

The children still play in the corridors of the castle. I wonder if they are looking for their sisters and brothers.

All four are of a theatrical bent, and their plays often feature ghosts, especially child ghosts.

Today being Christmas, and merry-making, they are devising a drama about their parents. 'How did you meet?' they ask. I describe the Anglo-Irish marriage market, and Richard, who is already an engineer, roughs out a sketch of market stalls in a London street. 'No!' I protest. 'This market is a ballroom!' They giggle at the idea of their mother dressed up for the ball. But how else can a plain-speaking Yorkshire-woman find her Irish Earl, complete with castle, a moveable telescope to rival Galileo's, and staff enough to move it, inch by inch, across the sky?

Randal plays me: Mary Field of Heaton, Bradford. Rachel walks behind him, carrying sheaves of papers. 'What are those?' demand the two playing all the other parts.

'The dowry!' declares Rachel. 'Half the land of West Yorkshire!'

I say: 'Come, come. Not half. A tenth, maybe.'

I tell them about the marriage proposal, which came soon after the ballroom scene. My suitor, William Parsons of Birr Castle, was attracted by my dowry. But he was concerned, too, about our compatibility. He had been told I was a skilled blacksmith with a penchant for star-gazing. 'Miss Field,' he said, 'could you design and make the gateway to my estate? And polish the lenses that I am developing for my telescope?' I nodded, and it was done.

The children do not believe me. But that was how it came about. I could have added: 'In due course, I will take *photo-graphs* of the progress we are making with the telescope.' Randal was puzzled. 'Photo ... -graph?' He had not yet heard of Monsieur Daguerre and the '*daguerrotype*'.

With tears in my eyes, I watch Randal, Richard, Charles and Rachel play out the story of dear William and myself. They depict him as somewhat obsessive. But then, so am I. They know how I made the gateway with its embedded Irish harps. They have lived with this telescope – the so-called 'Leviathan of Birr Castle' – all their lives.

But they cannot act out the complete compatibility of their parents. It enabled us to recover from the loss of seven of our eleven children, and to educate the remaining four, through selected tutors, in a way that suited their individual natures. That was how William himself had been educated: not at mock-English boarding schools, that teach only ancient languages and deprive their pupils of the sciences. *Our* tutors teach them physics, chemistry, metal-work and astronomy. I, too, was educated in the sciences and engineering, though a girl.

So I watch them creating me: hammering at the forge, feeding the staff as they labour, developing the lenses, and taking and developing and printing photographs of the many phases of our work. The 'Leviathan' will become the wonder of Ireland and beyond, but they do not know that now. They act out themselves, peering through our telescope, and wonder at the Milky Way.

Mary Parsons, Countess of Rosse, County Offaly, Ireland (1813-1885)

Alison Leonard

