It has been noted that some writers referred to John Tyndall as “the poet of science,” such was the nature of his prose. But the fact that in his youth he actually wrote poetry has remained obscured, although his poems were published in his local newspaper, The Carlow Sentinel, in the later quarter of 1841, while he was working in Youghal and Kinsale (Co. Cork) for the Ordnance Survey. He himself, when sending his second batch of poems to the editors, used as an excuse “the success of my previous experiment,” that is to say, his first two poems, which are presented below. As he was writing for a local paper, he used a pseudonym, “W.S.” to conceal his identity, which was reasonable in this case since the poems were of a political nature, and Carlow was in the middle of an election campaign.

In presenting two forgotten poems by the Carlow physicist John Tyndall (1820-1893) to a general readership we are aware that this could scarcely be justified on their literary value alone. It could be said, nonetheless, that they work moderately well as poems, and that they clearly reveal a taste for words—for their meaning and sound—and a good classical education. Beyond that, the interest of the poems is mainly historic, serving to illumine two areas of Tyndall studies; they reveal his unusual cultural roots among the rural Irish Protestant tenantry, and how the fundamental lines of his own future intellectual and even his scientific work were, in an embryonic form, already there in the early 1840s, with all the parts visible in place as budding limbs are in the early embryo.

The poems were found in the process of reviewing Friday’s Catalogue of the Correspondence of John Tyndall in search of material for the accompanying paper on Tyndall’s Carlow family. A reference was found in a letter to his father about poems that he had published in the Carlow Sentinel in October. A more detailed search of the newspaper produced six poems, of which two were unknown to the Database of John Tyndall’s Correspondence based in York University (Toronto, Canada). The poems were titled Landlord and Tenant and The Battle of the Constitution is to be fought at the Registry. A preliminary edition of the text, but preserving the punctuation as found, with comments to guide the reader to appreciate their aesthetic and biographical value, are the objects of this paper.
THE POEMS

Landlord and Tenant

“Look on this picture - and on this”

I

Nature had burst night’s trammels, and the sun—
From the rich glowing portals of the East—
Had shed a flood of radiance on the plains.
The accident had sent its zephyr forth
To pour the perfume of the mountain flower
In sweet abandon to the infant day.
From every budding petal trembling hung
A diamond dew-drop like the glistening tear
That lingers in the bright beauty of brilliant eye;
While her fair cheek is dimpled by a smile,
To watch the rosy wing of morning flap
The murky shades of gaity away;
I stood upon a verdant hill, and waxed
On natures chessboard which before me lay,
In varying beauty spread—the infant ear
Had burnt his emerald shroud and flimsily
Shrunk from the balmy breeze’s bland caress.
The meadow spread its carpet to the sun,
On which the brightest gems in Flora’s crown,
Like topaz blushed—on the horizon’s verge,
In far perspective azure mountains rose,
Bathing their peaks in ether—rapt I stood,
And viewed the lovely scene—the immortal mind
Expanded, and sought converse with the skies.
Acknowledging the goodness infinite,
I bowed before creation’s God, and mine!

A hoary occupier of the soil
Approached the flower-crown’d hillock where I stood
I marked his placid eye—the impetuous fire
Which burned there once was dimmed—and in its place
A calm and holy glow lit up its cheek.
Full seventy winter on his furrowed brow
Had spent their vehemence—yet smiling sat
Contentment there as lingers day’s last beam,
In peaceful radiance on the rugged cliff.
One smiling morn, by inclination led,
I wandered forth reflecting as I went
On bygone days—There is a peaceful spot
(though I) where discord has not raised its head;
I’ll to’t and view fair happiness once more.
I climbed a hill and from its mossy peak
I viewed that scene—no smoky curl
Danced on the eddies of the atmosphere.

One smiling morn, by inclination led,
I wandered forth reflecting as I went
Bygone days—There is a peaceful spot
(though I) where discord has not raised its head;
I’ll to’t and view fair happiness once more.
I climbed a hill and from its mossy peak
I viewed that scene—no smoky curl
Danced on the eddies of the atmosphere.

Onward I went towards the happy spot
— or so I deemed it still—no sound arose
To wake the sleeping echoes of the shade;
Each tree appeared to weep, as from the bough
The leaflets seared and severed dropped to earth;
A sad foreboding filled my anxious mind
When what I sought now burst upon my soul!
Black, desolate and dreary—roofless walls
Upreared themselves, on which each passing breeze
Lavished a sigh—fixed to the spot I stood
And traced the work of ruin’s ruthless hand.

Upon a rugged stile a being sat;
He seemed inanimate—as if his mind
Abstracted from the earth, had wondered from
Its tenement, which waited its return.
His forehead pale was by a grisly hand

II

The parting ray of the autumnal sun
Was slumbering on each ivy mantle pile
Which crowned in hoary grandeur every hill.
I neared my home—anticipation cast
The shroud of time aside - each playmate dear
Before me smiling stood, and breathed a welcome;
How sweet the thought – the kind, the warm embrace
Absorbed reflection – happy, happy youth!
Ideal time, when an utopian wing
Sweet fancy gaily soars on air ambrosial;
Alas! that item reality should crush
Thy visionary towers—I reached my home
And eyes that once beamed kindly passed me by
Unheedingly—dark strife had raised her flag
Where kindred hearts had throbbed in unison.

One smiling morn, by inclination led,
I wandered forth reflecting as I went
Bygone days—There is a peaceful spot
(though I) where discord has not raised its head;
I’ll to’t and view fair happiness once more.
I climbed a hill and from its mossy peak
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He seemed inanimate—as if his mind
Abstracted from the earth, had wondered from
Its tenement, which waited its return.
His forehead pale was by a grisly hand

“Resigned, his breath—his son has also trod,
“Full twenty years ago, the darksome vale.
“The hoary scion of this most revered stock,
“I, till the spot, “here once its foliage bloomed;
“My daughters portioned off, a hardy son
“Remained with me—the incense of whose prayer
“Ascends with mine to heaven’s high throne, and calls
“Who gave us all—when upon blight fell,
“When whirlwinds premature have wildly swept
“Across earth’s bosom, laying waste our fields
“With desolating power—meagre and chill
“Gaunt poverty has scowled upon our hearth;
“His smile benignant ever has dispelled
“The sable shades which gathered round my soul!
“When from life’s tendril, like the blighted leaf,
“I trembling hang—in prayer my dying tongue
“Shall falter feebly froth ‘God bless my Landlord.’”
Intensely pressed.— I, wondering, asked the cause
Of all I saw.— He started at my voice,
And like a reckless maniac answered—“THERE!”
“THERE is my life torn from me;—
Theré have I lived in happiness;—
Theré have I rocked my infant son.

“Damn it, ye furies!—on the guilty thing
Heap burning coals, and oh, ye veng-ful skies
Rain back perdition on his lonely grave!
Oh! I could the darksome thoughts which now revolve
Within my tortured mind, be quick enrobed
In hottest flame!— and were my burning breast
A thunder-cloud to roll the lightning on—
In dire explosion, on the miscreant’s head,
I'd showered the vengeance of a ruined man!
Curst be the hour he came with silver tongue,
And Syren sounds to woo me to my doom!
To suit my taste a bauble first he dressed,
And called it “Freedom”— God! I’ve found it false!
False as the fruit that blooms in Hell's abyss!
He talked of pampered tyranny— he said
I was a slave—and I, poor fool, believed.
Miseries, till then unknown; sprung up before
My jaundiced view— imaginary wrongs
Lent fuel to the furnace of my brain.
And viper-like, I turned and madly stung
(Oh! base ingratitude,) the man that fed me.
’I was done!— He cast the reptile from his breast—
Deserted by the fiend who worked my woe—
A wretched houseless wanderer I roam.”

The Battle of the Constitution is
to be fought at the Registry

Child of the North:- the fairest scene for thee
The native mountain’s wild sublimity
Which proudly from their kindred clouds look down,
White snows eternal firm their dazzling crown,
Thou lovest to see the foaming Geyser rise,
Bounding from earth in mingle with the skies;
And tho’ the truant feet may widely roam,
The joyous notes of Whigs awa’!
When once the conquering eagle rose,
With purple wing above the slain,
As havoc sheathed his keen sword,
Up on Pharsalia’s bloody plain.

Did Caesar linger? Shadowy bands
Of crimson Munda, is it so?
Resounding o’er her arid lands,
The voice of Sybia answers; ‘No.’
Men of Carlow! Now’s the time;
Rush to the embattled walls,
Writhing in his filthy slime
Crush the Hydra as she sprawls!
Onward! spirits of the free
Join the glorious Spartan band;
Let your thrilling watchword be;
BRUEN and our native land!’

*O’Connell gives him this honour.

COMMENTS
On Landlord and Tenant. This poem was published in the Car-
low Sentinel on 11 (first part) and 18 December 1841. The Car-
low Sentinel and Leinster Agricultural, Literary and Com-
mercial Advertiser was a large-format, four-page weekly
which Tyndall read regularly in his period in Youghal and Kin-
sale (Co. Cork). The paper published at least one poem every
week, on the top right corner of page 4, except for the last quar-
ter of that year, when the lists of voters took that place. In ad-
dition, sometimes a second poem was printed on the lower
central columns of page 3, the position occupied by all of Tyn-
dall’s poetic contributions. This prominent position was given
to these poems, perhaps, because they made reference—as dis-
tinct from the more conventional poems on page 4—to then
current political affairs. At that time in 1841 Carlow was in the
throes of a divisive election campaign.

Tyndall’s poems were signed “W.S.” which, as his correspon-
dence reveals, was John Tyndall’s shorthand for “Walter
Snooks,” a sobriquet that he used from time to time but that
could, in this author’s opinion, be meant also as a belated ref-
ERENCE to the nationalist Romanticism of Sir Walter Scott as a
source of inspiration. In the last term of that year another four
poems by W.S. were carried by the paper.

The poem does not follow any regular traditional form. Meter
and rhyme are irregular, but there are two stylistic devices
which lend music to the poem; one is a scattering of internal
rhyme, mostly minor, and the other, very frequent alliterations
(“balmy breeze’s bland caress,” “a diamond dew-drop” or “fal-
ter feebly forth,” for instance). There are three voices in the poem;
a man who is re-visiting the home he left long time ago, which is obviously self-referential, and two local characters; these are not, as the title would suggest, a landlord and his tenant, but rather, a lucky tenant and an unlucky one, as both refer to their landlord in dramatically different ways. Although their religion is not explicitly stated, one, happy and industrious, is the Protestant tenant. He is not free from natural disaster such as weather and blight, but he is able to fight them, or at least, he is contented with his lot, his home having stood for generations. “God bless my Landlord” are his parting words. The other, wretched, would appear to be the Catholic tenant, now homeless, the home where he spent a happy childhood and where his father died, and where “I might have spent a happy life” destroyed, through the landlord’s deceit, “A wretched houseless wanderer I roam” is the summary of his statement, but not without suggesting that in this case, these were “imaginary wrongs.” Tyndall does not make a moral judgement between the two, as to whether one was good and the other wasn’t. It was his unique experience having lived and having befriended real people on both camps, so he simply acknowledged their different forms of existence; the first, not blaming God, the second, putting the blame for all his sorrows at the gate of the landlord.

A dramatic effect is achieved by contrasting the respective surrounding landscapes, which are intensely observed, with the causes of the misfortunes of the two tenants. The visitor meets the two characters with different expectations; the happy tenant is “the hoary scion of this revered stock,” the unhappy tenant in his present dispossession, “a reckless maniac.”

Ostensibly the poem is a political statement, compressed in the last words from the lucky tenant; “God bless my Landlord.” But in view of Tyndall’s later life, the poem could be considered rather as a foreword to his scientific creativity, which is present there as in embryonic form. And he who delighted in speculation about the origin of scientific creativity, would probably have taken pleasure in seeing his later interests stated so early and so clearly by himself. However, it would seem that he did not go back often to his youthful poems as expressing the root-cause of his work, perhaps because they were a bit of an embarrassment, the work of a still orthodox believer, an attitude that he was later to renounce for the sake of science.

It is curious that to approach both scenes the visitor in the poem “climbs” a hill to gain a view. Leighlin stands beneath the Killeshin Ridge with magnificent views to the Blackstair Mountains.

Subjects that would concern the natural philosopher and the scientist in later life are already present here, when he is just twenty years of age and has had no formal instruction in the natural sciences. So, he starts with the keyword “Nature,” which is really the main but unstated character in the poem. “Radiance,” as in solar radiance or even body heat, appears twice, and this was to become one of his major subjects later, linked with spectroscopy, or with the effect of solar radiation when finding gases in its path. “Absorbed reflection” seems to be an early attempt to describe a physical phenomenon related to body heat—the warmth felt in the embrace—which is, after all, radiation of some form, bodily perceived. He already takes “accident” or chance as the source of natural causality, although the world is “God-given.” To watch the nearly Homeric “rosy wing of morning flap” and the poetically incongruous but scientifically daring “mountain peaks bathing in ether” became very productive exercises for the physicist, although at this point he could not have acquired the experience of ice and snow which would necessitate Alpine altitudes. “Reality should crush thy towering vision” would suggest a sound principle of the contemplative of nature before the speculations of the harried academic that needs to explain his existence through his scientific output.

On The Battle of the Constitution is to be Fought at the Registry. The poem appeared in The Carlow Sentinel on 27 November. The poem was addressed to the “child of the North,” a specific sector of the voting population of Carlow. In particular, the last line reveals that the poem is to rally Bruen’s supporters. Thus the military guise of the later part of the poem is appropriate because Henry Bruen was a Captain in the British Army, as well as a Magistrate in Carlow, the largest landowner in the county, with about 16,500 acres of land, with four large houses, in Carlow, Dublin and London, and after the election, Representative for the County in Parliament, together with Thomas Bunbury. Tyndall quickly moves into the metaphor of the mountains and the snow—which were much closer to him in Cork where he wrote than in Carlow where the poem was read, which is situated in a large plain where mention of mountains is metaphorical—a device to separate the superior from the inferior, or to put it bluntly, Protestant from Catholic. The reference to the geyser, with its intermittent upwellings of hot water, would appear to be out of place, unless it is meant to be a symbol for the Ascendancy, but this in a short poem of a bellicose nature only contributes to confuse the issue. The lines “And tho’ the truant feet may widely roam/Thy fondest thoughts still linger round thy home./Thus, Carlow, thus—wherever my lot may be/Fond mem’ry clings tenaciously to thee! ’tis an original description of the nostalgia of the forced emigrant for the home left behind, although their role in the poem is unclear, and can be seen as an untimely intrusion of the self. “Thy gallant son” is obviously one confronting O’Connell, but this is made clear using a singularly unpoetic procedure, a footnote. At the end of the poem we learn that this is Bruen, one of the local landlords that was politically involved and who ran for election in Carlow against O’Connell and the Catholics. Pbroch or Pi-broch is a form of music of the Scottish Highlands. For those in the know, the poem attempts to equate the election campaign then under way in Carlow with famous classic battlefields; Pharsalia, where Julius Cesar defeated Pompei (48BC), and Munda (Southern Spain) where Cesar obtained the decisive victory that put an end to the Civil War (45 BC). Sparta was prominent militarily in Greece around 500BC.

In my opinion this poem works less well than Landlord and Tenant for two reasons; first, the link between the title of the poem and the text is less obvious in this case, and second, because the author mixes too many emotions in a short space. The word “Registry” in the title does not recur or is further explained or alluded to. In brief the poem means; in the election the registry (or the ballot box, in current parlance) could be to us Protestants what Pharsalia was to Cesar, an important victory. When we read “Ireland’s battle fought and won,” we are
projecting the future on to the past, while in the classic allusions, the past is projected into the mixed emotions; the poem is a statement of tribal identity and superiority, a battle cry, the nostalgia of the emigrant for home, and a survey of Cesar’s military victories, all laced with a sharp observation of the landscape. The hydra, being a microscopic organism, might perhaps be described as slimy, but hardly as fearsome, and would have been unknown to most people. Medusa, hydra’s larger sister, would have done more appropriately. The fact that the poem is explicitly an ode to Captain Bruen’s military prowess very likely helped to have it published.

In brief, the poems were successful locally at the time because they expressed a local tribal situation, taking sides in a relatively sophisticated way, which could go over the head of ignorant readers. You needed to read between the lines and have an element of sensitivity and classic education to grasp them. Still more briefly, you needed to be Protestant to enjoy them. But it was precisely for those reasons, their local and temporary value, that their appeal was not universal, that they were not great poetry, and that they were forgotten. The use of a pseudonym probably helped to erase them from memory.

From Kinsale to Alp Lusgen

The only Tyndall poem that has attracted critical attention is his mature A morning on Alp Lusgen, which Tyndall signed in his own name. There are many versions of this poem but we include the one that was published in New Fragments. When read immediately after the youthful poems we are struck by the idea that this is a more serious, more universal, and so far-reaching work of poetry, where Tyndall deals with a bigger issue, the very possibility of true knowledge. It would seem that Tyndall began working towards this poem already in 1872, about twenty years before its final publication, a fact which attracted Francis O’Gorman to study the nature of the textual variations in search of the evolution of Tyndall’s own ideas.

O’Gorman observed that throughout the editorial process, Tyndall appears gradually to lose confidence in evolution as an explanation of his own aesthetic experiences in the Alps. More recently, a study of Alp Lusgen has formed a chapter in Daniel Brown’s study of The poetry of Victorian Science, from the viewpoint of the reactions Tyndall elicited in the circle of The Red Lion, which included Maxwell, Tait, Thompson and other Scottish scholars.

Both parts of Landlord and Tenant, which came out separately, as well as The Battle and Alp Lusgen, begin with a look upwards, to the sun, the sky or the mountain peaks. This is an initial search for energy, for the source, which is the object of the whole poem. In all cases the landscape is read minutely, it is interrogated as to its works and origin. Some stylistic features remain unchanged from the early to the latter poems; the abundance of internal minor rhymes (“rounded mounds,” “green … streams,” “marigolds … knolls” “heath … leaves,” “paints against” etc.) and a near absence of consonant rhymes at the end of lines. The foot is still irregular and so is the meter. Light and colour, temperature and sound were constant cues recurring in all poems, and some times their messages are interchanged in what Brown appropriately calls synaesthesia. When Tyndall tells us that “each particular blade trembles in song” he would seem to be invoking the Impressionists’ attitude to light, perhaps van Gogh in particular, who observed the plants in the landscape leaf by leaf, and who stood still in the open air to feel the sun on his skin.

By the time Alp Lusgen was finally printed, Tyndall had been exposed to poetic, aesthetic, religious, philosophical and scientific influences from many quarters, so it is truly remarkable that after such deluge the youth poems—virgin of the influence of the Alps, Carlyle, Darwin, Faraday, Forbes, Lange, Lucretius, the X Club and so many others, in brief, a purer Tyndall—still echo so strongly, both in the form and in the ideas, fifty years later, suggesting that there is, as it were, within the intellectual life of the author, and perhaps of all authors, a principle of conservation of cultural momentum that Tyndall would have relished to enunciate.

A MORNING ON ALP LUSGEN

The sun has cleared the peaks and quenched the flush Of orient crimson with excess of light. The tall grass quivers in the rhythmic air Without a sound; yet each particular blade Trembles in song, had we but ears to hear. The hot rays smite us, but a quickening breeze Keeps languor far away. Unshimmering, The soul enlarged takes in the mighty scene. The plummet from this height must sink afar To reach you rounded mounds which seem so small. They shrink in the embrace of vaster forms, Though, placed amid the pomp of Cumbrian Fells, These hillock crests would overtop them all. Steep fall the meadows to the vale in slopes Of freshest green, scarred by the humming streams, And flecked by spaces of primeval pine.

Unplanted groves! whose pristine seeds, they say, Were sown amid the flames of nascent stars —How came ye thence and hither? Whence the craft Which shook these gentian atoms into form, And dyed the flower with azure deeper far Than that of heaven itself on days serene? What built these marigolds? What clothed these knolls With fiery whortle leaves? What gave the heath Its purple bloom—the Alpine rose its glow?

Shew us the power which fills each tuft of grass With sentient swarms? — the art transcending thought, "Which paints against the canvas of the eye These crests sublime and pure, and then transmutes The picture into worship? Science dumb Oh babbling Gnostic! cease to beat the air. We yearn, and grope, and guess, but cannot know.

Low down, the yellow shingle of the Ehone Hems in the scampering stream, which loops the sands In islands manifold. Beyond, a town, Whose burnished domes flash back the solar blaze —Proud domes for town so small! But here erewhile

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Unfurled itself the Jesuit oriflamme,
And souls were nurtured in the tonic creed
Of Loyola. Grand creed! if only true.
Oh! sorrowing shade of him, who preached through life
Obedience to the Highest! could men find
That Highest much were clear! Yon tonsured monk
Will face the flames obedient to a power
Which he deems highest, but which you deem damned.
Cut by a gorge, the vale beyond the town
Breaks into squares of yellow and of green
—Of rye and meadow. Through them winds the road
Which opened to the hosts of conquering France
Lombardian plains—sky-touching Simplon Pass
—Flanked by the Lion Mountain to the left,
While to the right the mighty Fletschorn lifts
A beetling brow, and spreads abroad its snows.
Dom, Cervin—Weisskom of the dazzling crown—
Ye splendours of the Alps! Can earth elsewhere
Bring forth a rival? Not the Indian chain,
Though shouldered higher o'er the standard sea,
Can front the eye with more majestic forms.
From one vast brain yon noble highway came;
'Let it be made,' he said, and it was done.
In one vast brain was born the motive power
Which swept whole armies over heights unsealed,
And poured them, living cataracts, on the South.
Or was it force of faith—faith warranted
By antecedent deeds, that nerved these hosts
And made Napoleon's name a thunderbolt?
What is its value now? This man was called
'A mortal God!' Oh, shade before invoked,
You spoke of Might and Right; and many a shaft
Barbed with the sneer, 'He preaches force—brute force,
'Has rattled on your shield. But well you knew
Might, to be Might, must base itself on Right,
Or vanish evanescent as the deeds
Of France's Emperor. Reflect on this,
Ye temporary darlings of the crowd.
To-day ye may have peans in your ears;
To-morrow ye lie rotten, if your work*
Lack that true core which gives to Right and Might
One meaning in the end.

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Where are they now?
The gates and railings that once adorned
the road boundary of the Carlow Infirmary
that stood on the site of the present
Sacred Heart Home.

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