

Henry, Robert Mitchell

by Linde Lunney

Henry, Robert Mitchell (1873–1950), classicist and university administrator, was born 11 February 1873 in Belfast, son of Robert Mitchell Henry (1824–91), who was himself son of a Reformed Presbyterian minister, William Henry (1789–1852). Robert M. Henry sen., having started his career as a Reformed Presbyterian minister, became a baptist minister, and then after 1875 a preacher with the Plymouth Brethren; he married Kate Anne (1838–1928), daughter of Thomas Berry, a baptist minister in Athlone. Robert Mitchell Henry was the eldest of their four sons; the third son was Paul Henry (qv), the painter. The younger Robert M. Henry was educated at Methodist College, Belfast, and at QCB, and graduated in 1893 with first-class honours in classics from the RUI. He also received a first-class honours degree from London University (1895). He taught classics at RBAI while undertaking further study as the holder from 1898 of a studentship in classics in the RUI, and he held a junior fellowship in the RUI between 1900 and 1904. In 1906 he became reader in classics at QCB, and in 1907 professor in Latin, after an unsuccessful attempt to obtain a professorship at Liverpool. In 1908–9 he held a fellowship in the RUI, and in 1909 was elected secretary to the academic council of QUB, which had replaced QCB. From this power base, Henry came to exercise wide-ranging influence in the university; the official history notes that ‘he dominated almost every field of university life for close on thirty years, and the constitutional development by which the academic body won substantial independence within the framework of the Irish universities act and the charter was due very largely to his efforts’ (Moody & Beckett, 515). He was also a member of the university senate, and was twice pro-vice-chancellor (1933–4, 1938).

His defence of what he believed to be the essential academic freedom and original non-sectarian basis of the university was paralleled by his lonely and conspicuous stand in favour of nationalist politics. He was one of the most notable protestant nationalists of his generation, and his book *The evolution of Sinn Fein* (1920) is regarded as a flawed but indispensable sourcebook on the history of the party and the movement by an insider. He was a fervent supporter of the extension of education to involve as many people as possible in the community; he was one of the founders locally of the Workers' Education Association and assisted the Belfast Newsboys' Club. It was at his urging that the university established a range of extramural studies after 1928. For many years he was chairman of trade boards in Ireland and subsequently in the Irish Free State, and was recognised for his skill in helping to settle industrial disputes.

Henry was also a superb university teacher and an internationally recognised classical scholar, whose publications included many journal articles as well as an important edition of books 3–5 of Cicero's *Tusculan disputations* (1934), *Virgil and*

the Roman epic (1938), several works on Livy, and an edition and translation of an Irish astronomical manuscript, published in 1914. He received an honorary Litt.D. from TCD, an honorary LLD from QUB and the same degree from St Andrews, and was elected MRIA in 1918. He was a founder of the Ulster Society for Irish Historical Studies and thus of the long-established journal, *Irish Historical Studies*; his own wide-ranging interests in history and local culture and politics led to the formation of an important collection of books. Over 1,000 of these were given to QUB in 1929 to form the nucleus of the R. M. Henry collection; in 1939, on his retirement, he gave more material, and after his death the university bought up the residue of his library and also acquired all his papers. The collection has been augmented substantially since, and is now known officially as the Hibernica collection.

When Henry reached retirement age, the university's gratitude for his long years of service, while genuinely and publicly expressed, was not sufficient to provoke unusual efforts on the part of the authorities to retain his services. His nationalist views had made many more enemies than friends, and were distinctly out of style in the senior common room and senate chamber of the interwar years. After a senate vote, his conditions of tenure were not revised, and Henry left QUB in 1938 after almost fifty years. He was at once given an honorary professorship by TCD, and the following year (1939) he became professor of humanities in St Andrews University, where he worked enthusiastically and with success for another eight years. When he finally retired in 1947 after the second world war, he moved to Bray, Co. Wicklow, and continued his research and university teaching in TCD for another three years.

He died on 21 December 1950 in Bray; he had had no children, but was survived for almost fifty years by his second wife, Kathleen (1912–99), daughter of a Belfast engineer, Herbert Watson. She had recently graduated from QUB when they married in 1938, and later became a teacher. His first wife had been his first cousin Margaret Jane, daughter of John McFarland and Mary McFarland (née Henry) of Omagh; one of her brothers was Sir John Henry McFarland (1851–1935), chancellor of Melbourne University, and another was George McFarland, headmaster of Campbell College, Belfast. Her sister was married to Thomas Macafee Hamill (1853–1919), a professor of theology in Assembly's college, Belfast.

A portrait of R. M. Henry by his brother Paul Henry was destroyed when republicans petrol-bombed the Great Hall in QUB; a copy is in the university library.

R. M. Young, *Belfast and the province of Ulster* (Pike's New Century Series, 1909, reprinted in BBA) (photo); [H. O. Meredith], *A collaudation of Henry and Hummel* (1938); *WWW*; *Belfast News Letter*, *Ir. Times*, 23 Dec. 1950 (photos); T. W. Moody and J. C. Beckett, *Queen's, Belfast 1845–1949* (1959), esp. 444–5, 508, 514–15, 599 (photo opposite 369); Thomas G. Bennett, *North Antrim families* (1971), 91;

'Mrs Kathleen Henry', *Ir. Times*, 12 Apr. 1999; website 'Hibernica collection' (www/qub.ac.uk/rascal/CLDs/CLD16.html); accessed 2004

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