



## Mary Somerville and the world of science

by Allan Chapman

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+ 157, £12.95 (hbk).

For the three years I was an undergraduate at Somerville College, Oxford, I ate all my meals in the college hall under the gaze of the pretty young woman in a yellow dress whose portrait had pride of place in the centre of the end wall. To this day, I cannot fathom why I was not more curious at the time about who she was and why her name had been given to the college. I could easily have been much better informed had Allan Chapman's welcome little book been available then. As it was, I did not 'discover' Mary Somerville until years later when I was asked to prepare a talk on women astronomers. She immediately became one of my heroines, the personal qualities of genius and charm that



Laplace's *Mécanique Céleste* established her reputation among mathematicians, but her wider fame sprang principally from the enormous success of her *On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences*, a masterly synthesis of knowledge that went through nine editions before Mary died in 1872.

made her so celebrated in her lifetime still working at a distance of 200 years.

Born in Scotland in 1780, Mary showed early talent for mathematics but was denied much formal education as a child. Only after her second marriage, to Dr William Somerville, did her mathematical genius flourish. Her exposition in English of

Allan Chapman's short volume summarises her background and achievements, and sets them in the wider context of how science was conducted during the 19th century. It is not a comprehensive biography of her personal life, giving most weight to her writings and her interactions with the scientific circles in which she moved. As a historian of astronomy, Chapman has already researched this period in depth for his much more substantial book, *The Victorian Amateur Astronomer*, and he tells us in the Preface that this was how his interest in Mary Somerville began.

What he has now produced is eminently readable and an excellent introduction to Mary Somerville. Anyone inspired by it to learn more can follow up the many references he cites. (I particularly recommend Mary's own *Personal Recollections*.) I hope that this relatively inexpensive popular book will make more people aware of her. How nice it was to see that delightful portrait I so admired on the cover!

Jacqueline Mitton

Dr Jacqueline Mitton has written numerous books about astronomy. She read Physics at Somerville College Oxford and has given talks about women astronomers on many occasions.

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