

# MEMORIAL DISCOURSE

Trinity College Dublin

Trinity Monday 24 May 1937

**William Reeves**

**Bishop, Scholar, Antiquary**

By John Ernest Leonard Oulton

William Reeves was born at Charleville, Co. Cork, on St. Patrick's Eve, 1815. The family of Reeves originally came from Dorset, but had long been settled in the South of Ireland. Several of its members were connected with the legal profession: William's father, Boles D'Arcy Reeves was an attorney – "pragmaticus" he is styled in the Entrance Book; Sir William Reeves was attorney general in Ireland of King Charles I; and a more distant ancestor, Sir Thomas Reeves was an eminent ecclesiastical lawyer in the time of King James I. Incidentally, this Sir Thomas provides an instance of an author in the family, albeit of a somewhat peculiar kind, for he "rendered himself notorious by his literary efforts to represent St. Patrick as a myth, and the prevailing creed of Ireland a fable." It has not, therefore, been left to modern days to spin strange theories concerning our national saint. On his mother's side Reeves was also well connected. His grandfather was Captain Jonathan Bruce Roberts, who served during the whole of the War of Independence in America and fought at Bunker's Hill in 1775. When his military career was over, Captain Roberts settled down in his native town of Charleville, and became as a man of peace a model of all that a country gentleman should be. It was in his house that William Reeves was born.

Boles Reeves was a man of much originality and gifted with a store of wit and humour; and in this respect William certainly inherited something from his father, for he was always fond of a joke and much addicted, as were his contemporaries Dean Dickinson and Father Healy, to punning. But in the general make-up of his character, in its solidarity, its habits of discipline and application, Reeves derived solely from his mother, who was a woman in whom firmness of disposition was equally coupled with natural ability. Modern educationalists will be pained to hear that she insisted on her children learning by heart portions of Scripture every day, and that some of them in consequence were able at one time or another to repeat nearly the whole of the New Testament from memory. We can see clearly the fruit of her methods in William Reeves the student and the man. For we may say at once that all through his life he was a prodigious worker. In one of his essays A. C. Benson speaks of "the heartrending industry" of Westcott. The phrase may be applied also to him who is the subject of our discourse this afternoon. His literary labours were extraordinary, and some of them – such as transcriptions and the making of indexes – wearisome in their very nature. Yet he never seemed to find them so. Even in advanced years he would rise at six o'clock, and standing at a high desk made to suit him, spend the early hours in his literary

work, executed in a beautiful penmanship which rivalled copperplate, and with an accuracy which scarcely if ever needed correction.

When he was quite a little boy, his father and mother moved from Charleville to Dublin, where they lived in Leeson Street; and Reeves was sent to school, first to a Mr. John Browne in the same street, and afterwards to the Rev. Edward Geoghegan, 8 Hume Street.

But his school days were soon over. In October, 1830, at the age of fifteen, Reeves entered College as a Pensioner, under Mr. Geoghegan as his tutor. His career in this place was very creditable, without being brilliant. After obtaining Honours in Classics, he was in his third year elected a Scholar of the House, in company with several students who afterwards rose to distinction. Among them we may name Thomas Stack and Joseph Carson, both of whom obtained fellowship; John Thomas Ball, Lord Chancellor of Ireland in 1875 and one of the most prominent of our laymen at the time of disestablishment, and William Fitzgerald, Bishop of Cork, and subsequently of Killaloe, a brilliant and witty man, some of whose deft touches were, happily, allowed to remain in the Preface he composed for the revised Prayer Book of 1878.

Reeves also obtained the second Berkeley Medal for Greek in 1837, but before this he had set aside the serious study of the classics in favour of Divinity. He entered the Divinity School just at a time when important changes were introduced with a view to securing a more adequate training in theology. Hitherto the course had been for one year only, but now a second year was added, and there was a general tightening up of the regulations. In a short autobiographical note Reeves says with regard to this: "The rules of attendance and the consequence was that out of a very large Divinity class, numbering at the start above 100, only twenty-six got clean through without a check." At the same time and with the same object of greater efficiency, the office of Archbishop King's Lecturer was placed on a different footing. Up to 1833 it had been an annual office held by a Senior Fellow at so small a salary as to make it impossible to separate it from other places. But now it was to be held by a Junior Fellow, who should resign his pupils and be incapable of any College offices, and to continue until he be elected a Senior Fellow.

In 1835 Reeves obtained second place at what corresponded then to the Divinity Testimonium examination. In the same year he graduated in Arts. But he was under twenty-one years of age when his divinity course was over, and more than two years lay between him and ordination. With a view to increasing his usefulness as a clergyman, he entered the Medical School and after two years' diligent application to his new studies, graduated in Medicine in 1837. One of his medical professors afterwards testified to the profound impression as a man and a student that Reeves made upon his contemporaries in that School, who indeed quite frankly expressed their regret that he was going to enter another profession.

The following year, when he was just over twenty-three years of age, Reeves was made a deacon by Bishop Mant of Down, and in 1839 ordained a priest by Bishop Ponsonby of Derry. He remained a curate for almost twenty years, first as curate-assistant at Lisburn, where he spent three years, and afterwards as impropriate curate of Kilconriola (Ballymena) from 1841-1857, where for eight or nine years he also held the post of Master of the Diocesan School. There is clear and abundant testimony that in his pastoral work Reeves won the respect and affectionate regard of all who came in contact with him. He was essentially a faithful man. He knew, and acted upon the knowledge, that for a clergyman the foundation of

successful work is laid in a personal knowledge of his people. And they, on their part, gave him not once or twice a very practical recognition of their regard. Popular gifts as a preacher he did not possess, or try to cultivate; but his writings at once attracted the attention of those who were able to appreciate their learning and solid worth.

The quality of Reeves' character is clearly shown during all this period. Shortly before his ordination he had married his cousin, Emma Reeves, daughter of Captain Thomas Reeves of Carlisle, and of this union nine children were born. It was a hard struggle to keep things going on a curate's stipend, even when augmented by the modest sum he had as Master of the Diocesan School. Yet those who knew Reeves best testified that he never murmured or complained. Money was a thing which did not enter into his calculations as one of the important things of life. Indeed he was generous with it, far beyond his means. While he was at Ballymena a new Church was built, largely owing to his exertions, and he gave a sum of £220 towards its completion – a gift which was at once an inspiration and an embarrassment to his friends and parishioners, who knew how ill he could afford such a sum.

If the new Church at Ballymena was a source of pride to Reeves, it was also associated with the deepest sorrow he had to bear. The first funeral service to be held in it was that of his wife. She died at the age of forty, leaving him in sole charge of nine children, the youngest of them was only a fortnight old. He remained a widower for thirty-seven years. In the parish register he wrote with his own hand in beautiful Latin an entry of his wife's death and burial, which must surely be unique among entries of that kind.

It was a matter of comment at the time, and it is a matter of speculation now, why public recognition was not given earlier to his worth as a man and a scholar. Lady Ferguson's *Life of Reeves* contains a very remarkable letter written by a Roman Catholic to the Lord Lieutenant, the Earl of Carlisle, praying that Reeves might receive such promotion as would at any rate free him from financial anxiety. This is only one example out of many that could be given of his popularity with men of creeds other than his own. It is certain that in Bishop Mant Reeves had a Diocesan who was fully aware of and appreciated the worth of the curate and schoolmaster whom he numbered among his clergy. But Reeves with his large family was allowed to remain at Ballymena until 1857, when his friend J. H. Todd, Fellow of this College and Regius Professor of Hebrew, offered him the Vicarage of Lusk, of which Todd was the Patron as the Treasurer of St. Patrick's Cathedral. Reeves was willing to accept an offer which, though modest in emoluments, was more suited to the interests of his children and had the advantage of bringing him closer to libraries. No doubt, also the ecclesiastical antiquity of the parish of Lusk was in his eyes an added attraction; and characteristically, two of the things he did during his short stay there were to write a history of the parish, and to repair the fine round tower, which he found in an unsatisfactory condition.

During this early part of his ministry the literary reputation of Reeves was firmly established by the two great works which are in size the most considerable of his writings and by which he is chiefly known as an author. While at Ballymena, in 1847, *The Ecclesiastical Antiquities of Down, Connor and Dromore* was published. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this work is the manner in which Reeves has made use of an ancient taxation-list as the basis of a volume replete with information and interest of every kind. In the middle ages the people and subsequently the clergy only were subjected from time to time to a tax of a tenth of their emoluments for the purpose of carrying on the Crusades. Soon, however, the relief of the

Holy Land became merely a fiction, whereby the Pope collected revenues for himself, or allowed the King of England (if he was on friendly terms with him) to levy money for the expenses of the realm. In 1306, King Edward I succeeded in securing from the Pope leave to appropriate the ecclesiastical tenths in his dominions for a period which was afterwards extended to seven years, on the condition that a portion of the revenues should go to support the needs and burdens of the Roman Church. Two persons, whom we should now style Commissioners of Income Tax, were appointed to collect from the Irish clerics the specified amount, and in order to arrive at the sum which represented two shillings in the pound in each case they proceeded to find out by rigorous enquiry the value of each ecclesiastical benefice. The result is preserved in a taxation roll – a mere list of names opposite which the sums of money are set out for their respective assessment.

“Son of man, can these bones live?” Reeves believed they could: and he proceeded to clothe the skeleton with flesh and blood, so that after six hundred years’ mouldering decay it revived and stood upright. The ancient place-names in the taxation roll were all identified and given their modern counterparts. A vast amount of historical and topographical information in respect of each locality was added, with the result that – to use the words of each locality was added, with the result that – to use the words of Sir Samuel Ferguson – “there is not a parish, scarcely a townland, in the counties of Derry, Down and Antrim, over which Reeves has not breathed an air from the ancient humanities, which imparts picturesqueness and animation to what used to be one of the bleakest fields of investigation in all the circuit of Ireland.”

An even greater work appeared from Reeves’ pen ten years later, in 1857, namely his edition of Adamnan’s Life of St. Columba. Adamnan, ninth abbot of Iona, was born less than thirty years after the date of St. Columba’s death, and in his boyhood he had frequent opportunity of conversing with those who had seen and known the saint. His life of St. Columba is one of the finest, as it is one of the first, works of the kind which that period has produced. And as in his *Ecclesiastical Antiquities*, so in his edition of Adamnan, Reeves so treats his text that he is no mere editor, but rather the author of a monumental contribution to the whole subject of Celtic Christianity in that age. Dr. Dowden, Bishop of Edinburgh, preaching in this Chapel on the first Sunday after Trinity, 1895, speaks of this masterly work in the same breath as he speaks of Ussher’s contributions to the same field of learning; and scholars of to-day are unanimous in testifying to its lasting and definitive character. Apart from minor questions of palaeography, in which Reeves had not the opportunity to become an expert, after eighty years there is little to add to or take away from what he has written.

I have mentioned the fact that J.H. Todd presented Reeves with the incumbency of Lusk. And this is not the only indication we have of the recognition of his merits by members of our staff. It is true that he would have welcomed academic work, and many competent judges held him to be well suited to such a career. But if this was denied him, he never lost his love for the University, nor was it oblivious of the scholarship of its devoted son. When C. R. Elrington, Regius Professor of Divinity, died in 1850, the edition of Ussher’s Works, to which he had devoted the labour of many years, was not completed. Consequently the laborious and difficult tasks of deciphering and editing some of Ussher’s prelections, as well as of preparing as a 17<sup>th</sup> volume an Index to the whole work, was entrusted to Reeves. The Board showed its marked approval of his manner of carrying this out by remuneration which exceeded by more than double what it had originally proposed. In 1871 the University conferred on him the degree of LL.D. *honoris causa* – a just tribute to the recognised place he

then held in the scholarly world. But the connection between College and Reeves in his later life is also to be found in one of the most precious MSS. in our possession. After many vicissitudes in its long history, the Book of Armagh passed early in this eighteenth century into private hands, and so continued until the middle of the nineteenth, when for a time it was deposited in the Royal Irish Academy. Its owner then desired to part with it; and, together with other objects in historical interest, it found a place at the Dublin Exhibition of 1853, bearing a descriptive label to which were added the significant words "To Be Sold." Reeves happened to pay a visit to the Exhibition, and observing this at once determined to set about securing that this MS., of the worth of which he was well aware, should not leave the country. He endeavoured to interest Primate John George Beresford in the matter: but that munificent prelate had at the moment many heavy demands upon him and neither he nor the College felt disposed to offer for the MS. the sum of £500 which its owner was understood to ask for it. Reeves was nothing daunted. By an act which showed a splendid public spirit, all the more so in a man of limited means, he entered into negotiations with the owner and purchased the MS. himself. In a letter of October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1853, he writes to the Primate, "It may interest your Grace to know that I have become the possessor of the Book of Armagh. I found on communicating with Mr. Brownlow that £300 was the price he had put on it. So I wrote to him again and became the accepted suitor for its enjoyment." Next year, through the intervention of Todd, Reeves surrendered it, for the same sum which he had paid for it, to the Primate – then Chancellor of the University – who purchased it in order to present it to our Library.

In recognition of his action in the matter, Reeves was accorded the privilege of having the Book in his possession. He allowed it, for the most part, to remain in the Library, where many could have access to it. When it was in his own possession, he kept it in a safe procured for that purpose, or, when travelling, carried it in a specially made satchel strapped across his bag. The *editio princeps* of the Book was entrusted to Reeves; but beyond writing two papers on the subject, collecting a certain amount of material, and laying down the general lines on which the work was to proceed, he never found time in his busy life to accomplish this onerous task. The world of scholarship knows that afterwards the work was entrusted to Dr. John Gwynn, who in his monumental edition has paid a generous tribute to Reeves, and incorporated his materials, so far as they went.

Reeves left Lusk in 1862 to become Keeper of the Library at Armagh and Vicar Choral of the Cathedral; and for twenty-four years his lot was cast in a sphere wholly congenial to a scholar. In the stone above the entrance to the reading-room there is cut the Greek word ψυχηδιατριβιον "A Healing-place for the Soul." Reeves truly found it so. He loved the noble room, with its book-lined shelves; and when it came to him later on to leave Armagh, the wrench of parting was severe. "The noblest drawing-room in Europe" was his description of the Library to one of his chaplains, whom on the eve of his departure he was unable to usher into one of the living-rooms of the house. On another occasion he said that when he revisited Armagh he saw all his old friends (meaning the books), but that they all had their backs turned to him. On another visit to all the much-loved room, he says that the dear books almost leaped out of their shelves to greet him. In addition to his post as Librarian, Reeves soon received other preferment in the diocese. He became Rector of Tynan in 1865 and Dean of Armagh in 1875. This threefold office made him the foremost clergyman, next to the

Primate, in the diocese, and so led to the momentous change which came to him at the end of his life.

In the Constitution of the Church of Ireland there is a procedure laid down in the case of a vacancy in the see of Armagh, which among the various methods of episcopal election must be quite distinctive. The Synod of Armagh meets for the election of a Bishop, and the person so elected bears *ad interim* the title of Bishop-elect of Armagh. The House of Bishops then meet to elect a Primate out of their own number, and although the Bishop-elect of Armagh is a potential Primate equally with the other Bishops, it is from the nature of the case unlikely that the new-comer to the House of Bishops will be elected to the highest office in the Church, and accordingly it usually falls to him to fill the see left vacant by the translation of some other member of the House of Bishops to the Primacy. When Primate Marcus Beresford died in 1886, the Synods of Armagh and Clogher (for these dioceses were then united) elected, almost unanimously, Reeves as *ad interim* Bishop; and on the subsequent elevation of Robert Knox to the Primacy, it fell to Reeves, under this arrangement, to occupy the see of Down and Connor and Dromore thus left vacant. He was consecrated on St. Peter's Day for a task from which a much younger man than he might well have shrunk. The Church population in the North was then rapidly growing: for example, in the ten years 1881-1891 in Belfast alone it increased by 17,000 souls, and the problems arising from this fact were crying aloud for their solution. Reeves proved to be a wise and firm bishop; but the burden was too heavy for one who was in his seventy-second year when he first shouldered it. For the years that remained to him, he stayed at his post and met its duties with that faithfulness and diligence that men had learned to expect from him always. In 1891 he was elected President of the Royal Irish Academy, before which during his lifetime he had read many valuable papers. At the beginning of the following year he was in Dublin for one of its meetings. The weather was bitterly cold, and influenza was rife. The Bishop caught a chill, and after a short illness died at Campbell's Private Hotel in Molesworth Street at 6.15a.m. on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1892, in the seventy-seventh year of his age. The papers of January 15<sup>th</sup> contained an account of a memorial service held in St. Patrick's Cathedral the previous day, at which Dean Jellett gave the address, and also of the deaths of the Duke of Clarence and Cardinal Manning. After this service the body was brought to Armagh where it lies buried. His life and work are visibly commemorated in Belfast. Cathedral where a memorial tablet, with a Latin inscription from the pen of our Public Orator, was erected in 1932.

Reeves is the greatest ecclesiastical antiquary that Ireland has produced since Ussher. His fame rests not only on the two larger works that I have described, but also on the immense mass of material which he compiled during a laborious lifetime, dealing with records, registers, visitations, ancient buildings, place-names, persons, offices. Some of these have been published, but much remains still in the manuscript, in our library, in Armagh, and elsewhere, for future historians to make use of. When in his old age he catechized his grandchildren, he used to say to them "I want a clean answer." It was characteristic of the man and all that he did. He hated ambiguity. His work is marked always by accuracy, clearness, and arrangement. He never shrank from the toilsome, even heart-breaking labour which the minutiae of scholarship demand. He knew the value of a good index, and this was a form of work at which he excelled. When his friend John O'Donovan, the eminent Irish scholar, was engaged on his edition of the Annals of the Four Masters, Reeves contributed for his use of 60,000 references. On another occasion he constructed an Index in two folio

volumes of the townlands of Ireland, containing over 62,000 items. This index is preserved in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

His career in the Medical School cannot be dismissed as without relevance to our general estimate of the man. On the contrary, his literary work is characterised throughout by a quality which he may truly describe as scientific. He never allowed his imagination to lead him into attractive but unverifiable hypotheses. It has been said of his contemporary Lightfoot that his contribution to Pauline exegesis lay in the fact that he allowed St. Paul to speak for himself; he did not see the Apostle through the mist of poetical fancy or of theological pre-supposition. He went to the Pauline epistles with the single aim of finding out what they actually meant. Reeves' scholarship has the same detached, neutral, common-sense quality about it. His one aim was to ascertain the facts and let them speak for themselves, without note or comment of his own.

Reeves dedicated his scholarship to the service of his country. He spent himself in acquiring and spreading a wider knowledge of the past history of Ireland, and especially of its northern part, where except for a few years the whole of his ministry was cast. For this purpose he set himself to learn Irish, and his zeal for the language was the foundation of his intimacy with John O'Donovan, and, later on, with Whitley Stokes. On St. Patrick's Day he used to wear the emblem of the national Saint in the streets at a time when it was not customary to do so.

There can be little doubt as to the convictions which inspired him to this life-long work. As a Churchman, one of the most erudite Churchmen of this day, he was fully convinced that the Church of Ireland is the lineal descendant of the Church of St. Patrick, not only in historical succession, but also in faith and worship, in church order and discipline. As an Irishman, the fascination of his native land lay upon him, and he knew that in its service alone could he find full satisfaction. There is an illuminating letter of his, written to John O'Donovan at a time when O'Donovan felt disappointed and thought of leaving the country. Reeves advised him strongly against such a course, telling him that no sooner would he leave Ireland than he would be wishing to retrace his steps. "You would return," he says, "to the land of *tuber redivivus* with a heart full of longing associations... a soul thirsting to drink deep at the fountain which years of drought had dried up, and the only piece of solid enjoyment you would discover in the whole procedure would be the reunion of John O'Donovan and Fatherland."

In spite of her tragic history, Ireland means to her devoted sons something that greater fame or prosperity won elsewhere could never give them. Separated from her, they would be exiles, and know it. This sentiment, nay rather, this conviction, is the possession of no one religious or political creed. And Reeves is only one of many scholars belonging to the Church of Ireland who in the past one hundred years have striven to throw fresh light upon the history and literature of Christianity in this land. To mention only clergymen among them, we can name also Richard Mant, James Henthorn Todd, Charles Graves, Robert King, John Gwynn, John Henry Bernard, Newport John Davis White, Hugh Jackson Lawlor. Take away the contributions that these scholars have made, and the knowledge of Irishmen about the past history of religion in this country would be immeasurably the poorer. And of those whom I have mentioned, none placed his learning more devotedly on the altar of the Christian Faith and of his country than did he whom the University honours, through the imperfect medium of my words, this afternoon.