

Conway, Arthur William

by Donal McCartney

Conway, Arthur William (1875–1950), academic and president of UCD, was born 2 October 1875 in Main St., Wexford town, the only son of Myles and Teresa Conway (née Harris). He had one sister. His father died, aged 34, when Arthur was only two, and his mother married again, to a substantial livestock breeder, whose farm lay between Wexford and Rosslare. Arthur was educated at the Loreto Convent and St Peter's College, Wexford, winning an exhibition at the intermediate board examinations. In 1892 he entered University College, St Stephen's Green, Dublin, and in 1896 was awarded the BA in mathematical science with first-class honours by the Royal University of Ireland. The following year he graduated MA with first-class honours and won the studentship in 1898. At Corpus Christi College, Oxford, he became both junior (1898) and senior (1902) mathematical scholar and an MA. He won a junior fellowship of the RUI in 1900 and a senior fellowship in 1901 when he was appointed to the chair of mathematical physics in University College. He also lectured in higher mathematics at Maynooth. When University College became a constituent college of the NUI, Conway was appointed to the chair of mathematical physics, which he held from 1909 to 1940. He also served as registrar of the college during the same period.

The royal astronomer of Ireland, Professor Edmund T. Whittaker (qv), FRS, claimed in a testimonial accompanying Conway's application for the NUI professorship that 'Conway's researches have made his name honoured in every academy in Europe'. The earliest of his papers in learned journals was published in 1903, and the last in 1948. His main contributions included papers on electromagnetic waves, electrons, the application of quaternions to modern scientific theories, quantum theory, and relativity. Volume I of *The mathematical papers of Sir William Rowan Hamilton* was edited by Conway and J. L. Synge (qv) in 1931, and the second was edited by Conway and A. J. McConnell (qv) in 1940. Conway was regarded as a leading authority on quaternions. And Whittaker opened his obituary notice of Conway for the Royal Society with the statement that by general consent Conway was 'the most distinguished Irish catholic man of science of his generation'.

Under the Redistribution of Seats (Ireland) Act, 1917, the NUI became a parliamentary constituency with the right to elect one MP. In the general election of 1918 Conway stood as a candidate for the nationalist party. His opponent was a friend and colleague, Eoin MacNeill (qv), standing for Sinn Féin. MacNeill received 1,644 votes, twice the number cast for Conway, who polled 813 votes. It was indicative of the swing that occurred in the country generally. The Government of Ireland Act, 1920, increased the number of parliamentary representatives for the universities to four each. In the 1922 election six candidates contested the four NUI seats. Again MacNeill topped the poll with a comfortable 888 first preferences.

Conway with 410 was a clear second on first preferences. But because of the vagaries of proportional representation, he failed to be elected. Failure to be returned to the dáil allowed him to proceed in his academic career without the distraction of politics. He was the chief adviser to his old pupil, the taoiseach Éamon de Valera (qv), in the setting up of the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (1940), which brought fellow scientists Erwin Schrödinger (qv), Walter Heitler (qv), and Synge to Dublin. Conway was appointed chairman of the board of theoretical physics and participated regularly in the school's lectures and seminars.

He was elected president of UCD in 1940, where he inherited a critical financial situation, the pressure of increasing student numbers, and overcrowded buildings. His presidency (1940–47) coincided with the wartime and postwar years of special difficulty. He met the challenges with courage and some success. Within months of assuming office he had negotiations with de Valera about the possible transfer of Lord Iveagh's (qv) gift to the nation of Iveagh House (80 St Stephen's Green) and Gardens, for the use of UCD. While the college got the use of the Iveagh Gardens (lying between its two properties of Earlsfort Terrace and 86 St Stephens's Green), the government retained Iveagh House. A great deal of planning then went into the possibility of further expansion by the college in the area. But difficulties with the Board of Works, the Department of Finance, and the Department of External Affairs, as well as competition from private business interests for expensive property in the vicinity, defeated Conway's best efforts. The purchase of properties in the neighbourhood of Belfield began almost immediately after Michael Tierney (qv) had succeeded Conway in the presidency. Conway's predecessor in the presidency, Denis J. Coffey (qv), had tended to keep much of the administrative detail in his own hands. Conway, who was much more accessible, delegated and devolved work to the registrar, the secretary, and the deans of the various faculties. He set up a committee which identified the needs of the college and prepared the way for future planning. A new section in the annual reports of the president was devoted to the academic publications of the staff and was an indication of his desire to support research.

Outside his mathematical studies, which he continued all through his presidency, he made time for relaxing pursuits. He had been an oarsman at Oxford; was one of the earliest motorists in Dublin; was a prominent shareholder and chairman of the board of the catholic newspaper, the *Standard*, when it was founded in the late 1920s in the heyday of Catholic Action; he did crosswords of the more intricate sort; and to the end he was a strong swimmer and keen golfer.

He received honorary degrees from the RUI (1908), Dublin University (1938), and St Andrews (1938), and was made an honorary fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford (1940). He was elected fellow of the Royal Society (1915) and to its council (1935). A member of the council of the RDS for thirty-seven years, he was its president 1942–5, and president of the RIA 1937–40. His most cherished honour was his election to the vacancy, caused by the death of the distinguished physicist Lord

Rutherford, as a member of the seventy-strong Pontifical Academy of Sciences – the first Irish scientist to be so honoured. He died 11 July 1950 and was buried in Glasnevin cemetery. A portrait of Conway by Leo Whelan (qv) RHA, is in UCD.

He married (1903) Agnes Christina (d. 21 December 1929), daughter of William Bingham of Ballymena, Co. Antrim; they had one son, Morgan Felix, and three daughters, Teresa Mary (who married into the family of Arthur Conan, official rober to the NUI), Verna Marguerite, and Orlaith. At the time of Conway's death there were nine grandchildren.

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*Report of the President of University College Dublin 1946–7 and 1949–50*; J. J. Nolan, 'Arthur W. Conway', *Studies*, xxxix (Sept. 1950), 241–50; Edmund T. Whittaker, 'Arthur William Conway 1875–1950', *Obituary Notices of Fellows of the Royal Society*, vii (Nov. 1951); Rev. James McConnell (ed.), *Selected papers of Arthur William Conway* (1953)