Star gazing in Sligo

‘A Gentleman’s Observatory’

Markree Castle
In the mid 1800s, Markree Castle was home to Edward J. Cooper – an enthusiastic (and wealthy) amateur astronomer, who set up and supported an observatory. It was a type of ‘gentleman’s observatory’ – which wasn’t uncommon in those days – there was also one in Birr and one in Armagh.

The Markree Observatory is significant because it was home to one of the largest telescopes in the world at the time – a 13.3 inch refracting telescope.

When Edward Cooper died in 1863, the observatory was left idle for a number of years, until his nephew Colonel Cooper reactivated the observations.

Colonel Cooper’s interests were mainly meteorological, and the observatory at Markree was later described in the monthly notices of the Royal Astronomical Society as ‘...one of the best meteorological stations in Ireland’.

The Met Éireann Library holds meteorological records from Markree Castle from 1869 to 1968.

The records give readings of atmospheric pressure, temperature, wind direction, wind speed, cloud cover and rainfall (among other data). Observations were made at 9 a.m. and 9 p.m. every day. The records were handwritten on broadsheet-sized templates which were issued by the Meteorological Office in London. At the end of each month, the pages were folded into the size of an envelope and posted to London.

Anna Doberck’s brother, William, was an acclaimed astronomer and he was in charge of the Markree Observatory from 1874 to 1882. Anna assisted William at the observatory.

It was while the Dobercks were at Markree that our record lowest air temperature was recorded; that is -19.1°C (-2.3°F) on 16th January 1881.

In 1882, the Dobercks left Markree for Hong Kong, when William was appointed Director of the new Hong Kong Observatory.

Ten years later, in 1892, Anna was appointed Assistant Meteorologist in the same institution – only after lengthy negotiations with the Colonial Office.

Anna’s appointment was noted in the journal Nature Vol. 46 (108) 1892, where she was misidentified as Dr. Doberck’s daughter.

Anna remained at the Hong Kong Observatory until her retirement in 1915. Part of her role in Hong Kong was to visit ships in port to excerpt weather observations from their navigation log books. Because of the nature of her work, she was nicknamed ‘Typhoon Annie’.

In 1834, the telescope mounted at Markree by Thomas Grubb, who went on to make telescopes for the world’s greatest observatories.

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Observations illustrated here were taken by a woman of Danish origin, named Anna Doberck. Anna’s name appears on the Markree records from 1874 to 1876. Her records are distinctive because she draws the prescribed weather symbols in the notes field more frequently than other observers. For example,

- for hail
- for snow

Why was a lady of Danish origins recording observations in County Sligo in 1876?

Anna Doberck’s brother, William, was an accomplished astronomer and he was in charge of the Markree Observatory. Anna assisted William at the observatory.

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At the end of each month, the pages were folded into the size of an envelope and posted to London. The picture to the right shows the postage stamp and the address of the Met Office, written on the reverse of the observation sheet. This has been cut from the creases where it was folded into the size of an envelope.

Typhoon Annie

The Hong Kong Connection

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The telescope mounted at Markree in 1834 by Thomas Grubb, who went on to make telescopes for the world’s greatest observatories.

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Anna Doberck drew prescribed symbols to record weather information.

William Doberck

Hong Kong Observatory 1913


The lowest air temperature ever recorded in Ireland was -2.3°F, 16th January 1881.

Markree Castle. Drawn on the spot for Colonel Cooper by William Frederick Wakeman. ©Sligo County Library

Telescope Holder, Markree Observatory. Note the size of the telescope holder compared to the car to the left of the picture. ©Buildings of Ireland.