



## Historical Section

# Mary Acworth Evershed & Sheila Anne Boulter

## The two female Directors of the Historical Section



**Mike Frost**  
Director



**Bill Barton**  
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Director

Council declared 2020 a year of Highlighting Women in Astronomy. One way in which we have pursued this, particularly in the Historical Section, has been to highlight the achievements of BAA women from previous generations.

Two of the eight past-Directors of the Historical Section were women. Mary Acworth Evershed, the founder and first Director of the Section (1930–'44), the subject of a recent biography, is finally receiving the recognition she deserves. Sheila Anne Boulter, the fourth Director (1965–'68), is

much less well known and we would love to know more about her.

### Mary Evershed (1867–1949)

Mary was born Mary Acworth Orr in Plymouth in 1867. In her early twenties Mary travelled to Italy with her sister, and in Florence was particularly taken with the poetry of Dante Alighieri. Between 1890 and 1895, she migrated with her family to Australia. Mary became friends with John Tebbutt (1834–1916), the eminent New South Wales astronomer, and learnt her astronomy with him. She was the author of *An Easy Guide to the Southern Stars*, written because she could not find a popular guide to astronomy in the southern hemisphere.

Mary was part of the BAA expedition to Vadsø in northern Norway to view the solar eclipse of 1896 Aug 9. The eclipse was clouded out (she was more successful with an eclipse seen by another BAA expedition, to Algiers, in 1900 May). Subsequently Mary joined the BAA on 1896 Oct 28, becoming a member of the Lunar and Variable Star Sections. On the Vadsø trip she met John Evershed (1864–1956); they married in 1906 shortly before travelling to India, where John became first the assistant director and then the director of the Kodaikanal Observatory in southern India.

Mary had to turn down the offer of a job at the Dunsink Observatory to travel to India, but she carried out her own independent research at Kodaikanal, published in the *Monthly Notices* of the RAS on solar prominences. The Eversheds

travelled frequently from Kodaikanal, not just back to England but also to assess possible observatory sites in Kashmir and New Zealand. One particularly memorable trip was to observe the total solar eclipse of 1922 from Wallal, Western Australia, as part of a multinational team trying to confirm Eddington's historic 1919 measurements of the bending of starlight. On 1924 May 9 Mary was elected FRAS, serving for many years on the RAS Library Committee.

During her time in India, Mary wrote *Dante & the Early Astronomers* (published in 1914), a detailed exploration of the astronomical references in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This initially attracted little attention, but in the 1940s it was accidentally rediscovered by Dante scholar Barbara Reynolds, who realised that Mary provided insights missed by scholars of literature. Mary became the Director of the Historical Section when it was founded in 1930, and was the editor and compiler of the Section's first *Memoir*, 'Who's who in the Moon'; a catalogue of short biographies of everyone who had a lunar feature named after them.

Mary is the subject of a biography, *Dante and the Early Astronomer: Science, adventure, and a Victorian woman who opened the heavens*, by Tracy Daugherty, who is Professor of English and Creative Writing at Oregon State University and an amateur astronomer. The Director reviewed the biography (which he liked) in the 2019 August edition of the *Historical Section Newsletter*.

### Sheila Anne Boulter

Sheila is less well known – she was one of several Council members about whom Tony Kinder appealed for information in a letter to the *Journal*, and we made an independent appeal for information on her in the *Section Newsletter*. We have subsequently carried out a series of searches to try to find out more about her. A search of UK marriages revealed exactly one Sheila Anne Boulter (b. 1926 May), née Goodman, who married Ernest Albert Boulter (b. 1916; d. 1996 in Salisbury) in Paddington in 1946. If Sheila's maiden name genuinely was Goodman, this is of interest because she served on Council with Neville Goodman,



**Mary Evershed at the Kodaikanal Observatory. Mary is sat in the centre (fourth from left, third row from back), next to her husband John. (Indian Institute of Astrophysics Archive, Bangalore)**

BAA President 1972–74; perhaps they were (distantly) related.

As far as we know, Ernest was not a member of the BAA, but it is possible that he did make one contribution to the *Journal*, as a report on the partial eclipse of 1954 Jun 30 (total from Unst in the Shetland Isles), was received from an E. J. Boulter (note however the middle initial) on behalf of Winterslow School, a Church of England aided school in Wiltshire, about five miles east of Salisbury. The *Journal* confirms that Sheila lived in Salisbury.

Sheila Boulter joined the BAA on 1954 Apr 28, with an address in Bemerton Heath, Salisbury (west of the city centre). Her proposer was Colin Ronan, who in 1953 had become Historical Section Director, taking over from Howard Kelly. By 1955 she is listed in the *Journal* as being in charge of photographs, drawings and material suitable for exhibitions. There is a paper by her in the same edition on 'Films & film strips for astronomy'.

She was on Council from 1960–'62, and then 1964–'65, and was then Historical Section Director from 1965–'68. Her address changed in 1968 to Shakespeare Road, Stratford-sub-Castle, Salisbury (north of the city centre). She is designated as BSc and FRAS on Council listings, the election to the RAS having occurred on 1956 Feb 10 at the proposal of Neville Goodman. We don't know which university awarded her a BSc, but clearly she was well qualified.

The annual Section reports from her tenure as Director reveal a Section not too different to today. The Section dealt with enquiries from BAA members and others, and in her first report she suggested setting up a panel of Section members with specialist skills; next year she announced that the panel had successfully been set up, offering a translation service, and expertise in deciphering Tudor and Stuart handwriting. Sheila highlighted papers in the *Journal* such as 'The search for the nebulae' (by Kenneth Glyn James). She was supportive of a Section initiative started by Richard Baum to compile a bibliography of all papers regarding 'changes on the lunar surface', a subject of great ▶



Comet Section

# Comet prospects for 2021

Unless some bright long-period comets are discovered it promises to be a disappointing year for comet enthusiasts. 67P/Churyumov–Gerasimenko could be the only one of the returning periodic comets that receives any attention from European visual observers.



**Jonathan Shanklin**  
Visual observations coordinator,  
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These predictions focus on comets that are likely to be within range of visual observers, though comets often do not behave as expected and can spring surprises. Members are encouraged to make visual magnitude estimates, particularly of periodic comets, as long-term monitoring over many returns helps in understanding their evolution. Please submit your magnitude estimates in ICQ format. Guidance on visual observation and how to submit estimates is given in the BAA *Observing Guide to Comets*. Drawings are also useful, as the human eye can sometimes discern features that initially elude electronic devices.

Theories on the structure of comets suggest that any comet could fragment at any time, so it is worth keeping an eye on some of the fainter comets, which are often ignored. They would make useful targets for those making electronic observations, especially those with time on instruments such as the Faulkes telescopes. Such observers are encouraged to report electronic visual equivalent magnitude estimates *via* COBS. When possible use a waveband approximating to Visual or V magnitudes. These estimates can be used to extend the visual light curves, and hence derive more accurate absolute magnitudes. Such observations of periodic comets are particularly valuable as observations over many

returns allow investigation into the evolution of comets.

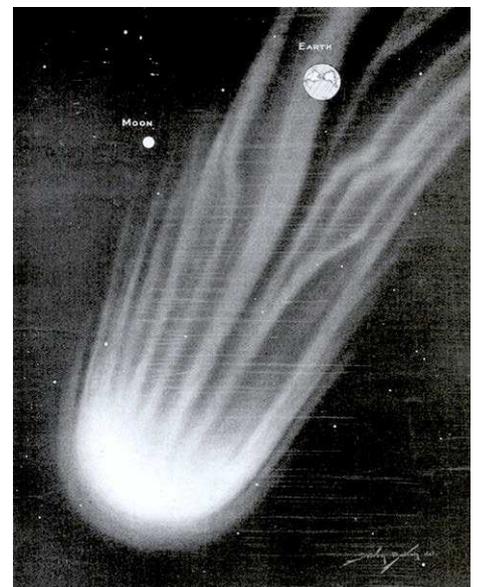
In addition to the information in the BAA *Handbook* and on the Comet Section web pages, ephemerides for new and currently observable comets are on the web pages of JPL, CBAT and Seiichi Yoshida. The BAA *Observing Guide to Comets* is available on the Section web page.

**7P/Pons–Winnecke** was discovered by Jean-Louis Pons with a 0.12m refractor at Marseille in 1819, but was then lost until rediscovered by Friedrich August Theodor Winnecke with a 0.11m refractor in Bonn in 1858. He demonstrated the identity and recovered the comet in 1869. The perihelion distance has slowly been increasing since the early 1800s. It can make close approaches to the Earth and did so in 1927 (0.04au), 1939 (0.11), 1892 (0.12), 1819 (0.13) and 1921 (0.14). The 2021 return produces a relatively close approach at 0.44au, but this is not sufficient to make the comet a bright object. An outburst of the meteor shower associated with the comet, the June Boötids, occurred on 1998 Jun 27.6, with another lesser display in 2004. The comet should be in telescopic range by April, but it is a morning object and UK observers will lose it by the end of May. When brightest at 10th magnitude in early June it will be best seen from the southern hemisphere.

**8P/Tuttle** has a rather poor apparition. Southern hemisphere observers stand the best chance

of seeing it, but only after perihelion when it is fading at around 11th magnitude.

**15P/Finlay** might reach 9th magnitude, but it won't be observable from the UK until it is past its brightest, and then only in the morning sky. William Henry Finlay discovered the comet from the Cape Observatory on 1886 Sep 26, with an 18cm refractor. It was around 11th magnitude at this and the following return. In 1906 it passed 0.3au from the Earth and reached 6th magnitude. Jupiter



An artist's impression of 7P/Pons–Winnecke by Scriven Bolton, which appeared in *Popular Science Monthly* in 1921 (Bolton's artwork is further discussed on p.373). The comet is expected to reach 10th magnitude in 2021 June.

▶ interest to BAA members during the 1960s and 1970s. Plans were made to commemorate two anniversaries due in 1968, the bicentenary of Alexis Bouvard and the centenary of George Ellery Hale.

Unfortunately, her duration as Section Director was not long. In the next Section report, Ernest Beet, who succeeded her in the role, said that 'it is reported with regret that during the session the Section has lost its able Director, Mrs Sheila Boulter J. P., who resigned in March owing to the increasing demands on her time and energy in her home city'. A Google search suggests that she remained a Justice of the Peace for many years, as a Sheila Boulter gave a talk to Salisbury U3A entitled 'On being a magistrate' on 2004 May 10. A search of Company House records also suggests that she was a director of mid-Wilts Relate from 2000–'01, and a director of Community First from 1997–'99;

both listings give the Shakespeare Road address. Sheila subsequently moved to another Salisbury address.

We would love to know more about Boulter. She may still be with us, so we would especially love to hear from anyone who knows her personally! Unlike Evershed, Boulter does not appear to have been a very active observer, but a life of service to the astronomical and wider community is clear. 🇬🇧

*Mike Frost acknowledges with thanks assistance from Chris Hicks.*

### Sources & further reading

We will use this opportunity to plug the Historical Section's directory of obituaries of BAA members, at [britastro.org/node/16732](http://britastro.org/node/16732). Mary's obituary is at: [bit.ly/38xmMKx](http://bit.ly/38xmMKx).

The BAA obituary project, run by Bill Barton, was inspired by a similar resource for Fellows of the Royal Astronomical Society. Links to Mary's RAS obituary and DNB entry can be found at: [bit.ly/38yhjTV](http://bit.ly/38yhjTV).

See also the report of Bob Marriott's talk on Mary Evershed at the Historical Section meeting of 2010 November, in *J. Brit. Astron. Assoc.*, **121**(2), 110 (2011). This was the first talk at what we think was the first ever Historical Section meeting, so our first Director was an appropriate subject.

Daugherty T., *Dante and the Early Astronomer: Science, adventure, and a Victorian woman who opened the heavens*, Yale University Press, 2019

Evershed M. A., 'Types of prominences associated with sunspots', *MNRAS*, **73**, 422 (1913). Communicated by John as Mary wasn't a Fellow at the time.

'Who's who in the Moon' is *Mem. Brit. Astron. Assoc.* **34**(1), 1–130 (1938)