

Quinn, David Beers

by Nicholas Canny

Quinn, David Beers (1909–2002), historian, was born 24 April 1909 at the Rotunda Hospital, Dublin, the only child of David Quinn, a gardener, who was a native of Co. Tyrone, and of Albertina Quinn (née Devine) from Co. Cork, both of a Church of Ireland background. His childhood years were spent in Clara, King's Co. (Co. Offaly), where his father served as head gardener at Inchmore, the largest estate house of the Goodbody family, quaker entrepreneurs who dominated the town socially and economically. He wrote affectionately of his childhood years at Clara and positively of his primary schooling at the No. 2 national school, an establishment run by one teacher which catered for protestants of various denominations. However, he was also conscious of belonging to a minority within a minority community: religion and politics debarred him from full association with his social equals in the numerically dominant catholic community, and religion and lowly status dictated that the Quinns remain dependants of the few wealthy quaker families in the town.

The young Quinn was recognised by his parents and teachers as a gifted child, and to ensure his access to a secondary education in a protestant environment his father had to seek employment in an urban centre; accordingly the family left Clara for Belfast in 1922 and David attended the RBAI for his schooling (from 1923), and studied as an undergraduate at QUB (1927–31). Success at each led to his proceeding to the University of London where he studied for the Ph.D. in history (1931–4), supervised by A. P. Newton, professor of imperial history. Quinn found Newton condescending, and it was on Newton's insistence that he served his apprenticeship on an Irish subject; his dissertation was entitled 'Tudor rule in Ireland, 1485–1547', and was a mirror image of Newton's earliest work on Tudor rule in England. In studying at London, Quinn followed in the wake of T. W. Moody (qv), who had preceded him by a year at the RBAI and at QUB; in London he also made the acquaintance of fellow research students Robert Dudley Edwards (qv) and G. A. Hayes-McCoy (qv), both from a different ethos fostered within the nascent Irish Free State. Quinn was to remain on friendly terms with all three throughout his working life and also with younger scholars who took an interest in early modern Ireland, a subject on which he continued to publish extensively. Irish history, however, was to become his secondary interest, especially after his work on his first edited volume for the Haykluyt Society, *The voyages and colonising enterprises of Sir Humphrey Gilbert* (1940). This was followed by his first book as an author, *Ralegh and British empire* (1947), in which he brought together his academic interests while also meeting his ambition to provide instruction for readers who had not had the opportunity to complete a formal education.

At this point Quinn was at the threshold of a career that would establish him as one of the pre-eminent authorities of his generation on European exploration of the

Atlantic, from the earliest Norse voyages to the outset of the seventeenth century. The pinnacle of his achievement was his scholarly *England and the discovery of America, 1481–1620* (1974), and the massive five-volume *New American world: a documentary history of North America to 1612*, which he edited with Alison Quinn and Susan Hilliard (1979). These publications derived from a lifetime dedicated to the close editing of documents (especially for the Hakluyt Society, which he served as president for many years) concerning individuals associated with England's great overseas explorers, ranging from Walter Raleigh (qv) and Gilbert (qv) to Drake, Frobisher, Thomas Hariot, the Hakluyts, and others. Quinn also became deeply immersed in controversies relating to European overseas endeavours, such as the authenticity of the Vinland map, the whereabouts of the American landfall of Columbus, whether anonymous sailors from Bristol had preceded Columbus to North America, and the precise location of the Jamestown landing of 1607; these debates earned him front-page reportage in the *New York Times* on two occasions. His achievements render him the only historian from Ireland of his generation to have gained international distinction in an area other than Irish history. This was to be recognised by the award of honorary doctorates from the University of Ulster, the NUI, and several universities in the United States and Canada, by his election as honorary fellow of the British Academy, and by the award of the prestigious Cunningham medal of the RIA, of which he had been a member for close on sixty years.

His scholarly work was achieved despite a busy career in academic teaching, supervision, and administration at Southampton (1934–9), QUB (1939–44), Swansea (professor, 1944–57), and Liverpool (Andrew Geddes and John Rankin professor of modern history, 1957–76). And over and above this Quinn and his Scottish wife, Alison Moffat Robertson (1909–93), whom he married on 30 October 1937 (and with whom he edited and indexed many texts), were activists in the British politics of the left from the 1930s to their deaths. This commitment persuaded Quinn to join the distinguished group of Marxist historians who established the Past and Present Society, and with it the historical journal *Past and Present*, on whose board Quinn served during its early radical years.

Quinn maintained contact with Irish historical scholarship during a busy career in Britain. On each occasion when he returned to Irish history he brought to it fresh insights, original perspectives, and novel methods. Some of these derived from his interest in geography and anthropology, which had been quickened by his early association with E. Estyn Evans (qv) at Belfast, but he also consciously strove to link scholarly enquiry on early modern Ireland to that being pursued in British and North American universities. His most imaginative contribution to Irish history is his book *The Elizabethans and the Irish* (1966), the method of which was inspired by that employed in his edition with Paul Hulton, *The American drawings of John White, 1577–90* (2 vols, 1964). Quinn also contributed substantially to both the second and third volumes of the New History of Ireland series (one of them in association with

Kenneth Nicholls). However his enduring influence on Irish history has been to link England's involvement in Ireland with contemporaneous adventures in the Atlantic.

Quinn and his wife had three children; they lived for many years at Knowsley Road, Cressington Park, Liverpool, where Quinn remained alone after his wife's death in 1993. He died 19 March 2002 at Arrowe Park Hospital, Birkenhead.

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D. B. Quinn, 'Clara: a midland industrial town, 1900–1923', *Offaly: history and society*, ed. Timothy P. O'Neill and William Nolan (1998); Nicholas Canny and Karen Ordahl Kupperman, 'The scholarship and legacy of David Beers Quinn, 1909–2002', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, lx (2003), 843–60; *ODNB*

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