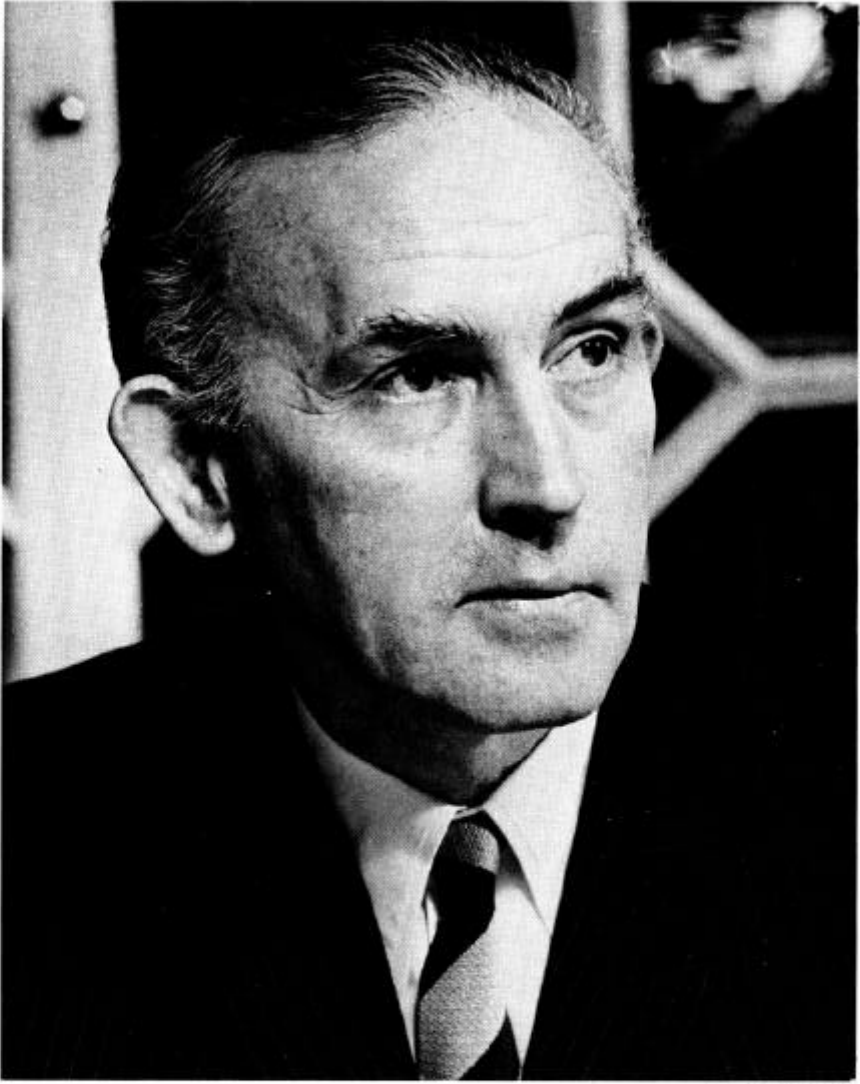


PLATE XXVII



F. S. L. LYONS

The Green Studio Ltd.

FRANCIS STEWART LELAND LYONS

1923–1983

THE tragically sudden death of Leland Lyons at the age of 59 was perceived in Ireland as a national loss: but ‘national’, as his great friend and mentor T. W. Moody characteristically remarked, ‘in a good, wholesome, self-respecting sense’. This was an apposite tribute to a scholar whose whole working career was dedicated to clarifying the processes of Irish history during the era of irredentist nationalism. But Lyons’s own life also reflected a continuing effort to make sense of being an Irishman brought up in a minority tradition, and fiercely committed to pluralism in Irish life; he stood for the reconciling but astringent approach inherent in the best of the Trinity College culture. The attendance at his funeral—the President of Ireland, Taoiseachs past and present, judges, senior clerics of both faiths—bore striking witness to his standing as a public figure as well as a scholar, utterly belying the more than usually uncomprehending statement of *The Times* obituarist that he ‘did not make much impression outside the university world’.

In fact, part of Lyons’s fascination for his contemporaries lay in the apparently effortless perfection of his life and achievements in a wide variety of spheres—equally distinguished as writer, teacher, sportsman, administrator, and public figure. But there was always a certain tension, and a slightly febrile quality beneath the formidable charm, which gave an added complexity to his character. Like W. B. Yeats, whose biography dominated the last ten years of Lyons’s life, he was preoccupied with ‘hammering his thoughts into a unity’; and there was also in his later writing something of what Yeats called the ‘ancient, detonating impartiality’ of the Anglo-Irish mind. This is witnessed by the background to his life, as well as by the remarkable works of scholarship which made his reputation.

The constituent parts of Lyons’s name indicate the traditions whence he came. His mother, Florence May Leland, was of southern Church of Ireland stock, from a family with a long Trinity College connection (Thomas Leland having been appointed Professor of History in 1761); his father, Stewart Lyons, was an Ulster Presbyterian. Lyons himself was technically a Derryman,

born in the city on 11 November 1923, but he left it at the age of four; his father's work in the Northern Bank enforced a peripatetic existence, moving round Ireland north and south. Lyons's education, however, was largely centred on England—first at Tunbridge Wells (where an aunt lived) and subsequently at Dover College, with only a final year at the High School in Dublin before entering Trinity. The decision in favour of an English education was not taken for traditional Ascendancy reasons (the Lyonses were not traditional Ascendancy); his schools were chosen on academic grounds, after he had demonstrated exceptional ability at a rural primary school. Outstanding intellectual gifts were unusually combined with striking good looks and notable athletic achievements. Lyons was a well-known rugby player at Trinity, attained great distinction as a tennis player at the Fitzwilliam Club, and excelled as a squash champion, on several occasions playing for Ireland. Here as elsewhere he seemed someone almost unfairly equipped with all that was needed for spectacular success in life.

The image of effortlessness, however, is misleading. Appositely for Yeats's biographer, Lyons seemed to possess the Castiglione quality of *sprezzatura*—the ability to achieve excellence nonchalantly. But he combined with his natural talents an austere, hardworking, and disciplined rule of life which reflected the professional Protestant ethos of his background. This strain was on occasion also evidenced in a devastating directness, and in his utter lack of pomposity. With a strict and rigorous aesthetic taste he combined a quizzical irony and a critical and adventurous spirit. Never a narrow historian, his interests included an early and sustained devotion to the cinema and the history of film, as well as the preoccupation with creative literature which developed with his career. (This stretched to an omniverous taste for both P. G. Wodehouse and detective stories.) Just as important was his deep love of music (Mozart, Haydn, and Mahler, as much as Beethoven). The unexpected character beneath the outward paragon was well expressed in his humour; there was a real sparkle as well as a satiric wit. Past the initial shyness, acquaintance could rapidly develop into friendship; but that sardonic reticence characteristic of his Northern forebears was always in evidence, and was related to the critical edge more and more clearly reflected in his latest and best work.

The basis of Lyons's early working life was Trinity College, Dublin. He entered the college as a Junior Freshman in 1941, was elected a Foundation Scholar in 1943, achieved a brilliant First

in Modern History and Political Science with a Gold Medal in 1945, and completed his doctorate in 1947. At this point he went to the University of Hull as lecturer in history, and stayed there until 1951 when he returned to Trinity as Fellow and lecturer. There he remained (with an interim as visiting Professor at Princeton from 1960 to 1961) until his appointment to the chair of Modern History at the University of Kent at Canterbury in 1964.

Trinity remained fundamental to Lyons's intellectual base; most of all because of the influence of Theodore Moody, with whom he formed a lifelong association. Lyons's return to Trinity as Provost, in the concluding phase of Moody's own career, was a source of tremendous joy to his old teacher; and throughout his life Lyons acknowledged his 'supreme indebtedness' to his first mentor. Lyons was, in his approach to the study of Irish history, a classical Moody product: objective, accurate, stringent, and taught in a tradition which combined historiographical innovation with almost Actonian values of moral rectitude. Moody's influential reorganization of the Trinity history school was just under way when Lyons entered Trinity, and he reaped full benefit—a benefit which was amplified by working for his doctorate under Moody's supervision. 'Thus began an apprenticeship which has continued to this day', he wrote in 1979: 'a training in how to define one's subject, how to locate one's sources, how to evaluate different kinds of evidence, how to progress from description to analysis, how to handle footnotes and bibliographies, and at the end how to set out one's conclusions clearly, reasonably, and, if all went well, even with some degree of style.'¹ Equally notable in the Moody ethos, however, was what Lyons described as the values of 'the liberal historian of the old school who still cherishes a lingering belief, if not in the perfectibility of man, at least in his improbability, and who has not entirely discarded the idea of progress from his mental equipment'.² And this was an approach which was less easily transmitted to some of his students, Lyons among them.

Moody trained a generation of historians who spearheaded that 'new' Irish history which dispassionately analysed many of the old myths out of existence, and preferred the difficult explanations of muddle to the easy ones of malevolence; and Lyons became the most prominent of their number. Symbolically, a posthumous work will be his survey of Irish history from 1891 to 1921 for

¹ 'T.W.M.', in F. S. L. Lyons and R. A. J. Hawkins (eds.), *Ireland under the Union: Varieties of Tension. Essays in Honour of T. W. Moody* (Oxford, 1980), p. 10.

² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

volume VI of the *New History of Ireland*, the great project of Moody's later career. Lyons's own early work matched the preoccupations of contemporaries like David Thornley and Conor Cruise O'Brien, who explored the realities of political organization behind the varieties of Irish constitutional nationalism, up to then the subject of flaccid generalization at best, and reductionist dismissal at worst. But his own interests ranged wider and wider, moving on to synthesizing work on international history, taking in a massive general survey with a strong social and economic inclination, producing brilliant biographies, and finding an eventual destination in literary and cultural history. Few would deny—and he himself affirmed it—that his work became better and better in the process.

Perhaps because of this constant intellectual development, Lyons himself was a teacher who attracted and inspired students; even when at the pinnacle of his career, he was endlessly helpful to younger supplicants, and a wandering research student with the most exiguous letter of introduction always found a warm welcome. So did many others. The fact that this was so owed much to his radiantly happy marriage. Here one encounters the Trinity connection yet again; Lyons met Jennifer McAlister when she was working in the Senior Tutor's office in 1953, and they married in 1954. Her gaiety, downrightness, and warmth helped moderate Lyons's shyness, and their marriage was a real partnership in the fullest sense. The birth of two sons, John in 1955 and Nicholas in 1958, created a close-knit family circle within which Lyons found endless stimulation as well as relaxation. As well as many of his talents, his children inherited his independence of mind; and anyone who heard him talk of them could not doubt that this gave him more pleasure than it would to many fathers.

It was when he returned to Trinity from Hull that Lyons's first books began to appear. *The Irish Parliamentary Party 1890–1910*, based on his thesis, came out in 1951 and set a notable standard of impartiality for Irish historiography of the time. Dealing with the most virulent period of Irish party politics—the Parnellite split and its aftermath—the book showed a complete control exercised over a very wide range of original sources; it also represented the result of Lyons's introduction to Irish history, which his undergraduate studies had barely touched upon. Perhaps because of this, he later disparaged *The Irish Parliamentary Party* as prentice work: 'That book stinks of the thesis', he once told a surprised interviewer. (He may also have been thinking of this when, later still, he counselled one aspirant scholar that 'a thesis consists of

putting everything in, a book of knowing what to leave out.’) Lyons later rebelled against the aridity of the exclusively political focus adopted in his first work, which is predictable ‘political history’. But its importance for his later development lies in the subject chosen—factionalist politics at their most rancorous, and the efforts made at reconciliation, while over the whole story looms the titanic ghost of Charles Stewart Parnell.

The connection forward to his next book was obvious; for this was *The Fall of Parnell*, published in 1960. Here Lyons essayed an intensive study of one year of crisis, the sort of subject later favoured by high-political historians like Maurice Cowling, John Vincent, Alistair Cooke, and Andrew Jones. It was approached, however, with a broader focus; though Lyons had a healthy respect for the achievements of the high-politics school (and far more time for their work than Moody had), he had a strong sense that there was more to be said.

What this interpretation seems to imply is that ‘questions’, whether Irish or other, exist to tax party managers. There may well be times when this is so. But there are also moments when these questions force themselves upon political parties, and their managers and leaders, with a violence that shatters old moulds and prepares the way for new ones, as the irruption of Parnell did in this very period. Under the arc-lights . . . the Westminster scene seems warm and comfortable, even predictable. It is easy to forget that outside, where the ignorant armies clash by night upon the darkling plain, all is cold and stormy and obstinately irrational. That outer world may be, often is, deeply confused, but that does not mean that it can always be manipulated by the cosier world of Tadpole and Taper. Sometimes, on the contrary, it imposes its own logic, however harsh or crazy that may appear to be. The view from the House of Commons lobby, though valid in its own terms, is not the whole of life, and history is vaster and more complex than the sum of its human agents.¹

In *The Fall of Parnell* the psychology of the flawed titan, and the ‘play of the contingent and the unforeseen’, preoccupied Lyons as much as the agonized political to-ing and fro-ing. Most of all, as perceptively pointed out by Emmet Larkin,² this early analysis of Parnell’s *realpolitik* was fundamental to Lyons’s development as a historian—and to the cold eye he always cast on ‘heroes’. None the less, *The Fall of Parnell* is a portrait of tragedy, though it

¹ Review of J. R. Vincent and A. B. Cooke, *The Governing Passion: Cabinet Government and Party Politics in Britain 1885-6*, in *Irish Historical Studies*, xx, no. 77 (March 1976), 100-1.

² *Irish Literary Supplement*, iii, no. 1 (Spring 1984).

is a tragedy of missed chances as much as of a Samson who pulled down the temple upon himself. It was a story, and a theme, which would preoccupy Lyons again.

For the moment, he turned aside from Irish history. He had become involved in the European movement, and in 1963 he published *Internationalism in Europe 1815-1914*, a work commissioned by the Council of Europe. Again, the themes involved idealism versus *realpolitik*; again, the outcome was ultimately tragedy. The tension between theories and the untidy reality of events remained a preoccupation. His first three books were all distinguished in their field, and built him a solid reputation by the age of 40; he was elected a Member of the Royal Irish Academy as early as 1962. But his early work was really an overture compared to what was to come. If Lyons's first books established his interests, his themes were still in process of definition. On one level, he was increasingly impatient with the limitations of exclusively political history; on another, he was reconsidering his early view that biography was 'corrupting' for historians and enforced a 'monocular vision'. There is, in retrospect, a break in Lyons's scholarly development after 1963—which was paralleled by a break in his professional life.

In a sense, Lyons always exemplified the Anglo-Irish dilemma about living in England or in Ireland. He was fond of mischievously quoting one of Parnell's less celebrated sayings: 'Ireland is a pleasant place to live in between June and October'; even after his return to Ireland he bought a flat in London. But the dilemma of belonging involved a more complex dimension than this. While thoroughly Irish, he lived as easily in England as in Ireland from his youth; he spoke in the tones assumed by some in Ireland to be 'English'; he was happily at home in the urbanity of Oxford or London. (An unintentionally condescending academic acquaintance in England once referred to him as 'the most civilized Irishman I've ever met'.) The temptation of an English chair was strong, especially given Trinity's celebrated reluctance to reward her own. In 1964 Lyons was appointed Professor of Modern History at the new University of Kent at Canterbury; he subsequently became Master of Eliot College in 1969, as well as Sub-Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Public Orator of the University. His time at Kent was to be in many respects the happiest period of his life.

Lyons was not only a founding professor of history; he in a sense inaugurated the whole Faculty of Humanities by giving the first lecture ever—an occasion still remembered—and going on to help

establish a tradition of interdisciplinary studies and cultural history which affected the direction of his own research as well as the intellectual formation of his students. A course in 'Education and the idea of culture' germinated many of the ideas which emerged in his last work; and his last public lecture, at the 1983 Edinburgh Conference on higher education, took as its subject 'The idea of a university' and looked back to the preoccupations of those early years at Canterbury. 'The maintenance of a common culture remains the highest function of the university.'¹

In these years the Lyons family made some of their closest friends; they loved the Kent countryside and bought Juniper Rough, a large house beautifully situated high on the Downs. The boys received an English education, in which they both distinguished themselves—John at the Royal College of Music and Nicholas at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge (reading Modern History). Lyons's own scholarship developed in approach, with a classic biography of John Dillon and a massive history of Ireland since the famine, as well as countless occasional pieces and articles. The idea of a definitive biography of Parnell began to develop. The move to England seemed fully vindicated.

The Anglo-Irish dilemma, however, presupposes a constantly nagging doubt: 'Would you go back?' In 1973, an enormous temptation was put in Lyons's way when the Provost of Trinity announced his retirement and the wheels of electoral machinery ground into action. He was slow to agree to stand, and reiterated his intention to be a 'Scholar Provost'. But once he had agreed to come forward he was the favoured candidate; and in his customarily effortless way he was elected on 23 February 1974. The year 1974 was, indeed, his *annus mirabilis*; in that year he was also appointed the official biographer of W. B. Yeats and elected a Fellow of the British Academy. (He was already a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and went on to accumulate six honorary doctorates.)² Lyons being Lyons, on his arrival at Trinity he also beat the student rated number three in the university at squash, becoming second in the table.

The work which he had published by the time he returned to Trinity represented a subtle new departure. *John Dillon: a*

¹ 'The Idea of a University: Newman to Robbins', in N. Phillipson (ed.), *Universities, Society and the Future: a Conference Held on the 400th Anniversary of the University of Edinburgh, 1983* (Edinburgh, 1983), p. 142.

² D.Litt., University of Pennsylvania, 1975; D.Litt., University of Kent at Canterbury, Queen's University, Belfast, and University of Hull, 1978; D.Litt., New University of Ulster, 1980; LL.D., St Andrews University, 1981.

Biography appeared in 1968; massive and sombre, it has been viewed by more than one authority as his masterpiece. Dillon's uncompromising life, and his particular brand of commitment, appealed to Lyons; the most striking section of the book is its conclusion, describing a politician of honesty and integrity outpaced by the events of his time, at odds with the world around him. Though based on the great collection of Dillon family papers now in Trinity College Library, the biography ranged much more widely, following through themes already traced in the earlier Parnellite works but bringing the study up to a much later period. By a logical development, his next work dealt with Ireland from the 1840s to the 1970s, providing a vast but balanced survey; it began with a bitter Yeatsian epigraph, though ending on a restrained note of hope. *Ireland since the Famine* provided the kind of synthesis previously only offered by pietistic general histories of the old dispensation; it incorporated the teachings of the revisionist school firmly in the ascendant by 1971, the date of its publication. This ensured the book a place as the foundation of school and university courses in Ireland; but its sales in the United States were correspondingly limited, probably because of Lyons's refusal to abandon complexity in favour of linear development, and his inability to provide simple and reassuring answers. *Ireland since the Famine* was not easily written, and at times gave signs of the strain: not only brought about by the effort to condense and combine, but also a result of the brutal pointlessness of so much of the story.

It is likely that many of the reflections prompted by writing *Ireland since the Famine* pervaded the composition of the biography of Parnell which followed it in 1977. Both books present a more complex development of Irish history than allowed for in the traditional view of heroes, villains, and an apostolic succession of national liberators. In Ireland, Irish history is of devouring interest to the general audience, and Lyons's views were often solicited; he was by now recognized as the foremost Irish historian of his day. But an interviewer who asked where he placed Parnell in 'the Irish pantheon' was told, courteously but firmly, 'I hate the whole idea of pantheons, quite honestly.' This approach was reflected throughout *Parnell*, sometimes to an extent that surprised even Lyons himself. Coming to the end, he wrote privately to a friend: 'So much of my comment appears extremely critical of the great man. What a curious end to the journey!' Later he added that he had come to see Parnell's shortcomings as 'almost as immense as his strengths'. For all his tremendous

power, Lyons's *Parnell* was a man who made his own fate; the *Samson Agonistes* of the earlier studies was now drawn with a sharper pen. Moreover, in Lyons's view control had begun to slip from Parnell's hands early on, long before the fatal divorce case; and the disingenuousness and *realpolitik* so evident in the negotiations of 1890-1 were fundamental to his weakness as well as his strength. Revisionism had claimed one of its most prominent victims.

Parnell won the Heinemann Award from the Royal Society of Literature, as well as bringing tremendous public acclaim. But Lyons subjected his own work to stringent scrutiny, and it was a disappointment to him that few critics read into his study the equivocal judgements so carefully arrived at. He was always his own hardest critic, and became positively annoyed at what he privately called the 'rough and ready goodwill' of most reviewing; he expected, and preferred, the kind of trenchant critique at which he himself excelled. He relished a chance of real criticism even when he had to administer it himself; at his initial meeting with a representative of Oxford University Press to discuss the Yeats project, he surprised his companion by subjecting the corpus of his own work to relentlessly detailed criticism. With the increasing eminence of his public position, he missed the cut and thrust of intellectual debate; in this as in other ways, his time as Provost of Trinity was a disappointment.

But there were more substantial reasons for what he conceived to be the over-respectful handling his books received; for by now he had achieved a style and a tone which were both unmistakable and extremely distinguished. With comprehensiveness, pace, and lucidity he combined a complete mastery of diverse material. This was what he had learned in the Moody stable. But by the time of *Parnell* (if not consistently evident in that work) Lyons's writing had reached a level of deftness, fluency, and even felinity which is by no means characteristic of most modern Irish historians, however impeccable their scholarship. (This may have developed with his study of the great critics in his days at Kent—notably Matthew Arnold, a constant presence in much of his later work.) The priorities of the Moody school stayed with him—well expressed in a review of a best-selling amateur history which, Lyons wrote,

lacks that lurking, nagging uneasiness—which is the hallmark of the true historian—that, however prolific his sources, there are still problems to be solved and much that remains untold. This is what one

means, presumably, by the necessary humility of the scholar. I do not, I confess, see very much of that humility here.¹

That kind of intellectual humility never left him, and he continued to refine and re-think his own conclusions. A few years after the publication of *Ireland since the Famine* a plain-spoken Trinity friend taxed him that, for all its impartiality, the book was written from a bias of 'sentimental nationalism'. Lyons replied at once: 'Yes; but you must remember I was living in England then.' Few others would have discerned such a tendency in the book. But perhaps this kind of reconsideration was already at work when he prepared the Ford Lectures delivered at Oxford in 1978 and published the following year as *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890-1939*.

The invitation from Oxford, where he had many friends, pleased Lyons greatly; he was affectionately amused when, in answer to his request that he might lecture on Irish rather than British history, the university gently intimated that they perceived little difference. Arising from his preliminary work on Yeats, Lyons chose to examine the conflicting cultures trapped in the 'little room' of Ireland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, creating the mentality behind the 'fanatic heart'. This produced, in the concluding words of the book,

an anarchy in the mind and in the heart, an anarchy which forbade not just unity of territories but also 'unity of being', an anarchy that sprang from the collision within a small and intimate island of seemingly irreconcilable cultures, unable to live together, or to live apart, caught inextricably in the web of their tragic history.

The arguments and illustrations that led to this conclusion were complex, sharp, and beautifully constructed; the lectures were (a rare occurrence) as much of a pleasure to hear as to read, and constituted a ringing triumph. This was compounded by their success as a book; *Culture and Anarchy* went on to win both the Ewart-Biggs Memorial Prize and the Wolfson Award in 1980. The resonance of this effect was more than Lyons expected, and once again he was worried by it. (A characteristic private comment: 'Although I'm quite fond of that little book, it was never designed to bear the weight that appears to be being put on it.') But it struck a chord with a large readership, at least partly because the arguments of the book questioned many of the pieties that had made contemporary Ireland what it was—north as well as south.

While the main preoccupation of the lectures concerned Irish

¹ Review of Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, in *Irish Historical Studies*, xiv, no. 53 (March 1964), 78.

culture and resurgent nationalism in the revolutionary period, with a special concentration on the position of intellectuals caught in the maelstrom, some searching attention was directed towards the Ulster dilemma; and outside the world of scholarship Lyons was also becoming involved in an effort to grapple with the desperate state of Northern Ireland in the 1970s, reflected by his chairmanship of the British-Irish Association and his association with the Ewart-Biggs Trust. 'The real revisionist historians', he remarked with grim humour when receiving the Wolfson Prize, 'are the gunmen.' This helps account for the bleak tone which had entered his historical analysis as well as his public comments by this time; but an additional pressure was building up in the ramifying responsibilities and constant strain of his tenure as Provost of Trinity.

In 1974 the Provostship still carried the aura and some of the trappings of Trinity's peculiar and exclusive past: the Lyonses moved into the great Georgian mansion in the centre of Dublin; Lyons joined the synod of the Church of Ireland. But the fact that he was the first Provost who had been elected on a general franchise of all the staff (not just the Fellows) was an indication of a new dispensation. Trinity had doubled in size since Lyons had left it (and had five times as many students as in his undergraduate days). Its complexion was notably different, with the input of overseas students (especially English) down to a bare minimum. The undergraduate population was now overwhelmingly Irish (even Dublin-based) and the structure of authority both more flexible and more responsive than in the old days. Lyons took to it wholeheartedly. His Provostship was remarkable for its high public profile, and for the prominent part he played in the life of Dublin (as opposed to that of Trinity, often in the past a very different thing). His gift for handling a public occasion was much in evidence in chairing Trinity feasts like the Foundation Scholars' Dinner, presiding over the retirement of a colleague, or hosting the memorable party for Theo Moody's *Festschrift*.¹ But he was also to be found attending the 1977 All-Ireland Gaelic Football Final at Croke Park, as a guest of the Gaelic Athletic Association, and entertaining members of the winning Dublin team at the Provost's House. His friendship with the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, the late Dermot Ryan, developed from this time and lasted until Lyons's death. Under the Lyons regime (and due as much to Jennifer Lyons's charm as to her husband's position) the Provost's House became a focus of

¹ Jointly edited by Lyons: *Ireland under the Union*, op. cit. above.

entertainment and of college life; a large party or a quick meal *en famille* with the Lyonses was equally memorable and each occasion would be handled with the same panache. One great occasion in 1977 involved entertaining a particular hero of Lyons's, Mstislav Rostropovich—an evening of unparalleled success despite the fact that the maestro turned out to be observing the Russian Lent. ('I felt like Metternich in the revolutionary year of 1848,' Lyons remarked afterwards, 'who had allowed for everything but a liberal Pope.') Trinity was extremely proud of its Provost; both the Lyonses were admired as well as loved. Lyons's slight formality and reticence never detracted from his charm, and his relationship with the college staff and involvement in college life was a marked contrast to many of his predecessors; he was a far more familiar figure than most of them.

At the same time, he had definite ideas about the direction the college should take, and not all of them were popular. Under his Provostship Trinity won the Freiherr vom Stein Foundation's European Prize for preservation of historic monuments, and in accepting it Lyons took the opportunity to emphasize that 'what we have here in Trinity is part of the national heritage and not some kind of alien excrescence' (a point that needed making in a country where great architecture has sometimes been conveniently identified merely as evidence of cultural oppression). More importantly, Lyons wanted to see the number of Northern Ireland undergraduates increased to 25 per cent, believing that Trinity should be an all-Ireland institution; and he regretted the falling-off in foreign students. He was ready—more ready than many of his colleagues—for experiments in co-operation with other institutions for third-level education in Dublin. While not a radical, his experience at Kent had given him a robust approach to the necessities imposed by modern mores. (A return to the ivory tower, he later pointed out, was 'immensely attractive to academics . . . but a voluntary return to the chastity and poverty which this would entail seems impracticable.') And from the very beginning of his tenure, he was plunged into a continuing crisis over the government's aggressive plans concerning the relations between the National University and Trinity. The threat of an enforced 'merger', which neither side wanted, was receding; but the unexpected removal of the veterinary science faculty from Trinity indicated that a high-handed approach could still be expected. As well as threats from outside, Trinity's internal finances were very straitened, and resources were badly needed;

¹ 'The Idea of a University' (op. cit. above), p. 141.

Lyons spearheaded the College Appeal for funds, indefatigably touring the United States and setting the appeal well on its road to raising three million pounds. But all this involved a heavy demand on his time, and helped exacerbate difficulties within the college.

Some of these were expressed in the form of student disruptions: mild by comparison with the outbreaks in British and American universities a decade earlier, but all the more embittering because they concerned internal administrative matters. There were also storms in tea-cups like the personal attack launched by a self-regarding younger colleague who published an article in the *Trinity Gazette* ostensibly criticizing the college 'power structure' but really accusing Lyons of backing down on a commitment to 'open government'. The Provost was pictured as trapped in a remote office, unable to combat 'the administration'. But the rancorous expression of this complaint was oddly reminiscent of the kind of attitudes which Lyons himself had explored so resonantly in *Culture and Anarchy*: 'More than a whiff of the Big House has clung to the style of the present dispensation.' The article raised a storm of objections, and hardly needed noticing; but it indicated the difficulties beneath the surface.

Ironically, the basic point of the *Gazette* article was one with which Lyons might not have disagreed: it is increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for a practising scholar to head an academic institution. But his own difficulties were compounded by the attitudes which lay behind the way such criticism was expressed. Lyons found it increasingly hard to stifle his impatience at the time-wasting and backbiting of the administrative world; he was equally critical of complacency, ignorance, and comfortable prejudice wherever he encountered it in Irish life. He hated, on the one hand, official self-importance and on the other, what he called 'the backslapping brigade'. Despite the apparent glamour and success of his tenure as Provost, the life of Yeats's 'smiling public man' was not for him; the stress of combining an almost impossible administrative load, the punishing round of fund-raising, and the weight of scholarly activity which he was accustomed to sustain, became almost unbearable. In 1978 his health nearly gave way under the strain.

Most of all, by 1980, after six years of being Provost, it had become impossible to reconcile the claims of college government with those of the massive Yeats biography. He had been involved with the project since October 1973; by now it was clear that it would never be written while he remained Provost. 'It came down in the end to a choice between Trinity and Yeats', he wrote to

a friend, 'and in such a case there really was no choice.' This makes an agonizingly difficult decision sound deceptively simple. It was not a dilemma which Lyons had anticipated. He was always an extremely effective organizer of his time, and a master at 'pacing himself'. He had come to believe that the worlds of administration and scholarship could be combined—though earlier in his career, balancing the choice between a vice-chancellorship and straight scholarship, he had thought, 'I'd prefer sweeping the streets to being a vice-chancellor.' He had continued to believe, unlike many of his colleagues, that the claims of political engagement and history-writing did not mix: proficiency in one field negated proficiency in the other. He was never, for instance, a ready signatory of petitions. But his experience at Kent had led him to believe that his master-work on Yeats could be written from the Provost's House at Trinity; the recognition that this was not so came slowly but inexorably.

It was a realization brought home all the more acutely because Lyons had a writer's temperament. He worried deeply about each book he wrote, often firmly believing that it would or could never be finished. Drafting, cutting, and polishing were matters of agonized commitment. He had no patience with colleagues in the historiographical world who worked from 'the philosopher's stone which turneth all to lead', writing English 'as if it were a dead language'. The Yeats task had assumed tremendous proportions in his mind; his conception of the life to be written was much more than simply biography. 'In such a case there really was no choice'; but that does not mean that the choice was easily made.

In October 1980 he announced his decision to retire early from the Provostship, and gave up office the following year, at the age of 56, three years before the expiry of his ten-year term. Characteristically, after accepting a parting gift he made over the balance of the sum subscribed to inaugurate a new fund for assisting post-graduate students to travel. In a pithy speech of farewell he remarked that 'as Provost I might have been criticised for not having made more enemies; but at least I kept my friends'. This was patently true in what were, incredibly, to be the last three years of his life.

Lyons now occupied a Research Chair at Trinity, as a professor of history with no prescribed duties, for the special purpose of writing the life of Yeats. Here he remained, despite blandishments like the offer of three headships of Oxford colleges (four if one counts a repeated solicitation). 'Trinity', he remarked, 'exerts a kind of loyalty'; but so did Yeats. Work began to move ahead,

with Lyons's accustomed energy and pace. He was handling a subject which had, in a sense, been waiting for him all his life. In *Culture and Anarchy*, arguably his best though his shortest book, he had shown his flair for cultural and intellectual history; he conceived the life of Yeats as extending this approach into a profile of the man and his times, written on the grand scale. The supreme attraction lay in studying a man 'whom neither Irish patriotic chauvinism nor English cultural imperialism can be permitted to annex . . . the supreme example in our history of a man who stands between two cultures, English and Irish'.¹

Lyons's unparalleled qualifications for such a task were by now obvious; but there remained the fact that the personality who represented these two cultures was by now accepted as one of the greatest figures of modern literature, the subject of a vast and ramifying intellectual industry. Reactions among literary academics to the prospect of a 'historical' biography were not unmixed. For himself, Lyons was in no doubt about what the historian could do; as he wrote to the publishers, his intention was to produce 'the biography *both* of the man in society *and* of the evolving poet'. He did not intend to analyse questions of comparison and variation between texts, or pretend to specialist knowledge: 'This would very quickly be exposed as phoney posturing of the worst sort'. But he had always loved and read widely in English and American literature (he had, for instance, a particular regard for the work of Saul Bellow); earlier in his career he had written with remarkable perception about Anglo-Irish fiction (including a notable essay on Somerville and Ross). For all his disclaimers, he was determined to master all the necessary secondary material of Yeatsian criticism—which by 1976 numbered seven thousand items in the standard bibliography. And he embarked on the task with his accustomed thoroughness as well as his accustomed flair.

This rapidly brought him into the American orbit, since much of the most distinguished Yeatsian scholarship, as well as the most important archive collections outside the family papers, were located across the Atlantic. John and Nicholas had left home; the Lyonses were now based in two easily run flats in London and Dublin; and there were no obstacles to travel. They spent two lengthy periods and innumerable short visits in the United States; Yeats brought them a whole new circle of friends and admirers in America as well as in Britain and Sligo. Initial

¹ Address to the Yeats Summer School, Sligo, 13 August 1978.

doubts among the literary community did not last long, as one Yeatsian scholar later recalled:

All such fears were quickly dispelled when Lyons began to lecture and to publish on Yeats. It was immediately evident that here was a superb scholar who had mastered the methodology of a discipline not his own, and who had immersed himself in both the primary and secondary materials to such a degree that we could turn to him, as he had initially turned to us, for opinions and advice. At the time of his death, no one had any thought but that the biography would be a masterpiece, the equal of anything he had done, a cornerstone of Yeats studies for the remainder of this century and beyond.¹

He worked through manuscripts in twenty libraries, as well as the great family collection at Dalkey, accumulating a vast archive of original and unpublished material; he even tracked down the surviving correspondence between Maud Gonne and Yeats. In many ways, the direction of his whole working career centred on to the point when he sat down at his desk in the summer of 1983 to begin writing. There is a characteristic note at the head of the manuscript: 'Begun, 1 June 1983 at 38, Trinity College Dublin on a wet, cold, dark, Irish summer's day.'

But he had written only a hundred-odd pages in longhand when, in mid-August, he collapsed from an attack which was not at first diagnosed as acute pancreatitis. He was rushed to the Adelaide Hospital, which he was not to leave again; and where he was devotedly attended by a 'guard of honour' of ex-Trinity medics. During his illness he remarked ruefully to his wife that Yeats's handwriting kept passing before his eyes; but symbolically, the last writing he himself did was to sign his nomination papers on 6 September for the Chancellorship of Queen's University, Belfast. He would have been the first southerner to hold the post, and his nomination was unopposed on 15 September. But this was probably the last news which he was able to take in: he died, after a great struggle, on the 21st. His ashes are buried in a quiet corner of Trinity, by the College Chapel wall.

Lyons epitomized the qualities praised by Yeats in *Cool Park 1929*, which was read at his funeral. He possessed a meditative spirit, capable of impetuosity, and through strenuous effort he achieved intellectual lucidity and independence of thought: 'Pride established in humility.' The loss to his friends was irreparable; the suddenness of his going remained for long nearly

¹ 'Vale: F. S. L. Lyons', in Richard Finneran (ed.), *Yeats: an Annual of Critical and Textual Studies*, ii (Ithaca, 1984), 327.

incomprehensible. But even with that complex, restrained, compelling presence gone, the works remain which established him as one of the foremost historians in a great succession. Lyons follows in a remarkable Anglo-Irish tradition; and in his relentless impartiality, his closely scrutinized style, and perhaps most of all an increasingly saturnine quality, his work most closely resembles that of Lecky. But he once compared Moody to Acton; and there was a parallel here for himself as well, since he too died with his great conception unfulfilled. The weight of achievement which lay behind that conception will give posterity as well as his friends and contemporaries much to be grateful for; as well as an example of a life that was integrated, dedicated, and quietly committed from beginning to end.

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