

Bio from dictionary of Irish Biography

King, Robert

by Linde Lunney

King, Robert (1815–1900), clergyman and church historian, was born in Cork city, eldest son of Joseph King, grocer and naval supplier, and Sarah King (née King). There were at least two other sons, both of whom were also clergymen in Ireland: Francis King (1817–91) became dean of Dromore. Robert King was educated by a Dr Porter in Cork, and entered TCD 20 June 1835 as a sizar; he was a scholar from 1835 and graduated BA in 1839, winning the senior moderatorship gold medal in mathematics, and prizes in Hebrew and divinity. He was ordained deacon in the Church of Ireland (1841); some sources have cast doubt on his ordination as priest, but he was curate of Stillorgan (1841–2), Desertlyn, Co. Armagh (1842–3), and elsewhere. King was one of the first six fellows of St Columba's College, Stackallan, Co. Meath, in 1843. His short career in St Columba's was marked by a disagreement with the college warden, [Robert C. Singleton](#) (qv), an enthusiastic supporter of the Oxford Movement, and with another founding fellow, James [Henthorn Todd](#) (qv). King refused to turn east during the recital of the creed in the twice-daily services in the college chapel; for a time he compromised somewhat by turning north-east or north-north-east, but despite writing thirty-six pages of theological and historical justification of his views, he was obliged to choose between compliance and resignation, and chose the latter course. He then held curacies in Ballinascreen (1844–51) and Armagh (1851–8), and was inspector of schools in Armagh (1856–8). In 1858 he succeeded his friend [William Reeves](#) (qv) as headmaster of the diocesan school, Ballymena. In 1867 the school moved to new premises in the town.

King was best known as an historian of the church; indeed [J. B. Leslie](#) (qv) considered that he was the father of modern Irish church history. His books include *The little red book of the history of the Holy Catholic Church in Ireland* (1848) and *Primer of the history of the Holy Catholic Church in Ireland*, which went into four editions and sold thousands of copies. His other publications include a memoir on the early history of the primacy of Armagh (1854), *The chronology of sacred history* (1850), *The old church of Ballinascreen* (as much a polemical as a historical work), a work on St Titus (1853), and several books in Irish, including a grammar for use in St Columba's (1845), and he reedited a version in Irish of the Book of Common Prayer (1860). His *Sgeúl fa bheatha agus pháis ar d'Tighearna* is a useful source of information on nineteenth-century Ulster Irish, and he may also have delivered a speech in Irish in favour of the repeal movement at a meeting in Dundalk on 29 June 1843.

It is possible that King's scholarly work contributed to the sense of identity of the Church of Ireland that was manifest in the disestablishment controversy of the 1860s; he believed that the Church of Ireland was the legitimate successor of the ancient Irish church, which he held to have been free from influence from Rome. Disestablishment brought in its wake, as well as its other more nebulous results, legal and financial difficulties for institutions such as diocesan schools. Although the Irish Church Act, 1869, protected the life interests of individuals such as bishops, it was held that the stipend payable after disestablishment to the incumbent headmaster of the diocesan school would cease at his death. Meetings in Ballymena in 1878 and 1886 sought the establishment of a new governing body, and initiated the collection of money locally to ensure the continuation of the school in a new guise. In 1890 an order in council provided that after King's death the school was to become known as Ballymena Academy. There were only two pupils attending it when King, who had been in poor health for some years, died 4 January 1900. He was buried in Broughshane.

He married (25 August 1857) Harriette, daughter of Alexander Stuart, rector of Killincoole, Armagh; they had nine sons, one of whom died at sea while an undergraduate, and another, Richard G. S. King (d. 1958), became dean of Derry. King's diaries are owned by one of his descendants.

Allibone; Boase; Anon., 'A couple of book catalogues', IBL, v (1913), 157; E. Ó Tuathail, 'A rare Ulster booklet', IBL, xxvi (Sept. 1939), 122–7; H. R. McAdoo, 'The Irish translation of the Book of Common Prayer', Éigse, ii (1940), 250–57; Breandán Ó Buachalla, 'A speech in Irish on repeal', Studia Hib., x (1970), 84–94; G. K. White, *A history of St Columba's College* (1981), 30–31; Hugh A. Boyd, 'The Diocesan School of Armagh and Connor, antecedent of Ballymena Academy', Eull Dunlop (comp.), *Mid-Antrim*, pt 2: further articles on Ballymena and district (1991), 83–5; J. B. Leslie, *Clergy of Connor* (1993), 426–7; Henry Swanzy, Succession lists of the diocese of Dromore, ed. J. B. Leslie (1933; reprinted 1996), 47, 226