# SOMERVILLE

1780 - 1872

Mary Somerville was born in Scotland, a descendant of George Washington. It was only because of her privileged background that she was able to go to school and learn about mathematics– it was very unusual for a girl in the early19th century to get a formal education.

In fact, like so many of our mathematicians, Mary hated school. She was forced to memorise the dictionary, wear restrictive braces and stand up straight. In the end Mary cried so much that it forced her parents to remove her from school and return to Scotland. She was much happier looking after the family chickens and hunting for starfish and crabs on the nearby beach.

One day, Mary was reading a ladies’ magazine. Amongst the pictures of fashionable dresses, beauty tips and gossip of the day she found a puzzle with *X*’s and *Y*’s in it. She became intrigued and was desperate to find out how to solve it. All anyone could tell Mary was that it was called ‘algebra’. It was only when she sneaked in on her brother’s maths tutorial that she found out how to solve the problem. It was the catalyst for her self-taught investigations into the world of mathematics.

Mary used to do the housework all morning, play piano all afternoon, and then sneak into her room to do maths and Latin in the evening. But Mary’s parents wouldn’t let her study – they believed (like most people of the time) that it was unhealthy for a woman to think too hard – so they confiscated her candles. But Mary was too clever for them. She memorised mathematical problems, then solved them in her head in the dark.

In time, Mary’s work was recognised by other mathematicians of the day and the King awarded her a pension for ‘eminence in science’. Her work was so respected that the famous astronomer, Sir Edward Parry, named an arctic island after her. Not content with just a small landmass in the frozen wastes of the far north bearing her name, Oxford University named Somerville College in her honour.