

## Thrift, William Edward

by Lawrence William White

Thrift, William Edward (1870–1942), academic and politician, was born 28 February 1870 in Halifax, Yorkshire, England, one of at least two sons and two daughters of Henry George Thrift, civil servant, and Sarah Anne Thrift (née Smith). The family moved in his childhood to Dublin, where his father was an officer in the inland revenue. After secondary education at the High School, Dublin, he entered TCD (1889) with a second sizarship in mathematics, and commenced a highly distinguished university career, scoring firsts in several examinations and winning numerous prizes. He was the Kidd scholar (1889–93), became a foundation scholar in mathematics as a junior freshman (1890), and in the 1893 BA examinations was a senior moderator and the mathematical student, taking first place and awarded large gold medals in both mathematics and mathematical physics, and experimental science. An accomplished cyclist who won many college competitions until suffering injury, he was also adept at chess. Elected fellow in mathematics and experimental science, and in mental and moral philosophy (1896), he became Erasmus Smith's professor of natural and experimental philosophy (i.e., physics) (1901–29). Despite moving in 1906 into splendid new facilities conceived by his energetic predecessor, G. F. Fitzgerald (qv), under Thrift's lengthy tenure the department stagnated; research atrophied, and lectures, as recalled by the department's most illustrious product, Ernest Walton (qv), were a decade out of date. While editing the updated fourth edition of Preston's *Theory of light*, Thrift produced no original scholarship. He was notoriously lax in discipline; when his lectures turned excessively unruly, his younger brother Harry Thrift (see below) – one of the department's two other staff members and a former rugby international – would sit with quiet menace in the rear of the hall, reading the *Irish Times*. Despite such deficiencies, Thrift as an administrator was conscientious and diligent, a notably effective committee-man in academia, politics, and civic activities. He was among the first directors (1900) of TCD's social services (tenements) company, the college's only established charity, engaged in acquisition of properties to house the poor. Especially devoted to development of college sport, as first chairman (1919–37) of the revived Dublin University Central Athletic Committee (DUCAC) he drafted a constitution with student representation, oversaw renovation of the athletic pavilion and playing fields, and secured new sources of finance, including an annual grant from the university. Elected representative for many years of the junior fellows on the university's governing board, he was coopted as a senior fellow in 1927, and appointed college auditor in 1928. Though as vice-provost (1935–7) – his appointment broke the tradition of the office going as a sinecure to the most senior fellow – he proved an able assistant, adviser, and deputy, during his tenure as provost (1937–42), suffering declining health and deficient in qualities of leadership, he delegated effective power.

A parliamentary deputy for Dublin University (1921–37), as one of the four independent, but pro-union, representatives for the constituency returned in May 1921 to the parliament of Southern Ireland under the 1920 government of Ireland act, Thrift attended the body's only two sittings, on 28 June 1921, and on 14 January 1922, when, joined by the pro-treaty members of Dáil Éireann, they elected the provisional government of the Irish Free State. Independent TD for Dublin University (1922–37) until the abolition of university representation, in December 1922 he announced in the house that he did not apologise for his previous unionism, but recognised that the days of unionism were over, and was fully committed to serving the new political reality. While rarely speaking on controversial issues, he opposed the 1925 legislation banning divorce, which he described as an infringement of individual and minority rights, and a betrayal of commitments made by Arthur Griffith (qv) during the treaty debates. His capable service on various dáil committees was recognised by his election as *leas-ceann comhairle* (deputy speaker). A long-serving council member of the RDS (1902–42), he was a commissioner of charitable donations and bequests (1933), and financial adviser to the general synod of the Church of Ireland. He sat on the governing boards of the Erasmus Smith schools and of the Incorporated Society for Promoting Protestant Schools in Ireland. Unimposing in physique and manners, tending to shabbiness in dress, apologetic and eager to please in unfamiliar company, he none the less possessed a quick turn of mind, shrewd powers of analysis, and tenacity of purpose. Devoted to cycling as a mode of transport, he owned bicycles renowned as the most rusty and dilapidated in Dublin. His portrait was painted by Leo Whelan (qv). He married a daughter of C. H. Robinson, a medical doctor; they had three sons and three daughters. He died at the provost's house, TCD, on 23 April 1942. His granddaughter, Maeve Kyle (née Shankey) (b. 1928), one of Ireland's foremost women athletes, won fifty-eight hockey caps and claimed Irish titles in numerous running and athletics events, including all distances from 80 to 880 yards on the flat and over hurdles. The first woman athlete to represent either the Irish Free State or republic of Ireland in the Olympic games, she competed in three Olympics (1956, 1960, 1964), and in the 1961 season secured the world's best indoor times at both 440 yards and 400 metres.

His younger brother, Harry Thrift (1882–1958), sportsman, sports administrator, and academic, was born 24 December 1882 at 29 Bloomfield Avenue, Portobello, Dublin, the family residence at the time. Educated at the High School and at TCD (1901–5), he won distinction both as a sprinter and a rugby player of international standard. He won the 100 yards at Trinity's college races seven years in succession, and was Irish 440-yards champion under IAAA jurisdiction (1906). His mention by James Joyce (qv) in the 'Wandering rocks' chapter of *Ulysses* (1922) among a field of 'quarter-mile flat handicappers' refers to an actual College Park event of 16 June 1904 in which Thrift placed second. A rugby out-half at the High School, with the Trinity thirds he switched to wing three-quarter. Playing for Dublin University 1st fifteen (1902–8), he won three Leinster senior cup medals (1905, 1907–8), was capped eighteen times for Ireland (1904–9), regularly captained the Ireland team, and scored five international tries. With both Trinity and Ireland he formed with J. C.

Parke (qv) a centre-wing combination rarely equalled, Parke's strength and timing complementing Thrift's fleetness of foot. In his international debut against Wales, he scored a second-half try that commenced Ireland's comeback from six points down to a stunning 14–12 victory that deprived the Welsh of the triple crown. He scored a try in the celebrated 11–6 victory over Wales in 1906, again denying the opponents a triple crown, when injuries put Ireland one man down throughout the second half and two down over the last ten minutes. He played on the Ireland team that were beaten 15–0 by the legendary All-Blacks touring side of 1905 – Ireland's first official international against New Zealand – and also competed in the first-ever Ireland internationals against South Africa (1907) and France (1909, his final cap). Serving many years on the committee of the Irish Rugby Football Union, he was a selector (1921–2) and president (1923–4). Representing Ireland on the international rugby football board (1931–56), he was the body's honorary secretary (1933–56), playing a major role in introducing new regulations governing the sport.

Becoming a TCD fellow in 1909, Harry Thrift lectured in physics under his brother William's professorship. While quick in thought, he was a perfunctory lecturer and indifferent tutor, described in the college history as an 'open and unashamed philistine' (McDowell and Webb, 398), ill-suited to an academic career. His peppery, somewhat bullying manner, perhaps respected in rugby boardrooms, aroused resentment among certain of his academic colleagues. A founding member of DUCAC, on his brother's admission to the provostship he succeeded as committee chairman (1937–56). Co-opted as a senior fellow and board member in 1938, he generated considerable controversy, accompanied by deep personal rancour, in his performance as bursar (1938–52). Capable in the minutiae of finance, he lacked foresight, and was intensely rigid in handling procedure and conservative in investments. Accused of inefficiency and neglect in exercising responsibility over maintenance of grounds and buildings, he took a close interest only in the organisation and finance of college sport. With Sarsfield Hogan (qv) of UCD he secured approval of the annual rugby colours match between TCD and UCD, inaugurated in 1952. Removed as bursar in a sweep of college offices and consequent reconstitution of the board under the newly admitted, reform-minded provost A. J. McConnell (qv), he thereafter served as college auditor (1952–8). He resided at 67 Highfield Rd, Rathgar, where he died on 2 February 1958, survived by his wife Etta.

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GRO (birth cert. of Harry Thrift); TCD calendars; *Ir. Times*, 24 Apr. 1942 (obit.); 'Carbery' (P. D. Mehigan), *Fifty years of Irish athletics* (1943); *WWW*, iv (1950); *Trinity College record volume* (1951); *Ir. Times*, 3 Feb. 1958 (obit.); Sean Diffley, *The men in green: the story of Irish rugby* (1973); *Dublin University Football Club 1866–1972* (1973), *passim*; Edmund van Esbeck, *One hundred years of Irish rugby: the official history of the Irish Rugby Football Union* (1974); R. B. McDowell and D.

A. Webb, *Trinity College Dublin: an academic history 1592–1952* (1982); Edmund van Esbeck, *The story of Irish rugby* (1986); Terry Godwin, *The complete who's who of international rugby* (1987); David Guiney, *Ireland v New Zealand: 100 years of international rugby* (1989); C. H. Holland (ed.), *Trinity College Dublin and the idea of a university* (1991); Trevor West, *The bold collegians: the development of sport in Trinity College, Dublin* (1991); J. V. Luce, *Trinity College Dublin: the first 400 years* (1992); Walker

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