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Edited by Mary Herschel

Excerpt

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CAROLINE HERSCHEL.

CHAPTER I.

RECOLLECTIONS OF EARLY LIFE IN HANOVER.

CAROLINE LUCRETIA HERSCHEL was born at Hanover on the 16th of March, 1750. She was the eighth child and fourth daughter of Isaac Herschel, by Anna Ilse Moritzen, to whom he was married in August, 1732. The family consisted of ten children, four of whom died in early childhood.

A memorandum in the handwriting of Isaac Herschel, transcribed by his daughter in the original German at the beginning of her Recollections, traces the family back to the early part of the seventeenth century, about which time, it appears that three brothers *Herschel* left Moravia on account of their religion (which was Protestant), and became possessors of land in Saxony. One of these brothers, Hans, was a brewer at Pirna, a little town two miles from Dresden, and the father of two sons, one of whom, Abraham by name, was born in 1651, was the father of the above-mentioned Isaac, and the grandfather of Caroline

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[More information](#)2 *Caroline Lucretia Herschel.* [1675–1731.]

Lucretia Herschel. Abraham Herschel was employed in the royal gardens at Dresden, he received commissions from various quarters on account of his taste and skill as a landscape gardener. Of his four children, Eusebius, the eldest, appears to have kept up little or no intercourse with his family after the father's death in 1718. The second child, Apollonia, married a landed proprietor, Herr von Thümer. Benjamin, the second son, died in his third year; and Isaac, the youngest, was born 14th of January, 1707, and was thus an orphan at the early age of eleven years. His parents wished him to be a gardener like his father, but a passionate love of music led him to take every opportunity of practising on the violin, besides studying music under a hautboy-player in the royal band. When he was about one and twenty he resolved to seek his fortune, and went to Berlin, where the style of hautboy playing was so little to his taste that he soon left it, and went to Potsdam, where he studied for a year under the celebrated Cappell Meister Pabrich, the means for so doing being supplied by his mother and sister; his brother, as he quaintly remarks, contenting himself with writing him letters in praise of the virtue of economy! In July, 1731, he went to Brunswick, and in August to Hanover, where he at once obtained an engagement as hautboy-player in the band of the Guards, and in the August following he married as above stated.

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[More information](#)

CHAP. I.]

Early Recollections.

3

The family group to which Miss Herschel's autobiography introduces us consisted of—

1. Sophia Elizabeth, born in 1733. [Afterwards Mrs. Griesbach.]
2. Henry Anton Jacob, born 20th November, 1734.
- (4) 3. Frederic William, born 15th November, 1738.
- (6) 4. John Alexander, born 13th November, 1745.
- (8) 5. Carolina Lucretia, born 16th March, 1750; and
- (10) 6. The little Dietrich, born 13th September, 1755.

With the exception of frequent absences from home which attendance on a regiment made inevitable, the family life went on smoothly enough for some years, the father taking every opportunity, when at home, to cultivate the musical talents of his sons, who depended for the ordinary routine of education on the garrison school, to which all the children went from the age of two to fourteen. Here the splendid talents of *William* early displayed themselves, and the master confessed that the pupil had soon got beyond his teacher. Although four years younger than Jacob, when the two brothers had lessons in French, the younger had mastered the language in half the time needed by the elder, and he in some measure satisfied his eager desire for know-

B 2

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Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Caroline Lucretia Herschel.* [1743–1753.]

ledge by attending out of school hours to learn all that his master could teach of Latin and arithmetic. At fourteen he was an excellent performer both on the oboe and violin.

The first serious calamity recorded was the irreparable injury caused to the father's health by the hardships of war. After the battle of Dettingen (June 16th, 1743) the troops remained all night on the field, which was soaked by heavy rains. The unfortunate bandmaster lay in a wet furrow, which caused a complete loss of the use of his limbs for some time, and left him with an impaired constitution and an asthmatical affection which afflicted him to the end of his life. During the dark times of the Seven Years' War, the little Caroline, then her mother's sole companion, often heard this grievous trouble spoken of, and the shadow of it cast a gloom over her childish recollections, most of which are of a sombre character. At three years old she was a deeply interested participator in all the family concerns, and of that period she writes :—

“ It must have been in 1753 when my brother [Jacob, aged 19] was chosen organist to the new organ in the garrison church ; for I remember my mother taking me with her the first Sunday on its opening, and that before she had time to shut the pew door, I took fright at the beginning of a prelude with a full accompaniment, so that I flew out of church and home again. I also remember to

have seen my brother William confirmed in his new oböisten uniform.”

The next interesting event was the marriage of the eldest daughter, who was living with a family at Brunswick, and whom her sister says she had never seen until she came home to be married. The bridegroom, Mr. Griesbach, also a musician in the Guard, found no favour in the eyes of his sister-in-law, and it is evidently some satisfaction to her to have been told that her father never cordially approved the match,

“for . . . he knew him at least to be but a very middling musician, and this alone would have been enough for my father’s disapprobation.”

Great preparations were made for

“providing and furnishing a habitation (which happened to be in the same house where my parents lived), which they did in as handsome a manner as their straitened income would allow, and to which my dear brothers took delight in contributing to the best of their ability. I remember how delighted I was when they were showing me the pretty framed pictures with which my brother William had decorated his sister’s room, and heard my mother relate afterwards, that the brothers had taken two months’ pay in advance for the wedding entertainment. . . . Though for stocking a family with household linen my mother was prepared at all times, as perhaps never a more diligent spinner was heard of; but to keep pace with the wishes of my dear brothers, by whom my sister was, as well as by her parents, exceedingly beloved—the whole family were kept for a time in an

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[More information](#)6 *Caroline Lucretia Herschel.* [1753–1755.]

agreeable bustle to see that nothing that could give either pleasure or comfort might be wanting in her future establishment. . . . The fête (without which it would have been scandalous in those days to get married) ended with a ball, at which I remember to have been dancing among the rest without a partner.”

A little later, when war troubles broke up the household, and the bride returned to her mother, we are told :

“my sister was not of a very patient temper, and could not be reconciled to have children about her, and I was mostly, when not in school, sent with Alexander to play on the walls or with the neighbour’s children, in which I seldom could join, and often stood freezing on shore to see my brother skating on the Stadtgraben (town ditch) till he chose to go home. In short, there was no one who cared anything about me.”

The earthquake which destroyed Lisbon on the 1st November 1755, was strongly felt at Hanover, and became closely associated in the poor little girl’s mind with the trials and troubles which shortly afterwards fell upon the family. She says :—

“One morning early I was with my father and mother alone in the room, the latter putting my clothes on, when all at once I saw both standing aghast and speechless before me ; at the same time my brothers, my sister, and Griesbach came running in, all being panic-struck by the earthquake.”

For a little while the family enjoyed a peaceful interval, during which the extraordinary proficiency of

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[More information](#)

CHAP. I.]

Early Recollections.

7

his two eldest sons was a growing source of delight to the father, whose utmost ambition was to see them become accomplished musicians; while the wider flights of William met with his most cordial sympathy. The following passage is one of the very few which reflect the brighter side of the picture:—

“My brothers were often introduced as solo performers and assistants in the orchestra of the court, and I remember that I was frequently prevented from going to sleep by the lively criticism on music on coming from a concert, or conversations on philosophical subjects which lasted frequently till morning, in which my father was a lively partaker and assistant of my brother William by contriving self-made instruments. . . . Often I would keep myself awake that I might listen to their animating remarks, for it made *me so happy* to see *them so happy*. But generally their conversation would branch out on philosophical subjects, when my brother William and my father often argued with such warmth, that my mother’s interference became necessary, when the names Leibnitz, Newton, and Euler sounded rather too loud for the repose of her little ones, who ought to be in school by seven in the morning. But it seems that on the brothers retiring to their own room, where they shared the same bed, my brother William had still a great deal to say; and frequently it happened that when he stopped for an assent or reply, he found his hearer was gone to sleep, and I suppose it was not till then that he bethought himself to do the same.

“The recollection of these happy scenes confirms me in the belief, that had my brother William not then been interrupted in his philosophical pursuits, we should have had much earlier proofs of his inventive genius. My father

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

8

Caroline Lucretia Herschel. [1755–1756.]

was a great admirer of astronomy, and had some knowledge of that science; for I remember his taking me, on a clear frosty night, into the street, to make me acquainted with several of the most beautiful constellations, after we had been gazing at a comet which was then visible. And I well remember with what delight he used to assist my brother William in his various contrivances in the pursuit of his philosophical studies, among which was a neatly turned 4-inch globe, upon which the equator and ecliptic were engraved by my brother.”

Towards the end of the year 1755 the regiment was under orders for England, and the little household was at once broken up. A place in the court orchestra had been promised to Jacob, but the vacancy did not, unfortunately, occur in time, and he was obliged to smother his discontent, lower his ambition, and accept a place in the band with his younger brother. At length the sad hour of parting arrived:—

“In our room all was mute but in hurried action; my dear father was thin and pale, and my brother William almost equally so, for he was of a delicate constitution and just then growing very fast. Of my brother Jacob I only remember his starting difficulties at everything that was done for him, as my father was busy to see that they were equipped with the necessaries for a march. . . . The whole town was in motion with drums beating to march: the troops hallooed and roared in the streets, the drums beat louder, Griesbach came to join my father and brothers, and in a moment they all were gone. My sister fled to

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[More information](#)

CHAP. I.]

Early Recollections.

9

her own room. Alexander went with many others to follow their relatives for some miles to take a last look. I found myself now with my mother alone in a room all in confusion, in one corner of which my little brother Dietrich lay in his cradle; my tears flowed like my mother's, but neither of us could speak. I snatched a large handkerchief of my father's from a chair and took a stool to place it at my mother's feet, on which I sat down, and put into her hands one corner of the handkerchief, reserving the opposite one for myself; this little action actually drew a momentary smile into her face . . . My father left half his pay for our support in the hands of an agent in Hanover, but Griesbach, instead of following my father's example, gave up his lodging and brought his wife with her goods and chattels to her mother, which arrangement was no small addition to our uncomfortable situation."

Even at this early age, it is not difficult to trace in these childish recollections the influence of that intense affection for her brother William which made him more and more the centre of all her interests; next to him, her father filled a large place in her heart. Of the long year of separation, nothing is recorded. At last Jacob arrived (having "out of aggravation" got permission to resign his place when the hoped-for vacancy in the orchestra had been otherwise filled) he had travelled by post, while his father and brother, "who never forsook him for self-consideration," were still toiling wearily on the march home.

"My mother being very busy preparing dinner, had

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[More information](#)

10

Caroline Lucretia Herschel. [1756–1757.]

suffered me to go all alone to the parade to meet my father, but I could not find him anywhere, nor anybody whom I knew; so at last, when nearly frozen to death, I came home and found them all at table. My dear brother William threw down his knife and fork, and ran to welcome and crouched down to me, which made me forget all my grievances. The rest were so happy . . . at seeing one another again, that my absence had never been perceived.”

The visit to England appears to have further developed the love of show and luxury which painfully distinguished Jacob, who must needs import specimens of English goods and English tailoring, while all that William brought back was a copy of Locke on the Human Understanding, the purchase of which absorbed all his private means, as he never willingly asked his father for a single penny. But it was becoming apparent that he had not the physical strength to continue in the Guard during war time, and after the disastrous campaign of 1757, and the defeat at Hastenbeck,* 26th July, 1757 (between 20 and 30 miles from Hanover), his parents resolved to remove him—a step apparently attended by no small difficulty, as our faithful chronicler narrates:—

“I can now comprehend the reason why we little ones were continually sent out of the way, and why I had only by chance a passing glimpse of my brother as I was sitting at

* The Duke of Cumberland's army suffered severely in this battle.