

Guest Editorial

The Bicentenary of The Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society

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Elsewhere in the Journal (112-116), I describe the establishment and objectives of The Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society in 1821, and its Bicentenary on 5th June this year. From what did this interest in Natural History stem? According to David Allen in his masterful Social History of 'The Naturalist in Britain', "It was the Enlightenment, with its ultimate power of dispassion and objectivity... By dispelling superstitions and accustoming people to see themselves and their surroundings with detachment...[thus]...Stripped by science of its ultimate mysteries, nature gradually assumed a fresh and entirely different mysteriousness..."¹ A wave of literary and philosophical societies, gradually spread across the "new industrial areas" of the north of England, especially textile towns (like Belfast), in the late eighteenth century, and these were followed by natural history societies.² Some of this was driven by 'Dissenting (from Anglicanism) Academies,' and Warrington Academy, a prime example based on Unitarianism, was founded in 1857.³ The great Chemist, Joseph Priestly, taught there and his "innovation of the teaching of history was ... that sciences and natural history" became part of the regular curriculum. Jean-Paul Marat, who was stabbed to death in his bath by Charlotte Corday, may have taught French at the Academy.⁴ Its first pupil, Thomas Percival, the great Physician, established the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society in 1781,² and in 1802 was the main author of the 'Health and Morals of Apprentices Act', designed to curb the exploitation of pauper children. Percival also published the first book on Medical Ethics in 1804.³

The impetus for The Belfast Natural History Society stemmed from the Belfast Academical Institution which had opened in 1814.⁵ To understand the ethos that pervaded the school in its early days, it is necessary to examine the motivations of one of its chief protagonists, William Drennan, who was born in Belfast in 1754. His father, the Reverend Thomas Drennan, was Minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Rosemary Street. Drennan studied Medicine in Edinburgh, graduating MD in 1778.⁶ He was a major driver of the chain of events, which culminated in the 1798 Rebellion, although, by then, he had lost interest in the cause.⁷ He was also a considerable poet, coining the phrase '*The Emerald Isle*' and 'lazy root,' for 'potatoes'.⁸ In 1783 William wrote to his sister, Martha McTier, recommending a Warrington-style Academy in Belfast as "...a truly desirable and patriotic

scheme."⁹ Warrington Academy dissolved in 1786, and although Drennan had no direct exposure to it, several of its ex-pupils were Irish,¹⁰ and two of these, Edward Corry and The Reverend Boyle Moody, were Drennan's friends in Newry from where he was writing.

Soon after his return to Belfast in 1807, William became deeply interested in the foundation of the Belfast Academical Institution which became simply 'Inst' and only acquired the prefix 'Royal' in 1831.¹¹ In this, Drennan was ably assisted by another 'United Irishman', the eminent Naturalist, John Templeton (1766-1825),¹² who contributed his 'Naturalist's Report,' and notes on 'Meteorology' to the Belfast Monthly Magazine, which he co-founded with Drennan, from 1808-14. Drennan delivered the Address at Inst's opening on the 1st February, 1814.¹³ It is rousing stuff, containing this line to commend the school's setting: "... backed by a sublime and thought-inspiring mountain: for it is these grand features of nature, rather than the machinery of art, which ought to enlarge the soul and dilate the affections in its earliest and sweetest and most lasting associations." Drennan and Templeton became School Visitors, providing direction to the course the school was steering.¹⁴ Drennan died in 1820; over a century later, Inst's Historian, John Jamieson, concluded that, "He was an indefatigable supporter of Inst, with an uncompromising sense of purpose and duty."¹⁵

It is, therefore, unsurprising that seven years later the Belfast Natural History Society was founded, and under one month later, the Society elected John Templeton, by then in failing health, as its first Honorary Member.¹⁶ The Society was founded by one of Inst's Professors and by at least four of its former pupils. The professor was James Lawson Drummond



James Lawson Drummond
(From a Water-colour
Drawing by W. C. Day
of London.

Presented to the Society by
a few members in 1843.)

Source: Deane A (Ed).
Belfast Natural and
Philosophical Society
(Centenary Volume,
1821 – 1921). BNH&PS
1924: Frontispiece



(see Figure), who, the year before, had galvanised matters by anonymously publishing his 'Thoughts on the Study of Natural History.'¹⁷ Drummond was born in Larne in 1783. His father was a naval surgeon who died when James was three, so his mother moved to Belfast along with James' brother and sister.¹⁸ He was educated at Belfast Academy, became an assistant naval surgeon in 1806, sailed under the command of Admiral Collingwood,¹⁹ who succeeded Nelson at Trafalgar.²⁰ Drummond then qualified in Medicine from Edinburgh in 1814, became Physician to the Belfast Dispensary, and then joined the staff of Inst in 1818 as Professor of Anatomy and Physiology. His main role was to help students preparing for the Presbyterian ministry acquire a little medical knowledge,²¹ and "taught a very wide field of natural history."²² His remuneration was small, but for two years from 1823, when funds were tight, he drew no pay at all.²³ Drummond's next major contribution to Belfast life was organising the fund-raising to build the Museum in College Square North. It opened in 1831, and a sketch of Inst from a window of the Museum in 1842 testifies to the intimate relationship the two buildings enjoyed. This intimacy was destroyed by the construction of the 'Tech' early in the 20th Century. It was built there to be close to Inst's Art Department but proved to be a severe case of the child overlying the mother.²⁴

The Museum met the prerequisites for a Natural History Society listed by Allen,² including a forum for discussion, a library to store collections of books and the Society's Proceedings, and 'Cabinets of Curiosities,' which the Society assembled and filled with great vigour. Meanwhile, Drummond was constantly publishing, and his 'Letters to a Young Naturalist' was his most popular book, which included a tirade against cruelty to animals,²⁵ a view he shared with his Unitarian Minister brother.²⁶ His 'First Steps in Botany' ran to four editions.²³ He also had the honour of having a Sea Cucumber named after him.²⁷ The Society also helped to establish a Botanic Garden for Belfast in 1827,²⁸ initiating the publication of the First Series of The Ulster Journal of Archaeology in 1853, and the Belfast Naturalists' Field Club in 1863.²⁹ This introduced the element of 'Field Trips' which, according to Allen, was the usual progression for Natural History Societies, but it came rather later in Belfast than in Great Britain. This time it was largely Belfast Royal Academy old boys who were involved.²⁹

Drummond's most resounding achievement, however, was the establishing of the Faculty of Medicine at Inst in 1835. He had promoted the idea of a joint surgical and medical school for the province as early as 1826. Drummond supervised construction of the accommodation of the new Faculty and even contributed £200 (at least £20,000 today) from his own pocket.²³ It was therefore fitting that when the Faculty opened, Drummond became its first President, and again in 1844. Drummond resigned his chair owing to ill health after 31 years when the Medical Faculty moved to the recently opened Queen's College. Drummond was a serial monogamist but had no children: his first two wives

predeceased him. His third marriage, in 1850, was to Eliza O'Rorke, of Ballybollan House, near Ahoghill, County Antrim. She was 20 years his junior, from an ancient Catholic family, but the couple had a Church of Ireland Ceremony. Drummond died at his house, beside the Museum, on 17th May 1853. He is buried in the Old Graveyard in Ahoghill. Eliza was laid to rest in the same plot, 43 years later. Their grave is in urgent need of refurbishment and it is the Society's plan to undertake this work in Drummond's honour to mark its Bicentenary. A small pilgrimage to the grave is planned.

Drummond attracted many epithets, but my favourite from the Dublin Penny Journal in 1833,³⁰ concerns the Society he was so instrumental in founding:

Such a modest, yet manly gravity of deportment, such an orderly regularity, and such sound intelligence we could not have anticipated to have found pervading such a youthful assembly, and left an impression on our minds which will not be speedily forgotten.

Two centuries ago, William Lawson Drummond became the Society's first President; I have the great honour of being its President during its Bicentennial year.

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