

Coffey, Denis Joseph

by Donal McCartney

Coffey, Denis Joseph (1865–1945), academic, president of UCD, was born 21 January 1865 in Tralee, Co. Kerry, son of John Coffey, shopkeeper, and Mary Coffey (née McMahan). He was educated by the Christian Brothers and at Holy Cross, Tralee, before entering the Catholic University school of medicine in Cecilia St., Dublin, and graduating in the RUI in 1888. The following year he was awarded the RUI's studentship in biology and pursued postgraduate studies in Madrid, Louvain, Marburg, and Leipzig. Appointed lecturer in physiology in the Catholic University school of medicine in 1893, he became professor in 1897 and registrar in 1905, which, in effect, made him the administrative head of the medical school. Because of his devotion to teaching and to the needs of the students he was known as the 'students' professor'. Apart from medical science, he took a keen interest in all subjects relating to the history and language of Ireland. A member of the Keating branch and of the executive of the Gaelic League, he fostered Irish-language classes in the medical school. He supported home rule and was an intimate friend of John Dillon (qv) MP. In his evidence before the royal commission on university education in Ireland (the Robertson commission) on 10 June 1902, he recommended the establishment of a non-residential catholic university in Dublin. He was appointed a member of the royal commission on Trinity College and the University of Dublin (the Fry commission) in 1906, which recommended the establishment of a college acceptable to Roman Catholics. He was a member of the Dublin commissioners appointed under the Irish Universities Act, 1908, to draw up the statutes for the NUI and its constituent colleges and to make the first university appointments. The charter establishing UCD as a constituent college of the NUI named Denis Joseph Coffey to be the first president of the college.

His Catholicism and nationalism were admirably suited to the ethos of the new institution. He presided over the erection of the new buildings at Earlsfort Terrace; the addition of the College of Science at Merrion St. and of the Albert Agricultural College at Glasnevin to UCD (1926); the transfer of the medical school from Cecilia St. to Earlsfort Terrace (1931); the acquisition of the sports grounds at Belfield (1933); the creation of the schools of librarianship and of social science; the conversion of 86 St Stephen's Green into a students' union house; and the expansion in student numbers by almost fivefold (from 530 in 1909 to 2,400 in 1940). He had the reputation of knowing many of the students by name and family background. A man of deep human kindness for whom students and staff had great affection, he was criticised in his later years for keeping much of the college business in his own hands. Even the college calendars were said to be prepared by him. His virtues of patience, caution, and shrewdness were used to good effect when UCD was caught up in the political turmoil during the period from the Easter rising to the civil war. He represented the NUI on the General Medical Council (1920–

45), and Ireland on the Health Council of the League of Nations, to which he was appointed in 1934. He was chairman of the Medical Registration Council of Ireland (1927–45). He received honorary degrees from the NUI, Dublin University, and QUB . He was awarded the Croix de Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur of the French republic in 1934, and conferred with the Grand Cross of the Order of St Silvester by the pope in 1940. He retired from the presidency of UCD 31 March 1940, and died 3 April 1945.

He married (10 August 1904) Maude Quin; one of their sons was the poet Brian Coffey (qv). The family lived at 41 Fitzwilliam Square and 136 Sandford Road, Clonskeagh, Dublin. A portrait of Denis Joseph Coffey by William Orpen (qv) is at UCD.

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Mary Macken, *Studies*, xxix (1940), 177–86; J. M. O'Sullivan, *ibid.*, xxxiv (1945), 145–57; Michael Tierney (ed.), *Struggle with fortune* ([1954]); F. O. C. Meenan, *Cecilia Street: the Catholic University School of Medicine, 1855–1931* (1987); *WWW; Beathaisnéis 1882–1982*, iii; Donal McCartney, *UCD: a national idea* (1999)