

Clerke, Agnes Mary

(1842–1907)

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Agnes Mary Clerke (1842–1907)

by Hayman Selig Mendelssohn

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Clerke, Agnes Mary (1842–1907), writer on astronomy, born at Skibbereen, co. Cork, on 10 February 1842, was the younger daughter of John William Clerke (1814–1890), and his wife, Catherine (1818–1897), daughter of Rickard Deasy of Clonakilty, co. Cork, and sister of Rickard Deasy, an Irish politician and judge. Her elder sister was [Ellen Mary Clerke \(1840–1906\)](#). Her only brother, Aubrey St John Clerke, (1843–1923), after a brilliant career

as a scholar and medallist in mathematics and science at Trinity College, Dublin, became a Chancery barrister in London. The father, a classical scholar and graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, was manager until 1861 of a bank at Skibbereen, owned land in the district, and practised astronomy as a recreation. From 1861 to 1877 he was registrar to his brother-in-law at the court of the exchequer, Dublin.

Interested as a child by her father in astronomy, Agnes Clerke was highly educated at home. In 1861 she moved with her family to Dublin. She and her sister, Ellen Mary, spent the years 1867–77 in Italy, chiefly in Florence, where Agnes studied in the libraries and wrote her first article of astronomical interest, '*Copernicus in Italy*', published in the *Edinburgh Review* in July 1877. A total of fifty articles mainly on scientific themes, both contemporary and historical, appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* between that year and her death. In 1877 the family settled in London, which was thereafter Agnes Clerke's home. A paper in the *Edinburgh Review* on '*The chemistry of the stars*' in 1880 was followed in 1885 by her first book, *A Popular History of Astronomy during the Nineteenth Century* (4th edn, 1902). Nothing of the kind had appeared since 1852, when the *History of Physical Astronomy* was published by Robert Grant. In the interval the spectroscope had been applied to astronomy and the science of astronomical physics established. Agnes Clerke's work, which at once became the standard work in its field, was especially valuable for its wealth of references. In 1888 she had the opportunity of practical astronomical work during a two months' visit to Sir David and Lady Gill at the observatory at the Cape of Good Hope. Soon after her return she was offered, but declined, a post at the nominal rank of computer at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich. In 1890 her second book, *The System of the Stars* (2nd edn, 1905), which shows clear evidence of Gill's influence, maintained her reputation. The third and last of her larger works, *Problems in Astrophysics*, came out in 1903. Smaller volumes were *The Herschels and Modern Astronomy* (1895) in the *Century Science Series*, edited by Sir Henry Roscoe, *Astronomy* (1898) in the *Concise Knowledge* series, and *Modern Cosmogonies* (1905). Each annual volume of the *Observatory Magazine* from 1886 until her death contained reviews by her of books or descriptions of new advances in astronomy. She contributed many articles, including those on Galileo, Laplace, and Lavoisier, to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (9th edn). In the 11th edition (1910) she was the author of the main article on the history of astronomy as well as of numerous biographies of astronomers. For the *Dictionary of National Biography* she wrote 150 entries, which include almost all the lives of astronomers from the first volume to the supplementary volumes in 1901. In 1893 the governors of the Royal Institution awarded to Agnes Clerke the Actonian prize of 100 guineas for her writings on astronomy. She was commissioned to write the Hodgkins Trust essay on '*Low temperature research at the Royal Institution 1893–1900*', published in 1901 (*Proceedings of the Royal Institution*, 16.699–718). This substantial essay, and her *Modern Cosmogonies*, reveal her interest in her later years in new developments in physics and chemistry. In 1903 she was

elected an honorary member of the Royal Astronomical Society, a rare distinction among women, shared at the time with Lady Huggins; it had been accorded previously only to Mary Somerville, Caroline Herschel, and Ann Sheepshanks.

Clerke's devotion to science never lessened her interest in literature and cultural matters generally, on which she wrote from time to time in the *Edinburgh Review*, as, for example, in her essays on Don Sebastian (1882) and the letters of Edward Fitzgerald (1894). In 1892 she published *Familiar Studies in Homer*, which illustrated her breadth of learning. She was also an accomplished musician. In private life she was shy and unpretentious. 'No purer, loftier and yet sweetly unselfish and human soul has lived', was Lady Huggins's appraisal of her character. Never particularly robust, her health declined in the last few years of her life, though she worked to the very end. She died of pneumonia at her residence, 68 Redcliffe Square, London, on 20 January 1907, and was buried three days later in Brompton cemetery.

Agnes Clerke's active years spanned a period of exceptionally rapid development in astronomy. Her meticulous *Popular History of Astronomy in the Nineteenth Century*, with its abundance of references to the work of minor as well as of major figures, remains a valuable chronicle of that important era. *The System of the Stars*, with its assertion as 'a practical certainty' that 'the entire contents, stellar and nebular, of the entire sphere belong to one mighty aggregation' represents the generally accepted view of the universe at the turn of the century.

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Likenesses

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Wealth at Death

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See also

- [Clerke, Ellen Mary \(1840–1906\), translator and writer](#)

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