



Discoverers of the Universe: William and Caroline Herschel

by Michael Hoskin

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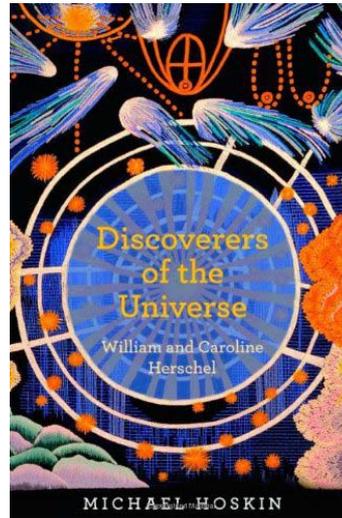
The French astronomer Jérôme de Lalande, writing to William Herschel in the 1780s, addressed his letter to 'the most celebrated of all the astronomers in the universe'. William is still regarded as one of the most talented and productive astronomers the world has ever known, and he led a fascinating life. In this delightful account by Michael Hoskin, the story unfolds like a movie drama – full of twists and turns, triumphs and disappointments, and complex human relationships. William's sister Caroline takes the prominent female lead, both in support of William's starring role and as a significant performer in her own right. She heads an extensive supporting cast of family members, royalty, and prominent scientists.

Michael Hoskin is a leading historian of astronomy and the acknowledged expert on the Herschels. No-one is better qualified to tell their story and he writes as if he has known them intimately for a lifetime, fleshing out their characters so they come alive

on the page. Summing up why William achieved so much, Hoskin points out that he always put his own interests first. Yet we cannot help but warm to this charismatic individual whose energy and enthusiasm inspired devoted loyalty from his sister Caroline and brother Alexander, the financial support of an occasionally exasperated king, and the admiration of the brightest scientific minds.

Ambition, practical skills, and a shrewd business sense – even to the extent of marrying into money – were also behind his success but, above all, he had the gift of an unfettered mind, and thought about the heavens in a revolutionary way.

Caroline's story is also compelling. She emerges as an intelligent, thoughtful woman, also with a determined personality. The powerful sense of loyalty that motivated her comes over clearly but so



does her independent streak. She accepted her role in the family enterprise and went far beyond what might have been expected of her to carve a place in the history of astronomy for herself.

This is a charming book, from Chapter 1 where we meet the musical Herschels in Hanover through to the touching scenes at the end when the aged William inspires his son John to take up the task of completing his father's work. It is also beautifully produced with

quality illustrations throughout to complement the text. I could not recommend it more highly. Read it and you will never again be able to read or hear the name 'Herschel' without recalling the vivid characters it depicts.

Jacqueline Mitton

Dr Jacqueline Mitton is an astronomy writer and former editor of the BAA Journal. She has a long-standing interest in women in the history of astronomy.

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