Guinness, Edward Cecil

by Diarmaid Ferriter

Guinness, Edward Cecil (1847–1927), 1st earl of Iveagh, businessman and philanthropist, was born 10 November 1847 at St Anne’s, Clontarf, Co. Dublin, youngest of three sons of Sir Benjamin Lee Guinness (qv), brewer, of Dublin, and Elizabeth, third daughter of Edward Guinness of Dublin. He was not sent to public school but was taught at home by a private tutor before entering TCD, where he took his degree in 1870. His father had died in 1868, leaving him a share in the brewery, and he took over management of the business with his brother Arthur (qv), who in 1876 sold his shares, making Edward sole proprietor. He was also prominent in municipal life, holding the offices of high sheriff of the city in 1876 and of the county in 1885, the year in which he was created a baronet. Edward was a brilliantly effective businessman, with close attention to detail and a focus solely on the brewery, to the extent of remaining independent from the rest of the brewing trade. In 1888 he bluntly told the Country Brewers’ Association: ‘I have always declined to identify myself with any trade question, or to take any side in a controversy on the liquor question, and to this I must adhere.’ In 1886 Guinness was floated as a public company, a superbly successful venture with applications for shares exceeding £100 million, and Edward remained as chairman until 1890, although his formal retirement in that year brought little reduction in his involvement with the company, and he continued to make the final decision on many minor matters as well as all major questions of policy.

Socially innovative, with a concern for the welfare of employees, from as early as 1870 he had established a free dispensary for his workforce and made provisions for pension and other allowances – acts of social reform that were remarkable for the time. To mark his retirement in 1890 he placed in trust £250,000 to be expended in the erection of working-class housing in London and Dublin; both funds were administered from London until 1903, when the Dublin fund was amalgamated by the Iveagh Trust act with other schemes carried out in Dublin by Edward (who had been raised to the peerage of the UK in 1891 as Baron Iveagh of Iveagh, Co. Down). The funds, which were to increase considerably from the original amount, were thereafter managed entirely in Dublin as a separate undertaking under the name of the Iveagh Trust, still in existence in the early twenty-first century. As one of the pioneers of the voluntary housing movement he was essentially carrying on the tradition of ‘merchant prince and city father’ established by his father and shared by his brother. Wealthy, ambitious, and resolutely unionist, he gave generous financial support to the Irish Unionist Alliance, and was also public-spirited, religious, and devoted to duty. Acknowledging that the Iveagh Trust was essentially ameliorative, he believed that major social change would only be achieved if numerous other wealthy people followed his example. He insisted that gifts of money from the fund were permissible only to assist individuals to improve their condition ‘without
placing them in the position of being the recipients of a bounty’. Numerous other philanthropic donations followed, including another £250,000 for slum clearance in the Bull Alley district of Dublin; various contributions to Dublin hospitals, particularly in 1903 and 1911 on the occasion of royal visits; and in 1907 the opening of the Iveagh markets, situated in the Francis St. and Patrick St. areas of Dublin city, were made possible with his financial backing. Generous contributions were also made to TCD (of which he was elected chancellor in 1908), and he donated land in Iveagh Gardens to UCD.

In 1905 he was raised to a viscountcy and in September 1909 the nationalist corporation of Dublin presented him with an address of thanks for his many gifts, and even discussed the possibility of offering him the lord mayorality of the city, which he declined owing to his political affiliations. By this time he lived chiefly in England, having bought Elveden Hall in Suffolk, where he frequently entertained royalty. He also purchased Lord Kensington’s London estate and made many donations to medical research societies in England, and in conjunction with Sir Edward Cassel he founded the London Radium Institute, as well as donating £250,000 to the Laster Institute of Tropical Medicine for the endowment of bacteriological research. In 1919 he was elevated to an earldom and in 1925 purchased the remainder of the Kenwood estate to the north of Hampstead Heath and arranged for it to become public property, ensuring the estate would not be sold for building purposes, and also bequeathed to the nation a valuable collection of art for use in the gallery at the same location. As well as being elected a fellow of the Royal Society, he was awarded honorary doctorates from the universities of Dublin and Aberdeen. He married (1873) his cousin Adelaide Maud (d. 1916), daughter of Edward Samuel Guinness, MP, of Dublin. They had three sons, the eldest of whom, Robert Edward Cecil Lee, succeeded his father as 2nd earl after his death at his London home in Grosvenor Place on 7 October 1927. He left an estate valued at £11 million.

Ir. Times, 8 Oct. 1927; WWW; P. Lynch and J. Vaizey, Guinness’s brewery in the Irish economy 1759–1876 (1960); Boylan; F. H. Aalen, The Iveagh trust: the first 100 years 1890–1990 (1990); S. R. Dennison and Oliver MacDonagh, Guinness 1886–1939: from incorporation to the second world war (1998)