

The Story of Celtic at Harvard



Historic Warren House, present home
of the Harvard Celtic Department



Celtic languages and literatures were introduced to Harvard by Fred Norris Robinson, Gurney Professor of English Philology, in 1896. A native of Lawrence, Massachusetts, Robinson received a B.A. from Harvard in 1891, masters degree in 1892, and the Ph.D in English Philology in 1894. Then, on the encouragement of his Harvard professors, he went off to Freiburg,



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Germany to study the emerging field of Celtic philology under the great Swiss scholar Rudolph Thurneysen. Two years later, in 1896, he returned to Harvard as an instructor and began offering courses in Irish language and literature. Over the years, he steadily built a collection of works in all six of the Celtic languages, while publishing essays and editions of texts in the field. His essay on “Satirists and Enchanters in Early Irish Literature,” published many years ago is still required reading in many courses on the Celtic Literary Tradition.

Professor Robinson retired in 1939. But he was about to see the efforts he had been steadily putting forth in the interests of Celtic Studies bear lovely fruit. He had not only been steadily teaching courses in the field but had been building a stunning collection of books dealing with Irish language and literature, Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, Cornish, Breton, and Manx. Harvard’s Widener Library has perhaps the finest collection of works in the field of Celtic Studies in the world.

In 1938, Boston attorney and politician, the distinguished Henry Lee Shattuck, visited Ireland, and among his stops was the Phoenix Park residence of President of Ireland, Douglas Hyde. President Hyde heaped praise upon Robinson’s work in Celtic Studies. Shattuck later wrote, “he agreed with me that something more might be done to advantage at Harvard in bringing to the attention of the American public Gaelic art and

literature and language....”¹ That was in 1938. Robinson retired in 1939. In 1940, at a meeting of the Charitable Irish Society of Boston, it was announced that Shattuck had given the sum of \$51,410 to Harvard in the Society’s name to establish a chair for the study of Celtic language and literature. Over the years, he added considerably to the original gift, putting the professorship on a sound and permanent basis.

With the chair in place, the Department of Celtic Languages and Literatures came into being. Its first holder was Kenneth Jackson, who had come from the University of Cambridge. He held the chair until 1950, when he left to become Chair of Celtic at University of Edinburgh. Vernam Hull was appointed in 1950, and held the chair until his retirement in 1962. Professor Charles Dunn was the third chairman of the department from 1962 until his retirement in 1984. It was under Professor Dunn’s leadership that the department really began to grow into what it is today. The young men and women who came to study with him and with his associate, Professor John V. Kelleher, went on to become professors in their own right and eventually became the founding members of the Celtic Studies Association of North America. Upon Professor Dunn’s retirement, several acting chairs attended to department affairs while a

¹ This is quoted in *The Gentleman Mr. Shattuck: A Biography of Henry Lee Shattuck, 1879-1971*, by John T. Galvin (Tontine Press: Boston, 1996), p. 286.

search was being conducted. Professor Patrick K. Ford was appointed in 1991 and upon his retirement in 2005 is currently Margaret Brooks Robinson Research Professor of Celtic Languages and Literatures.

When Professor Robinson died in 1966 at the age of 95, he left Harvard sufficient funds to endow a second chair of Celtic in memory of his wife, Margaret Brooks Robinson, the chair presently held by Professor Catherine McKenna. On the establishment of this new chair of Celtic, the Shattuck chair was redesignated as a chair specifically for Irish studies, and that is presently held by Tomás Ó Cathasaigh.



Fred Norris Robinson