

MARY SOMERVILLE, WOMAN AND SCIENTIST.*

BY THE REV. ABEL STEVENS, LL.D.

The present century has made a new era in the intellectual life of woman. She has not failed in other periods to give proof of literary capacity, but the instances have, before the present age, been only occasional, and have, therefore, appeared to be exceptional. In our day women fairly throng the field of the lighter kinds of literary labour. In poetry and fiction their success is no longer disputable. In biography and history, also, they have been taking rank by the side of man. Occasional examples show that they may aspire to the highest attainments of the male intellect, to the loftiest regions of abstract science.

Mary Somerville was born in Jedburgh, Scotland, December 26, 1780. Her father was a naval captain, and therefore absent from home most of his time. The family lived on a bare competence at Burnt Island, a small seaport town on the coast of Fife, immediately opposite to Edinburgh. Her mother had no special qualifications for the training of such an intellect as her child subsequently revealed. "My mother," she says, "taught me to read the Bible and to say my prayers, otherwise she allowed me to grow up a wild creature."

When between eight and nine years old, she knew not how to write, and "read very badly." She had amused herself somewhat with the "Arabian Nights," "Robinson Crusoe," and the "Pilgrim's Pro-

gress." Her father, returning from sea, and mortified at her little progress during his absence, said to her mother, "This kind of life will never do. Mary must at least know how to write and keep accounts." So at ten years of age she was sent to a boarding-school, where it is a wonder that the small amount of intellect she seemed to have was not entirely stultified by the absurd discipline to which she was subjected. "The chief thing I had to do," she says, "was to learn by heart a page of Johnson's Dictionary." On her return home, after a year of such training, she was reproached with having "cost so much money in vain." "My mother said she would have been contented if I had only learned to write well and keep accounts, which were all a woman was expected to know. I was like a wild animal escaped out of a cage." She complains of even an uncommonly defective memory. Before she began to read algebra she had to restudy arithmetic, having forgotten much of it. Here was certainly no portentous sign of genius, nothing like that precocity which is usually supposed to presage a great intellectual career. An intellectual prodigy as a woman, she was apparently beneath mediocrity as a child.

After her return from school she spent hours on the sea-shore collecting shells—the beginning of her knowledge of natural history. She found a copy of Shakespeare, and the great master inspired her with a love of higher and more varied reading than she had hitherto cared for. There were two small globes in the house; they excited her curiosity, and she learned

* We have pleasure in reprinting from the Methodist Review this admirable character-sketch of Mrs. Somerville, by the veteran historian of Methodism, who is himself a remarkable example of bringing forth fruit in old age.—Ed.