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978-1-107-65001-5 - The Herschel Chronicle: The Life-Story of William Herschel and His Sister Caroline Herschel

Edited by His Granddaughter Constance A. Lubbock

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

1651 1757

Origin of the Herschel Family. Isaac Herschel's autobiography. Early life of William and Caroline Herschel. William joins the band of the Hanoverian Guards. Historical sketch. William's account of his visit to England with his father and brother. Battle of Hastenbeck. Retreat and surrender of the Hanoverian army. William and Jacob come to England.

**L**ITTLE positive information is available concerning the progenitors of the Herschel family. The name suggests a Jewish origin, but as far back as they can be traced they were Christian Protestants and had even, according to family tradition, suffered persecution and been driven out of Moravia on account of their adherence to the Reformed Faith. The same tradition attributes the recurrence of Jewish names in the family to Scriptural rather than to racial associations. A certain Carl Herschel, who wrote to Sir William Herschel in 1790, claiming relationship, mentioned that there were in Germany many Jewish families bearing a similar name, but that it was usually, in their case, spelt with an "i", Hirschel. Whatever the truth of this matter may be, if, as seems probable, the Herschels were originally Jews, certain it is that they had inherited the best qualities of their race—industry, intelligence and loyalty to their religion; but, having no talent for money-making, they remained poor.

The authentic chronicles of the Herschel family reach back to the middle of the seventeenth century, when a certain Hans Herschel was living at Pirna, near Dresden in Saxony; he was by trade a brewer. Hans Herschel had two sons; what became of the eldest is not known; the second son, Abraham, was the grandfather of William Herschel, the astronomer.

From this time onwards we are on firm ground, as William's father, Isaac Herschel, left a short account of his own life and parentage which is here given in full, translated from the German. It was written in 1764.

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### ISAAC HERSCHEL'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

“Abraham Herschel was born in 1651; he learnt gardening at Dresden in the Elector’s gardens, and was besides very fond of arithmetic, writing and drawing, as well as of music; especially he was very far advanced in arithmetic and writing.

“He became what was called a pleasure gardener, on the estate of Hohensatz, which is part of Zerbst, and three or four miles from Magdeburg. He married Eva Meves, daughter of a dyer in the little town of Loburg; they had four children. The eldest son was Eusebius; he learnt gardening in Gotha, but afterwards took to farming. He married and had five sons who, I hope, are still living.

“The second child was a daughter, Apollonia; she married, after a somewhat romantic manner, a country gentleman named Herr von Thumen; they lived together very happily and had one son, who died young, and one daughter, who married a Prussian officer of good family.

“The third child of Abraham Herschel was a son, Benjamin, who, in the third year of his age, fell into a well and was drowned.

“The fourth and last am I, Isaac Herschel; I was born at Hohensatz on 4th January, 1707. My parents wished me to devote myself to gardening, but my father died in 1718, before I could take it up. My brother Eusebius, who had finished his apprenticeship in gardening, took up my father’s work for some years. After he had married he devoted himself to farming in Altenburg, in Chursachsen, and was very successful.

“As I had by that time learnt something of gardening, my brother got me a place at Zerbst, with an old widow lady, as gardener.

“While I was at Hohensatz I had procured a violin and learnt to play it by ear, and at Zerbst I took proper lessons in music from an oboist in the Court Band. I then procured an oboe for myself and was never so happy as when I was occupied with music. I worked day and night as much as I could get time, as my wish was to become an oboist; for I had lost all taste for gardening.

“When I had reached the age of 21, and considered that I had learnt enough to become an oboist, I gave up my situation and went to Berlin to seek service in a regimental band, but, as I found the Prussian service as a bandsman very bad and slavish, I went to Potsdam for a whole year and took lessons in music from the

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Prussian conductor, Pabush. My dear brother and sister supplied me with the necessary funds; my brother, however, urged me in his letters to come and study agriculture with him. I obeyed his call, but I could not long resist my love of music and travelling, and in July, 1731, I went to Brunswick, and there I could have taken a position as oboist, but the situation appeared to me too Prussian; I therefore went to Hanover. There it was my destiny to stay, and I was engaged as oboist in the Foot-Guards. In the following year I married Anna Ilse Moritzen, daughter of a citizen of Neustadt on the Rubenberg, three miles from Hanover. On the 12th April, 1733, God sent us our first daughter, Sophia Elisabeth.”

Isaac Herschel had ten children, four of whom died young, one of whooping-cough and one of small-pox. His daughter Caroline had small-pox at the same time, being then four years old. She says long afterwards: “Although (I) recovered, I did not escape being totally disfigured and suffering some injury to my left eye”.

The surviving children were:

Sophia Elisabeth	born	12th April, 1733,
Heinrich Anton Jacob	„	20th November, 1734,
Friedrich Wilhelm	„	15th November, 1738,
Johann Alexander	„	13th November, 1745,
Caroline Lucretia	„	16th March, 1750,
Johann Dietrich	„	13th September, 1755.

All these, except perhaps the eldest daughter, inherited their father’s musical talent. Jacob became an accomplished musician at an early age, and William told his son that he could remember himself, as a child of four years of age, being set on a table to play a solo on the small violin which his father had had made for his children.

There is an interesting note in the Commonplace Book of Sir J. F. W. Herschel, William’s son, concerning the Garrison school where William Herschel and his brothers and sisters received their first teaching. Under the date 26th June, 1817, he wrote:

“Baron Strandman and four young Russians visited Slough. Baron S. brought them to England to learn the Lancaster and Bell system<sup>1</sup> and

<sup>1</sup> The schools for the education of the children of the poorer classes started independently, in the beginning of the nineteenth century, by Joseph Lancaster in Southwark and by Dr Andrew Bell in India, had this feature in common, that the instruction of the younger children was entrusted to the older pupils.

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introduce it into Russia, by order of the Emperor. My father says that in Hanover a system of the kind had long been established; he himself was taught to read and write and sum at a school of the kind where were 500 boys, and remembers at 8 years of age being made to teach the boys of 6 what he had already learnt himself”.

Caroline wrote concerning her brothers Jacob and William:

“There was a great difference in their dispositions; the eldest esteemed music as the only science worth cultivating, whereas William gave early proofs of an eager desire for knowledge in general. . . . As our Preceptor (at the Garrison school) was a well-informed man, capable of teaching as much Latin as boys in general carry away from preparatory schools, and was besides reckoned an excellent arithmetician, my brother attended his private hours. And with joy Mr Antonius (the name of our Preceptor) informed my father that his son knew not *all* but *more* than he could teach him.

“And when the two brothers began at the same time to receive lessons in French, my brother William was master of it in less than half the time the elder wanted; but he continued to attend the lessons till his brother was also perfect in order to benefit by the learning of their language-master (Mr Hofschlager), whom, many years after, I have heard named as a man well informed in Mathematics”.

Isaac Herschel was able to engage the services of this teacher for his two boys, by applying for this purpose the salary which William earned after he was fifteen as a hautboy player in the Hanoverian Guards, and that which Jacob received at the same time as organist at the Garrison chapel. Hofschlager was a well-read man, and he imparted a taste for philosophy and metaphysics to his young pupils. Nothing could be further from the truth than to speak of William Herschel’s education as meagre. It was in fact far more liberal and purposeful than that given at the time to English boys in public schools. Having been supplied with the necessary instruments for acquiring knowledge, reading, writing and arithmetic, as well as the rudiments of Latin and logic, and having himself an insatiable thirst for knowledge, he was stimulated by his father and tutor to proceed along the only sure path of learning—that of reading and discussion with those better informed than himself.

Caroline has preserved for us her recollection of the evening talks, when she lay awake listening to her father and brothers debating on

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metaphysical or mathematical subjects. William seems to have been the most fluent in these discussions.

“My brother William”, she says, “and his Father were often arguing with such warmth that my Mother’s interference became necessary, when the names of 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 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 that his hearer had gone to sleep.

“My Father 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 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 philosophical studies, among which was a neatly turned globe, upon which the equator and the ecliptic were engraved by my brother.”

The simultaneous training of hand and mind is coming to be recognized as part of a sound education, so this encouragement given by the father to the mechanical tastes of his sons must also be regarded as an educational advantage. It was of course of great practical use to William in after life, when he was constructing his marvellous instruments. The practice of the violin may also have developed his extreme delicacy of touch. Years afterwards, at Datchet, when he was superintending and helping the workmen engaged on the erection of his telescope, one of them, amazed at his dexterity with the turning-lathe and also at forging iron, asked him what he had been brought up to. “To fiddling”, was the reply.

It may therefore truly be said that, if William Herschel had not received much definite instruction in his youth, he had yet been well educated; for he had been taught freely to use all the powers of mind and body with which nature had endowed him. Nor must we forget the moral influence of his father’s sincere and practical piety.

It may be useful here to take a cursory glance at the condition of Europe at this time, in order to understand how it affected the lives of the poor bandsman, Isaac Herschel, and that of his sons. When Isaac

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Herschel went to Berlin and found the Prussian service so little to his taste, he came into touch with that growing military power which was soon to throw the whole of Europe into confusion. The year 1740 was a momentous one, for in May of that year Frederick I of Prussia died and was succeeded by his son Frederick II, called in history Frederick the Great. Three months later Charles, the Emperor, also died, and then the seething cauldron of European troubles boiled over; Frederick seized Silesia and so began the series of wars which devastated Germany for twelve years.

England was drawn into the struggle and sided with Prussia. In June, 1743, a considerable army of mixed English and Hanoverian troops was dispatched to the Rhine; King George II, accompanied by his son, the Duke of Cumberland, went over to take command and was present at the battle of Dettingen, when the French were severely defeated. The English troops were, however, withdrawn to stem the Jacobite rebellion, but the war was carried on for over two more years, though Hanover itself remained unmolested. Isaac Herschel accompanied the band of the Foot-Guards throughout this campaign. He carried in his knapsack a devotional book, *Vom Wahren Christenthum*, by Johann Arndts; and on the inside of the covers of this book he jotted down the dates of the principal events of his life. From these notes it appears that he had been with the army throughout the campaign which led to the battle of Dettingen. Caroline in her Memoirs relates that he contracted rheumatism and asthma from lying in a wet field all night after the battle, and was invalided for some months, but then returned to the regiment. He does not appear to have been near the scene of fighting when the troops were defeated by the French at Fontenoy. His notes conclude with the words:

“1746, Feb. 13. Wieder mit dem ganzen Regiment in Hanover einmarschiert, Gott sy Dank”.

This was the end of the war; Isaac Herschel was now able to settle down to a quiet family life, superintending the musical education of his sons, with good hopes that they might, after serving an apprenticeship in the Guards band, be engaged in the Court Orchestra. The only events which broke the monotony of the next ten years were the births of two more children, Caroline and Dietrich, and the marriage of the eldest daughter, Sophia, to G. Griesbach, another member of the regi-

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mental band. Caroline mentions that her father was by no means satisfied about the match, and his fears were justified in the event, as Griesbach turned out to be both lazy and ill-tempered. But the wedding was very gay. Caroline wrote in her Memoirs:

“I remember how delighted I was when they showed 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, without which in those days it would have been scandalous to get married”.

William Herschel joined the regimental band as an oboist when he was fourteen years of age and his brother Jacob when even younger. In the year 1756, when William was in his eighteenth year, the peaceful current of the family life was rudely and, for him, permanently broken up.

England had been nominally at war with France since the previous year and her people lived in constant fear of invasion. Hanoverian troops were brought over to assist in the defence, amongst them the regiment of Foot-Guards in which Isaac Herschel and his two sons were serving. Caroline gives a graphic account in her Memoirs of the confusion and distress in her home when her father and both her elder brothers, as well as her sister’s husband, were all thus unexpectedly snatched away. William Herschel has left, in his Biographical Memorandums, some account of his experiences during this, his first, visit to England. These Memorandums begin with the following entry:

“1753, *May* 1. I was engaged as Musician in the Hanoverian Guards, being then 14 years and some months of age, and I remember playing for this purpose on the Hautboy and on the violin before General Sommerfeld, who approved my performance.

“This engagement furnished the means for my improvement not only in music, which was my profession, but also in acquiring a knowledge of the French language; with the advantage of studying above two years under a very well informed teacher [1755], who, taking a great liking to me, did not confine his instructions to language only, but encouraged the taste he found in his pupil for the study of philosophy, especially Logic, Ethics and Metaphysics, which were his own favourite pursuits.

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“Soon after the great Earthquake which the 1st of November destroyed Lisbon, the Guards marched out of Hanover, and about the end of March, 1756, we were at Ritzbüttel, and embarked at Cuxhaven for England, where after a passage of 16 days we arrived in April. We disembarked at Chatham and marched to Maidstone in Kent and were quartered in that town. Here I applied myself to learn the English language and soon was enabled to read Locke on the Human Understanding”.

(Caroline remarks that to obtain this book “had put him to great shifts, as he could not bear the thought of asking his Father for the smallest trifle”.)

“From Maidstone we marched to Coxheath where the Hanoverian troops were encamped. Here as well as at Maidstone my Father, my eldest brother and myself made several valuable acquaintances with families that were fond of music, and which on mine and my brother’s return to England proved of great service to us. During our stay in camp, we took leave of absence for a short visit to view London.

“While we were encamped on Coxheath my brother obtained his wished-for dismissal from the regiment and returned to Hanover.

“In autumn when the camp broke up the Guards marched to Rochester, where again I made some valuable acquaintances, but our stay there was not of long duration, as we soon after received orders to embark again for Germany.”

A little incident recorded by Caroline in her Memoirs shows how early in her life the kindness of her big brother William had inspired her with grateful attachment.

“My Mother”, she says, “being very busy in preparing dinner had suffered me to go to the parade to meet my Father, but I missed him, and continued my search till I was spent with cold and fatigue; and on coming home I found them all at table; nobody greeting me but my brother William, who came running and crouched down to me, which made me forget all my grievances. I mention this instance of my brother’s attention as it was the last I should receive from him (though it was not the first) for years to come.”

The Hanoverian Guards, after some quiet months at home, were now again to experience the hardships of actual service. The campaign in which they now took part had a disastrous ending. In July, 1757, the

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Duke of Cumberland's army, consisting mainly of Hanoverian and Hessian troops, was utterly routed by the French at Hastenbeck, not far from Hanover, and retreated in confusion to the mouth of the Elbe, where in September the Duke surrendered to the French commander. Under the terms of the capitulation, known in history as the Convention of Klosterzeven, the Hessian troops were allowed to return home, but the Hanoverian army was detained, and remained encamped before Stade, on the Elbe, while their country was left to the mercy of the French, who occupied Hanover for nearly two years.

As the charge of being a deserter from the army, which is so repeatedly brought against William Herschel in popular biographies, rests on his conduct after the defeat at Hastenbeck, it is only fair to his memory to examine closely the records which have come down to us and to bear in mind the condition of the country at the time.

After recording his return from England with his father in the autumn of 1756, William Herschel continued his Biographical Memorandums as follows:

“1757. Early in the spring my Father and I went with the regiment into a campaign which proved very harassing by many forced marches and bad accommodations. We were obliged, after a fatiguing day, to erect our tents in a ploughed field, the furrows of which were full of water.

“*July 26.* About the time of the battle of Astenbeck we were so near the field of action as to be within reach of gun-shot; when this happened my Father advised me to look to my own safety; accordingly I left the regiment and took the road to Hanover; but when arrived there I found that, having no passport, I was in danger of being pressed for a soldier; it was therefore thought proper for me to return to the army”.

Caroline, then a child of seven years, describes in her recollections how the poor distracted mother hurried her son out of the town, feeling he would be safer with his father and the army as a bandsman than liable to be enrolled in the hasty defence force which the panic-stricken burghers were trying to raise. Jacob, who was no longer in the band, went into hiding and, a couple of months later, managed to join William at Hamburg and to escape with him to England. To return to William's own narrative.

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“When I had rejoined the regiment I found that nobody had time to look after the musicians; they did not seem to be wanted. The weather was uncommonly hot and the continual marches were very harassing. At last my Father’s opinion was that as, on account of my youth, I had not been sworn in when I was admitted in the Guards I might leave the military service; indeed he had no doubt but that he could obtain my dismissal; and this he afterwards procured from General Sporken, who succeeded General Sommerfeld.

“I found no difficulty to leave the army as nobody seemed to mind whether the musicians were present or absent. My intention being to go to England, I took the road to Hamburg; and the French having taken Hanover, my brother Jacob left the place and came to me at Hamburg about the end of October and soon after went with me to England.”

It will be seen clearly enough from these extracts, indeed William himself makes no secret of it, that his father aided and abetted him in leaving the regiment without waiting for a formal dismissal, but the circumstances must be taken into account and also the fact that he had never been enrolled as a regular soldier; the word “soldat” is scratched out in the formal discharge which he later received and the word “haut-boist” is substituted for it, showing that he was engaged as a musician and non-combatant.

The insinuation which has crept into some biographies that he sneaked away from the army in peace time is probably derived from a careless perusal of Caroline’s account of his leaving Hanover to *rejoin* the regiment.

After William and his brother had gone to England, their father remained with the Hanoverian army and shared the banishment enforced upon it by the terms of the Capitulation of Klosterzeven. The men did not return to their homes for two years; such would have been William’s fate had he remained with the army.

The poor people in Hanover suffered grievously during the French occupation. Little Caroline was fully occupied in assisting her mother in household matters and in keeping her small brothers out of her sister’s way, who, full of her own troubles, “could not endure to have children about her”. Moreover, as her mother could neither read nor write, “my pen”, she says, “was frequently in requisition for writing, not only my