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Ignatius Donnelly

A DON QUIXOTE in the World of Science

DONALD H. DeMEULES

IN THE COURSE of a career which earned him the title "prince of American cranks" Ignatius Donnelly fought many windmills. To our age of scientific sophistication his battle in behalf of the Atlantean myth and his theory regarding the earth's collision with a comet undoubtedly appear the most Quixotic. His views on these subjects were set forth in two books: *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, published in 1882, and *Ragnarok: The Age of Fire and Gravel*, which appeared the following year.

Donnelly had little, if any, scientific training. He had attended Central High School in Philadelphia, where biology was stressed at the expense of the physical sciences, and following graduation there, his only professional study was in the field of law. This lack of formal preparation, however, was no deterrent to a man of Donnelly's voracious reading habits and truly

catholic interests. During the years when a political career kept him in Washington, he spent long hours in the Library of Congress, reading and filling notebooks, while at home in Minnesota his accumulation of books and periodicals was said to constitute one of the most extensive private libraries in that frontier state.¹

In writing *Atlantis* Donnelly attempted to demonstrate that the Atlantis of the ancients was not a myth, but a real island or continent in the Atlantic Ocean upon which man first rose from barbarism to civilization. Starting with the description of an island kingdom opposite the Pillars of Hercules, as given by Plato, Donnelly argued that Atlantis occupied a position to the southwest of Europe, and that the Azores marked the mountain peaks of the submerged world. He theorized that in some terrible cataclysm it had sunk beneath the sea with all its inhabitants except a scattered few who escaped in boats and carried the terrible tidings to its colonies; and that this report, handed down through countless generations, gave rise to the deluge legend, of which some version appears in the traditions of nearly all nations.

¹ Controllers of Central High School, *Reports*, 1844, p. 81-86. Copies are in the Free Library of Philadelphia. See also John D. Hicks, "The Political Career of Ignatius Donnelly," in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 8:80, 101 (June-September, 1921); Walter B. Rideout's introduction to Ignatius Donnelly, *Caesar's Column*, xii (Cambridge, 1960).



*A portrait of
Ignatius Donnelly,
probably taken
about 1890*

In this happy land of Atlantis, according to Donnelly, man progressed in wisdom, science, and art over a long period of time. The Atlanteans colonized the seacoasts of Europe, the shores of the Mediterranean, and the lowlands of India. They went up the Amazon and crossed to the Pacific Coast; and they settled in Mexico where they founded Aztec civilization. He maintained that they even ascended the Mississippi River and its tributaries, leaving evidence of their presence in the arts and customs of the Mound Builders. They were also the progenitors of the ancient civilization of Egypt.

Fantastic as this theory was, Donnelly brought to its support a mass of evidence collected from multifarious sources, which did credit to his indefatigable energy as well as his ingenuity and scholarship. The burden of his argument rested always upon the similarities that existed in widely separated regions. Customs which may have been derived by imitation from sources now

inaccessible, resemblances between the flora and fauna of the old world and the new, similarities between the primitive implements of the earlier races of America and Europe, and parallels of language and alphabetical signs were to Donnelly strong confirmation that all stemmed from a common source.

He wrote with the impulsive force of a man defending a cause rather than the caution of a scientist seeking the truth. There was more than a touch of oratorical drama in his style:

"Suppose," he demands of the reader, "you were to find in mid-Atlantic, in front of the Mediterranean, in the neighborhood of the Azores, the remains of an immense island, sunk beneath the sea . . . would it not go far to confirm the statement of Plato that . . . 'there was an island . . . called Atlantis?' And suppose we found that the Azores were the mountain peaks of this drowned island . . . while around them descending into the sea were found great

strata of lava . . . would we not be obliged to confess that these facts furnished strong corroborative proofs of the truth of Plato's statement that 'in one day and one fatal night there came mighty earthquakes and inundations which engulfed that mighty people?' . . . And," Donnelly finishes without equivocation, "all of these things recent investigations have proved conclusively."²

Originally published by Harper and Brothers in February, 1882, *Atlantis* was an immediate success and brought its author widespread fame. By 1890 twenty-three editions had been printed in the United States and twenty-six in England, and the book had been translated into several foreign languages. It was the first comprehensive and purportedly scientific treatment of the Atlantis myth, and it caught the imagination of a generation in which an awareness of the romantic potential of science was just dawning. Evidence of its enduring popularity is the printing of a revised edition as late as 1949.³

UPON PUBLICATION, copies of the work were sent to a number of prominent men. This brought about a happy day for its author, when he recorded in his diary that he had received a letter from William E. Gladstone, "Premier of England, famous Homeric scholar, king of men." Donnelly exulted that "He spoke warmly of Atlantis, believed in the theory & went on to give me some parallel facts."⁴ An examination of the original communication from Gladstone suggests that he was not as enthusiastic as

Donnelly chose to believe. The prime minister wrote: "Under much pressure of public affairs, I have contrived to read already an appreciable portion of it with an interest which makes me very desirous to go through the whole. I may not be able to accept all your propositions, but I am much disposed to believe in an Atlantis." He went on to refer to the Duke of Argyll, who saw while at Venice a fish that could also be found off the coast of Scotland. He called this "another case in which traditions have come down into the historical age from periods of time being put away in the background of preceding ages," because "Homer unquestionably . . . believed in a sea exit from the northern Adriatic."⁵

After he had read the letter from Gladstone, Donnelly confided to his diary, "I looked down at myself and could not but smile at the appearance of this man, who in this little, snow-bound hamlet, was corresponding with the man whose word was fate anywhere in the British Empire."⁶

Seizing the opportunity, Donnelly sent Gladstone a long letter, which, in part, asked that the British government throw a flood of light on the past history of the human race by sending out one of its idle war vessels to make accurate soundings of the northern section of the Atlantic Ridge, than called the Dolphin's Ridge, which many had supposed to be Atlantis. Gladstone stated in reply that he did not think the admiralty would send out a scientific expedition for the purely literary interest of Atlantis.⁷

The first Gladstone letter was used to advertise the book, but a letter from Charles Darwin was quietly buried in Donnelly's files. Darwin wrote that he had read *Atlantis* with interest, but in a very skeptical spirit. Another unenthusiastic letter was received from Bishop James Donnelly of Monaghan, Ireland, a distant relative of the Minnesota author, who declared that his mind was filled with melancholy in seeing what he regarded as symptoms of free-thinking in the book. He felt that biblical

² Donnelly, *Atlantis*, 46.

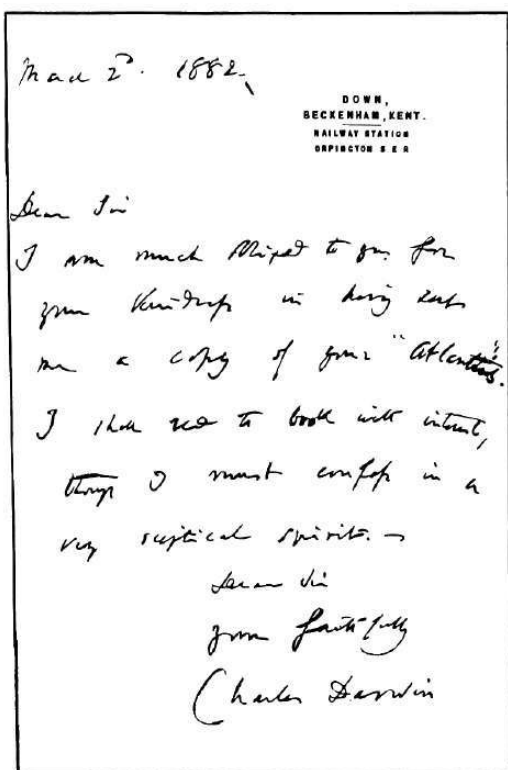
³ Rideout in *Caesar's Column*, xiii; Martin Gardner, *In the Name of Science*, 165 (New York, 1952).

⁴ Donnelly Diary, March 26, 1882, Donnelly Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. All manuscripts cited below are also in this collection.

⁵ Gladstone to Donnelly, March 11, 1882.

⁶ Donnelly Diary, March 26, 1882.

⁷ Donnelly to Gladstone, March 25, 1882; Gladstone to Donnelly, April 10, 1882. The "Dolphin's Ridge" was so referred to by Donnelly because of soundings made there by the United States ship "Dolphin" in 1851-52.



CHARLES Darwin's letter to Donnelly

narratives were treated with levity, and that Donnelly did not accept the holy scriptures as divine revelation.⁸

A quite different viewpoint was expressed by a correspondent of the *Chicago Times*, who was quoted in a St. Paul paper. He felt that "in this age, when science is eating away so many of the facts upon which the revelation of the bible rests, and when the scientists are agreed that there never was a universal deluge . . . this theory of 'Atlantis' comes as a valuable reinforcement of the truth of Genesis."⁹ Newspapers on the whole seem to have been neutral towards *Atlantis*. While refusing to endorse its author's daring theories, they were awed by the sheer quantity and variety of his evidence. "The whole world of science and all the realms of history seem to lie at his feet," observed the *St. Paul Dispatch* of March 8, 1882, whose reviewer also felt that *Atlantis* was "one of the notable books of the decade, nay of the century." Scien-

tific publications, however, were not so kind. The *Journal of Science* was very critical of the work, pointing out that "the author relies too much upon that dangerous form of argument which may be generalized in the terms, 'Why may not A be X?'"¹⁰

Many critics found it difficult to pinpoint their objections to *Atlantis*, for Donnelly built his argument with the skill of a seasoned political polemicist. It is in his methods, his assumptions, and particularly in what he chooses to ignore that one finds the basic weakness of his case. There are numerous inconsistencies and unanswered questions. The time element, for instance, is confused. He appropriates evidence of geologic change which took place over millions of years and uses it as proof of happenings which, according to his own argument, occurred in near-historic times. He claims that "the Gulf Stream flowed around Atlantis, and it still retains the circular motion first imparted to it by the presence of that island," yet he fails to explain why its course should remain unchanged when the circumstance responsible for it has ceased to exist.¹¹

A more fundamental objection to Donnelly's logic is based on his assumption that all similarities in human cultures must necessarily arise from some common origin. Most of the resemblances cited by Donnelly had been noted by scholars, but they were offset by such overwhelming dissimilarities that it took a truly romantic turn of mind to construct such a theory from them. Donnelly denied the possibility that common cultural traits might have arisen independently. He maintained that "there is no truth in the theory that men pressed by necessity will always hit upon the same invention to relieve their wants. . . . There are two great divisions of mankind, the

⁸ Darwin to Donnelly, March 2, 1882; Bishop Donnelly to Donnelly, April 24, 1882.

⁹ *St. Paul Dispatch*, March 8, 1882.

¹⁰ "Atlantis Once More," in *Journal of Science*, 5:327 (June, 1883).

¹¹ Donnelly, *Atlantis*, 31-34, 49, 50.

civilized and savage. . . . The abyss between . . . [them] is simply incalculable; it represents not alone a difference in arts and methods of life, but in the mental constitution, the instincts, and the predispositions of the soul. . . . We will seek in vain for any example of a savage people developing civilization of and among themselves.”¹²

THE SUCCESS of his first effort caused Donnelly to venture further into science by writing *Ragnarok: The Age of Fire and Gravel*. On July 8, 1882, less than six months after *Atlantis* was published, Donnelly noted in his diary, “This day I have completed ‘Ragnarok.’ I commenced to work at it about the middle of May and have worked laboriously . . . with the interruption of short trips, ever since—about one month and three quarters. It grew within me from small beginnings like an inspiration, and I hope it may do some good in the world.” Despite the short time devoted to it, *Ragnarok* was a tome of some 452 pages. Like *Atlantis*, it was a synthesis of many sources and was not the result of any original research. Its title is somewhat ambiguous. According to Donnelly’s etymological sources,

“Ragnarok” is a Scandinavian word which may mean “darkness of the gods” or “rain of dust.”¹³ Either interpretation yields an appropriate title for the book, with its hauntingly apocalyptic theme.

Its central argument is that the glacial theory for the origin of geologic drift is insufficient, and that only an outside force, such as a comet, can account for the deposits of sand, gravel, and nonnative rock found throughout much of the northern hemisphere. According to Donnelly’s explanation, “the comet brought down upon the earth clay-dust and part of the gravel and boulders; while the awful force it exerted, meeting the earth while moving at the rate of a million miles an hour, smashed the surface-rocks, tore them to pieces, ground them up and mixed the material with its own, and deposited all together on the heated surface of the earth, where the lower part was baked by the heat into ‘till’ or ‘hardpan,’ while the rushing cyclones deposited the other material in partly stratified masses or drifts above it.”¹⁴

This mighty catastrophe presumably occurred at about the time in which more conventional scientists place the last ice age, and was therefore well within the span of human existence. Following the method used in *Atlantis*, Donnelly seeks to prove his theory by citing parallel accounts of a world-wide disaster to be found in the

¹² Donnelly, *Atlantis*, 133.

¹³ Donnelly, *Ragnarok*, 141.

¹⁴ Donnelly, *Ragnarok*, 255.

THE library in
Donnelly’s home
at Nininger



myths, legends, folklore, and religious traditions of nearly all nations. He felt that "it was not possible for the primitive mind to have imagined these things if they had never occurred."¹⁵

A question as to how seriously Donnelly himself took the theory is raised by an entry in his diary for July 31, 1882. "I believe I am right," he wrote, "and if not right plausible and that the book will be a success." That the latter consideration was of prime importance is suggested by an earlier entry in which he privately hoped that *Atlantis* would be "a great financial success and lift me out of this slough of debt and poverty."¹⁶ In a letter to D. Appleton and Company concerning *Ragnarok*, he argued: "A book who [sic] proposes to interpret in such a curious and novel fashion the Drift, the Glacial Age, the Scandinavian legends, the old mythology of Egypt, Smyrna, Greece and Rome, the Book of Job, and Genesis itself, cannot but command wide attention whether its theories are correct or not."¹⁷

Publishers seemed less certain. Though Donnelly personally took the completed manuscript to New York City, Scribners declined to publish it. A scientist at New Haven had advised the firm that the theory was absurd and scientifically ridiculous. Donnelly next called on Appleton and Company, with whom he had more success. They agreed to bring out the book but warned him that it was futile to attempt to enlist scientific opinion in support of the theory. They also cautioned him against excessive optimism about the volume's reception by the public. These doubts were justified when *Ragnarok* appeared.¹⁸

The publisher blamed its slow sale in part on hostility from the clergy, and perhaps some of the latter did feel that Donnelly had gone too far in reading Genesis by the light of the comet. That this reaction was not universal, however, is indicated by a review in *The Churchman*, an Episcopal journal, which stated, "Mr. Donnelly can claim the credit of furnishing a theory

which is consistent with itself . . . and also with the teachings of Holy Scripture." The editors of the *Catholic World* felt that "*Ragnarok* . . . will on the whole repay perusal and furnish much matter for reflection as well as excitement for the imagination." Further evidence that the clergy was not aroused by *Ragnarok* is Donnelly's notation in his diary that Bishop John Ireland was "9/10ths of a convert to the 'Ragnarok' theory."¹⁹

An unidentified newspaper clipping pasted in Donnelly's diary presents an English review which was most unsympathetic toward *Ragnarok* and stated that the author had incorporated too much mysticism and chauvinism within the book. On the other hand, the reviewer for *The Arena* favored the work because of its metaphysical and sociological content. The *Popular Science Monthly* apparently summed up the majority opinion when it stated, "On the whole 'Ragnarok' is too absurd to do much mischief."²⁰

Perhaps Donnelly took comfort from the words of Carter Harrison, the mayor of Chicago, who told him that he was as crazy as a loon, since all original thinkers were crazy.²¹ At any rate, Donnelly seemed to have his fill of science after writing *Atlantis* and *Ragnarok*. Never again did he venture into that field, but his Quixotic instincts found a fresh area of conflict in supporting the theory that Francis Bacon was the author of Shakespeare's plays.

¹⁵ Donnelly, *Ragnarok*, 120.

¹⁶ Donnelly Diary, March 9, 1882.

¹⁷ Donnelly to O. B. Bunce, August 8, 1882.

¹⁸ Bunce to Donnelly, January 25, 1883.

¹⁹ *The Churchman*, 47:180 (February 17, 1883); *Catholic World*, 37:285 (May, 1883); Donnelly Diary, September 3, 1883.

²⁰ Imogene C. Fales, "Donnelly's Ragnarok," in *The Arena*, 21:351-357 (March, 1899); "Ragnarok," in *Popular Science Monthly*, 22:560 (February, 1883).

²¹ Donnelly Diary, September 3, 1883.

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