

Edwards, Robert ('Robin') Walter Dudley

by Aidan Clarke

Edwards, Robert ('Robin') Walter Dudley (1909–88), historian, was born 4 June 1909 in Dublin, elder son of Walter Edwards (1862–1946), a minor civil servant from Worcestershire, England, and Bridget Teresa McInerney (1871–1956), a nurse from Co. Clare. When his parents, a quaker and a catholic respectively, met in London, Walter was already married, but separated from his wife. He and Bridget moved to Dublin under pretence of being married. It was not till shortly before his death that Walter revealed the secret to his son. Robert Dudley Edwards (whose father had added his mother's maiden name of Dudley to his surname at Bridget's insistence) was brought up as a catholic and educated at the Catholic University School with a brief interlude at Pearse's (qv) St Enda's, again at the insistence of his fiercely nationalist mother, who unavailingly exhorted him to join the Irregulars in 1922. In 1926 he entered UCD, where he took a first-class honours degree in history in 1929, served as auditor of the Literary and Historical Society, and was awarded an MA in 1931, also with first-class honours, for a study of the penal laws against dissenting protestants in Ireland. A travelling studentship enabled him to study for a doctorate at King's College, London, where he investigated the pre-eighteenth-century Irish penal laws against catholics. He acquired an unofficial mentor in Philip Wilson in the British Museum, and found stimulation at the seminar programme in the Institute of Historical Research and in the company of his fellow Irish students Theodore Moody (qv) and David Quinn (qv). He was awarded a doctorate by the University of London in 1933 and published an extensively revised version of the first part of his thesis as *Church and state in Tudor Ireland* in 1935. Thorough and methodical, cleaving closely to the evidence and eschewing both confessional and nationalist glosses, the work was a landmark in Irish historiography in its application of exemplary standards of scholarship to the treatment of a deeply contentious subject.

He was elected to membership of the RIA in 1936 and conferred with the degree of D.Litt. for published work by the NUI in 1937. Supported by a succession of scholarships, research grants, prizes, and the earnings of his wife, Síle Ní Shuilleabháin, Dudley Edwards was actively engaged in research in these years and also, in partnership with Moody, involved in a series of organisational initiatives aimed at promoting systematic improvements in the standards of Irish historical scholarship. Their motives transcended the disciplinary: both were convinced of the ameliorative power of an informed and objective understanding of the past. Their efforts resulted in the twin foundations of the Ulster Society for Historical Studies and the Irish Historical Society in 1936. From these emerged, in the following year, an all-Ireland coordinating body, the Irish Committee of Historical Sciences, with Dudley Edwards as secretary; in 1938, a collaborative journal, *Irish Historical Studies*, jointly edited by Edwards and Moody; and in 1942 a joint annual *Bulletin*.

Dudley Edwards was appointed to a lectureship in modern Irish history in UCD in January 1939 and promoted to statutory lecturer in the following year. In 1944 he successfully competed for the chair, which he occupied till his retirement in 1979. By the time of his appointment he had produced an impressive body of original work, exceptional in both the range of its subject matter and the breadth of its chronological spread, and published editions of two important manuscripts. In the following twenty-five years or so, problems with his eyesight, which contributed to his resignation from the editorship of *Irish Historical Studies* in 1957, greatly restricted his research activity but his interests continued to range widely. Despite 'writer's block', he wrote perceptively on Young Ireland, Daniel O'Connell (qv), Charles Stewart Parnell (qv), the Easter rising, and church and state in modern Ireland. He also contributed valuably to the Royal Historical Society's bibliographies of Tudor and Stuart history and, most notably, edited (with Desmond Williams (qv) as sleeping partner) a volume of essays, *The great famine: studies in Irish history, 1854–52* (1957), in which careful research and dispassionate exposition were brought to bear (inappropriately, many thought) on aspects of the most emotionally fraught episode in Irish history. His chief concern in those years was to nurture a new generation of rigorously trained historical scholars through the improvement of the undergraduate programme in range and teaching methods, the encouragement of graduate research, and the creatively critical supervision of a wide range of theses.

Dudley Edwards was largely responsible for the foundation of the Irish Universities History Students' Association in 1950; annual conferences and, after 1956, the publication of an annual *Bulletin* created a framework of inter-university cooperation for students which paralleled that of their teachers. Edwards was both sympathetic to and exhilarated by the student protest movement in the late 1960s, and he emerged from UCD's 'gentle revolution' with renewed energy to embark on a fresh constructive phase of his career. He began to write (or, more accurately, to dictate) freely and exhibited a lively interest in university matters, serving as chairman of the academic staff association and as a member of the governing body of the college. A long-standing concern for the 'Preservation of papers of historical importance', which may have reflected the influence of Philip Wilson and on which he had first written in 1941 (*Cork Arch. Soc. Jn.*, xlvi (1941), 79), led him to undertake a series of related initiatives that contributed greatly to placing the care of Irish archives on a professional footing. He was the prime mover and first chairman of a new Irish Society for Archives, founded in 1970, which published the first issue of its annual *Bulletin* a year later. In the same year he succeeded in establishing a department of archives in UCD, which was designed to serve as both depository and research centre for the history of the modern Irish state. In 1972 he completed his immediate programme by introducing a graduate diploma course in archival studies. After his retirement in 1979, his larger objective was achieved with the passage of the National Archives Act, 1986, which fittingly came into effect some days before his death on 5 June 1988.

Dudley Edwards published a short survey of Irish history in 1972, an illustrated account of *Daniel O'Connell and his world* in 1975, and a narrative account of Tudor Ireland in 1977. Each contains its share of striking phrases and incisive passages, but they are works of indifferent quality: poorly structured, slackly written, and borrowing freely from earlier writings. In retirement, in collaboration with his former student, Dr Mary O'Dowd, he published an invaluable critical description of the sources of early modern Irish history, emphatically conveying to historians and archivists alike the message that the evidence must be dealt with in the full knowledge of how it came into being. What it failed to convey, in common with his other writing, was the ebullience of its sometimes difficult, oft-times inebriated, but always stimulating author, whose supreme gift was in performance. A lecturer of commanding presence, his teaching at both undergraduate and graduate levels was enlivened and enriched by the same attributes as his conversation – an ability to see unlikely correspondences, to make intuitive connections, and to draw startling inferences; eagerness to explore the potential of apparent irrelevancies, disturb complacency, and contemplate the outrageous; delight in paradoxes, jibes, and enigmatic utterances.

Dudley Edwards married (1933) Síle Ní Shuilleabháin (1905–85), a teacher from Cork with interests in literature and folklore, who published with Gill and Macmillan in 1973 *My own story*, her translation of *Mo scéal fein* by Peadar Ó Laoghaire (qv). They had three children, Mary, Owen, and Ruth, the latter two of whom followed their father's example to become historians of distinction.

---

Edwards papers, Archives Department, UCD; 'The historical writings of Professor R. D. Edwards', A. Cosgrove and D. McCartney (ed.), *Studies in Irish history presented to R. Dudley Edwards* (1979); R. Dudley Edwards, 'T. W. Moody and the origins of *Irish Historical Studies*: a biographical memoir', *IHS*, xxvi (1988–9); Aidan Clarke, 'Robert Dudley Edwards (1909–88)', *IHS*, xxvi (1988–9); Ciaran Brady, *Interpreting Irish history: the debate on historical revisionism, 1938–1994* (1994); personal knowledge