Commentary: Darwin’s *Origin*: the Irish connection

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A few years after his 5-year round the world voyage aboard HMS Beagle, Charles Darwin purchased Down House in the village of Down in Kent. There he began to ponder the implications of what he had collected and observed, a process that ultimately led to the publication of ‘On the Origin of Species’ more than 20 years later. The delay is said to have been due to Darwin’s agonising over the furore he expected would ensue when the bombshell of his theory was unleashed on Christian orthodoxy. The village of Down subsequently changed the spelling of its name to ‘Downe’, to avoid postal confusion with the Irish County Down. The name of Darwin’s house retained its spelling, which was a pretty coincidence, for without the actions of two members of County Down’s landed families, Darwin would almost certainly have never set foot on the Beagle.

In their ‘Darwin’, Desmond and Moore give the background to Darwin’s presence on the ship:

Fitzroy could not be familiar with his subordinates lest it weaken his command, but shunning all society was risky. Loneliness and isolation could take a terrible toll at sea. The Beagle’s former captain Pringle Stokes had shot himself off the South American coast. And Fitzroy feared his own hereditary disposition – in 1822 his uncle, Viscount Castlereagh, had slit his throat in a fit of depression [in fact he was then Foreign Secretary]. So he had decided to take a dining companion.

Pringle Stokes had shot himself in the head at Port Famine in the Strait of Magellan in August 1828, but he botched the job and lingered for 12 days before gangrene carried him away. Stokes was born in Surrey in 1793, boarded his first ship, the Ariadne, in 1806, and was made Captain of the Beagle in 1825. After Stokes’ tragic death, Robert Fitzroy was put in command and the vessel returned to England in the autumn of 1830. With him came four Fuegian Indians: a girl of 9 years nicknamed Fuegia Basket, and two males aged 20 and 26 years–these three had been taken as hostages when Indians had stolen a whaling boat used for surveying near shore; and James Button, a 14-year-old boy who Fitzroy had traded for a mother-of-pearl button. After their arrival in England, the Beagle was laid up and one of the male hostages died of smallpox. Fitzroy placed the remaining three with a Reverend Wilson at the Walthamstow Infants School.

The plan was to teach the Fuegians English, arithmetic and ‘the plainer truths of Christianity’ before repatriating them 2 or 3 years later, presumably to establish a small outpost of ‘civilisation’ in their homeland. Fitzroy’s hand was forced, however, as the 26-year-old had ‘fastened his sexual attentions’ on the 10-year-old Fuegia Basket. After only 7 months at the School, Fitzroy was going to extraordinary lengths, digging deep into his own pocket, to return his charges to Tierra del Fuego. By chance, the only boat available was the Beagle.

Fitzroy was a keen student of ‘Physiognomy’, and the new fad of ‘Phrenology’ or ‘Bumpology’, as he referred to it, and at first thought that Darwin’s nose foretold a lack of ‘energy and determination’. Nevertheless, the relationship gelled and the epic 5-year voyage began in the autumn of 1831. The objectives, apart from the repatriation, were 2-fold: most importantly to continue the admiralty’s surveying of the coast of South America to produce accurate naval charts; and to determine the exact longitude of all the ports which the Beagle would visit on its westward trip home. To accomplish this, the Beagle carried 22 chronometers to produce an accurate average time—a clockwork illustration of The Wisdom of Crowds.

Captain Robert Fitzoy was 26 years of age at the start of the voyage and 4 years Darwin’s senior. As we have seen, he had good reason to be worried about depression. Stokes’ fate was a bad enough reminder of the stresses of command but Fitzroy’s own family history must have concerned him. His mother, Lady Frances Anne Fitzroy was Lord Castlereagh’s sister.
Lord Castlereagh’s father, Robert Stewart, came from Ulster Scots Presbyterian stock and his paternal grandfather, Alexander Stewart of Ballylawn, Co. Donegal, was reputed to have been a pedlar. Castlereagh was born in Dublin in 1769 and was christened Robert for his father. His mother was a Seymour-Conway, a family noted for its eccentricity, if not mental instability. Robert was the second son, but his elder brother died in infancy and his mother died in childbirth when he was aged just 2 years. His father was raised to the peerage as Lord Londonderry in 1789 and the family’s seat was Mount Stewart in Co. Down (the Irish Ascendancy seldom have their seats in the County of their title). He was subsequently created Viscount Castlereagh, and Earl of Londonderry in 1796, which carried the courtesy title of Viscount Castlereagh for his eldest son.8

The young Viscount was still in his 20s when he was the Chief Secretary for Ireland at the time of the 1798 United Irish rebellion. There were allegations that he had condoned the use of torture during the uprising and in Ireland he became known as ’Bloody Castlereagh’. He also actively promoted the Act of Union of 1801, which won him few plaudits in his home country. However, the Irish patriot, Henry Grattan, told his son ‘Don’t be hard on Castlereagh, for he too loves Ireland’, but William Plunkett described him as ‘A green and sapless twig’. He subsequently had a glittering political career, despite fighting a duel in 1809 that forced him to resign. He is famous for his negotiations as British Foreign Secretary in the settlement after the Napoleonic wars, which took place in Vienna and Paris in 1814 and 1815, respectively. He is infamous for his part, as Leader of the House of Commons, in the Peterloo Massacre in 1819 and the introduction of the repressive ‘Six Acts’.8

In 1821, on the death of his father, Castlereagh assumed the title of ‘Marquess of Londonderry’, and was cheered tumultuously when he accompanied King George IV on a state visit to Ireland later that year. Cynics said his reception was because the people did not realize that Lord Londonderry was none other than Lord Castlereagh. Despite this light relief, pressure was mounting on Castlereagh: the previous year there had been an ugly incident known as the Cato Street Conspiracy. This was led by a Lincolnshire farmer’s illegitimate son called Arthur Thistlewood, and the plan was to murder the entire Cabinet and depose the King. Castlereagh and Lord Sidmouth, the Home Secretary, were to have their heads cut off and carried away as trophies, and the conspirators had prepared bags for this purpose. Luckily for Castlereagh and the others, the plot was thwarted. Before that Castlereagh was deeply involved in the messy business of the King’s attempt to divorce Queen Caroline.

Castlereagh’s suicide took place at Cray Farm at North Cray in Kent on 12 August 1822. It was expertly accomplished with a small penknife, which Castlereagh had acquired especially for the purpose. There ensued an inquest and, despite the circumstances of his death, he was buried in Westminster Abbey, having embraced the Established Church long before. Lord Byron, with characteristic venom, wrote:8

So He has cut his throat at last! – He? Who?
The man who cut his country’s long ago.

The events surrounding Castlereagh’s suicide are bizarre: for 8 or 10 days before an ‘unusual restlessness’ was apparent in Castlereagh and he drank more than he normally did. Apparently, the Secretary to the Treasury had received anonymous letters, one of which threatened to reveal Castlereagh’s ‘irregular conduct’ to his wife. These were not the first letters to surface: 3 years before, one had ‘threatened to tell her of his being seen going to an improper house. One Jennings was believed to be the source of the letters. Castlereagh by all accounts was devoted to his wife, although he was said to be ‘a great flirt and very fond of ladies’. A colleague’s wife described him thus: ‘He was above 6-feet high and had a remarkably fine commanding figure, very fine dark eyes, rather a high nose and a mouth whose smile was sweeter than it is possible to describe’ (Figure 1).8

![Figure 1](https://example.com/figure1.jpg) Lord Castlereagh (artist and date unknown), ©National Museums Northern Ireland 2009, Collection Ulster Museum, Belfast, photograph reproduced courtesy from the Trustees of National Museums, Northern Ireland
He had married Lady Emily Ann Hobart in 1794 when she was aged 22 years. She was then ‘strikingly attractive’ but, with time, she had developed a decided stoutness, although her legs remained very thin. She was often eccentrically rather than fashionably dressed. The couple were childless.

In another of these letters, the blackmailer referred to ‘a crime not to be named’. According to Montgomery Hyde, Castlereagh believed during his last days that he was about to be publicly denounced as a homosexual. This source asserts that there is no evidence that a homosexual offence had been committed. He believes that Castlereagh was the victim of entrapment by Jennings, and perhaps others.

As a result of a casual encounter one night during the session of 1819, Castlereagh was taken by his companion to a certain house, where they are both shown into an apartment furnished in the conventional manner of a brothel. His companion began to undress, when to his horrified amazement Castlereagh discovered that the person who had brought him there was not a woman, as he had supposed, but a youth dressed in woman’s clothes and disguised to pass as a woman.

Montgomery Hyde is quoting from a book, published privately by a Reverend Richardson in 1855, which states that at that point, ‘a couple of villains rushed in and accused him of being about to commit an act from which nature shrinks with horror; adding at the same time that they knew perfectly well who he was’. Montgomery Hyde, an Ulsterman himself, may have written a hagiography, aimed at removing any stain adhering to his fellow Ulsterman’s good name, but, to his credit, he ran a sustained campaign to decriminalize homosexuality.

Based on this evidence, one can accept that Castlereagh was not homosexual although it is hard to know what to make of his vision of ‘The Radiant Boy’ in Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal in 1793. From his bed he had been watching the embers of a fire when they burned brightly and a naked boy stepped into the room, growing in size and menace until Castlereagh confronted him, at which point he retreated. Irrespective of his sexuality, the fact remains that Castlereagh had been caught cheating on his wife.

Castlereagh discussed the letters with the Duke of Wellington and a few others on 7 August. On 9 August, he had an audience with the King in which he told him that ‘Police officers are searching for me to arrest me’, and when the King retorted ‘What nonsense! Why should they’, Castlereagh told him, ‘Because I am accused of the same crime as the Bishop of Clogher’. There followed an emotional scene in which Castlereagh claimed to be mad, and the King insisting that Castlereagh should see a doctor: in less than 72 h he was dead.

The Right Reverend Percy Jocelyn, Bishop of Clogher, was the third son of the first Earl of Roden, whose family’s seat, Tollymore, lay at the foot of the Mourne Mountains, not far away from the Londonderry estate, in Co. Down. At the time, the Bishop, aged 58 years and unmarried, had occupied a fine Episcopal Palace in Co. Tyrone, Ireland, for the past 2 years. Less than a month before Castlereagh’s suicide, on the night of the 19th of July, the Bishop, after spending the day in the House of Lords, was caught ‘in flagrante delicto’ in the back room of a public house with John Moverley, a 22-year-old soldier. The two men were, in William Cobbett’s words, ‘engaged in a way not to be described’, or as John Greville had it, ‘He [the Bishop] made a desperate resistance when taken, and if his breeches had not been down they think he would have got away’. These events were depicted by the cartoonist, George Cruikshank, in the same year (Figure 2).

The two men were arrested, providentially, before the Bishop had ‘perpetrated the last foul act’ of sodomy, which was then a capital offence, and so only a ‘misdemeanour’ had been committed. Even so the public backlash was immense, with much of it directed at the clergy, for, as the Archbishop of Canterbury wrote, ‘...it was not safe for a Bishop to shew himself in the streets of London’. Some of the shock stemmed from the fact that the deed had been committed in a ‘common alehouse’ and ‘with a private soldier’. Indeed, the scandal was so great that the Home Office was prepared to pervert the course of justice by preventing the trial, which was understandable, considering that Castlereagh’s suicide, with its whiff of homosexual intrigue, followed hot on the heels of the Bishop’s misadventures.

The ‘Arse’ Bishop, as he had become known, was released on surety of £1000 and bound over to appear in court, whereupon he immediately fled to the continent, leaving behind ‘...a country in uproar’. Moverley meanwhile languished in jail until the Home Office wrote to the Archbishop of Armagh suggesting that he write to the Earl of Roden urging that ‘someone’ tender bail for him. No sooner was this done than Moverley disappeared.

Then, the press discovered that the Bishop had a track record: in 1811, in Dublin, a domestic servant named James Byrne had accused the Bishop of having made immoral propositions to him. For his pains, Byrne was prosecuted for malicious libel. When the Bishop was asked in court whether Byrne’s allegations were true or false, he put his hand on his breast and replied ‘False’. The Irish solicitor advanced some novel arguments: that Ireland,
being so far from the ‘corrupted manners’ of the Continent, remained untouched by any homosexual practices and that, in England, from its ‘proximity … to the Continent of Europe, … the instances there are not a few’. In this respect, at the inauguration of the James Joyce Martello Tower at Sandycove, Co. Dublin, in 1962, the Ulster poet Bertie Rodgers was informed by a Councillor that there was no word in the Irish language for pervert. ‘I know’, replied Bertie, ‘and there is no word in the Eskimo language for snow’. In fact, in Eskimo there are ‘… fifty words for types of snow – though curiously no word for just plain snow’. Byrne was jailed for 2 years and publicly whipped. After the Bishop’s fall from grace Byrne became a public hero.

That October, the Metropolitan Court of Armagh convened for the Bishop’s trial, which deprived him, in absentia, of his Bishopric, severely castigating him for ‘… immorality, incontinence, and sodomitical practices, habits and propensities’. The ex-Bishop stayed on the continent for a period before settling in Scotland, where he assumed the name of Thomas Wilson and may have worked as a butler. He died in Edinburgh in 1843: he was buried in a coffin with a plate that bore an inscription in Latin which translated as—‘Here lies the remains of a great sinner, saved by grace, whose hope rests in the atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ’.

When Matthew Parris was researching his chapter about the Bishop, he met the present Earl of Roden who commented ‘I never thought Percy would crawl out of the woodwork’. Certainly, the Earl makes no mention of his troubled ancestor in a recent book. The Wikipedia entry for Percy Jocelyn states that:

… some years ago, the Jocelyn family vault at Kilcoo Parish Church in Bryansford, County Down… was opened and it was discovered that it contained one more coffin than the number of grave markers would indicate, and that the extra coffin was unmarked. This may well be the grave of the unfortunate Bishop of Clogher.
It has not been possible to verify this possibility, but privileged families, such as the Jocelyns, had the money and influence to look after their own. Perhaps, the last word on the Bishop is best left to a contemporary, anonymous rhymester:  

The Devil to prove the Church was a farce
Went out to fish for a Bugger.
He baited his hook with a Soldier’s arse -
And pulled up the Bishop of Clogher.

As we have seen, a chain of events, driven by sexual lust, of one kind or another, conspired to ensure Charles Darwin’s presence on the Beagle: the inappropriate liaison between the Fuegians, Lord Castlereagh’s infidelity and possible homosexual encounter and the Bishop of Clogher’s extremely flagrant one. In fact, when the Reverend Ian Paisley launched his campaign to ‘Save Ulster from Sodomy’ in 1989, he was closing a stable door from which the horse had bolted 167 years before. One wonders what Darwin would have thought if he had learned of the factors that connived to make him sail on the Beagle. After all, he had only recently passed his Anglican ordination exams. It is strange how an ‘unnatural act’ contributed indirectly to the Darwin’s theory of ‘natural selection’.

In the long run, however, Fitzroy’s concern about his family history turned out to be amply justified. In 1854, when the forerunner of the Meteorological Office was established, he became its chief ‘Meteorological Statist’. When The Origin was published 5 years later, Fitzroy took great pains to distance himself from it as he found it incompatible with his religious beliefs. He became famous for his ‘Admiral Fitzroy’ barometers, for which he may have made excessive claims, and coined the term ‘weather forecast’. After the passenger vessel Royal Charter was wrecked off the coast of Wales in a fierce storm in 1859, he decided to focus his attention on the prediction of bad weather. In 1865, depression got the better of him and on the 30th April, ‘… history – on his mother’s side – and Darwinism finally caught up with him. Fitzroy picked up his razor and cut his throat.’

Conflict of interest: None declared.

References
3 ADM 107/44: Lieutenant’s Passing Certificates. Kew: The National Archives.