

Oldham, Charles Hubert

by Owen McGee

Oldham, Charles Hubert (1859–1926), economist and nationalist, was born in Monkstown, Co. Dublin, seventh among eight children of Eldred Oldham, silk merchant, draper, and house furnisher, and Anne Oldham (née Alker), daughter of a house furnisher. For many years the family ran a prosperous business at 11–12 Westmoreland St., Dublin. Charles's sister Alice (1850–1907) taught at Alexandra College, Dublin, and became well known for her efforts to get women admitted to TCD. His eldest brother, Eldred (1852–1905), was a respected painter and the treasurer of the Dublin Sketching Club. His younger sister, Edith (1865–1950), was an honorary member of the Royal College of Music in London and the wife of Richard Irvine Best (qv). After attending Kingstown Grammar School, Charles became a scholar of TCD (1879) and graduated in experimental physics and mathematics (1882), winning gold medals in both subjects. Shortly thereafter he became a lecturer in mathematics and science at TCD and began studying law there. In politics he was a Gladstonian liberal but also held strong Irish nationalist sympathies, principally owing to his great admiration for Thomas Davis (qv). In February 1885, together with T. W. Rolleston (qv), he established the *Dublin University Review (DUR)*, a multidisciplinary publication of TCD. Under Oldham's editorship, the *DUR* promoted the works of young scholars and poets such as Douglas Hyde (qv) and W. B. Yeats (qv), and encouraged political contributions from men of conflicting ideological standpoints. To encourage debate on the articles of the *DUR*, he established the Contemporary Club (November 1885), an elitist club on College Green that continued to exist till the 1920s, although its significance as a centre for intellectual debate declined greatly after the 1890s. The *DUR* itself folded during 1887, not least because its apparent 'home rule' bias was not popular among Trinity students. In October 1885 Oldham joined the Young Ireland Society and by January 1886 was its vice-president. Although this society was heavily under the influence of the IRB, he did not become a member. He was, however, a close friend of John O'Leary (qv), who encouraged him to become more sympathetic towards Irish separatism.

In May 1886, with the encouragement of Gladstone and James Bryce (qv), Oldham established a Dublin branch of the Irish Protestant Home Rule Association (IPHRA), a small organisation established by Belfast liberals to encourage Irish protestants to support home rule. He was also the founder and editor of the official organ of the IPHRA, *North and South*, although this journal lasted for only one year (1887). Primarily owing to his efforts, the IPHRA continued to exist for many more years but it was always of little influence outside Dublin and ceased to be of any political significance after Gladstone's retirement in 1894. During the late 1880s Oldham spoke occasionally before Liberal party conferences in England on the subject of home rule. In 1890, after being awarded a BL from TCD, he was called to the bar.

He practised for a short time as a barrister in Ulster, although his outspoken support of the Parnellite party deprived him of many clients. He was an active member of the RDS and the National Literary Society (est. 1892) and, together with Maud Gonne (qv), published a posthumous volume of the poetry of Ellen O'Leary (qv). In 1892–3 he established his legal business at 33 Leeson St., Dublin. Not long afterwards he abandoned this career, resumed his former occupation as a teacher of mathematics, and became a prominent member of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland (SSISI). By 1900 he was the secretary and chief lecturer of the SSISI, of which he was to become vice-president in 1908. From 1900 to 1908 he also served as principal of the Rathmines School of Commerce. Thereafter he was professor of commerce (1909–17) and professor of national economics (1917–26) at UCD. As well as frequent contributions to the *Economist* and other periodicals, his publications included *Economic development in Ireland* (1900), *The history of Belfast shipbuilding* (1910), and *The public finances of Ireland* (1911). Although not openly identified with Sinn Féin, he sympathised with its civic republican and economic nationalist ideals and admired Arthur Griffith (qv). In 1914 he sat on a government sub-committee on Dublin housing and in 1920 made a report on behalf of the Dublin chamber of commerce on the financial implications of the government of Ireland bill. He welcomed the establishment of the Irish Free State and was appointed president of the SSISI in 1924. Thereafter he worked to create good relations between this traditionally unionist society and the Department of Industry and Commerce by recruiting members extensively from the Free State's civil service. He died on 20 February 1926 at his home on Terenure Road, Rathgar and was survived by his wife, Katharina (née Taesler), a German painter whom he married in the mid 1880s. They had no children. The contents of his library were donated to UCD after his death.

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NLI, minute-book of the Young Ireland Society, MS 19158; *Dublin University Review* (1885–7); *Thom*; S. S. Millin, *Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland* (1920), 164–5; *Ir. Times*, 22, 24 Feb. 1926; R. D. C. Black, *Statistical and Society Inquiry Society of Ireland centenary volume* (1947), 83–4; Dominic Daly, *The young Douglas Hyde* (1974), 55–7, 69–71, 73, 88, 92, 101–2; James Loughlin, 'The Irish Protestant Home Rule Association and nationalist politics 1886–93', *IHS*, xxiv (1984–5), 341–60; Maud Gonne MacBride, *A servant of the queen* (2nd ed., 1994); R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: a life*, i (1997); information from Susan Parkes, TCD