

the work of Catholics, so far from prejudicing him in its favour, would simply have increased the severity of his condemnation. It would, in his eyes, have been falling from a higher standard.

The two political subjects to which Sir John Acton attached most importance were ecclesiastical establishments and agrarian reform. The land laws were safe from disturbance under a Premier who flippantly remarked that tenant right was landlord wrong. The Irish Church, to which, as a Catholic and an Irish Member, Acton could not be indifferent, suddenly flashed into fatal prominence, when, on the 28th of March 1865, Mr. Gladstone declared that it did not fulfil its proper functions, because it ministered only to one-eighth, or one-ninth, of the community. This speech, coupled with his declaration of the previous year that every man not mentally or morally disqualified was on the face of it entitled to come within the pale of the Constitution, gave Mr. Gladstone for the first time the confidence of the working classes and of the Radical party. Sir John Acton went with him, then and afterwards, in all confidence and hope. As a Catholic he would naturally have been opposed to the maintenance of Protestant ascendancy by law. As a Liberal he was in favour of extending the suffrage, and of religious equality. But indeed the foundation of his agreement with Mr. Gladstone lay deeper than any political principle or measure. Belonging to two different branches of the Christian Church, they both desired the reunion of Christendom, and both held that religion was the guiding star in public as in private life. Between a High Churchman like Mr. Gladstone and a Liberal Catholic like Sir John Acton there was plenty of common ground. Both men became, in every sense of the word, more Liberal as they grew older, and Acton's belief in his leader ripened into a reverential devotion which nothing could shake.

At the General Election of 1865, Sir John Acton stood in the Whig or Liberal interest for Bridgnorth, the nearest town to Aldenham, and then a Parliamentary