



Rev. Msgr. James Robert McConnell



Dublin, Ireland, 25 Feb. 1915 - 13 Feb. 1999

Title Professor of Theoretical Physics, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, Dublin, Ireland

Nomination 25 June 1990

Commemoration – James Robert McConnell was one of the most distinguished of Irish scientists of his epoch and the doyen of Irish theoretical physicists. He entered University College Dublin in 1932 and graduated four years later with a Master's Degree in mathematics which he obtained with first honors. During those studies he came under the influence of the distinguished mathematical physicist and Pontifical Academician A.W. Conway who aroused in McConnell an interest in relativity and quantum theory. From that moment Conway became his mentor. McConnell gained the degree of Doctor of Mathematical Sciences in 1941 at the University of Rome "La Sapienza." Despite wartime difficulties, he managed to return to Dublin in 1942 and with Conway's support he was appointed Scholar at the School of Theoretical Physics of the newly founded Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies where he came under the influence and inspiration of the world-renowned physicists Erwin Schrödinger and Walter Heitler. His original researches were in nonlinear electromagnetic theory but he soon began a detailed study of the theory of the negative proton, or antiproton, whose existence was not confirmed until 1955.

In 1945 McConnell was appointed Professor of Mathematical Physics at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, where he continued his researches into the theory of fundamental particles. Following his appointment in 1968 to a senior professorship in the School of Theoretical Physics of the Dublin Institute, his research interests changed and he took up the study of the theory of rotational Brownian motion. He was elected to membership in the Royal Irish Academy in 1949 and was granted a Doctor of Science degree by the National University of Ireland.

From 1969 to 1972 McConnell was Director of the School of Theoretical Physics of the Dublin Institute and he was secretary of the Royal Irish Academy from 1967 to 1972. He was a founding member of the European Physical Society and served on its Council from 1969 to 1971. In recognition of his contributions to science he was awarded the Boyle Medal by the Royal Dublin Society in 1986. He was appointed to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in 1990 by Pope John Paul II. As many of us who knew him at this Academy can testify, James McConnell was a friendly, unassuming and generous man, who was full of vitality and who had an infectious enthusiasm for all that he undertook to accomplish.

George V. Coyne, S.J.