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INTRODUCTION

BECKETT PAPERS

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J.C. Beckett Papers (D4126)

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Summary

The papers of the late Professor James Camlin Beckett comprise c.130 volumes and c.400 documents including; diaries, pocket books and other journals, 1930-1993; correspondence, 1927-1988; notes, working papers and drafts relating to Beckett's major publications and broadcasts, c.1958-1987; folders of notes appertaining to specific historical compositions (inc. poetry, radio plays etc.), c.1929-c.1960; and documents concerning projects in which Beckett was involved.



Background

Beckett was one of the most important Irish historians of this century. Along with Theo. Moody, Robin Dudley Edwards and others, he was instrumental in advocating a more objective scientific approach to the study of Ireland's past and the lifting of scholarship above and beyond contemporary political concerns.



Education and Academic Career

Beckett was educated at Royal Belfast Academical Institution. In 1930 with a Queen's Entrance and a Porter Scholarship from Inst. he went up to Queen's University Belfast with the intention of reading for a degree in English. It was Irish history's good fortune, however, that he swiftly changed his mind and channeled his energies to the study of Modern history in the Honours School of James Eadie Todd, graduating in 1934 with first class honours.

During the next decade he worked as a teacher of History, English and Latin at Belfast Royal Academy whilst carrying out research for his MA degree. After the war he was appointed to a lectureship in Irish History at QUB and his first book (based on a revised version of his MA thesis), *Protestant Dissent in Ireland, 1678-1780*, was published by Faber & Faber in 1948. Throughout the 1950s Beckett produced a steady stream of articles and another book, *A Short History of Ireland* (1952), as well as collaborating with Moody on an impressive two volume history of Queen's University. In recognition of these achievements, Queen's created a personal (later to become official) chair in Irish History for Beckett in 1958.



The Making of Modern Ireland

Originally a scholar of the eighteenth century, Beckett gradually broadened his field of research to encompass the more turbulent 1600s, work which in many respects culminated with the publication of his magnum opus, *The Making of Modern Ireland*, in 1966. This highly lucid and deceptively simple book, which remains a staple of student reading lists to this day, brought Beckett widespread acclaim, and is, as one eminent historian commented, 'the safest and fairest guide through the Irish political jungle, partisan only in its wish to reach well'. Broadcasting, lectures and visiting professorships overseas followed, and honorary doctorates were conferred on him by Queen's, the University of Ulster and the National University of Ireland.



Active Retirement

In 1975 Beckett took early retirement from Queen's. Despite this, however, his scholarly output was maintained with the publication of numerous essays, articles, and books such as *The Anglo-Irish Tradition* (1976) and his biography of James Butler 1st Duke of Ormond, *The Cavalier Duke* (1988). Retirement, however, did give Beckett the time to develop his other interests such as travel and he became a frequent visitor to Norway, a country whose culture interested him greatly, and where he made a great many friends. A highly religious man, Church of Ireland matters also played a key role in Beckett's life, and he took a keen interest in wider church affairs.

Beckett died in February 1996, leaving behind him an influential body of work and an invaluable legacy to the realms of Irish historical scholarship. In the words of his friend and fellow historian Dr A.T.Q. Stewart, 'Beckett brought to Irish historical research a mind which was methodical, incisive, analytical and just, undeflected by personal or tribal prejudice'.



The Papers: Diaries of an Academic

Among his surviving papers in PRONI, Beckett's copious diaries are of particular import, as they shed much light on the thought processes, ideas and views of a man who shaped the writing of Irish history, yet who remained a curiously withdrawn figure. Through them can be traced the evolution of the major themes of Beckett's writings, such as the contribution of the Anglo-Irish in both the emergence of modern Ireland and of modern literature, the Dissenting tradition in Irish culture and the relevance of figures such as Dean Swift and the 'Cavalier' 1st Duke of Ormond. In tandem with this one can also witness the development of a more scientific method to the writing of the history of Ireland by one of its foremost exponents. Above all, the diaries of Professor Beckett allow us to observe the traumatic events of this century, such as World War II and the onset of violence in Northern Ireland through the eyes of a man with a truly unbiased breadth of vision and an intensely human perspective.

