The present text deals with Herbert Edward Ryle, the Dean of Westminster from 1911 to 1925. Ryle was born in Onslow Square, South Kensington, London, on 25 May 1856. He was the second son of John Charles Ryle, the first Bishop of Liverpool, and his second wife, Jessie Elizabeth Walker.
His mother died when he was 3 years old and in 1861 his father married Henrietta Clowes. Ryle, his brothers and sisters were brought up in their father's country, first at Helmingham and after 1861 at Stradbroke.
After attending school at Hill House, in Wadhurst, Sussex, Ryle went to Eton College in 1868.
In 1875 he won the Newcastle scholarship, and in the same year he proceeded to King's College, Cambridge, as a classical scholar. A football accident in 1877 prevented him from further involvement in athletics and he took a medical certificate in 1879. Between 1879 and 1881, however, he won every distinction open at Cambridge to students of theology, including a first class in the theological tripos.
In April 1881 Ryle was elected a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, and began a career of twenty years as a teacher. He was ordained deacon in 1882 and priest in 1883. On 15 August 1883 he married Nea Hewish Adams. They had three sons, the two youngest died.
He was Hulsean professor of divinity and President of Queen's college, Cambridge and published several books: The Early Narratives of Genesis (1892), The Canon of the Old Testament (1892), and Philo and Holy Scripture (1895). After his election as President of Queens' College, Cambridge in 1896 Ryle found little time for writing. He was, however, responsible for the edition of Genesis in the Cambridge Bible (1914), when he was Dean of Westminster.
Ryle was appointed Honorary Chaplain to Queen Victoria in March 1896, and in December 1898 a Chaplain-in Ordinary to Her Majesty, from which post he resigned in early January 1901.
In December 1900 Ryle was appointed Bishop of Exeter, being consecrated at Westminster Abbey in January 1901. He became Bishop of Winchester in the spring of 1903. In 1909 he was Chairman of the Commission sent to Sweden by the Archbishop of Canterbury to investigate the possibility of closer relations between the English and Swedish churches.
In December 1910 Ryle was appointed Dean of Westminster. He was installed in Westminster Abbey in April 1911, at a time when the building was being prepared for the coronation of King George V. He was created CVO (Royal Victorian Order) in 1911. Under his guidance and with the help of his advisers, the dignity of the Abbey services was notably increased, and his work was commemorated by the Dean Ryle Fund, a sum of £170,000 raised for the maintenance of the Abbey in response to an appeal issued by him in 1920.
During World War I Ryle used to take the midday service of intercession personally, and he was responsible for the many special services held in wartime.
The idea of a Tomb of The Unknown Warrior was first conceived in 1916 by the Reverend David Railton. He wrote to Dean Ryle in 1920 proposing that an unidentified British soldier from the battlefields in France be buried with due ceremony in Westminster Abbey "amongst the kings" to represent the many hundreds of thousands of Empire dead. The idea was accepted by Ryle and the then Prime Minister Lloyd George. There was initial opposition from King George V and others but a surge of emotional support from the great number of bereaved families ensured its adoption. The inscription on the tomb was composed by Ryle.
Ryle was created KCVO in 1921. He was dean at the Wedding of Prince Albert, Duke of York, and Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon.
He had never been strong and had a history of heart trouble. In the autumn of 1924 his health broke down. After five months in a nursing home at Bournemouth he returned in May 1925 to the Deanery, where he died on 20 August. He was buried on 25 August in Westminster Abbey in a spot close to the tomb of The Unknown Warrior.