

Lowry, William

by Brendan Lynn

Lowry, William (1884–1949), barrister and politician, was born 19 March 1884 in Limavady, Co. Londonderry, third son of Samuel Lowry of White Hall, Limavady, clerk of the petty sessions court, and Margaret Jane Lowry (née Gibson). He was educated at Foyle College (1896–1902), where on four occasions he took first place in the Honourable Irish Society's scholarship before being awarded an entrance exhibition in classics to QCB (1902) along with a law scholarship, first and second year. In 1905 he graduated (RUI) with a BA degree with honours and an exhibition in history, political economy, and jurisprudence. A year later (1906) he was placed first in the Victoria memorial prizes of the King's Inns, Dublin, and was also presented with the John Brooke scholarship. In 1907 he was called to the bar, later taking his LLB degree at QUB and in the process winning the Dunbar memorial prize. Lowry then served as Reid professor in constitutional and criminal law at TCD. He did not begin to practise until 1913, when he joined the old north-east circuit, and after partition in 1921 he went north when the supreme court of judicature of Northern Ireland was created. In 1926 he took silk and soon built a reputation as a barrister of some note, either prosecuting or defending in both civil and criminal trials.

In April 1939, after the elevation of E. S. Murphy (qv) to the bench, Lowry was returned unopposed as MP for the Stormont constituency of Londonderry city, and in 1940 was appointed parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Home Affairs (1940–43). This role became difficult given his extremely poor working relationship with his minister, the long-serving Dawson Bates (qv), and disagreements with the prime minister, John M. Andrews (qv). On occasions Lowry came close to offering his resignation, particularly over Andrews's handling of attempts to reform Belfast corporation, which had been found guilty of widespread corruption and abuse of patronage in the report of an inquiry set up by the Ministry of Home Affairs. In May 1942 Lowry urged the cabinet to support the Belfast county administration bill, establishing a body to administer the city free from interference from councillors. The prime minister, along with other cabinet colleagues, refused to back this tough stance and instead sought to reach some form of compromise to appease unionist councillors on the corporation. Lowry's unhappiness prompted thoughts of resignation, but he remained in office and continued to support Andrews's administration in the face of growing unrest from backbench MPs and other junior ministers. Finally, when Andrews was forced out of office in April 1943 to be replaced by Sir Basil Brooke (qv) Lowry was subsequently appointed minister of home affairs and held this position until October 1944, when he became attorney general on the elevation of his predecessor, J. C. MacDermott (qv), to the bench. Then in May 1947, when MacDermott was made a lord of appeal in ordinary, Lowry was promoted to the bench.

Outside politics and the law Lowry had been a member of the Orange order and the Royal Black Institution. As a student he was a keen sportsman, playing rugby at Foyle; he captained the First XV for two years as well as being a member of the first side from the college to win the Schools' Cup in 1900. Later he played for the First XV at QUB. In February 1948 he was elected president of the Northern Cricket Union of Ireland and subsequently reelected at the annual general meeting in 1949. After a prolonged illness he had to resign from the bench a few weeks before his death on 14 December 1949.

He married Catherine Hughes (d. October 1947), third daughter of the Rev. R. J. Lynd of May St. presbyterian church, a former moderator of the general assembly (1888). They had one son, Robert Lynd Erskine Lowry (qv), lord chief justice of Northern Ireland 1971–88. As well as his son, William Lowry was survived by three brothers – C. G. Lowry, emeritus professor of midwifery and gynaecology at QUB; H. Lowry, FRCS (Edinburgh); and S. M. Lowry, chief clerk of petty sessions, Belfast – and a sister, Jean, wife of F. J. Byrne, manager of the head office of the Northern Bank, Belfast. Another brother, Dr J. A. Lowry, formerly superintendent of the Surrey County Mental Hospital, Brookwood, had died in August 1948. His brother-in-law was Robert Lynd (qv).

Belfast News Letter, Belfast Telegraph, Ir. Times, Northern Whig, 15 Dec. 1949; Brian Barton, *Brookeborough: the making of a prime minister* (1988); J. F. Harbinson, *The Ulster Unionist party 1882–1973* (1973)