OBITUARY

CATHERINE OCTAVIA STEVENS

In 1864, the year before the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, a daughter was presented to the Rev. Dr Stevens, Rector of Bradfield. As the newcomer was the good Doctor's eighth daughter, he had her christened Catherine Octavia Stevens.

These were stirring times in which to be born. Only four years previously, at the 1860 meeting of the British Association at Oxford, Bishop Wilberforce and Darwin's Bulldog had fired the opening shots in the controversy that was to rock the foundations of Victorian Orthodoxy. C.O.S., as she liked to be called, spent her childhood in the secure respectability of the Rectory, whilst all around thundered the storm unleashed by Darwin.

In common with other young ladies of her station C.O.S. had tutors to teach her the gentle arts of music, painting, embroidery, and deportment, and the only excitement that impinged directly on the household in those early years was the occasion when the French tutor's brother was trapped in Paris when that city was besieged during the Franco-Prussian war. It seems that Dr Stevens and the tutor went to Paris and brought the unfortunate brother back to Bradfield, and this, moreover, without any undue excitement.

During these early years it was a little *infra dignitatem* to have scientific interests, and indeed a few years before Huxley had written to his sister:

> There is no chance of living by science. I have been loth to believe it, but it is so. . . . Owen, who has a European reputation second only to Cuvier, gets as Hunterian Professor £300 a year! which is less than the salary of many a bank clerk.

However, great changes were in the air. The Metaphysical Society, formed in 1869, was a straw in the wind. A new spirit of inquiry pervaded everywhere, and many people began to probe into the natural phenomena around them. It was the age that produced large tomes on microscopy to cater for the rapidly growing army of amateur microscopists, and botanical handbooks which, to quote:

> . . . will commend the work to such of the operative classes as are cultivating the study of botany . . .

and of course the B.A.A.

Our Association was formed in 1890. C.O.S. joined in 1891. She was then twenty-seven.

From the beginning Miss Stevens' interests were centred on the Sun. Using a 3-inch refractor she produced many interesting sunspot drawings. Later, although the Sun remained her central attraction, she extended her field of inquiry to aurorae, meteors, and, in later years, to meteorology.

During the first decade of this century C.O.S. visited New Zealand and used the opportunity to visit the boiling springs at Rotorua, which was at that time only a village, and spent a week living with a Maori woman who acted as a guide. It seems that neither could speak much of the other's language, but, in her own words, they got along famously by means of signs.

In 1910 she built a house-cum-observatory on the top of Boars Hill, Oxford, and lived there until 1956. The house was specially designed to facilitate observation, and, since it was situated on the edge of Oxford Preservation Trust land, there was little possibility that any other building would spoil the view, which consisted of about 220° of unobstructed azimuth. Only occasional car headlights could impede observations and the present writer can testify to the wisdom and foresight that dictated the choice of site.

Three eclipse expeditions were undertaken by C.O.S., to Algiers in 1900, Majorca in 1905, and Quebec Province in 1932, with interest mainly centred on the shadow bands of eclipse. Her conclusions on this subject can be seen in *Journals* **33** (3), **34** (5), and **43** (1).

In pursuit of knowledge of the Aurora Borealis, she spent a year in the Shetlands and believed that she had found a correlation between auroral activity and the weather. Her model of the atmosphere was a simple one. It consisted of an ocean of air disturbed by cyclones. Anticyclones, to C.O.S., did not exist. She would examine the winds in the high atmosphere by means of a projected telescopic image of the Sun, deduce the cyclonic formation, and prognosticate the weather two days head. She was remarkably accurate as a rule!

To cross the threshold of the house at Boars Hill was to walk into the age where scientific curiosity was still largely the province of the amateur.

Within one found, besides the usual paraphernalia of telescopic and spectrographic adjuncts and the barograph, carefully docketed and stored bric-a-brac that would delight any collector's heart. Silver-bearing ore from the Rocky Mountains, coral from the Great Barrier Reef, monstrous insects from the Antipodes immured these many years in alcohol, and bundles of letters on scientific subjects from people all over the wide world. Some, in faded copperplate, even began 'Dear Miſs Stevens . . .'

Such was the character of C.O.S., essentially a product of the age that produced Darwin, Huxley, Livingstone, and Speke, who lived in the years that saw a great scientific awakening and yet lived to see the times when the same motivating force has given man the means of his own complete destruction.

C.O.S. died on 16 June 1959, and later the earthly remains of this rebel agnostic daughter, frail in body but iron in will, were laid beside those of her strictly orthodox father. These two, so different in fundamental outlook, and yet closest together of all the family in life, were united again at the family home at Bradfield.

A grievous loss to us all. J.H.D.