Thirty-seven years before the rising of 1867, on July 23, 1830, to be precise, the second wife—her maiden name was Margaret Ryan—of John O'Leary (senior), a prosperous merchant of Tipperary town, gave birth to her first child, a boy who was called after his father. There were two other children of this marriage, Ellen (the future poetess of the Fenian movement), born in 1831, and Arthur, born in 1833.

Where exactly his brother and sister were educated we do not know; but about John O'Leary's own education a fair amount of information has survived. As a young boy he attended Tipperary Grammar School, perhaps better known locally as the Erasmus Smith School or simply as 'The Abbey.' Here for several years in the early 1840s the future leader of the Fenians mixed with the sons and daughters of the local gentry, both Catholic and Protestant. The school for day-boys and for girls was located, not in what we know as the Abbey grounds, but in one or more of the buildings in Bridge Street. Here young O'Leary obtained the solid foundations of what his associates in the movement years later had to admit was a remarkable store of learning. In addition to English and French literature—always his favourites—O'Leary acquired Latin, Greek, mathematics, geography and possibly even Italian and Hebrew. For Catholic pupils there was religious instruction in their own Faith, probably from the local clergy who were periodically in conflict with this Protestant institution that took the cream of local educational talent.

Eventually in 1845 O'Leary's father entered his son's name on the rolls of Carlow College, where John was to spend the best part of three years. It is a clear indication of how well-to-do the O'Learys were that the boy should be transferred from a fashionable Protestant school to what was then the leading Catholic boys' boarding school in Ireland: by the 1840s not even the Jesuit institution of Clongowes Wood could compete with Carlow College. Among those who had earlier been educated at Carlow were James Fintan Lalor, with whom O'Leary was soon to be closely associated, and Paul Cullen, who when later Archbishop and Cardinal was to be one of O'Leary's most formidable opponents. And the teaching staff, when O'Leary was a pupil at Carlow, included a young Cork priest who thirty years later would return from New Zealand and become Archbishop Croke of Cashel.

For the first sixteen years of his life there was nothing to suggest the makings of a nationalist leader in young O'Leary. He himself later described the family as politically neutral—not positively anti-British, but neither consciously pro-Irish. In 1846 a chance event radically altered this state of affairs for O'Leary. That Summer he became seriously ill with typhus and had to return home from Carlow College for three months. In his father's house he found a copy of the collected writings of Thomas Davis, then editor of The Nation, and O'Leary was so struck by the arguments for Irish freedom that overnight he was converted to nationalism, a creed to which he was
to remain loyal, even in the face of physical suffering, to the end of his long life sixty years later.

The following Spring—March 1847—O’Leary left Carlow College for good and spent the next six months or more at home in Tipperary, an enthusiastic if youthful member of the local Confederate Club. The Confederates were the extreme Young Irelanders who followed John Mitchel and had become impatient with what they thought was the too-mild policy of Davis in The Nation; in Tipperary town one of the leading Confederates was O’Leary’s uncle, William O’Leary.

Later in 1847 O’Leary went to Dublin and became a student at Trinity College. He intended to study for the Bar, but when he discovered that he must first take an oath of allegiance to the Queen of England, he at once abandoned the law. In Dublin he joined the Grattan Club of the Confederation and attended some of the great debates between the two rival groups of Young Irelanders. When in July he heard that William Smith O’Brien, John Blake Dillon and Thomas Francis Meagher had gone to Tipperary to lead a rising, he followed. But he found his fellow-townsmen more anxious to talk than to fight and in any event too poorly armed, and when it was rumoured that young O’Leary was about to be arrested he fled on horseback by night to the famous Father John Kenyon in Templederry, twenty miles to the North. After a week O’Leary returned home; the 1848 rising was now crushed and it was safe to appear at large again.

Most of the ‘48 leaders had been arrested in various parts of Co. Tipperary, and later that Autumn their trials began in Clonmel courthouse. O’Leary, with a Dublinman named Phil Gray who had hidden in the Waterford mountains with a force of men after the rising, now organised a plot to rescue the leaders from Clonmel jail. Informers revealed the plan to the British commander in the town, and when on November 8, 1848, O’Leary’s force assembled outside the town, at a place called the Wilderness, they were surrounded and captured. Ironically, they joined in jail the very men whose rescue they had been planning! The Young Irelanders were sentenced to transportation to Van Diemen’s Land; but O’Leary and his men were released.

Back home in Tipperary in January, 1849, John O’Leary established the first secret oath-bound revolutionary society in modern Ireland. With Joseph Brennan, a Cork journalist who had also been in the ‘48 rising, he organised the new movement all over Munster, and by the Summer of 1849 there were members even in counties Kilkenny and Dublin. When in July 1849 Queen Victoria visited Dublin, O’Leary was one of a small band of 150 secret society men who planned to kidnap her as a gesture, to show the world that Ireland was still disloyal; but this plan misfired. As a direct consequence of this failure, Joseph Brennan became more insistent than ever on military action, and finally a rising was fixed for September 16, 1849, to begin simultaneously in half-a-dozen Munster towns, including Cashel. But, as was to happen with the Fenians nearly twenty years later, exceptionally bad weather hit Ireland that night and only at Cappoquin was there any fighting. O’Leary left Tipperary town with 50 men for Cashel, where he linked up with Fintan Lalor’s force. From there they marched to Clonmel, only to find that no rising had occurred; they had to disband. Lalor was arrested and spent three months in jail; O’Leary escaped. Three months later Lalor died from ill-health brought on by his imprisonment, and the secret society of 1849, the forerunner of the Fenian organisation of 1858, apparently petered out.
For nearly ten years after the death of Fintan Lalor, John O'Leary took no part in Irish affairs. Instead, he led the leisurely life of a university student, and one, at that, whose family had enough money not to be too worried about whether or not their son passed his examinations. O'Leary for his part took full advantage of the freedom granted him, moving from one university to another, from one Irish city to another, even from Ireland across to England and the Continent.

His first year as an undergraduate, 1850, he spent in the newly-opened Queen's College, Cork, now University College Cork, where he obtained a scholarship at the annual examinations. From 1851 to 1853 he continued his medical studies in Galway University. Then followed a year at hospital-work in Dublin, another similar year in London, and a third year (1855) in Paris. From Paris he returned to London for 1856; in 1857 he was back in Dublin, where he spent two more years. But after 1850 it is noticeable that there were no more examinations passed and no more scholarships gained!

By now James Stephens had founded—on St. Patrick's Day, 1858, in Dublin—the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the controlling body of the Fenian organisation, and late in 1858 he approached O'Leary to seek his support. Though not so optimistic as Stephens, O'Leary agreed to sail to America to collect money for the IRB. He spent six months away, visiting many of the States to address meetings of Irish emigrants, writing for a Fenian paper called The Phoenix in New York, and establishing good relations with such prominent Irishmen as John O'Mahony, Michael Doheny (the former Cashel barrister) and John Mitchel, all of whom either then or later supported the IRB.

On his return to Europe late in 1851, O'Leary joined Stephens in Paris, now the headquarters of the Fenians. There O'Leary became dissatisfied with the progress being made; once more he fades out of the national movement—this time for three years, but for the last time.

Between 1858 and 1861 the IRB made only slow progress. The leaders were mostly unknown to the public; the mass of the people were apathetic after the failure of the Tenant Right movement and the betrayal of Sadlier and Keogh in the 1850s; and both churchmen and constitutional leaders constantly warned against the dangers of supporting a secret society. Then, in 1861, the IRB got the break it so badly needed. In far-off California occurred the death of Terence Bellew MacManus, a prosperous Liverpool-Irishman who had risked his fortune and life in 1848, and had later escaped from Van Diemen's Land. Supporters of the Fenian movement in the United States conceived the brilliant idea of burying MacManus in Ireland, and months of preparation and travel culminated in the remarkable public funeral through Dublin in November 1861, when tens of thousands of Fenians marched in military formation to Glasnevin cemetery.

Nevertheless, it is evident now that James Stephens, the IRB leader, failed unaccountably to take full advantage of the striking success of the MacManus funeral, and by 1863 the organisation was again desperately short of both money and arms, and its leaders were dispirited. At this stage Stephens boldly decided to launch a weekly newspaper, to act both as organ and rallying-point for the IRB. So it was that when on November 28, 1863, the first issue of The Irish People appeared in Dublin, John O'Leary was its editor, at the invitation of Stephens himself; this post O'Leary retained until the suppression of the paper by the Dublin Castle police nearly two years later.
It is on his period as editor of its weekly organ that John O'Leary's place and reputation in the Fenian movement securely rest. Not since the days of John Mitchel's paper fifteen years earlier had Irish nationalists so outspoken a journal; not until 33 years later when Arthur Griffith launched his *United Irishman*, was there another paper to equal O'Leary's *Irish People* in brilliance. It is worth recalling too that the Fenian paper had quite a sprinkling of Tipperary men on its staff. Next to O'Leary in rank came Thomas Clarke Luby and Charles Kickham, who were the two principal writers for the paper. Its sub-editor was Denis Dowling Mulcahy, a Clonmel man who had been in Lalor's '49 movement and later in the century was an associate of John Devoy in America, while one of the principal correspondents of *The Irish People* was a teacher in Tipperary town, Thomas Doherty Brohan, who later lost his job because of his Fenian views and also settled in the United States.

Critics of Fenianism have referred caustically to the idea of a secret movement publishing a weekly paper. But there can be little doubt that *The Irish People*, under the able pen of John O'Leary, acted as a powerful shot-in-the-arm for the IRB. Until then spokesmen for the movement had had to endure attacks from Church and State and from other Irish nationalists without being able to reply. Now they had their own weekly platform, which they skilfully used to strengthen their organisation until it became so powerful that at last, in September 1865, the British Government in Ireland became so alarmed that it closed down the paper and arrested all the Fenian leaders.

But long before that *The Irish People* had achieved its aim. It stated the case for armed revolt in preference to the policies of rival nationalists like A.M. and T.D. Sullivan; it replied to charges from Archbishop Cullen that the Fenians were anti-Catholic. It urged the Irish people to give up hoping for redress from the British parliament, and instead to plan carefully for the day when they could rise in arms. It encouraged Irish culture—music, language and games—and discouraged emigration; it urged the tenant-farmers to unite, and it prepared the path for the Land League of ten years later.

For all of these achievements, many of them undeservedly forgotten today simply because of the failure of the Fenians in the battlefield in 1867, much of the credit must go to John O'Leary, who, in his capacity as editor of the Fenian weekly organ during two of the most successful years of the IRB, did much to influence Fenian policy. For another reason too John O'Leary is entitled to credit for the astonishing growth of the Fenian organisation before 1865. A fact now almost completely overlooked by students of the movement is that it was he who was in charge of the finances of the IRB during this vital period. It was he who arranged for the regular (if often inadequate) sums contributed to the home movement by the Fenian Brotherhood in the United States. He it was who banked this money, kept account of it, superintended its spending and so on. And when in September, 1865 the blow came and O'Leary, Luby, Stephens, O'Donovan Rossa and Kickham found themselves in jail and facing trials for their lives, it was the money which O'Leary had prudently set aside that enabled them to employ the best lawyers in Ireland, like Isaac Butt, Q.C., to defend them at the State trials of 1865.

However, when it came to a verdict, O'Leary and his associates in the Fenian movement 102 years ago discovered (as many an Irish patriot has discovered both before and since) that not all the legal talent in the world will succeed in the face of biased judges, corrupt police, paid informers and packed juries. On November 28,
1865, the first Special Commission held in Dublin since the trial of Robert Emmet 62 years earlier, began. A Special Commission was an ingenious British legal device, whereby the Government made sure of a verdict of guilty by itself selecting the judges with suitable political backgrounds; in this case, it chose as the main judge to deal with the Fenians no less a person than William Keogh, the former Tenant Right MP who, with the Tipperary banker John Sadleir, had changed sides in 1852, had been rewarded by getting a high legal office and was later made a High Court judge.

This was the miserable creature who, with a jury of Dublin Unionists, tried Thomas Clarke Luby and speedily consigned him to twenty years' penal servitude. Next, on December 1, 1865, began the trial of John O'Leary. It was by far the longest of the whole sitting, lasting for five full days and marked by a great closing speech by Isaac Butt, the Home Rule Lawyer. O'Leary too was found guilty after a retirement of only 1 ½ hours by the jury; like Luby, he too got twenty years. Before he left the dock for Mountjoy jail, O'Leary made an historic speech which has since become one of the classic patriotic speeches from the dock. In it rejected the charge that any Irishman who plotted the overthrow of English rule in Ireland was a traitor; by that standard, he remarked as he finished, Emmet was a traitor, and he was proud to be in such company.

Five long years lay ahead of John O'Leary—five years of physical and mental torture in what must have then been one of the most brutal penal machines in the civilised world, the convict settlement of Victorian England. On the eve of Christmas Eve 1865, with the other Fenian convicts, O'Leary, manacles round his ankles and chained by the arms to Luby, crossed the Irish Sea to Pentonville jail near London. Here he remained for six months—rising at 6 o'clock every morning, cleaning out his tiny cell, lining up for the morning parade, spending the day picking oakum in the manner known to readers of Charles Dickens, never permitted to speak to another prisoner, or to any other human being save on the infrequent visits from relatives from Ireland. For his breakfast each day he got ½-pint of cocoa and ½-lb. of bread, for dinner 1 lb of potatoes, ½-lb. of bread and ½-lb of meat.

From Pentonville, O'Leary and 23 other IRB prisoners were, in May 1866, transferred to the notorious Portland jail off the coast of Dorset, a bleak treeless peninsula where stone has been quarried by penal servitude prisoners for 300 years. Here cruelties of a kind associated by later generations with concentration camps were practised on convicts. Here one Fenian was forced to work for days while his legs bled profusely from piles; another was obliged to swing a sledge-hammer for a full week after a heavy stone had fractured his finger; another delicate man began a slow death from cold; yet another, half-blind and unable to quarry stones, bravely knitted and sewed the years away until his sight disappeared completely. Here too, since there was no chaplain to minister to the spiritual needs of the 300 Catholic prisoners, Thomas Clarke Luby, the son of a Protestant clergyman from Tipperary and a Dublin Catholic mother, took advantage of his encyclopaedic knowledge of the Bible, and threw himself enthusiastically into the job of unofficial prison chaplain, reading daily well-chosen extracts about perjurers and liars and tyrants and oppressors—while the humourless British prison warders looked on, powerless to interrupt.

Fortunately, the outside world did not forget the Fenians in jail. Their manly appearance at their trials and their brutal sentences had won them wide sympathy. Under the leadership of public figures like Isaac Butt and Richard Pigott, the future forger of the so-called Parnell letters, a great amnesty movement was organised in
Ireland, and eventually, after a prison investigation, came the release in March 1869 of fifteen IRB men from Portland jail and of another 34 then serving their time out in the penal settlements of West Australia. But John O'Leary was not among those released.

A year later, in April 1870, the British premier, Gladstone, by now alarmed at the impetus given to the Home Rule movement by the organised clamours for the release of the rest of the Fenians, set up a new inquiry into their prison treatment. This body, under the chairmanship of Lord Devon, produced a mildly favourable 500-page report with evidence and recommendations. Influenced by this document, Gladstone now acted. By Christmas 1870, along with all the other Fenians convicted in 1865 or 1867, John O'Leary was a free man again—but only on condition that he spend the rest of his original twenty-year sentence out of England and Ireland.

And so, while most of the other Fenians like John Devoy and O'Donovan Rossa sailed for America in January 1871, O'Leary crossed to Belgium with Luby, who soon after set sail too for New York. O'Leary meanwhile crossed the French frontier and made for Paris. Ahead of him now lay fourteen lonely years of enforced political exile—fourteen years during which he had to watch from a distance while back in Ireland the IRB steadily declined until the movement practically died out altogether.

Before he settled down in Paris, however, O'Leary also paid a visit to the United States. For six months in the Summer and Autumn of 1871 he stayed with Rossa in New York, trying (but without much success) to mediate between rival Irish-American factions in that city. It was January 1872 before he was back in Paris, then only beginning to recover from the shock of defeat at the hands of the German army in the recently-ended Franco-Prussian war. Slowly O'Leary accustomed himself to life in Paris, a city he had known in his student days twenty years before. He was able to renew old acquaintances, and was pleased to act as host to Irish visitors, like Dr George Sigerson, his former colleague on *The Irish People*, or James Stephens, now deposed from leadership of the IRB and living in poverty in Paris with his wife.

From Paris, O'Leary gradually picked up the threads of Irish affairs. Slowly, as he came to understand the changes that had occurred during his five years in jail, he began to express his own views in a steady stream of letters and interviews published in Irish papers. Gladstone might prevent O'Leary from appearing in Ireland itself; but he soon came to realise that there was no way of stopping O'Leary from getting across his political philosophy, to an Irish public that listened to and read with respect every statement by O'Leary.

Events in Irish political life towards the end of the 1870s showed decisively how even from France O'Leary could influence the course of Irish affairs. By 1878, John Devoy, now one of the leaders of the new organisation, Clan na Gael, in New York, Michael Davitt, the Fenian arms agent just out of British jails after seven years, and Charles Stewart Parnell, now the leader of the Irish Home Rule MPs, were negotiating an alliance that came to be known in modern Irish history as the New Departure. During a brief visit home to Ireland in March 1878 O'Leary met Parnell in London. Nine months later another conference followed in Paris, this time attended by Devoy himself. Most of the IRB leaders, including Kickham, then President of its Supreme Council, were against any form of co-operation with Parnell and his party, but there is reason to believe that O'Leary supported Devoy's argument for limited support. Certainly, from the time he first met Parnell, O'Leary came to admire him, and to the end of Parnell's life he was the only Home Rule MP for whom O'Leary had not got a
bad word; for, as the Fenian movement became less and less influential with the rise of the Land League in the 1870s and 1880s, O'Leary, like Kickham and Devoy, became increasingly hostile to the constitutional movements led by Parnell and Davitt. Twice more, in 1880 and 1883, O'Leary visited the United States, on each occasion to try to dissuade Clan na Gael from continuing its support for the Home Rule party; in neither case did he succeed.

On January 19, 1885, just nineteen years after his conviction, John O'Leary arrived back in Ireland. Until the return in 1890 of James Stephens, O'Leary was the only Fenian leader of the 1860s to settle in Ireland. Luby, Devoy, Rossa, and John Boyle O'Reilly, all settled and died in America; Kickham was dead since 1882. O'Leary was, in fact, to outlive all these, save O'Donovan Rossa and the younger Devoy. For twenty years O'Leary's sister Ellen, the poetess, had lived quietly in a cottage in Tipperary town, making only occasional excursions to visit her brother in Portland jail or in his flat in Paris. Now she sold out in Tipperary, and with her brother's library moved to a flat in Dublin which the two shared. From here, O'Leary, immediately after his arrival in Dublin, renewed old friendships and began to visit the several informal clubs then flourishing in the city. Soon he came to patronise almost exclusively the Contemporary Club opposite Trinity College, and it was here that in 1885 he was first introduced to a young poet, W. B. Yeats, whose father the painter, John B. Yeats, had brought the youth to the club to help him to overcome his natural shyness.

Students of modern Anglo-Irish literature know well what results flowed from this strange friendship between the 55-year-old Fenian and the 20-year-old Protestant boy from Sligo. Under O'Leary's guidance, Yeats first learned of the vast store of Irish legend, available in translations and suitable material for a promising young Irish poet who could be persuaded to become Irish, if not nationalist, in his outlook. And this is precisely what O'Leary did in Yeat's case, so that inside two years Yeats was writing poetry of a kind not normally associated with a person of his Ascendancy background. O'Leary placed the whole of his fine library at Yeat's disposal, brought Yeats to listen to the weekly debates of the Young Ireland Society, secured for Yeats an entry to John Boyle O'Reilly's great paper The Pilot of Boston, and almost single-handed organised the collection of subscriptions for Yeats's first book of poems, The Wanderings of Oisin, published in 1888. It is no exaggeration to say that, but for the influence of O'Leary, Yeats would never have become a nationalist in outlook and might now be numbered among the forgotten minor poets of the late nineteenth-century. O'Leary is unique too in this respect, that he made a major contribution to the shaping of modern Ireland outside the sphere of politics, something no other Fenian leader achieved.

Nor ought it be forgotten that O'Leary himself, apart from his influence on Yeats, played a significant part in the literary revival that began in the late 1880s. He had a hand in the publishing of a small book, "Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland," which a famous literary critic has called "the first offering of the Revival." O'Leary was a prominent member of the Pan-Celtic literary group, which sponsored another volume of poems in 1889. When in 1887 the Gaelic Athletic Association began to publish a weekly organ, The Gael, O'Leary, one of the early patrons of the G.A.A., became its literary editor and when in 1891 the Irish Literary Society of London was founded, O'Leary was elected its first president.

To think, however, that from his return to Ireland in 1885 John O'Leary took no-
part in the nationalist movement is a grave error. On the day he landed in Dublin he went out of his way to announce that he came back with the same political philosophy as he had when he left Ireland twenty years before. At once he made contact with the new leaders of the IRB, took his seat on the Supreme Council, and set out on a six-month tour of provincial Ireland, England and Scotland, making speeches which made it abundantly clear that he still pinned his faith to physical force and still had none at all in parliamentary agitation. Periodically he visited Paris, where the Supreme Council then met to avoid the attention of the British secret police. And when at Christmas, 1890, the Parnell Split broke on Ireland, O'Leary led the massive Fenian support for the deposed leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, against the British Liberal Party and the Irish hierarchy, which together insisted on the rejection by the Irish party and electorate of the man who had so skillfully led the Irish nationalist movement for over fifteen years.

Seventy years later, when the centenary of the 1798 Rising, occurred, it was O'Leary, now approaching 70 years of age, who took the lead in forming the '98 Centenary Committee, which sponsored the year-long celebrations of 1898 that are now known to have been organised by the IRB. And it was through these celebrations that many of the later leaders of modern Ireland were introduced to the ideals of the separatist movement, a fact to which the late President Séan T. O'Kelly, among others, has testified. For O'Leary himself by far the most moving occasion of 1898 was his unveiling in Tipperary town in November of the statue of his old associate, Charles Kickham. And it is a safe bet, too, that O'Leary took special pride in the fact that it was the experience of working together during 1898 that eventually led to the healing of an old split in the Fenian movement when, in 1900, a united Supreme Council of the IRB chose as their President O'Leary himself.

From the ending of the division among Fenians flowed an important result for the nationalist movement as a whole. In 1898 Arthur Griffith's first— and, in the opinion of most people, by far the best—newspaper, United Irishman, had begun to appear; O'Leary was one of its directors. Subsidised by the IRB from funds sent across from America by Devoy out of Clan na Gael moneys, this paper became under the guidance of the old Fenian and future 1916 leader Tom Clarke, the spearhead of a re-vitalised separatist movement which led directly to the foundation in 1907 of Sinn Féin. The month before this historic event, on the eve of St. Patrick's Day, 1907, John O'Leary died in Dublin.

* * * *

It remains to consider briefly the political philosophy of O'Leary. Above all he was for decades the personification of the separatist movement in Ireland. At a time when physical force was unfashionable, when the Fenians and their failures had become something of a joke, at a time when the peaceful methods of Parnell and Davitt and Redmond looked like succeeding, he never deviated from his belief in the efficacy of arms as the only way to achieve the political separation of Ireland from England.

Yet his wide reading of history and his years of residence in France produced a paradox in O'Leary. For, though one of the leaders of a secret society which aimed at setting up an Irish republic, O'Leary believed that the Irish temperament was best
suited to a monarchy—not, it must be added, a British monarchy, but one ruled by a
member of an old Irish royal family as head of State of a democratic Ireland. Before
we too hastily smile at this curious idea, let us recall for a moment the discussion
between Pearse and his comrades in the GPO in 1916 as to which of the royal families
of Europe ought to be asked to nominate a king of Ireland.

A direct consequence of his belief in the complete separation of Ireland from
England, and of his advocacy of armed resistance as the means of achieving it, was
O’Leary’s lifelong opposition to agrarian agitation. From the day Davitt first thought
of the idea of the Land League, O’Leary was bitterly opposed to it; so were other
Fenian leaders like Kickham. To press for land reform before the British got out of
this country was, in O’Leary’s view, to put the cart before the horse, or to lower the
sights of the national movement. First get rid of British rule, he argued, and then
alleviate the plight of our tenant-farmer.

It was for this reason that all through the New Tipperary project of 1889 to 1891
O’Leary was against the town tenants. Not, of course, that he was the only Irish
leader to think thus; Parnell never once gave his blessing to New Tipperary. But then,
unlike O’Leary, who always believed in speaking his mind, Parnell was shrewd
enough a politician not to voice his opinions publicly.

Regarding the Irish language question, much confusion exists about O’Leary.
Dr. Douglas Hyde never forgave him for a speech he made in Cork in 1886, in which he
advised his audience to have nothing to do with the language. But this is to take his
statement out of context. O’Leary was urging preparation for eventual armed action,
and what he had in mind was merely the need not to spend too much time over less
essential matters of culture before freedom was won. There is, in fact, plenty of other
evidence to show that O’Leary was well-disposed to Irish—his directorship of Arthur
Griffith’s paper which was enthusiastically behind the revival movement, his regular
attendance at early meetings of the Gaelic League’s annual Oireachtas, and his
advocacy of the use of Irish during the various ceremonies of the ’98 centenary
programme.

In John O’Leary, Tipperary town has as distinguished a native as any town in
Ireland.* Because of his long career in Irish affairs, he became a living link between
the Young Ireland movement of the 1840s and the leaders of Sinn Fein, who 75 years
later planned and carried out the Rising of 1916. By his brilliant editing of the Fenian
organ The Irish People, he played a major part in the growth of Fenianism to its
greatest strength in 1865. By his guidance of W. B. Yeats, O’Leary gave Ireland its
greatest poet of modern times. And, lastly, by his loyalty in old age to his separatist
views he became an inspiration to men like Clarke and Pearse and Griffith, who laid the
foundations of the Irish State in which we now live.

* For further information concerning the life of John O’Leary, the reader is referred
to the author’s book, John O’Leary: a study in Irish separatism, published by Anvil
Books Ltd., Tralee, this year.