

Daniel O'Connell and Britain

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To the extent that this was possible in the first half of the 19th century, Daniel O'Connell was genuinely a man of international standing. He was well-known in Germany and other parts of Europe, especially wherever his brand of peaceful, reforming agitation could be seen as relevant to local conditions. Moreover, he was well-travelled, having been schooled in France and Belgium, and was known, if not universally admired, in America for his determined opposition to slavery.

While he enjoyed an exceptional international reputation, Britain was the country, aside from Ireland, with which O'Connell had the closest association. It was to Britain that he fled when the French Revolution made life on the continent unpalatable. It was in London, at Lincoln's Inn, that O'Connell undertook his legal studies and it was at the Westminster Parliament where he served as an M.P. for 17 years following the enactment of Catholic Emancipation in 1829, thus spending considerable time in London during parliamentary terms. In the 1830s and 1840s, he became a significant figure in British politics as a supporter of various reforming, radical causes. To this day, indeed, a fine portrait of O'Connell hangs prominently in the main hall of London's Reform Club, of which O'Connell was a founding member.

This paper tries to answer three questions: what was O'Connell's view of Britain; how was he seen in Britain during the active years of his political life from the late-1820s to his death in 1847; and how have British historians analysed O'Connell's qualities and achievements.

O'Connell and Britain

Like many Irish people back through the ages, O'Connell had an ambivalent attitude to our nearest neighbour. He was not especially happy in London during his student days. When he went back as a representative of Catholic Ireland, he was clearly flattered by the attention he received from the more prominent members of Britain's Catholic community, but he also felt a resentment at the inferior status that befell him as an Irish Catholic, even in comparison with those to whom he felt himself to be clearly superior in ability.

Unusually for an Irish nationalist, O'Connell, who was a supporter of monarchy, had a fondness for Queen Victoria, believing that the young Queen would help bring justice to Ireland. In 1839, he rejoiced in her dismissal of his arch-enemy Peel and the return of Lord Melbourne during the 'Bedchamber crisis', when he arranged for an address of gratitude to be sent to the Queen from Ireland.

O'Connell's first prime ministerial adversary was the Duke of Wellington, whom he described as a villain with '*neither heart nor head*.' On another occasion, O'Connell referred to the victor of Waterloo as '*a stunted corporal*'. Yet, it was Wellington who was instrumental in persuading a very reluctant King George IV to support Catholic Emancipation. When it came to Ireland, Wellington ultimately took a pragmatic stance, believing that the alternative to Catholic Emancipation would be a bloody sectarian conflict. O'Connell acknowledged Wellington's role and contributed to a fund set up in Dublin to recognise the Iron Duke's contribution to the achievement of Catholic Emancipation.

Peel was probably O'Connell's longest-running political adversary, an adversity that resulted in a challenge to a duel which happily never took place. O'Connell dismissed Peel as a man *'full of cant'* and as *'the champion of Orangeism'*. Memorably, he described Peel's smile as like *'a silver plate on a coffin'*. Peel, of course, turned out to be a nemesis for O'Connell, when he banned the monster meeting planned for Clontarf in 1843, an outcome that damaged O'Connell's image of political invincibility in the Irish public mind and encouraged the members of the Young Ireland movement to challenge him politically.

Another long-running feud was with Stanley who was Chief Secretary for Ireland during the early 1830s. O'Connell described him as *'the snappish, impertinent, overbearing High Church Mr Stanley.'* O'Connell tried without success to have Stanley removed from his post.

Contemporary British views of O'Connell

Five men held Prime Ministerial office during O'Connell's parliamentary heyday, 1829-1847 - Wellington, Melbourne, Grey, Peel and Russell. In all, there were seven changes of Government during those years when the Whigs and the Tories were evenly matched, which meant that O'Connell's support was vital to the Whigs. Interestingly, mid-19th century Prime Ministers - Wellington, Peel and Stanley - had previously been Chief Secretaries for Ireland, illustrating the salience of Irish issues during the first half of the 19th century. O'Connell's most sustained animosities were with those with whom he had crossed swords in Ireland.

Melbourne was probably the Prime Minister with whom O'Connell had the most productive relationship, for he broadly supported his Government during its 7 year term. Yet, Melbourne was personally hostile to O'Connell. According to his biographer, Melbourne saw O'Connell as *'a braggart and bully' ... 'whose word was worth nothing and whose objective was to make good government impossible.'* Although a moderate by the standards of his time, Melbourne had no love for the Irish who he saw as *'the most conspiring people on the face of the earth' and as 'a very violent and a very noisy people .. but not a very courageous people, particularly not morally courageous.'* This illustrates just what O'Connell was up against in the social and political climate of the early Victorian period, where even his nominal allies were personally hostile to him.

Peel reciprocated O'Connell's dislike of him, regarding O'Connell as a vulgar comic and a stage Irishman, but then Peel was himself often the target of condescension from Wellington and others who saw themselves as having a higher social standing.

Stanley saw O'Connell as a seditious influence and went so far as to express the view that he ought to be transported overseas. This, Stanley believed, would serve to calm Ireland, when it would most certainly have had the opposite effect.

O'Connell also had an unpleasant spat with a young Benjamin Disraeli, who attacked him as a traitor and a violent rebel. The reply was predictably sharp and made reference to Disraeli's Jewish origins. This was ironic because O'Connell was a strong supporter of Jewish emancipation.

O'Connell was more at home among the advanced political reformers of his day. He had great admiration for the radical Richard Cobbett, whom he described as *'one of the most*

extraordinary men that the world ever saw.' Cobbett paid O'Connell the compliment of referring to him as *'the member for Ireland.'* But even within this circle, there could be ferocious polemical exchanges and O'Connell and Cobbett eventually came to rhetorical blows with each other. Ultimately, very few British radicals were willing to support Repeal of the Union and they were distrustful of O'Connell's penchant for reaching compromise deals with the ruling Whigs.

A good example of O'Connell's relations with English political reformers was John Bright, who greatly admired him and shared his belief in agitation as a harbinger of reform and supported a variety of Irish causes, but was firmly opposed to Repeal and, at the end of his political career in the 1880s, to Home Rule.

The British liberal and free trade advocate, Richard Cobden, once wrote that O'Connell was *'the most potent champion that was ever raised up by heaven to defend the cause of good government against the arts of tyrants and bigots.'* In Cobden's view, all liberals ought to defend him as he had been made *'the scapegoat of reform by Tory calumniators and oppressors.'*

In the years that followed, Cobden became more ambivalent towards O'Connell, doubting the wisdom of his strategy, as he put it, of *'arraying the inferior race against the superior'*. (This comment further reveals the scale of O'Connell's task, when even his natural allies in the cause of political reform viewed Ireland in this manner). Nevertheless, Cobden recognised O'Connell's value to anti-Corn Law liberals, because his struggle for Repeal would compel the Government to rely more on the support of the British middle class which favoured free trade.

Yet, even though O'Connell consistently supported the repeal of the Corn Laws, Cobden, while acknowledging O'Connell's friendliness towards him, felt *'a complete antagonism and repulsion'* towards O'Connell and his supporters. He once said that he would as soon trust *'an Ashantee chief'* as the Irish Liberator *'on any public question.'*

By coincidence, Cobden was in Genoa the day after O'Connell's death and spoke with members of the Liberator's travelling party including his physician. In a letter he wrote at the time, Cobden strangely dwelt on the medical causes of O'Connell's demise. O'Connell's fate was he said, *'a warning to us all against overtaking the brain'*. He mused that he might have lived to 90 *'if he had moderated his mental excitement a few years ago.'* Cobden may not have heeded his own advice for he died at the age of 60!

The diarist, Charles Greville, offers another contemporary assessment of O'Connell. In 1828, he predicted that he would probably fail as an orator in the Commons, but *'to a mob, especially an Irish mob, he is perfect.'* He added a description of O'Connell as *'a man of high moral character'* who, however, did not worry about inconsistency because he trusted in his own ingenuity to see him through. Greville acknowledged that without O'Connell the Catholic question would never have been carried, but added that his *'bad taste'* and *'scurrility'* had *'made him lose the lustre of his former praise'*.

O'Connell and the historians

For most historians of 19th century Britain, O'Connell is a sideline concern. Writing at the end of the 19th century, the historian, William Nassau Molesworth, wrote sympathetically of

O'Connell's '*varied and persuasive eloquence*' and felt that he exhibited '*a rare mixture of caution and audacity*'. His '*versatile genius*' was able to goad the Irish people almost to madness and then '*restrain them in the wildest transports of their fury*'. He led them to display just violence enough '*to terrify their opponents without breaking out into open insurrection*'. In his early 20th century History of England, the conservative historian C.R. L. Fletcher saw O'Connell as '*the first great agitator*', but also an example of Irish ingratitude as, according to this view, whenever the Irish secured concessions it only whetted their appetite for more.

In a biography of O'Connell written in 1888, J.A. Hamilton acknowledged him as a very great genius as an orator, who spoke clearly and calmly in the Commons. On the negative side, he blamed O'Connell for being '*extravagant in the abuse of his enemies*' although he did, by way of extenuation, acknowledge how vigorously and remorselessly he had always been attacked by opponents. He argued that O'Connell should have enlisted English support, but '*he jarred upon them, offended them, alarmed them.*' The violence of his language was, in his estimation, a misfortune to his country and a discredit to himself. Hamilton paints O'Connell as a failure in parliament because he '*could not be a trusted statesman*'. His radicalism was a matter of expediency. His opinions were '*just and liberal*' and, had he possessed tact and moderation, he could have been more successful. This disapproval of his vigorous rhetorical style is a consistent theme running through British assessments of O'Connell.

More contemporary British historians have been kinder to O'Connell's reputation, recognising him as a great political innovator. Kenneth Morgan credited him with '*the expert management of Irish opinion*' while for Jonathan Clarke, he was '*a Catholic politician of genius*' having created in the Catholic Association '*the first mass movement*'. For Norman Davies, O'Connell's Catholic Association was '*the most effective political lobby of the day.*'

The historian, Paul Johnson, writing in the 1990s in his book, *The Birth of the Modern: World Society 1815-1830* described O'Connell as having '*weaknesses characteristic of his place, time and race.*' For Johnson, it was O'Connell's '*very Irishness .. which enabled him to speak for his country as no-one had ever spoken before and to become the first modern populist politician.*' Johnson compared O'Connell with his contemporary, US President Andrew Jackson, who also ushered in a new brand of popular politics. He attributed to O'Connell '*a political brain of great originality*' and considerable organisational skills that enabled him '*to create the first modern machine of mass politics.*'

Eric Hobsbawm, writing from a left-wing perspective, described O'Connell's aim as not national independence but '*moderate middle class Irish autonomy by agreement with the Whigs.*' He observed that the movement O'Connell led was genuinely supported by the mass of the Irish nation.

Douglas Hurd, in his biography of Peel offered a mixed assessment. He saw O'Connell as '*a romantic radical*' and rather harshly (and unfairly I would say) as someone who '*excited people with his words, then looked away if their excitement led them to riot or murder.*' In an implicit tribute to O'Connell, however, Hurd described Catholic emancipation as '*one of the great reforms of British history*' which had an effect on the politics of Britain as well as Ireland because '*for the first time a pressure group outside of Parliament had forced Parliament to alter the Constitution.*'

Perhaps the last British word on O'Connell should be left to Gladstone, who was impressed by

his cosmopolitanism epitomised by a principled opposition to slavery. For Gladstone, O'Connell was *'as thorough an English Liberal as if he had had no Ireland to think of' and had always supported whatever tended 'to advance human happiness and freedom.'*

Conclusions

Daniel O'Connell was a significant figure in British politics during an age of political reform when radical causes were on the rise. He was a member of the parliament that passed the Great Reform Act of 1832, which brought into Westminster politics individuals with whom O'Connell could feel an affinity. The votes of O'Connell and his supporters were vital to the passage of that reform. He was generally well regarded for his contributions to parliamentary debate, which ranged far beyond the concerns of his Irish electorate. His maiden speech, for example, was heard *'with profound attention.'* He skilfully used his position in parliament to extract concessions from the Whig Government.

His problem was that he had no alternative to a Whig alliance. And, while he benefited from a growing swell of support in Britain for his demand for Catholic Emancipation, this did not extend to the Repeal of the Union and it seems clear to me that there was no method, parliamentary or otherwise, by which Repeal could have been delivered during the 1830s or 1840s. Those who believe that O'Connell ought to have faced down Peel in 1843 should consider how willing senior figures were to use force against expressions of dissent in England itself. Wellington once remarked that *'the people of England are very quiet ... but if they won't be quiet there is a way to make them.'*

In my view, O'Connell achieved all that was feasible in the difficult circumstances of the 1830s and 1840s when fear of revolution spurred the political establishment in Britain, very reluctantly, to concede reforms such as Catholic Emancipation and the parliamentary changes incorporated in the 1832 Act. They were willing to go so far, but no further than they judged was necessary. They were willing to concede modest parliamentary reform but not a charter with provision for universal suffrage; Emancipation but not Repeal.

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