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INTRODUCTION

HARSHAW PAPERS

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The return of the Harshaw diaries

The diaries of James Harshaw of Donaghmore consist of 6 volumes dating from the 1830s to the 1860s. They were deposited in PRONI during the autumn of 1996 by the efforts of Marjorie Harshaw Robie, an American who descends from one branch of the Harshaw family. It seems that the diaries had been recently re-discovered in the United States and their historical importance recognised. They were offered to PRONI as the most obvious home for records which had such relevance to Northern Ireland. Thus their deposit was a final home coming for the diaries. It has been suggested that the diaries were taken to the United States by James Harshaw's youngest son, Samuel, in 1865 and after his death they were passed onto various family members. However, the volumes were used as a major source by Rev. J. Davison Cowan, rector of Donaghmore for his history of the parish which was published in 1914. It appears that he may have travelled to America during his researches for the book. After this it seems that they lay forgotten in a bank vault until fortuitous circumstances brought them back into the public domain and initiated their return to Northern Ireland.



James Harshaw's diaries: farming and rural life



James Harshaw, c. 1842

James Harshaw was born in 1797 and married Sarah, daughter of William Kidd of Kiddstown in 1816. They had twelve children, whose names and dates of birth are recorded at the start of volume 4. The Harshaws were a prominent family in the locality of Donaghmore and James Harshaw was a central figure in the community. The diaries reveal that he was an elder in Donaghmore Presbyterian Church, treasurer of Donaghmore Dispensary, and a well to do farmer. He also served as a local legal figure arbitrating in land disputes, acting as a witness, and executing wills. The six volumes provide a wealth of information about the daily life of James Harshaw and his

activities. They reveal an intimate and perhaps unique insight into the pattern of life as experienced by a fairly wealthy farmer during the mid-nineteenth century. The diaries are of immense value to anyone interested in social and economic history, and also to the local historian as he reports on virtually every aspect of rural life. The volumes record the daily farming activities and practices relating to flax, oats, potatoes, a host of vegetable crops, cattle, etc., etc. The diaries also contain interesting accounts for scutchers, 'streakers', beetler and attendants, farm labourers and for goods sold, etc. These accounts give details of the work done by farm labourers, how many days were worked and how much they were paid. The pages are full of information about local baptisms, marriages and deaths, and regularly mention families emigrating to the United States or Australia. This personal account provides useful material for professional genealogists or anyone tracing their family history.



Religion and revival

Religion was of central importance to James Harshaw, and it occupies a prominent part of the diary. He was a ruling elder in Donaghmore Presbyterian Church and usually attended church twice on a Sunday. He also frequented the local Methodist Chapel. The volumes provide details about the number of communicants, visiting deputations, attending the General Assembly, protesting on the removal of the Rev. Samuel James Moore from Donaghmore to Ballymena, etc. The diaries also provide good coverage of the impact of the 'Revival' of 1859 in the Donaghmore area. Volume 6 records local prayer meetings starting up in the area, and church services occurring on an almost daily basis. He writes about individuals being 'impressed' and describes the apparent hysteria of some women during church services.



Famine

In 1848 a dispensary was established in Donaghmore and James Harshaw was one of the founding committee members and served as treasurer. The diaries record his attendance at dispensary meetings, the election of Dr Saunderson as surgeon of the dispensary, and minutes of meetings, etc. [See volume 5.] The famine in Ireland is also covered by the diaries. The appearance of disease amongst the potatoes is first noted by James Harshaw, on the 7 August 1848 [see volume 1] and he also mentions efforts of a local relief committee, '... we agreed that the proceeds of the broken stone should be laid out in the purchase of blankets ... for the poor of Donaghmore and Glen' [see volume 1]. There are further entries mentioning the spread of the disease amongst the potato crops.



Young Irelanders

James Harshaw's sister, Jane, married a Samuel Martin. The Martins were also a prominent family in the locality. Their son, John, was a notable repealer and a colleague of Gavin Duffy and John Mitchel. John Martin wrote for both the Nation and the United Irishman and was eventually arrested on charges of sedition. James Harshaw's diaries record the publication of the United Irishman, the arrests of John Mitchel and John Martin, Martin sharing a cell with Gavin Duffy and Martin being sentenced, '...received a note from John ... informing me that the judge had charged against John Martin which grieved me much ... 2nd note informed me that the jury had returned a verdict of guilty, with a recommendation to mercy-James Martin [brother] immediately after challenged the foreman of the jury to mortal combat, was then arrested and lodged in jail.' [See volume 1.] John Martin was sentenced to transportation to Australia but later returned to Ireland and served as an MP for Meath from 1871 to 1875. [See entry in the Dictionary of National Biography.]



Further reading

The history of the parish of Donaghmore by the Rev. J. Davison Cowan, which has already been mentioned above, provides plenty of useful background to the period covered by the diaries. It gives details on many of the individuals referred to by James Harshaw and helps fill out much of the information which he recorded.



James Harshaw: the final years

The sixth diary of James Harshaw concludes in January 1864, however, their story does not end there. It turned out that PRONI had a microfilm copy of the final diary, MIC39, which contains the last entries of James Harshaw and a sketch by Andrew Harshaw, a son of James, telling of his father's illness, death and funeral. Thus the story is complete.

