

# Michael Davitt, Irish nationalism and the British empire in the late nineteenth century

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The traditional assumption that Irish nationalism was by its nature anti-imperialist has been effectively challenged by various historians, among them Stephen Howe, who argues in *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* that the history of Irish anti-imperialist discourse is 'a surprisingly thin subject'.<sup>1</sup> However, Howe's assertion that 'Early Irish nationalists hardly ever identified their situation or case with that of other, non-European subject peoples in the British Empire or beyond',<sup>2</sup> and Bernard Porter's claim that 'The Nationalists rarely looked further than their Irish noses; they saw everything from the point of view of the Anglo-Irish dispute',<sup>3</sup> appear to overstate their case. There were a few Irish MPs in the House of Commons, among them Frank Hugh O'Donnell, J.C. McCoan, Alfred Webb and Michael Davitt, whose interventions show them concerned both to challenge the British empire as an institution, and to denounce various instances of injustice or misgovernment in a manner that was neither designed simply to harry the government nor to make points that were essentially about Irish politics.<sup>4</sup> The focus of this essay will be an examination of Davitt's critique of the British empire and his activities in opposition to it.

Michael Davitt's life has sometimes been seen as dividing into an early phase, up to the end of the Land League in 1882, when he was primarily concerned with Irish affairs, and a second period of his life when he drew closer to the British labour movement and focused more on international affairs. While this is broadly true, there is some evidence that his interest in world events dated from his youth.<sup>5</sup> Examination of the Davitt's first long manuscript, 'Jottings in Solitary' – written while he was imprisoned in Portland in 1881–2 – demon-

1 Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford, 2000), p. 43. 2 *Ibid.*, p. 44. 3 Bernard Porter, *Critics of Empire* (London, 1968), p. 312, quoted Howe, *Ireland and Empire*, p. 46. 4 Other party members who spoke out frequently on imperial issues included J.J. O'Kelly, T.P. O'Connor, Justin McCarthy and later John Dillon, William Redmond and Swift McNeill. See, for the period 1880–86, Alan O'Day, *The English Face of Irish Nationalism: Parnellite Involvement in British Politics, 1880–86* (Dublin, 1977), pp. 158–66. 5 For example, in 1885 he referred to the Hungarian leader Lajos Kossuth as 'one of my favourite heroes when doing my boyhood reading', Davitt Papers, Trinity College Dublin, MS 9544, Diary, 24 January 1885. I should like to thank the Board of Trinity College Library, Trinity College Dublin for permission to quote from the Davitt Papers.

strates that, even before the demise of the Land League, he was addressing himself to a broad critique of British colonial policy. Here he commenced by asking:

Of all the races which are known in history as 'Conquerors,' that is, robbers and murderers on a gigantic scale – the one which has most signally failed in impressing either its civilization or religion upon the victims to its lust of power is the Anglo-Saxon. This is all the more surprising from the fact of their form of government, institutions and administration of justice *in England* being infinitely superior to those which obtained in Spain and Portugal when these latter countries commenced their career of conquest; as well as from the additional circumstance of their religion – the Protestant – being, if I may use the expression, a more *palatable* one to force upon a vanquished nation, than that of the Roman Catholic faith; with its mysterious ritual, sacramental obligation, and rigid exaction of implicit belief in the infallible teachings of its Church. What then, is the explanation of this defect in the conquering career of the Anglo-Saxon Race?<sup>6</sup>

His answer was that British policy, both in international relations and with respect to its colonies, was dominated by considerations of 'British interests', narrowly conceived. In illustration he cited the examples of India and Ireland. The fate of India's inhabitants had been 'left in the hands of the rapacious East India Company', whose employees proceeded to plunder it on a vast scale. British rule proved far more repressive than 'the petty despotism and rapacity of the native rulers of India', and was characterised by acts of violence and bad faith. In Ireland, too, any attempts to win Irish support for 'English civilisation' were vitiated by repressive policies. Resistance was not due to

any inherent antagonism of Keltic blood in the composite race of the Anglo-Saxon, as probably most of our countrymen flatter themselves into believing – but from the seemingly inseparable relationship of English conquest to all that sordid selfish lust of power, sleuth-hound unerring pursuit of object and remorseless disregard of every humane feeling toward a defeated but unbending victim, or fear of moral responsibility in carrying out a pitiless policy of extermination towards him if he yield not a willing submission[.]

He concluded:

had the national land code been ... left intact and the people allowed to remain the owners, instead of the creation of the plantation scheme – from which Irish Landlordism is derived – and permitted also the same enjoy-

<sup>6</sup> Davitt Papers, MS 9639, 'Jottings in Solitary,' fol. 20. An edition of *Jottings in Solitary* was published by University College Dublin Press in 2003.

ment of their religious creed, there is every probability that Ireland would be today in reality and not in name, 'an integral part of this British Empire,' and my countrymen as submissive to English rule as those of their kilted and Cambrian race north of the Tweed and west of the Severn.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to note that Davitt's quarrel with British rule is not a racial one: on the contrary, he suggests that had British imperialism been less repressive it might have been successful. His strongest arguments against British rule in Ireland were, firstly, that the British government propped up a parasitic landlord class as a 'garrison' in Ireland, which leached money from a needy economy. And, secondly, that while the British political system was an admirable one as it functioned in Britain, British rule in Ireland was not an extension of the British system there but a mechanism to promote British, rather than Irish, interests. Dominated by Dublin Castle and its apparatus, it was profoundly anti-democratic, self-serving and corrupt. He used the device of imagining the situation reversed, of an Irish clique ruling of Britain through Whitehall (a model he later employed in speeches and in his pamphlet, *The Castle Government of Ireland*).<sup>8</sup> These were important insights. The first point linked the imperial system to the perpetuation of landlordism. The second observation contradicted the argument often made for British rule overseas, that it extended the benefits of liberal democracy across the world. Davitt, while he admired liberal democracy as practised in Britain, claimed that this was not what the empire exported to its colonies. His arguments were broadly economic and political, rather than cultural or religious. His brand of nationalism was intrinsically anti-imperialist, as he believed that the people of each nation knew their own best interests and were therefore best fitted to rule themselves.

Through most of the nineteenth century there was a strand of Irish nationalist opinion that opposed the empire. O'Connell had criticised the brutality with which the empire was built and had helped to form the British India Society in 1839. Thomas Davis had anathemised Britain's 'tottering and cruel Empire' in the 1840s.<sup>9</sup> In the 1870s and 1880s, as Britain launched itself on the expansionary track of the New Imperialism, the radical wing of the Irish Parliamentary Party was the most active group in the House in debating imperial affairs, F.H. O'Donnell, J.J. O'Kelly and J.C. McCoan playing particularly prominent roles. This attitude was far from universal among the Irish representatives and, as Alan O'Day and others have pointed out, some Irish members held a more positive view, their criticism of the empire mingled with admiration and recognition of the part the Irish had played in building it.<sup>10</sup> H.V. Brasted has identified three

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 38, *Jottings*, pp. 29–30. <sup>8</sup> Michael Davitt, *The Castle Government of Ireland* (1882); reprinted in Carla King (ed.) *Michael Davitt: Collected Writings, 1868–1906* (8 vols, Bristol, 2001). He makes the same arguments in *Leaves from a Prison Diary* (2 vols, London, 1885), vol. 2, 170–210. <sup>9</sup> John Neylon Molony, *A Soul Came into Ireland: Thomas Davis, 1814–1845. A Biography* (Dublin, 1995), p. 165. <sup>10</sup> O'Day, *English Face*, pp. 162–4; T.G. Fraser, 'Ireland and

broad strands in Irish nationalist thinking about the empire. In an approach first mooted by Isaac Butt, one current of opinion held that the empire should move toward a form of federalism, in which the constituent parts would be partners. At the other extreme were republicans who sought the destruction of the empire through violent means. Between these two positions came the Parnellite programme, critical of the empire but seeking reform from within.<sup>11</sup>

The most consistent and informed critic of the British empire in the late 1870s and early 1880s was Frank Hugh O'Donnell (1848–1916), for many years foreign editor of the *Morning Post*, and whose brother was an Indian civil servant. In words with which Davitt would have concurred, he told the House in 1884 that 'English tyranny in Ireland was only a part of that general system of the exploitation of suffering humanity which has made the British empire a veritable slave empire', and he urged that 'Parliamentary agitation would not be very effective until the Irish people, crushed down under their present tyranny, effected a coalition with the oppressed natives of India and other British dependencies, and all regarded England as the common enemy'.<sup>12</sup> According to Brasted, it was O'Donnell who formulated three basic principles on which Irish representatives should play an enhanced role in attacking the empire:

One, that Irishmen were specially qualified to postulate cures for imperial disorders;

Two, that Home Rulers were the natural representatives in Parliament of the unenfranchised empire;

Three, that nationalists in Ireland should form an alliance with nationalists in Asia and Africa to achieve the mutual goal of self-government.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, O'Donnell seems to have had a rather difficult temperament, and was bitterly opposed to Parnell, who refused to allow his nomination in the election of 1885. Although this put an end to his parliamentary career, he continued to exert an influence through his journalism.

It is difficult to identify the precise source of Davitt's thought concerning the British empire. The Fenians were broadly opposed to it but their approach tended to be limited to seeing 'England's difficulty as Ireland's opportunity' and they did not generally seek a broad coalition of nations within the empire. One exception to this, and a likely source of influence on Davitt's thinking, was Patrick Ford, editor and proprietor of the *Irish World*. Ford had provided indispensable support to the radical wing of the Land League during the Land War and was an adherent of the land nationalisation programme of Henry George

India', in Keith Jeffery (ed.), *'An Irish Empire'? Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire* (Manchester, 1996), pp. 77–93. <sup>11</sup> H.V. Brasted, 'Irish nationalism and the British empire in the late nineteenth century', in Oliver MacDonagh, M.F. Mandle and Pauric Travers (eds), *Irish Culture and Nationalism, 1750–1950* (Canberra, 1983), pp. 83–103. <sup>12</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, vol. 285, col. 1766. <sup>13</sup> Brasted, 'Irish nationalism', pp. 91–2.

(whom he employed as the *Irish World's* Irish correspondent in 1881–2). He had served his journalistic apprenticeship in Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*, and denounced the empire in almost messianic tones as not only oppressive but also contrary to the laws of God. In April 1881 he began a series of open letters to W.E. Gladstone,<sup>14</sup> in which he declared: 'I hold the Genius of the British Empire is an emanation from the mouth of the Evil One,' and that 'the spirit of conquest ... is sinful'.<sup>15</sup> He referred to the empire as 'a system of diabolism' and 'a modern Babylon',<sup>16</sup> later calling on the subject peoples of the empire, 'the victims of this infernal system' to combine with the Irish 'in a holy crusade' to destroy it.<sup>17</sup> Ford further, like Davitt, identified the crimes of the British empire with a class: 'I have said that the British oligarchy are, in fact, the British empire. They own the army, the navy, the law, established church, the judiciary and all the foreign offices.'<sup>18</sup> Davitt's denunciations of the empire, if lacking Ford's biblical tone, shared his strong element of moral indignation.

The closing decades of the nineteenth century saw the British empire at the peak of its strength; between 1870 and 1900 around 66 million people and 4.5 million square miles were added to its overseas possessions.<sup>19</sup> This expansionist policy was very popular at home and while some historians have suggested that the rising levels of imperialist fervour served in Britain to cheer up the public in the face of the economic difficulties of the late 1870s and 1880s,<sup>20</sup> others have pointed to the influence of British business interests in pursuing the considerable profits to be made from some of the colonies.<sup>21</sup> Support for imperial expansion was never unanimous, however. In the 1870s the Liberals had been less than enthusiastic about the prospect of heavy expenditure on an expanding empire and preferred to see an extension of free trade. But the incoming Liberal leadership of 1880 was forced, initially by the Egyptian crisis, into a role of defending imperial interests, and in the process they developed their own interpretation of the 'white man's burden'. Some on the radical side of the Liberal party, such as John Bright, John Morley and Henry Labouchère,<sup>22</sup> and writers such as Herbert Spencer and J.A. Hobson,<sup>23</sup> continued to oppose imperialist policies. Spencer's ideas certainly influenced Davitt, who admired him greatly and made frequent references to his work. In political terms these represented

<sup>14</sup> The letters were published in book form after Ford's death, as *The Criminal History of the British Empire* (London, 1915). See also Brasted, 'Irish nationalism', pp. 83–103. <sup>15</sup> *Irish World*, 31 March 1881; Ford, *Criminal History*, pp. 7–8. <sup>16</sup> Ford, *Criminal History*, pp. 8–9. <sup>17</sup> *Irish World*, 21 April 1881, quoted in Brasted, 'Irish nationalism', p. 89. <sup>18</sup> *Irish World*, 14 May 1881; Ford, *Criminal History*, pp. 51–2. <sup>19</sup> L.C.B. Seaman, *Victorian England. Aspects of English and Imperial History, 1837–1901* (London, 1973), p. 332. <sup>20</sup> A. P. Thornton, *The Imperial Idea and Its Enemies* ([1959] London, 1985), p. 67. <sup>21</sup> See, for example, A. Redford, *Manchester Merchants and Foreign Trade* (Manchester, 1956). <sup>22</sup> R.J. Hind, *Henry Labouchère and the Empire, 1880–1905* (London, 1972). <sup>23</sup> J.A. Hobson (1858–1940) did not publish his famous study, *Imperialism*, until 1902, but Davitt would almost certainly have been acquainted with his ideas as he was a prominent economist interested in tackling the problems of inequality through taxation, a topic close to Davitt's heart.

the strand in British political opinion to which Davitt was closest, although he was later to transfer his allegiance to the newly-emergent British Labour Party. His dislike of the empire was perhaps more visceral than theirs, representing a fundamental part of his nationalism.

As some Irish MPs took on the mantle of critic of imperial affairs, there was a move on the part of British leaders, both Liberal and Conservative, to view the Irish question as a challenge to the integrity of the empire as a whole. Any grant of Irish demands for Home Rule would, they argued, set off a chain reaction leading to the disintegration of the British empire. Lord Salisbury initiated this version of a 'domino theory' in 1883,<sup>24</sup> and it was later evident among some administrators such as Lord Dufferin in India, who took to referring to the Indian National Congress as the 'Indian Home Rule movement'.<sup>25</sup>

Gladstone's attitude to imperial expansion had begun to shift during the Egyptian crisis in 1881-2. Until then, Egypt, while formally constituting part of the Ottoman empire, had in fact enjoyed considerable autonomy. Its strategic importance to the European powers had been notably enhanced with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Ten years later, Egypt's ruler, the Khedive Ismael, who had run up considerable debts to western bankers, was deposed in favour of his son, Tewfik. This sparked off a revolt by Egyptian reformers opposed to Western involvement in their country, led by Urabi (or Arabi) Bey, who threatened to repudiate Egypt's debts to European bondholders. The Liberal government sent in battleships and a military force, bombarding Alexandria on 11 July 1882, and eventually defeating the insurgents at Tel-el-Kebir on 13 September 1882. In August, while the fighting continued, Ford published a portrait of Urabi, with the comment that he was gallantly upholding the no-rent banner in Egypt, and expressed the hope that 'the accursed British Empire and its armies and navies may melt before Arabi and the miasma of Egypt as snow before the noon-day sun.'<sup>26</sup> Urabi Bey and some of his followers, first sentenced to death, were exiled to Ceylon, from where they petitioned to be either allowed to return home, or failing that, to be moved to Cyprus, on the basis that the climate in Ceylon did not suit them. The Irish Party had been active in denouncing the British government's actions in the early 1880s, and five years later Wilfred Scawen Blunt, the most prominent English opponent of British policy in Egypt, drew comparisons between the situations in Egypt and Ireland in the course of the Plan of Campaign, during which he was imprisoned in Ireland. He met and visited Davitt during his time in Ireland, and discussed world events in general and the possibility of achieving a broad front aimed at attacking the British empire from within.<sup>27</sup> Later, as an MP, Davitt questioned in 1897, 1898 and 1899

<sup>24</sup> He outlined this view in 'Disintegration', *Quarterly Review*, 156 (October 1883), 559-95, and in a speech at Newport on 7 October 1885, see Brasted, 'Irish nationalism', p. 84. <sup>25</sup> Fraser, 'Ireland and India', p. 87; Howard Brasted, 'Indian nationalist development and the influence of Irish Home Rule, 1870-1886', *Modern Asian Studies*, 14:1 (1980), 37-63. <sup>26</sup> *Irish World*, 11 August 1882; quoted in *Freeman's Journal*, 12 August 1882, p. 5. <sup>27</sup> Wilfred Scawen Blunt, *The*

the refusal to grant the request of the revolt's leaders to return home; government spokesmen replied variously that it was up to the Egyptian government, and that the exiles were too dangerous to permit their return.<sup>28</sup>

Late nineteenth-century British opinion saw India, in the cliché of the day, as 'the jewel in the imperial crown', a vast market for British goods, a source of raw materials and the essential basis for British world power and prestige. The Irish had contributed significantly to sustaining the Raj as soldiers and administrators, and even as viceroys. Parallels had frequently been drawn between India and Ireland and a measure of solidarity was to emerge between Irish and Indian nationalists. But despite India's economic and strategic importance to Britain, unlike Ireland it had no political representation. In 1879, following an approach from the executive committee of the British Indian Association, O'Donnell put to Isaac Butt the proposal that the Irish Party might run Indian candidates in order to provide them with seats at Westminster.<sup>29</sup> This attempt failed, but in 1883 Davitt, possibly on the prompting of O'Donnell, suggested to Parnell that the party find a seat for Dadabhai Naoroji, whom he later described as 'a thoroughly representative Indian gentleman residing in London, and well known to Mr Parnell and others of us. Ireland would thus have the honor of giving a direct voice in the House of Commons to countless millions of British subjects who were ruled despotically and taxed without votes.'<sup>30</sup> Parnell, while apparently initially 'very much taken' by the proposal, eventually informed Davitt that 'he liked the plan very much, but he feared it would not be clearly understood in Ireland and might lead to trouble within the party.'<sup>31</sup> Naoroji himself rejected the idea on the grounds that if Ireland gained Home Rule, as appeared possible in 1886, there would be little point in the Indian movement having representation in an Irish parliament.<sup>32</sup> He was returned for Finsbury in 1892, but when he lost this seat in 1895, he appealed again to Davitt, whose reply was that there was 'no hope'.<sup>33</sup> Davitt, however, was still keen on the idea of the Irish Party providing seats for Indian candidates in 1887, when he discussed the idea with Blunt.<sup>34</sup>

In October 1894 Naoroji conveyed to Davitt the invitation to preside at the Tenth Indian National Congress in Madras, but Davitt refused on the grounds that it would be too risky for Congress to invite him, commenting in his diary:

*Land War in Ireland: Being a Personal Narrative of Events in Continuation of 'A Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt'* (London, 1912), pp. 50–1, 76–7. <sup>28</sup> *Hansard*, 4th ser., vol. 45, cols 94, 95 (1897); vol. 60, col. 793 (1898); vol. 73, cols 1140, 1141 (1899); vol. 76, col. 14 (1899). Blunt wrote to express his appreciation of Davitt's effort, Davitt Papers, MS 9433/2688, Blunt to Davitt, 4 July 1898. <sup>29</sup> F.H. O'Donnell, *The Irish Parliamentary Party* (2 vols, London, 1910), vol. 2, 428; Brasted, 'Indian nationalist development', pp. 37–63. <sup>30</sup> Michael Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* (London, 1904), p. 447. <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>32</sup> R.P. Masani, *Dadabhai Naoroji: the Grand Old Man of India* (London, 1939), p. 227, quoted in Mary Cumpston, 'Some early Indian nationalists and their allies in the British Parliament, 1851–1906,' *English Historical Review*, 76 (1961), 279–97. <sup>33</sup> Naoroji to Davitt, 15 January 1896, quoted in Brasted, 'Indian nationalist development' p. 49. <sup>34</sup> Blunt, *Land War in Ireland*, p. 318. Blunt felt the scheme to be premature, and better pursued once Home Rule had been achieved.

Think it would be a big risk for the Congress movement for *me* to accept this invitation. The Anglo-Indian press would howl with frantic madness at such an event, while the Times and Co would scarcely be able to write from indignation. This, however, would not affect me much. The question is would my presiding at this Congress help the cause of the Indian people?<sup>35</sup>

His friend and fellow-nationalist MP, Alfred Webb, presided at the Congress instead.<sup>36</sup> The opportunity to assist by providing Irish seats for unrepresented nations within the empire was lost but in his parliamentary interventions Davitt repeatedly raised Indian issues.

In 1885, in his first book, *Leaves from a Prison Diary*, Davitt had expressed his conviction that 'the overthrow of British rule in India is only a question of time.'<sup>37</sup> Independence was delayed by the difficulties of organising a united movement in such a large and diverse nation and by the poverty to which it had been reduced, but, he argued, the British were deceiving themselves if they thought that India was content. He linked the abuses of British rule in Ireland and India to the class system in Britain.<sup>38</sup>

Imperial policies toward Canada and Australia were considerably more liberal than those pursued elsewhere. In the second half of the nineteenth century both colonies moved toward self-government and Davitt took a close interest in this process. In late 1891 he paid a visit to the north west of Canada, publishing his impressions in an article in the *Nineteenth Century*.<sup>39</sup> Canada had been granted dominion status as a federal state with its own national government in 1867. In certain respects it challenged his views. Normally an opponent of emigration, he could see the extent to which any future development of north-western Canada would depend on a continued influx of immigrants. He also appreciated the opportunities it offered to impoverished emigrants from the old world anxious to make a new start. Furthermore, although a lifelong proponent of national independence, he was forced to admit that this was not what the Canadians he spoke to were seeking, as it would leave their country vulnerable to absorption by the United States. They preferred the broad measure of autonomy they enjoyed by remaining part of the British empire, a fact that he recognized.

Davitt had been anxious to visit Australia for over a decade when in 1895 he undertook a seven-month lecture tour through Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand, addressing some seventy-two public meetings and gathering material

35 Davitt Papers, MS 9556, Diary, 3 October 1894. See Brasted, 'Indian nationalist development', pp. 57-63, on the alarm caused in India by parallels being drawn with the Irish movement. 36 Webb described the Congress in detail in his autobiography, see Marie-Louise Legg (ed.) *Alfred Webb: The Autobiography of a Quaker Nationalist* (Cork, 1999), pp. 67-71. He had been a member of the parliamentary committee on India since its formation in 1893. 37 *Leaves from a Prison Diary*, vol. 2, 156. 38 *Ibid.*, pp. 153-6. 39 Michael Davitt, 'Impressions of the Canadian North West', *Nineteenth Century*, 31 (April 1892), 631-47.



for the book he wrote on his return.<sup>40</sup> As in Canada, he relished the more democratic and egalitarian atmosphere of this other new world. At the time of his visit Australia was about to be transformed from six separate colonies into the self-governing federal structure embodied in the new constitutional arrangement established in 1900. He paid close attention to the rise of the Australian labour movement, the granting of women's suffrage in some of the colonies, and the workings of the various parliaments. He could not help remarking on the discrepancy between the granting of home rule in 1890 to Western Australia, a community of only 45,000 people ('a population about equal to that of Limerick'), 'after denying in 1886 a cribb'd, cabined, and confined self-governing constitution to five millions of people in Ireland'.<sup>41</sup>

For some political thinkers of the day, the developments in Canada and Australia pointed the way for an evolution of the empire toward a looser federation of self-governing states, each enjoying 'home rule'. While Davitt might have accepted this as an improvement on the existing empire, he was ultimately a republican nationalist whose aim, for Ireland and elsewhere, was the establishment of sovereign national republics.

By the mid-1890s he was one of the leaders of the anti-Parnellite faction of the Irish Parliamentary Party. He evinced an intense dislike of the House of Commons, once telling it that he saw membership as a punishment, and that he 'sighed while sitting helpless on these Benches, for the days when, instead of vainly trying to make laws, I might have built up a lasting reputation in Dartmoor as a stonebreaker'.<sup>42</sup> Most of his activity in the House was directed to exposing abuses in the government's policy or activity, both imperial and domestic. His questions were generally brief and he once described himself as 'a rather silent member',<sup>43</sup> although there were some longer interventions. Although he was first returned to Westminster in July 1892, his most active participation came in the years 1896-9.

In February 1897 he drew the attention of the House of Commons to a famine that had broken out in the Central Provinces of India in 1895.<sup>44</sup> The following week he was a prominent speaker at a public meeting organised by the Social Democratic Federation in London to protest at the famine, moving a resolution:

That this meeting of the citizens of London calls upon the Government to stop now and henceforth the drain of produce from India officially certified at a value of more than £20,000,000 sterling a year, used to pay home charges, pensions, interest, etc., this drain having caused and now hideously intensifying the famine which is devastating British India.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Michael Davitt, *Life and Progress in Australasia* (London, 1898). <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27. <sup>42</sup> *Hansard*, 4th ser., vol. 53, col. 1094 (1898). This was a reference to the seven and a half years Davitt spent serving a sentence to hard labour in Dartmoor and other prisons for treason-felony. <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 52, cols 443-4 (1897). <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 45, col. 1555 (8 February 1897). <sup>45</sup> *Justice*, 13 February 1897, Davitt Papers, MS 9620, f. 20.

The famine was accompanied by a cholera epidemic and the authorities had taken sweeping powers to enforce the plague regulations, which Swift MacNeill (MP for South Donegal) claimed were enforced insensitively.<sup>46</sup> Shortly afterwards two British officials were murdered in Poona. Two suspects, the Natu brothers, were held under the Bombay Act that allowed arrest on the warrant of the viceroy if he considered them 'dangerous persons' and imprisonment for an indefinite period. This detention without trial was denounced by both Davitt and MacNeill, and compared to the *lettres de cachet* used by the Bourbon government against their enemies before the French Revolution. Davitt claimed that the outcry in the British press occasioned by the murders had been unfair to India and urged that the standards of justice provided under the British constitution should extend to its rule of India. He went on to question Britain's right to rule in India in general. The only justification, he argued, for 'holding India by the sword would be in making it a prosperous and contented country'. He contended that British governments had failed to do this, citing continuing high levels of illiteracy, the waste of money on twenty border expeditions and failure to carry out irrigation works.<sup>47</sup> While condemning what he termed 'these cowardly acts of assassination', he argued that they were very rare in India and that 'foreign domination and foreign officialism' were likely occasionally to drive men to commit them. He praised the Indian population for its patience and caused some amusement in the House by asking what would be the difficulties facing them if instead of having to deal with 250 million Indians they had to deal with 250 million Irishmen. He concluded by saying:

He felt very strongly in sympathy with the Indian people. He felt the deepest sympathy with every people who were subject to another nation. He was one of those who believed that England had no right whatever to rule in any country outside her own borders and he sincerely hoped and trusted that, unless the British Government would extend to British subjects in India the full right of protection of the British Constitution, the Indian people would undertake by means fair and honourable, to win their own independence.<sup>48</sup>

Davitt's interest in the British empire was wide-ranging. He denounced the mistreatment of the Ashanti king Prempeh by the British army in 1896, 1897 and 1898;<sup>49</sup> questioned the Royal Niger Company's behaviour in Benin;<sup>50</sup> in 1897 he queried the need for British involvement in Sudan;<sup>51</sup> in 1898 he

<sup>46</sup> *Hansard*, 4th ser., vol. 52, col. 441 (5 August 1897). <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, cols 447–8. <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, cols 437–448. <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 51, cols 1440, 1441 (19 June 1897); vol. 45, col. 678 (28 January 1897); vol. 53, cols 1632, 1633 (24 February 1898). For a succinct account of British involvement in West Africa in the late nineteenth century, see M.E. Chamberlain, *The Scramble for Africa* (London, 1999), pp. 42–57. <sup>50</sup> *Hansard*, 4th ser., vol. 45, col. 188 (21 January 1897). <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 1499 (5 February 1897).

demanded to know why the Chinese leader, Sun Yat Sen, had been excluded from Hong Kong two years earlier;<sup>52</sup> and he condemned the use of 'dum-dum' or exploding bullets in India and South Africa.<sup>53</sup>

The most significant challenge to the British empire of the nineteenth century came at its close with the Second Boer War. As in the case of India, developments in Ireland and South Africa were intertwined. It was in opposition to the British annexation of the Transvaal in the summer of 1877 that Parnell had first come to prominence in a forty-five-hour obstruction of the debate on the South African Confederation Bill. This opposition had been compromised somewhat by the acceptance by Parnell of a £11,000 subsidy from Cecil Rhodes in 1888.<sup>54</sup> Davitt had denounced the Jameson Raid in an interview in the *New York Evening Sun* on 2 January 1896, attributing its countermanding by the British government to fear of American reaction and claiming that the raid had been planned by Englishmen in the Transvaal in revenge for the Boer victory at Majuba Hill and in pursuit of 'the rich mines of Johannesburg'.<sup>55</sup> When in June 1899 he asked the first lord of the treasury, Arthur Balfour, whether the government claimed 'suzerain rights over the South African Republic,' he received no reply.<sup>56</sup> By the time war broke out on 11 October 1899 there had been a considerable build up of public opinion in Ireland in favour of the Boers. On 1 October Dublin had seen a mass meeting of over 20,000 people in Beresford Place to protest against 'the attack of England upon the liberties of Transvaal'. It was chaired by John O'Leary and Davitt proposed the motion 'That this great meeting of the citizens of Dublin sends its sympathy to the Boers, and hopes, should war result from the present crisis, that Providence will give them a victory over the tyrannous armaments of England.'<sup>57</sup>

Three weeks later, in the most famous speech of his parliamentary career, Davitt resigned, denouncing the action against the Boers as 'the meanest war this country has ever waged against a civilised race'.<sup>58</sup> As a journalist, he was particularly incensed by the jingoistic press campaign against the Boers, which he saw as occasioned purely by the wish to annex the Transvaal and Orange Free State. He denounced what he saw as a 'stockbrokers' war' and argued that there was no basis to the claims that the Uitlanders were discriminated against,

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 56, cols 219, 220 (5 April 1898); vol. 62, cols 76, 77 (18 July 1898). Sun Yat Sen wrote to Davitt to thank him for his efforts, Davitt Papers, MSS 9488/4918, 4919. <sup>53</sup> *Hansard*, 4th ser., vol. 56, col. 803 (22 April, 1898); vol. 74, col. 302 (10 July 1899); col. 468 (11 July 1899); cols 687, 688 (13 July 1899). <sup>54</sup> £10,000 was donated by Rhodes and a further £1,000 by John Morrogh, under an agreement that Parnell and his party would press for the retention of Irish representatives in Westminster in the next Home Rule bill, and arrangement which would further Rhodes' scheme of imperial federation, see Donal P. McCracken, *The Irish Pro-Boers, 1877-1902* (Johannesburg and Cape Town, 1989), pp. 23-34. <sup>55</sup> *New York Evening Sun*, 2 January 1896, Davitt Papers, MS 9620, fol. 43. <sup>56</sup> *Hansard*, 4th ser., vol. 73, col. 1155 (30 June 1899). <sup>57</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 2 October 1899, p. 6. <sup>58</sup> *Hansard*, 4th ser., vol. 73, col. 618 (25 October 1899).

that the Boer governments were corrupt, or that they were unjust towards the Africans. He added that although Irish opposition to the war might damage the prospect for Home Rule, liberty for Ireland should never be purchased at the price of voting against liberty in South Africa.<sup>59</sup> His resignation made a deep impression inside and outside the House. The news was taken up and reported on the continent as well as in Britain and Ireland, and messages, both friendly and hostile, were received (including one threatening letter).<sup>60</sup>

Various motives were attributed to Davitt's resignation, from Tim Healy's malicious suggestion that he was piqued by his failure to win a nomination for Mayo County Council,<sup>61</sup> to the suggestion that he had decided to move to a warmer climate for the sake of his health. The most likely explanation, however, is simply that after the demoralising experience of backbiting and petty infighting of the 1890s, Davitt felt that at last he had been presented with a great struggle into which he could throw himself. He took an active part in the Irish pro-Boer movement, serving as a member of the Irish Transvaal Committee,<sup>62</sup> and toured Ireland addressing pro-Boer meetings. When it was announced that Trinity College had invited the colonial secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, to Dublin in December, to confer on him an honorary doctorate, he suggested another demonstration, exclaiming in a letter to Dillon,

What a horrible sink of anti-Irish feeling Trinity College is; I am inclined to think that there should be a pro-Boer demonstration in Dublin on Saturday the 17th – the day before Joe comes. Oh, for a Corporation that would vote the Freedom of Dublin to Joubert on the 18th!<sup>63</sup>

Whether on Davitt's prompting or independently, the Transvaal Committee organised a demonstration at Beresford Place for 17 December. On the eve of the event Dublin Castle banned the meeting and rioting followed attempts to hold the demonstration and police efforts to prevent it. Eventually it was held outside the Transvaal Committee's offices on Abbey Street; William Redmond and Davitt addressed the crowds, denouncing both the war and Chamberlain's part in it.<sup>64</sup>

Four months after his resignation Davitt travelled to South Africa as a war correspondent. Once he had decided to make the journey he set about trying to

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 622. His point was that there was a strong likelihood that Irish support for the Boers would alienate Liberal leaders who might otherwise have supported the cause of Irish Home Rule. <sup>60</sup> Davitt Papers, MS 9419, has press cuttings from eleven French newspapers, including *La Patrie*, *Le Figaro* and *La Libre Parole*, two Belgian, one German and one Swiss paper. The threatening letter is MS 9419/2094. <sup>61</sup> *Dublin Evening Telegraph*, 25 October 1899. <sup>62</sup> McCracken, *Irish Pro-Boers*, p. 48, lists him among regular attenders, along with F.B. Burke, A. Griff, P.T. Hoctor, George Lyons, K.J.W. O'Beirne, William Redmond, William Rooney, T. O'Neill Russell, T.D. Sullivan, Peter White and W.B. Yeats. The chief activists were Maud Gonne, Arthur Griffith and John O'Leary. <sup>63</sup> Davitt Papers, MS 9410/1797, Davitt to Dillon, n.d. Piet Joubert was commander-general of the Boer army. <sup>64</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 18 December 1899; see also McCracken, *Irish Pro-Boers*, pp. 63–7.

find newspaper commissions to finance it. He had to borrow £250 to pay his travel costs and to meet family expenses while he was away. The *Freeman's Journal* agreed to take his articles and after he had started on his journey he received a cable at Marseilles informing him that Hearst's *New York Journal* would do so as well but his offer to cover the war for the *Irish World* was not accepted.<sup>65</sup>

Davitt spent from late March to June 1900 in South Africa, travelling through the Transvaal and Orange Free State on trains and horse-drawn cars, meeting and interviewing Boer leaders and observing the people. He attended the last meeting of the Transvaal parliament, the Volksraad, on 7 May, describing the atmosphere as funereal, despite an impassioned valedictory address by President Kruger.<sup>66</sup> He remained in South Africa until after the fall of Pretoria on 5 June. The Boer leaders were clearly glad of his support and gave him valuable assistance, so that the dispatches he sent back to Europe were very detailed. He had taken some risks to travel to South Africa – and not only financial ones. With Britain and the Boers at war and his open espousal of the latter in his columns, he was always likely to have attracted a certain amount of public hostility in Britain.<sup>67</sup> He wrote to John Dillon from Pretoria before departing to send word to Paris to let him know 'how feeling is in my regard in the London press and otherwise owing to my visit out here'. He had heard threats in South Africa that there would be an attempt to arrest him on his return and was anxious to be forewarned so that if necessary he would take his family to America until the dust settled.<sup>68</sup> In the event this proved unnecessary, although there were sporadic attacks in the press, such as the letter in the Unionist *Daily Express* in October 1900 asking 'can any of your readers explain how it is that Michael Davitt, after joining the enemy in the Transvaal, is still at large and at liberty to deliver electioneering harangues'.<sup>69</sup>

Davitt had written to Dillon from Naples of his anxiety to return home and begin work on a book about his visit to South Africa. Two years later he published *The Boer Fight for Freedom*, an analysis of the war from a strongly pro-Boer point of view. Beginning with an analysis of the background to the war, the book examines Boer society and the political constitution of the Transvaal and Orange Free State, and provides detailed accounts of the military campaigns, interspersed

<sup>65</sup> Davitt Papers, MS 9572, Diary, 24 February 1900; *ibid.*, 9411/1801, Davitt to Dillon, n.d. (early January 1900). Ford later told Davitt that his war letters, which he had read in the Dublin edition of the *Freeman's Journal*, were 'decidedly the best war letters I have seen published during the entire war', *ibid.*, 9483/4746, Ford to Davitt, 20 July 1900. <sup>66</sup> Michael Davitt, *The Boer Fight for Freedom* (New York and London, 1902), pp. 421–30. <sup>67</sup> His diaries tell of his suspicions of being followed by detectives in Marseilles before he boarded the *Oxus* for South Africa, Davitt Papers, MS 9572, fol. 17, Diary, 25 February 1900, of a rumoured attempt to kidnap him, *ibid.*, 9573, fols. 3–4, Diary, 9 May 1900, and a fabricated interview with him was published in the *St James's Gazette* in June 1900. <sup>68</sup> Davitt Papers, MS 9411/1803, Davitt to Dillon, 25 April 1900; he wrote again expressing similar fears from Naples on 23 June, MS 9411/1811. <sup>69</sup> *Daily Express*, 16 October 1900, press cutting pasted onto the inside front cover of Davitt's diary, Davitt Papers, MS 9573.

with his own experiences and impressions of places and leaders and is accompanied by his and other photographs. It was, as Howe puts it, 'the most substantial Irish nationalist consideration of the conflict',<sup>70</sup> but it was also, as Howe points out, a flawed account. Davitt's sympathy for the Boers and their struggle at times clouded his judgement and led him into inconsistencies and oversimplification. He greatly admired the courage of the small republics in their resistance to the might of the British empire. He extolled the 'manliness' and stoicism of the people, which he compared to the dissolute behaviour of the fortune-seeking Uitlanders. His denunciation of the role of the mine owners in the origins of the war was apposite, although unfortunately in both his parliamentary speeches and in his book, it led him into a measure of antisemitism. On 17 October 1899, in an address in answer to the queen's speech, he had asked 'Who are the head and front of the Uitlander agitation? Here are the names of some of the "fine old English gentlemen" for whom the British Empire is going to war. They are nearly all millionaires and leading Uitlanders – Beit, Wernher, Eckstein, Rouilot, Bernato, Adler, Lowe, Wolff, Goldmann, Neumann, and Goertz.'<sup>71</sup> Davitt's tone here is curious because in an age when overt antisemitism was common, in Ireland as elsewhere, he defended Jews on more than one occasion in his career. He took part in a mass demonstration against the persecution of Russian Jews held in London in 1890, and acted as investigator for the *New York American* into the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, writing his fifth book, *Within the Pale*, as a study of the situation of Jews in Russia.<sup>72</sup> The following year he denounced as a national disgrace antisemitic sermons by a Redemptorist priest that stirred up attacks on Jews in Limerick. As Donal Lowry has pointed out, antisemitic attitudes were widespread among opponents of the Boer War, including J.A. Hobson, the socialist Edward Carpenter and the trade union leader John Burns.<sup>73</sup> But in Davitt's case it appears incongruous: he clearly made a sharp distinction between privileged Jews and their downtrodden co-religionists.<sup>74</sup>

Even more striking is Davitt's inconsistency in his treatment of Africans. In 1898 he had defended the rights of West Africans to govern their own country,<sup>75</sup> a rather radical position to take in a prevailing atmosphere in which even

<sup>70</sup> Howe, *Ireland and Empire*, p. 46. <sup>71</sup> *Hansard*, 4th ser., vol. 73, col. 125 (17 October 1899).

<sup>72</sup> Michael Davitt, *Within the Pale: the True Story of Anti-Semitic Persecutions in Russia* (New York, 1903); see also Carla King, 'Michael Davitt and the Kishinev pogrom, 1903,' *Irish Slavonic Studies*, 17 (1996), 19–43. <sup>73</sup> Donal Lowry, "'The Boers were the beginning of the end'?: the wider impact of the South African War,' in Donal Lowry (ed.), *The South African War Reappraised* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 203–46. <sup>74</sup> This led him to the peculiar statement in the introduction to *Within the Pale*: 'Where anti-Semitism stands, in fair political combat, in opposition to the foes of nationality, or against the engineers of a sordid war in South Africa ... I am resolutely in line with its spirit and programme', although he goes on to attack it in relation to the Kishinev pogrom as 'a thing deserving of no more toleration from right-minded men than do the germs of some malady laden with the poison of a malignant disease' (p. ix). <sup>75</sup> *Hansard*, 4th ser., vol. 53, col. 1633 (24 February 1898).

many reformers who would have granted a measure of self-government to the Indians might have denied it to Africans.<sup>76</sup> However, in his accounts of the situation in South Africa he adopted the same racist tone towards the African population as the Boers, describing them on several occasions as 'savages' and refusing to see in British criticism of Boer treatment of the Africans anything more than a smokescreen for their own ambitions.

Davitt considered the Boer War to be a turning point in Britain's imperial prestige, because it had alienated the other western nations by its aggressive actions towards a small and relatively defenceless country. On witnessing the arrival of some 400 English prisoners on a train after the British defeat at Sannaspos, he confided his mixed feelings to his diary: 'A personal sympathy towards them as prisoners; a political feeling that the enemy of Ireland and of nationality was humiliated before me and that I stood in one of the few places in the world in which the power of England was weak, helpless and despised.'<sup>77</sup>

In his day, through his books and journalism, Davitt's impact on public opinion, both in Ireland and among the Irish abroad, was considerable. In his view nationalism and imperialism were incompatible. While the imperialist assumed that, in Thornton's words, 'good government was better than self-government',<sup>78</sup> Davitt held that only self-government would bring good government because it alone would express the democratic will of the people governed. His internationalist approach, always a minority view among the Irish Party, was to be drowned out in the rise of Irish-Irelandism, with which he explicitly disagreed.<sup>79</sup> In part this was attributable to a generation difference: he was already in his fifties when he served as an MP. Throughout Europe – and Ireland was no exception here – nationalism was taking on a more chauvinistic, even racist tinge. With a few exceptions, such as Roger Casement, E.D. Morel and a handful more, Irish nationalism for the next half-century at least, was to become relatively inward-looking, dominated by the relationship with Britain. While Davitt would have identified himself first as an Irish nationalist, he also sympathised with the downtrodden everywhere, from Australian Aborigines, to Indian workers in South Africa, to Jews in Russia and others.<sup>80</sup> His approach may be summed up in the epitaph he once claimed for himself: 'Here lies a man who from his cradle to his grave was considered by his foes to be a traitor to alien rule and oppression in Ireland and in every land outside her shores.'

<sup>76</sup> Indeed, Lord Salisbury, in a speech on Irish Catholics and Home Rule, had declared as axiomatic that: 'You you would not confide free representative institutions to the Hottentots, for instance', *The Times*, 17 May 1886. <sup>77</sup> Davitt Papers, MS 9572, f. 121, Diary, 4 April 1900. <sup>78</sup> Thornton, *The Imperial Idea*, p. 70. <sup>79</sup> *The Nationist*, 1 February 1906. <sup>80</sup> David Krause identifies him as 'the conscience of Ireland' (or its representative) in his article, 'The conscience of Ireland: Lalor, Davitt, and Sheehy-Skeffington,' *Éire-Ireland*, 38:1 (Spring 1993), 7–31, but his emphasis is firmly on Davitt's influence in Ireland. Davitt might also be seen as a pioneer of the idea of an ethical foreign policy.