

## Robert Dudley Edwards (1909-88)

Robert Dudley Edwards died on 5 June 1988 in Dublin, where he had been born seventy-nine years and one day before. In later life, at least, he would have approved of that exact, spare sentence, because in later life he resolved the conflict between his undisciplined temperament and the discipline of his profession by reducing his role as historian to the task of record keeping. I said as much in a review of his *Ireland under the Tudors* in 1978,<sup>1</sup> and some weeks later was alarmed to see him making purposefully towards me through a reception crowd, telltale large Paddy held protectively on high. 'I liked your review', he shouted across the heads; 'you were exactly right'. Reaching me, he added in an undertone, 'they were hoping that I was going to make a scene'. They were, of course, and it was typical of Dudley that he extracted as much satisfaction from disappointing the expectation as he might have done from fulfilling it. Others have told me that he became cantankerous with age, and the evidence is conclusive, but I never experienced anything but generosity from him from beginning to end.

For me, the beginning was in the mid-fifties, when a student conference adjourned to Thirty-one Castle Avenue. To one accustomed to the austere régime of Moody's Trinity, the experience was something of a revelation. Beer was drunk; religion, politics and even history were endlessly discussed; songs were sung; and every so often the professor of modern Irish history stalked in and out of his study sporting a theatrical eyeshade, trailing the galley-proofs of *Irish Historical Studies*, addressing students by their first names, and delivering himself of a variety of conversation stoppers, some so delphic as to require a courteous pretence of thoughtful consideration, others so sharply personal as to compel silence. Thereafter, suffering mildly from transposed loyalties, I became first a regular attender at U.C.D. History Society meetings and later one of the many beneficiaries of Dudley's store of knowledge and flair for divining what did or did not make historical sense. In the 1970s we collaborated on a chapter of the *New history of Ireland*.<sup>2</sup> I wrote, and over lunch in the Unicorn he commented, invariably adding crisp afterthoughts by phone at 8 o'clock the following morning. His direct comments were always valuable,

<sup>1</sup>*Irish Economic and Social History*, v (1978), pp 84-5.

<sup>2</sup>Aidan Clarke, with R. Dudley Edwards, 'Pacification, plantation and the catholic question' in T.W. Moody, F.X. Martin and F.J. Byrne (eds), *A new history of Ireland*, iii (Oxford, 1976), pp 187-232.

and almost always directed towards suggesting connexions and subjecting the exposition to the test of what was presented as common sense, but in fact amounted to a subtle and sophisticated appreciation of what was consonant or dissonant with the seventeenth-century ethos. His indirect comments were of no value at all, which did not dismay me since I had come fairly early to the conclusion that when Dudley did not make himself clear it was because he had nothing clear to say. It amused him to watch the obsequious struggle to impart meaning to a remark which had none. A few weeks before he died I spoke with him at length in Carlingford, where we had assembled to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the first publication of *Irish Historical Studies*, and was confirmed in my view that the story of his professional life is a cautionary one: it concerns a man who was irresistibly drawn to the vocation of Irish history, for which he was well suited as it was then practised, but whose intelligence led him to embrace a reformation which excluded him.

Since the attraction to Irish history, by his own reckoning, began at the age of ten, the simple explanation, that it reflected his family background, may be sufficient. His father Walter was an unassuming and well-read Englishman of liberal inclinations and Liberal associations, who came to Ireland with his wife, Bridget MacInerney, an emigrant nurse from County Clare, and after some years secured a position that accorded with his principles, as an unestablished civil servant in the national health insurance scheme. The Edwards boys, Robert (or Robin, as he was known to his intimates) and his younger brother Ralph, had a broken schooling, governed by the shifting enthusiasms of their oppressively dominant and politically committed mother whose reaction to the 1916 rising was to remove them from the Catholic University School and send them to a disorganised St Enda's where they remained for a year before moving on to Scoil Bhríde, Synge Street, and finally back to the Catholic University School. Whether as a result of this progression or in imitation of his mother's obsessiveness, Robert's performance in his final school examinations in 1926 was extravagantly uneven: failures in both French and Irish were balanced by first place in Ireland in history. The pattern was to be repeated in the King's Inns, to which he proceeded at his mother's insistence, where he won medals for oratory and failed his examinations, but not in University College, Dublin, which he entered by his own choice and where his success was unalloyed and his progress triumphal. He gained first-class honours in history in 1929, became auditor of the Literary and Historical Society, and took a first-class master's degree with the award of the National University of Ireland prize in 1931. His dissertation, about which he was later dismissive, had dealt with the penal laws against protestant dissenters, apparently in a deliberate effort to correct his perspective, and it was Edmund Curtis in Trinity who prompted him to go on to investigate the legal situation of catholics in Ireland before the 'penal laws'. A travelling studentship took him to London in 1932 and it was there, under the supervision of the Reverend Canon Claude Jenkins, soon to become regius professor of ecclesiastical history at Oxford, that he 'studied the subject scientifically'<sup>3</sup> and completed the research which brought him a London University doctorate in 1933. In London, through an acquaintanceship aptly begun on the steps of the National Library in Dublin, he shared lodgings with

<sup>3</sup>Robert Dudley Edwards, *Church and state in Tudor Ireland: a history of penal laws against Irish catholics, 1534-1603* (Dublin, 1935), p. xxiii.

Theo Moody, who had arrived there a year previously from Queen's University, Belfast, and made the acquaintance of David Quinn. And in London, principally at the seminars in the Institute of Historical Research, he learned the historian's trade after a fashion that had been impossible in Dublin where his teachers, as he delicately phrased it late in life, 'had had little connexion with historical research'.<sup>4</sup> It does not appear that a revolution in Irish historical scholarship was consciously plotted in Bloomsbury, but the shared experience of new approaches and a common belief in the ameliorative power of informed understanding was to provide the foundation for a concerted effort in the years to come.

In Dublin, Edwards entered upon a period of hyperactivity and evident grooming: a special research grant from the National University of Ireland, the Coyne memorial scholarship, and the Irish historical research prize supplemented the earnings of his wife Sheila O'Sullivan, a teacher from Cork with interests in folklore, as he prepared the first part of his doctoral thesis for publication by the Talbot Press as *Church and state in Tudor Ireland* in 1935. In 1936, the year in which he was elected to membership of the Royal Irish Academy, a meeting with Moody in the National Library ended with a joint resolve to introduce new standards of scholarship by establishing both a society and a journal devoted to the study of Irish history. Within two years they had accomplished their purpose; the Ulster Society for Irish Historical Studies and the Irish Historical Society began life separately in 1936, became complexly intertwined through the Irish Committee of Historical Sciences in 1937, and were symbiotically associated in the byzantine editorial and managerial arrangements made for *Irish Historical Studies*, jointly edited by Edwards and Moody, which first appeared in March 1938. In that year, Edwards, who had been awarded a D.Litt. by the National University of Ireland in 1937, was appointed to a position as lecturer in modern history in University College, Dublin. Promotion to a statutory lectureship followed in 1939 and five years later he was appointed to the chair which he was to occupy until his retirement in 1979.

When he became professor of modern Irish history, Edwards's research record was impressive.<sup>5</sup> In addition to *Church and state in Tudor Ireland*, he had published half a dozen scholarly articles, some drawn from the second, unpublished, part of his doctorate, others dealing with medieval topics, and one, written in association with Moody, which perhaps stands as the most formidable exemplar of the new approach, 'The history of Poyning's law, part I, 1494-1615',<sup>6</sup> impeccable in its scholarship, relentless in its magisterial and dispassionate rout of centuries of misunderstanding. He had, moreover, edited two substantial manuscripts, the Chichester letter-book in *Analecta Hibernica*<sup>7</sup> and the minute-book of the Catholic Committee in *Archivium Hibernicum*.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup>R.W. Dudley Edwards, 'T.W. Moody and the origins of *Irish Historical Studies*: a biographical memoir' in I.H.S., xxvi, no. 101 (May 1988), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Clara Cullen, 'The historical writings of Professor R.D. Edwards' in Art Cosgrove and Donal McCartney (eds), *Studies in Irish history presented to R. Dudley Edwards* (Dublin, 1979), pp 347-53.

<sup>6</sup>I.H.S., ii, no. 8 (Sept. 1941), pp 415-24.

<sup>7</sup>*Anal. Hib.*, no. 8 (1938), pp 8-177.

<sup>8</sup>*Arch. Hib.*, ix (1942), pp 1-172.

In the next twenty-five years or so, there were perhaps another half-dozen articles of note, a couple of them venturing into the twentieth century, others on fifteenth-century papal provision, the counter-reformation and the reformation parliament, and one a re-worked segment of the part of his doctoral thesis that had dealt with the mid-seventeenth century. He also edited, with Desmond Williams, *The Great Famine*,<sup>9</sup> compiled, with David Quinn, an account of the historiography of sixteenth-century Ireland,<sup>10</sup> and contributed largely to the Royal Historical Society's bibliographies of Tudor and Stuart history.<sup>11</sup> In 1969, in a review in *Studies*,<sup>12</sup> he confessed himself taken aback by Geoffrey Elton's brusque assertion in *The practice of history* that historians who failed to write as much as they should were fundamentally self-centred: excess of diffidence and pressure of other duties, Edwards ruefully noted, were dismissed as evasions.

Pressure of other duties, there certainly was. Since 1945, Edwards had steadily built up his department, working closely with his former pupil, Desmond Williams, who was appointed to the chair of modern history in 1949, to enlarge the area of study and diversify teaching methods. It is hard to believe that anyone but Edwards could have devised the famed 'marathon' in which, for days on end, students first criticised one another's work and then criticised one another's criticisms. It was certainly he who was the prime mover in the establishment of the Irish History Students' Association in the late 1940s which, with its annual conference and its associated *Bulletin*,<sup>13</sup> performed for undergraduates that integrative function that the Ulster and Irish Historical Societies performed for their teachers, and which provided for Edwards himself the recurrent stage on which many of his more fabulous exploits were set. His chief concern as professor, however, was to raise a new generation of historical scholars, rigorously trained, and subjected to a regimen so testing as to border on the unattainable. He tended to leave the concern for absolute standardisation to Moody, who policed the commas, the colons and the outlaid upper-case letters while Edwards probed content and approach, pinpointed weaknesses in the evidence and presentation and teased out unspoken assumptions. If he wrote little enough himself in these years, he bore a significant responsibility for much of what a good many other people wrote, not only in *Irish Historical Studies*, but elsewhere. And if he did write little, even Elton, one supposes, would have acknowledged as more than evasion the persistent and debilitating eye trouble that led Edwards to resign the joint editorship of *I.H.S.* in 1957 and eased only in the late 1970s. Its effects are evident in the record: in what should have been his prime years his access to new materials was restricted and he lived on his accumulated research capital.

<sup>9</sup>R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams (eds), *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52* (Dublin, 1957).

<sup>10</sup>R. Dudley Edwards and D.B. Quinn, 'Sixteenth-century Ireland, 1485-1603', in *I.H.S.*, xvi, no. 61 (Mar. 1968), pp 15-32.

<sup>11</sup>Conyers Read, *Bibliography of British history: Tudor Period, 1485-1603* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1959); Godfrey Davies, *Bibliography of British history: Stuart period, 1603-1714*; 2nd ed., Mary Keeler (Oxford, 1970).

<sup>12</sup>*Studies*, lviii (1969), pp 92-5.

<sup>13</sup>The publishing history of the *Annual Bulletin of the Irish History Students Association* needs attention. I believe that it first appeared in 1956, changed its name in 1960 to *Retrospect*, the title under which it continues to publish.

In the 1970s, Edwards embarked on a fresh constructive phase of his career, founding a department of archives in U.C.D, initiating a graduate diploma course in archival studies, and building up with astonishing rapidity a major collection of twentieth-century documentary material in Stephen's Green, close, as cynics were quick to note, to his familiar haunts and mercifully far from Belfield. An Irish Society for Archives followed inexorably, with Edwards as its first chairman, and in due course a *Bulletin* also, its first issue carrying the chairman's rousing call to 'rescue the records'.<sup>14</sup> In 1972, he was elected by the U.C.D Academic Council to membership of the Governing Body, and in these years he found time and energy to become chairman of the U.C.D. Staff Association at a difficult stage in its development and to take an active part in the affairs of the council of the Irish Federation of University Teachers. He invited me, as his counterpart in Trinity, to address a meeting of the association: it was of no importance what I said, he assured me, the object was to present his members with living proof that chairmen required neither age nor seniority: 'I'm trying to wean them from deference', he explained. And he did.

In these busily creative years he acquired the luxury of tactful and willing research assistance and began to publish more freely. A survey of Irish history appeared in 1972<sup>15</sup> and was followed by a short, lavishly illustrated account of *Daniel O'Connell and his world* in 1975<sup>16</sup> and a narrative history of Tudor Ireland in 1977.<sup>17</sup> In the early 1980s, after his retirement in 1979, he collaborated with Dr Mary O'Dowd in a critical description of the sources of early modern Irish history.<sup>18</sup> With the exception of the latter, in which Edwards's part was no doubt largely consultative, much of this later work was of indifferent quality: though by no means lacking in sharp observation and iridescent passages, it was poorly structured, often slackly written, and borrowed freely from earlier writing. The Tudor history, however, was diagnostic: reflecting as it did his preoccupation with archives, written as it was after the fashion of a chronicle, this unsuccessful return to his original interest in the sixteenth century both poses the enigma of Edwards in its most starkly reductive form and provides the clue to its solution.

The enigma is simply that none of Edwards's writing displayed the delight in perversity, paradox and obliquity that characterised his spoken word, or conveyed that provocative, endlessly questioning iconoclasm that animated his lectures. In print, his sense of fun proved to be far from irresponsible, and surfaced only to mislead. The anarchic promise of his mischievously pre-emptive title, *A new history of Ireland*, was not realised in an unadventurous text, nor was it intended to be: the title was chosen to annoy Moody, and it did. When Edwards experimented teasingly with a novel system of unkeyed general references in his contribution to the Luke Wadding commemorative volume,<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup>R. Dudley Edwards, 'Rescue the records' in *Irish Archives Bulletin*, i (1971), pp 7-10.

<sup>15</sup>*A new history of Ireland* (Dublin, 1972).

<sup>16</sup>*Daniel O'Connell and his world* (London, 1975).

<sup>17</sup>*Ireland in the age of the Tudors: the destruction of Hiberno-Norman civilization* (London, 1977).

<sup>18</sup>R.W. Dudley Edwards and Mary O'Dowd, *Sources for early modern Irish history, 1534-1641* (Cambridge, 1985).

<sup>19</sup>'The Irish catholics and the puritan revolution' in Franciscan Fathers (eds), *Father Luke Wadding: commemorative volume* (Dublin, 1957), pp 93-118.

the essay itself scrupulously avoided taking advantage of the licence that the author seemed to have granted himself, so that the abiding impression is of a coat being trailed over a carefully set trap. The fact is that Edwards's scholarship was exemplary and wholly responsible. The demotic Edwards, the 'Dudley' of legend who figured in countless stories that only the uninformed would dismiss as improbable, made no appearance in his published work. It might, indeed, be argued that his development as an historian was in the opposite direction. *Church and state in Tudor Ireland* was a landmark in its time, but it is difficult to recover a sense of its novelty at this remove, for it now seems a conventional work in which the results of methodical and thorough research were interspersed with measured comment in orthodox fashion, confessional commitment was not successfully kept at bay, and the young author was, as young authors tend to be, bumptiously unfair to the recent work of his perceptive elder, Canon Jourdan, who had perceived ambiguities that have had to be rediscovered.<sup>20</sup> *Ireland in the age of the Tudors*, however, was authorially self-effacing to the point of idiosyncrasy. Though Edwards did not actually say so, the book was in essence an affirmation of the primacy of the sources, an exemplification of Galbraith's wry contention that while historians may come and go their dispensable ways, the sources endure. The archival concerns of Edwards's later years seem wholly consistent with the reductionist tendency that appears in his approach to historical presentation. His typically constructive insistence that the evidence must be read in the full knowledge of how it came into being, which was the organising principle of the account of early modern sources on which he collaborated with Dr O'Dowd, appears to have completed a slow transmutation: the sources became less the evidence that the historian must use than the subject with which he must deal, and the historian became the custodian of the past rather than its interpreter.

The disjuncture between the man and his writing is perhaps instructive. The qualities that made the superb teacher and the challenging colleague and companion — the ability to see unlikely correspondencies, to make intuitive connexions, and to draw startling inferences; the eagerness to explore irreverence, disturb complacency and contemplate the outrageous; the delight in jibes and oracular utterances — were all attributes of precisely the kind that were eschewed by the disciplinary canons that Edwards and Moody imported into Irish historical scholarship and promoted thereafter. Thus Edwards's natural bent was inhibited by his principles. Off the record, he conversed with sparkling fertility and lectured with unbridled gusto; on the record, he produced uncharacteristically restrained works of careful scholarship and ultimately resolved the problem of how much of his extravagant individuality he could put into his writing by erecting depersonalisation into a private principle. Moody may almost be said to have done the reverse: *The Londonderry plantation*<sup>21</sup> revealed few signs of human origin once the first chapter was past, but the massive research that went into his study of Davitt underpinned a deeply felt personal statement.<sup>22</sup> There is, beyond doubt, much to be grateful for in the historiographical revolution

<sup>20</sup>G.V. Jourdan, chapters iv-viii, in W. A. Phillips (ed.), *History of the Church of Ireland from the earliest times to the present* (3 vols, London, 1933-4), ii, 169-524.

<sup>21</sup>*The Londonderry plantation, 1609-41: the city of London and the plantation in Ulster* (Belfast, 1939).

<sup>22</sup>*Davitt and Irish revolution, 1846-82* (Oxford, 1981).

that professionalised and objectified the study of the Irish past, but one wonders if the reformers were not too literal and mechanistic in their exposition of the creed, too intolerant of the undocumented statement, too unappreciative of the contribution that the historian himself can make to the understanding of the past. It may be that the enigma of Dudley Edwards testifies to that. Excess of diffidence was not, at first sight, the most obvious of his characteristics, but his reaction to Elton's phrase perhaps suggests that the writer's block to which he admitted privately, and which left him in Stephen's Green in the 1970s, was created by the knowledge that he could not himself compound the prescription that he had given to so many others. I suspect that it was removed by a realisation that it was out of character for him to care.

At dinner in the Unicorn he deftly assessed the draft of a colleague's contribution to *A new history of Ireland*, which he had read and I had not: 'it's what we know he knows', he said. He said it without malice, as one whose eagerness for fresh knowledge and new understanding of the past had been disappointed; with regret, as one who realised that his own work might be described in the same way; and perhaps also with the special sadness of one who daily conjured the unexpected from the familiar and the commonplace from the exceptional but whose alchemy seemed powerless to transmute the written word. The pity is that nothing that Dudley wrote captured the flamboyance, the arrogance, the perverseness, the passion, the erudite intuition, and the theatrical instinct that made him what he was, a great performer whose exuberance irradiated 'the dismal muse of Irish history'.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>The phrase is Austin Clarke's: 'The Yeats we knew', Radio Éireann, Thomas Davis Lectures, series xxxiv, no. 6, broadcast on 14 March 1965.