



Agnes Mary Clerke →
and the Rise of Astrophysics

M. T. Brück



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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	I
1 Family background in County Cork	3
2 Ireland and Italy	16
3 London, the literary scene	31
4 <i>The History of Astronomy</i>	39
5 A circle of astronomers	48
6 A visit to South Africa	62
7 <i>The System of the Stars</i>	79
8 Social life in scientific circles	98
9 Homer, the Herschels and a revised <i>History</i>	115
10 The opinion moulder	131
11 Popularisation, cryogenics and evolution	148
12 <i>Problems in Astrophysics</i>	161
13 Women in astronomy in Britain in Agnes Clerke's time	175
14 Revised <i>System of the Stars</i>	189
15 Cosmogonies, cosmology and Nature's spiritual clues	204
16 Last days and retrospect	213
17 Epilogue	229
<i>Notes</i>	233
<i>Appendix</i>	261
<i>Bibliography</i>	269
<i>Index</i>	271

I Family background in County Cork

The Clerkes

Agnes Mary Clerke, born on 10 February 1842 in Skibbereen, Co. Cork, was the second of three children of John William Clerke, manager of the Provincial Bank in that town, and his wife Catherine Mary née Deasy (Figure 1.1).¹

The Clerkes were a well-known and extensive family in West Cork. According to one account, the founder of the line was a major in King William's army who stayed on in Ireland after 1691. In the nineteenth century the Clerke family records yield a remarkable number of highly talented persons. Agnes' grandfather, St John Clerke, was a much loved physician in Skibbereen; his cousin was the renowned Dr Jonathon Clerke of Bandon. The latter's son, Major Sir Thomas Henry Shadwell Clerke,² was made a knight of the Royal Hanoverian Order after service in the Peninsular War, and became a military journalist. He took a keen interest in the sciences and in 1823 became a founder member of the Royal Astronomical Society, to which Agnes Clerke was to be elected some 90 years later. He was also elected a Fellow of the Royal Society and of the Royal Geographical Society. He was made Foreign Secretary of the latter society on account of his linguistic prowess. Among other noted members of the Clerke clan in the nineteenth century was Skibbereen-born Thomas W. Clerke, LL.D, Judge of the Supreme Court in the USA, author of important treatises on law and co-founder in 1841 of the Irish Emigrant Society.³

In the immediate family, Agnes Clerke's grandfather St John Clerke, the local medical doctor, was esteemed not only professionally but also for his energetic support of just causes. He and his brother Thomas, a corn miller, were prime movers in organising relief in the

4 Family background in County Cork

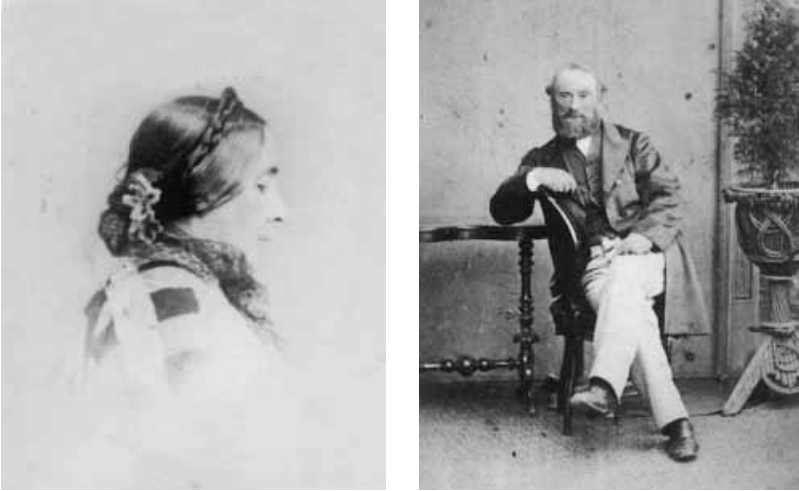


Figure 1.1 Catherine and John Clerke, Agnes Clerke's parents.

form of food and employment for the victims of the near-famines of 1817 and 1822, as well as personally donating several hundred pounds 'to our starving poor'. A Protestant himself, Dr Clerke was equally strenuous in campaigning to secure legal rights for his Catholic fellow citizens in the days before Catholic emancipation (1829). To show his solidarity with them, he attended in person a general meeting of Catholics in the Skibbereen area, convened in November 1824 to protest at sectarian injustices and to support Catholic Rent, a fund initiated by the great Irish politician Daniel O'Connell to fight the cause by legal means.⁴

It was into this exemplary and liberal-minded family that Agnes Clerke's father, John William, was born in 1814, one of three brothers and a sister. All three brothers were educated at Trinity College Dublin. John, a scholar in classics also studied mathematics and the sciences, especially astronomy: his surviving annotated textbook, Robert Woodhouse's *Treatise on Astronomy*, testifies to his industry in this regard. On graduating he returned to his native town and, having worked briefly in a locally owned bank, was appointed manager of the London-based Provincial Bank (now the Allied Irish Bank) when it

opened its doors in Skibbereen in 1839. The bank, on Bridgetown or Bridge Street, the town's main street, was the largest house in the street and one of the most substantial in the entire town.

Here, on his appointment, John Clerke set up home with his bride, Catherine Deasy, a sister of his friend and contemporary at Trinity College, Rickard Morgan Deasy.

The Deasys

The Deasys belonged to an old Irish family with a romantic history.⁵ The surname (Déiseach in Irish) derives from the district of the Decies (na Déisigh) in County Waterford on Ireland's south coast, which was the clan's native territory. According to family tradition, the West Cork branch sprang from a single refugee from that area, a pregnant woman who, fleeing westwards from Cromwell's troops in their fearsome advance through Leinster in 1649, eventually came to a halt at the sea at East Barryroe, Co. Cork. There she gave birth to a son, the reputed head of the entire West Cork Deasy dynasty.

The family prospered, acquired land, and by around 1700 had its seat at Lisscreeen Castle overlooking a secluded sandy beach and the wide open sea beyond, the walls of which still stand. The Deasys intermarried with notable local families, including that of The O'Donovan, chieftain of an ancient clan who was a member of the Irish Parliament of King James II. Later interesting family connections included Fitz-James O'Brien, a well-known American journalist and an early writer of science fiction,⁶ whose mother (née Deasy) was an aunt of Mrs Clerke; and possibly Edmund Burke, the great Irish politician and orator who (according to Mrs Clerke) was distantly related by marriage.⁷ Whatever the details, it is undoubtedly true that the Deasy kin had intriguing ramifications, and threw up into the world some unusual and dashing characters.

A direct descendant of the original patriarch was the colourful Timothy Deasy of Timoleague, Co. Cork, who was arrested in 1745 for singing a Jacobite song and narrowly escaped the death penalty. When the case against him as a Jacobite sympathiser failed, he was indicted on

6 Family background in County Cork

the arms charge, since Catholics were forbidden from possessing arms. Meanwhile, his elder brother had made his fortune in Jamaica, where he acquired valuable estates. The proceeds of the Jamaican property, a major source of the family wealth, were eventually inherited by Timothy's grandson Rickard, Agnes Clerke's grandfather. As a boy, Rickard attended a school in Cork – such schools, run by private teachers, were very common – where he clearly achieved a high standard of literacy and polish, as revealed in the memoirs he wrote for the benefit of his children in his old age.⁸

The Deasys were Roman Catholics and traditionally nationalist in politics. On the repeal of the Penal Laws Rickard Deasy achieved the distinction of becoming in 1793 the first Catholic magistrate in Cork for a century. In 1807 he set up a brewery in Clonakilty – Deasy and Company – which became the town's chief industry and operated until 1940 when it was succeeded by the present Deasy Bottling and Mineral Water Plant. The soaring chimneys of the brewery still dominate the skyline of Clonakilty: the old structure is in fact being conserved for its historical interest. The brewery incorporated its own cooperage with highly skilled craftsmen: a magnificent polished oak cask with brass hoops conveyed the firm's prizewinning stout to the International Exhibition, commemorating the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus, in Chicago in 1896.⁹

The Deasys also established another highly successful business as sea-merchants and shipbuilders.¹⁰ Deasy's Quay, still so named, in Clonakilty Harbour, shows the remains of the docks and of the shipyard which flourished there in the first half of the nineteenth century. Several schooners were built there, including the *Mary Ann* (the name of Deasy's wife and of one of his daughters) and the *Catherine*, named after the daughter who was to become Agnes Clerke's mother.

The commerce at Deasy's Quay included smuggling, chiefly of wine and brandy from France, a lucrative and far from disreputable trade in that part of the country. The O'Connells of Derrynane, to which Daniel O'Connell belonged, famously belonged to the same smuggling consortium which operated along the south coast.

Rickard Deasy and his wife Mary Ann, whom he married in 1802, were people of considerable influence in the community, which they

exercised to the full in charitable and social causes.¹¹ The West Cork Regional Museum at Clonakilty devotes a special section to the history of the Deasy family, spanning four generations and ending with Henry Hugh Peter Deasy, Agnes Clerke's first cousin, a noted explorer in Tibet at the end of the nineteenth century.

The immediate maternal family

Rickard Deasy's elder son, who adopted the alternative spelling of Decie as his surname, settled in England. He died at the age of only 29, leaving a successful family with its own share of adventure: one of his sons was a noted transatlantic yachtsman.¹² The younger son, Rickard Morgan, the dominant member of the family in that generation, was a man of exceptional intellectual talents. He entered Trinity College Dublin at the age of only 15, graduated in law at 20 and was called to the Bar at the unusually early age of 23. At the time of the Clerkes' marriage Rickard Deasy was practising as a barrister in Dublin at the start of a highly successful career.

Rickard Deasy and John Clerke, who entered Trinity the same year at the even younger age of 14, were fellow-students for five years. It was through their friendship that Clerke was introduced to Deasy's favourite sister: according to their mother, Rickard was the 'idolised brother' of her 'dear affectionate child', Catherine.¹³

Catherine was the youngest of six daughters. The others were Anne and Margaret, who became nuns; Honoria and Mary Anne who, like Catherine, made marriages to husbands in Co. Cork; and Ellen who died young, probably while still in her teens.¹⁴ The girls were educated at the Ursuline Convent, Cork, where their names may still be seen in the school roll.¹⁵ They also had the benefit of a learned tutor, John Sheahan, employed by the family to teach the children, who went on to become a journalist with the local *Southern Reporter* and other papers.¹⁶

Convent boarding schools grew in popularity in Ireland throughout the nineteenth century. The Ursuline nuns, one of the first religious orders to set up establishments in the country after the abolition of

8 Family background in County Cork

the Penal Laws, were well-known educators of girls from middle class Catholic families. Though women of that era were not destined for careers, the Ursuline nuns imparted a high standard of education to their pupils. The subjects on the curriculum were English, French, Spanish, Italian, History, Geography, Religious Knowledge, Music and Art – the usual list of accomplishments of young ladies of their time – though Needlework is strangely missing. Science was on offer, consisting probably of a little Nature Study, but Mathematics was not mentioned.¹⁷ Parents were promised that ‘every gentle and persuasive method shall be used to impress on the minds of young ladies an elevated and habitual sense of decency and propriety, and to polish and refine their manners’.¹⁸ Music was very special to Catherine. She practised the piano every day of her life right into old age. She also played the harp, and in her seventies still enjoyed performing Irish melodies and accompanying her daughters’ singing.

The Ursuline Convent in Cork was one of the places visited by the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray in the course of his tour of Ireland in 1842.¹⁹ Already prejudiced against the idea of an enclosed religious life, he produced a sarcastic account of conditions within the convent walls. He concluded that ‘we have as much right to permit Sutteeism in India, as to allow women in the United Kingdom to take these wicked vows, or Catholic bishops to receive them’. Sister Josephine (formerly Anne Deasy, the eldest of the six sisters) who was a member of the community there since 1822 would have given a different interpretation.

The Clerke–Deasy marriage

John William Clerke and Catherine Deasy were married on 9 July 1839. She was the last of the daughters to marry. In Ireland’s religiously divided society, such an alliance was sometimes seen as giving a Catholic partner access to the Protestant ‘gentry’, but this was far from the case with the Deasys, who were wealthy and independent. The Clerkes belonged to the category of ‘liberal Protestant’ frequently mentioned and praised by Catherine’s father in his extant recollections of

family and political life. A marriage settlement of some complexity worth £1,500 was drawn up on Catherine, 'written on sheets of parchment like mainsails'.²⁰ In the course of time John Clerke would be further helped by his more affluent brother-in-law Rickard.

According to the civil rules then prevailing, the Clerkes' marriage, being mixed, was officiated twice, once before the Church of Ireland (Anglican) clergyman, and afterwards in the Catholic Church in Clonakilty before the Reverend David Walsh, Parish Priest. The bride's father no doubt intended to memorialise the occasion when he named the schooner *Catherine*, a vessel of 87 tons built in his shipyard in 1840. The *Catherine* was lost off the Scilly Islands in 1850 when on her way to London with a cargo of oats. She filled and sank as her pumps were unable to cope.

The Clerkes' three children – Ellen Mary (born 26 September 1840), Agnes Mary (born 10 February 1842) and Aubrey St John (born in April 1843) – were all brought up in their mother's Catholic faith, and remained active and exemplary members of their church throughout their lives. In 1840, only one year after their marriage, John's father, the devoted Dr St John, died at the age of 72. At about the same time, certainly before 1845, Catherine's parents left Clonakilty and went to live abroad. It appears that – perhaps as a result of their lavish and over-generous life-style – they ran into financial difficulties and emigrated to the Island of Jersey. They resided in Jersey for the rest of their days while keeping actively in touch with home. Rickard Deasy died in 1852, and his wife in 1853.

Skibbereen

The small town of Skibbereen²¹ on the beautiful remote south coast of Ireland where the Clerkes reared their family had long been a focus of business for the surrounding countryside which, according to *Pigot's Directory* of 1824, was 'thickly inhabited by an opulent gentry'. It had its weekly market where farmers brought their produce and regular fair days for the sale of livestock. A coach passed through each morning and evening, carrying mail and connecting travellers to the neighbouring

towns and to the city of Cork, a distance of 53 miles. There was a courthouse, a police barracks, a post office, a coastguard station, the offices of the famous *Skibbereen Eagle* newspaper, hotels, public houses, a medical dispensary and the inevitable workhouse for paupers, erected in 1842. The Bishop of Ross had his seat in Skibbereen, where a handsome Catholic Cathedral had been built in 1826. Abbeystrewry Church of the Church of Ireland dated from 1827 and the Methodist Chapel from 1833. There were schools attached to these churches, the largest being the Catholic school supported by the National Board.

In the early years of the nineteenth century the town, of about 4,000 inhabitants, had been a thriving centre of the textile industry, producing woollen and linen goods in its mills. After the Napoleonic Wars that industry fell into decline, and with it the overall prosperity of the populace. There still existed a large brewery and a steam corn mill; craftsmen such as coopers, rope-makers and dyers followed their trades amid the crowded shops on the town's four streets. Much of the population, however, according to the reports of various travellers, was cluttered in miserable dwellings in the surrounding lanes.

The bank, a relatively new feature in Irish provincial towns, was sure to be a focal point in local commercial life. The three-storey building, which today houses business offices, had living quarters for the manager and a plot of land behind leading down to the river Ilen (Figure 1.2). The family and bank customers shared an entrance door which opened directly from the street into a large hallway. Off this on one side was the bank office with a window facing the street. The private part of the house was shielded by a pair of doors, behind which is still preserved the original curved mahogany staircase leading past a huge window commanding a beautiful view of the river. The same panorama of the river and the barge traffic could be enjoyed from the top floor.

The Great Famine

Then came the calamitous Great Famine of 1845–50. The potato blight which caused the famine first struck in Co. Cork and quickly spread. The area around Skibbereen, noted for the excellent quality of its pota-



Figure 1.2 Agnes Clerke's birthplace (with white doorway) in Skibbereen.

toes, the staple food of the majority of the local people, was one of the worst afflicted in the whole country;²² by the end of the decade a third of its population was lost, either through death or emigration. The only 'growth industry' in the town was the conversion of disused buildings to form extra workhouses; in the ten years from 1841 over 4,000 people died in these institutions, not counting many who died in their homes, on the roadside and even on the streets of Skibbereen. In the countryside there were wholesale evictions of tenants unable to pay their rents, and a consequent exodus of those fit enough to depart for America. There were numerous instances of rioting and theft of food, followed by court proceedings and sometimes transportation.

Living as they did in the midst of the community, the Clerke family could not escape the realities of life about it, and, in fact, had a

12 Family background in County Cork

very direct experience of the worst phase of the Great Famine. At the first signs of impending tragedy, John Clerke, as his father and other members of his family had done in earlier crises, took measures to alleviate the desperate plight of the hungry. In the autumn of 1845 a group of townspeople set up a soup kitchen in the steam mill and opened a private relief fund with Clerke as treasurer and secretary. When government action belatedly came into play, Clerke, as secretary of the Committee of Gratuitous Relief, was the one who communicated with officials in Dublin, pleaded for government assistance, and took charge of public relief subscriptions.

Hunger was not the only evil stalking the country. Famine brought with it a cholera epidemic which was not confined to the malnourished but spread through the professional and business classes. John Clerke at the Bank was one of those who fell victim; so did the police inspector next door, the doctor's family, the hotel-keeper and other neighbours, some of whom died.²³ Clerke's superiors sent a replacement from London to manage the bank who on arrival in March 1847 sent a report back to London on the terrible conditions he encountered – dead bodies carried away on carts, people dying of fever on the streets, the bank office besieged by skeletal beggars. The shocked Directors in London passed the officer's report to the head of the British treasury 'for your information; but you are at perfect liberty to make such use of the communication as you shall consider to be proper'. This harrowing account was put on official record, to be quoted in many accounts of the Irish famine.

Mr Clerke took two months to recover from fever. It is unlikely that the children, being all under the age of six, would have retained a clear memory of this particular anxious episode. Yet they cannot have grown up unaware of the general situation around them which went on for some years, and of their father's continued charitable exertions. Pat Cleary,²⁴ a local historian, writes: 'How Mrs Clerke shielded her children from the horrors of the famine is difficult to fathom. They lived at that side of town where there were two soup kitchens, both visible from the Clerke residence. There were other workhouses in the town which they would have passed on their way to Mass'. At the less prosperous end of the street, deserted small dwellings formerly the homes of poor

families, lay derelict, while as late as the end of the decade the workhouse was still packed with 2,500 people.

In 1854, the Crimean War broke out. Though geographically happening far away, it was a significant occasion in the south of Ireland, where many soldiers had enlisted in the army. Agnes later put on record how a display of the northern lights seen in the autumn of 1854 was believed by the people of nearby Berehaven to signal the deaths of those slain at Balaclava.²⁵

Along the street from the Clerkes was the grocery and hardware shop of Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, Skibbereen's most famous son who was founder of the Phoenix Society, a political and literary club of local young men with nationalist aspirations, which in 1858 became incorporated in the Fenian movement.²⁶ Rossa's arrest and the subsequent police activity would not have passed unremarked by the teen-aged Clerke children. They were too old, however, to coincide with another celebrated inhabitant of West Cork, the writer Edith Somerville (born 1858), who with her cousin Violet Martin formed the famous literary partnership of Somerville and Ross and were the authors of several novels and popular stories with a local flavour.

The family circle

Despite the shadow of the Famine, Aubrey Clerke in middle-age had the happiest recollections of his childhood.²⁷ He recalled a close devoted family where reading, study and music were the children's occupations, under the tutelage of their gifted parents. The father was a shy and scholarly person, more interested in intellectual pursuits than in 'mixing in society',²⁸ a temperament inherited quite particularly by Agnes. Mrs Clerke, a sympathetic and high-minded woman, was more outgoing by nature: Ellen, who was fond of riding and boating, had rather more of her mother's lively personality.

At the age of 12 Aubrey was sent to St Patrick's College, Carlow, a Catholic secondary school under the aegis of secular clergy. St Patrick's College, which still flourishes, had a senior seminary for students preparing for the priesthood and also instructed senior pupils for the

London University external examinations. Under normal circumstances, Agnes and Ellen might have been sent to board at the Ursuline Convent in Cork, where their mother had been educated and where their aunt was a senior member of the religious community. That this did not happen may be put down to Agnes being a delicate child and the sisters not wishing to be separated. The more robust Ellen remained Agnes' companion and protector all her life; indeed, Agnes was the darling of the family, to whom Aubrey, too, remained utterly devoted.

The parental decision to instruct their daughters all by themselves was a tremendous advantage for these exceptionally intelligent and diligent girls who quickly attained a phenomenally high level of education. The parents' effort was all the more remarkable when one considers that the father was not a man of leisure or of great wealth: he had his work at the bank and his self-imposed civic duties.

As they pursued their studies and grew to adulthood, the young girls were not without encouraging role models within the family circle. Their aunt Anne (Sister Josephine) in the Ursuline Convent in Cork, where she spent over 50 years, was, according to the convent records, a woman of exemplary character, 'endowed with splendid talents and possessed of an exceptional amount of information'.²⁹ Another aunt, Margaret (Mother Vincent), was a religious in the Convent of Mercy in Cork, having entered the order in its early days as a young novice in 1835. The Order of Mercy, founded in Ireland in 1831 and dedicated to the needs of the poor, expanded rapidly throughout the English-speaking world; by the end of the century hardly a town in Ireland, Britain and North America was without its Convent of Mercy. The fearless sisters also gave noble service as nurses in the Crimean War and in the American Civil War. To some extent Irish nuns in the nineteenth century were more emancipated than contemporary non-Catholic Englishwomen, with better opportunities to lead serious and active lives. A leading feminist, Barbara Bodichen, thought it 'happier by far a Sister of Charity or Mercy than a young lady at home without work or a lover'.³⁰

Mother Vincent's mission was to England, where in 1843 she established a convent in Sunderland, an industrial town with its quota of poverty and misery. She and her companions worked in hospitals,

tended the sick, opened schools and founded a convent which still operates. Mother Vincent returned to the Order's house in Cork, where she lived out a life of great saintliness and austerity until her death in 1878. In those last years she gave service through her writings, including translations into English of Spanish devotional works.

Another admirable female member of the family was Catherine Donovan – Mrs Clerke's first cousin and Ellen's godmother – educational pioneer and founder in 1819 of a school for local girls in Clonakilty. Compelled by poor health to abandon a vocation to the religious life, 'Miss Kitty', as she was affectionately known, resolved to devote her life to good works.³¹ The Clonakilty School of Industry taught reading, writing, and useful crafts like needlework and knitting, and acquired a reputation well beyond the shores of Ireland for its beautiful embroidery and lace-work. Despite the setback of the Great Famine, the indomitable Miss Donovan with help from friends and members of the extended Deasy clan kept the school afloat up to her death in 1858. Hundreds of girls who passed through the Clonakilty School during the course of its existence were enabled to earn their own living at home, in Britain or in America.³²

To Agnes and Ellen, as to these women, hard work came naturally, and a love of learning and intellectual achievement were not regarded as beyond the bounds of a woman's vocation.