

HISTORY

For Heaven's Sake

GALILEO'S DAUGHTER
A Historical Memoir of Science,
Faith, and LoveBy Dava Sobel
Walker. 420 pp. \$27

Reviewed by JAMES RESTON JR.

Occasionally a book like Dava Sobel's *Longitude* comes along with an idea so startlingly original that other authors of non-fiction can only shake their heads and marvel. That book took a scientific topic, mariners' search for a way to calculate longitude, and turned the story into an irresistible mix of science, character and drama. With a reporter's directness and a keen eye for detail, Sobel told the *Longitude* story simply, cleanly and concisely. Deservedly it enjoyed tremendous success, becoming a bestseller and being translated into 27 languages.

In *Galileo's Daughter*, Sobel had the germ of another good idea. When Galileo turned his telescope to the heavens, he changed world history with a single motion of his hand, for the first glance revealed a fluid, swirling, perhaps infinite universe, very different from the static one with the earth at its center so cherished by the holy fathers. When the Catholic Church tried him for heresy, his case gave definition to the eternal clash of science and faith, a clash that is very much with us today in the issues of bioengineering.

But this man of Florence remains an attractive figure for the modern biographer partly because of the extravagance of his personality. Besides his voracious appetite for

food and friends, good conversation and good fun, he loved women, and by a wench nearly half his age he had three children, two daughters and a son, born not in holy matrimony but "of fornication," as the contemporaneous documents state.

His oldest daughter, Virginia, is the subject of Sobel's title (though not the primary subject of her book). Like her younger sister, Livia, Virginia married Christ as a Poor Clare at a very young age. It was something of a shotgun marriage, for Galileo pushed his two daughters into the convent a few years before the legal age, and that proved to be a very convenient arrangement for him. As love-children born out of wedlock, they were unmarriageable. Better that they enter a convent, where they could receive training and have a roof over their heads, than rely upon their famous and busy father for their well-being. Through many of these years, Galileo's daughters lived without enough to eat, without enough blankets at night, in the most horrid circumstances, while just over the hill, their most famous father, arguably the wealthiest man in Italy, pursued his dramatic researches in his palace, Belosguardo.

Virginia took the name Maria Celeste and lived out a harsh and meager existence in the Convent of San Matteo in Arcetri. More than a hundred letters from her to her father have survived. Written over a span of 11 years, when Galileo's troubles with the Church over his Copernican proclivities reached a crescendo, the letters are a loving testament of a daughter's profound love for her great and beleaguered father. But Maria Celeste

was equally devoted to her Church, and it is in the clash between these two loves that these letters find their subliminal life.

They have been in print for years in Italy, in a slender and much-cherished volume called *Lettere al Padre*. But Sobel gets herself in trouble immediately with an overreaching claim: that these letters "recast" the Galileo story, that they "recolor the personality and conflict of a mythic figure." This, of course, is silly, for over the centuries Galilean scholars have always known the Maria Celeste story and dealt with it appropriately, as a marginal subplot with a touch of saccharine melodrama. As if she has discovered some great new truth through her supposed recasting, Sobel writes that Galileo "remained a good Catholic who believed in the power of prayer and endeavored always to conform his duty as a scientist with the destiny of his soul." But the depth of Galileo's faith has never been in doubt; indeed, the very essence of his epic pits his deep faith against his integrity as a scientist.

In trying to wrap an entire book around these touching documents, Sobel faced a difficult problem: the relationship between Maria Celeste and her father—at least as we see it in the letters—never changes. The daughter is forever the doting, unflinchingly sympathetic, long-suffering admirer of her great father. He can do no wrong.

Presented uncritically, without editing and without analysis, the letters can lapse into being cloying and tiresome. Sobel herself seems almost as respectful of the great man

as Maria Celeste was. He is always tenderhearted, even in his adversity. But this is not the real Galileo, whose mean streak and temper and vanity and even paranoia served him well in his valiant struggle with the Church. With *Galileo's Daughter* Sobel has lost her bearings. This was an idea that called for a narrow passage, navigating by latitude alone. With so little to go on about the father-daughter relationship, Sobel reverted to rehashing the familiar details of the Galileo tale, often with long, blocked and undigested quotations from the classic documents of the case. Chapter after chapter goes by with the briefest mention of the daughter while the old chestnuts of the father's story are rolled out yet again. The specific story of Maria Celeste does not get significant play until after page 100, and the real interest of the relationship during the period when Galileo comes under sharp attack does not begin until after the 200th page.

After the publication of *Longitude*, an *Illustrated Longitude* followed. Perhaps, in time, we might hope for an abridged and revised edition of *Galileo's Daughter*, with the gobs of extraneous material cut out. We could use a disciplined concentration on this poignant relationship and on the brutish life of a 17th-century nun in Florence. Such a book would indeed be a contribution to the already rich Galilean literature, but that is not the book Sobel has written. ■

James Reston Jr. is the author of "Galileo: A Life." He is working on a book about the Crusades.