

Tierney, Michael

by Donal McCartney

Tierney, Michael (1894–1975), academic and president of UCD, was born 30 September 1894 at Esker in the parish of Ballymacward, near Castleblakeney, Co. Galway, fourth of six children (four sons and two daughters) of Michael Tierney (a small farmer with little more than ten acres, whose family had come from Lough Caragh, Co. Mayo) and Bridget Tierney (née Finn). He was educated at Esker national school, where the teacher, recognising the boy's natural talent, gave him extra tuition after school hours. At 13 he won a free place as a boarder to St Joseph's College, Ballinasloe; was awarded exhibitions throughout his secondary school career; and won an entrance scholarship to UCD in 1911. While still an undergraduate he joined the Irish Volunteers at their inaugural meeting in the Rotunda on 25 November 1913. When the contradictory mobilisation orders were given at Easter 1916, Tierney was on holiday at the family home in Esker. Later he was to have no doubt that MacNeill's countermanding order was the correct decision. After a brilliant course at Latin and Greek he became an assistant in the Greek department at UCD. He won a travelling studentship in 1917, but because of the war he had to postpone his studies until 1919, and then spent the next two years between the Sorbonne, Munich, Berlin, and the British School of Archaeology in Athens. Meanwhile in 1919 he had published *Education in a free Ireland*, which looked forward to the development of the educational system under the control of a native government. In December 1922 he was appointed professor of Greek at UCD. His published work on classical Greece included 'Aristotle and Menander' in *RIA Proc.* (1936); an edition, with introduction, of Euripides' *Hecuba* (1946); and several articles in *Studies* and other journals. He married (23 June 1923) Eibhlín, eldest daughter of Eoin MacNeill (qv); they had five sons and two daughters.

A supporter of the Anglo–Irish treaty of December 1921, he became deeply involved in post-treaty politics, being honorary secretary of Cumann na nGaedheal 1923–33. He was elected TD for Mayo North 1925–7 and for the NUI constituency 1927–32. His was one of the more liberal voices on the censorship bill (1928) in the dáil and subsequently in the seanad debates on censorship in 1943. He served on three commissions – the Gaeltacht commission (1925), the second chamber commission (1936), and the commission on vocational organisation (1939). He was a member and vice-chairman of Seanad Éireann 1938–44. Throughout the 1930s in articles in *United Ireland* and *Studies* he was a strong advocate of the corporate state and the principles of social justice as expounded by Pius XI in *Quadragesimo anno*. Initially he supported Eoin O'Duffy (qv), leader of the Blueshirts, who became president of the new party, Fine Gael. Tierney was one of Fine Gael's vice-presidents, but resigned because he disliked the way the party was moving and the militancy of its right wing. He remained however, on very close terms of friendship with Fine Gael

colleagues, especially those who were fellow academics in UCD – J. M. O'Sullivan (qv), Patrick McGilligan (qv), and Michael Hayes (qv).

After the 1930s, although he was never to lose his interest in politics, he devoted more of his time and energy to the university. Despite a weak showing in the voting for the three presidential candidates at the governing body, where he was only a poor third, he was elected president of UCD by the senate of the National University (30 October 1947). The seventeen years of his presidency were to be among UCD's most critical and eventful years – the result in large measure of the forceful and critical character of the president. He was both visionary and authoritarian. In the pursuit of his goals and in the administration of the country's largest university he displayed great reserves of energy and versatility. He was bold to the point of being rash; he was outspoken but tended to speak too harshly. He was articulate, but this, too, had its disadvantages; he was resolute and persistent and did not suffer fools gladly. The very virtues that worked to the benefit of the college in his dealings with the government and the civil servants did not always help when applied to students and staff. Among these he inspired deep loyalty as well as bitter enmity.

Tierney was greatly influenced by J. H. Newman (qv), first rector of the Catholic University of Ireland. His interest in Newman's educational ideals and labours in Ireland resulted in a number of publications which he organised and edited and to which he was himself a major contributor – *A tribute to Newman* (1945); *Newman's doctrine of university education* (1952); *Struggle with fortune* (1954); *Newman: university sketches* (n.d.). He was also an effective publicist with a keen sense of ceremonial for the historic occasion. The celebrations that he organised in UCD in 1952, to mark the centenary of the delivery in Dublin of Newman's discourses on university education, were followed two years later by an even greater display. The week-long celebrations in 1954 marking the centenary of the Catholic University involved leaders of church and state and the distinguished representatives of some seventy university institutions from many countries. It was the biggest public function to date in the history of UCD, and it provided the president with a unique opportunity to emphasise a favourite conviction: that UCD was the direct descendant of the Catholic University, and that Newman was the founder of the institution over which Tierney now presided. He was also constant in the conviction that because of its size and the wide spread of its faculties UCD was really 'a university masquerading as a college'. Given his own way, he would have turned the college into a catholic university in its own right. Failing this, he was determined to maintain its catholic ethos. This involved him in a close relationship with Archbishop J. C. McQuaid (qv). It also gave rise to a certain bitter rivalry with TCD, then making a sustained effort to shed its Anglo-Irish, protestant-ascendancy image.

The steady expansion of the college became a feature of Tierney's presidency. Student numbers more than doubled from a little more than 3,000 to over 7,000. An increasing number of junior staff – many from post-war Britain – were added to the departments. The president took a special interest in the establishment and

development of a separate folklore department. He successfully resisted the attempt of the government to remove much of the teaching and research in agriculture and veterinary medicine from the college and place it in an Agricultural Institute. He negotiated an agreement with the teaching hospitals which ensured academic control over appointments to the medical faculty. He encouraged the improvement of courses in Law and Commerce; specialist studies were introduced into Engineering; and overcrowded conditions in Science received his special attention. During his presidency, faculty meetings grew in number and frequency, and by attending these meetings he kept himself informed of the various problems and aspirations of all the faculties. In the area of staff development the single grade of assistant was replaced by three grades: assistant, assistant lecturer, and college lecturer. It was this increasing use of the title 'lecturer', which under the 1908 Irish universities act and charters was a university (as distinct from a college) appointment, that led to a visitation and necessitated the University College, Dublin Act (1960) in order to legalise the nomenclature. Given his committed and combative nature, controversy was never very far from Dr Tierney. His strong sense of discipline and authority created difficulties for him with student bodies and their magazines. His relationship with the Literary and Historical Society, the college's premier debating society, was especially troublesome. His name, however, will always be associated with the transfer of UCD to its new campus on 300 acres at Belfield. Strong opposition to the move came from some academics, some politicians, the Department of Finance, national newspapers, Tuairim, and Convocation. Tierney's persistence eventually prevailed. The commission on accommodation needs reported (1959) in favour of the move, and the government approved the transfer in 1960. Because of Belfield, he was looked on by admirers as the second founder, after Newman, of UCD. Tierney wrote a number of influential memoranda for the commission on higher education which reported in 1967 in favour of the defederalisation of the National University and the establishment in its place of independent university status for its colleges. When the minister for education announced instead a merger between UCD and TCD, Tierney, although then retired, gave his support to the idea of a total merger.

He retired from the presidency of UCD in 1964. He had remained a prolific author throughout his career. Apart from the writings on Newman, noted above, he also contributed to and edited *Daniel O'Connell: nine centenary essays* (1948); between 1922 and 1970 he published some sixty articles in *Studies* on a variety of cultural, social, and political issues; and during his retirement he completed the biography of his father-in-law, entitled *Eoin MacNeill: scholar and man of action 1867–1945* (1980). He died on 10 May 1975. A portrait of Michael Tierney by Seán O'Sullivan (qv) is in UCD. The Tierney papers are in the School of History and Archives at UCD.

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Michael Tierney papers, UCD Archives; *UCD: Report of the President, 1963–4*; J. J. Hogan, 'Michael Tierney 1894–1875', *Studies*, lxxv (autumn 1976), 177–91; Martin Tierney, *A classicist's outlook: Michael Tierney, KSC, MA, D.Litt., 1894–1975* (2002)

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