

The Life of **James Lawson Drummond**

1783 - 1853



James Lawson Drummond ... A man of 'assiduous and unremitting zeal'

On the southern edge of the village of Ahoghill in County Antrim stands St Colmanell's Parish Church, an attractive building in the Gothic style. Within the walls of this mid-Victorian place of worship is a monument to the memory of James L. Drummond, who died on 17 May 1853 at the age of 68. The inscription tells us several things about his life: he was a surgeon in the Royal Navy, he was the 'Professor of Anatomy in the Royal Academical Institution', and he was the 'Founder of the Natural History Society of Belfast'. Who was James Lawson Drummond and why was he commemorated in Ahoghill, at some distance, relatively speaking, from his main centre of activity? This booklet will attempt to address these issues by exploring the life of

a remarkable individual who died almost 170 years ago.

Family background

James Lawson Drummond was the son of William Drummond and Rose Hare from Larne, or at least the Larne area of County Antrim. Drummond senior was a surgeon, whose indenture of apprenticeship to Dr William Hamilton of Larne was still in existence just over a century ago. He obviously had a high regard for the doctor for he named his eldest son William Hamilton Drummond (b. 1778). The exact date of James Lawson Drummond's birth is not known, but the year is usually given as 1783, although going on the age at which he died, as recorded on the monument in Ahoghill, it may have been 1784.

After whom was he named? The answer to this question may be found in a letter in the Admiralty records in The National Archives,



Portrait of James Lawson Drummond derived from a watercolour by W.C. Day of London and presented to the Society in 1843.

Kew, written on 24 February 1781 by a Lieutenant Lawson, the commander of the tender *Bridport*, then in Belfast Lough. In this letter Lawson sought confirmation from his superiors of the appointment of William Drummond as surgeon's mate. The *Bridport* sailed regularly between Belfast Lough and ports in England, transporting young men for service in the Royal Navy, and the care Lawson took of his human cargo was highlighted in the press as an encouragement for those considering such a career. It may well have been the case that the elder Drummond, if indeed he

was the individual named in the letter (there are no other obvious candidates), named his second son after this officer. In addition to two sons, the Drummonds also had a daughter, Isabella (b. 1776), who was to marry Andrew Marshall, a distinguished surgeon in early nineteenth-century Belfast.

On the question of James Lawson Drummond's birthplace, there is no general agreement. Most authorities give Larne, although his obituary in the *Belfast Mercury*, published three days after his death, names his place of birth as Ballyclare, where his father had established a medical practice before moving to Belfast in 1786. In May of that year the *Belfast News Letter* carried a notice announcing that William Drummond, 'Surgeon and Man Midwife', had opened a shop in North Street in the town where he was selling 'an assortment of medicine of the best quality, which he will sell on the lowest terms.' The item continued: 'In gratitude



to the inhabitants of Ballyclare and the surrounding country, he will attend them when call'd, on the same terms as formerly; hopes the success which attended his practice in that neighbourhood for eight years, will recommend him to their future favours ...'. Only a little over a year later, on 18 May 1787, however, Drummond senior died of fever and was interred in the burial ground on the site of what had been the 'Corporation Church' in High Street (where St George's now stands).

In straitened circumstances, Rose Drummond began a small business to support her young family. Later we know that she operated a circulating library from her house in Castle Street. Her sons attended Belfast Academy, at that time in Donegall Street, where the principal was Rev. Dr William Bruce, a man who was to exercise a strong influence over both youths. On several occasions James Lawson Drummond was named as the recipient of a premium or

certificate for superior answering in the summer and Christmas examinations, Latin being the subject at which he excelled. Whereas William Hamilton Drummond entered the Church and had a long ministry, first in Belfast (1800–15) and then in Dublin (from 1815 onwards), his younger brother chose a very different path.



The statue of Admiral Lord Cuthbert Collingwood atop his monument at Tynemouth, England.

Naval surgeon

In December 1799 James Lawson Drummond appeared before the Governor and Directors of Apothecaries Hall in Dublin and 'received a certificate of his proper qualification to become an apprentice to learn the business of an apothecary'. There is no evidence that he ever obtained a licence to practice as an apothecary, but in the early years of the 1800s he worked alongside his future brother-in-law, Andrew Marshall, a former surgeon's mate in the Navy, who had an apothecary's shop in High Street, Belfast. Drummond also became involved in the intellectual life of the town, then a settlement of around 20,000 people, joining the Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge (now the Linen Hall Library) and the Belfast Literary Society, which his brother William had helped to found.

Whether seeking adventure or further experience in his chosen field, Drummond joined the Naval Medical Service in 1806, much to his family's disapproval. His brother wrote to their sister Isabella with a sense of horror at what lay in store for him: 'Could you bear to see your dear James a prisoner in the cockpit, at the mercy of wind, and waves, and cannon balls, after being skeletonised by a miserable servitude of five years over the pestle and mortar. No, no, James, thou deservest a better fate.'

Based in the Mediterranean, where the fleet was under the command of Admiral Lord Cuthbert Collingwood, who had succeeded Nelson at Trafalgar, Drummond served on a number of vessels, eventually, on Collingwood's orders, being appointed surgeon on HMS *San Juan*, a warship which had been captured from the French. According to the monument in Ahoghill Drummond served 'his country with distinction' under

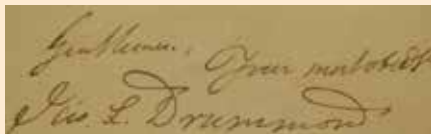


Collingwood, 'by whom his talents, zeal and professional skill were highly appreciated.'

Service in the Mediterranean allowed Drummond to study the natural world in different settings. From 1811–13 the *San Juan* was 'anchored close to the New Mole at Gibraltar', which provided Drummond with the opportunity in the spring and autumn to observe the migration paths of swallows, as he related years afterwards to his friend, the naturalist William Thompson. After receiving permission to retire from the Navy in May 1813, Drummond qualified in Medicine from Edinburgh in 1814 with an MD Thesis concerning the comparative anatomy of the eye. Written entirely in Latin, as was then the custom, it was dedicated to William Bruce, the Principal of his old school.



Royal Belfast Academical Institution ('Inst'), where Drummond was Professor of Anatomy for over 30 years.



Drummond's signature from a letter to Belfast Inst, 7 March 1820 (PRONI, SCH/524/7B/14/7).

Return to Belfast and subsequent medical career

On returning to Belfast he opened a medical practice, became Physician to the Belfast Dispensary and Attending Physician to the Fever Hospital, and became involved in the Belfast Institution for Diseases of the Eye. His real passion, however, lay in teaching and further study and in October 1817 he wrote to the Joint Boards of the recently established Belfast Academical Institution ('Inst') offering *gratis* a series of lectures on medicine, specifically 'On the Anatomy, Physiology, and Diseases of the Human Bones'. A little over a year later, he gave up general practice and other medical commitments, and joined the staff of Inst as Professor of Anatomy and Physiology, retaining this position for 31 years.

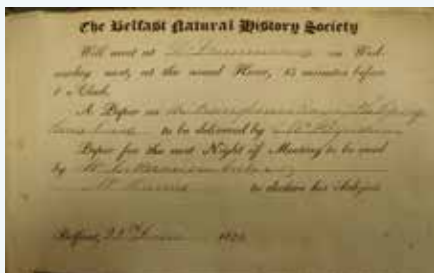
His main role at Inst was to help students preparing for the Presbyterian ministry to acquire a smattering of medical knowledge, and, as he told a parliamentary committee in 1825, he 'taught a very wide field of natural history', which set his course apart from courses in Anatomy taught in medical schools. His remuneration was small, initially only £50 per annum, and for two years from 1823, when funds were tight, he drew no pay at all.

Drummond's most resounding achievement 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 over £200 (at least £20,000 today) from his own pocket. It was therefore fitting that when the Medical 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.

Natural History Society



Invitation to a meeting of the Belfast Natural History Society in Drummond's house in Chichester Street, Belfast, 1822 (PRONI, D3263/E/1).

In the late eighteenth century, a wave of literary and philosophical societies, gradually spread across the newly industrialised areas of the north of England, especially textile towns (like Belfast), and these were followed by natural history societies. Drummond was the driving force being the creation of such a society in Belfast in 1821. The year

before, he had galvanised matters by publishing anonymously his *Thoughts on the Study of Natural History*. The *Belfast Mercury* was later to comment: 'This little work characterised all the energy which marked Dr Drummond in his favourite pursuits, and by all that simplicity and plainness of illustration whereby he was enabled to expound the most abstruse truths, and render them interesting and attractive subjects of study.'

The publication catalysed the Society's formation, with its first meeting were convened at Drummond's house at 5 Chichester Street, Belfast, on 5 June 1821, when he was elected the first President. He retained this position until 1842, apart from a five-year gap in the mid-1820s (when he was Vice-President). The Society's object was '... for the cultivation of that science in its various forms, and more particularly for the investigation of the natural history of Ireland.' The Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society's *Centenary*

Volume (the 'and Philosophical' was added in 1842 to reflect its broadening remit) is dedicated: 'To the enthusiasm of the eight youthful founders: Francis Archer, James L. Drummond, James Grimshaw, George C. Hyndman, James MacAdam, William M'Clure, Robert Patterson and Robert Simms.'

They shared certain characteristics, especially youth (seven of them were in their early 20s, or younger, and Drummond, their leader, was aged less than 40). In 1833, a report in the *Dublin Penny Journal* had this to say about the Society:

“ It commenced among a few respectable young gentlemen of that town, nearly all of whom were engaged in commercial business, and who devoted those leisure hours to literary and scientific pursuits, which young men of their age and class too generally employ in folly or debauchery. ”

Beginning in July 1821, Drummond delivered more than 30 lectures to the Society. His first was on 'Botanical characters of the roots of plants', followed soon afterwards by others on the stems of plants and the surface of plants. His final lecture to the Society was in November 1842 when his subject matter was the human digestive system.

The Belfast Natural History Society

Will meet at Dr Drummond's on Wednesday next, at the usual Hour, 15 minutes before 8 o'clock.

A Paper on the transformations of the Lepidopterous Insects.

Paper for the next Night of meeting to be read by Mr Patterson on Ants.

Mr Simms to declare his subject.

Belfast, 24th June 1822.

Text from the invitation to a meeting of the Belfast Natural History Society.



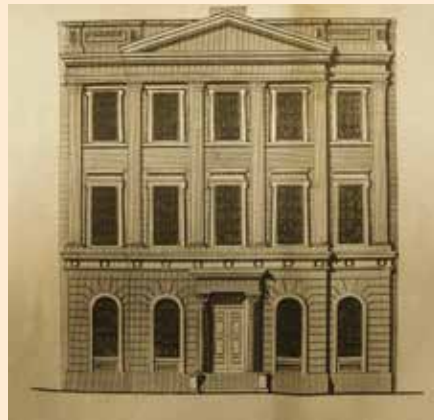
The Museum



Admission ticket to the opening of the Museum, 1 November 1831 (PRONI, D3263/E/1).

Drummond's next major contribution to Belfast life was organising the fund-raising to build the Museum in College Square North, the first in Ireland to be built by voluntary subscription. It was opened on 1 November 1831, with the inaugural lecture delivered by Drummond himself. The Invitation design demonstrated the Society's range of interests. The Museum was sited close to Inst, but the intimate relationship between the two buildings was destroyed by the construction of

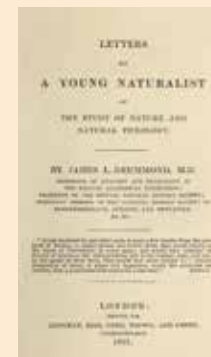
the 'Tech' early in the twentieth century. It was built there to be close to Inst's Art Department but proved to be a severe case of the child overlying the mother. The Museum met the prerequisites for a Natural History Society, including a forum for discussion, a library to store collections of books and the Society's Proceedings, and 'Cabinets of Curiosities,' which the Society assembled, and the members filled, with great vigour.



Engraving of the Museum from a poster of 1831 advertising the opening hours of the Museum (PRONI, D3263/E/1).



The Old Museum Building in College Square North, one of Belfast's finest buildings.



Title page of Drummond's most successful book, 'Letters to a Young Naturalist' (1831).

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, a view he shared with his brother, William. His *First Steps in Botany* ran to four editions. He also had the honour of having a Sea Cucumber named after him. Drummond, drew up the following description from the living animal:

Bangor, June 27, 1839. – *Halothuria* dredged yesterday of an olivaceous and white colour; at first the shape of a lemon, and nearly as large as a middle-sized one; today, 10 inches long, contracting itself slowly in various places, but has not yet shown its tentacles. It has five broad longitudinal bands of tubercle-like suckers running from end to end; these have four in each transverse row; suckers light brown; down the middle of each of the five series a whitish band extends; spaces between the belts of suckers of a bluish-white, with numerous irregular narrow transverse whiter lines of various breadth.



A Sea Cucumber – Cucumaria Drummondii – was named in Drummond's honour by his friend, the naturalist William Thompson (Edward Forbes, 'A history of British star-fishes' (1841), p. 223)

Space does not permit a more thorough exploration of his achievements, and it is only possible to note in passing his many other contributions to life in Belfast and beyond. In the late 1820s his interest in Botany, the branch of Natural History to which 'he had always devoted himself most ardently', led him to become 'an active and zealous promoter' of the creation of the Belfast Botanical and Horticultural Society, which established the Botanic Gardens in the town.

Another of his interests was fine art and he was a patron of the talented Belfast artist Andrew Nicholl. In the summer of 1842, he chaired a meeting in the Museum at which it was resolved to form a society 'for the promotion of Fine Arts in the North of Ireland', which was to be known as the Northern Irish Art Union. Drummond himself was appointed the secretary of the new association. In the brief biographical sketch of his life prepared by S. Shannon Millin for the BNHPS *Centenary Volume*, it was written:

His life was not marked by any startling incident, nor was the world enriched by any scientific discovery as the result of his individual exertions; but it may be safely asserted that by his assiduous and unrelenting zeal the intellectual life of Belfast was considerably advanced during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Domestic life

Drummond was a serial monogamist but had no children: his first two wives predeceased him. In 1824 he married Jane Getty, whose family belonged to the Third Belfast Presbyterian Church, the 'orthodox' congregation in Rosemary Street, where there were also two 'non-subscribing' churches, one of which had previously been pastored by Drummond's brother William. Jane was the daughter of John Getty, a merchant based in Donegall Street, but with roots in Larne. She died on 8 February 1831; hers is the last name on a tombstone just east of St Cedmas's Parish Church, Inver, Larne, which begins with the death of a Robert Getty in 1698.

Drummond's second wife Catherine, daughter of the late Alexander Mitchell of Newgrove, whom he married in St George's Church, Belfast, in 1834. Their marriage lasted 15 years before her death on 27 December 1848. His third marriage, on 10 May 1850, was to Eliza O'Rorke, of Ballybollan House, near Ahoghill, County Antrim. She was more than 20 years his junior, from an ancient Catholic family with roots in County Leitrim, but the couple had a Church of Ireland ceremony in St Ann's Church, Belfast.



Ballybollan House, near Ahoghill, formerly the home of the O'Rorke family.

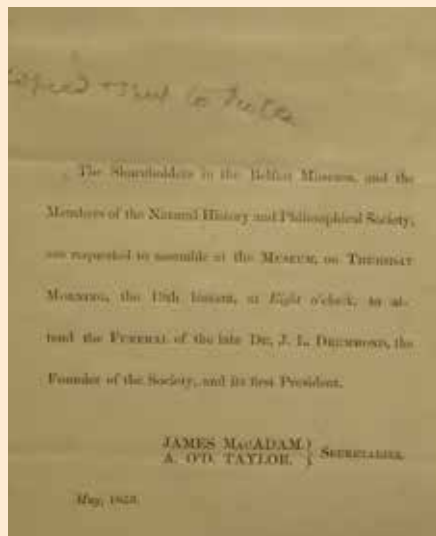


Death and burial

Drummond had become virtually housebound during his final years, partly through age, but also through a serious injury as the result of an accident in 1849. He remained mentally active, however, and in the last year of his life Drummond, ‘...pursued with all the ardour of his youth’ two works for publication – one on the wild flowers of Ireland, and another on conchology. In the spring of 1853 he suffered a severe attack of influenza, from which he never really recovered, and he died on 17 May 1853 at his home, 8 College Square North, where he had resided since the early 1830s. Two days later his body was taken to Ahoghill for burial in the graveyard adjoining what was then the Parish Church (the present St Colmanell’s Church was built more than ten years later).

Funeral announcements were issued to the shareholders in the Museum

and the members of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society requesting them to assemble at the Museum at 8 o’clock that morning to observe the removal of Drummond’s remains from his home. A similar announcement was circulated to the Board of Managers and Visitors of Inst, Drummond being the ‘Senior Surviving Professor of the Institution’.



The announcement of Drummond’s funeral issued to the shareholders in the Museum and the members of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society (PRONI, D3263/E/1).

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

“Of those meetings we can speak from personal observation, for about this period we happened to visit Belfast, and had the honor [sic] to be invited to one of them through their excellent president, Dr James Drummond, and we confess, were never in our lives more surprised or gratified. 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 speedily be forgotten.”

Eliza Drummond

Though married for only three years Eliza had shown considerable devotion to her husband during his final years. After his death she returned to her native mid-Antrim. To her exertions belong, almost certainly, the handsome monument in St Colmanell’s and the fine grave with iron railings rising from a sandstone plinth in the old churchyard. Years later Eliza was remembered as a ‘tall, old lady with grey-white hair, who lived alone, with maid to look after her, in small house at Gracehill.’ She remained active into her old age and was recalled as a ‘very bustling lady’, who entertained visitors by playing the piano. Nearly every Sunday she was driven over to Ballybollan for lunch in her childhood home where a portrait of her husband hung on the dining room wall.

Eliza died at Gracehill on 27 November 1896 and was laid to rest



in the same plot in Ahoghill. Among the bequests in her will was her late husband's gold watch and chain, which was given to Robert Drummond, son of her brother-in-law William Hamilton Drummond. She also desired her nephew, Ambrose Howard O'Rorke, 'to erect a suitable tablet or monument to my memory over my grave or in the Parish Church of Ahoghill'. This he did in St Colmanell's (though he erred in placing the letters LLD, rather than MD, after the name of her husband).



The fine stained-glass window in St Mary's Catholic Church, Ahoghill, in memory of Ambrose O'Rorke of Ballybollan.

Grave refurbishment

As part of its bicentennial celebrations, the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society turned its attention to the grave of its Founding President, James Lawson Drummond in the old graveyard in Ahoghill. A visit to the grave in the early spring of 2021 confirmed that the memorial was in urgent need of refurbishment, and it was decided that the Society's should be to undertake this work in Drummond's honour to mark its Bicentenary. On 5 June 2021, two hundred years to the day from the founding of the Society, an outing to Ahoghill was organised, with visits to the grave of the Drummonds, to St Colmanell's to see the monument to Dr Drummond, and to St Mary's Catholic Church where there are memorials to the O'Rorkes and a stained-glass window dedicated to the family.



The grave of the Drummonds in Ahoghill Old Graveyard prior to its restoration.

Following discussions with Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, which has responsibility for the graveyard in Ahoghill, the current President, Professor Alun Evans, entered into a three-year contract, on behalf of the Society, to take over the refurbishment of the grave. Nathan Morrow, of The Rock Stone Masonry in Glenarm, was commissioned to undertake the restoration work, which

involved replacing the sub-walls with authentic old bricks and completely replacing the badly deteriorated sandstone plinths in fresh sandstone. The railings were basically sound, but lead replacements for the decorative cast iron collars were required.



An Artist's Impression by Deva Evans (March 2023) of the way the refurbished grave will appear.



At the time of writing, the refurbishment is at an advanced stage, and the Society is planning a further outing to view the finished result in the summer of 2023. This will roughly coincide with the 170th anniversary of Dr Drummond's death.



St Colmanell's Parish Church, Ahoghill, consecrated in 1865.



A memorial to James Lawson Drummond can be seen in St Colmanell's Parish Church.

Further reading

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Notes

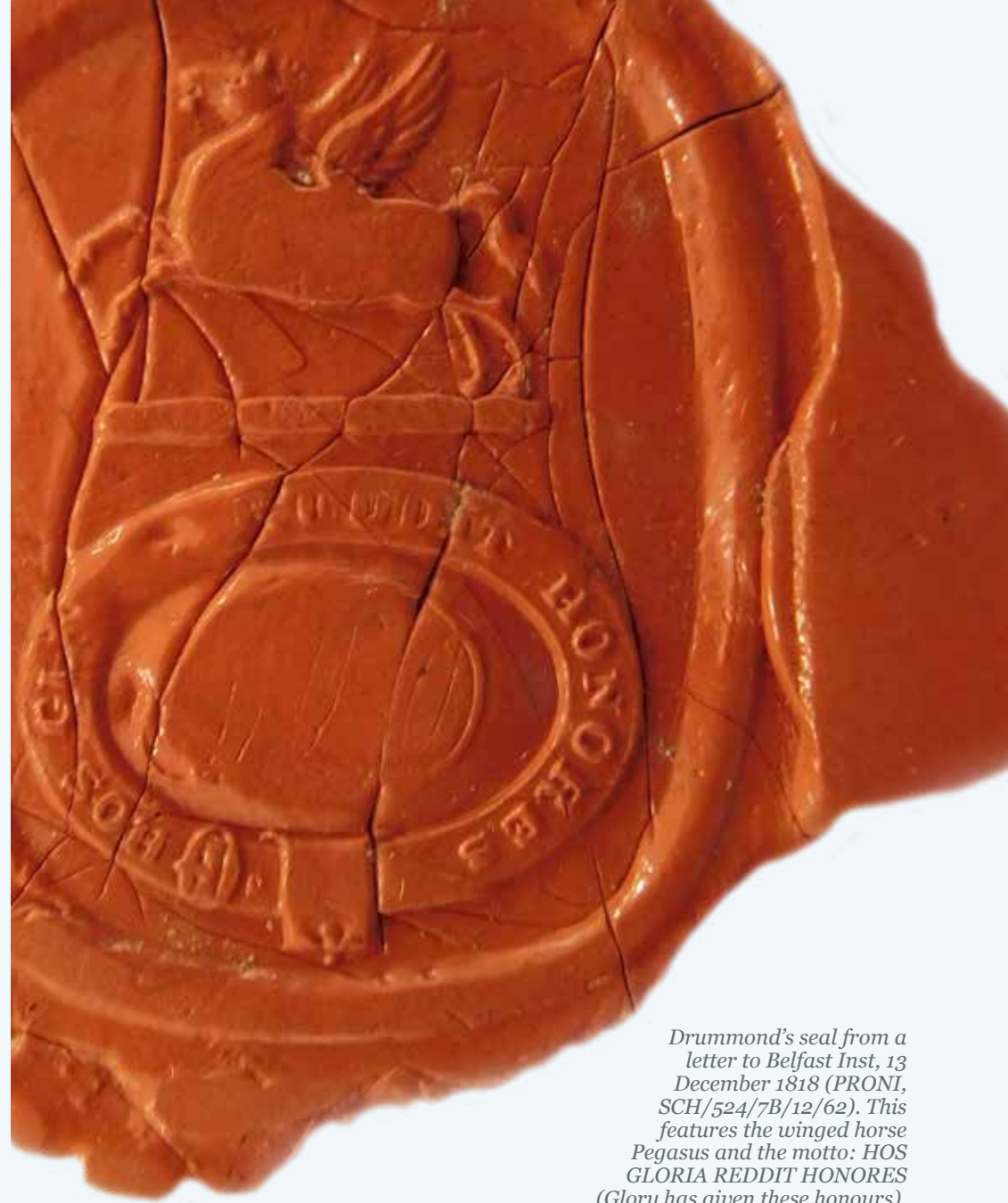
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Drummond's seal from a letter to Belfast Inst, 13 December 1818 (PRONI, SCH/524/7B/12/62). This features the winged horse Pegasus and the motto: HOS GLORIA REDDIT HONORES (Glory has given these honours). This was the crest and motto used by the seventeenth-century Scottish poet William Drummond of Hawthornden.



This commemorative guide has been produced in May 2023 by the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society with Mid and East Antrim Borough Council to mark the restoration of James Lawson Drummond's grave and that of his wife, Eliza O'Rorke, in Ahoghill Old Church Yard.

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Front cover image: Seal used by James Lawson Drummond (PRONI, SCH/524/7B/12/62).



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