

6 DONNELL

JOHN O'DONNELL, FORMER M.P. FOR MAYO SOUTH, IRELAND.

1900 - 1910

John O'Donnell was born in Towneyeamon Westport County Mayo in the year 1868. He was the son of Martin O'Donnell a hardworking farmer of that District. He was educated in the Christian Brothers' Schools in Westport and early in life he entered politics where his career in that searching arena was marked by the tempestuous vicissitudes that fall to the lot of a man with a marked individuality of his own. John O'Donnell came into actual political life in one of those moments when the Irish cause seemed cold in death. Eight years of the degrading wars of the Parnell Succession had done their work resulting in the existence of three political factions incapable of anything except vilifying each other, and the Country paid little or no attention to their triangular brawls. In the Province of Connaught in the West of Ireland where John O'Donnell lived worked and died the congestion of the people on small allotments of land was little short of appalling. His father's share was some four acres of swamp and heather some three or four miles from the Town of Westport. Wherever the land was rich there was no population - such lands being used exclusively for the raising of cattle - and wherever the population was huddled together there was no land. In the Union of Westport alone a population of about 20,000 was trying to live on plots of land upon which existence would be impossible without the annual migration of harvest labourers to Scotland. In the wars for the Parnell Succession the politicians paid little or no attention to the plight of the people in the West of Ireland and the people themselves had sunk into a depression. They were forced to try and eke out an existence on miserably small allotments of land and this in an area where there was sufficient land to provide every family with fifty acres apiece.

*And stamped the Country North, South, East and West on it's behalf*

It was the foundation of the United Irish League which restored the National Unity broken to fragments by the Parnell split. It may with truth be said that John O'Donnell was one of the two or three men but for whom the United Irish League could not have come into existence. He was its first Secretary and with indomitable energy and indifference to hardship he carried the torch of the new movement through mountain and depopulated wilderness. It was while on this campaign that O'Donnell was on one memorable occasion violently dragged from his platform whilst addressing a meeting and imprisoned in Castlebar Jail for daring to utter the word "grabber" of a local land monopoliser. In Jail his refusal to wear criminal garb or to accept anything less than the status of a political prisoner led to a long course of brutalities which left their lifelong mark on his health. It was while O'Donnell was still in prison that Michael Davitt, who was then the member for Mayo South, threw up his seat and departed for the seat of war in the Transvaal. The prisoner in Castlebar Jail was started for the vacant seat being opposed by Major John MacBride, but O'Donnell, against all the array of feudalism and grazierdom, against the intrigues of all the "ites" and "isms" of the day headed the poll and with his victory disappeared the last hope of choking the United Irish League in its cradle.

John O'Donnell's political life was spent in espousing the cause of the oppressed people of his native land in their struggle for relief from the barbarous conditions under which they were compelled to exist. Under the Land Conference Treaty of 1903 the confiscations of James and Cromwell and William were reversed and the ownership of four fifths of the land of Ireland restored to the race whom the Penal laws of a century before forbade to acquire as much as a thirty one years lease. The nightmare of an irresistible feudalism which had oppressed O'Donnell's life had vanished into eternal darkness. This measure of relief was not attained however without a long and bitter struggle. He had had fierce encounters both in Parliament and in the Country with the nimblest political wits of the day including one memorable controversy with Mr. T. M. Healy M.P. On another occasion he rushed across the floor of the House of Commons and shook his clenched fist in the face of Mr. A. J. Balfour after one of the latter's mocking insults to Ireland.

He retired from active politics in 1910 and established a prosperous business in Galway City. In 1904 he married Mary Brett a sister of Thomas Brett a well known West of Ireland Merchant. There were six children born of the Marriage two of whom died in early childhood. He died on the 12th day of August 1920.

*John O'Donnell*

Mary St.  
Galway

13 Mar. 1901, Compted District (D) Bill  
Spide at St. Cayla.