Introduction

The second half of the nineteenth century was a period of extraordinary scientific progress. In astronomy, bigger and better telescopes, and the techniques of spectroscopy and photography, brought about a revolution in humankind's vision of the universe. The documentation – in the English-speaking world at least – of the astronomical labours of that important era was almost entirely due to Agnes Mary Clerke, historian of astronomy and painstaking chronicler of astrophysical discovery as she witnessed it over thirty years of her active life. This remarkable woman, educated solely within her own family and through her own private studies, not only kept abreast of astronomical progress world-wide but also had a genuine understanding of the matters on which she reported and the gift of communicating them through her fluent and prolific writings. Her books – in particular her *Popular History of Astronomy during the Nineteenth Century*, first published in 1885 and reprinted over almost twenty years – are treasured by historians and by amateur lovers of astronomy alike as sources of reliable and enjoyable information on that period. She was also much in demand in her lifetime as a contributor to literary journals and encyclopaedias.

Agnes Clerke numbered among her circle of friends and correspondents many of the eminent astronomers of the day. Unobtrusive and gentle by nature, she nevertheless became an authority on astrophysics and a figure of respect in the literary world. This status was achieved, as is revealed in letters preserved in the archives of observatories in South Africa, the United States and Europe, through intense application and tireless enquiries from the experts. Agnes Clerke's erudition stretched beyond science; she was a classical scholar, a gifted linguist, an accomplished musician, and a person of deep religious

conviction. Her story, from her upbringing in a remote town in Ireland in the dark days of the potato famine, to her thirty years residence in London, is linked with that of her sister Ellen who, in another sphere, was a minor poet and a journalist of some influence in the English Catholic press.

1 Family background in County Cork

The Clerkes

Agnes Mary Clerke, born on 10 February 1842 in Skibbereen, Co. Cork, was the second of three children of John William Clerke, manager of the Provincial Bank in that town, and his wife Catherine Mary née Deasy (Figure 1.1).[1]

The Clerkes were a well-known and extensive family in West Cork. According to one account, the founder of the line was a major in King William's army who stayed on in Ireland after 1691. In the nineteenth century the Clerke family records yield a remarkable number of highly talented persons. Agnes' grandfather, St John Clerke, was a much loved physician in Skibbereen; his cousin was the renowned Dr Jonathon Clerke of Bandon. The latter's son, Major Sir Thomas Henry Shadwell Clerke,[2] was made a knight of the Royal Hanoverian Order after service in the Peninsular War, and became a military journalist. He took a keen interest in the sciences and in 1823 became a founder member of the Royal Astronomical Society, to which Agnes Clerke was to be elected some 90 years later. He was also elected a Fellow of the Royal Society and of the Royal Geographical Society. He was made Foreign Secretary of the latter society on account of his linguistic prowess. Among other noted members of the Clerke clan in the nineteenth century was Skibbereen-born Thomas W. Clerke, LlD, Judge of the Supreme Court in the USA, author of important treatises on law and co-founder in 1841 of the Irish Emigrant Society.[3]

In the immediate family, Agnes Clerke's grandfather St John Clerke, the local medical doctor, was esteemed not only professionally but also for his energetic support of just causes. He and his brother Thomas, a corn miller, were prime movers in organising relief in the

Figure 1.1 Catherine and John Clerke, Agnes Clerke's parents.

form of food and employment for the victims of the near-famines of 1817 and 1822, as well as personally donating several hundred pounds 'to our starving poor'. A Protestant himself, Dr Clerke was equally strenuous in campaigning to secure legal rights for his Catholic fellow citizens in the days before Catholic emancipation (1829). To show his solidarity with them, he attended in person a general meeting of Catholics in the Skibbereen area, convened in November 1824 to protest at sectarian injustices and to support Catholic Rent, a fund initiated by the great Irish politician Daniel O'Connell to fight the cause by legal means.[4]

It was into this exemplary and liberal-minded family that Agnes Clerke's father, John William, was born in 1814, one of three brothers and a sister. All three brothers were educated at Trinity College Dublin. John, a scholar in classics also studied mathematics and the sciences, especially astronomy: his surviving annotated textbook, Robert Woodhouse's *Treatise on Astronomy*, testifies to his industry in this regard. On graduating he returned to his native town and, having worked briefly in a locally owned bank, was appointed manager of the London-based Provincial Bank (now the Allied Irish Bank) when it

opened its doors in Skibbereen in 1839. The bank, on Bridgetown or Bridge Street, the town's main street, was the largest house in the street and one of the most substantial in the entire town.

Here, on his appointment, John Clerke set up home with his bride, Catherine Deasy, a sister of his friend and contemporary at Trinity College, Rickard Morgan Deasy.

The Deasys

The Deasys belonged to an old Irish family with a romantic history.[5] The surname (Déiseach in Irish) derives from the district of the Decies (na Déisigh) in County Waterford on Ireland's south coast, which was the clan's native territory. According to family tradition, the West Cork branch sprang from a single refugee from that area, a pregnant woman who, fleeing westwards from Cromwell's troops in their fearsome advance through Leinster in 1649, eventually came to a halt at the sea at East Barryroe, Co. Cork. There she gave birth to a son, the reputed head of the entire West Cork Deasy dynasty.

The family prospered, acquired land, and by around 1700 had its seat at Lisscrimeen Castle overlooking a secluded sandy beach and the wide open sea beyond, the walls of which still stand. The Deasys intermarried with notable local families, including that of The O'Donovan, chieftain of an ancient clan who was a member of the Irish Parliament of King James II. Later interesting family connections included Fitz-James O'Brien, a well-known American journalist and an early writer of science fiction,[6] whose mother (née Deasy) was an aunt of Mrs Clerke; and possibly Edmund Burke, the great Irish politician and orator who (according to Mrs Clerke) was distantly related by marriage.[7] Whatever the details, it is undoubtedly true that the Deasy kin had intriguing ramifications, and threw up into the world some unusual and dashing characters.

A direct descendant of the original patriarch was the colourful Timothy Deasy of Timoleague, Co. Cork, who was arrested in 1745 for singing a Jacobite song and narrowly escaped the death penalty. When the case against him as a Jacobite sympathiser failed, he was indicted on

the arms charge, since Catholics were forbidden from possessing arms. Meanwhile, his elder brother had made his fortune in Jamaica, where he acquired valuable estates. The proceeds of the Jamaican property, a major source of the family wealth, were eventually inherited by Timothy's grandson Rickard, Agnes Clerke's grandfather. As a boy, Rickard attended a school in Cork – such schools, run by private teachers, were very common – where he clearly achieved a high standard of literacy and polish, as revealed in the memoirs he wrote for the benefit of his children in his old age.[8]

The Deasys were Roman Catholics and traditionally nationalist in politics. On the repeal of the Penal Laws Rickard Deasy achieved the distinction of becoming in 1793 the first Catholic magistrate in Cork for a century. In 1807 he set up a brewery in Clonakilty – Deasy and Company – which became the town's chief industry and operated until 1940 when it was succeeded by the present Deasy Bottling and Mineral Water Plant. The soaring chimneys of the brewery still dominate the skyline of Clonakilty: the old structure is in fact being conserved for its historical interest. The brewery incorporated its own cooperage with highly skilled craftsmen: a magnificent polished oak cask with brass hoops conveyed the firm's prizewinning stout to the International Exhibition, commemorating the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus, in Chicago in 1896.[9]

The Deasys also established another highly successful business as sea-merchants and shipbuilders.[10] Deasy's Quay, still so named, in Clonakilty Harbour, shows the remains of the docks and of the shipyard which flourished there in the first half of the nineteenth century. Several schooners were built there, including the *Mary Ann* (the name of Deasy's wife and of one of his daughters) and the *Catherine*, named after the daughter who was to become Agnes Clerke's mother.

The commerce at Deasy's Quay included smuggling, chiefly of wine and brandy from France, a lucrative and far from disreputable trade in that part of the country. The O'Connells of Derrynane, to which Daniel O'Connell belonged, famously belonged to the same smuggling consortium which operated along the south coast.

Rickard Deasy and his wife Mary Ann, whom he married in 1802, were people of considerable influence in the community, which they

exercised to the full in charitable and social causes.[11] The West Cork Regional Museum at Clonakilty devotes a special section to the history of the Deasy family, spanning four generations and ending with Henry Hugh Peter Deasy, Agnes Clerke's first cousin, a noted explorer in Tibet at the end of the nineteenth century.

The immediate maternal family

Rickard Deasy's elder son, who adopted the alternative spelling of Decie as his surname, settled in England. He died at the age of only 29, leaving a successful family with its own share of adventure: one of his sons was a noted transatlantic yachtsman.[12] The younger son, Rickard Morgan, the dominant member of the family in that generation, was a man of exceptional intellectual talents. He entered Trinity College Dublin at the age of only 15, graduated in law at 20 and was called to the Bar at the unusually early age of 23. At the time of the Clerkes' marriage Rickard Deasy was practising as a barrister in Dublin at the start of a highly successful career.

Rickard Deasy and John Clerke, who entered Trinity the same year at the even younger age of 14, were fellow-students for five years. It was through their friendship that Clerke was introduced to Deasy's favourite sister: according to their mother, Rickard was the 'idolised brother' of her 'dear affectionate child', Catherine.[13]

Catherine was the youngest of six daughters. The others were Anne and Margaret, who became nuns; Honoria and Mary Anne who, like Catherine, made marriages to husbands in Co. Cork; and Ellen who died young, probably while still in her teens.[14] The girls were educated at the Ursuline Convent, Cork, where their names may still be seen in the school roll.[15] They also had the benefit of a learned tutor, John Sheahan, employed by the family to teach the children, who went on to become a journalist with the local *Southern Reporter* and other papers.[16]

Convent boarding schools grew in popularity in Ireland throughout the nineteenth century. The Ursuline nuns, one of the first religious orders to set up establishments in the country after the abolition of

the Penal Laws, were well-known educators of girls from middle class Catholic families. Though women of that era were not destined for careers, the Ursuline nuns imparted a high standard of education to their pupils. The subjects on the curriculum were English, French, Spanish, Italian, History, Geography, Religious Knowledge, Music and Art – the usual list of accomplishments of young ladies of their time – though Needlework is strangely missing. Science was on offer, consisting probably of a little Nature Study, but Mathematics was not mentioned.[17] Parents were promised that 'every gentle and persuasive method shall be used to impress on the minds of young ladies an elevated and habitual sense of decency and propriety, and to polish and refine their manners'.[18] Music was very special to Catherine. She practised the piano every day of her life right into old age. She also played the harp, and in her seventies still enjoyed performing Irish melodies and accompanying her daughters' singing.

The Ursuline Convent in Cork was one of the places visited by the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray in the course of his tour of Ireland in 1842.[19] Already prejudiced against the idea of an enclosed religious life, he produced a sarcastic account of conditions within the convent walls. He concluded that 'we have as much right to permit Sutteeism in India, as to allow women in the United Kingdom to take these wicked vows, or Catholic bishops to receive them'. Sister Josephine (formerly Anne Deasy, the eldest of the six sisters) who was a member of the community there since 1822 would have given a different interpretation.

The Clerke–Deasy marriage

John William Clerke and Catherine Deasy were married on 9 July 1839. She was the last of the daughters to marry. In Ireland's religiously divided society, such an alliance was sometimes seen as giving a Catholic partner access to the Protestant 'gentry', but this was far from the case with the Deasys, who were wealthy and independent. The Clerkes belonged to the category of 'liberal Protestant' frequently mentioned and praised by Catherine's father in his extant recollections of

family and political life. A marriage settlement of some complexity worth £1,500 was drawn up on Catherine, 'written on sheets of parchment like mainsails'.[20] In the course of time John Clerke would be further helped by his more affluent brother-in-law Rickard.

According to the civil rules then prevailing, the Clerkes' marriage, being mixed, was officiated twice, once before the Church of Ireland (Anglican) clergyman, and afterwards in the Catholic Church in Clonakilty before the Reverend David Walsh, Parish Priest. The bride's father no doubt intended to memorialise the occasion when he named the schooner *Catherine*, a vessel of 87 tons built in his shipyard in 1840. The *Catherine* was lost off the Scilly Islands in 1850 when on her way to London with a cargo of oats. She filled and sank as her pumps were unable to cope.

The Clerkes' three children – Ellen Mary (born 26 September 1840), Agnes Mary (born 10 February 1842) and Aubrey St John (born in April 1843) – were all brought up in their mother's Catholic faith, and remained active and exemplary members of their church throughout their lives. In 1840, only one year after their marriage, John's father, the devoted Dr St John, died at the age of 72. At about the same time, certainly before 1845, Catherine's parents left Clonakilty and went to live abroad. It appears that – perhaps as a result of their lavish and overgenerous life-style – they ran into financial difficulties and emigrated to the Island of Jersey. They resided in Jersey for the rest of their days while keeping actively in touch with home. Rickard Deasy died in 1852, and his wife in 1853.

Skibbereen

The small town of Skibbereen[21] on the beautiful remote south coast of Ireland where the Clerkes reared their family had long been a focus of business for the surrounding countryside which, according to *Pigot's Directory* of 1824, was 'thickly inhabited by an opulent gentry'. It had its weekly market where farmers brought their produce and regular fair days for the sale of livestock. A coach passed through each morning and evening, carrying mail and connecting travellers to the neighbouring

towns and to the city of Cork, a distance of 53 miles. There was a courthouse, a police barracks, a post office, a coastguard station, the offices of the famous *Skibbereen Eagle* newspaper, hotels, public houses, a medical dispensary and the inevitable workhouse for paupers, erected in 1842. The Bishop of Ross had his seat in Skibbereen, where a handsome Catholic Cathedral had been built in 1826. Abbeystrewry Church of the Church of Ireland dated from 1827 and the Methodist Chapel from 1833. There were schools attached to these churches, the largest being the Catholic school supported by the National Board.

In the early years of the nineteenth century the town, of about 4,000 inhabitants, had been a thriving centre of the textile industry, producing woollen and linen goods in its mills. After the Napoleonic Wars that industry fell into decline, and with it the overall prosperity of the populace. There still existed a large brewery and a steam corn mill; craftsmen such as coopers, rope-makers and dyers followed their trades amid the crowded shops on the town's four streets. Much of the population, however, according to the reports of various travellers, was cluttered in miserable dwellings in the surrounding lanes.

The bank, a relatively new feature in Irish provincial towns, was sure to be a focal point in local commercial life. The three-storey building, which today houses business offices, had living quarters for the manager and a plot of land behind leading down to the river Ilen (Figure 1.2). The family and bank customers shared an entrance door which opened directly from the street into a large hallway. Off this on one side was the bank office with a window facing the street. The private part of the house was shielded by a pair of doors, behind which is still preserved the original curved mahogany staircase leading past a huge window commanding a beautiful view of the river. The same panorama of the river and the barge traffic could be enjoyed from the top floor.

The Great Famine

Then came the calamitous Great Famine of 1845–50. The potato blight which caused the famine first struck in Co. Cork and quickly spread. The area around Skibbereen, noted for the excellent quality of its pota-