

## DEMESNE

**(On the astronomer Earls of Parsonstown, King's County, UK, now Birr, Co. Offaly, Republic of Ireland)**

### I

The circumterrestrial swarm glowed at the edge of the galaxy. Cooling, it gave us the Earth and the Moon. The Moon was thrown into ageing, expanding its collection of rilles and ridges. Below it was the Earth, a slipshod crust reshuffling its plates.

Force made this island. The two shores of the proto-Atlantic confronted one another, wrestled and pushed, crushed against one another like bad lovers, producing intense deformations to the west.

Granite made its intrusions. Forces equal in power and dignity cut up the land with mountain-ridges. Disturbances in the centre of Europe spread hercynidal blisters to its rim.

Tensions made this island. Strains dug basins that drew water into the land mass.

Then the plates of America and Europe separated. The shore slowly chugged away from us, until its beach disappeared across a horizon that was the young Atlantic.

Soon after, Greenland took its leave, slipping off to the Arctic wastes in a welter of volcanic fireworks.

The dead made this island. The tantrums of the Earth had led to order: animals grew skeletons; plants developed woody tissue. The fish that had continuously been cast upon the shores, finally learned their lesson. Such creatures were physically more robust, but inherently unstable: born without photosynthesis, they were cursed to spend eternity scurrying across the Earth, eating one another.

Unending massacres were heaped upon one another as limestone. The forces of the Earth bulldozed it across the land's surface, folding it down like pages of books, stacking it as

cliff-rock, riddling it with karstic bullet-holes.

And meanwhile, the humus accumulated, preparing the soil for much blood and munching.

The weather, too, was capricious, and deep cold traumatised the land. Swelling and melting water pock-marked the soil with wrench-faults and pingos. For a while, there were land-bridges joining the island to Britain. A long procession of plants and animals, equipped with one-way tickets and unlimited visas, arrived shivering among us, then got to grips with the habitat.

The temperature rose, and a wet mildness, nourished by the ocean, slapped its clammy hands upon us. The land-bridges were submerged, drowning many a hapless exodus. A fish, with the Kerry fjords as backfins, trod water beside the mainland.

## II

Rock movements had come to a standstill. On this island, the ridges and promontories were exposed to the insidious wind and tides. It was far away in unheard-of lands that the Earth's crust still shook and buckled.

Forests had reached their climaxes and now swooned beneath the industrious blades of the people. A preponderance of vegetal death favoured the rise of peat. In these bogs flourished aggressive, meat-eating plants.

Invading Celtic warriors had reorganised the social structure, placing themselves at the top of an aristocratic elite. And yet, to outsiders, theirs was a chaos that begged organisation. They floundered blindly among riches of wood, fish and game. God and property were unsure in the marshland of their brains. They needed reformation and exploitation.

The Queen of the mainland was a Virgin. yet she sent the men under her power in the other direction. As she sat back, her Seal intact, they expended themselves on new-found lands, where they planted their dominance.

It was difficult for minds to network the peatbogs. Hooves sank and squelched in rain-sodden mud. Branches mocked hacking and concealed landmarks. Natives could be uncooperative and hostile. Their movements were unpredictable and dumbfounding.

But the swipe of a blade or a noose around the neck kept the body in place. By executing the hardy, and coaxing the weak, peace would be spread on the land. New lines were drawn on the map. The nomads would be anchored to the soil.

In the centre of the island, a demesne was settled. The land thus enclosed was harnessed to enrich its Lord. In the centre of the demesne was built a castle.

In these grey walls strutted and shivered the new faith. Idolatry had been sent up in one big bonfire, and once the black smoke of obscurantism had cleared, the harsh, limpid new word made the habitat's rain and wind its own.

But, if the bricks of the Castle dug deep into the mud, the land remained restless. When light faded, you could sense the natives nattering behind the rustling leaves. Every bush and hedge sounded betrayal.

Dissent exploded beneath the ramparts. Inspired arms plunged blades into scandalous fatness. Cows staggered like drunks, bloody gullets gurgling. Wombs were purified with sperm.

Like the Moon which, occasionally, sent the ocean crashing even further than the raised beaches, the bog people cratered the demesne with their restlessness. Until musket and sword had pinned them down and their last leaders straggled onto ships that pitched and tossed perilously on the route to France.

It was thus that the demesne took root. The people settled down to applying their limbs to reaping the seasons. Model houses were built. Foreign Protestants devoted their work ethic to the making of glass. And warmed by peat-fire and port, a burgeoning aristocratic gait could swagger and relieve its loins.

### III

The second Earl who belonged to the line grew up on the demesne. Root crops and carcasses fed his flesh. Eschewing school, he and his brother stayed in the castle to be educated. They read the classics. The faith chiselled their individual consciences. And there would be long rambles among cottage, plough, tree and bush. They chased the animals and studied the peasants.

Such flesh, as it grew older, could not move for ever in thin air. It propelled itself upon a female body, and, remaining there, drew a line that extended the race. Such limbs awakened to their own power strolled into the Parliament in Dublin and took a seat.

Back in the demesne, in the King's County, the Second Earl lifted his eyes to the heavens. If he waited, he saw the stars gather, until the sky was a crowd of glinting pinpricks. Up in that cold air, Moon and stars moved with calculated speed. Weight forced the masses into place. A glistening mechanism stood there, mute and immutable.

In Dublin, buffoonish sophisticates, bloated on porter, rents and tithes, chattered away the well-being of the country, in deference to the mainland.

*The politicians of the ancient world were always talking of morals and virtue: ours speak of nothing but commerce and money.*

In Paris, a row of pillars supported the facade of the Panthéon. Solid and simple, they contrasted with the sunken roofs of the poor and the sensuous waste of the aristocracy. Horace, it was plain to see, held out his arms in an oath to the Republic.

*The world has been empty since the Romans, but the memory of the Romans fills it. They go on prophesying liberty.*

The King was overthrown, and Nature resumed its rights. The people of the Nation, one

and indivisible. overpowered guards and dismantled the edifice of tyranny. Pikes speared the heart and tripe of the oppressor.

*The words just and unjust are understood by every conscience.*

Bowed but not broken, those who stooped on the plough raised their heads to insult the flagrant bodies who laughed at their misery.

*Where man obeys and is not presumed good there is neither liberty nor a native land.*

Their mass became critical and broke down the gates of the castles. Skin that sweated and shitted was ripped from overbearing garments, then examined in public. The Seigneur's meat was dined upon. The *premier cru* cascaded into gullets that splattered the carpets with patriotic vomit. Ties were loosened and seed was sprayed in every direction.

*A government is not oppressive because it oppresses evil.*

The blade of the guillotine fell fast and sure upon the necks of the King and his followers. Such a mechanism ensured a democratic death. The heart of the body could race madly, and the intestines twist for hours after, and the severed head could have time to make one last imploring look to God, but the blade would continue and persevere. And if there were faults in this terrible beauty, they were like the blood that coagulated on the guillotine's frame, and which would be removed with efficient rubbing.

*Government: a protector of simplicity.*

Back on the island there were those who sought to save virtue from the marasm of parliamentary politics.

*Just as the love of wealth, the love of reputation has made martyrs: it is another trap for weak souls.*

Wolfe Tone, for whom the Second Earl was 'one of the few honest men in the House of Commons', led the fight for liberty: Brutus against the British Caesar. The overbearing mainland shielded the island from the awakening of Europe. It would have to be confronted if the Republic was to be founded.

Tone left across the water to seek the talent of the wielders of the guillotine.

*Everyone fights for what he loves, or lives in bad faith.*

Violence cut through the talk whose alcohol threatened to dull muscle and brain.

*Monsters of sweetness against wild untutored beauty.*

The Second Earl took his leave of the chattering capital and returned to the demesne. His carriage took him through the bogs, the woods, and down the fat, vibrant lanes.

*Liberty calls you back to nature.*

The peasants drew the wealth from the soil. They applied honest sinew to plough, hammer and axe. Nourished with potato and milk, families lived in peaceful intimacy beneath the thatch.

*Cottages and virtues are the greatest things in the world.*

Strolling in the demesne, the Second Earl peered at the stars which the cloudbanks deigned to reveal. He thought of Tone in Paris, petitioning the severe leaders of the Revolution to send military aid to the island's rebels. French steel would send the English Crown tumbling. The people would reward them with passion.

Ships did set off from the land of Reason. But the ocean, spun by the Earth and tugged at by the Moon, was restless and treacherous beneath their hulls. The wind treated their sails with brute disregard. And their maps had not foreseen the uneven geometry of the coast. Once the straits were navigated, and their boats lodged themselves on the beaches, the men went shivering into battle.

*The wars of liberty must be conducted with rage.*

Rain drenched their uniforms as they struggled to get a foothold in the mud. Orders were passed down the line. Horsemen made spectacular and artistic bursts. But attacks broke up on a resolute defence, whose cannon shot skipped high their legs. For days they meandered in foothills and flat fields, then delivered themselves to the shelter of prison.

Encouragement had been the ships' main cargo, and the island people rose up against their monstrous oppressors. The rich were ransacked; the yeomanry disembowelled. Flushed with insolence, processions waved seditious flags. Until the government lifted a boot that ground its print on the land.

In a cell where daylight flung small change, Tone took a blade to sever his cords.

*Those who make revolutions, those who wish to do good, sleep only in the grave.*

The Second Earl chose to remain in the demesne. Dublin was the place where arrogant men celebrated their disaster. The mainland held the island firmly in its clutches. Some people

found their indignity seductive.

The Second Earl devoted his energy to cultivating the land. He pored over books and speculated on what dwelled in the heavens. And he strolled the grounds, although, with age, his limbs began to tire.

One evening, in the twilight, he came upon his son. The latter was putting in place a great spectacle. He had erected a large telescope. which he had designed himself. Son asked father to take a look.

The stars showed up, clearer and larger than before. In the ever-growing crowd could be distinguished familiar and fabled constellations.

But the atmosphere of the earth did not allow endless gazing. Far up in the air, temperature was falling below the dew point, and air became saturated with water vapour. The vapour rose and expanded, then descended earthwards. High cirrus clouds heralded a period of depression. As the storm centre approached, the wind began to freshen and sweep through the trees. In the castle, the barometer fell like lead. Cumulonimbus clouded the sky then hammered upon the demesne.

Father and son ran beneath the trees, then found refuge in the castle. Once they were dry, and the rain had stopped, they ventured out towards the telescope. But hours had passed, and grey fractostratus loitered in a sky that illuminated a sodden land.

#### IV

Father and mother couldn't stand the rain. It beat down with perverse insistence, down the nape of the neck and down the spine, down the drainpipes and down their sides. It filled a great swimming-pool of wet air that threatened to inundate their lungs. In the furrows, its Atlantic excess made a mockery of cultivation.

Father and mother left for Brighton. Where the air was drier and the sun shone crisply on the white-painted benches. The sea-salt was revivifying, and amicable Calais and Dover

kept their fingers pressed on the Channel's neck.

The son was left to continue the quest for more light. He excelled at his studies, then took a seat in London's parliament. Fresh from visits to mummy and daddy, he voted to emancipate the Catholics and supported Reform. Then it would be a boat to the isle of Erin, with its steamrolling clouds.

There was so much up there beyond the cloudbanks. It loved to hide but, some nights, when the wind had chased the exhausted clumps of water vapour, you could strain your eyes at its mystery. The stars crowded out gradually the sky. The sunlight that struck them returned to the Earth, but even to the Third Earl's keen sight, they danced and disappeared. Those eyes were made to search the humus. The infinity of the sky ensured their shipwreck.

The first telescope had been a success, but its range was limited, and the rain had long since rusted and tarnished it. The Third Earl resolved to create a large reflecting-glass which would harness as much as possible of the light the night sky could offer him. Up there were star-clusters, double stars and wisps of gas and dust, all entangled in a mass that only Reason could decipher.

It was not easy to manufacture a reflecting-glass in the middle of Ireland. The technology was not ready at hand. Nor was the know-how, for those who knew jealously guarded their secrets.

It was a challenge to the Third Earl, but he was not daunted. He proceeded without apparatus, skilled helpers or advisors. He gathered together workers from the demesne: a carpenter, a blacksmith and men who worked on the land. He had a forge built, where they experimented to find the metal alloy which would form the reflecting-glass.

For weeks they heated copper and tin, then mixed them in a soup, leaving it to cool, then inspected it. Would it be perfectly smooth? Did it capture light without prejudice? They finally discovered the correct ratio of copper to tin.

There remained, however, the problem of grinding and polishing the mirror. It would be far too laborious to do by hand. So, the Third Earl devoted his mind to inventing a steam-driven

machine that would turn the perfect alloy into a perfect reflecting-glass.

In this contraption, which enraptured the inhabitants of the demesne, English coal and Irish water combined to set the pistons pumping. Grinding for hours, the tool became convex as the mirror became concave.

This was looked upon admiringly by the Lady of the demesne. She would watch for hours, caressing and cajoling the Earl and his workmen. Then, when the forge was emptier, she would, with the blacksmith, turn iron red hot, which she would form into long bars. Her ornate iron fencing, curved as flowers and plants, marked out anew the perimeter of the demesne.

How would they use the telescope? The Third Earl called upon the advice of an Ulsterman, Director of the Armagh Observatory, whose star-catalogue was simply the best in the world. He made his way south and spent a week in the demesne around All Saints' Day.

The weather was unwelcoming. Clouds scudded and spat. Wind wrecked the woods. Stray dogs and cats scuttled beneath the bushes. Owl-talk was drowned out.

Yet they persevered, and the Ulster observer realised that the Third Earl had done his work well. Finally, the lower heavens calmed down. They stared greedily into the lens. Star-clusters, nebulae and double-stars stood out in their magnificence. Already the star-catalogue was expanding! Excitedly, they turned the telescope upon the Moon, which shocked them with its size and radiance. More naked than ever. The Ulsterman wrote: 'It is scarcely possible to preserve the necessary sobriety of language in speaking of the Moon's appearance with this instrument, which discovers a multitude of new objects at every point of its surface.'

By the great crater Ptolemaeus, they espied a ridge coruscated with tiny craters. In the crater of Aristarchus, basking in the sunshine, lurked two dark parallel stripes.

There was no doubt that this contraption, standing out into the Irish sky, would make a formidable contribution to science. But, for the Third Earl, this was no opportunity for small-mindedness or secrecy. The telescope would be as open and welcoming as the skies would increasingly be. He offered an invitation to the scientist of the globe:

'Although the instrument and the laboratory where it was constructed are in the centre of

Ireland, the facilities of communication are such that those who desire further information can easily obtain it on the spot and form their own estimate of the performance of the instrument.'

## V

It was not enough. The more they peered into the sky, the more they came across celestial bodies whose features remained a blur. Were the nebulae on the rim of their vision just a chaos of gas and dust, or would they fall into focus as stars? The telescope could not take in enough of the light that rained upon them. They were hungry for more. The speculum would have to double in size.

For making a mirror six feet across, one crucible would not be enough. So three large crucibles, 24 feet across, were used Simultaneously. they were placed in three furnaces that were connected up to one large chimney.

Thousands of cubic feet of turf were cut from the bogland and stuffed into the furnaces. The turf burned for hours on end, until hot enough to take the alloy.

The men from the demesne executed the Third earl's orders with silent, unerring obedience. The Third Earl walked among them calm and self-possessed, as the Ulsterman looked on with keen-eyed enthusiasm.

Evening was blessed with a clear sky, and the Moon rose full and bright upon the demesne. The furnaces sent up to it great columns of yellow flame. And the crucibles carried out onto the field spurted red light that sent shadows racing across the castle walls.

The Lady looked upon the men as they cheered the molten alloy that spread out in the speculum mould. The Third Earl would see that the work was done, then send his servants home. The night sky would cool the metal. He would retire to bed and the Lady would spread across him her smooth, young skin. Tongue and nipple demanded that he pierce. Mouths and sexes enjoyed a perfect union, which would extend the line.

Once the alloy was cool, the people of the demesne gathered to watch. The steaming

grinding machine laboured for hours across its surface, until the mirror captured the clouds and treeline, and the curious faces of children. But as they endeavoured to carry the speculum, which weighted several tons, a workman slipped on the damp earth and sent it crashing to the ground. The mirror was split.

The Third Earl chided the servant, but did not make a meal of the incident. Instead, they resumed their work. More turf burned; more smoke joined the clouds; and another speculum was smelted and polished.

The speculum was placed at the bottom of a great wooden tube, eight feet across. The tube was protected from the force of the wind by two parallel walls. The tube was lifted by a large pulley, operated by assistants. The observation point was a gantry suspended sixty feet above the ground. Erect, the telescope reminded one of the round towers that sprouted across the land of Ireland.

But the clouds would not clear. February dragged on without a peep of the night sky. The Third Earl and the Ulsterman stared hopelessly up at the heavens, who pissed disdain on their faces.

But the clouds' depressing monotony broke briefly, and the men lay across the chasm, looking through the eye-piece. There was beautiful Castor in Gemini, two stars fused together in shining union. Shouting down to the assistants, the Third Earl had the telescope moved slightly upwards so that the distant star-cluster, Messier 67 in the Crab, could at last reveal something more of its form.

The Third Earl and the Ulsterman watched and discussed for hours. Until the clouds returned to obscure their view: cirrus, cumulus and fractostratus, depositing the Atlantic on the telescope and the demesne.

The downpour was typically dogmatic, and they soon had to deal with the problem of the speculum being tarnished by the encroaching dampness.

However, it was not entirely unreasonable to expect better weather. An opening ceremony was organised. The workmen joined the Third Earl and the Ulsterman for a

celebratory glass of whiskey. The local Protestant minister swaggered down the telescope tube, unhindered by his top hat and umbrella, and marvelled at the tube's width, offering his blessing.

The Lady stood back from them, her head hidden beneath a shroud as she peered into the lens of her favourite new invention, the camera. Her eye framed together the men who stood in front of their proud contraption pointed up to the sky. Then she froze their steady, patient gestures.

Jokes and back-slapping congratulations filled the hours as they waited, slightly drunk, and willed the clouds to stay apart as the sun melted gradually into the western ocean.

## VI

Beyond the Lady's iron fencing, and beyond the treelines and walls that farmers guarded with blunderbusses, the land was emptying.

The rain-sodden earth was perfect for the potato. Those tubers were ravenous for water, but nourished bodies. It seemed that they would grow in every place that the clouds dropped the ocean upon.

Great quantities of them every day, fed families. Boiled or roasted in ash, with herbs that children spent the day searching for.

The potato bred in the wetlands. And the bog people multiplied too. Like an egg burrowed by sperm, the land subdivided and subdivided. Stones were prised from the earth to permit cultivation; birds wandered dazed, expelled from sequestered hedges; peat was cut, and mud stolen from marshes that pools of rainwater replaced. Huts were built against rockfaces.

The young wandered higher and higher up the hillsides, establishing unconvincing settlements. Until the slope became implausible, and they tumbled down to the shore, where boats were waiting to take them across the wide ocean to America.

There came a time when the potato plants withered, and when that which was dug from the soil had an unhealthy skin. What was eaten made you retch or was not enough. Families beat

each other up, protested to heaven, looked pathetically amongst the lazy beds, as hunger took its turn to bloat their stomachs. Scum on the rim of Europe, they lay in their huts, entranced and delirious.

The Third Earl came down from his observation post, leaving some mechanical instructions for his skilled workmen to use in perfecting the telescope. He was Lord Lieutenant of the King's County, and Colonel of the Militia. He rode out to assume his responsibilities to the people.

He inspected the hovels that rotted outside the demesne. Drawing his hand across his face, he was shocked by their utter listlessness: unable even to drag themselves to their feet and lay siege to his wealth and property.

The imploding old; the helpless young men; the titless mothers; and the young body whose head seemed swollen out of all proportion to his minimal body, screaming a final scream, screaming against the uselessness of his birth.

The Third Earl undertook to try to relieve them, knowing that the rain-crop had indubitably failed and left the people open to catastrophe. The men-folk spent days building walls around unproducing plots and laying roads that criss-crossed a paralysed landscape. Farmers put down their blunderbusses and had money extracted from them. The Lady scooped gruel from a large tub, which she distributed to a long and desperate queue.

One night, the Third Earl climbed up to the gantry, and shouted to his idle assistants to point the telescope in the direction he desired. He looked once again into the eyepiece.

There was Canes Venatici. If you looked at the constellation, you could make out the form of hunting dogs. They were caught in the motion of chasing their prey. They would take turns relentlessly to catch their quarry, barking encouragement and excitement all the way. And then they would catch it and rip its squealing inferior frame to pieces.

Staring into the Hunting Dogs, the Third Earl identified a nebula, Messier 51. The tremendous light-grasp of the telescope enabled him at last to see it clearly. Before him was a spiral. twisting unendingly away before him, as far as the eye could see.

There was not a quick end to the shrieks and whimpers of the hungry. Along the barren coastline, beacons were lit, with wooden arrows perched upon them pointing ships to harbour. Bodies hobbled or were carried down the slopes, then drew the strength to scabble and claw their way on board. Then they would set sail, in hope of reaching the continent that lay so far away across the horizon. Some bodies, wilful and youthful, kept looking across the waves until they reached land. Others fell in the water with a pitiful splash and disappeared.

For those who remained, and still breathed, there was more space. Holdings could expand once again. A new wisdom would exploit the ravaged soil. The island now lay more receptive to Modernity.

The speculum was tarnished. but after some determined rubbing it was back to its exceptional best. The observer returned from Ulster, untroubled by what had traumatised the demesne. His head was fat with plans for exploration. The Third Earl's son too, and they happily set back to work.

## VII

Behind the iron flowers, the territory of the demesne was cultivated in a way that displayed the utmost Reason and Order.

Trees, whose cuttings explorers brought from all over the globe, were planted, if the climate permitted it, and grew along the neat gravel paths which traversed the castle grounds. A great fernery swung its back and threw its slingshot of seeds. The stream climbed up an aqueduct which deposited its contents in a pond spanned by a bridge which lit up at nightfall. There was also a formal walled garden, where bushes and trees were laid out in regular geometrical lines. In alcoves and under arches, classical statues flexed or poised their white, immaculate limbs.

The demesne welcomed astronomers from all over the world. Of course, with the relentless rain, the speculum, at times, became tarnished, and could offer a poor picture of the

heavens. Some scientists arrived at these unfortunate moments, and spent hours in the garden, or on the Bridge of Light, bitching about the Third Earl's inadequacies.

Nevertheless, exploration continued. The telescope's extraordinary light-grasp made possible more detailed observation of the Moon. The Ulsterman was particularly impressed by a huge, winding valley that ran from the crater Herodotus. It was a 'strange channel' that some celestial knife had carved on the lunar surface. Also of interest was the floor of the grand crater Albaterius, which was strewn with minute blocks, like dice.

Main attention was directed towards star-clusters and nebulae. For the Third Earl, it was absolutely essential to map out exactly what the telescope revealed: were they clouds of gas and dust, or were they groups of clearly formed stars?

Some of the bodies in the night sky were star-clusters lacking in definite shape: Pleiades, Hyades, and the group which studded the Sword-handle of Perseus. There was also the nebula of Orion, hanging just below the Hunter's Belt. Its glowing gas and dust were a birthplace for stars which, one day, would sparkle up above.

Despite the ageing of his limbs, the Third Earl could only laugh at the danger posed by leaning over the sixty-foot chasm. Through the eyepiece he beheld the immensity of time and space, calculating the light-years which marked out the geography of the Universe.

He tracked the movements of variable stars, which shone out then disappeared into darkness. Their luminosity indicated their distance from the Earth. The Third Earl also examined the spiral nebulae which rotated in space beyond the bounds of his galaxies. The sky was dotted with shining catherine-wheels.

He and the Ulsterman had a great hoot when observing the Owl Nebula in Ursa Major. The telescope revealed two stars, some distance apart, in a cloud of gas and dust. 'It looked,' wrote the Ulsterman, 'like the visage of a monkey.'

Use of the telescope was a time-consuming business, and the Third Earl was obliged to employ assistants to work the mechanism and to continue observation in his absence. He was particularly pleased to enjoy the services of his son, once he had reached the age of majority.

The latter had been experimenting with a smaller telescope and showed his father how he harnessed the power of the stream for a clock-driven mechanism which moved the said telescope. Father was impressed.

Just because the land was less hungry, this did not mean that the Third Earl was not busy. Indeed, he was deeply involved in the organisation of the Great Exhibition of 1851. He took delight in assembling the collection of machines which astonished the visitors and attested to the spread of Modernity across the planet.

With the help of the telescope, the map of the skies became richer in detail. International acclaim followed. In addition to accolades at home, the Third Earl's tunic was increasingly weighed down with medals from modernising despots in France and Russia.

However, not long after this recognition was achieved, the Lady of the demesne went down with sickness. Her hair whitened, her eyes glazed, and her skin became clammy and wan. The Third Earl spent hours perched over her unfathomable form until, in an orgasm of fever, she let loose the last of her breath.

Even after shedding his mourning clothes, the Third Earl walked obsessively around the demesne, clipping at trees, tearing ivy from the classical statues. He spent weeks in his study, drawing up plans for armour-clad warships which would blast any enemy to kingdom come. The Royal Navy rejected him.

The insidious dampness of the climate threatened to fill his lungs. His breathing became difficult. A stone seemed to grow in his breast. So the Third Earl took his leave of the demesne, and installed himself on the coast, as his father had done. The air was indeed fresher, but he stared irritably beyond the seagulls who came to say hello. His creased brow imagined metal boats spitting fire at one another, committing the loser to the Davy deep. then he keeled over and lay face-down, inert among the dunes.

## VIII

The Third Earl's sons followed his example. One developed designs for a steam-turbine engine which would run warships. Another son became engineer on the railways. The eldest had watched with enthusiasm his father's stargazing and, having reached his majority, continued the demesne's astronomical exploits.

After his father's death, the Fourth Earl turned his attention to the Moon, which showed up massive and bright through the eyepiece. It seemed to make a mockery of the sunlight it reflected: it shone over the demesne at night-time, or at the edges of short winter days. Did it hold any warmth? Did the rocks on the Moon ever rise beyond the freezing-point of water? The Fourth Earl stared up at the icy sphere that gradually slipped from view.

He endeavoured to obtain the measurement of the temperature of the Moon. Indeed, lacking in any atmosphere, the Earth's satellite was strongly heated by the Sun. Yet, when the Earth stood between it and the Sun, a wave of cold passed over it, plunging the rocks into paralytically low temperatures. The rocks of the lunar ridges were utterly indifferent to the Sun's rays: they reflected and cast shadow but retained nothing. And there was no internal reserve of heat warming the outer crust. The Moon simply hurtled along its orbit in cold, brute, raw lifelessness.

The Fourth Earl's measurements were commendable, although some elements of the scientific community threw them into question. But, as time passed, and the century drew to its close, the telescope itself became of questionable worth. Elsewhere on the planet, larger and more powerful telescopes were penetrating the night sky.

News came from Armagh of the Ulsterman's death. A hush fell on the demesne. No longer would it be visited by his energy.

Alone on the gantry, the Fourth Earl awaited the return of Biela's comet. His predecessors had seen it before, spending profligate light on whatever it passed. He now looked forward to it hurtling earthwards. However, after much patient gazing, he could only make out a brilliant shower of meteors, flung out over long distances and burning up in the atmosphere.

Looking elsewhere in the sky, the Fourth Earl felt that great Jupiter was losing its

colour: it was less and less red. Turning his attention to Mars, he made out Phobos and Deimos, the two small sidekicks of the angry planet.

The systematic study of nebulae, which his father had begun, came to a stop. For Otto the German, the new astronomer-in-residence, such exploration was becoming more and more difficult. Indeed, Otto, who, with his pince-nez and goatee, attracted the amused curiosity of the demesne, spent his time looking at the night sky, drawing in great detail the Milky Way. When asked why he undertook to draw the sky, when a photograph would now suffice, he replied that the telescope was unsuited to such modern technology.

Indeed, the arrival of the new century displayed the limits of the telescope. In 1901, in the constellation of Perseus, a star exploded. When the sky was clear, the Fourth Earl and Otto the German looked eagerly at the brilliant chaos that spread out across space. And yet, shouting instructions to the assistants to modify the telescope's bearing they could not get the nova into focus. The nova defeated their eyes. Decades of Irish rain had finally seeped in and tarnished the speculum and its instruments.

The decline of the telescope did not lead the Fourth Earl to be idle. He had a duty to govern the demesne and spent much time shoring up respect for his status. the countryside was restless and demanded the utmost sensitivity. Otherwise, the demesne would be isolated, and cattle lose their limbs.

As he drifted towards death, he wandered in the garden, studying the habits of wasps. He watched their sharp forms emerge from the smooth, hard carapace of their nests to dive upon his bald pate. Their pollenless bodies emitted persistent whines. They promised a sting but no honey.

## IX

There came a time, indeed, when the waters were dotted with warships whose turbines sent them steaming from the Atlantic to the Baltic. The seas were as restive as ever, but the boats'

steel hulls kept them steady enough to fire great cannons at the enemy, who flinched, flaked and dissolved into the waves.

Bosnia had lit the flame. It was a young man intoxicated with liberty who broke open the ribcage of the oppressor. Those who had been selected for the great game dropped their shorts to reveal dripping love-guns. Women would be ripped open. Man would have his heart eaten out.

Artillery bombardments tore out divots of turf and flesh. Barbed wire ripped tunics from conscripted bodies which wrestled and star-jumped in the mud. Horses wailed at the helplessness of their obsolete hooves. New technology disciplined and punished. Men cowered in the craters of a filth-smearred Moon.

Back in the demesne, Otto the German received his marching orders. He had not finished drawing the Milky Way, but that was not the point. People inside and outside the demesne believed he spent his time watching them. The eyes that had espied nebulae now followed the movements of the country's soldiery. As a German, he was declared an enemy alien, then expelled from the island.

In Brighton, the seaside climate could still be pleasant. but, sitting on the pier, you could hear the guns pounding across the water. Rain and shell cooked up a mess of mud.

The Fifth Earl crossed the Channel with the flower of the officer corps. Trained in the castle, his limbs robust from country living, and his eyes as keen as any of his star-gazing ancestors, he promised much to his country.

A shell from the heavens poleaxed his young body, tearing it asunder. Blood, brain and eyeball scattered in clusters on the black earth, which thousands of boots kicked over then sprinkled with the bodies they carried.

Back on the island, things were changing. In Dublin, the Irish tricolour was raised, and blood and guts were left on the pavements, with the intention of fertilising the soil. Guttred buildings and executed heroes tried to sever the mainland which had drawn it to the distant battlefield.

The occupants of the castle eventually packed their most precious belongings and drove over to the mainland and safety. In their absence, the rain soaked the wood and iron framework of the telescope. The remaining inhabitants of the demesne took their sides in a war which roamed across the country, leaping from behind bushes and street-corners. After many months, they could drop their tools or walk to the doors of their model-houses and look at the British army barracks, on the outskirts of the town, blazing in the afternoon sun.

The mainland's troops had left, at last, and the heroes of the Republic danced and drank in the sunset, stamping on the ashes. But, by the morning time, they had taken arms against one another, persisting in the search for the ultimate cruelty, arguing over how best to sever links with the other greater island, to which their grey clouds continued travelling to deposit the ocean.

No-one wanted to look through the telescope. By now the clouds had rendered it rotten and rusted. The speculum was tarnished, looking weakly up at the sky. One day it collapsed, but no-one came running to help. In the demesne around the empty castle, new forces partitioned the land. While above the cloudbanks, planets roared along their orbits, constellations shone, stars were born and then they died. In occasional gaps they would reveal themselves amidst the billowing mass that endlessly rolled from the Atlantic across Europe.