

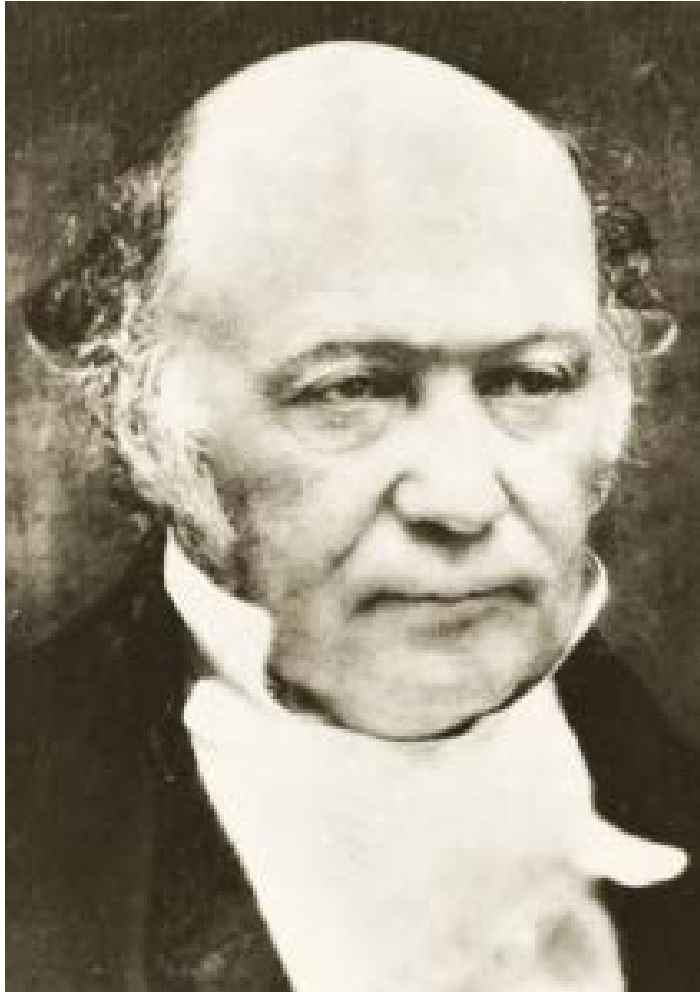
A biographer's opinion as primary source



**the strange case of
Sir William Rowan
Hamilton
(1805-1865)**

*From: Wayman, P.A. (1987), Dunsink Observatory,
1785-1985 : A Bicentennial History.*

The strangeness of Hamilton's case



In a letter to one of his sons, the famous Irish mathematician Sir William Rowan Hamilton described the walk with his wife during which he found the quaternions

It sounds peaceful; she had come from somewhere and walked with him, and she had been talking to him now and then

Yet Hamilton's marriage has generally been described as unhappy

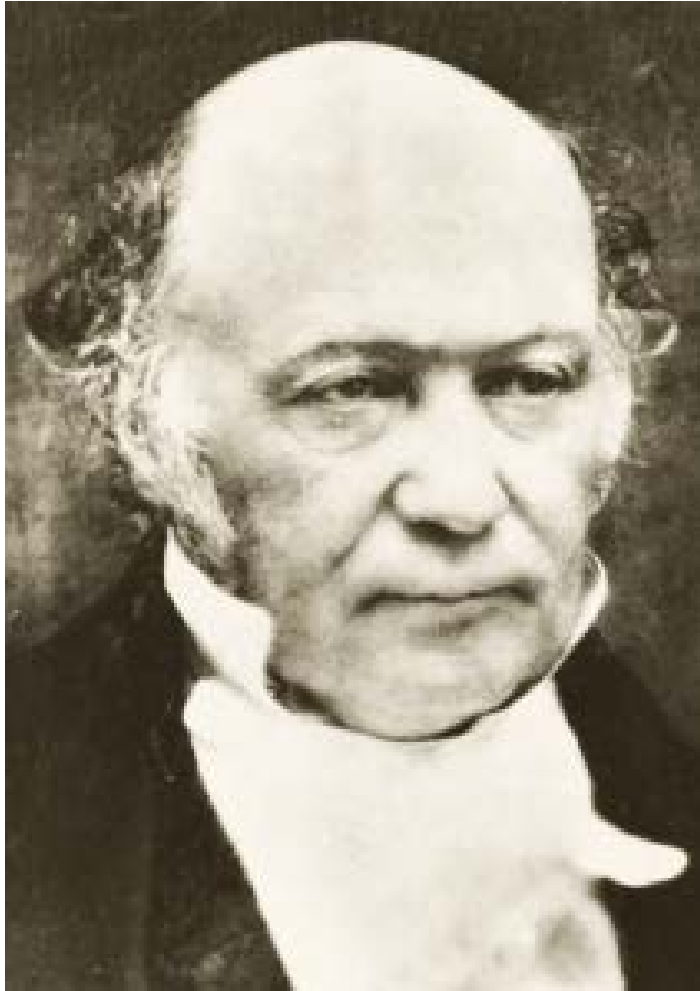
The strangeness of Hamilton's case



Sir William Rowan Hamilton was (one of) Ireland's most famous / distinguished / inventive / most renowned / greatest ever / &c. mathematician

Yet the idea of Hamilton as an alcoholic is so widely accepted that any one seems to be allowed to write anything about him as long as it fits the depressed view of him

The negative view on Hamilton's private life



When Hamilton's work is mentioned, it is often accompanied by remarks about his private life

It suffices to roam the web using the search words Hamilton, quaternions, depression, alcoholism

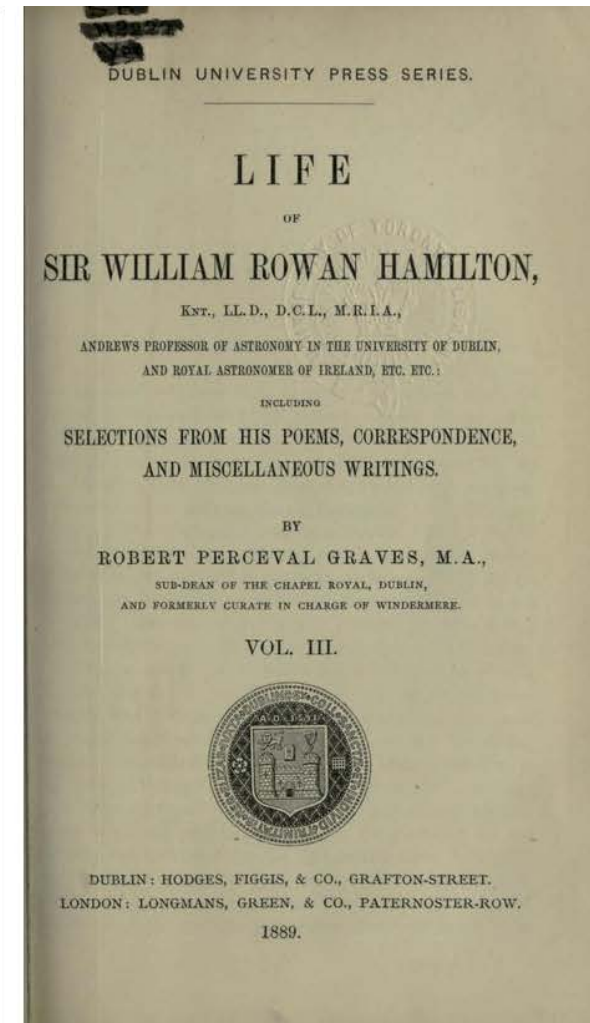
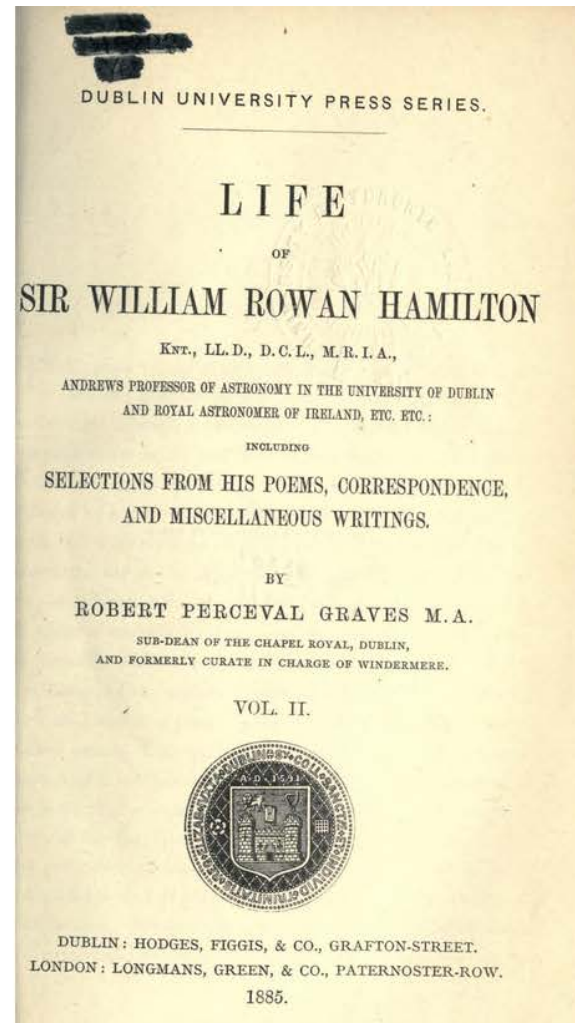
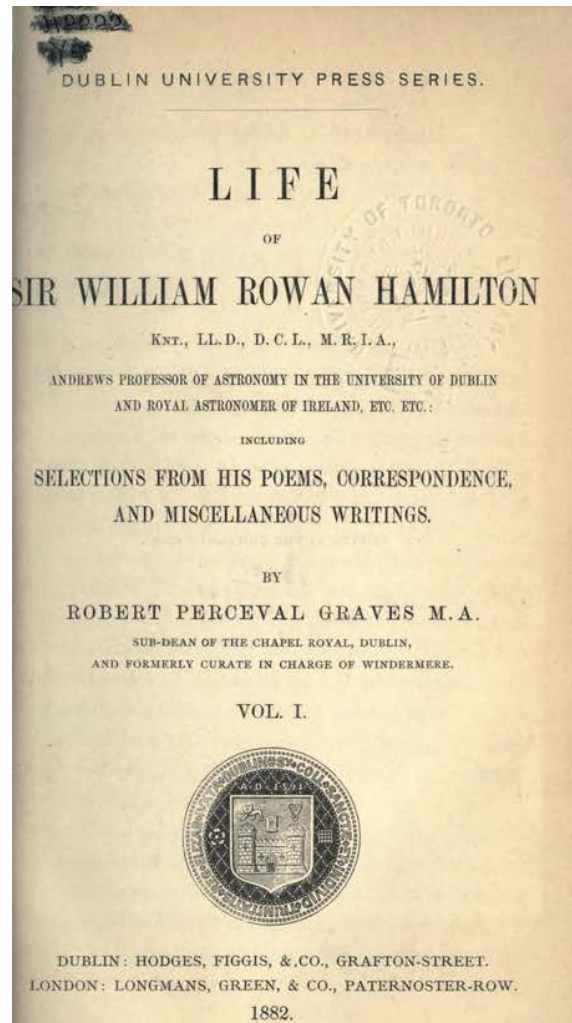
The negative view on Hamilton's private life



The goal of this presentation is to show that the negative view on Hamilton's private life is flawed

It was deduced from an enormous biography, of more than two thousand pages, written in the 1880s by Robert Perceval Graves

Graves' biography (1882, 1885, 1889)



Graves' biography (1882, 1885, 1889)



Almost completely consisting of primary sources,
it seemed to be very trustworthy

But crucial parts appeared to be not so primary at all

Robert Perceval Graves (1810–1893)



From: The Graves Family of Yorkshire and Mickleton Manor, Gloucestershire, England.

Hamilton's biographer Robert Graves had been a friend of Hamilton

Graves also was a brother-in-law of Leopold von Ranke, the German historian who said that historical research should be based on primary sources

Graves seems to have followed Von Ranke's ideas

Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886)



- Describe history based on the “narratives of eyewitnesses, and on genuine and original documents”
- Do not describe history based on reports of contemporary historians (except if they have personal and immediate knowledge of facts)
- Describe history with the greatest possible objectivity

Graves' biography (1882, 1885, 1889)



Graves meticulously followed the first two requirements, and filled his biography with original letters

It made his biography intensely trustworthy

But he apparently did not feel the need for objectivity

Graves' biography (1882, 1885, 1889)



In the preface he wrote that he had given “a reluctant consent [to writing the biography], **wishing that the memory of my friend had been more fortunate**, but at the same time conscious that by me would be devoted to it the warmth of honest affection and admiration, and the desire to be just and truthful”

Graves' biography (1882, 1885, 1889)



As will be seen later, it appeared to relate to contemporary, and presumably mostly local gossip

Graves obviously wrote for his Dublin contemporaries

He does not seem to have realized in any way the extent of his readership in place and time

Apparent goals for the biography



- Counteract the gossip about having been unjustly favoured (Hamilton became Andrews professor before having finished his studies), and presumably resting on his laurels

Show Hamilton's beautiful, simple character

- Find excuses for Hamilton's "insidious habit" as he called it

Show how badly his wife had taken care of him

Graves was nuanced about Lady Hamilton ...



[Helen Bayly] brought calm to [Hamilton's] affections; she won the good opinion of his friends; and she became to him the centre round which the pleasures, the duties, and the hopes of home were gathered

[Hamilton] remained to the end of his life an attached husband, just as Lady Hamilton remained an attached wife, as well as a good woman

... but only amidst criticisms



There is not any positive sentence about Lady Hamilton which is not sandwiched between critical remarks

Of the about two thousand pages, only six or seven pages (filled with criticisms) now define Lady Hamilton's reputation

But even sacrificing her reputation did not outweigh the later repetitions of his criticisms of Hamilton

Hamilton's alleged alcoholism



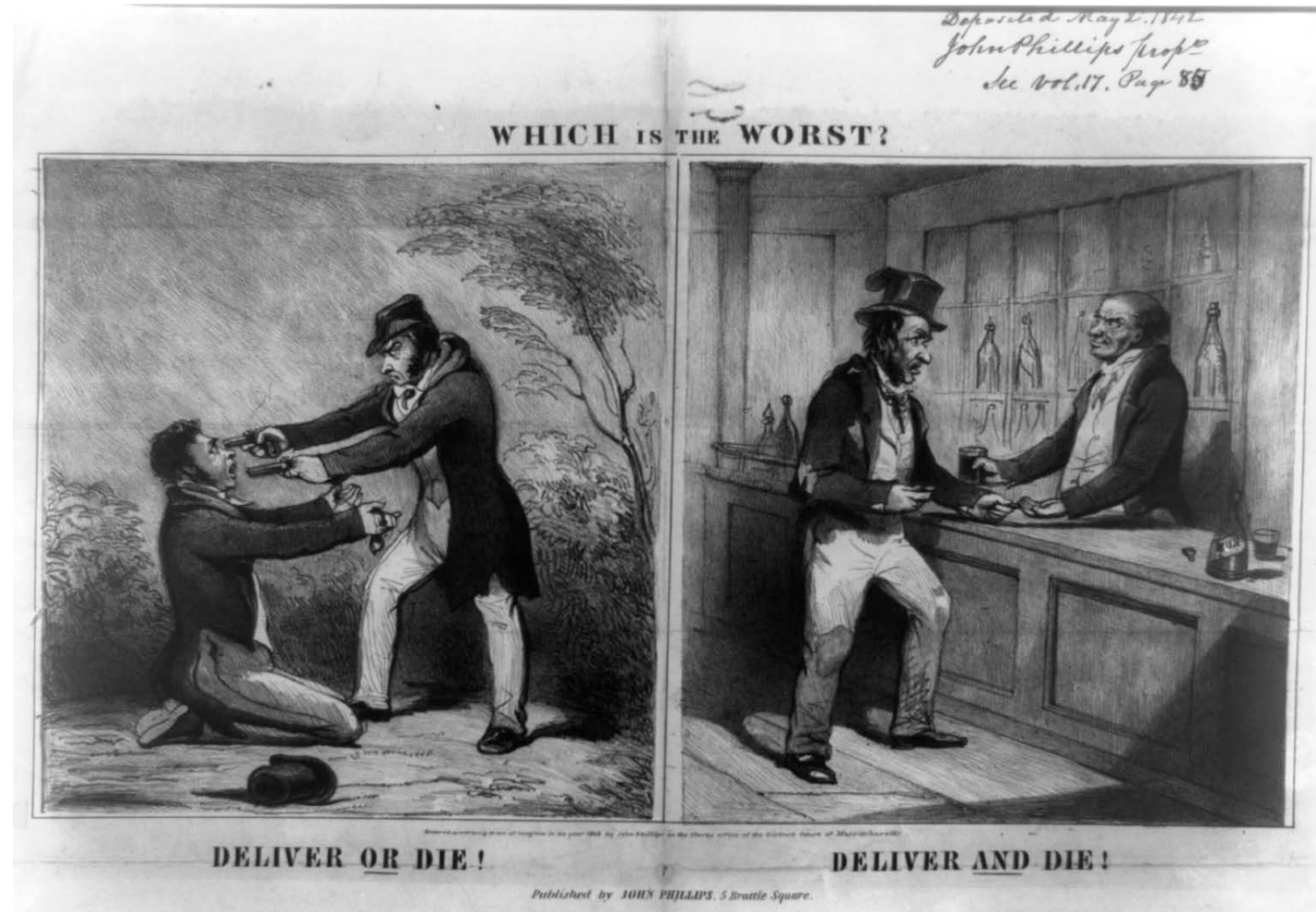
Sentences about Hamilton's alleged alcoholism are sprinkled about on the web

“The last years of Hamilton's life were marred by alcoholism.” (2005 Blogpost Russell Library)

“Hamilton was an alcoholic for the last third of his life.” (Wolfram ScienceWorld Biography)

Of the possible issues to discuss, the origins of this view are the easiest to identify

Influence of the Temperance Movement



In April 1838 the Irish Temperance movement was founded in Cork, by the “Apostle of Temperance,” the Franciscan priest Father Theobald Mathew

It started in Dublin around 1840, when Hamilton was 35

Graves was temperate



Graves' temperance can be seen in sentences as:

- in Hamilton's younger years it was "the general habit to drink much more wine at and after dinner than **happily** is now usual"
- the "**insidious** habit" was "the one shadow upon the brightness of Hamilton's life and character"
- Hamilton was a "**sufferer** with scarcely any disturbing consciousness of the **evil** it involved"

An occasional mastery



The biography having been ordered chronologically, while writing about 1840 Graves suddenly bursts out:

“The insidious habit [of drinking alcohol] gradually gained firmer possession, and produced that relentless craving which in a few years from this time exercised over him an occasional mastery; by which he must himself have felt humiliated, and which his friends could not but notice with a deep sadness”

An occasional mastery

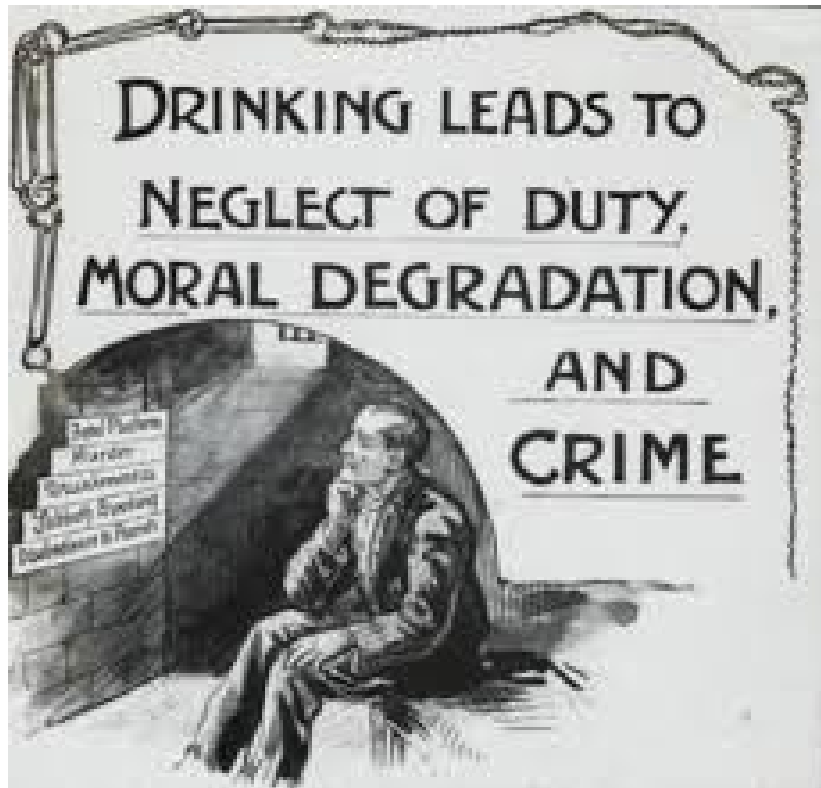


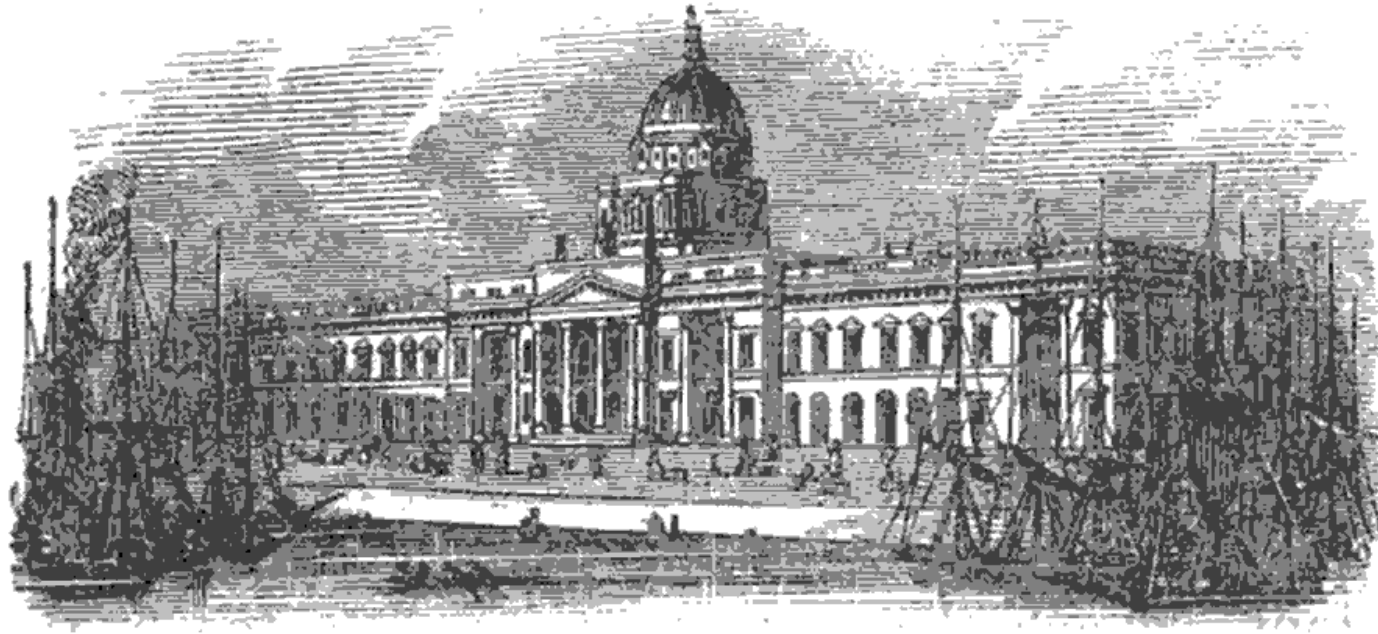
Image: University of Central Lancashire

For very many pages reading about the goings on in Hamilton's life, the reader is wondering what will happen which could be so terrible

Then, having arrived in 1846, Graves writes that on the 11th of February something happened

One evening. Six years of writing towards it, 170 pages. That is at least not very objective

Geological Society 1846; what happened



Geological Society of Dublin

Dinners and meetings were held in the Custom House. The Anniversary meetings were held on the 2nd Wednesday in February, that year on the 11th

Public humiliation in 1846; what happened



Hamilton did not usually attend these meetings, but he had had an idea: that in summer Ireland would rise out of the sea because of the heating of the land



The rising should elevate the observatory at Armagh, but tilt the observatories of Dunsink and Markree

Public humiliation in 1846; what happened



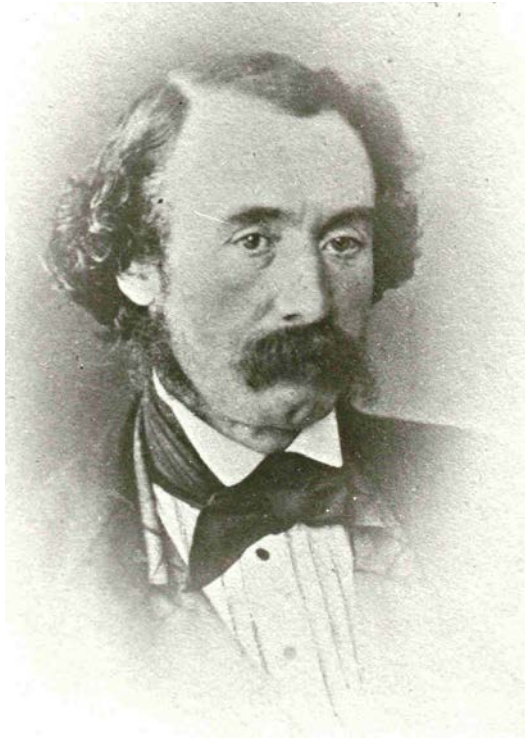
It should be able to show the movement using transit levels and star positions, and the idea would add to the research of the movements of the Earth's crust



In the morning of 11 February 1846 Markree Observatory in county Sligo sent Hamilton confirmation of his idea

It was a new connection between astronomy and geology

Public humiliation in 1846; what happened



*Robert Mallet (1810-1881)
was president then*

Very excited, that evening Hamilton visited the
Dublin Geological Society

He dined with the Members of the Geological Society
before their Anniversary Meeting

Public humiliation in 1846; what happened



Pleasurable excitement at the table was increased by having been called upon to speech

After the dinner and the speech Hamilton wanted to attend the meeting

At the top of a high flight of stairs he had an attack of giddiness

Public humiliation in 1846; what happened



Hamilton became violent and had to be restrained

Hamilton sent Graves a report



Graves did not live in Ireland, he lived in England; therefore Hamilton sent him a report

- Had had a long period of hard work and abstemiousness
- Was unusually and very pleasurably excited
- Had drunk only a moderate amount of wine
- Had had attack of giddiness and lost control over his thoughts

Gossip



Graves did not want to say what exactly happened:

“I forbear from going into further details. Suffice it to say, this painful event became generally known, and was much talked of in society”

Unfortunately, that left what happened open for any interpretation

Why did the gossip get so out of hand



Hamilton was indeed very famous

Despite the Temperate Movement he had not stopped drinking wine at public dinners

Many people will have assumed that he now finally had drunk too much

It was the beginning of the end of his good reputation

Why did the gossip get so out of hand



Charles Graves, brother of the biographer, warned him that his reputation was in jeopardy

Hamilton immediately abstained from drinking any alcohol any more, but he explicitly did not vow

His remarks seem to suggest that he only abstained to prevent future gossip in case of a second attack

Why believe Hamilton



Other people confirmed that he only drank a moderate amount of wine

He knew what alcohol would do to his thoughts, because he sometimes drank much in public

Why believe Hamilton

JOURNAL
OF THE
GEOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF DUBLIN.

VOL. III. PART III.

1846.

No. 2.

MARCH 11th—"On some secular and diurnal motions of the earth's crust, &c. with a reference to a communication from Sir Wm. R. Hamilton, Professor of Astronomy, and Astronomer Royal of Ireland," by Robert Mallet, Esq. Mem .Ins. C.E. M.R.I.A. President of the Society.

consideration. I remember, also, acknowledging that Dr. Robinson had long ago remarked to me that the whole hill on which the Armagh observatory stands is found to have a motion with the seasons, but that I had been in the habit of conceiving Dr. Robinson to deduce this from observations of the azimuth, rather than of the level; and that my own conjecture, perhaps a very wild one, had been, that Ireland as a whole expanded, and thereby rose somewhat more out of the sea in summer than in winter; which expansion, if it were admitted to exist, would account for the western end of the astronomical level rising a little on the east and sinking on the west coast of the Island. Indeed, as

Mallet was present at the dinner, and he talked with Hamilton

Yet he still published Hamilton's memorandum describing his astronomical-geological idea

Why believe Hamilton

if not at an earlier date. The conversation in which I was engaged with you on this and similar subjects, at the last anniversary dinner of the Geological Society, interested and excited me at the time very much indeed; and if you think the foregoing memorandum, which I have drawn up at your desire, worthy of being incorporated in any communication of your own to the Society, it is perfectly at your service for that purpose.

“ I remain, my dear Sir, very truly yours,

“WILLIAM R. HAMILTON.”

Hamilton had concluded the memorandum with a remark about what had happened to him

Mallet also published Hamilton's remark

Why believe Hamilton



Finally, Hamilton had written a personal note, in which he explained to Mallet what had happened, and that it had not seemed to him that he had been taking at all too much wine

Also, that he would abstain, “as to make it unlikely, if not impossible, that such a state of things should ever occur again”

Mallet, who had been at the table with him, apparently accepted Hamilton’s statement

Why did Graves not follow Hamilton's report



Graves was very aware of Hamilton's bad reputation

Graves focused completely on restoring it

Suggestion: because of the gossip Graves did not think his readers would accept any denial or excuse

Why did the gossip get so out of hand



Hamilton decided to end the total abstinence in Parsonstown in 1848; there had not been a second attack, and he liked the “pleasures of the table”

Graves was very disappointed and blamed George Biddell Airy of Greenwich Observatory

Graves used very dramatic expressions; that with ending his abstemiousness Hamilton “lost forever his precious safeguard”

Why did the gossip get so out of hand



After 1848 Hamilton occasionally drank much at public gatherings, but he was always temperate at home, where he was most of the time due to his mathematics

Graves also mentioned that “a most exaggerated notion of his weakness, of the degree to which he yielded to it, and of the number of his lapses, became prevalent”

Charles Graves warned Hamilton again but not about his health; it was about his reputation

Why did the gossip get so out of hand



Graves did not mention when Charles Graves gave his warning, and therefore it is unknown how long this period, of sometimes drinking much in public, lasted

It cannot have lasted for more than a few years, most likely until 1851, and at the at the most until 1853

Also this time Hamilton immediately changed his behaviour, and it never happened again

But that did not stop the gossip

Why not take Graves literally



Graves' biography was not as first-hand as it seems to be:

Graves wrote about events as if he saw it all from close-by, but during the largest part of Hamilton's marriage he lived in England

Graves' biography was indeed not very objective: Graves used dramatic expressions as "sufferer," "infirmity," "fatal habit," "painful topic," "lost forever his precious safeguard"

Why not take Graves literally



Graves had a reason to do what he did, and a goal for the biography

For those times, and that place, that may have been the right choice

Graves' biography should be read in the context of its place and time

Conclusion



If Graves' criticisms are left out, it can be seen that the letters show an affectionate marriage

That would explain the peacefulness of the walk during which Hamilton found his quaternions



Conclusion



Leaving Graves' criticisms out would resolve the strange contradiction between Lady Hamilton's alleged 'morbid shyness and timidness' and Graves' remark that she "won the good opinion of [Hamilton's] friends"



Conclusion



Leaving Graves' criticisms out would also explain why the famous astronomer John Herschel, who knew Hamilton very well, said about him:



Conclusion



“Hamilton was indeed a most admirable person, and a most truly amiable and high-souled one. Nothing but so much greatness could have made so much enthusiasm only what was natural — and nothing but so much enthusiasm could have carried him on to so much greatness”

Conclusion



**Perhaps it is time
to stop treating
Graves' opinion
as an impeccable
primary source**

Conclusion



**and
stop
the
gossip**