Leviathan, which God of all his works
Created hugest that swim th’Ocean stream:
Him haply slumb’ring on the Norway foam
The Pilot of some small night-foundered Skiff,
Deeming some Island, oft, as Seamen tell,
With fixèd Anchor in his scaly rind
Moors by his side under the Lee, while Night
Invests the Sea, and wishèd Morn delays.

—John Milton, Paradise Lost, Bk. 1, 201-208

Between them the Herschels, father and son, bestrode the astronomical world like colossi. For half a century, they commanded the most powerful telescopes in existence. The greatest of all was the 40-foot, with its 48-inch mirror, at Slough. But here William overreached. A glorious failure, difficult, even dangerous, to use, it was never deployed for the study of the nebulae for which it was designed. But it inspired an even more colossal instrument, the “Leviathan,” at Parsonstown (now Birr), Ireland. Built by the wealthiest “Grand Amateur” of his day, William Parsons, the 3rd Earl of Rosse, its mirror, 72 inches in diameter, would not be surpassed until the 20th century. The achievement was all the more remarkable, given that at the time Rosse built the telescope, Ireland was an economic basket-case of its day.

This telescope would first reveal that class of nebulae which are among the most imposing, majestic, and characteristic in the universe—the spiral nebulae—ample fulfilling its maker’s expectation that with it “data will be collected to afford us some insight into the construction of the material universe.”

The 3rd Earl’s family, the Parsons, were descendents of Anglo-Irish Protestant landowners who had prospered during the great Irish land confiscations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The founder of the family fortune was Richard Boyle, who in 1588, the fateful year of the
Spanish Armada, crossed the Irish Sea from England, having, it was said, no more than the shirt on his back. But patronage worked in his favor, and obtaining a position as deputy to the escheator general for Crown lands, he used it, said his enemies, “to defraud Irish landowners, especially in Munster, of their existing titles and to pass title to himself at absurdly deflated prices. He then expelled the Irish tenants and replaced them with more pliable and profitable English settlers.” Relentlessly and ruthlessly forging ahead in “the path of Christian virtue and the favor of Providence,” he amassed vast fortunes in lands and rents, until his income in rents exceeded those of any other of the Crown’s subjects. He was raised to a barony in 1616, created Viscount Dungarvan and first earl of Cork in 1620. That same year Boyle’s nephew, Laurence Parsons, enters the story: having already acquired from Boyle Myrtle Grove (the gabled residence in Youghal where Raleigh had once lived), he now established at Birr the Parsons family’s connection with the place; it continues right up to the present day.

A castle had stood at Birr since the twelfth century. Laurence Parsons had a new one built by English workmen, in which he and his successors lived as grandees sequestered behind fifteen-foot high walls (high even by Irish standards) within a showpiece demesne consisting of the castle and well-manicured grounds.

In the eighteenth century, one improving landlord at Birr, another Laurence Parsons, the 5th Baronet, began digging an artificial lake and planting beech trees. His son, the 6th Baronet (and after 1807 2nd Earl of Rosse), turned the old house back to front in order to face the park, heightened and crenellated it in the then-fashionable Gothic style, and added the great “Gothic saloon” whose windows look down on the waterfalls of the river Camcor. He entered politics, and served in Parliament for the next several years. He was, of course, highly conservative, and yet in one respect unconventional—he and Lady Rosse were unusual in the approach they took to the upbringing of their five children, two daughters and three sons, including the eldest son William, the future astronomer, born at York in 1800. Instead of sending them to the public schools such as Eton, they educated them at home with the assistance of tutors, thus affording them a thorough grounding in science and engineering. Laurence himself was of a scientific turn of mind; a suspension bridge he built over the Camcor was the first of its kind in Ireland, described by a visitor as “a curious wire bridge … suspended in the air just under the castle.”

When William (the future 3rd earl) turned 18, he and his younger brother John, who suffered from ill health and died young, were sent to Trinity College, Dublin, though they continued to do most of their work at home as allowed by the regulations of the time. In 1821 they transferred to Magdalen College, Oxford, and William (known as Lord Oxmantown until his father’s death) received a First-Class mathematics degree the following year.