



The comet sweeper: Caroline Herschel's astronomical ambition

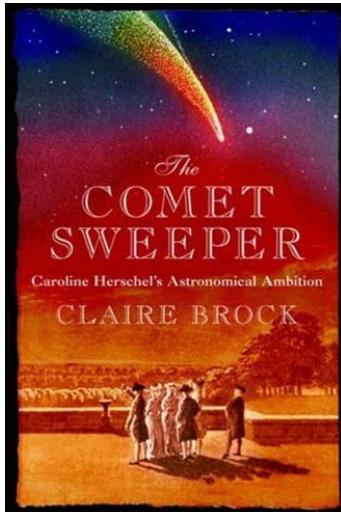
by Claire Brock

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Caroline Herschel (1750–1848) is best remembered as the devoted astronomical secretary to her brother William, dutifully writing down his observations as he made them at the telescope. In *The Comet Sweeper* Claire Brock, a lecturer in English at Leicester University, aims to demonstrate that Caroline had strong ambitions of her own, and that she was an important astronomer in her own right, despite all the barriers facing women in science in this period.

Brock chronicles Caroline Herschel's life in four chapters. In Chapter 1 we read of her early life in Hanover, where her progressive father encouraged her early interests in music and nature. Unfortunately her father died young, leaving her less enlightened mother to use her as an unpaid domestic servant. Chapter 2 describes her 'rescue' to Bath by William and her ambition to become an opera singer. Brock brings out her frustration as her desire for an independent career was threatened by continued household commitments and also having to assist with William's burgeoning interest in astronomy.

Chapter 3 describes not only how she helped William in his telescope-building and observational work, but also how she discovered her first comet in 1786 and the following year was granted an annual salary from King George III, thereby becoming the world's first female professional astronomer. Through quotations from contemporary sources, Brock really brings alive how her



comet discovery gained Caroline recognition from her scientific peers and in the wider world. The final chapter chronicles Caroline's further achievements: seven more comet discoveries, a star catalogue correcting the errors in John Flamsteed's monumental *British Catalogue*, and finally a catalogue of all the nebulae and clusters observed by William and Caroline.

Brock argues persuasively how Caroline derived great satisfaction from making her own contributions to astronomy. She makes extensive use of primary sources, and also sets Caroline's life in context with much useful background on eighteenth-century English and German society. The descriptions of the Herschels' astronomical work are largely accurate, though could have been clearer in places.

Overall, I found *The Comet Sweeper* a delight to read. It is easily accessible to the general reader, and there are copious footnotes and an extensive bibliography for the serious scholar wishing to go further. I feel that the author successfully achieves her aim of rehabilitating Caroline Herschel as an astronomer in her own right, and recommend it to everyone interested in the history of astronomy.

Lee Macdonald

Lee Macdonald has been a BAA member for many years and is the author of How to Observe the Sun Safely (Springer, 2002). He holds a Master's degree in Modern History and plans to begin post-graduate work in the history of science at Cambridge University in autumn 2007

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