

Alton, Ernest Henry

by J. V. Luce

Alton, Ernest Henry (1873–1952), classical scholar and public representative, was born 21 September 1873 at Marlinstown, near Mullingar, Co. Westmeath, eldest son of James Poë Alton, banker, of Limerick and Marguerite Alton (née Keely). His abiding passion for classical literature was fostered in the High School, Dublin, whence he proceeded to TCD in 1892. During an outstandingly brilliant undergraduate career, he was elected to a foundation scholarship (first place) in 1894, and graduated BA in 1896 with senior moderatorships in classics (large gold medal) and in philosophy. He won the prestigious Berkeley medal (in Greek) and the Wray prize (in philosophy), and was awarded a studentship (postgraduate scholarship) on his final results. His recreations included debating in the University Philosophical Society, where he became a leading light, and playing rugby as a forward on the first XV, a team that won the Leinster cup in 1897–8. Short in stature, but strong and compact in physique, he was dubbed ‘the pocket Hercules’ by a sports journalist.

His expected progress towards a fellowship of the college was briefly interrupted by a foray into journalism in London. At that time the only route to fellowship lay through an extremely stiff written examination held once a year. He first sat this test in 1899, but faced by a backlog of able and more experienced candidates, he was not successful until 1905. Fellows were then appointed for life, and ‘Tubby’ Alton gave effective and devoted service to Trinity in various capacities, most notably as professor of Latin (1927–42), as vice-provost (1941–2) and as provost (1942–52).

Elected to membership of the RIA in 1912, he served the Academy on the council (1915–44), as vice-president (1942–4, 1946–7), and as secretary for foreign correspondence (1916–17, 1921–4, 1927–9). He was responsible for proposing Sir Alfred Chester Beatty (qv) for membership (1951).

His *métier* lay in scholarly research, but his warm and extrovert personality brought him into significant contact with other currents in Irish life. As a member of Trinity's Officer Training Corps he was summoned for action on Easter Monday 1916 when there was a strong possibility that a detachment of the insurgents, who had occupied Westland Row station and were patrolling the loopline overlooking the parade ground, might move to seize the considerable armoury of the Corps, located only yards from them on the eastern perimeter of the college. Because of the Easter break many of the cadets as well as the CO, Maj. Robert Tate, were away, and by mid-afternoon Capt. Alton found himself in command of the small force that had assembled. His efficient conduct of the defence of the college over the next few days earned him the award of the MC.

Within days of the signing of the treaty constituting the Irish Free State, the board of the college passed a motion of support for the settlement terms, and urged Trinity men to play 'an active and sympathetic part in the building up of happier conditions in Ireland' (TCD board minutes). This was the cue for Alton's commitment to parliamentary work. He secured election to Dáil Éireann as one of the three representatives of his university, serving continuously from 1923 to 1937, and then in the senate (to which university representation had been transferred) from 1937 to 1942. He rarely spoke in debates, his forte lying rather in committee work and in building up relationships with Ireland's new rulers. His quick mind, genial personality, and unfeigned patriotism gained him significant friends in government circles, and did much to conciliate official sentiment in favour of the college in the inter-war decades. His work as a public representative ceased soon after his admission as provost on 13 May 1942, but his contacts remained as a significant background factor when the college made its first, and successful, application for public funds in 1946–7. In 1951–2 the final weeks of his life were cheered by a personal communication from Éamon de Valera (qv) that a very substantial increase in the government grant could be expected.

Acclaimed after his death as 'the greatest authority on Ovid since Heinsius in the eighteenth century' (*Ir. Times* appreciation), his reputation as a Latinist was primarily based on his work on the complex manuscript tradition of the *Fasti*. A senior colleague, L. C. Purser (qv), had suggested he undertake a commentary, but on being given six months leave of absence to visit the libraries of western Europe, he soon realised that the textual foundation of the poem needed further investigation. The work brought him into friendly personal contact with many leading scholars in the old and new worlds, and led to his rediscovery and reassessment of two crucial but neglected sources, one in Brussels and one in Oxford. This early triumph led to the award of an honorary D.Litt. from Oxford. He was also honoured in the same way by Padua – one of his favourite workplaces. He personally investigated up to 150 of the 171 extant MSS (see D. E. W. Wormell and E. Courtney, 'A catalogue of the manuscripts of Ovid's *Fasti*', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* (1977), 37–63).

The papers arising from this work, lodged in the library of TCD by his daughter Mrs Bryanna Babington, provided a firm foundation for subsequent work on the text by his successor in the chair of Latin, Professor Donald Wormell, in collaboration with Professor Edward Courtney. They agree that 'Alton devoted much of his life to investigating and collating the manuscripts of this poem with a standard of detail and accuracy which puts all previous work in the shade, and our checks have left us completely convinced of his reliability' ('Problems in Ovid's *Fasti*', *Classical Quarterly*, new ser., xxiii (1973), 144). A revised Teubner text of the six books of the *Fasti*, bearing the names of Alton and the two scholars who built on his work, appeared in 1978. Alton also wrote the section on the Roman army in J. E. Sandys's *Companion to Latin studies* (1910), and was joint author (with W. A. Goligher) of the volume on Roman society in Herbert Spencer's *Descriptive sociology* (1934).

The completion of his *Fasti* project was delayed by the outbreak of war in 1939, and then put beyond his reach by the demands of the provostship. However, like his predecessor J. P. Mahaffy (qv), he explored the college archives, throwing new light on Trinity's history. For example, he made a significant reevaluation of the notorious case of the Jacobite Edward Forbes, a row that bedevilled college politics for some years from 1705 on (*Hermathena*, lvii, lviii (1941)). He also made the interesting suggestion that the smaller bell now hung in the Campanile 'in all probability' came from the steeple of the church of the monastery that previously occupied the college site (*TCD Magazine*, 9 June 1943).

As provost he initiated and supervised the first complete photographic facsimile of the Book of Kells, published in 1951 by the Swiss firm Urs Graf Verlag. The project originated in 1945 from a conversation with the then Swiss *chargé d'affaires* in Dublin, Charles Benziger. Not unnaturally 'the talk turned to manuscripts and the eighth-century links between Switzerland and Ireland' (G. O. Simms, *Trinity*, iii (1951), 14). Benziger spoke about a recent Swiss colour reproduction of the St Gall codex, and thus was sown the idea of a Book of Kells reproduction on the same lines. The work appeared in three handsome volumes, the last of which contains an introduction under Alton's name. He probably made a start on this, but failing eyesight in his last years inhibited completion, and it is now recognised that the published text was essentially the work of his friend A. A. Luce (qv), then vice-provost, who went on to edit the Book of Durrow facsimile.

Alton married (1915) Ethel Marjory, daughter of Col. Sir Charles Hughes-Hunter of Anglesey, north Wales, and they had two sons, Charles and Henry, and a daughter, Bryanna. For much of their married life they lived at 5 Dartmouth Rd, Ranelagh, Dublin. R. J. Babington, MP for Down North (1969–73) was one of their grandchildren, and Dr Bryan Alton (qv), senator, and doctor to Éamon de Valera, was a nephew. Alton was also brother-in-law of J. E. Healy (qv), editor of the *Irish Times* 1907–34.

After a short illness Alton died 18 February 1952 in the Provost's House Dublin, from whence the cortège, followed on foot by many members of the college, emerged to make a solemn circuit of the Front Square before entering the college chapel for the funeral service. The writer attended, and was informed by one of the mourners, Mr E. St C. Brown, known as 'Brown the Grinder', that he had been present at seven such occasions in sequence back to the funeral of Provost George Salmon (qv) in 1904, a striking instance of the strength of tradition in the college that Alton served so long and so faithfully. A portrait of Alton by Leo Whelan (qv) is in Trinity College.

Alton papers, TCD MSS 4258, 7641–2, 8192–8262b (*Fasti* material), 8417–8 (college history); obituary by R. M. Gwynn, and appreciation (unsigned, but almost

certainly by D. E. W. Wormell), *Ir. Times*, 19 Feb. 1952; *Times, Ir. Independent, Ir. Press*, 19 Feb. 1952; A. A. Luce, 'Ernest Henry Alton', *Trinity: an annual record*, iv (1952), 28–31; *WWW*; D. A. Webb and R. B. McDowell, *Trinity College Dublin, 1592–1952: an academic history* (1982); J. V. Luce, *Trinity College Dublin: the first four hundred years* (1992); personal knowledge

Downloaded from <http://dib.cambridge.org> by IP 100.103.238.216 on Mon Jan 18 13:42:17 UTC 2021 Dictionary of Irish Biography Online © 2021 Cambridge University Press and Royal Irish Academy. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.