

IRELAND'S LIBERATOR

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OW OFTEN is the glamour that is attached to many world leaders today only the temporary glittering of a star that will presently darken and finally pass into oblivion forever? Few men indeed can withstand the passage of a decade; fewer still can take the buffetings of a century and come through still great. To this last select group belongs a man who, during his lifetime, gave all that he had in order that his country might survive. He influenced the fate of that country, and so inspired his people with confidence that he was recognized during his own lifetime and afterwards as the greatest political and economic genius of the early nineteenth century.

A glimpse at Daniel O'Connell seems particularly timely when Americans feel deeply the pricelessness of liberty, for liberty was the pivotal point around which his life revolved. O'Connell's story is the saga of a modern fighter for freedom. By one of those strange but appropriate quirks of fate, he came into the world just when the American colonists were beginning their successful struggle for the liberty he so ardently desired for his own native soil.

He was born on August 9, 1775, in the County of Kerry, in the southwestern part of Ireland, near historic Killarney. For some reason, his rich uncle, Maurice, took him and educated him. It was due to this twist of fortune that the young Kerryman embarked on his educational career. His course of schooling was varied and interrupted by the turbulent times. In 1792, a memorable year for Ireland, the Catholic Relief Bill was passed, sounding the death knell for many of the more vicious Penal Laws. This enabled young O'Connell to undertake those studies which would lead to the profession of Law, heretofore barred to all Catholics. Accordingly, in that same year, he transferred from St. Omer to Douai, where he was to study rhetoric and philosophy. In January of 1793, however, with the advent of the French Revolutionaries on their march through Belgium, he fled the city. Subsequently he studied on his own, until the May of 1798, when he was admitted to the Bar. This climaxed a casting process which was to bring Ireland and her patriot into intimate contact for fifty turbulent years.

The Irish Court at the time of O'Connell's debut was notoriously

base and corrupt. Sycophancy and nepotism brought their inevitable rewards; inefficiency and bigotry were flagrant. What would have deterred the less resolute furnished stamina to his efforts. The Kerry Barrister handled himself with extraordinary astuteness and boldness. Many times his audacity threatened him with disaster but he invariably came through unscathed. The keen brain behind his boldness was to save him from peril innumerable times during his career.

During the winter of 1800, O'Connell saw the necessity of declaring himself on the leading question of the day—the parliamentary union of Great Britain and Ireland, better known simply as "The Union." The question was bitterly contested for years, and its settlement in 1800 completely destroyed every vestige of freedom that an Irishman might have. How the youthful lawyer's great heart swelled within him when, in his maiden political speech, he aligned himself to the cause for which he was to exhaust himself. Now the war was on in earnest; stately courtrooms and public arenas were transformed into theatres of political warfare. The need for leadership becoming imperative, O'Connell assumed the toga which placed him at the head of a new movement—a radical movement inasmuch as it was opposed to the former weak-kneed activity which had gained absolutely nothing for Ireland.

The year 1813 saw O'Connell beleaguering the courts by his wit, his eloquence, and his sarcasm. Day after day he entered their halls and spoke as no Irishman had previously dared to speak. He jeopardized not only his own freedom, but also that of his entire following. Time and again he assailed his opposition; repeatedly he hurled his sarcasm at the presiding justices. The end of the year witnessed some success, for he had defeated the acceptance of a compromise which, though it offered many privileges, would have killed Ireland's fight for its own independence.

All was not too serene, however, for during the next few years O'Connell suffered severe attacks upon his character. Gift bearers seldom walk alone; frequently they are pursued. Scarcely any man has felt the touch of glory without having left another with the sting of jealousy. In the early days of his career, perhaps in his earnestness, O'Connell overstepped the bounds of patriotism and unwittingly placed himself in the field of Theology. The unsound counsel of years past, "sins against morals are less than sins against faith," now rebounded unexpectedly and in a way that hardly enhanced his public usefulness. This statement was used to support the accusation that he once had illegitimate relations with a certain Eleanor Courtney. As it turned out, the charge was false.

In 1823 O'Connell conceived a plan so gigantic that few thought it possible. He wished to enroll all the poor and down-trodden in Ireland into a vast army. Each person, no matter how wretched, was to give one farthing each week to finance the fight for freedom. While enemies ridiculed him and friends pitied him, maintaining that the scheme was impracticable, he went through with his plan with characteristic courage, and the income from that small tax in one year amounted to fifty thousand pounds. His "Army of Beggars" was responsible for the doubling of his party's activities, enabling him to fight case upon case and introduce bill after bill. His success was almost miraculous; this was the beginning of his public political career. For the next few years until 1830, he divided his time between the Courts and his "Army," veering, nevertheless, more and more to politics, both local and national. He was elected to Parliament, but refused to take an oath which declared that the King was the head of the church, and that the Mass was an abomination. Success would not be without sacrifice; and a seat in the gallery was to be preferred to apostasy. The Patriot returned to Ireland to continue the fight locally. In 1830 he brought his legal career in the courts to a glorious finish, when he successfully defended a group of men who were on trial for being implicated in the Doneraile Conspiracy. He so ridiculed the evidence that all were freed, even though before his arrival some had already been found guilty.

From now on O'Connell decided to devote his entire energy to politics; and his primary intention was to work for the repeal of "The Union," and the restoration of absolute political liberty to the Irish people. His success for the first few years was as amazing as had been his success in the Courts. They were the years during which he reached the peak of his public life. He exercised tremendous influence on the settling of problems and bills and was the chief reason for Catholics being admitted to offices from which they had been barred for over two hundred years. In 1836, however, his influence began to wane. He was attacked chiefly because he seemed to renege on his former steadfastness. ". . . he was not a humanitarian; he was a realist occupied with the *present* conditions of his own country. . . . he was a political revolutionary first and foremost. He was a social revolutionary only in that he would first provide something to revolutionize."¹ He quarrelled privately and publicly much more frequently. His chief object of animosity was Lord Robert Peel, who for more than thirty years had always felt the brunt of O'Connell's

¹ O'Faoláin, Seán, *King of the Beggars*, pp. 273-274. The Viking Press, New York, 1938.

anger. At one time he had been a mere Secretary, and as such had to suffer the sharp rebukes of the Patriot's tongue. Now he was Prime Minister, and it was for him to decide whether O'Connell might continue or not. As a result, the Irishman's remarks were tempered to such an extent that even Peel had no strong grounds for reprisal.

During this decline we can obtain a better insight into his inner self. His wife died in 1837, and he was so bereft with grief at losing her that he thought of retiring to a monastery. This was not a passing fancy, nor was it an attempt to escape reality; rather he became the subject of a real resignation to the Divine Will; and this desire to devote himself wholly to God's work was, perhaps, the result of a comparison of the passing glory of this life with that glory that knows no end. Although he never entered a monastery, his letters and papers from that time on seem to contain some hidden meaning, which showed that religion had become a consciously predominant force in his life.

But the end had not come yet. Like a flare that, having been reduced to sparks suddenly bursts forth again, in 1840 he started anew a fight against the many petty laws passed by the British Parliament; laws which tended to make life even more unbearable for the Irish people. Constantly he fought enactments which the indomitable Peel tried to foster; night after night he appeared at famous "Monster Meetings" before crowds numbering from a few hundred thousand to nearly a million people.² Time and again he hurled threats and dares at the government, and goaded them to declare war. In 1842 Peel reached the limit of his endurance and retaliated by passing laws which forbade the Irish people to own weapons, and which allowed English soldiers to invade Irish homes on any pretext whatsoever. Two years later the crisis came; O'Connell was convicted of conspiracy and incitement to sedition. The unfavorable verdict was reached in February and passed in May. The sentence was not unaccompanied; for, unknown to anyone, even to himself, he was suffering from a disease of the brain. When his mind failed him, his actions became more and more senile. Thus, when he began his prison term, all resistance seemed to have left him. His friends fought a terrific battle on his behalf, but he was strangely apathetic. A reversal of the Court's decision by the House of Lords, however, granted him freedom and provided the necessary stamina for a last effort.

² *Ibid.*, p. 305.

Freedom now meant very little to him. His ship of politics had been scuttled both by his own mad actions and those of his son, John. The great Liberator in his last years went on insulting not only his friends in Ireland, but also the peoples of France and America. The potato famine of 1845 seemed to arouse him. Again he took to the forum on behalf of his beloved "Army of Beggars" which had been increasing steadily. Throughout the following year he appeared at different times in Commons, cajoling, beseeching and threatening. In February of 1847, he appeared for the last time. He was far from the flashing, fiery, brilliant orator; old, tottering and mumbling, he gasped out a few words asking for compassion upon his cherished Ireland. A few days later he fell into his final illness. His physicians advised that he take a tour, in the hope that restful travel would prolong his life. He was persuaded to travel to Rome where he was promised an audience with the Holy Father. The laborious journey was begun; traveling was necessarily slow and it was not until May that they stood upon the threshold of the Eternal City. In Genoa his strength failed him completely, and he lingered in a pitiable state until the fifteenth of May. In late evening of that eventful day, breathing the sacred name of "Jesus," the Irish hero entered into his Eternal Courtroom.

Ireland's storm-center was dead, but even his opponents could not help regarding him with mixed feelings. Sydney Smith, the English critic, perhaps best expressed their sentiments when he wrote that: "the best way to deal with Daniel O'Connell was to hang him up and then erect a statue to him under the gallows." The gallant Irishman had fought well, and though he was not to live to see his native land independent, yet he would certainly rejoice at a breath of air in the freer Ireland of today. His step would be light, yet sure, as he would promenade through the Courts of Dublin; then, perhaps on Upper O'Connell Street, he would be gladdened to hear more than one Irishman pay his respects with that highest Irish compliment: "Daniel O'Connell, you are Ireland's own!"

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