

## **"Mary Ward of Castle Ward" - Frances Bailey** **13<sup>th</sup> March 2019**

Frances Bailey, Lead Curator of the National Trust Northern Ireland gave an intriguing presentation on "Mary Ward of Castle Ward" a remarkable woman that from the age of 3 took an intense interest in nature and science. In time she gained renown as an astronomer, microscopist, natural historian, collector, illustrator and writer.

Born at Ballylin (Offaly) in 1827, the youngest child of the Rev. Henry and Harriet King, the family were frequent visitors to Birr Castle the home of her cousin William Parsons the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Rosse. Parsons was a noted astronomer who later became president of the Royal Society (1848 – 1854), though 27 years older, both he and his wife took much interest in Mary's scientific studies. In 1840 Parsons commenced construction of 'Leviathan' a reflecting telescope that until 1919 was the largest in the world. Everything was manufactured and assembled on site and Mary meticulously recorded all aspects of the construction in notes and detailed technical drawings. Many eminent scientists visited Birr Castle to view the telescope giving Mary the opportunity to discuss scientific matters and show her illustrations. One visitor was the astronomer Sir James South who having seen the 18 year old making concise drawings of tiny insects using a single lens magnifying glass suggested that she should purchase a microscope. Her parents bought an instrument from Andrew Ross of London that was the best available, she read many articles and gained expert knowledge of microscopy that became a lifelong passion. Glass was difficult to source and she made her early slides from slivers of ivory though she later used glass. Another regular visitor was physicist Sir David Brewster who was so impressed with her powers of observation and artistic skills that he asked her to prepare illustrations for his publications that were to include the drawings of 'Leviathan', microscopical studies and very intricate and precise geometric patterns of glass being subjected to heat. She sent a series of letters accompanied by drawings to a friend Emily Clark describing how she used her microscope.



In 1854 she married a son of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Viscount Bangor, Henry Ward a commissioned army officer who had served in the Crimea. Shortly after the marriage he resigned his commission giving up any regular income; being the 2<sup>nd</sup> son he had no land entitlement so money was always a problem. They moved between family spending time at Ballylin, Birr Castle and Castle Ward and Dublin where they had many friends. They with their children were always welcomed and considered delightful to have as guests.

Until her untimely death in 1869 she underwent 11 pregnancies, 8 children were born live and 6 attained adulthood. During this period she vigorously pursued her academic studies at most times researching, studying, drawing and writing late into the night and early morning when the children were in bed. As an 'exceptional case' she was granted permission to visit Greenwich Observatory not normally open to women, she made many sketches of equipment and instruments and took copious notes. She became 1 of only 3 women placed on the mailing list for the Royal Astronomical Society, the others being Queen Victoria and Mary Somerville, a scientist after whom Somerville College,

Oxford is named. She produced a 20 page home printed paper with hand coloured illustrations 'A Windfall for the Microscope' that was given to family and friends.

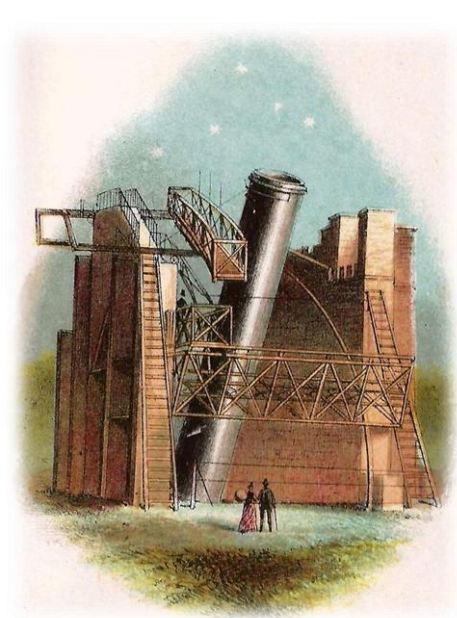
In 1857 her letters to Emily Clark were incorporated into her first book 'Sketches with the Microscope' that she initially published privately for sale by subscription, it was then accepted by a publisher and put on general sale. A constant stream of papers, publications and studies followed.

Castle Ward was where much of her work took place, she made many drawings and paintings of the grounds and surrounding area, her garden paintings have been important reference documents during the recent restoration of the Victorian and Sunken Gardens. (Her drawings of 'Leviathan' were also used during the telescope's reconstruction some years ago).

In August 1869, Mary Ward sadly died during a stay at Birr Castle; William Parsons' sons were experimenting with steam driven road vehicles and had constructed a car. Passengers sat across the open front, she was thrown from the seat whilst going round a bend and tragically she was run over by the rear wheel.

At Castle Ward there is an album that was presented to Mary by her sister and brother in law (Jane and William Rosse). It contains a sizeable collection of her memorabilia, photographs, drawings, cut-outs, and annotated letters and notes from friends and family. Mary kept annual diaries that recount her day to day life and activities, and they illustrate how she managed to devote herself to her children and family whilst at the same time immersing herself in the study of all the subjects that she was so expert in. The diaries are available at PRONI and on-going research is bringing to light just how remarkable a woman Mary Ward was.

Being 150 years since her death, there will be events at Castle Ward during 2019 that will focus on Mary Ward; many exhibits will feature her drawings, specimens, research, collections, illustrations and drawings.



Leviathan Reflecting Telescope

