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Edited by Mary Herschel

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Memoir and Correspondence of Caroline Herschel

Memoir and Correspondence of Caroline Herschel (1876) contains the letters and diaries of the celebrated astronomer Caroline Herschel (1750–1848), edited by her great-niece, Mary Herschel. Caroline was born in Hanover to a musician father and an illiterate mother who did not want her daughter to be educated. However Caroline's brother William, an organist employed in Bath, persuaded their mother to allow Caroline to join him there. She left for England in 1772 to live with William, to whom she remained devoted all of her life. In Bath, William turned towards telescope-making and astronomy, to such effect that in 1781 he discovered the planet Uranus. He was appointed 'the King's astronomer' in 1782, and Caroline, trained by William, continued to work at his side as a scientist in her own right. Between them, they discovered eight comets and raised the number of recorded nebulae from a hundred to 2,500.

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Caroline Herschel.

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MEMOIR AND CORRESPONDENCE
OF
CAROLINE HERSCHEL.

BY
MRS. JOHN HERSCHEL.

WITH PORTRAITS.

LONDON :
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1876.

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INTRODUCTION.



FAMILIAR to all as is the name this volume bears, it is not without hesitation that the following pages are given to the world. To subject the memorials of a deeply earnest life to the eyes of a generation overcrowded with books, raises a certain amount of diffidence.

Of Caroline Herschel herself most people will plead ignorance without feeling ashamed, and yet may we not assert that Caroline Herschel is well worth knowing.

Great men and great causes have always some helper of whom the outside world knows but little. There always is, and always has been, some human being in whose life their roots have been nourished. Sometimes these helpers have been men, sometimes they have been women, who have given themselves to help and to strengthen those called upon to be leaders and workers, inspiring them with courage, keeping faith in their own idea alive, in days of darkness,

When all the world seems adverse to desert.

These helpers and sustainers, men or women, have all the same quality in common—absolute devotion and

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unwavering faith in the individual or in the cause. Seeking nothing for themselves, thinking nothing of themselves, they have all an intense power of sympathy, a noble love of giving themselves for the service of others, which enables them to transfuse the force of their own personality into the object to which they dedicate their powers.

Of this noble company of unknown helpers Caroline Herschel was one.

She stood beside her brother, William Herschel, sharing his labours, helping his life. In the days when he gave up a lucrative career that he might devote himself to astronomy, it was owing to her thrift and care that he was not harassed by the rankling vexations of money matters. She had been his helper and assistant in the days when he was a leading musician ; she became his helper and assistant when he gave himself up to astronomy. By sheer force of will and devoted affection, she learned enough of mathematics and of methods of calculation, which to those unlearned seem mysteries, to be able to commit to writing the results of his researches. She became his assistant in the workshop ; she helped him to grind and polish his mirrors ; she stood beside his telescope in the nights of mid-winter, to write down his observations, when the very ink was frozen in the bottle. She kept him alive by her care ; thinking nothing of herself, she lived for him. She loved him, and believed in him, and helped him,

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with all her heart and with all her strength. She might have become a distinguished woman on her own account, for with the “seven-foot Newtonian sweeper” given to her by her brother, she discovered eight comets first and last. But the pleasure of seeking and finding for herself was scarcely tasted. She “minded the heavens” for her brother; she worked for him, not for herself, and the unconscious self-denial with which she gave up her own pleasure in the use of her “sweeper,” is not the least beautiful feature in her life. She must have been witty and amusing, to judge from her books of “Recollections.” When past eighty, she wrote what she called “a little history of my life from 1772—1778” for her nephew, Sir John Herschel, the son of her brother William, that he might know something of his excellent grandparents, as well as of the immense difficulties which his father had to surmount in his life and labours. It was not to tell about herself, but of others, that she wrote them. There is not any good biography of Sir William Herschel, and the incidental revelations of him in these Recollections are valuable. They show how well he deserved the love and devotion she rendered to him. Great as were his achievements in science, and his genius, they were borne up and ennobled by the beauty and worth of his own inner life.

These memorials of his father and his aunt were

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much valued by Sir John Herschel, and they are carefully preserved by the family along with her letters. The perusal of them is like reading of another world. The glimpses of the life of a soldier's family in Hanover at the time the Seven Years' War was going on are very touching. Both father and mother must have been remarkable persons, and the sterling quality of character developed in William and Caroline Herschel was evidently derived from them. All the family seem to have been endowed with something like touches of genius, but William and Caroline were the only two who had the strong back-bone of perseverance and high principle which made genius in them fulfil its perfect work.

Her own recollections go back to the Great Earthquake at Lisbon; she lived through the American War, the old French Revolution, the rise and fall of Napoleon, and all manner of lesser events and wars. She saw all the improvements and inventions, from the lumbering post waggon in which she made her first journey from Hanover, to the railroads and electric telegraphs which have intersected all Europe, for she lived well down into the reign of Victoria. But her work of "minding the heavens" with her brother engrossed all her thoughts, and she scarcely mentions any public event.

Her own astronomical labours were remarkable, and in her later life she met with honour and recognition

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from learned men and learned societies; but her dominant idea was always the same—"I am nothing, I have done nothing; all I am, all I know, I owe to my brother. I am only the tool which he shaped to his use—a well-trained puppy-dog would have done as much." Every word said in her own praise seemed to be so much taken away from the honour due to her brother. She had lived so many years in companionship with a truly great man, and in the presence of the unfathomable depths of the starry heavens, that praise of herself seemed childish exaggeration.

The Letters and Recollections contained in this volume will show what she really was. She would have been very angry if she could have foreseen their publication, yet, in consideration of the great interest they possess, we hope to be justified for making known to the world such an example of self-sacrifice and perseverance under difficulties.

The spelling has been modernised,—an old lady who had discovered eight comets might be allowed to spell in her own way; but it is pleasanter to read what is written in an accustomed manner. A word has been altered occasionally where the sense required it, otherwise no change has been made, and as little has been added as was possible, and only with the view of giving a slight connecting thread of narrative.

If these Recollections convey as much pleasure

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to the readers of them as they have given to the Editor, they will feel that they have gained another friend in Caroline Lucretia Herschel.

December, 1875.

NOTE.

WHEN past ninety a second memoir was undertaken, and in order to encourage her to continue it her niece, Lady Herschel, wrote to her as follows:— “Now, my dearest aunt, you must let me make an earnest petition to you, and that is, that you will *go on* with your memoir until you leave England and take up your residence in Hanover. How can I tell you how much my heart is set upon the accomplishment of this work? You know you cannot be *idle* while you live. But indeed, if I could tell you the influence which a short account by a stranger of *your* labours with your dear Brother had upon me when a child, and of my choosing *you* (then so unknown to me) as my guiding star and example, you would understand how the possession of such a record by your own hand would make me almost believe in auguries and presentiments, and perhaps inspire some future generations more worthily, as the record would be more genuine.”

August 9, 1841.

May we not echo this hope, and feel indeed that “SHE BEING DEAD YET SPEAKETH.”

M. C. H.

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TO BINDER.

Portrait of Caroline Herschel. *Frontispiece.*

Portrait of Sir William Herschel, after the original by Abbott, in the National Portrait Gallery, to face p. 118.

Herschel's Forty-foot Telescope, to face p. 29.