

Mary Somerville's autobiography

Henning Strandin

2016-02-04

I recently read Mary Somerville's (1780–1872) autobiography. While sometimes a little too focused on dinner parties and social life—at least for someone whose main interest is in her role in the history of science—it is still a very rewarding read, especially the early parts that recount her struggles as a young woman to be allowed to study the things, mathematics and natural science, that she obviously had such exceptional talent for. She was also an explicit liberal and feminist, and her outspoken stance here is also interesting, informative, and in a way encouraging. The text has been out of copyright for a long time and is available for download at the Gutenberg Project.

If you know nothing of Somerville, there is a brief biography here.

Eventually, her skills and talents were recognized throughout Europe. William Whewell was so taken by her translation and elaboration of Laplace's *Mécanique céleste* that he burst into poetry! Feel his plea, and free to choose, to put some rhymes in your reviews.

TO MRS. SOMERVILLE, ON HER "MECHANISM OF THE HEAVENS"

Lady, it was the wont in earlier days
When some fair volume from a valued pen,
Long looked for, came at last, that grateful men
Hailed its forthcoming in complacent lays:
As if the Muse would gladly haste to praise
That which her mother, Memory, long should keep
Among her treasures. Shall such usage sleep
With us, who feel too slight the common phrase
For our pleased thoughts of you, when thus we find
That dark to you seems bright, perplexed seems plain,

Seen in the depths of a pellucid mind
Full of clear thought, pure from the ill and vain
That cloud the inward light? An honoured name
Be yours; and peace of heart grow with your growing fame

From The Blog at henningstrandin.me

©2016 Henning Strandin

Email: henning.strandin@gmail.com