

'Sir' William Herschel incorrectly honored, historian says

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(Phys.org) —In a paper published on-line today by the *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, the historian Michael Hoskin, emeritus at the University of Cambridge, says that William Herschel should not be addressed by the appellation "Sir".

Dr. Hoskin says: "It is commonly said that William and John Herschel were each made a knight of the Royal Hanoverian Guelphic Order (correct) and that therefore they became Sir William and Sir John respectively (not correct).

"The Guelphic Order was in the gift of the King of Hanover (who was also King of the [United Kingdom](#)), and William and John were 'foreign' members (William because he was a naturalized British subject by Act of Parliament, and John because he was born in Great Britain). The king of another country could make awards to British subjects (then as now) but he obviously could not confer titles on them (then as now). After the award, William and John could put the letters KH after their names but that was all.

"How William came to be known as 'Sir William' is a confused story that begins with a letter to him by Count Muenster who administered the Hanoverian Court from London. The Count wrote to William asking a favor, in a letter sent a few days after William was made KH. It seems Muenster did not stop to work out whether to address him as "Sir [William Herschel](#)" or "Dr. Herschel", so to be on the safe side he used both: "Sir William Herschel Dr."! Once this was done, there was no

turning back by Muenster; and no-one had the heart to tell the venerable "Sir William" Herschel that it was all a mistake.

"Once William Herschel died things were different, and in his obituary in The Times of London he is 'Dr. Herschel'. The author of the current website of the [Science Museum](#) in London has somehow learned the truth of the matter and says that he is 'often styled, incorrectly, Sir William Herschel'.

"William's son John then had a problem: his ageing mother who mistakenly styled herself 'Lady Herschel', and his aunt Caroline who revered the memory of 'Sir William'. For the time being John could let sleeping dogs lie, but in 1831 he was offered a KH, along with other scientists. John Herschel KH would then be 'Mr. Herschel KH', but his mother and aunt would not understand why he was not 'Sir John' like (it seemed) his father. So John initially tried to decline the KH. But he was told it was the wish of King William IV (King of Hanover and King of the United Kingdom), and that he had little choice.

"So John agreed with the authorities a semi-secret solution. A few days after the KH award, Mr. John Herschel KH was received by King William in his capacity as King of the United Kingdom, and dubbed a Knight Bachelor of the United Kingdom—and thus he did indeed become truly 'Sir John Herschel'. John then wrote to Caroline and told her he was KH and "therefore" Sir John. This was intentionally misleading, for his 'Sir' had nothing whatever to do with the KH and everything to do with his British knighthood which he was careful not to mention. And he has misled historians from that day to this.

"I have looked into this in collaboration with Andrew Hanham, who is the authority on the early history of the Guelphic Order, and with advice from the College of Arms in London. Our article setting this out in full is available through on-line Open Access at shpltd.co.uk

"We asked the York Herald how he thought the modern [historian](#) should now write of William. He replied that 'to style him Sir William would be inaccurate, so one should perhaps omit in his style reference to the knighthood he never received'."

Professor Jim Bennett of Oxford University describes this as "a wonderful story of a mistake that became a public deception, preserved for the best of reasons; it has misled historians ever since".

More information: The paper can be downloaded from www.shpltd.co.uk

Provided by Science History Publications

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