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WILLIAM C. ROBINSON AND THE EARLY YEARS OF THE
CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

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In the fall of 1895, the Catholic University of America installed its School of Philosophy and School of Social Sciences and opened its doors to laymen. At that time, William C. Robinson, long a professor of law at Yale, was called to head the School of Social Sciences. Under his charge were the departments of sociology, economics, political science and law. ¹

His tenure was at first temporary, for Dean Robinson was sixty-two and deeply rooted in New Haven. He feared that his health might be impaired by the climate of the District of Columbia. ² By the end of his first year in Washington, it was evident that the task of building a university was not the work of months but of years, and Robinson decided to remain until the new venture was successfully launched. ³ Although he was Dean of the School of Social Sciences, his primary interest was the Department of Law. In a few years, he was designated as Dean of the Faculty of Law, a position he held until his death in 1911.

William Callyhan Robinson was born in 1834 at Norwich, Connecticut. After receiving his early education in Norwich's public schools, he attended Wesleyan University and Dartmouth College, graduating from the latter in 1854. Although he was reared in the Methodist Church, soon after graduation he entered the General Theological Seminary, where he studied for the Episcopal Ministry. His first charge was as missionary of a parish at Pittston, Pennsylvania. Soon thereafter he became a rector in Scranton. His tenure as an Episcopal clergyman was brief and was terminated by his conversion to Roman Catholicism in the early 1860's. Had he not been married, Robinson would probably have become a Catholic priest.

Forced to change his vocation, he chose the legal profession and began the study of law in 1862. Two years later he was admitted to the bar of Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, but in 1865 he moved to New Haven, Connecticut, where he practised for the next three decades. For a time he served as judge of the municipal court and of the New Haven County common pleas court. During the 1870's he sat for a term in the Connecticut House of Representatives. In the next decade he was chairman of the Connecticut Tax Commission. ⁴

1. Patrick H. Ahern, The Catholic University of America, 1887-1896. The Rectorship of John J. Keane, p. 99.
2. William C. Robinson to Simeon E. Baldwin, Nov. 13, 1895. All Manuscript sources are from the Baldwin Collection, Yale University Library.
3. William C. Robinson to Simeon E. Baldwin, May 22, 1896.
4. Biographical data, except where otherwise quoted, is from Charles S. Lobingier, "Robinson, William Callyhan," Dictionary of American Biography, XVI, 56-57.

Shortly after coming to New Haven, he became associated with the Yale Law School, which was languishing in the post-Civil War period.⁵ Manned by a single teacher, former Governor Henry Dutton, the school was in danger of extinction in 1869 when Professor Dutton became ill and died. Pressure from the New Haven bar and encouragement from the President of Yale, however, induced three young lawyers, Robinson, Simeon E. Baldwin,⁶ and Johnson T. Platt, to assume responsibility for the school's operation the following fall. They taught the classes, disposed of the administrative details, and were only nominally compensated for their services. This informal arrangement continued until after 1900. As busy, practicing attorneys the three soon realized that someone with more time was needed to head the school. They persuaded Francis Wayland, a well-to-do New Haven attorney and Lieutenant Governor of Connecticut (1869), to associate himself with the institution -- first as instructor (1871), then as professor (1872), and finally as dean (1873). Professor Wayland remained Dean of the Law School until 1903. The triumvirate of Wayland, Robinson, and Baldwin were the guiding powers at the Yale Law School for the next generation.⁷ They procured the money for an adequate building and library, improved the school's faculty, increased its enrollment, enriched its curriculum, lengthened the time necessary to earn an LL.B, and made it the first institution in the United States to offer graduate degrees in law. In brief, they raised the Yale Law School from its lowest point to one of the nation's better law schools.

William C. Robinson served as an instructor at the Yale Law School from 1869 until 1872, when he was made a professor. During the first year of the triumvirate's control of the School, he also served as Secretary and Dean of the Faculty. He continued as Dean until 1873, when he voluntarily withdrew in favor of Francis Wayland.⁸ He remained a professor until he moved to Washington in 1895.

In Addition to teaching, Professor Robinson found time for considerable writing. His Notes on Elementary Law appeared in 1875 and was later expanded into a textbook widely used by American law schools. His major work was The Law of Patents for Useful Inventions, printed in three volumes in 1890. Three years later his Forensic Oratory was published. Another of his works, which appeared anonymously in 1883, reflected the religious changes which he had experienced and his thinking regarding the impact of the theory of evolution upon Christianity. Clavis Rerum, as this was entitled, also exhibited his speculative turn of mind and probably represented many years of reflection and inner turmoil.

As a scholar and teacher he was esteemed by his colleagues. In a letter written to Edward E. Hale, April 23, 1894, Simeon E. Baldwin spoke of him "as a man of ability, reading, and judgment...and the leading layman (of the

5. Several booklets on the history of the Yale Law School have been written by Frederick C. Hicks, formerly librarian of the Law School. The one pertaining to the period under consideration is entitled Yale Law School: 1869-1894 Including the County Court House Period (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937). Keith Clark of Yale University is engaged in research on aspects of the Law School's development.
6. Two unpublished doctoral dissertations have been written on Simeon E. Baldwin: Forest C. Weir, The Social Opinions of Simeon E. Baldwin (Yale University, 1941) and Frederick H. Jackson, Simeon E. Baldwin, American Social Scientist (University of Pennsylvania, 1950).
7. Johnson T. Platt continued to teach for many years but did not influence the destiny of the School to the extent that Robinson, Baldwin, and Wayland did.
8. Draft of a letter from Simeon E. Baldwin to Francis Wayland, April 1, 1903, on the back of a letter from Wayland to Baldwin, dated March 31, 1903.

Catholic Church) in Southern New England.” Writing to Simon Newcomb, the distinguished astronomer, Baldwin said of Robinson: “...He writes well and speaks well, has always been interested in philosophical studies and has made valuable contributions to them.” 9

This was the background of the man who somewhat reluctantly but nevertheless resolutely “took up the cross”, as he termed it, and transplanted himself to the site of the new Catholic University of America in 1895. That his efforts to establish a Law School at The Catholic University of America proved to be a difficult task, and not altogether a happy one, is indicated in some of his letters to his old friend and colleague, Simeon E. Baldwin. On November 13, 1895 he wrote to Baldwin, stating:

“...Two months ago both the Law Department and this University and my personal connection with it were experiments. The law department no longer is such, but my connection with it still is. Until I have passed a winter here I can form no opinion of the effect of the climate upon my health, and until I have tried family life here I cannot judge whether it is a place in which I should be willing to remain...” 10

In another letter, dated November 18, 1895, also written to Baldwin, Robinson said:

“...This law department is running its four classes now, with a more extended curriculum than that at Yale though with many fewer hours spent in recitations, the system of lectures and private research being the one adopted here...This requires of me continued oversight besides an hour a day five days a week in the lecture room. I cannot leave here this fall nor in the winter term unless I find some man who can fill a professor’s chair here in my place. In the spring I may be able to lay aside the sceptre and return to work in New Haven...” 11

On March 25, 1896, Dean Robinson indicated the tremendous amount of responsibility that was his when he declared in a letter to Baldwin, “I find myself full of work here. The creation of a University is not the task of sinecures.” 12

Another letter to Baldwin revealed more than the others the condition of The Catholic University of America at the end of Dean Robinson’s first year there and his as yet incomplete acclimatization to it.

“...In some of the departments eminent professors are drawing large salaries and have no students, though they are supposed to be devoting themselves to the ‘advancement of science’. In other departments like my own we have a fair number of students and are fearfully shorthanded for teachers...there are but four teachers, and yet we cover the full curriculum work of a good law school. This means that instead of giving five hours a week to the work as I agreed to do, I am here all day every day except Saturday and Sunday besides two evenings a week. Now, if I

9. Draft of a letter from Simeon E. Baldwin to Simon Newcomb, January 6, 1904.

10. William C. Robinson to Simeon E. Baldwin, Nov. 13, 1895.

11. William C. Robinson to Simeon E. Baldwin, Nov. 18, 1895.

12. William C. Robinson to Simeon E. Baldwin, March 25, 1896.

had known the work that lay before me, and the roasting climate, and the half civilized condition of the whole region, I do not think I should have 'embraced the cross' which coming here in any event involved, with so much submissiveness...But here I am and like the pilot of a ship on the lee shore in a gale of wind I cannot abandon my job till the vessel is in clear water." 13

Writing in 1898 to acknowledge receipt of a copy of Baldwin's first book, Professor Robinson commented on his edifices as it appeared at the beginning of his third year of building. By this time his title was Dean of the Faculty of Law.

"...On the whole I have got along pretty well here, and have so far completed the organization of the Law School that both the ordinary and graduate courses can be fully given. But it has been a labor and responsibility far beyond my anticipation and I have often wished I were safely back in the easy seat of old Yale..." 14

Upon the death of Dean Wayland in January, 1904, Robinson and Baldwin corresponded once more. In his letter Dean Robinson confided something of the personal cost he had paid in leaving New Haven for the new position in Washington.

"...The sacrifice I have made in severing myself from all the associations that constituted my life you have never known, for nothing has ever taken their place, and I am not yet certain that the object for which I made it will be accomplished though the prospect is brighter now than ever before..." 15

William C. Robinson combined a deep religious faith with a marked ability as a teacher and writer on legal and philosophical subjects. The former led him to leave the Methodism of his childhood for the Episcopal ministry and shortly thereafter for Roman Catholicism and a new career as a lawyer. Many years later it caused him to abandon his pleasant life in New Haven to devote his sixties and seventies to the development of his faith's most ambitious project in the field of higher education in this country, The Catholic University of America.

The living faith of Dean Robinson was paid high tribute by The Catholic World at the time of his death. Above and beyond his high intellectual attainments were his religious devotion to duty and his abiding determination to use all his powers in the service of Catholicism. 16

"...his appreciation of the gift of Catholic Faith with which God had blessed him was so keen, that he constantly, by sympathetic study, by speech, by pen, by personal conversation, and, above all, by example, sought to lead after him those who had not been blessed as he had been. The conversion of America was ever dear to his heart." 17

13. William C. Robinson to Simeon E. Baldwin, May 22, 1896.

14. William C. Robinson to Simeon E. Baldwin, Nov. 1, 1898.

15. William C. Robinson to Simeon E. Baldwin, Jan. 13, 1904.

16. The Catholic World, XCIV, (December, 1911), p. 427.

17. Ibid., p. 428.

As a professor of law, his attainments were amply attested by the Yale Law Journal early in 1912.

"His grave and handsome face, his extraordinary ability as a teacher, his fluency of speech and masterly diction, his versatility, and his faithfulness to the task of building up the school, made an indelible impression upon his students and his associates, and his death, on November 6, 1911, will be mourned by all of them who survive him." 18

Not a genius or a thinker of great originality, William C. Robinson was a man of high talents and one who used his native endowments to the full. A teacher of merit, an able writer, a man aware of the new scientific doctrines of the second half of the nineteenth century and their implications, he found peace in the Roman Catholic Church and devoted many of his ripest years to its service through his work at The Catholic University of America.

18. "William C. Robinson, LL.D.", Yale Law Journal, XXI, (January, 1912) p. 237.