
Co-constructing scientific identities in 19th-century Britain: Mary and William Somerville

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Prior to their marriage in 1812, both Mary Greig (née Fairfax) and Dr William Somerville had established modest reputations for themselves within scientific communities. As a married couple, the Somervilles radically shifted their visibility within British science and manoeuvred themselves into the centre of a multidisciplinary network of scientific households. In this talk I will explore the complementary identities that Mrs and Dr Somerville pursued within their scientific communities. Dr Somerville was content to remain an “interested gentlemen”, directing his efforts towards social activity, while Mrs Somerville established herself as an expert through publishing results of experimental work and writing a book on physical astronomy. When the family started to face financial difficulties, Mrs Somerville turned her attention to the writing of popular books in which she was substantially assisted by Dr Somerville. He lent books from libraries, mediated letter correspondence, liaised with her publisher, and more. The Somervilles’ collaboration was unique for their time, in that a woman was the more prominent intellectual figure and administrative support was provided by a man. I will therefore analyse how the Somervilles’ collaboration was presented as conforming to the gendered expectations of the day.

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