Preface

William Thomson, later Lord Kelvin, was born in Belfast in 1824, and his family had lived near Ballynahinch in the north of Ireland, quite close to Belfast, from the seventeenth century. At the time of Kelvin’s birth, James Thomson, his father, was Professor of Mathematics at the Belfast Royal Academical Institution (Inst). However, following the death of his wife in 1830, James took up a new position as Professor at the University of Glasgow, and he and his children moved there in 1832.

Apart from three years studying at Cambridge, and a very brief period immediately afterwards travelling and teaching in Cambridge, Kelvin was to spend the rest of his life in Glasgow, where he occupied the Chair of Natural Philosophy (or Physics) for 53 years. The natural assumption might be that his birth in Ireland was irrelevant to Kelvin’s life and work, and that the fine monument erected in his honour in Belfast’s Botanic Gardens, which is pictured on the front cover of this volume, was more a demonstration of civic pride than a recognition of an aspect of Kelvin’s life which was important to him.

The purpose of the meeting was to demonstrate that this was not the case, that, great Glaswegian as he undoubtedly became, Kelvin always delighted in the title of Irishman. The influence of his father, very much an Ulsterman, was immense, and Kelvin and his siblings were to follow his non-sectarian and reforming approach. Also important for Kelvin was his Christian upbringing, which began in Belfast, and his beliefs were to play a role of importance in his life and indeed in much of his most important work, in particular that on thermodynamics.

Two of his siblings returned to Belfast and spent much of their lives there, and Kelvin was a frequent visitor. While the most celebrated example of his engineering work was his massive contribution to the Atlantic telegraph cable, and his maritime and other inventions were used throughout the world, he was especially pleased to contribute to two important technical accomplishments in the north of Ireland, the occulting Holywood lighthouse and the Giant’s Causeway tramway. Kelvin’s interest in Ireland came again to the fore in the Home Rule debate
at the end of the nineteenth century; Kelvin was vehemently opposed to Home Rule and became a passionate member of the Liberal Unionist party, a crucial factor in his becoming a peer.

Accounts of these aspects of Kelvin’s involvement with Ireland are given in our first four papers. The fifth paper was particularly appropriate for the meeting. It describes how an important contribution of Kelvin on optimal packing has been improved in Ireland by the speaker, Denis Weaire, himself, and how the result has been seen by the whole world in Beijing.

Finally there is a discussion of Kelvin’s place in the story of Irish science. There have been many highly accomplished Irish scientists, and the meeting showed clearly that Kelvin certainly deserves to be included among the greatest.

Acknowledgments

The meeting was the second regional event of the Institute of Physics (IOP) in Ireland, the first being the meeting on John Desmond Bernal: Science and Society held in Limerick in June 2006 and published in the same series as this volume. The meeting also benefited from the support of many bodies and institutions.

We would like to thank the committee of the IOP in Ireland for providing finance and also giving their full support. We would particularly mention Vincent Casey, the Chair, who also chaired the afternoon session, Emma Sokell, the Secretary, and Denise Gabuzda and Kevin McGuigan, past and present Treasurers. We would also thank Sheila Gilheany and Alison Hackett for general help and encouragement, including assisting the organisation on the day of the meeting.

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The meeting was also supported by Queen’s University Belfast. We would thank Tom Millar, Dean of the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Science for arranging this support. We were supremely fortunate to be allowed to use the magnificent Great Hall, a highly suitable room for the meeting since among the portraits on the walls were many of those referred to in the talks, and even one of the speakers! Catering and audiovisual services were also very helpful. From the School of Mathematics and Physics at Queen’s, we would acknowledge the considerable help of Angela Anderson and Margaret Hewitt.

We would also thank Kevin Mulhern, who arranged for publicity, Lisa Mitchell who provided the publicity in a splendid way, and also Eugene McCusker and Claire Wilson. Juliet Chantler of Northern Visions prepared an enthralling TV programme around the event and we are very grateful to her also. Joe Millar of the Ulster Scots Agency also publicised the meeting and we thank him as well.

David Livingstone gave general support and chaired the morning session, for which we are grateful, and of course we would like to thank all the speakers who were responsible for the meeting being interesting and enjoyable. We would mention Andrew Holmes who gave a very erudite paper at the meeting. Unfortunately, since his material is being published elsewhere, we have not been able to include his contribution here, but he has given helpful advice on the preparation of this volume.

Finally we would like to thank Graham Douglas, Publisher for the Journal of Physics Conference Series for his courtesy and helpfulness in the preparation of this volume.
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