

# James Apjohn of Pallasgrean 1795-1886

by Michael Dwyer

**L**t is a rare enough occurrence to find someone born in a rural environment who is talented enough to overcome what might be termed a disadvantage and going on into his chosen profession, be it science, medicine, religion, business, military or sport, and reaching a pinnacle which earns him international acclaim. Such was Isaac Newton, a mathematician, chemist, and physicist who did so much in his lifetime towards solving the mysteries of natural phenomena. Dr. James Apjohn did not reach the heights that Newton did, but there was a remarkable similarity in many aspects of their lives. Like Newton, he came from a rural environment. Born in Sunville, Pallasgrean, Co. Limerick, he came from a well-off family. His father, Thomas Apjohn, possessed a considerable acreage of land in Sunville and the adjoining townland of Dromlara. He was also a tax collector and land agent for absentee landlords. James Apjohn received his early education in Tipperary Endowed Erasmus Smith Grammar School. He entered Trinity College, Dublin, in 1815 as a sizar - a low fee undergraduate - and took his BA 1817, MB 1821, MD 1837, LKQCP 1829, Fellow of Trinity College 1830-1850, Hon. Fellow 1850-1870, Professor of Applied Chemistry TCD 1844-81, Fellow of the Royal Society 1853, Vice President of the Royal Irish Academy 1845, representative of the University of Dublin on the General Medical Council 1858, and author of a *Manuel of Metalloids*.

During his long academic career he was closely associated with the Royal Irish Academy and was a regular contributor to its proceedings, to which he submitted papers on chemistry, the properties of gases etc. He was a physicist rather than a chemist and became well known for his work on hygrometry and the dewpoint. In March 1838 he was awarded the Cunningham Medal, the highest honour the institution could bestow. The president of the RIA, Sir William Rowan Hamilton, in his address stated:

*I have the honour to inform you that your council, in the exercise of the discretion entrusted to them by you, have taken into their consideration since the commencement of the present session, the various papers which have been for a few years past communicated to our transactions on several different subjects, in order to determine whether any and which of those papers should be distinguished by the award of a Cunningham*

*Medal: and that the Medal for the most important paper on Physics communicated to us during the three years ending in March 1838 has been adjudged to Dr. Apjohn for his Essay on a New Method of Investigating the Specific Heats of the Gases, published in the first part of the 18th volume of the Transactions of the Academy. The importance of the study of what are called the imponderable agents is known to all Physical enquirers. Indeed it would appear that as the scientific history of Newton and of his successors during the century which followed the publication of his Principles of Natural Philosophy is connected mainly with the establishment of the Law of Universal Gravitation and with the deduction of its chief consequences, so are the mathematical and physical researches of the present age likely to be associated for the most part with the study of light and heat and electricity and of their causes, effects and connexions.*

On the conclusion of a lengthy address covering a wide scientific field, the president delivered the Medal to Dr. Apjohn, addressing him:

*"Dr. Apjohn, in the name of the Royal Irish Academy, I present to you this Medal for your investigations respecting*

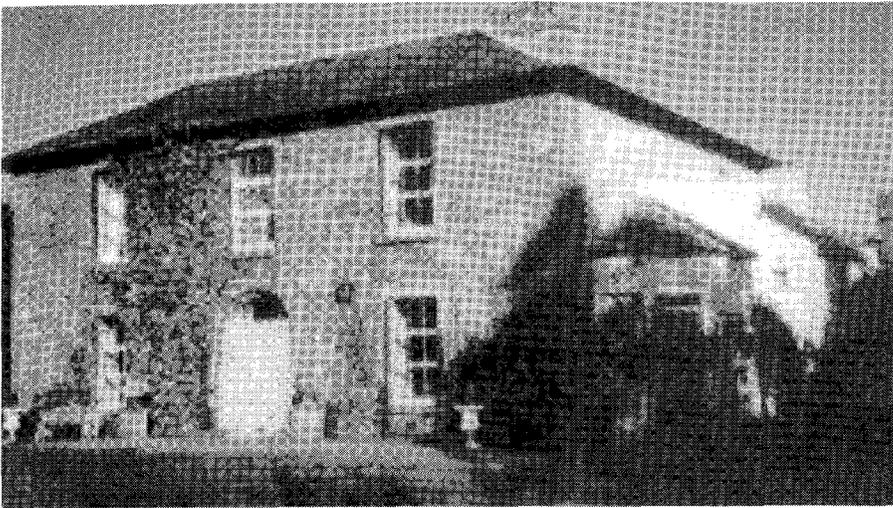
*the specific heats of the gases, hoping that it will be received and valued by you as attesting our sense of the services you have already rendered to that important and delicate department of physical research, and that it will also be to you a stimulus and an encouragement to pursue the same enquiry further still so as to improve still more the results already obtained and to establish other new ones and thus to connect more and more closely your name and our transactions with the history of this part of science."*

In *Three Centuries of Irish Chemists*, Professor Apjohn is noted as best remembered for his work on hygrometry and the Apjohn dewpoint. The elite circle of scientists he catered to acclaimed his ability, as is testified in the *History of Medicine in Ireland* as follows: "Apjohn was internationally famous as a scientist. In the College of Surgeons his lectures became so popular that accommodation had to be extended. In 1840 he was requested to deliver annual lectures on natural philosophy to registered pupils."

The records show that Apjohn from maturity to his life's end was deeply involved in promoting the welfare of medical practice. In 1824, with J.W. Cusack, S. Wilmot, Robert Graves and Henry Marsh, he founded the Park Street School. The building had two lecture theatres, a dissecting room, a museum and a laboratory where the students performed experiments. On its closure in



Tomb of James Apjohn's parents at Old Pallas Cemetery. The inscription, without date, reads "Thomas Apjohn & his wife Anne, dead and gone".



Sunville House, Pallasgrean, 1998.

1849, the school building was acquired by Sir William Wilde - father of Oscar Wilde - for his use as an Eye and Ear Hospital.

On the 16th September 1838 an unusually brilliant Aurora Borealis attracted wide attention. The subject of it having been discussed at the RIA, Dr. Apjohn described his experience of having seen it at Sunville, Co. Limerick, so despite his busy Dublin life, he did find time to visit his birthplace, which would not have been easy, as in the pre-railway days it would involve a full days journey in a lumbering coach over rough roads.

A will made in 1871 gives some insight into Dr. Apjohn's background. As he came from the privileged class of his period, many doors were open to him which would otherwise be closed.

The will reads:

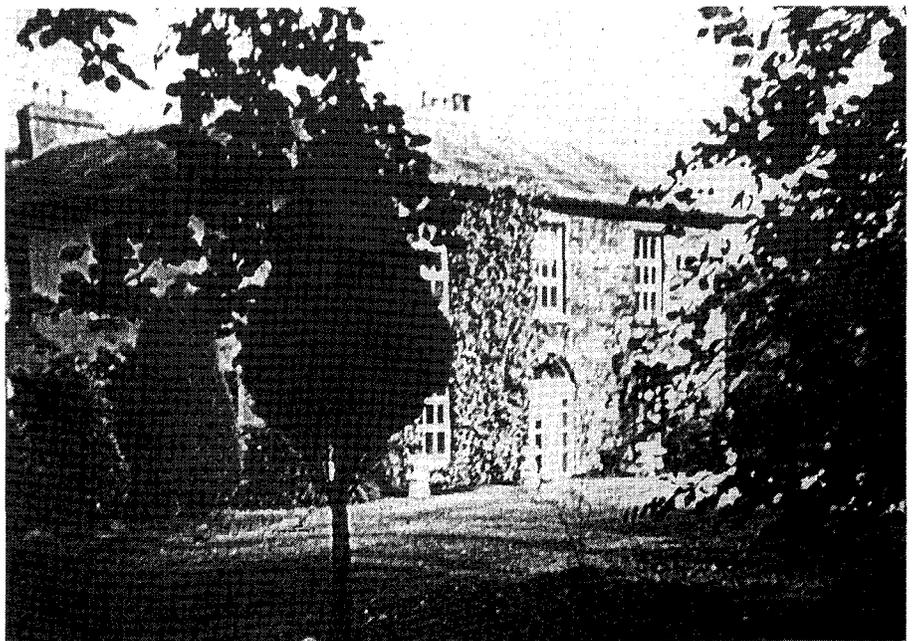
*"This is the last Will and Testament of me, Frances Apjohn of Sunville, County Limerick, Spinster. I devise my Lands of Ardromin situate in the Barony of Lower Connello in Co. Limerick with their appurtenances to my brother James Apjohn of South Hill, Co. Dublin, Doctor of Medicine, and my granephew Thomas Francis Hussey de Burgh, now a Lieutenant in Her Majesty's 17th Regt. of Foot, upon trust during the life of my Graniece Annie Sophie, the wife of Jonathan Bruce of Milawn Castle, Co. Cork, Esq., to pay the rents and profits of my lands when same become due, and on her demise upon trust for every daughter of Annie S. Bruce by her husband Jonathan but not by any aftertaken husband. On failure of such issue, upon trust to the proper hands of my Graniece Mary Elizabeth Lloyd Apjohn, daughter of my niece Olivia, wife of Michael Marshall Lloyd Apjohn Esq., of Linfield, Pallasgrean. I bequeath all my personal estate to my Graniece Mary Elizabeth. I appoint my said brother James Apjohn, my Granephew Thomas F Hussey-DeBurgh executors of my will.*

*In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand this 16th Day of December 1871 - Frances Apjohn.*

*WITNESS John H O'Connor, Rector, Grean .... William Vaughan, School-teacher, Grean."*

The estate at Ardromin was in the Kilmallock area and not very extensive. Lieutenant DeBurgh later came to reside at Sunville and farmed 280 acres in the nearby townland of Pullagh up to the end of the 19th century. Old timers here spoke of working for Col. DeBurgh. Obviously he had a successful army career. He was descended from the Rev. John Hussey Burgh of Dromkeen. His father, Thomas, was a captain in the 61st Regiment and his mother, Georgina Marie, was a niece of Dr. James and Frances Apjohn. Dr. James married into a local landed family. His wife, Anne, was of the 'Newport Whites' who resided at Doon, Co. Limerick.

The Apjohn estate in the Grean district comprised some 1700 acres let to tenants at will and by lease. Dr. Apjohn's branch of the family had no interest in this estate which in the last quarter of the 19th century became so encumbered that a receiver was appointed to take sole charge of it. The Apjohn connection with Grean covered two centuries. It ceased with the death of Michael M. Lloyd Apjohn in 1895, all of his family having emigrated before then.



Sunville from the garden, 1998.

An obituary notice in the Irish Times of 3 June 1886 stated:

*"Our paper to-day contains the death notice of the well known Professor Apjohn F.R.S. He was born in 1794 in the parish of Grean, Co. Limk, at Sunville, the property of his parental ancestors. Dr. Apjohn has long held a foremost place, his reputation extending beyond his native land to the Physicists of Britain and the continent." In 1874 he retired from all professional occupation and was seldom seen except for those who visited him. He enjoyed good health almost to the end. With him has passed away one of the most upright and honourable of men, whose noble intellect for nearly a century shed lustre on the country of his birth. He was buried at Mount Jerome Cemetery, Dublin.*

*Funeral of James Apjohn, M.D. The chief mourners were John Kellock Barton M.D., son-in-law; Robert C. Barton, Granson; Thomas Apjohn, Nephew; Major Hussey DeBurgh, Granephew; George Bruce, Great Granephew.*

*The Rev. John Lombard, Rector of Booterstown, read the burial service, after which, in a few elegant and well chosen words, he spoke of the great talents of the late professor Apjohn, and his uncompromising love of truth in private and public life, and, best of all, his appreciation of holy things, and his reverent use of prayer. The coffin was then lowered into the family vault and placed beside that of his much loved son Richard, who predeceased his father by eight years. Trinity College, College of Physicians, and Royal College Surgeons, were represented.*

I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Tony Browne, Limerick, Deirdre Hamill, TCD Library, M. Griffin, Limerick City Library, Mary O'Doherty, Mercers Library, Dublin, for information on James Apjohn. Without same this account on him could not have been written, as no information on him has survived in his native Pallasgrean.