

Book Reviews

ELIZABETH CHAMBERS PATTERSON, *Mary Somerville and the cultivation of science, 1815–1840*, Boston, Mass., and The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1983, 8vo, pp. xiii, 264, Dfl.90.00/\$39.50.

In 1879, Mary Somerville (1780–1872) received one of the most prized forms of eponymous recognition when a women's college at Oxford was named after her. There was good cause for conferring such immortality upon her. In 1829, no less than David Brewster, a man peculiarly sensitive to charlatanry, judged Mrs Somerville to be “certainly the most extraordinary woman in Europe — a mathematician of the very first rank, with the gentleness of a woman, and all the simplicity of a child. . . . She is also a great natural philosopher and a great mineralogist”. The reasons for such a eulogy are set out with comprehensive detail in Elizabeth Patterson's chronological account, which considers mainly the scientific aspects of her London-based life for the twenty-five years to 1840 when she left England to live in Italy for the rest of her days. Patterson's biography, with its excellent index, adds a great deal of information to the autobiography of Mrs Somerville (1873), previously the standard source. It is especially revealing about her apprenticeship *qua* natural philosopher and mathematician, and about salon life in London and Paris.

If some Victorian male scientists such as Charles Lyell had tamed wives, Mrs Somerville married a medical man whom Patterson depicts as a paragon of humility in his sympathetic encouragement to his wife, in whose accomplishments he gloried. Yet he was also a determined careerist who became physician to the Chelsea Hospital, worth £700–£800 a year when he began there in 1819. On his retirement in 1840, he was put on half-pay at £600 a year, a transaction which provoked *The Times* to denigrate him as “a close and assiduous hanger-on among the Melbourne ministers”. Readers of this journal may well be disappointed to discover that medical science was of no interest to Mrs Somerville, but they will be intrigued by the details about the life of her subjugated and still enigmatic husband.

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