

Thomas Davis – *A Nation Once Again*

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

Thomas Davis was born in Mallow, Co. Cork, Ireland in 1814. Educated at Trinity College, the Protestant son of a British Army surgeon, came forth with a burst of verse that roused a generation. He was trained as a lawyer, but wrote as if he'd never put his nose inside a book of law. He possessed a clear vision for his native land which involved an idea of uniting all creeds and classes in a vigorous national movement. It was not Catholics versus Protestants, not north against south, or Orangemen against Friends of Saint Patrick but here was an opportunity to unite all Irishmen.

Thomas Davis frequently spoke at Trinity's Historical Society and in an important address there in 1840, pleading for the study of Irish history, he urged his Protestant audience to work for Ireland, saying famously: "Gentlemen, you have a country." For Davis, it was vital that all Irish work together for the good of the nation and, like Wolfe Tone, he wished to break down the barriers separating Catholics and Protestants.

Together with Charles Gavan Duffy and John Blake Dillon he launched a publication called the *Nation*. This transformed Irish journalism and had an enormous influence on the next generation of Irish nationalist leaders including Patrick Pearse, James Connolly and Michael Collins. Though only 10,000 copies were printed each week, the paper was passed around, twenty-five readers to an issue, and became the island's first national publication. In a country where most peasants were illiterate, the poetry of Tom Davis spread word of mouth. The writers of the *Nation* were young, educated, not afraid to poke at the old order, to mock English rule with satire, to recast tired stories into allegories of modern struggle. Thomas Davis' poems, stories and songs provided the impetus that heralded the Young Ireland Movement.

One of the leaders of the Young Ireland Movement, Thomas Francis Meagher, had great admiration for Thomas Davis as a Poet. In the *Nation's* first publication, a few verses from a poem stood out to Thomas Meagher:

*As your fears are false and hollow
Slaves and dastards stand aside-
Knave and traitors, Faugh-a-Ballagh.*

To Thomas Meagher, that was it. *Faugh-a-Ballagh* (clear the way) became the war cry of the Irish Brigade in the Union army. In fact, it was said the confederate army heard that battle cry of the Irish Brigade charging down 'bloody lane' at Antietam.

Davis wrote prolifically for the *Nation*. He urged the development of all aspects of Irish life and a spirit of self-reliance which, again, prefigured Sinn Féin. However, unlike Daniel O'Connell (The Liberator) who urged the Irish people to drop the Irish language, Davis championed it: "To impose another language on such a people is to send their history adrift among the accidents of translation. People without a language of its own is only half a nation. A nation should guard its language more than its territories. To lose your native tongue, and to learn that of an alien, is the worst badge of conquest – it is the chain on the soul." Hence, from this evolved the Gaelic League, founded by Douglas Hyde in 1894.

Arthur Griffith, the organizer of Sinn Féin, spoke of Davis in the Treaty debate of 1921-22 as “the prophet I followed throughout all my life, the man whose words and teachings I tried to translate into practices and policies”. He also said: “I have never departed in my life one inch from the principles of Thomas Davis.”

Davis had written more than eighty ballads, poems and songs. His essays numbered in the hundreds. He could write stirring and immensely popular poems/songs, such as *A Nation Once Again*, which became the nationalist anthem for generations afterwards. The most popular songs were published in one volume in 1843 as *The Spirit of the Nation*.

Thomas Davis died from scarlet fever in 1845 at the age of 30.