

Ireland

Jim McGowan examines the impact of Daniel O’Connell’s campaigns for Catholic emancipation and repeal of the Act of Union on William Gladstone

‘The Liberator’ and the Grand Old Man: Daniel O’Connell and Gladstone

WHEN, IN 1800, Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger was seeking to steer his proposals for the legislative union between Great Britain and Ireland through parliament, there was a widespread understanding within the government that this would be the first step in a two-stage process. First, the parliaments in Westminster and Dublin would vote in favour of creating the Union (which would mean the disappearance of the Dublin parliament) and then the newly established parliament for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland would vote to remove the remaining civil disabilities that applied to Catholics, with the most significant of these being the right to sit in parliament, although they also included restrictions on Catholics holding senior positions in the military and the legal profession. Pitt’s plan for the first step went smoothly, with the new Union coming into effect on 1 January 1801, but the second step was dramatically blocked – leading to Pitt’s resignation as prime minister. Despite many further attempts, it took almost 30 years and eight different prime ministers before the legislation to remove Catholic disabilities was finally passed. This was the background against which Daniel O’Connell

achieved his greatest triumph and led to him being hailed as ‘The Liberator’.

Given that the campaign to gain Catholic rights and liberties was sustained over such a long period, it required the input and leadership of numerous different people, but, many years later, when Gladstone looked back on O’Connell’s life, he was very clear that he considered O’Connell to be the great driving force behind the change. Gladstone wrote:

O’Connell was the commander-in-chief, although as yet they hardly knew it; and even the most illustrious supporters of Roman Catholic emancipation, on whichever side of the [St. George’s] Channel, were but the rank and file behind him. His were the genius and the tact, the energy and the fire, that won the bloodless battle. By the force of his own personality, he led Ireland to Saint Stephen’s [a reference to the location of the House of Commons prior to the 1834 fire], almost as much as Moses led the children of Israel to Mount Sinai.¹

When the Act of Union was passed O’Connell was a young Dublin lawyer just starting out on his career. He had maintained an interest in politics since childhood and this had been rekindled by the turbulent events of the past



Daniel O'Connell (1775–1847) by Sir George Hayter, 1834 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

few years. As a teenager, he had spent two years being educated at an English-speaking Catholic school in France, but was compelled to flee France with great haste in January 1793 as the revolutionary violence accelerated and Catholic schools became a target. He left Calais just two days after the execution of Louis XVI.² After escaping France, he settled in London and started his legal training, before transferring to Dublin to complete his studies. Just a few months after O'Connell returned to Ireland, a French invasion fleet of over forty ships and 15,000 soldiers reached Bantry Bay in south-west Ireland³ (very close to O'Connell's family home). Although the French fleet were unable to land because of inclement weather, the event caused consternation

across Ireland and O'Connell, like many of his contemporaries, enlisted in a company of volunteers to help repel any invasion force.⁴ Two years later, in 1798, Ireland faced further turmoil with the rebellion of the United Irishmen, which drew on support from Catholics and Protestants alike and was inspired by the revolutionary activity in France. The rebellion failed and its supporters were brutally suppressed, but it had led to 'some of the bloodiest and most ferocious fighting in Ireland's history.'⁵ It was against this background that Pitt and his cabinet determined to consolidate the two kingdoms into a single entity.

As the union with Great Britain was being debated, O'Connell was clear in his opposition to the proposals and helped organise a public

meeting in Dublin in January 1800 to express that view. In his first ever public speech he proclaimed:

Let every man who feels with me proclaim that if the alternative were offered him of union, or the re-enactment of the penal code in all its pristine horrors, that he would prefer without hesitation the latter, as the lesser and more sufferable evil; that he would rather confide in the justice of his brethren, the Protestants of Ireland, who have already liberated him [a reference to the Dublin parliament's 1793 decision to extend the franchise to Catholics with sufficient property holdings], than lay his country at the feet of foreigners.⁶

Despite these and similar protestations, the Irish parliament grudgingly voted itself out of existence, its members bribed with money and peerages from London.⁷ Pitt believed that the further extension of rights to Catholics 'would be the logical corollary of the Union: it was part of binding the whole Irish population into the newly united nation, with Protestants safe from any fear of a Catholic majority in Ireland.'⁸

Pitt knew that there would be opposition to removing the civil disabilities faced by Catholics, but he had significant support within his government, especially from the Lord Lieutenant, Cornwallis, and the chief secretary for Ireland, Castlereagh, and there was a widespread belief that Pitt would succeed on this issue, as he had on many others during his premiership. As Cornwallis wrote, 'if Mr Pitt is firm, he will meet with no difficulty'.⁹ However, Pitt was not firm on this issue – his management of cabinet discussions was poor, he allowed splits to emerge within the cabinet and he displayed 'his habitual procrastination'¹⁰ in raising the matter with the king. By the time, Pitt raised the issue with George III, the king's opposition was well

established, and he viewed the issue as far above ordinary political discourse: he felt that 'the admission of Catholics to public office would be a direct violation of his Coronation Oath to uphold the established Church'.¹¹ Pitt's view was that he had no option but to resign. The issue was further complicated because the king was insistent that raising the issue of emancipation endangered his mental health. As a consequence of these events, anyone lobbying for Catholic emancipation in the next few years was liable to be accused of both disloyalty to the crown and threatening the king's health – a most inauspicious background for a successful campaign.

Initially, in the years after 1801, the main pressure for emancipation came from a group of Irish aristocrats and landed proprietors who relied on the support of any remaining well-wishers in government and the occasional petition to parliament requesting that the issue should be addressed.¹² At first, O'Connell was too involved in his personal and professional life to be directly involved, but gradually this started to change.

O'Connell's background

Daniel O'Connell was born into a Catholic family in August 1775, the eldest child of Morgan and Catherine, at Cahirciveen on the Iveragh peninsula in south west Ireland. His father was a small landowner and a farmer – who sup-

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plemented his income with some smuggling. Daniel's first language was Irish. When Daniel was still very young (perhaps 5 or 6 years old), he was effectively 'adopted' by his childless uncle, Maurice¹³ – also known as Hunting Cap, because of his insistence on wearing a huntsman's velvet cap, rather than paying the

tax that was imposed on the headgear normally worn by the gentry. At the time that he adopted Daniel, Hunting Cap was a widower in his early 50s and effectively a clan chieftain. Like Daniel's father, he was a landowner, farmer and smuggler – and more successful and prosperous in each of these activities. Following his adoption, Daniel moved to his uncle's home at Derrynane, twelve miles down the peninsula. Describing Daniel's adoption, one of O'Connell's biographers states that it 'placed an immense burden upon the boy, even if it also spread great possibilities before him. He was, permanently, on trial; he was totally dependent on a patron; his own easy-going father had been replaced by a hard and implacable foster parent. He grew up in fear and awe; and the spell of Hunting Cap upon him was not altogether broken for over forty years. Hunting Cap was always dominant and often domineering.'¹⁴ Hunting Cap supported Daniel throughout his education and legal training, but placed considerable emphasis on Daniel making a success of his legal career, and avoiding any potential diversions, including political activities. O'Connell was extremely successful in his legal career, with this being evidenced by the comment from Sir Robert Peel (who became an implacable opponent of O'Connell) that there was no one whom he would prefer as counsel to represent him.¹⁵ O'Connell's income grew considerably as his reputation expanded, but he was dependent on maintaining his legal caseload to manage his household finances – he had very little private income to fall back on.¹⁶

A further explanation as to the timing of O'Connell's involvement in political activity is the demands of his personal life. In 1802 he married his third cousin Mary, who was described as a 'penniless but devoted wife',¹⁷ but Daniel feared that his uncle would disapprove of Mary because she had no dowry, so they agreed to keep their courtship and marriage a secret – which must have been a major

strain on both in such a small and interconnected community. Months later, when their first child was due, they finally told Hunting Cap about the marriage; he was horrified and essentially disinherited O'Connell – with the result that he had even less private income to support his growing family.

By 1804, O'Connell was a member of the Catholic Committee, the main organisation working for the removal of Catholic disabilities, immediately putting his legal training to good use in drafting parliamentary petitions and by 1808 he had emerged as the dominant player within the committee.¹⁸ However, relations were never easy within the committee (and its successor organisations) and there were various divisions over tactics and questions over how much pressure it should seek to apply. One particularly thorny and recurring issue was the idea of the state having a veto over future episcopal appointments – with many viewing this as a helpful compromise that could be used to reassure the fiercest opponents of emancipation. However, O'Connell's view was that the veto would be another way of extending Catholic degradation and confirmation of continued servility; he argued forcefully for 'full' or 'unqualified' emancipation.¹⁹ To complicate matters further, the English Catholic Board, which was influential in both Westminster and Rome, was decidedly pro-veto in inclination.²⁰

Campaign for Catholic emancipation

Although the campaign for emancipation took much of O'Connell's energy in the years before the early 1820s, it was a stop-start campaign. At times, there were signs of hope and progress, but invariably these were followed by major setbacks. For example, in June 1812, when George Canning, a long-time supporter of emancipation, proposed that the issue of Catholic disabilities should finally be tackled in the next parliament session, the House of

Commons supported him by an overwhelming majority²¹ – but nothing materialised from this vote and within a couple of months, the incoming prime minister, Lord Liverpool, had appointed Robert Peel as his chief secretary for Ireland.

At this time, the main thrust of the campaign was through public meetings – often held at locations that O'Connell was visiting on the assize circuit. The emphasis increasingly shifted to a campaign that was focussed on 'the people' – but the precondition for success was to spurn all violence or even illegality and to rely exclusively upon (in O'Connell's words) 'the repetition of your constitutional demands by petition, and still more by the pressure of circumstances and the great progress of events.'²² O'Connell confined political action to the limits of the constitution, and the goal of all such action to a full, fair and equal place within that constitution. O'Connell's oratory was a key feature of these public meetings. Years later, when Frederick Douglass, the social reformer and abolitionist, had the opportunity to hear O'Connell speak towards the end of O'Connell's life, he commented:

I have heard many speakers within the last four years – speakers of the first order; but I confess, I have never heard one, by whom I was more completely captivated than by Mr. O'Connell ... His power over an audience is perfect.²³

However, an unfortunate side of O'Connell's oratory was that sometimes it got the better of him and he resorted to excessive use of violent language. On one occasion, O'Connell's intemperate language caused offence to a relatively progressive member of the Dublin Corporation, John D'Esterre, with the result that D'Esterre challenged O'Connell to a duel. It was an ill-matched contest, as D'Esterre had served in the Royal Marines and had by far the greater military experience, but it was D'Esterre who sustained the only injury, with a seemingly

minor wound. However, the wound was far more serious than first suspected and D'Esterre died days after the duel. O'Connell was full of remorse.²⁴ However, just months later, O'Connell found himself in a similar confrontation with Peel. Unlike the clash with D'Esterre, the conflict with Peel escalated slowly over a period of four months, with accusations being made by both parties, until eventually it was agreed that they would fight a duel in Ostend – outside the reach of the British authorities. However, the authorities in London intervened to stop O'Connell crossing the Channel – due in part to the fact that Mary O'Connell had discovered her husband's intentions and had informed the authorities. Soon after this, O'Connell (spurred on by Mary's urgings) made the decision to renounce duelling – largely on the basis that the practice was inconsistent with his religious faith. However, O'Connell's renunciation of duelling did not enhance his reputation – he was now accused of cowardice and refusing to give satisfaction in a dispute. What greater proof was required that O'Connell was not a gentleman?

The years around 1815 have been described as a 'kaleidoscope of failures'²⁵ for O'Connell, with this period coinciding with Peel's term as chief secretary. But O'Connell was extraordinarily resilient²⁶ and ready to seize a new opportunity; he had tremendous flexibility and ingenuity.

1821 brought yet another false dawn in O'Connell's struggle when the newly crowned George IV visited Ireland; the visit was viewed as a great success by all sides and led to what O'Connell and his affiliates called an 'experiment in conciliation', but once again this failed to produce any tangible benefits. The major turning point came a couple of years later with the formation of the Catholic Association, which from the beginning was intended to be a mass membership organisation. O'Connell had taken care to nurture good relationships with most of the Catholic hierarchy and as a

result individual parish priests were frequently prominent supporters of the new association. In 1824, O'Connell proposed that the association develop a permanent fighting fund to help further its political demands. Members of the association paid annual subscriptions of £1 or more, while associates paid as little as a penny a month – with this becoming known as the 'Catholic Rent'. The association was a great success, and the Catholic Rent was highly effective both in raising funds and in giving the peasantry a sense of ownership of the wider campaign. The strength of the Catholic Association started to unsettle the government and the decision was made to suppress it, with O'Connell's old adversary, Peel (who was now home secretary) playing a large part in steering the legislation through parliament. Within months of the suppression of the Catholic Association, O'Connell founded the New Catholic Association, 'defining its objectives in terms of the subjects specifically exempted from the operation of the Suppression Act.'²⁷ The Act compelled O'Connell to find new ways to campaign, but in the process produced new and more effective modes of agitation. The prohibition on the collection of subscriptions was countered by the device of vesting the money in a single individual, Lord Killeen. The New Catholic Association was able to demonstrate its strength at the 1826 general election, when it backed a candidate standing in County Waterford. The sitting MP was a local landowner from a Protestant Ascendancy family – he was also a committed opponent of emancipation. O'Connell and his supporters recruited a liberal, pro-emancipation landowner to stand as his opponent, and they developed a network of election committees with representation in every parish. They organised meetings, warned people about the moral consequences of accepting bribes, and provided financial

support for farmers who faced eviction for failing to vote as directed by their landlord. In addition, they organised for voters to travel to Waterford city, where polling took place: their maintenance there for several days and their disciplined and sober behaviour at the voting booths. The emancipationist candidate won by a landslide – the victory was a remarkable success and a clear demonstration of the strength and organisational ability of the emancipationists.

County Clare by-election 1828

O'Connell's dilemma after the 1826 election was how to maintain pressure on the government – he had proved that he had the organisational capability to win parliamentary seats and could probably win a significant number at the next general election, but that might not be until 1833. It was in this context that the decision was made to oppose every Tory candidate in forthcoming by-elections – irrespective of their personal views – until the government conceded emancipation. As the Duke of Wellington was forming his government in early 1828, he appointed Vesey

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Fitzgerald as president of the Board of Trade, which meant that Fitzgerald had to submit himself for re-election by his constituents in County Clare in the west of Ireland. In normal times, Fitzgerald's re-election would have been a formality – he was a popular local landowner, known to be in favour of emancipation. However, the Catholic Association considered they must put up a candidate or they risked losing the momentum gained at Waterford. Enquiries were made about liberal Protestants willing to stand, but no suitable candidates were identified. With only weeks to go

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until the election, O'Connell himself agreed to stand, even though as a Catholic he would be barred from taking his seat at Westminster. O'Connell's decision to stand for election was a high-risk strategy – if he won, he would significantly increase the pressure on Wellington's government, but if he lost, he would be humiliated, and the emancipation movement would be setback many years. In terms of tactics, O'Connell followed a similar approach as in Waterford, with a large amount of theatricality surrounding his appearances on the hustings. But he was also conscious that the by-election was being followed carefully well beyond Clare and O'Connell showed exemplary conduct and moderation in all his dealings with election officials.²⁸ O'Connell won the election by a substantial margin, securing almost 70 per cent of the votes cast. In his moment of

triumph, he struck a conciliatory note, stating 'Wellington and Peel, if you be true to old England, for I love and cherish her ...all shall be forgotten, pardoned and forgiven upon giving us Emancipation, unconditional, unqualified, free, and unshackled.'²⁹ O'Connell did not try to take his seat at Westminster immediately – he appreciated that his by-election victory had cut through over a quarter of a century's obduracy on the emancipation issue. Wellington's government had been plunged into a deep crisis, with civil war threatened in Ireland. Wellington accepted that emancipation was required to save the Act of Union, but the king was less easily persuaded. At one stage, George IV accepted Wellington's resignation, but reinstated him when he realised that there was no viable alternative government – finally

Political cartoon, 17 March 1829 (Isaac Cruikshank): Daniel O'Connell held aloft in celebration of Catholic Emancipation. O'Connell says: 'By the Powers I'll make ye all W[h]igs' – i.e. raise the poor of Ireland to rank and property.



after months of prevarication, the king conceded that emancipation was inevitable.³⁰

The Roman Catholic Relief Act finally received royal assent in April 1829, nine months after O'Connell's triumph in Clare.³¹ O'Connell was forced to accept a number of concessions to enable the passage of the act – interestingly, he didn't have to concede a veto for the state on episcopal appointments, but he did have to accept the suppression of the Catholic Association and the disenfranchising of the small tenant farmers – the forty-shilling freeholders, who had been the bedrock of his support in the by-election.³²

The significance of 1829 in Irish history was recognised by Gladstone, when introducing the 1893 Home Rule Bill, he stated that 'the maintenance of the Union between 1800 and 1829 was really a maintenance not by moral agency but through the agency of force.'³³

O'Connell's parliamentary career

When O'Connell finally took his seat at Westminster, he would have seemed a very unusual figure: he was approaching his fifty-fifth birthday, considerably older than most first time MPs; he was a celebrity or, to most people, a notoriety; and he was a confident and well-established orator. From the beginning of his parliamentary career, O'Connell was determined to make this the focus of his energy and effectively abandoned his legal career – with significant implications for his already stretched finances. When his uncle had died in 1825, O'Connell had received a partial inheritance, including the house at Derrynane, but this was nowhere near sufficient to finance his parliamentary activities, including accommodation in London. Initially, O'Connell was supported by a testimonial organised by some wealthy Dublin businessmen, but over time this evolved into an annual event and became known as 'the O'Connell Tribute.' The tribute became an indispensable part of

O'Connell's finances, but it did add to the suspicion and distrust that so often accompanied him. A frequent gibe was that he was 'the big beggarman'.³⁴ Within the British governing class there was a widespread perception that O'Connell was driven solely by self-interest, in the form of either financial gain or progressing his own legal career.³⁵ In his memoir, the diarist Charles Greville described O'Connell as 'utterly lost to all sense of shame and decency, trampling truth and honour under his feet ...'³⁶ Yet again, O'Connell's renunciation of duelling was used as evidence to discredit him. Anti-O'Connell feelings were widespread, with one example being that, just as emancipation had been achieved in 1829, O'Connell allowed his name to go forward for election to the Cisalpine Club, an association of the English Catholic elite, but his membership was blackballed – a rejection that O'Connell took with characteristic magnanimity.³⁷

At Westminster, O'Connell worked closely with the Whig government in support of parliamentary reform,³⁸ and he showed an ongoing commitment to a wide range of liberal causes, including the abolition of slavery, law reform, secret ballots, repeal of the Corn Laws and Jewish emancipation. However, his relations with Whig governments were not always easy and Lord Grey, the prime minister, strongly objected to any alliance with O'Connell.³⁹ O'Connell had repeated clashes with Edward Stanley (subsequently the Earl of Derby), who was chief secretary for Ireland in Grey's government. When O'Connell was arrested, in 1831, on charges of conspiracy and seditious libel, he held Stanley personally responsible. O'Connell resented that under Stanley's instructions 'common thief-takers were sent to his house, to drag him from the bosom of his family'⁴⁰ and although the charges were allowed to drop, the relationship between the two men continued to deteriorate. When Stanley and his associates resigned from the government over its proposals to

reform the Church of Ireland, it was O'Connell who coined the derisory nickname the 'Derby Dilly' to describe the breakaway grouping.⁴¹

O'Connell's relations with the Whigs improved under Melbourne's leadership – with Melbourne being yet another senior politician who had served as chief secretary for Ireland at a formative time in his career. During the short-lived Conservative administration of 1834–35, O'Connell and the Irish Repeal MPs began to work increasingly effectively with the Whigs and the Radicals, with all parties implicitly accepting that some form of cooperation was required if they were to defeat the Tories. O'Connell made clear how this aligned with his goal of Repeal when he stated:

If I am asked if I give up the repeal of the Legislative Union, my answer is, that I suspend it. But for what? To give time for carrying into full operation the three measures I have described; to give them a fair trial, to see if they will amend the condition of Ireland, and if they fail, then again to resort to repeal; but if they succeed, then to give it up for ever.⁴²

In addition to legislative reform, O'Connell looked to the new administration to adopt a more even-handed approach to Irish appointments and other patronage, ensuring that the gains from emancipation translated into an equal standing for Catholics.

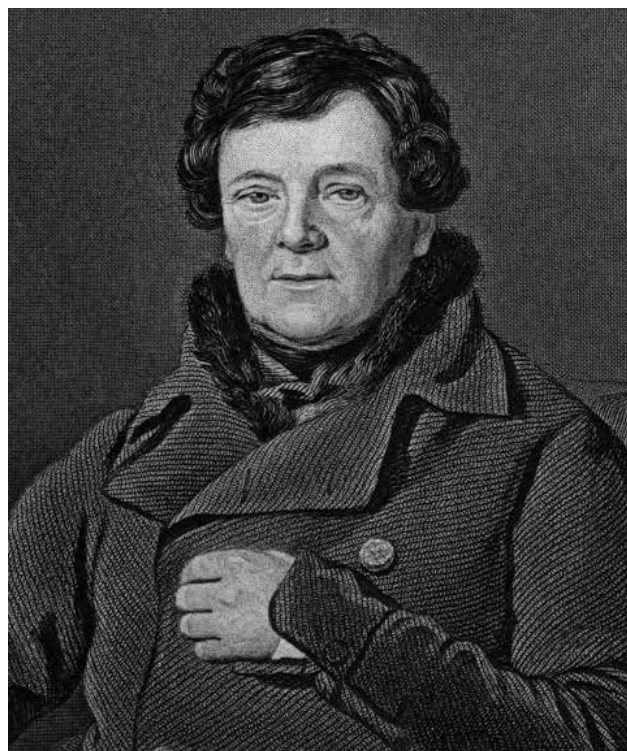
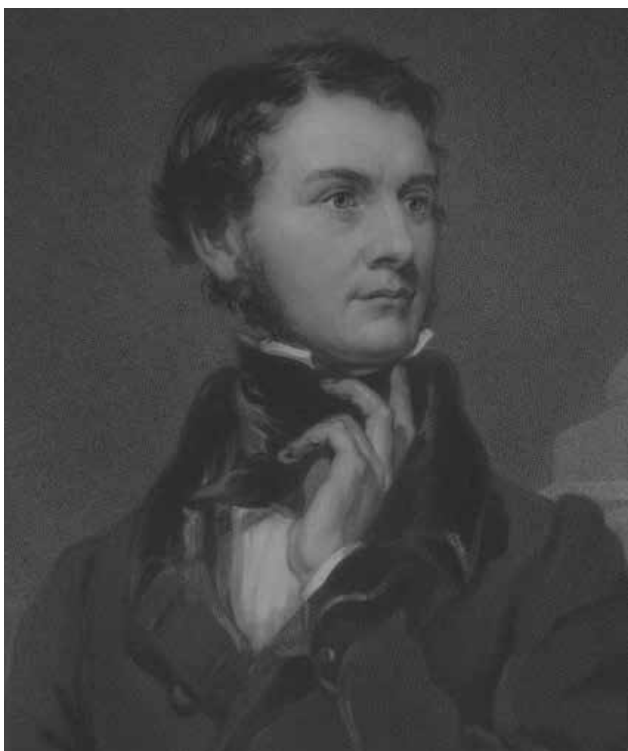
Campaign for repeal of Act of Union

After years of illness and steadily declining health, Mary O'Connell died in 1836. Mary's death and the meagre legislative gains achieved under Melbourne's government took their toll on O'Connell and his interest turned from Westminster to alternative forms of campaigning. Whereas, in the early 1830s, he had been extremely active in the Commons, by the late 1830s many months would go by without O'Connell speaking in the Commons.

In 1840, recognising that the Union was still not delivering justice for Ireland, O'Connell formed the 'National Association for full and prompt Justice or Repeal', implicitly accepting that once again he had to appeal directly to 'the people' – he considered that this had become more pressing with the start of Peel's second premiership in 1841.

Encouraged by some early popular successes, O'Connell declared that '1843 is and shall be the great Repeal year.'⁴³ O'Connell's model for the campaign was the emancipation movement of fifteen years earlier and, just like then, he thought he could force Peel to make concessions; incidentally, the Repeal campaign was a key subject at the first cabinet meeting Gladstone attended.⁴⁴ However, O'Connell's health was now deteriorating, he was mired in financial problems, and he no longer had Mary's support; in addition, challenges to his leadership were not far over the horizon. A series of 'monster meetings' were held all over Ireland, with O'Connell speaking at many of these; O'Connell also announced the creation of a Council of Three Hundred which would meet in Dublin; it was clearly intended to be a virtual parliament, but was carefully worded to stay within the law.⁴⁵ Attendance at the 'monster meetings' frequently exceeded 100,000, but the meetings remained orderly, celebratory, and well managed. The largest of all was held at the historic site of the Hill of Tara on a church holiday in August 1843, and even a paper as hostile as *The Times* reported a crowd of approximately one million.⁴⁶ This was O'Connell's Indian summer – he would never match these heights again and from now on was hit by a series of devastating setbacks.

The climax of the campaign was due to be a final monster meeting at Clontarf on the outskirts of Dublin in October, and there were proposals that Irish communities in Britain were to be encouraged to attend to create an immense audience. The government



William Ewart Gladstone in 1838 or 1839; Daniel O'Connell in 1844 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

prevaricated about banning the meeting and finally decided on this course of action less than twenty-four hours beforehand – but O'Connell remained determined to stay within the law and promptly cancelled the meeting, demonstrating the efficiency of the Repeal Association. Within days, O'Connell and some of his key associates were arrested on charges of seditious conspiracy, linked to events on the Repeal campaign over the preceding months. He was convicted and sentenced to a year's imprisonment – but the decision was reversed on appeal, and he was released after four months. He was not ill-treated in prison and was allowed a significant degree of freedom, including an almost unlimited ability to see visitors, but at nearly 70 years old, the experience drained his energy and famed resilience. And when he was released, the nationalist movement was on the verge of splitting beyond repair

Finally, the failure of the potato crop in late 1845 and the emergence of the famine resulted in a fundamental change in the

political landscape. O'Connell's final speech in the House of Commons was in February 1847 when he appealed for additional famine relief, calling on parliament to act generously as Ireland's future was in their hands – 'If they did not save her, she could not save herself.'⁴⁷

Within weeks of this speech, a visibly failing O'Connell set off on an abortive pilgrimage to Rome but died en route in Genoa.

Gladstone's perspective on O'Connell's career

Although the overlap between their careers was comparatively brief, O'Connell's life was to have a significant and recurring impact on the development of Gladstone's thinking.

From an early age, Gladstone had been a firm supporter of Catholic emancipation, with both William and his father being heavily influenced by Canning's long standing pro-emancipation views.⁴⁸ Hammond records that one of Gladstone's earliest letters as an Eton schoolboy was a defence of Catholic

emancipation,⁴⁹ and, while still a student in 1828, Gladstone recorded that he was reading many of the 'Clare Election speeches'.⁵⁰ Within days of entering the House of Commons in 1833, Gladstone recorded hearing an 'able' speech by O'Connell and, later in the same month, a 'powerful speech' on the woes of Ireland.⁵¹

However, a shared view on Catholic emancipation was not accompanied by a wider respect for O'Connell, and years later Gladstone confessed that 'in early life I shared the prejudices against him, which were established in me not by conviction, but by tradition and education'⁵² and that 'my prejudices against him were strong and irrational.'⁵³

Following Grey's resignation and Melbourne's appointment as prime minister, O'Connell's influence within the House of Commons increased, raising the possibility that some of his proposals to curb the power of the established Church of Ireland might become law.⁵⁴ Particular concerns to the defenders of the established church (like Gladstone) were plans for a reduction in tithes due to the church and appropriation, or the reallocation of church revenues to secular purposes. It was against this background that, in 1834, Gladstone wrote an article for the *Dublin Uni-*

of his 'youthful indiscretions' and 'immoderation',⁵⁶ and he was content for the article to quietly disappear from the historical record, until it was uncovered by Kanter and Powell's remarkable investigative work in 2018.

In his 1834 article, Gladstone is extremely critical of the governments of Grey and Melbourne, describing them as 'profligate' and 'a feeble and unprincipled ministry,' unable to stand up to the 'skilful mixture of kicking and coaxing' by O'Connell.⁵⁷ Gladstone refers to O'Connell as 'the agitator' and, where Melbourne's government has sought to work with O'Connell, Gladstone accuses them of entering 'on the insane course of purchasing, by the sacrifice of all principle, a temporary quiet from the lord of misrule.'⁵⁸ Gladstone derides O'Connell's description of himself as the 'pacificator of Ireland' stating that 'will his force be diminished, or his temper mitigated by the accumulated triumphs of another campaign of outrage? No! the dark nights are his invaluable treasure – ministerial poltroonery is his best card – upon him, we can calculate free, at least, from the pains of uncertainty.'⁵⁹ Although the defence of the Irish Church is the immediate objective of Gladstone's article, his overriding concern is that concessions on this issue would lead to further demands relating

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to the peerage, the Church of England and the repeal of the Act of Union. 'How is it possible that ministers can suppose the cause of repeal will be checked, and not advanced, by the surrender of the Church?'⁶⁰ And 'before the concession of the Catholic claims they and their friends [O'Connell and his supporters] incorporated into their tactics, the unhesitating declaration that the proposed concession would strengthen the rights of the church, and extinguish the very idea of repeal. ... But now – how is it possible to comprehend the policy of

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those who invite us to make an immense sacrifice for the purpose of conciliating men who have plainly told us they will not [*Gladstone's italics*] be conciliated by it?'⁶¹

Just days after the article's publication, William IV unexpectedly dismissed Melbourne's government, in part because of the instability created by their Irish Church policies,⁶² and appointed a Conservative prime minister, initially the Duke of Wellington, but as a caretaker for Robert Peel. Although there is no evidence that Gladstone deliberately suppressed his authorship, almost from the moment of publication he had strong political reasons for maintaining his anonymity.

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Despite this exchange, the young Gladstone remained extremely critical of O'Connell. In 1841 he records in his diary a long conversation with the art critic Alexis-François Rio, where Gladstone comments that 'O'Connell ... is a man regardless of all laws divine and human: whose career affords the most flagrant instances of abuse employed as an instrument of personal vindictiveness, of falsehood, and of pecuniary corruption.' Rio defended O'Connell's sincerity and sought to explain how his behaviour was shaped by the wrongs inflicted on the Irish people, but it is clear from the diary entry that Gladstone remained unconvinced by this attempted justification.⁶⁵

It was many years after O'Connell's death before Gladstone started to reflect on

O'Connell's life and career. In 1877, after he had completed his first term as prime minister (1868–74) and had stood down as the leader of the Liberal Party, Gladstone and his wife, Catherine, spent nearly a month in Ireland; this was the catalyst for a reappraisal of O'Connell's career. While in Ireland, Gladstone met Rev John O'Rourke, one of O'Connell's biographers, and visited O'Connell's tomb and memorial tower in the national cemetery at Glasnevin.⁶⁶

Upon his return to Hawarden, Gladstone read O'Rourke's biography of O'Connell and a further biography by Mary Cusack.⁶⁷ He also wrote to O'Rourke with a detailed recollection of a coach journey he had shared with O'Connell in the summer of 1834, a little over two months before Gladstone wrote his article for the *Dublin University Magazine*. Gladstone sent O'Rourke a copy of his contemporaneous notes outlining his wide-ranging conversation with O'Connell – which, unsurprisingly, covered many of the same issues as the later article, but without the same invective and vehemence. In addition to his notes from 1834 (which Gladstone had originally written for his father's benefit), Gladstone also included his recollections of the journey and the time he had spent with O'Connell, with these indicating a significant mellowing of his views over the forty-year time gap. Gladstone recalled that he and O'Connell were part of a parliamentary sub-committee relating to the Inns of Court. A key witness lived in a remote part of Essex, but due to age and infirmity, he was unable to travel to London, so various members of the committee (including O'Connell and Gladstone) travelled to Essex to interview him.⁶⁸ O'Rourke was delighted to receive this new perspective on O'Connell's life and included Gladstone's comments in subsequent editions of his biography. Subsequently, Gladstone noted 'the astonishing amount of labour' and 'personal sacrifice' that O'Connell had put in to seek justice for someone with

whom he had no personal connection. In Gladstone's view, O'Connell's only motive for this enormous effort was 'an overpowering belief that justice to an individual demanded it.'⁶⁹

Gladstone continued his reappraisal of O'Connell when he wrote an essay for the leading periodical *The Nineteenth Century* in 1889.⁷⁰ By now Gladstone had embraced the case for Irish home rule and had seen his third government fall over its failure to get the relevant legislation through the House of Commons. Hammond, in his magnum opus *Gladstone and the Irish Nation*, argues that, by this stage, 'O'Connell ranked almost with Peel in Gladstone's regard.'⁷¹ Having grappled with Irish issues for so much of his career, Gladstone now saw O'Connell in a new light. In contrast to his 1834 article in the *Dublin University Magazine* (which was still too politically embarrassing to receive a mention), Gladstone states that O'Connell 'is justly called the Irish Liberator.'⁷²

Having grappled with Irish issues for so much of his career, Gladstone now saw O'Connell in a new light. In contrast to his 1834 article in the *Dublin University Magazine* (which was still too politically embarrassing to receive a mention), Gladstone states that O'Connell 'is justly called the Irish Liberator'.

Gladstone acknowledges several of O'Connell's faults, including his support for 'exclusive dealing' or boycotting, with this sometimes spilling over into social exclusion and violence,⁷³ his persistent over-optimism and his tendency to exaggerate.⁷⁴ Gladstone argues that his 'gravest fault' was 'his too ready and rash indulgence in violent language, and this even against men whose character ought to have shielded them from it.'⁷⁵ But after many years wrestling with Irish issues, Gladstone had softened his view of O'Connell very significantly. Fifty years earlier, Gladstone had been questioning the genuineness

of O'Connell's faith, but now he writes that he 'was in truth thoroughly, consistently, and affectionately devout' and had 'a lively sense of the presence of God.'⁷⁶

Gladstone refers back to the events of the 1840s, acknowledging the prejudice that existed towards O'Connell and the Irish nation as a whole, and contends that it was representative of 'the hatred which nations ... are apt to feel towards those whom they have injured.' He admits his own prejudice, but argues that he 'was not blind to his greatness. Almost from the opening of my parliamentary life I felt that he was the greatest popular leader whom the world had ever seen.'⁷⁷

He praises O'Connell's oratory, stating that 'as orator of the platform, he may challenge all the world; for who ever in the same degree as O'Connell trained and disciplined, stirred and soothed, a people?'⁷⁸ And that he should be viewed as a great statesman given that 'he never for a moment changed his end; he never hesitated to change his means. His end was the restoration of the public life of Ireland; and he pursued it, from his youth to his old age, with unfaltering fidelity and courage.'⁷⁹

O'Connell is acclaimed as a committed advocate of Liberal causes and 'whatever tended, within the political sphere, to advance human happiness and freedom.'⁸⁰ O'Connell is to be 'regarded as a man who desired to maintain peace, property, and law,' but Gladstone notes the difficulty of this stance when faced by unjust laws. Demonstrating how far his understanding had developed since his 1834 article, Gladstone comments on the violence that could arise from social exclusion that it 'must be condemned and so must the recommendation which was the immediate incentive; but not so as to blind us to the fact that a severer

condemnation is due to those, who maintained abominable laws, impossible to be borne by human beings except in a state of abject slavery.⁷⁸¹ And in a personal note, he recounts that 'at all times [O'Connell] was most kindly and genial to one who had no claim to his notice, and whose prejudices were all against him.'⁷⁸²

Gladstone concludes his assessment of O'Connell by stating that 'Few ... will withhold their assent from the double assertion that he was a great man, and that he was a good man ... [who was] both over-censured and undervalued ... Besides being a great and a good, he was also a disappointed man. The sight of his promised land was not given to his long-ing eyes. But as a prophet of a coming time, he fulfilled his mission. It seems safe to say, that few indeed have gone to their account with a shorter catalogue of mistaken aims, or of wasted opportunities; and not only that he did much, but that he could not have done more.'⁷⁸³

Jim McGowan has had a long-standing interest in the life and career of Gladstone; an earlier version of this article was given as a paper at the Gladstone Umbrella at Gladstone's Library, Hawarden. He is currently researching his family history in, among other locations, Ireland and India. Many thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for extremely helpful comments they made on the first draft of this article.

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- 17 Gladstone, *Daniel O'Connell*, p. 153.
- 18 MacDonagh, *O'Connell*, p. 99.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 100.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 111. The motion was carried by 235 votes to 106.
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- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 253.
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- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 329.
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