

James Fintan Lalor



“Someone, somehow, somewhere must strike the first blow for Ireland”.

James Fintan Lalor was born on the 10th March 1807 at Tenakill, Raheen Co Laois the eldest son of twelve children of Patrick and Ann Lalor. His spine was injured at birth and as a result he was hunch-backed. He was shortsighted, deaf and suffered from acute asthma all his life. James Fintan was educated at home and later at Carlow Lay College. Although he was apprenticed for a while to Dr. Jacob, a chemist in Portlaoise most of his life was spent in seclusion.



Ireland in the 1830's and early 1840's was very concerned with the political struggle for repeal of the union with Britain. Daniel O'Connell, who had succeeded in achieving Catholic Emancipation, led the Repeal Movement. He organized "Monster meetings around the country to get people to support the Repeal Movement.

A new movement called "Young Irelanders" soon challenged his leadership of Irish Nationalism. This new movement consisted of young idealistic nationalists who found O'Connell's ideas upsetting. The leading figures included Thomas Davis and Charles Gavan Duffy. The Young Irelanders movement had a newspaper called "The Nation"

James Fintan wrote mainly on the land question. He wanted the land of Ireland to be for the people of Ireland. His famous quote was "Ireland her own - Ireland her own and all therein from the sod to the sky. The soil of Ireland for the people of Ireland, to have and to hold from God alone who gave it- to have and to hold to them and their heirs forever, without suit or service, faith or fealty, rent or render."

He is also reported as saying

"Whoever owns the land rules the people".

James Fintan supported his father on the Tithe Question but disagreed with him about supporting Daniel O'Connell on Repeal of the Act of Union because he wanted the Land Problems solved first. He even wrote to the British Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel to complain about O'Connell. This upset his father who was a friend and admirer of O'Connell.

Between 1845 and 1850 Ireland was hit by a calamity – the Famine. The population fell from over 8 million to 6.5 million. The decrease in population from starvation, fever and emigration left deep emotional scars. In the long and troubled history between Ireland and Britain no issue has produced so much anger as that of the famine.

The British were accused of “failing to stop corn and other grain exports from Ireland” during this period. The British Government felt that the social structure (landlord / tenant) would collapse if it distributed free food and resisted all suggestions to do so. Meanwhile speculators made fortunes from continuing grain exports while starving families roamed the countryside looking for food. The reality for many people in Ireland from 1845-1850 was that society was collapsing, millions were dying or fleeing the country and the main consideration for most was how to stay alive.

The Famine changed James Fintan’s views and by 1847 he was writing about revolution. Canon Conor O Hanlon who wrote ‘The History of Laois’ described James Fintan as “The fiercest felon of them all”.

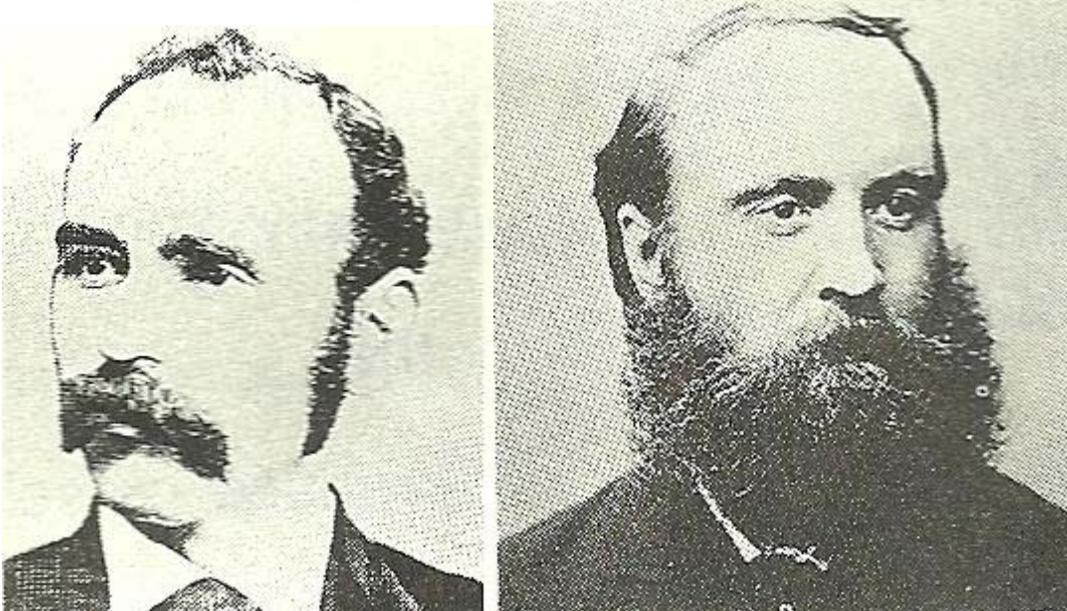
The Young Irelanders James Fintan Lalor and John Mitchel held firmly to the view that Britain failed to stop corn exports and they published their views in The Nation, The United Irishman and The Irish Felon.

From 1847 onwards James Fintan Lalor set the revolutionary agenda for freedom from England.

Even in 1848 he was far seeing enough to know that neither the Land Problems nor the freedom of Ireland could be achieved separately. In 1848 in an article he wrote in The Irish Felon he said “ To achieve independence – the only form in which repeal can ever be carried- there is, I am convinced, but one way alone; and that is, to link Repeal to some other question like a railway carriage to the engine; some question possessing the intrinsic strength which Repeal wants; and strong enough to carry both itself and Repeal together- if any such question can be found. And such a question there is in the land. One ready prepared- ages have been preparing it. An engine ready-made- one too, that will generate it’s own steam without cost or care- A self-acting engine, if once the fire be kindled and the fuel to kindle- the sparks for the kindling are everywhere. Repeal has always to be dragged. This I speak of will carry itself, as the cannon-ball carries itself down the hill.”

In 1848 he also demanded “Our fair share of Ireland, our fair share of the earth, a house to live in that no-one can tumble down, a happy home, the necessities of life, all those things without which the world is worthless and existence itself is a misery: these we must have and security for all these”. Moreover, he wrote: “forever henceforth, the owners of our soil must be Irish...unmuzzle the wolf dog”. Lalor’s call for National Revolution was new. It promised action instead of suffering and grew directly out of the desperation caused by the ‘Great Hunger’

This is difficult language for us to understand but our teacher said that what he meant was that if the Land Problem and the Self Rule problems were done at the same time one would help the other. Ireland at this time depended almost completely on Agriculture for jobs so if the Irish owned the land they would be able to elect their own MPs and then get independence for Ireland. He said that a Man called Michael Davitt and Charles Stewart Parnell later saw this and worked well together. Our teacher said that James Fintan Lalor was ahead of his time in expressing these views.



As well as his inspirational writings, Lalor sought to inspire and organize direct action on behalf of the downtrodden Irish tenant farmers. Lalor called on them to save themselves from starvation and overthrow British authority by a general strike against rent.

In his final days James Fintan who had been against violence all his life

reluctantly found himself involved in two attempted rebellions in Tipperary and Waterford in September. In 1848 Lalor helped John Martin found the Irish Felon before partaking in the June 1848 Rising at Clonakilty near Thurles, County Tipperary after which he was arrested and imprisoned in Nenagh Jail, and then transferred to Newgate Prison in Dublin. His health, never good, was permanently shattered in the close confinement, but as soon as his release came, he gathered a few comrades around him where he lived in Capel St. in Dublin, and began to plan for insurrection.

He became intimate with John O'Leary and Thomas Clarke Luby, who were destined to become leaders of the Fenian Movement, and with them and John Savage and Joseph Brennan he led an attempted Rising in Waterford and Tipperary in September 1849. There was a partial rally, but it proved a failure. But Lalor was satisfied that it perpetuated, even flickeringly, the flame of revolt against British rule in Ireland.

A little over three months later he died. The imprisonment, the restless planning and working and writing had told on the weak frame, and on December 27, 1849, James Fintan Lalor, one of the greatest of the great lovers of Ireland, was carried to his last resting place in Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin.

The Fenian movement was greatly motivated by the writings of Lalor and Mitchel. Their writings also inspired the actions of Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-1891) and the members of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Likewise their theories greatly influenced Michael Davitt and the Irish National Land League. Davitt said of Lalor "he made the ownership of the soil the basis of the fight for self-government in Ireland". Their ideas ultimately brought James Connolly (1868-1916) and Patrick Pearse (1879-1916) together. Connolly described Lalor as "a revolutionist and rebel against all forms of political and social injustice".