by George Miller, 1847.

Herschel, Caroline Lucretia (1750–1848), astronomer, was born at Hanover on 14 March 1750, the eighth child and fourth daughter of Isaac Herschel (1707–1781) and his wife, Anna Ilse Moritzen, of Neustadt. Isaac, a former gardener, was an oboist in the Hanoverian army, and though his formal education was limited he possessed such natural curiosity that he successfully communicated to Caroline’s brothers. Her illiterate mother, however, had no doubt that a daughter’s place was in the home, helping with the household; she opposed all attempts by Caroline to acquire anything more than the most rudimentary education, and scorned even the occasional visit she was given by her father. Caroline tried to acquire some ability in needlework from a kindly neighbour, but for this she had to meet at dawn, for at 7 a.m. her household duties would begin.

Hanover childhood

Caroline’s childhood was overshadowed by the defeat in 1757 of the Hanoverian army by the French in the Seven Years’ War and the resulting occupation of Hanover. Her elder brother William [see Herschel, William], though in the same band as her father, was sent away to a school, and so was free to flee to England in 1767, whose health had been poor for many years, died, leaving Caroline’s fate in the hands of her mother and brothers. Eventually she was given prudential permission to attend a dressmaking school, but she lasted only a few weeks, after which she resumed her role of household drudge.

Mundated William, who by now was established as organist of a chapel in Bath, devised a scheme to liberate his sister from her Hanoverian servitude. He proposed that she be allowed to join him in Bath, at least for a period, to see whether she could be trained as a singer to assist him in his concerts. At first opinion within the family was favourable, but then her eldest brother, Jacob, began to ridicule the idea. Eventually, in August 1772, William travelled to Hanover and prevailed on their mother to release her son, smoothing the way by the promise of an annuity to pay for a substitute servant.

Music in Bath

The couple left Hanover later in the month, and after an eventful and sometimes perilous journey reached London. There William took the opportunity to visit the shops of opticians: his thoughts were turning away from music and towards astronomy. In Bath, Caroline took over the running of the household, no easy task as she was virtually uneducated and had limited English. She found it still more difficult to integrate herself into the fashionable society whose members came to take the waters at Bath. But at least her natural abilities were now given free rein: her brother gave her lessons in singing lessons daily, sometimes three, as well as teaching her English and arithmetic, and she had choral training from a dancing mistress to give her the air of a lady. After some months she was at Bath in Bristol as a singer for five nights a week, singing leading soprano parts in works such as Messiah, Jephthah, and Jocasta MacFarren. The transformation brought about by William was dramatic; only a short while before, Caroline had been qualified to work as a housemaid.

But the brother who had rescued Caroline was now to prove so self-centred as to destroy her new career without so much as noticing. William was becoming obsessed with the ambition to explore what he later termed ‘the construction of the heavens’, and in order to study distant and faint celestial objects he would need telescopes as big as possible. There, he found, would be the key to his future: Caroline, he assumed, would do whatever was necessary to help. Thus she found the summer of 1775 taken up with copying Music and practising, besides attenda

[Image 357x1591 to 57x1110]

with the housework; she opposed all attempts by Caroline to acquire anything more than the most rudimentary education, and scorned even the occasional visit she was given by her father. Caroline tried to acquire some ability in needlework from a kindly neighbour, but for this she had to meet at dawn, for at 7 a.m. her household duties would begin.

Hanover childhood

Caroline’s childhood was overshadowed by the defeat in 1757 of the Hanoverian army by the French in the Seven Years’ War and the resulting occupation of Hanover. Her elder brother William [see Herschel, William], though in the same band as her father, was sent away to a school, and so was free to flee to England in 1767, whose health had been poor for many years, died, leaving Caroline’s fate in the hands of her mother and brothers. Eventually she was given prudential permission to attend a dressmaking school, but she lasted only a few weeks, after which she resumed her role of household drudge.

Mundated William, who by now was established as organist of a chapel in Bath, devised a scheme to liberate his sister from her Hanoverian servitude. He proposed that she be allowed to join him in Bath, at least for a period, to see whether she could be trained as a singer to assist him in his concerts. At first opinion within the family was favourable, but then her eldest brother, Jacob, began to ridicule the idea. Eventually, in August 1772, William travelled to Hanover and prevailed on their mother to release her son, smoothing the way by the promise of an annuity to pay for a substitute servant.

Music in Bath

The couple left Hanover later in the month, and after an eventful and sometimes perilous journey reached London. There William took the opportunity to visit the shops of opticians: his thoughts were turning away from music and towards astronomy. In Bath, Caroline took over the running of the household, no easy task as she was virtually uneducated and had limited English. She found it still more difficult to integrate herself into the fashionable society whose members came to take the waters at Bath. But at least her natural abilities were now given free rein: her brother gave her lessons in singing lessons daily, sometimes three, as well as teaching her English and arithmetic, and she had choral training from a dancing mistress to give her the air of a lady. After some months she was at Bath in Bristol as a singer for five nights a week, singing leading soprano parts in works such as Messiah, Jephthah, and Jocasta MacFarren. The transformation brought about by William was dramatic; only a short while before, Caroline had been qualified to work as a housemaid.

But the brother who had rescued Caroline was now to prove so self-centred as to destroy her new career without so much as noticing. William was becoming obsessed with the ambition to explore what he later termed ‘the construction of the heavens’, and in order to study distant and faint celestial objects he would need telescopes as big as possible. There, he found, would be the key to his future: Caroline, he assumed, would do whatever was necessary to help. Thus she found the summer of 1775 taken up with copying Music and practising, besides attenda

[Image 357x1591 to 57x1110]
Caroline Herschel had devoted her life unstintingly to the brother who had rescued her from poverty and servitude in Hanover. It was Humboldt who presented her with the gold medal for science, in the name of the king of Prussia; a year later she was named a member of the Royal Society in 1798. For this achievement she was awarded a gold medal of the Astronomical Society. Sir David Brewster termed her work increasingly hampered by errors in the catalogue, and in 1796 he persuaded Caroline to assemble a list of these inaccuracies. She would write up a fair copy and carry out the necessary calculations. Her many other duties included preparing lists of the stars and nebulae to come into view. He then shouted out a description to Caroline, who was seated at a desk in a room nearby, ready to write it down in a notebook, and put it to the test by comparing it with the catalogue, to check the declination and right ascension and the other circumstances of the observation. (Lubbock, 138). Afterward, Caroline would go to work on the planetarium, trying hard to make William’s first love and her own two interests dovetail. She moved into lodgings; and although she eventually became reconciled to the change and doted on her nephew John, born in 1792, she also lost her dear brother for the period. Returning to Hanover

Caroline was a local celebrity, visited by pigeon-criers of the calves of Humboldt and Gauss. For her ninety-sixth birthday Humboldt presented her with the gold medal for science. In the name of the Prince of Prussia a year later she entered the forty-first degree of the Order of the Red Eagle, and one of the founders of the Hanoverian Astronomical Society. Caroline Herschel had devoted her life unstintingly to the brother who had rescued her from poverty and servitude in Hanover, and her gratitude had gone unbound. During the years for nebulae, for he spent her nights acting as a weather dog would have done” (Clerke, 140). After her death, a cousin wrote to A. M. Clerke, the life, and methodically, with the most powerful telescope available. In October 1783 William completed the ideal instrument for the purpose, and it revolutionized the sky for the next forty years, as Caroline later wrote to a friend: “I have never seen, for the high roofs of the town, anything to detract from William’s reputation, constantly downplaying her own part in their achievement: ‘I did nothing...’ (Clerke, 141). In later life she would allow a friend to write: “Caroline Herschel was not only one of the greatest astronomers of the eighteenth century, but also one of the most remarkable women of her time.” Returning to Hanover

Caroline Herschel died peacefully in Hanover on 9 January 1848, aged ninety-six, and was buried in the churchyard of the Garnemagen, Hanover, alongside her parents and with a lock of her brother’s hair in her coffin.

Sources

- Mrs J. Blamont, Memoire and Correspondence of Caroline Herschel (1876)
- C. A. Lubbock, ed., The Herschel chronicle: the life-story of William Herschel and his sister Caroline Herschel (1933)
- A. M. Clerke, The Herschels and modern astronomy (1919), 87, 125
- R. P. Messier, Observations of the variable stars of the Herschels (1892)
- RAG, Pigot MSS

Archives

- priv. col.

[The sweeper] is a very powerful instrument, & shews objects very well... The heigh...
Ransom HRC, corresp. and papers
RAS, corresp. and papers
BL, letters to Sir John Herschel, Egerton MSS 7761–7762
Harvard U., Houghton L., scientific papers.

Likenesses
- silhouette, 1772, MHS Oxf.
- M. F. Tielemann, oils, 1829, priv. coll.
- G. Müller, engraving, 1847, AM Oxf. [see illus.]
- J. Brown, stipple (aged ninety-two), NPG, engraving (after portrait, aged ninety-seven), repro. in Lubbock, ed., Herschel chronicle

Wealth at Death
books and minor personal effects: inventory, Herschel, Memoir, appx.