

## Darwin's Limerick Nemesis: Charles O'Shaughnessy

DONAL MURPHY

2009 is a double anniversary of Charles Darwin. It is the bicentenary of his birth in 1809 and the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the publication of his most famous work, *The Origin of Species*, in 1859. A little known Limerick connection is discussed: an attempted refutation of Darwin's views written and published by a man from Kilfinane.

In January 1876 Charles O'Shaughnessy, a shopkeeper in the county Limerick town of Kilfinane, wrote to Charles Darwin alerting him to the imminent appearance of a pamphlet which he had just written. This correspondence now forms part of the Darwin Papers and Manuscripts held at Cambridge University Library. The envelope has the Kilmallock postmark, and was addressed to: 'Doctor Darwin, Down, Beckhenham, Kent'. O'Shaughnessy's began his letter 'I am happy to inform you that I have completely confuted your work on the 'Descent of Man'. He went on to tell Darwin that his work was 'the most absurd production'. He then outlined his own many publications purporting to give cures for potato blight, epilepsy and other ailments (see Appendix). He finishes by stating that he will 'have the pleasure' to send Darwin a copy of his refutation when it is printed.<sup>1</sup>

When the pamphlet *Darwin Confounded* appeared in print the following month,<sup>2</sup> he immediately despatched a copy to the eminent scientist. It is twenty-three pages in length and is written in the form of a series of letters to an imaginary interlocutor ('Dear Rupert'), a literary device to allow the author to expound his thesis. This *modus operandi* harked back to the eighteenth century when writers such as Richardson, Fielding and Smollett developed the epistolary form for their narratives.

O'Shaughnessy begins his first 'letter' by saying he had 'read six hundred and eighty-six pages of Darwin's Monkey this week' (this would appear to be a reference to Darwin's *The Descent of Man*) and goes on to describe the work as 'the climax in monstrosity'. He clearly has little regard for Darwin's theory, stating 'I find not a single argument ... that I did not know before, and everyone else as well that had observation of the domestic animals that we are everyday in contact with.' The root of his desire to refute Darwin is shown at the end of the first letter, when he says of such a refutation: '... it is no loss to morality.' O'Shaughnessy clearly felt very strongly that Darwin's theory undermined Christian religion and morality.

This theme is taken up at the start of the next letter. O'Shaughnessy now becomes more rigorous in his arguments 'for banter will no longer do when morality is at stake – nay more, Heaven and God's glory.' He attacks Darwin's method, noting somewhat sarcastically that 'like all the other professors', the theory is based purely on hypothesis. O'Shaughnessy, on the other hand, holds the view that man has 'no temporal knowledge but what he has received from observations ...' He is careful to state it is temporal knowledge to which he refers; this avoids any difficulties with religious orthodoxy.

<sup>1</sup> See, David O'Shaughnessy, 'Evolution Confounded: Charles O'Shaughnessy's Rebuttal of Darwin', *History Ireland*, vol. 17, no. 3 (2009) pp 24-7 where the letter is printed in full.

<sup>2</sup> Published by Francis Guy, Munster Steam Printing Works, 70 Patrick Street, Cork.



While we cannot establish if O'Shaughnessy had read Locke or Berkeley, he seems to be reflecting their approach here; especially the latter's *esse est percipi*. It is quite likely in fact that he was familiar with these writers as he does mention Laplace, Newton and Herschell, thus showing extensive reading.

The wish to defend the orthodox religious teaching is O'Shaughnessy's prime motive. In his last five letters, he complains that Darwin and Huxley do not accept the biblical account of Creation. O'Shaughnessy insists that there is a Great Being and we see the Spirit of the Being in everything in the universe. For this reason, it is important for him to deny the theory outlined in *The Descent of Man*. He mentions this work's 'genealogy of man' where humans and other primates are held to descend from a common ancestor. O'Shaughnessy rejects the notion of human evolution on the basis that man's moral sense or conscience marks the human as radically different. He signs off his final missive with his name (as at the end of each letter) and his full address: 'Kilfinane, Kilmallock, Ireland'.

O'Shaughnessy was not Darwin's only Irish correspondent. DeArce<sup>3</sup> has shown that some 160 letters crossed between him and Irish addresses. Darwin himself was a prolific letter writer (as befitted a man whose name comes from the Old English for 'dear friend') and some 14,000 pieces of correspondence to or from him survive. That this is only a portion of his actual correspondence is shown in the preface penned by his son, Francis Darwin, who in 1887 published in multi-volume format *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*.<sup>4</sup> The younger Darwin tells us of his father: 'It was his custom to file all letters received, and when his slender stock of files ("spits" as he called them) was exhausted, he would burn the letters of several years, in order that he might make use of the liberated "spits".' This process, we are told, continued on for years. After 1862 he was persuaded to keep 'the more *interesting letters*...' The survival of O'Shaughnessy's correspondence, therefore, may indicate it fell into this latter category for Darwin.

Charles O'Shaughnessy was a businessman in Kilfinane.<sup>5</sup> The family were originally 'strong farmers' in Ballyanne near Rathkeale, Co. Limerick. His older brother Patrick went into business in Bruff. He obtained a premises on a long lease from the Earl of Limerick and opened a drapery shop. One of the conditions of the lease was that he must expend not less than £1,000 on renovations, a large sum at the time, showing that the family were prosperous. Charles attended the Christian Brothers in Bruff and then worked in his brother's shop. Having learned the retail trade, he moved to Kilfinane. Here he ran a similar business to Patrick's, a large drapery and hardware shop in the centre of town. The business specialised in shoemaking, with as many as seven cobblers employed at one time.

J.M. Feheney believes that Charles operated a pawnbroker's shop in Bruff before moving to Kilfinane.<sup>6</sup> This is listed in *Slater's Directory* for 1856 (though O'Shaughnessy family sources believe he moved to Kilfinane in 1853). He relates the following story to highlight Charles' entrepreneurial spirit: a woman who had made several purchases in his shop was unable to carry them all to her horse and trap outside

<sup>3</sup> M. DeArce, 'Darwin's Irish Correspondence', *PRIA*, 108B, no. 1 (2008) pp 43-56.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Darwin (ed.), *The life and letters of Charles Darwin, including an autobiographical chapter* (London, 1887).

<sup>5</sup> Family sources believe he died in 1908 but this cannot be correct as he was alive in 1911 when the census return gives his age as 84 years old; we have no month of birth so we can only therefore give 1826 or 1827 as the year of birth. His death does not appear to have been registered.

<sup>6</sup> J.M. Feheney, *The O'Shaughnessys of Munster: The People and their Stories*, (Cork, 1996). I am grateful to Dr Feheney for also providing me with other details not in the book.



on the street. As she was paying she asked if he had a shop-boy to whom she could give sixpence to carry her parcels. Charles assured her she could give him the sixpence and he would make the necessary arrangements. When she gave him the money he put it in his pocket and told her he could carry parcels as well as any boy!

Charles does not appear in Griffith's valuation of Kilfinane (as it is spelled there) and there are no entries for Kilfinane in Henry & Coghlan's *Munster Directory* (1867) or Slater's *Directory* for 1881. However, Guy's *Postal Directory of Munster* (1886) describes it as a 'Post town and parish, 5 m. from Kilmallock, on the road from that place to Mitchelstown.' The population of the parish was 2,537 with 1,398 in the town. Among the three Hardware Merchants & Ironmongers is listed 'O'Shaughnessy Chas' and he is also included again among the eight Drapers in town. Guy's *Directory* presents Kilfinane as a bustling business town which held regular fairs and markets, with a butter market every Tuesday. It had a bank, hotel, two flour mills and five 'Posting Establishments.' Among the trades listed were 22 grocers, 20 vintners, seven provision dealers, five bakers, four leather merchants and three each of tobacconists and victuallers. A flavour of the social dynamic of the times is given by the listing of three 'Emigration Agents' in town. The town was described as being 'situated in the midst of a group of mountains, by which it is surrounded on all sides but the north, where it opens on the rich vale of Kilmallock.' This is a direct (but unacknowledged) quote by Guy from Lewis' 1837 account of Kilfinane. The ravages of the Famine can be inferred from the 1837 population of parish and town being 4,437 and 1,752, respectively.

While being a successful businessman, O'Shaughnessy appears never to have owned any land in the district. He is not listed in the 1876 *Return of Owners of Land of One Acre and Upwards* for Co. Limerick. He appears in both the 1901 and 1911 census. The return for 1911 lists him as a Shopkeeper, by then a widower aged 84 years, with whom three unmarried sons, aged from 17 to 33 years, resided. Charles was in fact widowed twice. His first wife was the sister of his brother Patrick's wife, Jane O'Mahony. His second wife was Mary Anne Downes of Kilmallock. He had at least twelve children, eleven of whom were sons, all by his second wife.<sup>7</sup>

While references to O'Shaughnessy in the official record are scant, we can infer he was also caught up in the Land War. Bernard H. Becker, a correspondent with the *Daily News*, went on a journey through the south and west of the country during the winter of 1880-1. His published account of this journey<sup>8</sup> describes how he spent Christmas Eve in Spa Hill House in Kilfinane, home of Uniacke Townsend, agent for absentee landlord Mr. Coote. The famous Land War priest Fr. Sheehy had called for a boycott of Townsend because of his attempt to evict a tenant farmer named Murphy. Becker describes the Townsend family living behind locked doors and going about armed with revolvers and Winchester rifles even though guarded by two armed policemen. Fifty soldiers were due in Kilfinane before Christmas Day to provide further protection. The boycott was absolute locally; all provisions had to be sourced by train from Cork to Kilmallock and collected by an armed party from the house. As a prominent local businessman, O'Shaughnessy must have been participating in the boycott. Given that one of his pamphlets was entitled *O'Shaughnessy's Answer to the Screwing Landlord* we can be fairly confident about where his sympathies lay.

O'Shaughnessy became very wealthy. He is reported to have had £70,000 in the bank at one time, an enormous sum in those days. He also harboured a burning ambition

<sup>7</sup> Personal communication from Dr Feheney.

<sup>8</sup> B.H. Becker, *Disturbed Ireland, Being the Letters Written During the Winter of 1880-81* (London, 1881).



to own a Grand National winning horse. The Ballyanne family were very involved in sport, from Gaelic football to coursing and horseracing, so Charles was following family tradition here. Despite his business acumen, this almost proved his undoing. He invested heavily in a number of steeplechasers without success. By the time he died he had used up almost all his capital and it was left to his eldest son and heir, Michael, to revive the family fortunes.<sup>9</sup>

O'Shaughnessy's writings are now very rare. The British Library and the libraries of the universities of both Oxford and Cambridge have some texts but not the full *oeuvre*.<sup>10</sup> Neither the National Library of Ireland nor the Libraries in UL or UCC have any texts at all nor are any copies available in the public library service. This year sees a plethora of events worldwide marking the double anniversary of Darwin. While his theory of evolution is now generally accepted among scientists there is still controversy attached to it among certain religious groups, especially those who insist on a literal interpretation of the account of creation in the Old Testament. O'Shaughnessy held such views and it is fitting, therefore, to recall this Irish interlocutor and critic of Darwin. He sent his book to the great scientist himself, fully confident, it would appear, that not only had he successfully refuted his arguments but that Darwin would accept that he was mistaken and be grateful to the Kilfinane man for saving him from grievous error.

#### **Appendix: List of Books and Pamphlets by Charles O'Shaughnessy**

1. *Darwin Confounded*
2. *Every Man His own Doctor*
3. *O'Shaughnessy's Discoveries for the Prevention and Cure of all kinds of Farm Stock And Crops*
4. *O'Shaughnessy's Proof That We Do Not Go Round The Sun*
5. *Lunacy*
6. *Rheumatism*
7. *Married Woman*
8. *Scurvy*
9. *Hernia*
10. *Epilepsy*
11. *Sore Eyes*
12. *Consumption*
13. *Paralysis*
14. *All Diseases in Children*
15. *Errors of the Solar System*
16. *Deafness*
17. *O'Shaughnessy's Answer to the Screwing Landlord*

<sup>9</sup> Feheney, *O'Shaughnessys of Munster*.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix.