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**DID YOU KNOW.....?**  
**By Deirdre McKiernan Hetzler**

Many Irish and Irish Americans take pride in their ethnic heritage, but know little about it. With this issue, we initiate a column intended to give us all "a reason for the faith that is in us." The Irish have contributed significantly to this country, and to the world, and we Irish need to spread the good news.

Did you know, for example, that the famous Newgrange is one of three 5,000 years old Stone Age burial mounds in the Boyne Valley (Knowth and Dowth being the others), making them older than Stonehenge in England, and even older than the pyramids in Egypt? The construction is so precisely engineered that at each winter solstice the rising sun illuminates the inner chamber at Newgrange. (Quite a feat, considering having to calculate on a sunny winter morning in Ireland!) This makes it the world's oldest known astronomical observatory!

And speaking of scientific discoveries, did you know that the largest telescope in the 19<sup>th</sup> century world was built by an Irishman? In 1845, William Parsons, third Earl of Rosse, built this telescope on the grounds of his castle in Birr, Co. Offaly. Its six-foot mirror weighed four tons and was the largest metal mirror ever cast; the 54 foot long telescope tube was probably Ireland's biggest barrel. The telescope can still be seen by visitors to Birr Castle; the museum on the grounds details much of Parson's scientific experimentation.

The Parsons family were quite the inventors. William's eldest son, Laurence, devised a way of taking the first accurate measurements of the moon's temperature. And Charles, another son, invented the steam turbine in 1884. The latter revolutionized marine transport and naval warfare; it also made it possible to generate cheap and plentiful electricity.

An astronomer at the Armagh Observatory, Thomas Romney Robinson, built the first device capable of measuring wind speed and showed it to the Royal Irish Academy in 1850. The device consisted of four hemispherical caps which spun freely around a central spindle as the wind blew them. A mechanism Robinson designed counted how often the caps spun each minute, and thus could calculate the wind speed.

Would you be surprised to know that an Irishman won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1951? His name was Ernest T.S. Walton.