

John Birmingham: his portrait discovered.

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A New Star

It was shortly before midnight on the 12th of May, 1866 - the year when Professor Julius Schmidt was to announce a volcanic eruption on the Moon and James Stephens a Fenian eruption across Ireland – that the tall, gaunt figure of a North Galway landlord was striding through the darkness back to his home at Millbrook House. John Birmingham slowed to look up at the constellations bejewelled in the night sky, the clouds from Connemara having cleared for once. His sharp eyes were scanning the familiar stars when . . . abruptly he stopped. There to his utter astonishment was shining a star that hadn't been there before, a new star added to the constellation of the Northern Crown [Corona Borealis]. At 50 years of age, he was making a discovery that would spark intense interest and discussion among the international community of astronomers, and would mark the start of a singular contribution to several avenues of astronomical science. Ten years later the *Irish Times* (20 March 1876) and *Freeman's Journal* (22 March 1876) remembered:

“A few years since a gentleman wrote to the [London]*Times* detailing his observations of a sun, or fixed star, which he found on fire, traversing the heavens. But, seeing that the amateur astronomer wrote from near Tuam, that great journal cast contempt on the pretension that an unknown Irishman could anticipate Greenwich and the many British observatories, and indignantly consigned the letter to the waste basket; thus depriving the scientific world of knowledge of [the early stages of] a phenomenon of the rarest occurrence and the highest interest. The writer of the letter was Mr. Bermingham [sic], Dalgin, near Tuam, a magistrate of the County Galway, who has a private observatory, and is a skilled practical astronomer.”

A Late Accolade

Seventeen years and many stars on from his ‘new star’, on 29 January 1883, the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin agreed to award John Birmingham its Cunningham Gold Medal for his outstanding astronomical researches, in particular for his culminating work ‘The Red Stars: Observations and Catalogue’ published in 1877. The gold medal was presented to him at the Academy on Monday, 14 January 1884 (only eight months before his death), by the President of the Academy, the poet Sir Samuel Ferguson LL.D., Q.C..

Calling on Mr. John Birmingham, the President addressed him as follows:

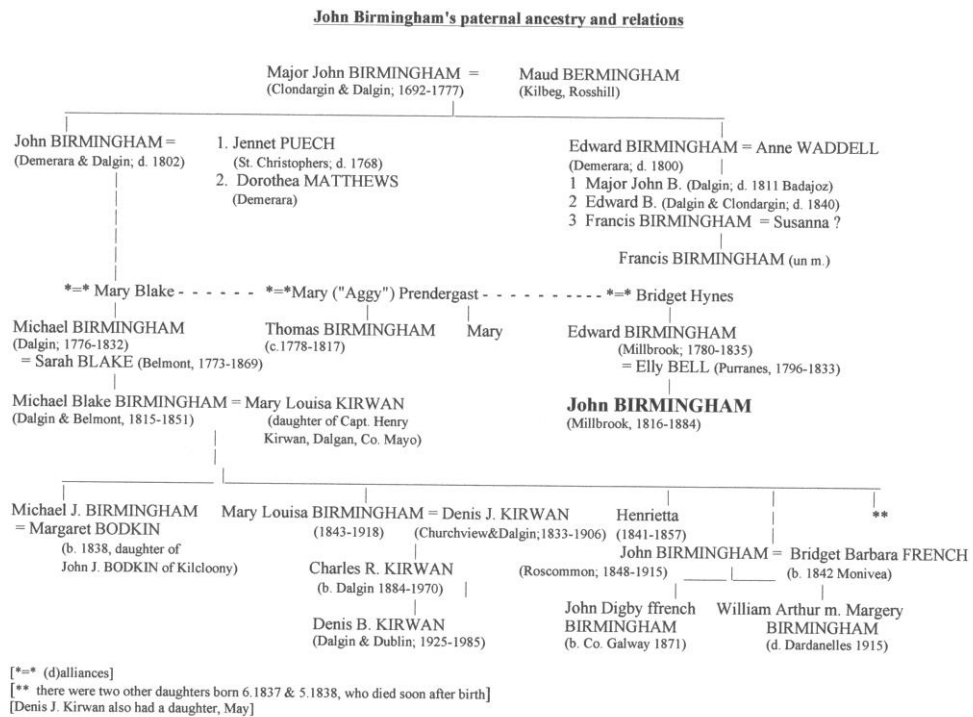
“You, Mr. Birmingham, from your Vald, Arno in the West*, where the feudal lords of Athenry and Tuam used formerly to prosecute pursuits of so different a nature[!], took your place as one of our leading Irish representatives in this walk of Science. You had already, on the outburst of T Coronæ in 1866, been the first to observe that notable addition to the class then attracting so general an attention. It was at this time, when your name was rising into distinction in the Observatories of the world, that your Danish precursor, Schjellerup, published his list of the Red Stars observed up to that time. It, for about ten years, was the authoritative source for past observations; but the growth of newly-recorded phenomena, to which your own discoveries began materially to contribute, ultimately called for a revised and supplemented Catalogue, and in furnishing

this to our Transactions, in 1876, you established your claim to this, the highest scientific distinction the Academy can bestow.”

(* Ferguson, aware that John’s second language was German, chose a German term to refer to the forested Birmingham domain; he then alluded to the river at Florence, the home city of Galileo who similarly was fifty years old when starting his career in astronomy.)

What sort of a man was this gifted westerner, descendent of the once noble de Berminghams, Lord Barons of Athenry (Figure 1)?

Figure 1: The Birmingham family tree, Dalgin branch, from the late 17th century on.



Despite the loss of most of his correspondence, his library and his personal effects, enough is known to secure him the title of extraordinary polymath. Not only was he an outstanding astronomer and acute geologist, he was a sensitive poet, a pianist and violinist, a vigorous athlete and long-distance walker, a mathematician, an engineer, a surveyor, an advocate of animal rights, a humourist, an apologist of deep reading and knowledge, a landlord who enjoyed the company of his tenants, and who gave generous harbour to three aged relatives. He was also self-effacing, sometimes to a fault: a man of strong faith not advertised. What then might have been the appearance of this man?

A Portrait: its Discovery

The dedication inside the biography of John Birmingham - 'Tuam and Ireland's New Star' - is faced by a blank page. Blank, that is, except for a centred signature reading "Very truly, J Birmingham" and reproduced from John's 23 March 1876 letter to Thomas French, assistant librarian in Trinity College Dublin. But that is not all. At the bottom of the page a keening footer reads: "Signature of John Birmingham, of whom there is no known surviving photograph nor portrait."

Now, some twenty years on, we can joyfully announce that a portrait has been identified. To place this unexpected discovery in context it is necessary to outline the known history of John Birmingham's effects, following his death in September 1884 and up to our present time. His will, dated 30 August 1884, shows that he divided his estate amongst his several relatives, additionally granting full ownership to many of his tenants. The most important items, including Millbrook House and grounds, went to his uncle Arthur D. Bell, resident with him there; other items to Mary Louise Birmingham, daughter of his cousin Michael Blake Birmingham, residing in Rathgar; and grants to the husband of Mary Louise, Denis J. Kirwan, land agent and purchaser in 1863 of Dalgin House from Michael, son of Michael Blake Birmingham.

Two years after John Birmingham's death, his uncle put all of John's personal belongings up for auction. The newspaper advertisement for this event cited 'valuable family pictures', according to John's will already specifically allotted to Denis J. Kirwan. What is certain is these came down through Denis J's son Charles to grandson Denis B. Kirwan. When in 1956 young Denis sold Dalgin House and moved to Dublin (possibly the house of his grandmother), he brought with him the surviving Birmingham pictures together with packages of documents and other particulars. During this time he befriended Mrs Carmel Comerford of Dun Laoghaire, and following his death in 1985 she found herself in possession of the Dalgin Kirwan-Birmingham archive.

In 1994 the attention of Mrs Comerford was attracted to an article in the Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society, entitled 'John Birmingham of Tuam - a Most Unusual Landlord'. She contacted its author (P.M.), and mentioned she had portraits and items that had been granted over to her by Denis Kirwan. This led to meetings and discussions in Dublin and Milltown, and a few years thereafter she very generously donated the portraits of John Birmingham's great-grandfather, Major John Birmingham of Dalgin, and grandfather John ('Seán Rua') Birmingham, to the Milltown Heritage Centre, opened in 2005 by President Mary McAleese. What however Mrs Comerford seems to have been unaware of was that a portrait of John Birmingham himself lay hidden within the large volume of archive documents.

The Portrait (Figure 2)

The portrait was uncovered by Mrs Comerford's daughter (R.C.S.) while carefully sorting through a portion of the Kirwan-Birmingham material in summer 2021. A mere 8 cm square in size, it had been taped to cover a space of slightly smaller size cut out of an A4 sheet of cardboard. The portrait is a watercolour painted on thin cardboard. The back of the portrait bears the signature, 'John Birmingham', and, in the same hand, "London Nov^r 1 ..." with black tape hiding the continuation of the date (Figure 3). The tape's tenacity in adhesion will require specialist removal. A pencilled rectangle immediately inside the margins of the portrait hints that it (the portrait) has been cut out from a larger original. The similarity of John's signature thereon with that on his 1876 letter to librarian Thomas French might suggest that John was some sixty years old when he sat for this portrait; but the face would seem younger than that, hinting perhaps his early fifties soon after discovering the 'new star'. It is interesting to seek facial features in common with those of his grandfather, Sean 'Rua/Dearg MacFheoris' Birmingham (Figure 4).

Figure 2: Portrait of John Birmingham, made in London at a date yet to be uncovered



Figure 3. Obverse of the portrait, showing signature of John Birmingham.

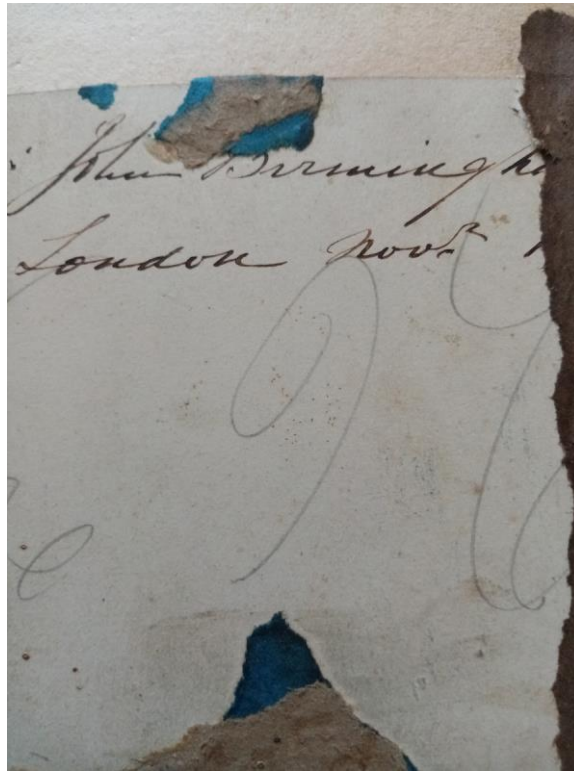


Figure 4: Portraits of John Birmingham's grandfather and great-grandfather, hung in the Milltown Heritage Centre. Painted by 'Bruscette' in the late 1760s or early 1770s.



The character of John Birmingham: eulogies and memories

A man's character informs his face. Equally, in the way he acts, speaks and in what and the way he writes. Given that most of what we know of John Birmingham comes from his written works, both serious and light-hearted, it is these where his character can be sought. His essays reveal three aspects of his personality: courtesy, modesty and an inner joy. The first two are clearly recognised in the eulogies that follow. The third of its nature is more private. To better appreciate John's 'inscape', it needs to be appreciated what he inherited. The descendants of his grandfather, Sean Rua Birmingham, were left in a parlous financial position from his huge borrowings in support of payments to the House of Lords, seeking to obtain the title Lord Athenry (where he failed). Thus John in particular faced lawsuits throughout his life in dispute over ownership of Millbrook House and his north Galway properties. He could never have rested in security. Was his strong faith his rock? As it was, 'inner joy' burst out unpredictably and sometimes inappropriately in his writings, whether the topic were astronomy, geology, roads or railways, satire or parody, or innocent mischief with his tenants. Specific examples can be found in his biography.

Here, let those who knew John eulogise on his character. Although his passing was widely noted outside Ireland, the fact that he had never sought an advantageous career position away in Dublin, London or Berlin meant that eulogies were restricted almost entirely to publications in his native place. Brief extracts follow:

Galway Vindicator, 10 September 1884, 'Death of John Birmingham, Esq.':

"The lamented deceased was a man of powerful physique; simple as a child, and one of the most sincere of friends. He was silent, and of a melancholy temperament, very abstemious and imbued with deep devotional feelings."

Tuam News, 12 September 1884, 'Mr. John Birmingham—his scholarship—other traits of character—death':

[On his being endowed with the Royal Irish Academy's Cunningham Gold Medal] "Although his name for years past—say, twenty or longer— had been known in Germany, in Denmark, in Rome, and in St Petersburg, as well as at Washington and Sydney, he had hitherto achieved no great work for which he could have earned the thanks of a nation. As a poet, he had, it is true, written a work, but it was of a controversial character, [one] not pleasing in the eyes of those in power and place at the period. The great work which renders Mr. Birmingham's name *super sidera notus* is his book on the fixed stars. His name will be linked with discoveries in the science of astronomy as long as that science will be cultivated on earth."

Tuam Herald, 13 September 1884, 'Death of John Birmingham, Esq.':

[note: this is the second of three memoria that the Herald published within the month. Very sadly, the first has not been preserved]

"His modesty was as great as his genius. As a friend he was genial, good humoured, and open hearted, hospitable — a delightful 'raconteur.' Such a fine specimen of humanity so well dowered by Nature with every gift and grace was child-like in self-suppression and humility, unduly sensitive to every passing difference and disagreement."

"Mr. Birmingham was a deeply read and accurate mathematician, a profound geologist, a most eminent naturalist, and a clever amateur at practical engineering. As a German and French scholar he had no equal in this locality, and his general acquaintance with continental literature was very extensive. Even our old tongue and its quaint antiquarian beauties did not appear too obscure for his varied and brilliant intellect, for he studied Celtic literature with very deep research.

His knowledge of music was most comprehensive and exact, enabling him to appreciate that art more keenly than an untrained ear can pretend to. His character was as was said of Sir Isaac Newton, 'that which [strives] to distinguish the scholar, the philosopher and the patriot, his modesty was as great as his genius.' As a friend he was genial, good humoured, and open hearted, hospitable and [highly] gifted -- a delightful 'raconteur,' an accurate historian, a much-travelled and wide-knowledged man, a devout Catholic and a true gentleman.

To live among the people where he was bred and born was his desire, and that local lure kept him unhappily from going where he would easily have won material honours. In physical as in intellectual development he was a Titan. - his giant muscular strength was unexampled and unequalled. His pedestrian feats were wondrously great and, in throwing a sledge or a weight, no man ever beat him, while in jumping he outdistanced any competitor.

He was a good neighbour, alive to every local want which he ever strove by pen and purse to redress and alleviate. Such was the honoured dead."

Tuam Herald, 27 September 1884. The late Mr. Birmingham. by 'A Friend' [Canon Ulick Bourke].

"DEAR SIR —Your very just and appreciative obituary notice of Mr John Birmingham's great scientific and literary fame has been read with deep interest and sympathy. The noble self-sacrificing character of the lamented deceased was as you know well appreciated by those who knew his many excellent qualities and which qualities gained for him universal esteem. . . In [my attempt to raise a] small tribute, I am sure every man of science in Europe cordially will join and I trust also every Irishman who respected the character and fame of as brilliant a countryman as the present age has produced."

[quoted by by Christy Molloy in his 'Milltown Sketches' (1995), from a source not cited]

"There was probably none other in the province as highly gifted with mental endowments who yet had such a quiet and inobtrusively [sic] rural life . . . there was no instance more telling than the record . . . that no man is a prophet in his own country. . . To live among the people where he was bred and born was his desire, and that local love kept him unhappily from going where he would have easily won honours."

Tuam Herald, 4 May 1918:

“Every one in Tuam and Co. Galway in the [eighteen] sixties and seventies was familiar with the striking appearance of Mr. John Birmingham, of Millbrook, near Milltown. He was a very highly cultured man, an astronomer, and a poet and a man of letters. He was a tall, gaunt, foreign looking man with a fine face and walked with a long stride. He was clean shaven with striking features and a great pedestrian. He thought nothing of walking into Tuam from Milltown, a distance of over ten miles and walking back in a day.”

Tuam Herald, 26 April 1919:

“When the late John Birmingham of Millbrook came in and out of Tuam we did not think at the time, he went about his way in so quiet and unostentatious a manner, was so unassuming and modest, that we really had a genius and a remarkable man in our midst in a million. . . . When going about amongst us he rarely spoke to any one unless spoken to, but when he did speak he was genial and pleasant. He had a slight hesitancy in his speech and stuttered somewhat.” . . .
“His funeral by his own request was a remarkable and characteristic one, fully emblematic of his modesty and hatred of humbug and pomp. By his will his body was put into a common deal coffin with no ornamentation, and of course no flowers or hat bands or scarves. He was drawn to the grave, a distance of fourteen miles, on a common cart and buried without stone or monument to mark his grave. Thus did this truly great man die.”

‘John Birmingham, Tuam and Ireland’s New Star’, 2002:

“In the busy and lively social round of the North Galway-South Mayo gentry he appeared as a strangely reticent bachelor. He was much more at ease in the company of his tenants, joshing, teasing and partying, heaving and wrestling. In contrast, at meetings of the Board of Guardians in Tuam in his later years, the meeting minutes reveal that he very rarely spoke.”

The eulogies are only one window into the character of John Birmingham. A deeper, more colourful insight comes from his poetry. His long poem ‘Anglicania’ is mainly devoted to stern, even fierce social commentary and apologetics, but in it he provides relief from this with unexpected lyrical passages. These reveal his sensitivity to landscape where, standing beside sad Erin on the summits of Connemara, he turns to view through the tenuous light of distance the deep history and mystery of his own land. This too is in his face.

Exemplary Teacher

For an appreciation of John Birmingham's talent for combined graphic description and logical structure of argument, it would be difficult to find a finer instance than his essay entitled 'A Crater in the Moon', published in 'Good Words for the Young', July 1867 issue). His science is never without a poetic tinge. The essay commences with a singular word: "Not among the countless phenomena that we see around us, and the myriad wonders of the distant sky, is there one that bears witness to creative design more forcibly than the airless moon". Here there is only space for the essay's finale, where John arguing how vital the Moon's location and size are for life, human affairs and even astronomy itself:

"Our satellite was considered by an eminent philosopher as affording a proof that the world was not formed by an omnipotent intelligence. [Pierre-Simon] Laplace says that the moon is not situated to the best advantage for giving light, as she does not always shine in the absence of the sun. To attain the object for which the partizans of final causes imagine her intended, it would have been sufficient at the beginning to place her in opposition to the sun in the plane of the ecliptic, and at a hundredth part of the distance of the sun from the earth, at the same time giving her a motion by which the opposition would ever be maintained. That distance would secure her against eclipse, and there would thus be a continual full moon rising regularly at sunset.

But it may be proved mathematically that the moon could not retain that position with respect to the earth; and, even if she could, the advantages suggested by Laplace would be more than doubtful. In the tides we see clearly that it is not her light-giving properties alone that mark her usefulness; and her attractive force, which is shown by various other phenomena of less obvious, though, perhaps, not less real importance - such as precession and nutation - would be vastly modified by her removal to near four times her present distance. In her relatively unchanging position she would be far from serving, as she does now, for the closest determination of the longitude. By the non-occurrence of eclipses we should be deprived of most admirable and instructive phenomena. We should never watch in wonder the veiling of the lunar disc, nor mark the earth's roundness in her coppery shadow. We should never, and with still more solicitude, observe the sun himself varying, like a mystic day-moon in rapid phase, up to the awe-inspiring moment when he vanishes among the kindling stars; nor should we ever await in astonishment that most enrapturing of celestial sights when, in the annular eclipse, the thin sun-streams flow round on the central darkness, and encircle the pitchy space like a bright setting that lost its gem. Supposing still that the moon could be maintained in the position favoured by Laplace, her disc would appear near sixteen times smaller than at present, and her illuminating and other influences would be in the same degree less. I am not aware that the philosopher, to meet those objections, suggested any increase of size; and it might be said that the moon of eminent physical and scientific value would not, according to his plan, exist - neither would the moon of poetry. The ever-round and over-diminutive-looking satellite would furnish no striking theme for description or romance, nor suggest to genius some of its grandest conceptions. Milton could not have told of the sun *looking from behind* the eclipsing orb in a simile with which no other writer can be compared for an instant; nor, again, could he have thrilled us with the description of the arch-fiend's shield, whose—

"Broad circumference
Hung on his shoulders like the moon."

In a scientific point of view, it will be easily understood that if the distant and nightly-appearing satellite had still the power of giving any effective light to the earth, in place of being an object of high interest it would be a positive nuisance to the astronomer. How few of its great wonders would the heavenly space have revealed to us through the veil of an eternal moonlight! The most beautiful systems of the double and multiple stars, with their different lights and motions, would be scarcely noticed. We should never receive delight from the exquisite charms of the many-hued cluster, dappled with coloured fires, like the flashing of the diamond, the sapphire, and the ruby; nor should we know of the far-remote cloud-worlds, with all their surprising shapes of the ring, the sphere, the spindle, the spiral, and a thousand indescribable forms, many of which are already proved by the spectroscope to be no other than what they appear to be - luminous vapour.

And if those mystic glories of the sky would remain unseen, so, also, would the wonders of its darkness. We should have no speculations about the rayless regions, such as stain the brightness of the *Milky Way*, or set off the splendours of the *Southern Cross*. The deep gulf in the great nebula of Orion would be as unseen as the marvellous promontories that it divides; and, undiscovered among the brilliant tracts of *Scorpio*, would remain the dreary aperture of an Avernian blackness, through which we can perceive, as it were, the eternal night of outermost space, whose secrets no telescope has ever penetrated. Our acquaintance with the moon's own appearance would be vastly circumscribed. At such a distance we should have little pleasure in contemplating the great landscape of half a planet. Thousands of details now plainly enough visible would be only imperfectly or totally unseen; and it is probable that we should never be attracted by such sights as the obscuration of Linné [a very young crater being asserted by some contemporary astronomers to be actively exhaling volcanic steam].”

John Birmingham's awareness of his pedigree

We cannot leave John without noting the family pedigree in which, for one private moment, he revealed his pride. This came in his fourth of ten letters to the renowned astronomer Fr. Angelo Secchi, S.J., at the Vatican Observatory, and dated 'Palm Sunday 1876'. Secchi at this time was compiling his own catalogue of the red stars and their timing in stellar evolution. His correspondence with John soon made him realise that here was the man with the ability and intent to do a first-class job, and to him he and other professional astronomers generously handed over their own observations.

The relevant section of John's fourth letter begins:

"I regret to say that you make a great mistake in calling me 'Revd.' for I fear I have little claim to the title in any sense of the word. However there were Reverends in my family before now, and even an Archbishop of Tuam, and they have ever been noted for their devotion to their Faith, for which they suffered deeply in times of persecution and lost immense tracts of property. Many of the principal old Abbeys of this country were founded by them and it grieves me now to see their ruins."

He then quotes a paragraph from the 1762 'Hibernia Dominicana', in Latin, that summarises the founder Birmingham, Barons of Athenry, and ends with an apology "for thus troubling you with family history which cannot have much interest for you", before returning to discuss the various properties of individual red stars.

Let John have the last word!

When this you see
Remember me,
Your friend Josh B.
Etarlinee