

BOOK REVIEW

Night Watches - Inventions on the Life of Maria Mitchell

Carole Oles, 1985, 72 pages. ISBN 0-914086-56-1 cloth \$12.95; ISBN 0-914086-57-X paper \$6.95. Alice James Books, 138 Mount Auburn Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA.

Imagination, like scientific insight, gains its greatest force when it has been launched from a strong grounding in reality. So the "inventions" in the title of this book should not dissuade the reader who has grown wary of modern poetry. Carole Oles' inventions on the life of Maria Mitchell show in every line a careful study of the 19th century astronomer's letters, diaries, and observing notebooks. One can feel in these poems Carole Oles' own growing sense of discovery - the excitement and awe that come with discovery - as she traces, and sometimes must extrapolate, the track of a life that she finds both strangely remote from, and startlingly akin to, her own:

Once a man's voice pierced the dark - "Miss
what are you doing there?" - shook my sight.
Spiders, ticks, even rats had visited, but no
person until he made his arboreal ascent
to find out what lone women do so late
on rooftops, with only sky for cover.

Mister, with nature's consent I climb to sight,
to know the heavens. Later I must sleep. Here
are comets to discover.

- from "Miss Mitchell's Comet"

This struggle to "climb to sight" is the overriding concern throughout **Night Watches**. It is a concern which drives astronomer and poet alike, and which exists in some measure in everyone who lives between these poles of the "greatest of sciences" and the "greatest of arts." The difficulty in the 19th century was most severe for Maria Mitchell, who, for example, had won recognition by the King of Denmark before any of her own countrymen would acknowledge her for scientific accomplishment. And, despite the fact that 19th century Nantucket was one of the few places in the country where women were free to assume roles of intellectual and social leadership without derision, Maria nonetheless had to pay the price of being looked at as two people - a mind within a body - as Oles retells a historical anecdote in a poem called "Rough Passage":

...two island women in the corner
took up a conversation, "I suppose
Maria Mitchell did some big things -
people say so - but she is awfully homely!"
"Well, yes" hesitates the other "she is,
but you must admit she has fine eyes."

which I kept shut upon the things
that people say: the pitch, the roll...

If isolation and alienation must be the price of self-determination, it is also fitting that Carole Oles weaves into these poems the contrasting elements of "trespass" and "intrusion." In the obvious sense, Maria might be seen as the intruder into a traditionally male intellectual realm. But in a much subtler sense, it is the cold-hearted and often hypocritical world of a social and intellectual status-quo that Maria Mitchell has to contend with. That obstinate world had interfered with the determination of one woman to remain true to herself.

Dr. Dorrit Hoffleit, writing of Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin (1984, **Sky & Telescope** 68, 225), has quoted from Maria Mitchell a passage that is a central idea in Oles' **Night Watches**:

Until women throw off reverence for authority they will not develop. When they do this, when they come to truth through their own investigations, when doubts lead them to discovery, the truth they get will be theirs, and their minds will go on and on unfettered.

Maria Mitchell, the "pioneer American woman astronomer," was neither the first nor the last person to have to fight against intellectual and social prejudice, yet it seems very appropriate the Carole Oles has presented Maria Mitchell in these pages as a symbol of persistence that we are not asked to look up to, but that we are made to feel compelled to discover alive within ourselves.

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ERRATUM

In Volume 14, Number 2, the Table of Observers 1984-1985 (Table III of the Director's Report) contained a number of errors. The corrected table is reprinted on the following pages. We extend an apology to those observers whose totals were printed incorrectly in Volume 14.