PRESS RELEASE

Exploring Birr Skies

A Creative Response to Birr’s Astronomical Heritage and Contemporary Astrophysical Research

Inspired by the astronomical heritage and contemporary astrophysical research in Birr, science communicator and creative, Dr. Niamh Shaw is collaborating with Birr Theatre & Arts Centre, Birr Tidy Towns and local cross stitchers to explore the skies of Birr and its celestial objects - stars, planets, comets, meteors and other objects beyond our naked eye. This will be undertaken through a programme of online and offline sessions, guest speakers and site visits. In addition, a very unique event will take place on Friday 25th June with a stargazing party in the Gardens of Birr Castle.

Birr Theatre & Arts Manager, Emma Nee Haslam said “Birr Theatre & Arts Centre are very excited to be working with Dr. Niamh Shaw on this community project and know, from previous work she has been involved in throughout the country, that the people of Birr will have an amazing experience as she shares her knowledge of the Birr skies and brings out our creativity as we explore what is above our heads!”

Niamh brings her knowledge of science, astronomy and space, in association with the Science Centre at Birr Castle and I-LOFAR (based on the grounds of Birr Castle) to explore what the skies above Birr look like. This project will consider the origins of early astronomy in Birr with the work of the Third and Fourth Earls and Mary, Countess of Rosse, in the middle and late 1800s. Through the archives & artefacts at the Science Centre, Niamh and community collaborators begin their own voyage of discovery into what the Parsons family visually experienced when they observed in the night skies, the coordinates they mapped, the patterns and colours that were optically detected, both with the naked eye and also through the Great Telescope – The Leviathan. This six-foot telescope was built by William Parsons, 3rd Earl of Rosse from 1842 to 1845.

Niamh and local community members will find out about the current astrophysical work of I-LOFAR and how the sensitivity and extremely large field-of-view of the Low Frequency Array (LOFAR) make it an ideal telescope for undertaking deep, large area surveys of space. LOFAR is an international network of state-of-the-art telescopes used to observe the Universe in unprecedented detail at low radio frequencies. LOFAR is one of the largest astrophysics projects in Europe, consisting of twelve international stations, including Ireland (I-LOFAR), Germany, Poland, France, UK, Sweden and additional stations and a central hub in The Netherlands.

Dr. Niamh Shaw said “I am very excited to collaborate with Birr Theatre & Arts Centre, Birr Tidy Towns, Birr Castle, Gardens & Science Centre and the I-LOFAR Education Centre in this creative approach to exploring the skies over Birr and the fascinating astronomical features that exist. This is a unique opportunity to explore Birr’s heritage and current cutting-edge astrophysical work and this initiative will engage with the data of the past and present – the historic data using lens telescopes and contemporary data captured by radio waves. I encourage local people to get involved and explore Birr skies with me and be amazed with the astronomical patterns and features that are billions of years old.

Working with the data of the past and present, of astronomical objects discovered and observed through the Great Telescope, as well as data from I-LOFAR, Niamh and community members will map out historical and contemporary astronomical features and their coordinates - exploring the skies by bringing together the past and present.

Physical maps will be created using the the craft of cross stitching as a means to not only ‘map’ women back into the narrative of the skies but also to create a bridge between an analogue and digital world. Cross stitching is the oldest form of embroidery and can be found all over the world since the middle ages. Cross stitching would have been a possible leisure activity of Mary, Countess of Rosse (and if not her, then females in her family and extended network). The coordinates on the maps created by the cross stitchers will be used to choreograph a suite of movements which will be performed outdoors by community members later in the year.

A full programme of events on 25th & 26th June including the stargazing party will be available on the Birr Theatre & Arts Centre website. For more information and how to get involved in this project, go to [www.birrtheatre.com](http://www.birrtheatre.com). Keep in touch for updates and opportunities across Birr Theatre & Arts Centre social media channels:

Facebook @BirrTheatreandArtsCentre, Instagram @birrtheatre and Twitter @BirrTheatre

The ‘Exploring Birr Skies’ initiative is in partnership with Birr Theatre & Arts Centre, Birr Tidy Towns, Birr Castle, Gardens & Science Centre and I-LOFAR Education Centre, and is supported by the Creative Ireland Programme (2017-2022) in partnership with Offaly County Council.

**Ends**

Image & Credit

Dr. Niamh Shaw - Walking Slowly Towards Space (Credit Ros Kavanagh 2018)

Dr Niamh Shaw – (Credit D Kilfeather)

Dr. Niamh Shaw - Headshot (Credit Steve Humphreys 2018)