

THOMAS DAVIS

by Mike McCormack

There are few events in Irish history as tragic as the death of Thomas Osborne Davis. He was a rare man whose impact on the history of Ireland has never been truly appreciated. Born in Mallow, Co Cork on Oct 14, 1814, the son of a British Army Surgeon, he was educated at Trinity College and called to the Bar in 1838, but Davis heard another call: the call of Ireland. He heard it in the voice of Dan O'Connell when the Great Emancipator visited his home town in 1842, and asked a crowd of 400,000, "Where is the coward who would not die for Ireland?" This was a fiery young O'Connell, not the parliamentarian of later years, and he raised the consciousness of the Irish to a new spirit of nationalism. Men like Davis, filled with the fire of that patriotism, joined his cause. You see, after the brutal suppression of Ireland following the rising of 1798, the country remained depressed until O'Connell began to raise the issue of Catholic emancipation. It was then that the Irish people began to raise their heads again, but when they did it was not the voice of O'Connell they heard, but the voice of Thomas Davis and the Young Irelanders.

O'Connell fell short of the goals he inspired in other men when he chose to negotiate in the Parliamentary arena. Davis, on the other hand, fired by O'Connell's early speeches against the tyranny of England, never changed direction as his mentor had. The young Protestant barrister with two colleagues, Charles Gavan Duffy and John Blake Dillon, founded **The Nation**, a newspaper that would propagate patriotism and a love for Irish national literature like no other tabloid of its time. It was then that the doctrines and principles of Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen were resurrected, and Tone was finally recognized as the Father of Modern Irish Republicanism. As the spirit of nationalism once more began to beat in Irish breasts, a poem appeared in the April 1843 edition of **The Nation**. It was called the Memory of the Dead, and it read:

*"Who fears to speak of '98? Who blushes at the name?
When cowards mock the patriot's fate, who hangs his head for shame?
He's all a knave, or half a slave who slights his country thus;
But true men, like you men, will fill your glass with us."*

The Nation became a great power whose place in history is that it rekindled the dying flame of Wolfe Tone's nationalist doctrine of Irishmen – Catholic, Protestant, and Dissenter, together for Irish freedom. The gallant attempt at independence by the United Irishmen of 1798, and by Robert Emmet in 1803 were all but forgotten. England's brutal and abusive suppression after those attempted risings had all but stamped out the memory of the great Tone and his ideals. The Nation revived that memory, and the sentiment that had inspired it, and in so doing, created a nationalist tradition that has lasted to this very day, due in no small part to the writings of Davis himself.

It is truly written that the bullet of the patriot is soon forgotten while the words of the poet are immortal. Davis was brilliant with words and verse; his poetry captured the nation's imagination. He lionized Ireland's heroes, and gave her some of her most inspiring ballads. His lament for the great Chieftain Owen Roe O'Neill who was poisoned by a pawn of the English in 1649, seethes with fury:

*Did they Dare, Did they dare to slay Owen Roe O'Neill
Yes they slew with poison him they feared to face with steel.
May God wither up their hearts, may their blood cease to flow,
May they walk in living death, who poisoned Owen Roe.*

His memorable poems about Fontenoy, the Clare Dragoons, and Wolfe Tone were on the lips of every Irishman of the age. He drew to his philosophy such talented future leaders as John Mitchel, Speranza, William Smith O'Brien, Michael Doheny, Clarence Mangan, D'Arcy McGee, and Thomas Francis Meagher. His followers became the Young Irelanders, and their impact on history was considerable for they carried Davis's philosophy into the origin of Ireland's greatest nationalist movement - the Fenian Brotherhood. Unfortunately they did so without the master, for Thomas Davis succumbed to a fever brought on by an exhausted condition, and he died at his mother's home in Dublin on September 16, 1845 – 164 years ago. It was only a month before his 32nd birthday and just at the start of **An Gorta Mor** – the great hunger that would devastate his beloved Ireland. How he would have faced that tragedy can only be imagined, but there is no doubt that it would have been memorable.

The death of Davis, the brave young hope of his country, was a greater disaster for Ireland than she has ever recognized for he was the bridge between Wolfe Tone's United Irishmen and the Irish Republican Brotherhood. It was he who insured that the nationalism of Tone was not interred with him in that green grave at Bodenstown which Irishmen cherish as their most prized possession. The only consolation we have is that his songs are with us still. Who has not marveled at the bold courage displayed in **The West's Awake**; and who is not moved - to this very day - by the nationalist sentiment in the song he wrote to express his fondest desire - **A Nation Once Again**.