

# WRITS OF EJECTMENT: JAMES FINTAN LALOR AND THE REWRITING OF NATION AS PHYSICAL SPACE, 1847-1848

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## ABSTRACT

The rise of Irish nationalism during the nineteenth century cannot be understood without *The Nation* newspaper and its determined crusade to (re)create Ireland as a distinct cultural community during the 1840s. Among its contributors, however, was a writer who set himself apart from his contemporaries, and has always eluded clear-cut ideological ascriptions. James Fintan Lalor (1811-1849), an allegedly 'marginal' figure, but the most brilliant writer of the Young Ireland generation, is perhaps best known for linking the cause of independence with that of the tenant farmers, thus providing an ideological precedent for the Land War of the 1880s. However, Lalor's contribution to Irish nationalist thought goes far beyond mere political strategy. An analysis of Lalor's writings in *The Nation* and the *Irish Felon* reveals that for him, Ireland was not one of Anderson's "imagined communities," artificially bound by mental ties of language, history and tradition, but a physical space, a tangible reality to be reclaimed from the grasp of England's "landlord garrison."

KEY WORDS: Nationalism, nineteenth century, Young Ireland, James Fintan Lalor, land issue.

## RESUMEN

El nacimiento del nacionalismo irlandés en el siglo XIX no puede explicarse sin el papel jugado por el periódico *The Nation* durante la década de 1840 para (re)crear Irlanda como una comunidad cultural distintiva. Entre los escritores de *The Nation*, sin embargo, destaca un escritor que se diferenciaba radicalmente de sus contemporáneos, y siempre ha resultado difícil de clasificar en términos ideológicos. James Fintan Lalor (1811-1849), supuestamente una figura 'marginal', pero el escritor más brillante del grupo de Joven Irlanda, es conocido sobre todo por asociar la lucha por la independencia con la lucha agraria, proporcionando así un antecedente ideológico a la Guerra Agraria de la década de 1880. Sin embargo, la aportación de Lalor al pensamiento nacionalista irlandés supera la mera estrategia política. El análisis de sus escritos en *The Nation* y el *Irish Felon* muestran que para Lalor, Irlanda no era una de las "comunidades imaginadas" de Anderson, unidas artificialmente por vínculos mentales de idioma, historia y tradiciones, sino un espacio físico, una realidad tangible que debía ser recuperada de manos de la "guarnición de terratenientes" establecida por Inglaterra.

PALABRAS CLAVE: nacionalismo, siglo XIX, Joven Irlanda, James Fintan Lalor, cuestión agraria.



In his emblematic study of nationalism as the construction of “Imagined Communities,” Benedict Anderson addresses the role of print in the construction of collective national identity, and focuses his attention on newspapers as the “extreme” form of the book; a “one-day best-seller,” around which a mass ceremony takes place:

The almost precisely simultaneous consumption (“imagining”) of the newspaper-as-fiction. [...] Each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. (35)

But beyond their role in establishing a psychological bond between readers in an “imagined community,” newspapers are also encoders and disseminators of ideology. The rise of Irish nationalism during the nineteenth century cannot be understood without *The Nation* and its determined crusade to (re)create Ireland as a distinct cultural community during the 1840s. Among the contributors to *The Nation*, however, one particular figure stands out who represented an entirely different approach to nationalism. For James Fintan Lalor (1807-1849), Ireland was not an intellectual construct, a compound of cultural and historical traditions, but a material object to be reclaimed; while the Irish people was an entity he never felt the need to define, except to vindicate the tenant population and exclude the landlord class.

Lalor was one of the most powerful writers of the Young Ireland generation, and one of the very few whose press writings transcended the short life of the weekly journal to be republished as anthologies (e.g. O’Donoghue; Marlowe; Fogarty; Ramón). Lalor’s enduring popularity seems all the more remarkable because it actually rests on a very small corpus of about a dozen articles. It becomes easier to understand when we add that these articles were published between 1847 and 1848, at the height of the Famine, and with a degree of literary quality that argues for Lalor’s inclusion among the great names of nineteenth-century European journalism.

Although Lalor is best known as an agrarian activist, the prophet of the Land War of the 1880s, his ideological sophistication and his strongly inspirational prose made him a tempting founding father for various other causes at the turn of the twentieth century. Thus for instance, while Patrick Pearse singled him out as one of the four evangelists of Irish Separatism along with Wolfe Tone, Thomas Davis and John Mitchel (240), James Connolly with a little straw-clutching celebrated him as “the Irish apostle of revolutionary Socialism” (121). Lalor’s posthumous appeal, on the other hand, is in poignant contrast with his considerable difficulties to make converts during his lifetime. Throughout his short career, Lalor remained a writer at the margins of a movement itself marginal; the visionary whose proposed solution to the Famine crisis was considered too radical even by his supposedly radical coreligionists.

As a thinker on the Famine, Lalor was not original either in his anxiety about the collapse of the small tenant class, his censure of the landlords, or his belief that any solution to the land question must include Irish independence. However, while most contemporary writers focused their attention on short-term relief measures, improvements in land legislation, or the panacea of self-government, Lalor discarded



all such distractions, proclaimed that society was already effectually dissolved, and advocated nothing short of a thorough reorganisation of the social fabric with the tenant class at its core (*The Nation*, 24 April 1847). His approach to the nationalist cause was equally sweeping. Repeal “in its vulgar meaning” he dismissed as a futile and impracticable cause; he aimed for bigger game. As he wrote to John Mitchel in June 1847:

My object is to repeal the Conquest—not any part or portion but the whole and entire conquest of seven hundred years—a thing much more easily done than to repeal the Union. That the absolute (allodial) ownership of the lands of Ireland is vested of right in the people of Ireland—that they, and none but they, are the first landowners and lords paramount as well as the lawmakers of this island [...] these are my principles. (Fogarty 43-44)

Lalor’s determination to “repeal the conquest” was more than a powerful catchphrase; it went hand in hand with a new formulation of Irish nationalist demands not based on ethnic difference or political grievances, but national property rights: the Irish land was the rightful property of the Irish people, and it must be reclaimed from a “robber” landlord class who had usurped it by force. In the context of the Famine, this natural right became reinforced by the laws of survival. The landlords, Lalor denounced, “have served us with a general writ of ejectment. Wherefore I say, let them get a notice to quit at once; or we shall oust possession under the law of nature.” (*Irish Felon* (24 June 1848)).

While John Mitchel was famously converted to radicalism under Lalor’s influence, most of the Young Ireland leadership was more alarmed than impressed by Lalor’s arguments. To middle-class romantic nationalists, singing the praises of revolution in the abstract was one thing; trying to subvert the social order by suppressing landlordism and raising the spectre of land nationalisation was quite another. Although the Young Ireland leaders were quite willing to debate Lalor’s ideas in correspondence, they refused to give them public endorsement, and when Lalor died prematurely in December 1849 he remained a minor figure, merely celebrated as yet another 1848 martyr, or wielded as ammunition in the bitter subsequent fallout between John Mitchel and Charles Gavan Duffy (*The Nation* (27 May 1854)). His incorporation to the literary canon of the Land War and early-twentieth-century nationalism has further obscured the full extent of his intellectual originality when his writings were first published. This article wishes particularly to highlight Lalor’s pioneering role in rewriting the Irish nation, not as a creature of political imagination to be fashioned into existence—as Benedict Anderson posits—but a real, physical object to regain possession of.

James Fintan Lalor was born at Tennakill, Abbeyleix, Co. Laois, on 10 March 1807, the eldest of twelve children. His father, Patrick Lalor, was a substantial gentleman farmer who gained national renown in 1831 as a leader of the Tithe War, and immediately afterwards as an O’Connellite MP. As the story goes, the young James Fintan was dropped from a servant’s arms as a child, and suffered a spinal injury that made him a hunchback. His health was also quite delicate, especially



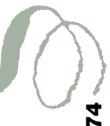
after he contracted some kind of pulmonary illness, probably tuberculosis, during the mid-1840s. By 1848, every new acquaintance he made was struck by the contrast between his weak, deformed body, and his vigorous and original mind.

Beyond the poetic nature of this story, however, Lalor was indeed profoundly original, even in his choice of political course. While the archetypal Young Irelander would have begun his career within the Repeal Association, and he himself belonged to a family of committed Repealers, Lalor was intensely disgusted by the whole movement. In his view, the Repeal Association was corrupt, ineffectual, and completely mistaken as to objectives and methods (qtd. O'Neill 133-135). For Lalor, the key to national prosperity, and the only goal worth pursuing, was not the trappings of legislative independence, the Repealers' wild-goose chase, but the physical control of the soil. And O'Connell's political programme, besides placing tenant-right firmly in the post-Repeal future, included the repeal of the Corn Laws, the tariff system protecting Irish agriculture from foreign competition. In 1843, at the height of O'Connell's campaign of monster meetings, Lalor wrote a shocking secret letter to Sir Robert Peel, the Conservative prime minister, offering information to help destroy the Repeal Association. There is no evidence that his offer was taken up, but this letter provides an insight into Lalor's political mindset. As he explained to Peel:

I was, myself, at one time, something *more* than a mere Repealer, in private feeling; but Mr. O'Connell, *his agitators*, and his series of wretched agitations, first *disgusted* me into a conservative in point of *feeling*; and reflection and experience have *converted* me into one in point of *principle*. I have been *driven* into the conviction, [...] that it is only to a Conservative Government, to her landed proprietors, and to *peace*, that this country can look for any improvement in her social condition. (O'Neill 36-38)

Lalor has been described, harshly but not wholly without foundation, by D.N. Buckley as “hawking his ideas about from post to pillar in the (vain) hope that some individual, club, or party would sponsor and help to realise them” (28). When the Conservatives repealed the Corn Laws in 1846, and thus abandoned agrarian protectionism, Lalor swerved course and again turned his attention towards the nationalists. Circumstances were particularly propitious; Young Ireland seceded from the Repeal Association in July 1846, and a few months later announced the foundation of their own organisation, the Irish Confederation. On 11 January 1847, before the principles of this new organisation were officially proclaimed, Lalor wrote to Charles Gavan Duffy in order to offer his own recommendations. Above all, Lalor urged that they should not commit themselves explicitly either to Repeal—a “petty parish question” compared to the real issue at stake—or to the use of “moral force” alone, as was O'Connell's mantra (Fogarty 3-4).

Success, Lalor urged, required the support of the rural masses, but in order to win them over to Repeal, Young Ireland had to offer them some more tangible benefit than legislative independence; they had to become the champions of the right to land, as well as nationality. With the right goal in sight, the tenantry would



provide Young Ireland with the necessary muscle to pressurize the government, and achieve *both* self-government and tenant-right. This combination of agrarian and nationalist demands is of course what Lalor is most famous for, the proverbial image of the land question acting as the railway engine that would carry Repeal through to success. But this was a mere point of strategy; Lalor's intellectual originality went much further, and became spectacularly evident when he accepted Duffy's invitation to publish his ideas in *The Nation*.

In his first public letter on 24 April, and two more which followed on 15 May and 5 June, Lalor described the operating causes of the Famine with masterful clarity, and concluded what modern researchers now take for granted: the Famine was not only a human tragedy; it was a watershed, the collapse of the existing social order and the emergence of a new one. Mass deaths and emigration were draining the country of the small tenant population, and heralding the change from tillage farming to grazing. As Lalor lamented, "The agriculture that employs and maintains millions will leave the land, and an agriculture that employs only thousands will take its place. Ireland will become a pasture ground once again." (*The Nation* (15 May 1847)). Lalor's aim in these early, relatively moderate articles was partly to persuade the landlords, for their own good, to help stop the haemorrhage of depopulation, and give the Irish people a new "social constitution," as he termed it, based on the creation of a strong tenant class.

It should not come as a surprise that the landlords were less than receptive to this proposal, but that was probably no more than Lalor expected. He was far more disappointed in his new nationalist allies. After his first contact with Charles Gavan Duffy, Lalor had received a warm welcome into the Irish Confederation, and had been led to expect support. However, most of the leadership were extremely reluctant to deviate from their old dogmas—Repeal above all else—and remained outwardly sympathetic, but in effect uncooperative. The rare and celebrated exception was John Mitchel, who gradually came to share Lalor's view of the landlords as the "foreign garrison" of republican rhetoric, and the land system as the foundation of British domination (Mitchel 178). But Mitchel's conversion to radicalism was slow, and Lalor spent 1847 in the vain hope of seeing the Confederation adopt his agrarian programme. After a catastrophic attempt to set up a tenant league in September 1847, Lalor gave up political activism in frustration and disgust (O'Neill 69-72).

He only returned to the public forefront in June 1848, when John Martin offered him a place in the editorial staff of the *Irish Felon*, the intended successor to John Mitchel's firebrand *United Irishman*. Between 24 June and 22 July 1848, the final month before the Young Ireland insurrection, Lalor published seven articles in the *Felon*. Free from any further need to conciliate the landlords, Lalor alternated proposals for a new revolutionary organisation with detailed expositions of his ideas on independence and popular sovereignty. The very first issue of the *Irish Felon* on 24 June featured a full-page letter by Lalor to the editor, John Martin, laying out the grounds on which he was ready to offer his cooperation. Not for the first time, the force of Lalor's rhetoric gave later republicans a wealth of warlike quotes:



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 [...] Not to repeal the Union, then, but to repeal the conquest, [...] not to resume or restore an old constitution, but to found a new nation, and raise up a free people, and strong as well as free, and secure as well as strong, based on a peasantry rooted like rocks in the soil of the land—this is my object, as I hope it is yours.

But besides stirring exhortations, this letter also contained Lalor's first public declaration of his political principles. He began once again by establishing a clean break with the standard nationalist demand: he was emphatically *not* seeking to repeal the Union. Repeal as usually understood was a dead-end cause; neither "moral force" nor revolution could succeed in bringing it about. The British parliament would never be coerced into granting it by mere political agitation, and the Irish people—at least the rural masses—would never be induced to join a physical force movement for such an airy goal; one that, besides, failed to get at the heart of British dominion: the landowning establishment. Success required an alliance of town and country; the nationalist demands of the urban population, and the agrarian demands of the rural population.

But Lalor's principles went beyond a utilitarian alliance of interests. To him, land tenure and nationality were not only complementary banners; they were one and the same cause. Lalor was unique among contemporary nationalists, in that he did not base his demands on cultural distinctiveness, the country's "rights and wrongs," or the legal technicalities that allegedly invalidated the Act of Union, as O'Connell liked to do (e.g. *Freeman's Journal* (28 Oct. 1840)). Lalor approached independence as a matter of national property rights. Using the legal phraseology of land ownership, he declared that the whole of Ireland "up to the sun, and down to the centre," was of right the property of the Irish people who, as sole owners, were also the only ones entitled to make laws for it. And he continued:

In other, if not plainer, words, I hold and maintain that the entire soil of a country belongs of right to the entire people of that country..., to let to whom they will, on whatever tenures, terms, rents, services, and conditions they will; one condition being, however, unavoidable and essential, ...that the tenant shall bear full, true, and undivided fealty and allegiance to the nation.

Lalor warned his readers not to be distracted by "constitutions, and charters, and articles, and franchises," the trappings of a "mock" freedom. True national independence meant effective, physical possession of the land itself. In Lalor's ideological universe, just as national rights materialised as agrarian rights, national sovereignty materialised as land ownership (Buckley 36). In effect, Lalor enlarged the scope of social contract theory from power relations between individuals, to control over the land itself. The consent of the governed (in his case, significantly *mutual* consent among the people, rather than between themselves and a sovereign ruler) was necessary not only to give legitimacy to the government and its laws, but also to sanction the occupation and use of the soil.



But it was Lalor's fifth article, published on 8 July and solemnly entitled "The Faith of a Felon," that most clearly laid out his theories on the nature of British dominion and the Irish right of resistance. The opening paragraphs explained:

Years ago I perceived that the English conquest consisted of two parts combined into one whole,—the conquest of our liberties, the conquest of our lands. I saw clearly that the re-conquest of our liberties would be incomplete and worthless without the re-conquest of our lands,—would not, necessarily, involve or produce that of our lands [...]; while the re-conquest of our lands would involve the other—would, at least, be complete in itself, and adequate to its own purposes.

As he explained, he was "biding his time" when the Famine broke out, decimating the smallholders on which he counted for strength, and making re-conquest vitally urgent. When Young Ireland split from O'Connell, Lalor saw his opportunity to change the course of Irish politics, and made his overtures to the Council of the Irish Confederation. Unfortunately the Young Ireland elite were social conservatives who believed in the necessity of a national aristocracy, and dreamed of achieving independence without upsetting the social order. Except for a very small minority, Lalor lamented, "They desired, not a *democratic*, but a merely *national* revolution." Thus they threw away precious months in a futile effort to win over the landlords. Lalor passed over regrets, and again laid out his programme for his new readers, summarised in four points. The first two declared that tenants ought to refuse all payment of rents exceeding their own subsistence needs for the year, and resist ejectment. The last two help to explain why James Connolly felt compelled to claim Lalor for the Socialist pantheon:

3. That they [the tenants] ought further, *on principle*, to refuse all rent to the present usurping proprietors, until the people, the true proprietors... have, in national congress or convention, decided *what* rents they are to pay, and *to whom* [...].
4. And that the people, ...ought to decide... that those rents shall be paid *to themselves*, the people, for public purposes [...].

In Lalor's case, however, appearances are deceptive. His view of that elusive entity called the Irish people, and of "democracy" as a class, was constrained to the tenant population; would-be small capitalists, rather than exploited workers. There was in Lalor's scheme no master plan including either rural labourers or the working population as a whole. But beyond issues of political affiliation, and more closely within the scope of this article, Lalor's manifesto also included his most detailed analysis of the significance of the British conquest and its implications for the property rights of the landlord class. Lalor did not wish the Irish people to take over the land merely on account of the pressing necessity of the hour; he demanded it as a universal right. And in order to make his case, he set out to prove that the only competing right, that of the landlord, was in effect null and void.

Lalor defined private property categorically as "the right of man to possess, enjoy, and transfer, the substance and use of whatever *he has himself* created." This therefore excluded land, which was conversely "the free and common property of



all mankind, of natural right, and by the grant of God.” All men being equal, Lalor continued, no man had the right to appropriate to himself any portion of it except by the common consent and agreement of the community. Against this, British constitutional law upheld “first occupancy” as the basis of land property—in other words, the land belonged to whoever was in occupation, in this case the landlords. Lalor dismissed this as an artificial principle, formulated *ex post facto* in order to justify the British system of settlement. Unless he were thrown on a desert island, Lalor argued, every single individual trying to claim “first occupancy” would have to assert his right against someone else. And then, he concluded, “*what constitutes occupancy? What length of possession gives ‘title by occupancy?’*”

For Lalor, there were only two ways in which land was ever settled: by common agreement, or by force. Common agreement yielded the fairest system of distribution, but even when this was the case, ultimate property rights remained in the hands of the community at large, who retained the right to revise and amend the system at any time. Stability therefore depended on finding a settlement that the majority of the population would be interested to maintain. In Ireland, however, settlement had been founded on conquest, and thus it was that 8,000 individuals had been given full possession of the land against the rights of the remaining eight millions. Conditions for the tenants were better in Ulster, Lalor explained, because it had not been simply conquered, but “colonised”; the native Irish had been expelled, and the “conquering race” had agreed on a system of occupation—the Ulster custom—among themselves.

To voices that might defend the landlords’ claim to the soil on the grounds that they, too, were “one class of the Irish people,” Lalor responded categorically by excluding them not only from the Irish nation, but any other; in Foucauldian terms, a radical subversion of Othering which made the powerful the intended object of exclusion and enforced alienation:

Strangers they are in this land they call theirs,—strangers here and strangers everywhere; owning no country and owned by none; rejecting Ireland and rejected by England; tyrants to this island and slaves to another; ...an outcast and ruffianly horde, alone in the world and alone in its history, a class by themselves.

The way to regain control of the soil, of undoing the conquest and turning the tables on the mass eviction process that the landlords were embarked on, was neither political campaigning, as Young Ireland persisted in, nor a hopeless recourse to revolution, as was sometimes threatened, but what Lalor termed “moral insurrection”: refusing to acknowledge British authority, taking “quiet and peaceable” possession of government, and defending its exercise by passive resistance or defensive force (*Irish Felon* (1 July 1848)). But he acknowledged that wholesale civil disobedience was impracticable. Instead, he suggested concentrating resistance on one carefully selected law:

The law you select for assailing must have four requisites:—first, it must form no part of the moral code; second, it must be essential to government... one the



abrogation of which would be an abrogation of sovereignty; third, it must be one easily disobeyed; and fourth, difficult to enforce; in other words, a law that would *help* to repeal itself.

Although Lalor was ostensibly merely drawing attention to the futility of the Repeal campaign—arguing that there was no such law on which Repealers could take their stand—the implication was strongly in favour of his own agrarian version of national sovereignty: while “unluckily” there was no state tax in Ireland that could be resisted as a matter of principle, there was a landlord system which levied its own equivalent in the form of rent. A general rent strike would bring landlordism to its knees, force Britain to come to the rescue, and lead to a full-blown revolution. (*Irish Felon* (8 July 1848)). If this revolution were successful, it would be the end of both landlordism and British authority in Ireland.

Lalor’s theories of popular sovereignty and land ownership were not in themselves original. They owed much to classical political theory, and to the contributions of earlier land activists, including Lalor’s own mentor, William Conner (see O’Brien). As early as 1835, in a pamphlet entitled *True Political Economy of Ireland*, Conner had anticipated Lalor by denying the principle of private property in land and upholding the supreme value of the labouring classes as the foundation of the whole economic system (2). Lalor’s proposed strategy of “moral insurrection” was closely modelled on the Tithe War of the early 1830s, where as explained, his own father had played a prominent role. But Lalor used all these elements to put forward a new and revolutionary approach to Irish nationalism. Lalor looked beyond both political theory and cultural revivalism to focus on the physical world. Thus the land was not for him an ideological construct, a metonymy for the nation at large, but a material object that had to be recovered from British domination, exercised by proxy through the landowning class.

While Lalor was by no means alone in his denunciation of the “Conquest,” and in referring to the historical past as a foundation for political claims in the present, he departed radically from contemporary nationalist discourse in that, at the same time, he denied the value of tradition. He argued his points merely on the grounds of natural law; any concrete settlement had no basis other than mutual consent, and could be subjected to revision at any point. And his explanation, perhaps unintentionally, struck at the very root of ethnic nationalism:

For no generation of living men can bind a generation that is yet unborn, or can sell or squander the rights of man; and each generation of men has but a life-interest in the world. But no generation continues the same for one hour together. Its identity is in perpetual flux. (*Irish Felon* (8 July 1848))

It may be no wonder that Lalor fit so uneasily within the nationalist generation so recently bewitched by Thomas Davis. His writings refuse to engage with language, culture, religion, history—everything that was important in the romantic nationalist world, so strongly dominated by the educated youth of the cities. In exchange, Lalor offered theoretical sophistication, logical argumentation, and a view of



Ireland that was exclusively rural, and dominated by the contest between landlords and tenants. Thus while his revolutionary rhetoric captivated the radical youth of the Confederate clubs, his deeper message was generally either rejected, unnoticed or misunderstood. In the immediate posterity of the 1850s and 1860s Lalor was not remembered for his political principles, but his connection with Mitchel, his role as a leader of the 1849 conspiracy, and especially his celebrated final call to arms: “Who strikes the first blow for Ireland? Who draws first blood for Ireland? Who wins a wreath that will be green for ever?” (*Irish Felon* (22 July 1848)).

Yet even his claim to nationalist fame has been undermined by modern critics. David N. Buckley denies Lalor’s nationalist credentials on the grounds that:

His own concern was with social and economic collapse, rather than with possible future forms of government... The struggle in which he was engaged... was not concerned with orthodox political parties (such as the Repeal Association), with political panaceas (independence), or with popular political forms (franchises, charters or parliaments). His aim was, quite simply, to overthrow the aristocracy. To describe him as a “nationalist,” therefore, effectively leaves his central beliefs untouched. (84-85)

Buckley’s assessment, however, merely tries to fit the square peg of Lalor’s unorthodox theory into the round hole of canonical, culture-driven definitions of nationalism. Buckley finds in turn that Lalor was neither a nationalist, an anarchist, a socialist, nor a conservative; he finally settles on defining him as a bourgeois radical of the Paine school (87). This is an apt conclusion, but Lalor’s originality resides precisely in the fact that ascription to one label does not necessarily exclude others. While socialism and anarchism were certainly not on Lalor’s list of sympathies, nationalism—understood as the demand for self-government on behalf of a particular community, howsoever defined—was central to his writings. Buckley is perhaps a little too rash in writing off Lalor’s numerous references to independence as the product of revolutionary opportunism. Lalor’s ideas on a future political settlement were vague and even impractical. His only concrete suggestion, calling for a federal union between Ireland and Britain (*Irish Felon* (1 July 1848)), was merely a nod to contemporary debates, and lost sight of the fact, as Arthur Griffith pointed out, that a third overruling power was still required (Fogarty viii). But lack of a proper post-independence master plan was not uncommon when revolution had to be disposed of first; the Fenians are a prime example of this. Lalor’s rejection of established political institutions was echoed by John Mitchel and likewise inherited by the Fenian movement. If Lalor refused to engage with the concerns of cultural nationalism, this does not negate his belief in the existence of an Irish nation; it merely reveals a different set of priorities in the face of the Famine, and a closer identification with the classical republican tradition than the *volksgeist* rhetoric of his own age.

Lalor remained an obscure figure after the 1850s, mostly remembered in Fenian circles for his role in the 1849 conspiracy, which was once claimed as the model for the IRB itself (*Irishman* (3 November 1877)). But tenant farmers were no longer the paradigm for poverty and oppression in the post-Famine bonanza,



and the IRB addressed its message to rural labourers and the urban working classes instead. Although the Fenian newspaper the *Irish People* made repeated calls to peasant proprietorship, it left the details undefined and never referred to Lalor as an inspiration.

Lalor was rescued from oblivion in the 1880s to serve as the alleged intellectual forerunner of the Land War, but the similarities between Lalor's doctrines and those of the Land League were more superficial than real. The Land War was almost exclusively agrarian in focus, with nationalism as a subtext, and ultimately relying on Parnell's efforts in parliament. Whereas Lalor turned his back very emphatically on the British parliament, and unlike Parnell he did not regard the land question as a bargaining counter in the fight for self-government, but treated both causes as integral to each other. All the while, Lalor's most original contribution to Irish nationalist thought—the immediate correspondence between nation and physical space—went virtually unnoticed, especially after the land question was resolved by the various land acts of the late nineteenth century, and the Gaelic Revival again made cultural distinctiveness the core of nationalist discourse. For the nationalists of the twentieth century, Lalor was mainly a prophet of republicanism, an inspiring writer of revolutionary harangues. His agrarian doctrine was celebrated for its revolutionary potential, but as Arthur Griffith remonstrated, “though it liberated the Irish peasant from his serfdom on the soil it did not [...] free the Irish nation.” The key to Irish freedom, Griffith declared, was not in Lalor's vision, but in Thomas Davis's (Fogarty xi). Ironically, the rural Ireland that Lalor was struggling so desperately not only to preserve, but to make hegemonic in 1847, proceeded to be recreated, idealised and enshrined in the post-independence imagination. De Valera's Arcadia of cosy homesteads and frugal comforts contrasts with Lalor's unsentimental view of the rural world, not as the embodiment of the national soul, but as the actual, physical body of the nation, literally dying away in the throes of famine. Lalor's Ireland was not one of Anderson's “imagined communities,” artificially bound by mental ties of language, history and custom, but a tangible object: the soil that provided sustenance, and the people who depended on it.

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