

Obituary

Alan Pennell Lenham, 1930-1996

The son of a GWR engine driver, Alan Lenham was born in December 1930 in the railway town of Swindon, and was to spend most of his life there. He enjoyed academic success at grammar school, where he was also introduced to cricket, his favourite



Solis Lacus and Sinus Meridiani, with Valles Marineris, drawn by Alan Lenham with the 82-inch reflector at the McDonald Observatory. 1958 November 2, 0600-0700 UT, magnification x900.

sport. Taking up astronomy during the wartime blackout, by the summer of 1946 Alan and his cousin John Gould had raised the £3 needed to buy a 200-year old four inch (10cm) Gregorian: their first serious telescope.

Alan joined the BAA in 1948, but was soon doing his National Service at the RAF radar station on Bulbarrow Hill, deep in the heart of the Dorset countryside. He visited the then Saturn Section Director Dr A. F. O'D. Alexander at his home in nearby Dorchester, and sent him frequent letters and sketches made with his 3 inch (7.5cm) reflector. The Mars Section Director praised his enthusiastic efforts with a small aperture, and Lenham also observed the Moon and Jupiter. Starting with a paper about the mapping of Mare Humorum, Lenham wrote several short papers about lunar topography. He was also interested in the question of long-term changes in planetary atmospheres (*JournalM*, 120,122; 63,39,140,143; 74, 203; 76, 186, 258). He also published in the *Irish Astronomical Journal*.

After demob he returned to work in the physics department of the Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham. In 1956, however, he accepted the opportunity to work for Dr Gerald Kuiper (as a Research Assistant) at the Yerkes and McDonald Observatories: his notebooks show that he lost no chance to observe whichever planet was visible. He was an independent discoverer of the martian 'great yellow

cloud' of 1956, and at the next opposition he made a superb drawing with the McDonald 82-inch of what would later be called the Mariner Valley region, described in the *Journal* (74, 128) and reproduced again here. Upon returning to England and the RMCS in 1959, Lenham did little further observational work until the 1980s.

As a Senior Scientific Officer he carried out research into the optical constants of metals, and atmospheric transmission, publishing several papers in the *Journal of the Optical Society of America*. Alan Lenham was an experimental physicist of the old school; there was no antiseptic spaciousness to his lab. Electronic amplifiers

were usually constructed in tobacco tins with co-ax cables soldered on. All this reflected the immediate post-war technology and its extensive use of ex-service equipment: but it had the advantage that apparatus could be modified easily and cheaply. The results Alan obtained were always comprehensive, accurate and inexpensive. For many years he was the Trade Union representative for the scientific sector of the MoD in the Institute of Professional Civil Servants. The privatisation of the RMCS in 1984 initiated his early retirement.

Finding time on his hands, and using an odd-looking portable but functional 20cm reflector, he once more supported the BAA Mars and Saturn sections. His reports sometimes contained amusing (but always accurate) comments, one of which went something like: 'Mars: Seeing poor - low over fish and chip shop!' Clearly these comments pointed to a jovial character - and character by all accounts he was. The writer is sorry that he knew him only through his letters and phone calls. But astronomy was only one of Alan's interests. He was a devoted cricketer, described as a slow off-break spin bowler, and a prolific wicket taker. A past Chairman of Swindon Cricket Club, he wrote its official history in retirement. He was also interested in the history of the railways and of his own family. His father had been a pilot during World War One, and Alan also was interested in aviation.

Much of Alan's work remains unpublished, and it is sad that he did not live to learn how valuable his Mars observations have proven to the current writer in his martian dust storm catalogue. He died suddenly of a heart condition on 1996 August 18, having remained a lifelong bachelor. I thank John Gould for much background information that has enabled this short appreciation to be written.

Richard McKim



The staff at the Yerkes Observatory circa 1957. Lenham is 5th from the right of the second row. In the front row can be recognised van Biesbroeck, Dollfus and Kuiper. Ewan Whitaker stands behind and to the right of Lenham.