



The contribution of Sir William Brooke O'Shaughnessy (1809–1889) to plant taxonomy

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Abstract

William Brooke O'Shaughnessy deserves recognition for his major contributions to chemistry, medicine and electrical engineering, mostly made while working in India. His contribution to botany was more limited and in terms of taxonomy amounted to a dubiously described species of agar-producing seaweed (*Fucus amylaceus*) and one new combination for a vascular plant (*Scilla pancration*). His main work of botanical interest, *The Bengal Dispensatory*, first published in 1841, also contains two other new combinations which should be ascribed to the authorship of Nathaniel Wallich. These are *Abelmoschus longifolius* and *Pharbitis caerulea*. The basionym of the latter, *Ipomoea caerulea*, is lectotypified to an illustration and an epitype is selected. *Hebradendron pictorium*, which is listed by O'Shaughnessy, is a combination that was first published by Lindley based on *Garcinia pictoria* of Roxburgh, a species from southern India which is lectotypified here. *Garcinia pictoria* was not validly published by Buchanan-Hamilton. He applied the name *Oxycarpus indica* to a species in cultivation in Calcutta that Roxburgh referred to as *Garcinia cornea*. This was actually *Garcinia celebica*.

Key words: *Abelmoschus*, Algae, Bengal Dispensatory, Buchanan-Hamilton, *Garcinia*, India, *Pharbitis*, Roxburgh, seaweed, typification, *Scilla*, Wallich

Introduction

William O'Shaughnessy Brooke né William Brooke O'Shaughnessy (1809–1889) was a remarkable man, who made major contributions to the fields of medicine, science and technology during the 19th Century, yet died in relative obscurity and is now largely forgotten. He is credited with a role in developing intravenous fluid replacement therapy in the treatment of diseases such as cholera (Moon 1967), considered a founding father of forensic chemistry (Gorman 1984) and a technical innovator and master of organisation in his running of the Telegraphic Service in India (Bridge 1998), for which he was knighted in 1856. His pioneering scientific investigations into the properties of Indian hemp (*Cannabis sativa* L. var. *indica* (Lam.) Wehmer) have been lauded in recent years by the 'medicinal cannabis' lobby, but they represent only a small part of his studies of *materia medica*.

Born in Limerick, Ireland, in 1809, he graduated in medicine from Edinburgh University (where briefly he was a contemporary of Charles Darwin). In 1833 he entered the service of the East India Company and went to India where he was to spend most of his working life. He was appointed professor of chemistry at the Calcutta Medical School in 1835 and went on to accumulate further appointments in Calcutta including Chemical Examiner to the Government and Assay Master to the Calcutta Mint. He was appointed Superintendent of Telegraphs in 1853, becoming Director-General of the service in 1856.

O'Shaughnessy's contribution to botany in comparison to his work in other fields was minor and stemmed from his medical interests. Of course, as a doctor of that period, he had received training in botany and given