

## Professor George Coton Steward

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The death of one of the founding fathers of RSCF (and thus of CIS) occurred on 19th November, 1989. George Coton Steward, Professor of Mathematics at Hull until his retirement in 1961, was the only senior academic at the first meeting in 1944 of the Research Scientists' Christian Fellowship (all the rest were research students).

The son of a Wolverhampton optician, George Steward was born on 6 April, 1896. From Wolverhampton Grammar School he went to Cambridge where he became Senior Scholar at his college, and later Wrangler. Various appointments filled the years during and immediately following World War I, including a post at the National Physical Laboratory, Teddington, in the optics department (following the family tradition), and an Assistant Lectureship in applied mathematics at Leeds. In 1922 he returned to Cambridge to a Fellowship, first at Caius, and then at Emmanuel. His researches led to a monograph *The symmetrical optical system* (Cambridge, 1928), reprinted 30 years later. He received a London D.Sc. in 1926 and a Cambridge Sc.D. in 1937. He also wrote extensively on plane kinematics and geometry.

In 1930 he became the first Professor of Mathematics at University College, Hull. He remained there for 31 years, building up his department and attracting many able students and staff. Through the war he was also acting head of the department of aeronautics, teaching (among other things) the theory of aircraft structures. His lectures were models of elegance and clarity. The important thing, he urged, was to start with the right assumptions and make the right connections. After that it was plain sailing and a good student could use conventional techniques to arrive at the result. As he would say, 'The rest is algebra!'

The motivation and inspiration of

Steward's whole life was a deeply held Christian faith. His passion for the Gospel dated back at least to his days in Cambridge. It remained with him through 31 years as Professor, and nearly as many in retirement. He was a great man for aphorisms, one of which was that 'Christianity lasts', long outliving the fads and fashions of contemporary culture. He himself was a living testimony to the truth of his own dictum; his faith did last to the end of the road.

Another of his much-loved declarations was: 'Christianity has nothing to fear at the bar of reason, but everything to gain'. In the 1950s, when Christianity was commonly feared to be undermined by scientific ideas, this testimony from a distinguished man of science never failed to make a deep impression on an undergraduate audience.

George Steward was involved in the formation of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (now Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship) and was for many years a Vice-President. Together with the late Professor Jessop he helped to establish a student evangelical Christian witness in Hull and to keep it going through the war years. Memories are of a large, rather shy man, reluctantly willing to be cajoled into chairing an important meeting, yet never wanting the limelight, and always preferring (as he said) to sit in the back row. He would turn up at early morning C.U. prayer meetings, just encouraging the students by his presence.

In the long, lonely years of retirement he knew the inexpressible comfort of the company of Jesus; as he once wrote 'Apart from His presence life has no meaning for me'. He maintained a lifelong interest in UCCF; on his 93rd birthday he was enquiring after its welfare. He became one of those old people who carry their years like a crown.

C.A. Russell