

Mary Somerville's Family

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It was common for the upper classes of the 18th and 19th centuries to have complex family trees. The reasons were large families, frequent second marriages, a predilection for marrying cousins, and to add flavour, a fair number of illegitimate births. Mary's family was no exception. For example, her first marriage was to a second cousin and her second marriage was to a first cousin.

Several members of Mary's family were distinguished persons in their own right. Particularly noteworthy were her father, Vice Admiral Sir William Fairfax, and her first father-in-law, Admiral Samuel Greig.

We are very grateful to Mark Pallot, who lives on the island of Jersey, for supplying us with information confirming that Mary Somerville does have living descendants. None of Mary's children had legitimate living children of their own, but Mary's son, Woronzow Greig ([see below](#)), had an illegitimate daughter. Mark himself is delighted to have been able to demonstrate conclusively that he is Mary Somerville's great great great great grandson. (Update, February 2016 - I have been able to confirm that, sadly, Mark Pallot died a few years ago.)

Mary Somerville's parents

Mary was brought up at the family home in what is now Somerville Square, Burntisland. Her parents were:

Father - Vice Admiral Sir William George Fairfax (1739-1813), hero of the Battle of Camperdown in 1797 (British victory over the Dutch in the French Revolutionary Wars). Although born in Surrey, he came from a formidable Yorkshire family. His first marriage was to Hannah Spears, daughter of the Rev Robert Spears, Minister of Burntisland Parish Church. They had two children who died in infancy. We also know they had a daughter Jean (born 1769), who may be one of those who died in infancy. It is possible they had other children. Hannah died in 1770, aged 30. In April 1772 William Fairfax married Margaret Charters, mother of Mary Somerville (see below).

Mother - Margaret Charters, daughter of Samuel Charters (Solicitor of Customs) ([see image](#)) and his wife Christian Murray. Margaret's siblings included:

- Martha, who married the Rev Thomas Somerville of Jedburgh and was the mother of William Somerville, Mary Somerville's second husband.
- William Henry, who married Christian Boog and who lived in Burntisland.
- Christian, who married the Rev James Wemyss, Minister of Burntisland Parish Church; one of their children, [Janet](#), married John Leven who came to Burntisland in 1804 as Collector of Excise.

Margaret Charters' grandfather was the Rev Samuel Charters of Inverkeithing. The Rev Charters had a daughter, Jean, who married Charles Greig (grandfather of Mary Somerville's first husband, Samuel Greig). The Rev Charters's wife was Mary Knox, a great great grandniece of the Protestant reformer, John Knox.

Mary Somerville and her siblings

Mary was born in 1780 in the manse at Jedburgh, Roxburghshire, the home of the Rev Thomas Somerville and his wife Martha (Mary's mother's sister). Mary herself explained why she was born there: "[My father] was appointed lieutenant on board a frigate destined for foreign service. I think it was the North American station, for the war of Independence was not over till the beginning of 1783. As my mother knew that my father would be absent for some years, she accompanied him to London, though so near her confinement that in returning home she had just time to arrive at the manse of Jedburgh, her sister Martha Somerville's house, when I was born, on the 26th December, 1780. My mother was dangerously ill, and my aunt, who was about to wean her second daughter Janet, who married General Henry Elliot, nursed me till a wet-nurse could be found. So I was born in the house of my future husband, and nursed by his mother - a rather singular coincidence."

We have to take Mary's word for the exact date of her birth. There is no record of her birth or baptism in the

Jedburgh Parish Registers. The Burntisland Baptismal Register has the following entry for 1780:

"Cap^t Fairfax a Daughter named Mary 26 Dec^r 1780". Although entries in baptismal registers usually include both the date of birth and the date of baptism, Mary's entry contains only one date, and the implication is that she was baptised on 26 December. Baptism was of great importance in those days, so it is likely that the Burntisland Session Clerk felt it necessary to record the event, although it almost certainly took place in Jedburgh. The fact that she was apparently baptised on the day she was born is easily explained, as she was born in the house of a minister, her uncle Thomas.

Mary Somerville's siblings were (in order of birth):

- Jean (half sister), born 1769; also one or perhaps two other half siblings who died in infancy - [see above](#).
- Joseph, born 1773. Died young.
- Christian, born 1774. No other information available at present.
- Samuel (1776-98). Unmarried. In 1797, he left Britain for India to take up a post as Writer to the Bengal Civil Service. In May 1798 he took ill with severe sunstroke followed by bilious fever. It is likely that these led to his death four months later in September 1798 at the age of 22. He was buried in South Park Street Burial Ground, Calcutta.
- [* Mary herself, born 1780.]
- William George, born 1784. Died young.
- Margaret, born 1786. No other information available at present.
- Henry William (1790-1860). Married twice. He attained the rank of colonel in the British army. He was created a baronet in recognition of his father's distinguished war service.

Mary Somerville's first marriage

Mary's first husband was her second cousin, Samuel Greig, whom she married in 1804. We are told that it was not a particularly successful marriage. It was also a short one, ending when Samuel died in September 1807 at the age of 29. Samuel was the son of [Admiral Samuel Greig](#) (1736-88) of Inverkeithing. Admiral Greig is best known as "The Father of the Russian Navy" and is interred in St Mary's Cathedral, Tallinn, Estonia.

Mary Somerville's second marriage

In 1812 Mary married her first cousin, [Dr William Somerville \(1771-1860\)](#). William was an army surgeon who had a distinguished career in his own right. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. Unlike Mary's first husband, he took a keen interest in her work and gave her great support and encouragement. In 1838 William became seriously ill. Shortly afterwards, for the benefit of his health, he, with his wife Mary and daughters Martha and Mary, moved to Italy where they remained until their deaths. William died in Florence in 1860, and is buried in the old Protestant Cemetery in the city.

Mary was William's second wife. His first wife was Ann Rutherfoord of Knowsouth, Roxburghshire, whom he married in 1806. They had a son, Thomas, born in 1807 in Malta. Sadly, Thomas died when he was two months old. Ann died in Falmouth in 1808.

William also fathered an illegitimate son, who became Dr James Craig Somerville. He was born about 1799. We are told that William named the boy for his friend and senior officer, General James Craig. William always acknowledged and supported James, who was made welcome in the family's social circle. He and Woronzow Greig ([see below](#)) were educated together, with William presumably footing the bill. James Craig Somerville had a relatively successful medical career, albeit tainted by allegations of gross professional misconduct. He was appointed Inspector of Anatomy for the London area in 1832. He served as a member of the Senate of the University of London for a few months in 1838, but was forced to resign in murky circumstances. He died in 1847.

Mary Somerville's children

By her first husband, Samuel Greig:

- Woronzow (1805-65). He was named for Count Semen Vorontsov, the Russian Ambassador in London,

who had appointed Samuel Greig his Consul General in the city. Woronzow married Agnes Graham in 1837. It was a matter of great sadness to Woronzow and Agnes that Agnes was unable to bear a 'living child' (see [Mary Somerville's letter of 1845](#)). However, Woronzow had fathered an illegitimate daughter in his student days at Cambridge University. He provided support for the child, although his wife knew nothing of his youthful indiscretion until after his death. Woronzow became a barrister in 1833, and worked in Yorkshire for a number of years. He was appointed Clerk of the Peace for Surrey County in 1849. He took a keen interest in scientific matters, and was of considerable assistance to his mother. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1833. He died of heart congestion on 20 October 1865.

Woronzow's daughter Jane was born in London about 1825 and took the name Jane Ernestine Rowland. She married Henry White in 1852 and the couple had six children. Jane died in 1884 in Gosport, Hampshire.

- William George (1806-14).

By her second husband, William Somerville:

- Margaret Farquhar (1813-23). Margaret may well have been Mary's favourite. When she died aged ten, Mary described her as "a child of intelligence and acquirements far beyond her tender years". She also questioned whether she might have pushed Margaret too far, too soon: "I felt her loss the more acutely, because I feared I had strained her young mind too much."
- Thomas (1814-15).
- Martha Charters (1815-79). Martha and her sister, Mary (below), appear to have devoted most of their lives to supporting their mother. When her mother died, Martha took this to a logical and much appreciated conclusion, by drawing together her mother's personal journals and letters and publishing them as "Personal Recollections, from Early Life to Old Age, of Mary Somerville" (Martha Somerville, published by John Murray, London, 1873).
- Mary Charlotte (1817-75). See Martha (above).

Mary Somerville (died 1872) and her daughters, Mary (died 1875) and Martha (died 1879), are buried together in the old Protestant Cemetery, Naples.

Further reading

"Queen of Science: Personal Recollections of Mary Somerville", edited and introduced by Dorothy McMillan, Canongate Classics, 2001. There are several editions of the 'Personal Recollections'. I found this one particularly good because of Dorothy McMillan's helpful editing, and also her substantial and informative introduction.