

**DANIEL O'CONNELL**  
**An Appraisal**

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# 1. Daniel O'Connell

## **Family**

The first 47 years of the nineteenth century are often known in the history of Ireland, as the age of Daniel O'Connell. O'Connell was born in 1775 in a wild part of Co. Kerry, the barony of Iveragh, which forms the extreme western part of the peninsula that runs out from Killarney. It is mountainous and weather-beaten tourist country, facing the Atlantic and separated from the rest of Ireland by a range of mountains. O'Connell's family had long occupied a considerable position among the Catholics of that county, a county noted not only for its national and Catholic feeling, but also for its addiction to smuggling.

## **Education and career**

Educated in France, O'Connell was called to the Irish Bar in 1798, being one of the first Catholics to enter the legal profession after Catholics had been permitted to do so in 1792, and he rapidly became one of the most successful barristers in Ireland. A handsome man with dark curly hair, he was in no sense an academic lawyer, but his eloquence, charm and ability to judge character made him a top-notch criminal advocate, able to earn by the mid-1820s, over £5,000 a year.

Such talents made not only O'Connell the foremost advocate of the Irish Bar in the early nineteenth century, but also the most prominent of Irish politicians. He made his first political speech in 1799; in the 1820's he assumed the leadership of the movement for Catholic Emancipation; and in 1829 he gave up his practice at the Bar to concentrate on politics. Supported by the voluntary subscriptions of his supporters, O'Connell took up such causes as the Tithe issue and the Repeal of the Union, and became the most controversial figure in Irish and Anglo-Irish politics until his death in 1847.

## 2. Reputation

### **‘The Liberator’**

Never has a man been so loved or so hated. Those who loved him were impressed by his looks, his charm and his courtesy. More especially, by his forceful personality, by his great energy and enthusiasm, and his oratorical gifts, he gained great power over Catholic masses in Ireland. By playing on their emotions, he welded them together and made them feel important. To the Catholic Irish, this man of charm and presence was ‘the Liberator’.

### **‘The chief quack of the world’**

It is, however, possible to paint a very different picture of O’Connell. Sometimes observers found it difficult to determine whether O’Connell was a sincere politician or merely a demagogue who enjoyed publicity. Some doubted his sincerity, while others disapproved of his apparent love of power. To the economist Nassau Senior, O’Connell was ‘a perfect mob orator, and to Thomas Carlyle, he was ‘the chief quack of the world’, ‘the Demosthenes of Blarney’. Such English commentators might have been expected to have taken a jaundiced view of O’Connell, but one Catholic Frenchman shared their views, doubting whether O’Connell was a man of ‘very steady principle’, claiming that,

He is only a demagogue; he is no such thing as a great orator; he is windy and declamatory; his arguments have no conviction; his imagination has no charm, no freshness; his style is harsh, abrupt and incoherent; the more I see of him the more I am confirmed in my first opinion that he is not stamped with the seal of genius or of true greatness.

Not only did critics regard O’Connell as a demagogue, they also thought him self-interested, especially in the matter of money. To become a professional politician he had given up a large income at the Bar, and he was forced to collect funds from the people. Those collections undoubtedly gave unity of sentiment and helped to finance his campaign, but the money boxes at his meetings, especially those attended by the poorest, struck for the stranger a discordant note.

O’Connell’s need for money can be partly excused on the grounds that he needed to keep up appearances and inspire his poor compatriots. Had he, remarked one German commentator, ‘clothed himself in rags and subsisted on nothing but potatoes, he might

never have attained such power, but, on the contrary, have been despised and neglected by the people'. Nevertheless, even when this is said, the fact remains that O'Connell was extravagant, living far beyond the people's real means.

According to *The Times*, O'Connell was

Scum, condensed of Irish bog!  
Ruffian, coward, demagogue,  
Boundless liar, base detractor  
Nurse of murders, treason's factor.  
Of pope and priest to crouching slave  
While they lips of treason rave.  
Ireland's peasants feed thy purse  
Still, thou art her bane and curse.

### **O'Connell's oratory**

One of the reasons for his appeal in Ireland was his oratory. Although some foreign observers found O'Connell's style unattractive, nevertheless it appealed to the Irish masses. O'Connell was the master of the monster meetings he held during the agitations for Emancipation and Repeal. There he was at his demagogic best, playing on the emotions of his audience like an accomplished musician on his instrument.

The audience laughed when they were supposed to laugh, cried when they were supposed to cry, cheered when he wanted them to cheer, and when he wanted quiet, it was like the church consecration. He flattered his audience - the most virtuous, religious, intelligent, loyal, brave and strongest people in the world. Then he described the benefits they would derive from emancipation or repeal, and went on to warn the government of the consequences of ignoring these demonstrations of opinion. During the Repeal agitation, he concluded by praising the Queen.

Even the most sober men of intellect were moved by such scenes. Lord Lytton had left a verse description of one of the repeal meetings, and it is well worth quoting.

Once to my sight the giant was given:  
Walled by the wide air, and roofed by boundless heaven,  
Beneath his feet the human ocean lay,  
And wave on wave flowed into space away.  
Methought no clarion could have sent its sound  
Even to the centre of the hosts around;

But, as I thought, rose the sonorous swell  
    As from some church tower swing the silvery bell.  
Aloft and cleared, from airy tide to tide  
    It glided, easy as a bird may glide;  
To the last verge of that vast audience sent,  
    It played with each wild passion as it went;  
Now stirred the uproar, now the murmur still,  
    And sobs or laughter answered as it willed.

### 3. Tithes

#### **Concrete reforms for Ireland**

Having won Emancipation in 1829, O'Connell did consider agitating for repeal, but on reflection, he put a low priority on it. Instead, he co-operated with other reformers in Britain to win concrete reforms for Ireland, forming a reasonably close working relationship with the Whigs when they were in office in the 1830s.

#### **The tithe issue**

Thus, the issue which most moved Ireland in the 1830s was the question of tithes, not that of repeal. Catholics resented paying tithes, on arable land, for the upkeep of the alien and Protestant Church of Ireland, especially when tithes were collected by often ruthless tithe proctors or tithe farmers.

#### **The tithe war**

In the 1830s, the Irish tenantry began to resist payment and in 1831 the tithe war broke out in Graiguenamanagh in County Kilkenny. The people there declared to the local magistrate,

Let the parson wait until Parliament meets; maybe Parliament will pay them; we won't anyhow. Daniel O'Connell will get the tithes taken off us as he got emancipation.

The people were as good as their word, and the parson failed to collect the tithe, despite the help of 600 police and military.

Other places followed Kilkenny's lead. It was intended, at first, to be a campaign of passive resistance, but soon violence erupted and many conflicts were reported between people armed with sticks, stones and pikes and the military armed with bayonets and rifles.

#### *'Massacre of Rathcormac'*

One of the most famous incidents in the tithe war occurred on 18 December 1834 at Gortroe, near Fermoy, County Cork: the so-called 'Massacre of Rathcormac'. During an attempt by the Rev. Archdeacon Ryder (popularly known as 'Black Billy') to collect £4.16s from a widow woman, Widow Ryan, the military (two companies of foot and one of dragoons) and police opened fire upon unarmed people gathered

to defend Widow Ryan's property by offering passive resistance. After the riot act was read, the cavalry opened fire, killing nine including the widow's son, aged twenty. The troops then seized four stacks of corn in satisfaction of the tithe demand.

### **Partial settlement**

The tithe war lasted until 1838, when at last the government intervened effectively. Melbourne's Whig government would not abolish tithes, partly because of the difficulty of getting such a measure through the Tory House of Lords.

Instead, the government altered the system. Tithes were lowered by a quarter and converted to a rent charge. The tenant paid an extra rent to the landlord, who in turn paid the parson. It was only a partial solution of the Roman Catholic grievance against the existence of the Protestant establishment in Ireland, but it brought the tithe war to an end.

## 4. Repeal

### **O'Connell and repeal**

It was the question of the repeal of the Union that exposed O'Connell to most criticism, not only in Great Britain, but also in Ireland.

O'Connell had long been opposed to the Act of Union. He had been among the Dublin lawyers who had spoken out against the Union when it was still being debated. In fact, he made his first public speech in 1798 on the matter, 'trembling', as he afterwards said, 'at the sound of his own voice'.

When the Act of Union was finally passed, he expressed his disappointment in the following words:

The year of the Union I was travelling through the mountain district from Killarney to Kildare. My heart was heavy with the loss Ireland had sustained. My soul felt dreary as I traversed the bleak solitudes. It was the Union that first stirred me up to come forward in politics. I was maddened when I heard the bells of St Patrick ringing out a joyous peal for Ireland's degradation, as if it was a glorious national festival. My blood boiled, and I vowed on that morning that the foul national dishonour should not last, if ever I could put an end to it.

### **Loyal National Repeal Association**

Yet it was not until the 1840s that O'Connell undertook a massive agitation for repeal. In 1840 he formed the Loyal National Repeal Association. Its ostensible object was the restoration of the Irish parliament, abolished in 1800.

O'Connell hoped to repeat the tactics of Catholic emancipation. The reason why he took up repeal in this manner was the return of a Conservative government under Peel. The limited gains he had won for Ireland by working with the Whigs in the 1830s helped him to decide on a return to his earlier methods, although the uncharitable reckoned that it was because he was on the verge of bankruptcy in 1840 and needed the people's 'rent'.

O'Connell duly launched a campaign of monster meetings, designating 1843 as 'Repeal Year'. However, the calling of his bluff by the British government not only meant that there was no repeal, but also produced a split in the repeal movement.

### **The Young Irelanders**

A section of the younger men broke away in 1846, and early in 1847 formed their own Irish Confederation. This Irish Confederation, launched in a surrealistically chivalrous manner, an abortive rebellion in 1848. It was led by William Smith O'Brien, and petered out in a widow's cabbage garden.

This agitation and the rift between O'Connell and the Young Irelanders raised a number of questions: what were the main differences in the sense of nationality held by O'Connell and the Young Irelanders; and why did they hold different views. Those questions raise notions of generational conflict and the possibility that ideas are formed by early experiences that crystallise early in life.

## 5. The Meaning of Repeal

Both O'Connell and the Young Irelanders wanted the restoration of the Irish parliament, but their reasons for doing so were very different, stemming from very different views of Ireland.

### O'Connell's pragmatic nationalism

O'Connell saw Ireland in humane, human and practical terms, wanting to see a well-governed and prosperous nation. It was for this reason that he wanted to Repeal the Union. British indifference, if not downright hostility to Ireland, had made the Union a farce and had, he argued, depressed the standard of living materially and spiritually, in Ireland. As he once put it in 1839,

There is an utter ignorance of, and indifference to, our sufferings and privations. It is really idle to expect that it could be otherwise! What care they for us, provided we be submissive, pay the taxes, furnish recruits for the Army and Navy, and bless the masters who either despise or oppress, or combine both. The apathy that exists respecting Ireland is worse than the national antipathy they bear us.

This was a recurrent theme of O'Connell's speeches and correspondence: a poor view of the English. As he wrote to Isaac Goldsmith in 1829, arranging to serve as parliamentary spokesman for Jewish Emancipation,

Allow me at once to commence my office of your advocate and begin by giving you advice. It is: not to postpone your claim to write beyond the second day of the ensuing session. Do not listen to those cautious persons who may recommend postponement .... You must, I repeat, *force* your question on the Parliament. You must not confide in English liberality. It is a plant not congenial to the British soil. It must be *forced*. It requires a *hot-bed*. The English were always persecutors. Before the so styled Reformation, the English tortured the Jews and strung up scores of Lollards. After that Reformation they still roasted the Jews and hung the Papists. In Mary's day the English, with their usual cruelty, retaliated the torches on the Protestants. After her short reign there were near two centuries of the most barbarous and unrelenting cruelty exercised towards the Catholics ... The Jews too suffered in the same way. I once more repeat. Do not confide in any liberality that which you will yourself

rouse into action and *compel* into operation.

O'Connell's rather mundane approach to Repeal and Ireland was summed up in a letter he wrote to the Earl of Shrewsbury in 1840. The letter was in reply to a pamphlet calling on the Catholics in Ireland to join with Catholics in Britain to uphold the Corn Laws. For Shrewsbury, Repeal was the 'Giant mischief of Liberality', but O'Connell retorted that Repeal was 'so much preferable to any other relief'.

## **Idealism of the Young Irelanders**

### *Heroic nationalism*

The Young Irelanders also subscribed to these critical views of the British connection, but they ultimately had a different vision of Ireland. They did not see Repeal in terms of practical reforms and better government. Rather, they saw the restoration of the Irish Parliament in more romantic and heroic terms. They wanted restoration to restore a sense of Irish nationality that had been eroded. Theirs was a cultural nationalism. They appealed to the past to promote a sense of comprehensive nationality and preached in the manner of the United Irishman, the unity of all classes and creeds. Pitting holy and rural Ireland against the greedy urbanisation of Britain, they aimed at 'enabling the soul' rather than improving material conditions.

The Young Irelanders rejected the economic laws of the marketplace as determinants of social relationships. For them, the ideal was 'an organic hierarchical community within a nation-state, with the efforts of each group directed towards the common good of all'. The nation was a spiritual entity, and the Young Irelanders dedicated themselves to recreating this national spirit, to cultivating the collective consciousness of the people, preaching the essential 'oneness' of the nation, and giving each member of the nation a sense of belonging whatever their rank, station or creed.

### *The Nation*

The Young Irelander's instrument for creating this national spirit was the *Nation* newspaper, which began publication in October 1842. Not only did the paper report the activities of the Repeal Movement, but it was packed with stories celebrating the heroic past of Ireland, and encouraging all aspects of native culture. Their romantic and heroic tone was summed up in a famous poem by Thomas Davis, lamenting the death of Owen Roe O'Neill in 1649. According to Yeats, the *Lament for Owen Roe* 'has the intensity of the old ballads, and to read it is to remember Parnell and Wolfe Tone, to mourn for every leader who has died among the ruins of the cause he had all but established, and to hear the lamentations of his people'.

### **Different views on the Irish language**

This was a far cry from the rather prosaic reasoning of O'Connell, and the differences in outlook between O'Connell and the Young Irelanders were further underlined in their attitudes towards the Irish language. O'Connell could take the Irish language or leave it, and on the whole regarded English as the sensible language to use - as the language of the present and the future.

Such a view was anathema to the Young Irelanders who attached an almost mystical significance to the Irish language as a badge of nationhood. As Thomas Davis once wrote:

The language which once grows up with the people is conformed to their organs ... mingled inseparably with their history and their soil, fitted beyond any other language to express their prevalent thoughts in the most natural and efficient way.

Such mysticism was far removed from the views of O'Connell, for whom nationalism was a matter of democracy and good government. As one of O'Connell's over-sympathetic biographers maintains,

O'Connell's nationality had an indispensable quality of universalism and a deep commitment to human rights and liberation which Irish nationalism was the poorer for ignoring while under the spell of writers such as Mitchell, Griffith and Pearse. Racial exclusiveness and the subjection of culture to politics revolted O'Connell.

## 6. Constitutional or Revolutionary Means?

The difference in vision between O'Connell and the Young Irelanders had important implications in practice for the conduct of the agitation for Repeal and for relations with Westminster.

### **Repeal or reform**

In the first place, although O'Connell always claimed to have Repeal as his ultimate aim, he was ever ready to shelve that issue in return for concrete reforms from Westminster. Thus, the emancipation agitation, working with the Whigs in the 1830's, and attempting to work with them again in the mid-1840's. Significantly, the original title of the Repeal Association had been cumbersome and cautious, 'National Association for Ireland for full and prompt justice or repeal'.

Such pragmatism was considered reprehensible by the Young Irelanders as a betrayal of Ireland. Their lofty earnestness left no room for compromise, and they were particularly censorious of the wheeling and dealing which was an essential feature of O'Connell's political style. According to John Mitchell, 'Poor old Dan' was a 'wonderful, mighty, jovial and mean old man! With silver tongue and smile of witchery, and heart of melting ruth! - lying tongue! Smile of treachery! Heart of unfathomable fraud! ... What a royal, yet vulgar soul ... with a base civility of a hound, and the cold cruelty of a spider!'

### **The question of violence**

The logical extension of the disagreement over pragmatic means was a violent disagreement over the question of violence. O'Connell abhorred bloodshed and constantly repeated that no revolution was worth the shedding of human blood. His rhetoric may have been violent, and his mass meetings were an exercise in constitutional intimidation, but, nevertheless, O'Connell was not willing to put his life or the lives of his followers at risk. Thus, it was that in October 1843 he climbed down in face of a government ban on the holding of a monster meeting at Clontarf.

This climb-down was the greatest treachery to many of the Young Irelanders who thought that a blood sacrifice would have averted later evils, such as the Famine. For the Young Irelanders, there was something noble in bloodshed. The sword had accomplished much elsewhere, and so it could in Ireland. As Thomas Francis Meagher put it,

Abhor the sword, and stigmatise the sword? No, my Lord, for at its blow a giant nation sprang from the waters of the Atlantic, and by its redeeming magic the fettered colony became a daring, free republic. Abhor the sword, and stigmatise the sword? No, my Lord, for it scourged the Dutch marauders out of the fine old towns of Belgium, back into their own phlegmatic swamps, and knocked their flag and laws, and sceptre, and bayonets, into the sluggish waters of the Scheldt. My Lord, I learn that it was the right of a nation to govern itself, not in this hall [Conciliation Hall, Dublin], but upon the ramparts of Antwerp. I learned the first article of the nation's creed from those ramparts, where freedom was justly estimated, and where the possession of the previous gift was purchased by the effusion of generous blood. My Lord, I admire the Belgians, I honour the Belgians for their courage and daring; and I will not stigmatise the means by which they obtained a citizen king, a chamber of deputies.

## 7. A Conflict of Generations?

The differences between Daniel O'Connell and the Young Irelanders require explanation, particularly as they raise more general questions about the origins of individuals' political ideas, and about generational conflict and the problem of political leadership and succession.

### **O'Connell's background**

Basic to any explanation of the conflict is the question of the formative years of the political development of O'Connell and the Young Irelanders. O'Connell had been born in 1775 to a substantial Catholic gentry family; he had been educated in France; and he had read for the Bar in London. The prevailing intellectual climate of his day may be described as liberal and egalitarian. During that time he embarked upon a wide course of reading which turned him from a Catholic Conservative into a Radical Utilitarian - Paine's *Age of Reason* and the libertarian ideas of William Godwin with prolonged excursions into Voltaire, Rousseau, Adam Smith and Bentham. The key words of such an intellectual diet were toleration, full civil and religious liberty, and the economic canon of laissez-faire.

Moreover, O'Connell's first-hand experience of the excesses of the French Revolution had left him with an abiding horror of violence as a political weapon. As he emphasised in 1838,

I was then satisfied that I had all the argument, all the reasoning with me in favour of Repeal. One only duty remained: it was, and is, to concert the means of effecting the restoration of the Irish parliament without bloodshed; my political creed being, that the best possible political revolution is not worth one single drop of human blood.

### **The Young Irelanders' background**

The Young Irelanders were brought up in a very different intellectual climate. For instance, Thomas Davis, a Protestant, born in 1814, had been educated at Trinity College, Dublin, and, although called to the Bar in Ireland, had preferred to be a man of ideas. The general store of ideas he drew upon were very different from O'Connell's formative years. In Davis's formative years young men throughout

Europe were being influenced by notions of romantic nationalism which produced 'young' movements in most countries under some form of foreign rule - most notably, of course, in Italy. Moreover, the revolutions of 1830 in France and Belgium had been relatively bloodless affairs compared to the 1789 revolution in France which had produced so many deaths.

### **O'Connell's style of leadership**

Different circumstances thus produced different perspectives, but what made it difficult for these to be reconciled was the nature of O'Connell's leadership. Throughout his career, O'Connell had adopted an extremely individual and personalistic style of leadership, dominating committee's and careless of the details of the bureaucracy that often underpins successful leaders. This style reflected his own personality and also the nature of his profession. He was, after all, Ireland's top criminal lawyer, and he carried that way of behaving into politics. For O'Connell 'the Verdict is the thing', and, according to Yeats, O'Connell's 'exaggeration and hectoring after the verdict have corrupted client and jury after the verdict has been given'.

That style, combined with advancing years and poor health, meant that O'Connell was ill-equipped to cope with the generational challenge that arose with the Young Irelanders, preferring to rely on his far less talented son John rather than attempting to give others a more formal voice in the running of the Repeal Association. While the Young Irelanders might have been idealistically priggish, O'Connell was often downright rude.

## **8. The Failure of Repeal**

These different visions of nationalist Ireland go some way to explaining the failure of the Repeal movement of the 1840's, but they do not provide the full explanation. There were two main reasons why Repeal failed in the 1840's, whereas Catholic emancipation had triumphed at the end of the 1820's.

### **Catholic Ireland divided**

In the first place, Irish Catholic opinion had been united behind the agitation for emancipation. This was not the case with Repeal. Some Catholics were doing alright under the union, and many leading clergy were suspicious of O'Connell as a rival for influence over the people.

### **British determination**

In the second place, British opinion had been divided over the question of emancipation, but it was united in its determination to uphold the union in the 1840s. It was this near unanimity in Britain that gave Westminster governments the confidence to know that, if necessary, they would have backing in Britain to use the massive force of police and army to put down any movement to end the Union.

## 9. The Achievements of Daniel O'Connell

### Positive contributions

#### *Catholic self-confidence*

O'Connell made two contributions to the development of modern Ireland. In the first place, he gave Catholics in Ireland a degree of self-confidence, a hitherto unheard of degree of coherence and energy, thus helping to obliterate the penal law image of abject inferiority. That achievement must be the justification for the extravagance and violence of his language during the agitations for Emancipation and Repeal. The habitual violence of his language was deliberate. He believed that Roman Catholics had for so long been accustomed to accepting an inferior status that they had lost confidence in their ability to assert their rights, and that it was his duty to set them an example by fearless defiance of the ascendancy.

#### *Constitutionalism*

O'Connell's second positive contribution was to give this Catholic energy a constitutional political form and outlet. In this connection it is worth stressing that O'Connell was very much in the mould of nineteenth century English Radicals. Eschewing revolutionary means, he inaugurated among Irish Catholics a tradition of parliamentary democracy and harnessed the power of Irish Catholicism to reformist activity.

### The Price

#### *Political utopianism*

Yet these two benefits were purchased at a price, in fact two prices. First, the emancipation repeal agitations helped to breed in Irish political movements a certain utopianism. Irish Catholics were encouraged to expect too much from reforms, to see reforms as panaceas for all evils.

For instance, utopia would follow repeal, according to O'Connell. To meetings hung with such slogans as 'Repeal is Erin's Right and God's Decree', O'Connell brought such fervid messages as this to a Dublin audience in 1842:

England has made slaves of all nations that are not able to resist her  
.... For six hundred years the Saxons have exerted all their powers to  
nothing by our total oppression, to plunder us for their own advantage,  
completely to annihilate our nationality, and to make us the willing  
servants of their despotic commands.... For forty years I have wished

but one thing, striven for but *one* cause - to obtain justice for Ireland, and to shake off the tyranny of England.... There is but *one* thing on which all welfare depends - Repeal! With Repeal you will be happy, with Repeal you will become rich, with repeal you will obtain all that you desire and strive for.

This was heady stuff, with the result that people tended not to think ahead and to suffer disillusionment and resentment when their over-expectations were not fulfilled. Thus, O'Connell never got down to think about the nature of Irish government after Repeal, merely assuming that Ireland and the Irish would prosper, and this utopianism affected the Home Rule and Republican movements later on, inhibiting Nationalists, for example, from developing social theories and policies.

### *Sectarian division*

The second price paid was a polarization of religious opinion in Ireland. By taking up emancipation, and by relying so much upon the organisation of the Roman Catholic Church, and by emphasizing the almost revolutionary benefits that Catholics would gain from emancipation and repeal, O'Connell roused Protestant apprehensions. These apprehensions were not necessarily well-founded, for O'Connell and the Church were not always at one.

Nevertheless, for practical purposes, the differences between O'Connell and the clergy were obscured, as O'Connell relied upon the latter in his agitation, and Irish Protestants were not discerning enough to see that Catholic lay leaders were not mere tools of the Pope and his Church. The result was that the Protestant minority in Ireland, members of the Church of Ireland and non-conformists - began to sink their former rivalries and find common ground in apprehension at a Catholic revolution. Catholic equality was one thing, Catholic predominance was another, and it was fear of the latter that bound Protestants together in the north of Ireland and laid the basis for Ulster unionism and the partition of Ireland. The fear that Home Rule meant Rome Rule, stemmed from the era of O'Connell.