

The Centenary of the Death of Michael Davitt

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IRISHTOWN HONOURS MAYO'S FAMOUS SON

2006 marks the centenary of the death of Michael Davitt, one of the great figures of Irish history, who was born in Straide in County Mayo on the 25th March 1846 and died on the 30th May 1906.

Around the country but especially in Mayo, in Dublin and in Haslingden, Lancashire and extensive range of events have been organised to mark the centenary. Here in Irishtown we were privileged to be able to take part in and host a number of activities to commemorate and remember a man whom historians correctly identify as "Mayo's most famous son".

One hundred years on from his death the story of Michael Davitt has the capacity to exercise a powerful hold over our imagination.

It is the story of a man who suffered many severe blows in his childhood and early adult life, these being, eviction, emigration, the hardship of being a child labourer, of losing an arm in an industrial accident at age eleven, of imprisonment and of being a convict on parole.

It is the story of a man who bore those blows with resilience and emerged without bitterness to become a person of great courage and conviction.

It is the story of a man who during a seven year and exceptionally hard prison sentence turned, with a greatness of soul and a power to forgive, from a Fenian activist to a constitutional politician.

The legacy of Davitt is his absolute conviction that violence is self defeating and that non violent peaceful protest is a more powerful, effective way of challenging the social system. He will be remembered as the ex Fenian who abandoned armed insurrection for the politics of peaceful protest.

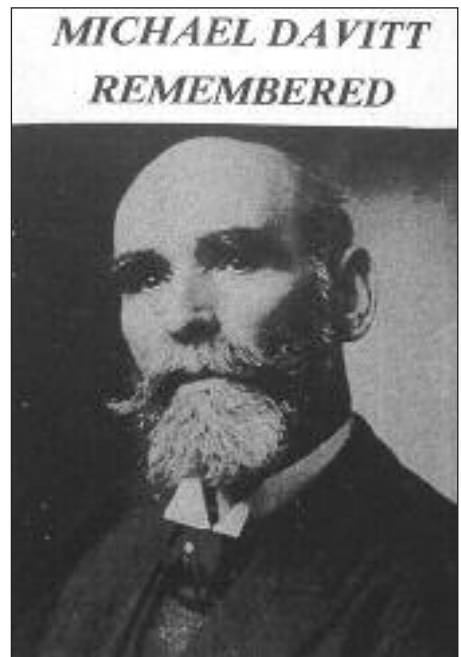
One hundred years after his death we are still in awe of his great courage, determination, vision and appetite for change which he displayed right throughout his life. Immortalised as "The Father of the Land League" Michael Davitt was also a great social reformer, a pioneer of the Labour movement, a Member of Parliament, an author and an international humanitarian. A man of vision and ideas with a passion for truth, honesty and social injustice, history has shown Davitt to be a man far ahead of his time, a hugely influential historical figure.

It is little wonder then, given his association with Irishtown, that the Davitt centenary generated much interest in our community and became our central theme for many of our events for 2006.

It was Davitt's support for the oppressed tenants of Irishtown and its hinterland in 1879 which initiated the Land League, the most successful lay movement in Irish history that changed the lots of millions of Irish small farmers from the status of tenants to owner-occupiers, from state of oppression to a level of dignity and self respect.

On St. Patrick's Day 2006, our community formally began its tribute to Michael Davitt by taking part in two local parades, Cloonfad and Claremorris. Our theme centred on the sequence of events which led to the mass peaceful demonstration at Irishtown in 1879. We were delighted when our efforts were rewarded with the top prize in both venues.

Readers might like to know that Michael Davitt did not appear at the Irishtown meeting of 1879. He was then a convict on a 'ticket of leave' (parole) and risked been arrested if seen at such gathering. However he was an active member of the organising committee, it was he who arranged the speakers and it was he too who wrote the resolutions for the meeting.



Back to 2006 and to the 20th April when Irishtown played host to the first of our commemorative evenings to mark the centenary. Incidentally the 20th April is the anniversary of the 1879 meeting. Our evening began with a parade to the site of this historic meeting led by piper Pat Conlon and the children from Davitt's GAA club.

Councillor Henry Kenny, Chairperson of Mayo County Council, unveiled a plaque at the site and addressed the large group of participants about the significance of the 1879 meeting in Irish history. Paying his first visit to Irishtown, Fr. Tom Davitt, grandson of Michael Davitt expressed his delight to finally stand on the historic spot.

The evening continued at Irishtown Community Centre when Bernard O'Hara, Registrar at the GMIT gave a comprehensive lecture on Michael Davitt's life and times to a capacity crowd. This was followed by a paper delivered by Patrick Prendergast, a student at GMIT, on the reasons why the Irishtown meeting was so successful and the part played by the people of our community and hinterland. Side by side with those lectures was an exhibition detailing the life of Davitt, his association with Irishtown and their combined contribution to the changing course of history.

On Saturday the 3rd June 2006, the Irishtown community once again went all out to celebrate Davitt's life. Our second commemorative evening evoked tremendous community spirit, with the entire community getting involved in the evening's proceeding. Young and old gathered in large numbers in the local park where on a beautiful summer's evening at 9.30pm, Archbishop Michael Neary concelebrated a wonderful open air mass. Following on from this, the Minister for Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Dick Roche addressed the crowd about the amazing contribution that Michael Davitt made to the welfare of the people of Irishtown and the surrounding areas.



A selection of the crowd in attendance in Irishtown

By now darkness was falling and as traditional music, from a wonderful group of young musicians, filled the air, the atmosphere in Irishtown was really building, with the crowd gearing up towards the keenly anticipated outdoor night pageant. This historical show which depicted the life and times of Michael Davitt, his association with Irishtown and their combined contribution to the Land League was an unprecedented success and went down a treat with one and all.

With a cast of 60 plus, all dressed in period costume the pageant struck an immediate cord. The narration, music, sound effects, lighting and superb acting all helped to keep a crowd of almost 1,000 glued to the show. Not a sound emerged from the audience as they watched the story unfold.

The story of Irishtown interwoven with that of Michael Davitt is a very powerful story indeed and it is little wonder that it stirred emotions in many. One could hear a pin drop right through the true to life pageant. The audience watched in silence as the cottages of the evicted took fire and burned out under the clear summer night sky, as their former tenants thrown to their fate lived or died, as the young Michael Davitt lost his arm, as he served his harsh prison sentence, as he finally left prison, as he met the tenants farmers from Irishtown and the subsequent 1879 meeting, as he fostered the Land League, travelled the world and finally as he died still a relatively young man with his funeral cortege returning to Straide.

The pageant went on until after midnight and although many were getting tired by then nobody was prepared to call it a day until the festivities had reached a conclusion with tea in the community centre.

And so ended our tribute to Davitt. We hope our events, added to those staged elsewhere, will have helped raise the profile of his truly great historical figure and help ensure his contribution to Irish history is recognised and appreciated.

Our country has seen many changes in recent times. Let us not forget that in the not too distant past things were much different. Michael Davitt and others invested their lives in advocating social injustice. As we now reap the benefits of that investment let me be mindful of those who pioneered the way.



The plaque adorns the place where the first meeting took place.