

# Editorial

## A MAGICAL EIRE

Sheila Williams

Ever since March 2020, the radius I occupy has mostly been defined by the distance I can comfortably walk. I've been in a car three times and ridden the subway five times since our lockdown began. Feeling a little claustrophobic about the uninterrupted months I've spent on the island of Manhattan, I find my thoughts turning to a magical time on a different island.

Well-known *Asimov's* author, Rick Wilber and his colleague, Mike O'Conner, led a tour of Ireland just prior to the 2019 Dublin World Science Fiction Convention. As a journalism professor at the University of South Florida, Rick taught a student summer travel-study program in Ireland for twenty-six years. His recent retirement from the university meant that he was now free to lead a group of his relatives and individuals from the science fiction community on an expedition devised for a collection of people interested in science, science fiction, and fantasy.

We began our tour with a journey to Dunsany Castle. The castle had been the home of Edward Plunkett, 18th Baron of Dunsany, and, as Lord Dunsany, author of *The King of Elfland's Daughter* and many other works. We were met by Maria Alice Plunkett, the widow of Lord Dunsany's grandson. The marvelous Lady Dunsany showed us the treasures of her home, which included paintings by the Victorian artist and illustrator Sidney Sims, as well as Lord Dunsany's own paintings and beautiful journals. Her stories about the castle and her family were fascinating. None of us could ever have imagined that this charming woman would be lost to Covid-19 early in the spring of 2020.

From Dunsany Castle we drove to Brú na Bóinne to visit Newgrange—a large five-thousand-year-old burial mound. We walked through the narrow passage of this Neolithic tomb to find the stone alters located at the center. The entrance to the tomb



**The Great Telescope**

L. to R.: Irene Bruce, Sheila Williams

Photo credit: Gregory Norman Bossert

aligns with the rising sun on Winter Solstice. The entrance stone and other standing stones are covered with megalithic art. Newgrange featured in medieval Irish folklore as the dwelling place of deities.

The following day found us at the Science Center and grounds of Birr Castle. A stroll around these grounds brought me to The Great Telescope. Built in the early 1840s, it remained the largest telescope on Earth for seventy years. Through its lens, William Parsons, the Third Earl of Rosse, discovered the spiral nature of some galaxies. The telescope is also called The Leviathan. Huge wooden structures were built so that when necessary, workers could change the angle of The Leviathan. I stood and marveled at this wonder with my daughter Irene and SF authors Joe Haldeman and Gregory Norman Bossert.

A couple of days later we drove south stopping at the gorgeous Cliffs of Moher. These stunning cliffs have appeared in several movies. Perhaps most famously, they doubled as the Cliffs of Insanity in *The Princess Bride*. On the walkway overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, I found it amusing to think about the Dread Pirate Roberts. If he were to scale the cliffs at that moment, he'd be met not by Fezzik and Inigo Montoya, but by numerous tourists and a herd of placid cows. The cliffs are also featured in a terrifying scene in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*.

The next day, we took a trip to the "mini ring" of Kerry. These roughly 3,500-year-old Bronze Age standing stones are located in Kenmare. The trees planted around the field of impressive stones are a lovely sight. They're why the local people call the area "The Shrubberies." The largest stone in the circle created such a strong visual and emotional pull, that our group of writers and science fiction professionals decided to stand by it for a photo op.



### Kenmare Standing Stone

Left to right: Gary K. Wolfe, Sheila Williams, Gregory Norman Bossert, Sue Burke, Alan Smale, Rick Wilber, Walter John Williams, Brad Aiken, Gay Haldeman, and Joe Haldeman

Photo credit: Juliet Bruce

## January/February 2021

Our final stop on the Wilber Tour was the fabled Blarney Castle. Kissing the famous Blarney stone is supposed to give you the “gift of gab.” I’d done so when I was fourteen, and my family and I decided to skip the two-hour line and stroll the castle gardens. We visited the primeval fern garden filled eighty varieties of these ancient flora. Some of them towered above us. We also spent time in the Poison Garden. Some of the plants were considered so dangerous that they were in cages. Some, like wolf’s bane, mandrake, and belladonna, are certainly familiar from works of fiction.

We returned to Dublin to attend the Worldcon—a magical experience of its own.