extremist, and had no chance of secur-

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ing his larger policy. Unmoved by this opposition, however, O'Connell was prepared to wait. He certainly was not going to accept an Emancipation which should interfere with his ultimate hope of the Repeal of the Union.

For ten years the question, despite his continued agitation, slumbered, till, in 1821, it was revived by the proposed visit of George IV to Ireland. The King had disgusted the Catholics for throwing them over in 1813, when he became Regent on the renewed insanity of George III. But O'Connell was now prepared to forget the past and was determined that the Catholics should do so also. It shows the greatness of his power and of his persuasiveness that he was able to secure for the English King who had betrayed them a most enthusiastic welcome from the Catholics of Ireland. The King was impressed by the loyal demonstration and turned back once more to the scheme of his Whig friends for the freeing of Catholics from their disabilities. After some hesitation, however, he decided to do nothing. That very year, 1821, Plunkett introduced a Bill on the lines of Grattan's earlier Bill which included again the Veto of the Crown and also an oath of loyalty to be taken by the priesthood. Again, however, O'Connell opposed it; and, though not perhaps for his reasons, it was thrown out of the House of Lords by ninety-nine votes.

This proved to be the turning point in the agitation. O'Connell suddenly saw his opportunity to develop his proposals in a new scheme and with his remarkable sense of political intuition to gather to his side every popular enthusiasm. His new method was now to link Catholic Emancipation with the growing cry for Parliamentary Reform. In 1821-22 distress and disorder were over all Ireland, due to a series of catastrophes, themselves closely related, namely, the failure of the

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potato crop, famine and disease, high rents and evictions, the conversion of arable land into pasture, and the absorbing of the little farms by the bigger farmers. Under the influence of the prevailing discomfort, O'Connell refounded the Catholic Association (1823), represented the Government and Parliament as having dismally failed to achieve anything in the economic crisis, and now began an appeal to reform Parliament itself. Much had been accomplished when Sheil, one of the leading politicians, went over to his side.

His new scheme was now of so broad a character as to enable him to rouse the whole country. It was no longer an association for Catholics only; it was an appeal for a national electorate. He managed by means of reporters to get his monster meetings advertised before and after in the press of the day, and started a fund which was open to all subscribers. Of course, he did not neglect his old Catholic relationships and contacts. Indeed, he asked for 'a monthly penny' from every priest and every parish. This was partly to secure an income, but chiefly to secure the backing of the Catholic influences. It was less the penny that he wanted than the priest. Here we see him in the full stature of his greatness as the first democrat of modern politics, the agitator who first built up a national organisation of men and money; he was the first to realise the power of the poor. By 1825 he had won to his side not the poor only, but the peers. Their own scheme had failed; his at least had obtained the backing of the people.

As a result of his new organisation and the enthusiasm it provoked, riots broke out in Dublin. The Lord Lieutenant had a bottle thrown at him in a theatre. After this, Dublin and the Lord Lieutenant agreed that things were going too far and something must be done. The rioters and O'Connell were

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indicted for sedition before the Grand Jury. Here, O'Connell won a new victory. In January, 1825, the Grand Jury threw out the Bill. Even Government itself was paralysed by its divisions. Against Emancipation were (once more) the King, now George IV, Lord Liverpool, Lord Eldon, Sir Robert Peel, and, most important of all, the Duke of Wellington. These were absolutely opposed to every concession. In its favour, however, were Canning and the majority of the Government supporters, who were even anxious to go further, and establish the Catholic religion in Ireland. On the motion of Sir Francis Burdett, a Bill embodying these proposals was passed in 1825 by the House of Commons. Led by the Duke of York, the House of Lords, by forty-eight votes, threw it out. The excitement in Ireland grew frantic. All attempts to suppress the Association were foiled by the ingenuity of O'Connell. Thus, Goulbourn's Act (March, 1825), which limited all associations for petitions to fourteen days, was eluded by the association (now the New Catholic Association) renewing itself every fortnight. This, however, was of less importance than the fact that the moderate politicians and public men testified their agreement to O'Connell. When the General Election of 1826 came, O'Connell's wisdom was proved; for the first time in Irish history the peasants as a whole voted solidly against their landlords. His organisation had swept in every one; Protestant as well as Catholic, the whole country was entirely on his side; everywhere O'Connell's candidates topped the poll. A Beresford was beaten at Waterford. Fear of civil war ran high; and though O'Connell was himself openly and vehemently against violence, the Government began to be afraid of civil war. Then came a violent fluctuation of political hopes, for, in 1827, the Duke of York died, and Lord Liverpool, becoming ill, resigned office, two of the

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public opinion? After his success over Emancipation, he had proceeded with his original plan of pursuing the further policy of the Repeal of the Union. He had never pretended that Emancipation was his final end; moreover, the country was in so much ferment that it could not immediately have settled down to peaceful life, and it was more than likely that, if he had withdrawn from the movement, the extremists in his party would have captured the organisation and pushed the Repeal by force. He could only retain his influence by continuing to head the agitation, for which, indeed, there was ample material, the injustice that still hampered the Catholics through the tithes, education, land-laws, etc. Therefore, he continued to use the same weapons, the Petition Association, monster meetings, and the Catholic rent: but now these all failed, and failed, at least in part, because of their very success in the long-drawn Emancipation struggle. The English Whigs and Tories who had supported Emancipation were opposed to the Repeal of the Union: indeed, their very support of Emancipation had been given precisely because they thought it would consolidate the Union. When O'Connell now pressed for the Repeal the disappointment was bitter amongst them and, quite unfairly, they judged they had been betrayed. The Irish Protestants who had favoured Emancipation had done so in the belief that the Catholic parliamentarians now to be elected would be submerged in the English Parliament; they grew afraid of an Irish Parliament which would, at least, be dominantly Catholic. Even the Repeal Party was divided into those who were content (as was O'Connell as a first instalment) with a subordinate Irish Parliament and representative Irish members sitting at Westminster, and those who, bearing the title of *Young Ireland*, were determined on a real separated Ireland and on the use of force to achieve

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their end. His phrases made co-operation between himself and the Mitchell, Davis, Gavan-Duffy group impossible. Agitator as he was, the supreme agitator in European politics, the first inventor of the power of the people, he had yet set his face steadily against the employment of physical violence: 'No human revolution is worth the effusion of one single drop of human blood.' 'It is no doubt a very fine thing to die for one's country, but, believe me, one living patriot is worth a whole churchyard of dead ones.'

When he died in exile in 1847 he knew that famine, disorder, and coercion were destroying Ireland's peace, that his leadership had failed, but that the Young Ireland Party were no nearer success than he. The year after his death saw the failure of the use of arms.

He was the first Irishman in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, however, of really European fame; he was a Liberal Catholic, and he took no mean part in that common movement all over Europe that inflamed the ideals of Montalembert, Lacordaire, and the Wiseman of that day. Moreover, he was an ardent supporter of complete religious toleration, favoured the admitting of Jews to Parliament, and in 1811 he had protested against the famous troubles at Nismes, when it was thought that the Huguenots had been unjustly treated by the Catholics. He was never a revolutionist; he hated the Chartists, and, after the accession of Queen Victoria, he protested his love and loyalty towards the English Crown.

To Lacordaire, in his funeral-panegyric over the remains of the Liberator in Notre Dame, O'Connell was the father of the new age: 'Maître d'une postérité à peine née sur sa tombe,' and 'le premier médiateur entre l'Eglise et la société moderne.' He adds characteristically: 'La société moderne est l'expres-

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sion des besoins de l'humanité et par conséquent elle est aussi l'expression des besoins de l'Eglise.'

We think ourselves that the part he played in the political and religious development of the nineteenth century has never been sufficiently recognised, obscured under national flamboyance and the ornate and bombastic eloquence of that period. To him more than to anyone else the title of Liberator is justly due: he set free the political subservience of the peasant voter, the clerical fear of public democratic government, and the Catholics of these islands. He merited, said Lacordaire, 'le titre œcuménique de libérateur de l'Eglise.'

Our debt to him is beyond measure.

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