William Joseph Walsh 1841-1921

Born in Dublin, William Walsh studied at the Catholic University Dublin (now UCD) and later at St Patrick’s College Maynooth, becoming President of the college in 1885. His was a leading voice in Irish public life on issues of land reform, home rule and education. His campaign for university education for catholics was influential in the establishment in 1908 of the National University of Ireland. In that year, he was elected first Chancellor of NUI and played a major role in its early development.

This lecture has been arranged by NUI as part of the Decade of Centenaries programme.
Opening Remarks

I am delighted to welcome you tonight to this lecture on my predecessor, Archbishop William Walsh, the first Chancellor of the National University of Ireland. In this Decade of Centenaries, NUI considered it appropriate to focus on a remarkable figure not merely for his importance to the early development of the University but as a figure of major influence in the history of the Irish state.

William Walsh was a leading voice in Irish public affairs, with a formidable and diverse range of interests and abilities. Over the course of the evening, we can expect that the social, political and educational issues of interest to William Walsh will be explored, as will the impact of his life and legacy in home rule, land reform, and education.

It is a great pleasure to welcome our honoured speakers this evening. Diarmuid Martin was appointed Archbishop of Dublin in 2004, 119 years after the appointment of William Walsh to the same position. I am very pleased that Professor Michael Laffan will respond, and we are grateful to both speakers for participating in this event.

Finally, it is a great pleasure to welcome all our guests to this particularly special venue. We are very grateful to UCD for giving us access to Newman House for this lecture on William Walsh, who himself passed through its doors as a student.

I look forward to what promises to be a great discussion tonight on this key and often-controversial figure.

Dr Maurice Manning
Chancellor
From the eve of the first Home Rule crisis to the final months of the War of Independence, William Walsh’s episcopacy spanned a critical period in the evolution of modern Ireland (1885-1921). Throughout those decades, the archbishop played a key role in the life of Ireland and the birth of the new nation, to the extent that, while the Anglo-Irish war raged on, his coffin was draped in the tricolour of the republic. Yet of all of his endeavours, the *Irish Independent* identified the establishment of the National University as the ‘crown of his life’s work’.¹


William Joseph Walsh was born in Dublin in January 1841. He undertook third-level studies at the Catholic University of Ireland under John Henry Newman, and continued his education at St. Patrick’s College Maynooth in the field of clerical studies. He would later become Professor of Moral and Dogmatic Theology (1867-78), Vice-President (1878) and President (1881) of St. Patrick’s College. He was ordained in 1866, and appointed Archbishop of Dublin in 1885.

Archbishop Walsh was possessed of great energy and a formidable intellect. The breadth of his interests and abilities may be gauged by the diverse subjects of his publications, ranging from Catholic education and Gregorian music to bimetallism. He lived in a period of intense political ferment, and took an active part in public affairs of a political, social, and educational nature.

William Walsh’s role in political affairs was shaped by his sympathies for

¹ *Irish Independent*, 9 April 1921.

A meeting of Irish bishops in 1895 planned to raise the motion to condemn cycling by members of the clergy. Archbishop Walsh cycled to the meeting.
constitutional nationalism and open support for Home Rule. He was a keen proponent of agrarian reform, and a passionate advocate for the rights of tenant farmers, offering practical assistance and exerting political influence on land issues and campaigns. His relationship with constitutional nationalism changed over time. He initially supported prominent Irish Nationalist Charles Stewart Parnell, and assisted him in exposing Richard Pigott’s incriminating letters as forgeries. Although he at first refused to condemn Parnell following the outbreak of the O’Shea-Parnell divorce crisis, he was later heavily critical of his leadership and withdrew support from the Irish Parliamentary Party.

In addition to his interest in politics, Archbishop Walsh was passionate about education. He was a lecturer and a scholar, and held a position in both the Senate of the Royal University of Ireland and in the Commission of National Education. As Archbishop of Dublin, he established 70 new schools and guaranteed state funding for two new Catholic teacher training colleges. Throughout his career, he fought for radical change in Irish university education. He was elected the first Chancellor of the newly established National University of Ireland in 1908, guiding the NUI through its difficult early years. His time in office was shaped by both the challenging nature of Irish society and the turbulent dynamic within the newly established federal university.

He held the position of Chancellor until his death in office in April 1921.

Letter from John Henry Newman to William Walsh, 1 December 1880

‘Most truly yours
John H Card. Newman

P.S. What has struck me at once, which though accidental & secondary, is a real merit, (& I hope not an impertinence in an old man to notice) is that your Latinity is very good’
‘So little was stated in the authorized account of the Senate’s proceedings, and so much in the unauthorized account, that people did not really understand exactly where they were. We are a very suspicious people, perhaps more so than any other populace in Europe, and the popular tendency is to make things out to be worse than they are.’

Letter from Douglas Hyde to Archbishop Walsh, 10 May 1910

‘Finally I would request Your Grace to convey to the Episcopal Committee our thanks for the straight-forward and valuable testimony they bear at this moment of trial, to the constitutional character of the Irish movement, and the absence of crime attending the present struggle for the national right.’

Letter from Charles Stewart Parnell to Archbishop Walsh, 4 June 1887
Letter from Patrick Pearse to Archbishop Walsh,
15 May 1910

My dear Lord Archbishop,
I send for your private information a copy of the letter I have sent to the Bishops concerned relative to our conversation and the valuable advice you so kindly gave me. I trust your health is improving and that with God’s Grace you will soon be restored to health.

Letter from General Maxwell to Archbishop Walsh,
6 May 1916
Letter from Mabel FitzGerald, the mother of future NUI Chancellor Garret FitzGerald, to the then Chancellor Archbishop Walsh, 23 May 1916.

Note from the Aeolian Musical Society asking Archbishop Walsh if Committee members can visit him to discuss their choral programme for the coming year, 15 June 1920.
‘Your Lordship, ten thousand exiles, assembled in Glasgow, beg your intersession to save our brothers in Mountjoy, without surrendering.’

Telegram from Glasgow, around December 1920.

Letter from UCD Students’ Representative Council, 9 December 1920, expressing gratitude to Archbishop Walsh for his ‘efforts to secure the liberation and reprieve of our late fellow-student, Kevin Barry’
Archbishop Diarmuid Martin

Archbishop Diarmuid Martin attended Oblate School, Inchicore, De La Salle School, Ballyfermot, and Marian College, Ballsbridge. He studied philosophy at University College Dublin and theology at the Dublin Diocesan Seminary. He was ordained priest in 1969 and later pursued higher studies in moral theology at the Pontifical University of St Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum) in Rome. In 1973-74 he was Curate at the Parish of St Brigid in Cabinteely and in 1975 was responsible for the pastoral care of Dublin pilgrims in Rome during the Holy Year. He entered the service of the Holy See in 1976 in the Pontifical Council for the Family. He was appointed the Under Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in 1986, becoming the Council Secretary in 1994. In 1998 he was appointed Titular Bishop of Glendalough and received the Episcopal ordination at the hands of Pope John Paul II in St Peter’s Basilica in 1999.

During his service at the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Archbishop Martin represented the Holy See at the major United Nations Conferences on social questions in the 1990’s. He also participated in activities of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, especially on the theme of international debt and poverty reduction.

In 2001 he was appointed Archbishop and Apostolic Nuncio and undertook responsibilities as Permanent Observer of the Holy See in Geneva, at the United Nations Office and Specialised Agencies and at the World Trade Organisation. He was appointed Coadjutor Archbishop of Dublin in 2003 and succeeded Cardinal Desmond Connell as Archbishop of Dublin in 2004.

Professor Michael Laffan

Michael Laffan studied in Gonzaga College, University College Dublin, Trinity Hall Cambridge, and the Institute for European History in Mainz. He was awarded a Cambridge PhD for a dissertation on international relations in the 1920s. He lectured briefly in the University of East Anglia, Norwich before taking up what proved to be a long-term post in UCD. He taught there for over three decades, served in various positions, including that of head of the School of History, and retired in 2010. From 2010-12 he was president of the Irish Historical Society, and he is now an emeritus professor in UCD. He has lectured widely in Ireland and across the globe.

He has published extensively on Twentieth Century Irish History. His writings include The Partition of Ireland 1911-1925 (Dublin, 1983), The Resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin Party, 1916-23 (Cambridge, 1999), and Judging W. T. Cosgrave (Dublin, 2014). He has also edited The Burden of German History, 1919-1945 (London, 1988). He hopes to return to his research on Irish political funerals.