

## W.A.E. USSHER: HIS ANCESTRAL BACKGROUND

by Michael House

**Abstract.** It is shown that W.A.E. Ussher, after whom the Ussher Society is named, and who contributed much to the geological understanding of south-west England, came from a large and well-known Irish family of Usshers. The family included Archbishop James Ussher whose date for the Creation of 4004 B.C. led to the establishment of the Catastrophist School in geology. W.A.E. Ussher's ancestry is outlined back to the fifteenth century.

The very limited biographical accounts of W.A.E. Ussher, after whom the Ussher Society is named, comment on his geological work in south-west England, but give no detail of his background, and deal not at all with non-geological aspects of his career, or with his geological contributions in other areas of the British Isles. This contribution is intended to outline something of Ussher's ancestral background. Details are mainly taken from *The Ussher Memoirs* (by W.B. Wright, published in Dublin and London in 1889) and *The Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1903). I am indebted to Dr Joyce Bellamy for drawing my attention to the former work which is a rather thorough review of the Irish Ussher Family, and of which W.A.E. Ussher was himself a subscriber. Dr Bellamy has also helped in tracing other biographical material related to him.

The earliest clearly recorded ancestor of the Irish Usshers was Arlantor (or Arland) Ussher, Mayor of Dublin in 1469, who died in 1479. It is descendants from his second marriage, and his sons John and Christopher, which led to the diverse and distinguished family over succeeding generations. Many played an important role in Irish affairs; this is witnessed by the fact that in the period 1579-1757, 34 Usshers received the freedom of the city of Dublin. It is probable that John le Ussher, made Constable of Dublin Castle in 1302, was Arlantor's grandfather or great grandfather. A seventeenth century family tradition states that Arlantor was descended from a John Nevil (of the north of England family) who accompanied Prince John in 1185 to Ireland as Usher of the Court and adopted the surname from this office.

Arlantor's eldest son, John, had two sons, Arland and Thomas. Arland was Mayor of Dublin in 1528. His descendants use the spelling Usher and need not concern us farther. The second son, Thomas (1496-1566) had at least eight children of which the second son was Archbishop Henry Ussher (c. 1550-1613) whose petition to Elizabeth I was largely responsible for the founding of Trinity College, Dublin (warrant dated 1592), and he was appointed its first fellow. In 1595 he became Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of all Ireland. The fourth son of Thomas Ussher was named Arland, and Arland's second son was Archbishop James Ussher.

Archbishop James Ussher (1581-1656), who has been described as Ireland's greatest scholar, entered T.C.D. in 1593 and was Vice-Provost in 1614 and 1617. He was mainly responsible for establishing the library and for obtaining *The Book of Kells* for it. His major geological contribution was an indirect and negative one. In his *Annals of the Old Testament* he attempted to date from biblical sources the time of the Creation and, in 1654, he affirmed that the Creation was at 9 a.m. on October 26th, 4004 B.C. Acceptance of this date led to the establishment of the Catastrophist School in geology. Since it was clear to many that geological processes required greater time than this, it was inferred that fossil faunas must represent earlier creations destroyed by a succession of catastrophes. Such theories were held by notable geologists even after the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859. Elevated to the bishopric of Armagh in 1625, Archbishop James Ussher is buried in Westminster Cathedral.

To trace the ancestry of W.A.E. Ussher we must now return to Arlantor Ussher's sixth child, and second surviving son, Christopher (c. 1465- ! 526) who was Bailiff of Dublin in 1511, and Mayor in 1516 and 1524. Christopher's eldest son John Ussher (c. 1525-1590) was Mayor of Dublin in 1561 and was Collector of Customs for the Port of Dublin. John Ussher is said to have been responsible for the first book ever printed in Irish--an Irish alphabet and catechism dated 1571. In 1582 he is recorded as also pressing for the establishment of a university in Ireland (in order to keep young men from "rebellion in the future and the notions imbibed at Louvain and Douay", the universities where, apparently, many then went). John married a daughter of Sir William Newman (also a mayor of Dublin). Their second surviving son was William Ussher who was knighted in 1603.

Sir William Ussher (c. 1563-1659), who signed his name Vscher, was Clerk of the Council. He married Isabella, the second

daughter of Adam Loftus, Lord Archbishop of Dublin, Provost of T.C.D., and Lord Chancellor of Ireland. It is recorded that in his house was executed the first Irish version of the New Testament. William had eight children, and following the pattern of choosing partners carefully, the husbands of four of the daughters were knights of the realm. His second son, Adam Ussher, was Ulster King of Arms in 1632. His eldest son, Arther Ussher (c. 1588-1629) had 12 children, and several sons fought for Charles I. Arthur's eldest son William, W.A.E. Ussher's ancestor, was knighted in 1636.

Sir William Ussher Jnr. (1610-1671) was Commissioner of Excise at Dublin. He married twice, and John, the eldest son of the second marriage, continued the lineage we are following. John Ussher ( 1646-1732) was Master of Chancery, 1698-1721, and married a daughter of the Ulster King of Arms in 1681. Of his six sons, the fifth, Christopher (c. 1690-1763) concerns us here. The sixth son was Samuel whose grandson became Professor of Astronomy at T.C.D. and first Astronomer Royal of Ireland: £5000 to found a chair for Samuel specifically, and also to build an observatory, had been left by Francis Andrews, Provost of T.C.D.. Samuel's eldest son became Admiral Sir Thomas Ussher who conveyed Napoleon from Marseilles to Elba in 1814.

Returning to Christopher Ussher (1690-1763), he was Secretary of the Linen Board in Dublin and his country seat was Mount Ussher, Co. Wicklow. His eldest son, John, was Member of Parliament for Inistiogue (1783-90) and a grandson through his second daughter, Martha, was the Abbé Edgworth, chaplain to Louis XVI, and present at his execution. Christopher left £1000 each to his two sons, William and Christopher (born 1732, W.A.E. Ussher's ancestor), and he wrote in his will that to his two surviving daughters, Catherine and Martha "who are turned Roman Catholiques, and have quitted me and my family and all natural ties to them and their country, I leave them I s. each, with my blessing".

Christopher Ussher (1732-1772), W.A.E. Ussher's great-grandfather, entered the navy and rose to be captain by 1761. He had two sons, Christopher (born 1770) and John (born c. 1771). The latter was a Captain of Militia, settled in Canada, and married a daughter of Samuel Street, for 24 years Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Canada. Their daughter Mary Jane (born c. 1814) was W.A.E. Ussher's mother.

Christopher Ussher (born 1770) succeeded his uncle John Ussher, M.P., in 1796 and established the Ussher family house at Eastwell, Longhrea, Co. Galway. His eldest son and heir, John (1798-1851) married his Canadian first cousin, Mary Jane, in 1831. These were W.A.E. Ussher's parents. W.A.E. Ussher was born on 8 July, 1849, and his father died on 24 April, 1851, so Ussher would not really have known him. Eastwell passed to Ussher's elder brother, Christopher (born 1832). Ussher's mother survived until 12 December 1888, and she died at Rookfield, Cary Crescent, Torquay, where Ussher lived for a time during his geological work in south-west England. I am indebted to Patrick Ussher of T.C.D. for informing me that Eastwell has now been pulled down by the Land Commission and that Harry Ussher, the trainer, was the last male representative in Ireland of the Galway branch of the family.

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