

Medical History

Anthony Traill (1838-1914), the first Provost to confer degrees on Women Graduates

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Accepted: 11th May 2015

Provenance: internally peer-reviewed

ABSTRACT

Anthony Traill was born into a Scotch-Irish family at Ballylough House near Bushmills in county Antrim in November 1838. At the age of twenty he entered Trinity College Dublin to study engineering, but he was a professional student who passed through all the faculties and took legal and medical degrees in 1864-1870. He applied his knowledge of physics when advising his brother William who was building the Portrush-Bushmills electric railway. Though he took time off to indulge his athletic abilities, he steeped himself in College affairs and became Provost in March 1904, a post he held until his death in October 1914. His outstanding contribution whilst holding that post was to welcome women with university training into graduation.

ACADEMIC, ENTREPRENEUR AND POLITICIAN

Anthony Traill would have been called a professional student in my youth. He glided through the faculties: born on the 1st of November in 1838, at Ballylough House, two miles south of Bushmills in county Antrim, he entered Trinity College Dublin to study Engineering, graduated in Mathematics and Experimental Science with the Science Scholarship, then proceeded MA in 1864 and LL.D. in 1865.¹ Even after becoming a Fellow of the College he took the degree of Master of Surgery in 1869, and that of Doctor of Medicine in December 1870, but there is little evidence that he ever practised the healing art.

Traill's knowledge of Physics, not surprisingly, was valuable to his brother William Acheson Traill (1844-1934) who conceived, designed and built the Giant's Causeway, Portrush, and Bush Valley Railway & Tramway Company in 1883. Anthony Traill was its first chairman, and it remained in operation until 1947. At the Berlin Trade Fair in 1879, and on a short (1½ mile) conversion of an existing line in Lichterfelde near Berlin in 1881, Siemens had demonstrated the world's first railway electrification system. This led the Traills to invite the British branch of the company, Siemens Brothers of London, to electrify the new line they planned to build from Portrush to Bushmills, a distance of approximately 7 miles. Opened in early 1883, this was the first long electric railway in the world, the first to be supplied with electric current through a third rail, and the first to be powered by hydroelectricity. This was provided by a generating station

built at Walkmill Falls, near Bushmills. The Giant's Causeway extension of the track, completed in 1887, was engineered by Alfred Price (1837-1934), son of James Price the eminent Irish civil engineer.²



Fig 1. Portrait of Anthony Traill, by J. Sydney R Rowley, oil on canvas, 141 x 111 cm, Trinity College Dublin Art Collections. Reproduced by kind permission from the Board of The University of Dublin, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland.

Institutional and national politics soon became Traill's chief occupation (in 1884 he was appointed High Sheriff of Antrim, and in April 1901 Commissioner of National Education in Ireland)³, yet he found time to indulge his interest and his

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immense physical energy in athletics, and he captained the Trinity College Dublin cricket eleven for eleven years and was College racquets champion for fourteen seasons. Though he did not cut an academic figure, he was an Assistant in the Department of Natural Philosophy from 1884 to 1899.¹



Fig 2. Portrait of Sir William Siemens; reproduced from the website http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wilhelm_Siemens.jpg under Public Domain licence.

From 1865, when he became a Junior Fellow in Trinity College, Anthony Traill worked successfully in the interests of the College, and in 1899 his abilities and dedication were recognised when he was promoted Senior Fellow on the resignation of Thomas Dunbar Ingram (1826-1901). But, whilst still a Junior Fellow, Traill was not averse to self-promotion. In 1880 the Provost of Trinity College, Humphrey Lloyd, was 80 years old and showed signs of deterioration. And there was no precedent for retirement! Fears of a Liberal administration caused alarm and despondency, and those fears were realised when the Conservatives lost an election. Traill came forward with an audacious solution to the problem in Trinity College: he proposed to two Conservative Members of Parliament that he would hand over his private income of £2,000 per annum to pay a pension to Lloyd if the Conservatives, in the last throes of office, were to appoint him as Provost. At the time there were 25 Fellows senior to Traill, whose sole publication was a political speech. His machinations came too late, for Gladstone took office in April

1880, Lloyd lingered into 1881, and Gladstone appointed as Lloyd's successor John Hewitt Jellett (1817-1888), the choice of the Senior Fellows.¹

Jellett was succeeded as Provost by George Salmon (1819-1904) and, when Salmon died five years after, Traill was promoted Senior Fellow, a bevy of names came up for consideration for the vacant Provostship, among them John Pentland Mahaffy (1839-1919) and Robert Yelverton Tyrrell (1844-1914). On the 22nd of March 1904 Arthur Balfour, the Prime Minister, announced that his choice was Anthony Traill.



Fig 3. Portrait of John Pentland Mahaffy, by Walter Osborne, oil on canvas, 80 x 65 cm, Trinity College Dublin Art Collections. Reproduced by kind permission from the Board of The University of Dublin, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland.

PROVOST OF TRINITY COLLEGE, DUBLIN

Traill's most notable achievement was welcoming women with university training and qualification into graduation. He argued that these women, who were as well educated as any male Dublin BA, should be admitted as candidate Bachelors and allowed to graduate without further examination. The Board of Trinity College passed a resolution in 1903 that "the time had come to admit women to teaching and degrees of Trinity College". A few claimed their degrees in December 1904. But what attracted Irish women also attracted English women and by December 1907, when the concession terminated, 720 'mailboat degrees' had been added to the Trinity College roll. 'Selling degrees to strangers' met with ridicule, but Traill 'simply ignored the barbs and accepted the fees', income always being welcome.¹ The new female undergraduates outnumbered the males – and outshone them, too.

Constant agitation to secure academic opportunities for Irish Catholics in the University of Dublin met with organised opposition from the authorities and students of Trinity College – epitomised in Traill's paper 'Hands off Trinity' published in the journal *Nineteenth Century* in March 1899.

⁴ The Robertson Commission of 1901-3 recommended reconstruction of the Royal University as a teaching body with an additional College in Dublin associated with the Queen's Colleges in Belfast, Cork and Galway, and the Fry Commission of 1906-7 recommended the establishment of a College in Dublin acceptable to Catholics, but its members were divided as to whether it should be included in the University of Dublin or not.

That Catholic opinion was divided can be traced back to the time of Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890) who, many years earlier, intimated to Aubrey de Vere (1814-1902):

"If we fail at present to create a Catholic University, there remains another great benefit which we may confer on Ireland. We can in that case fall back upon a second college in the Dublin University, one on as dignified a scale as Trinity College and in all respects its equal; one doing for Catholics what Trinity College does for Protestants. Such a college would tide over the bad time, and eventually develop into a Catholic University."⁵

'Hands off Trinity' became the rallying cry of the opposition to the proposal. But soon, in 1907, James Bryce (1838-1922) was replaced as Chief Secretary for Ireland by Augustine Birrell (1850-1933), and Birrell and the Royal Commission eventually succeeded in persuading the Government in London to establish the National University of Ireland (leaving out the unblest Trinity) in 1908.

Though Kirkpatrick dedicated, with permission, his *History of the Medical Teaching in Trinity College Dublin and the School of Physic in Ireland* to Anthony Traill in 1912, that is the sole mention of his name, which appears in neither the text nor the index.⁶

In 1914 Traill was forced by illness to cease active involvement in the affairs of Trinity College, and was confined to his bed for several months before dying, still in office and aged almost 76 years, in the Provost's House.² His successor as Provost was John Pentland Mahaffy, who was less than four months younger than Traill. Upon hearing that Traill was ill, Mahaffy was said to have remarked, "Nothing trivial, I hope?"⁷

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