

Obituary
Neil MacIntyre Bone, 1959 June 27–2009 April 23

The BAA's Meteor Section Director Neil Bone died on 2009 April 23 after a long and determined battle against bowel cancer, faced throughout with courage and his keen and very distinctive sense of humour. He was not quite 50 years old. Neil had been Director of the Section since 1992, and through his great energy and enthusiasm he made an enormously important contribution to work in this field during his tenure, particularly in relation to the major annual meteor showers. That Neil should pass away at the time of maximum of the annual April Lyrid meteor shower is somehow poetically ironic.

Neil was born on 1959 June 27 in Campbeltown, Argyllshire. He became interested in astronomy in 1968, while collecting a set of cards (that came packed with bubblegum) on the subject of space. Acquiring some astronomy books from his uncle, Sandy McMillan, Neil's interest was sparked, and the subject remained a great passion for the rest of his life. He recalled that Colin Ronan's 1968 book *The Universe* (part of The Franklin Watts reference library) was a particular favourite in those early days. There can be little doubt that the dark and transparent night skies of Argyllshire were also instrumental in kindling his early fascination with astronomy. Neil gradually learned his way around the night sky, peering out of the bedroom window when he was supposed to be in bed. His interest was further boosted when he joined the Junior Astronomical Society (now the Society for Popular Astronomy) in 1972. He acquired a small telescope and also became interested in meteors at this time.

Although astronomy was his passion, Neil chose a different branch of science as a ca-

reer. In his own words, 'I couldn't handle the maths to do 'proper' astronomy.' On leaving Campbeltown Grammar School, he went up to Edinburgh University, where he studied for a BSc. in Microbiology. Whilst an undergraduate at Edinburgh Neil became a key member of the Astronomical Society of Edinburgh, and it was also a time when he began to emerge as a key player in British amateur astronomy. He joined the British Astronomical Association in 1980 November and founded the Aurora Section of the Junior Astronomical Society in 1981, remaining its Director until 1989. Neil was an indefatigable observer of meteors, the aurora, NLC and variable stars, contributing regular observations in all of these areas throughout his life.

Neil was quite a character as many BAA members will know. He was absolutely fearless and would stand no nonsense from anybody. Others looked on in awe when, as an undergraduate student, he faced up to Professors Fred Hoyle and Chandra Wickramasinghe, picking holes in their 'Diseases from Space' arguments during their lectures in Edinburgh. He did exactly the same thing some years later at a BAA Out-of-London meeting. Neil also remonstrated with the Astronomer Royal for Scotland about dousing the floodlights at the Royal Observatory on Blackford Hill. Aside from the



obvious absurdity of having a floodlit astronomical observatory, Neil was particularly upset because, as a key member of the University astronomical society, he had organised a meteor watch by society members on the Hill; in fact Neil did most of his serious observing from there, both as an undergraduate and afterwards when he worked in the Dept of Molecular Biology. Neil took great joy in showing a picture of

his 'observatory' whenever he gave talks. It consisted of a deck chair, a clipboard with paper, pens and pencils, a red torch and a pair of binoculars.

On graduating from the Edinburgh School of Biological Sciences, Neil started work as a research assistant in the laboratory of the late Prof John Scaife in the Dept of Molecular Biology, Edinburgh, working on the genetics of the malaria parasite, towards the development of malaria vaccines. As his friend and work colleague, Martin Mackay, recalled of those days: 'It was a world of science, Lorimer's 70 bob (a well known Scottish beer of the time), the Hearts (Neil's favoured football club), kebabs (Neil's very own health food), and the Greenmantle (a well known Edinburgh pub of the time). And Neil walked everywhere – he was amazing. He was also an incredibly hard worker – 7 days a week'.

In 1986, Neil moved south to work with Robert T. Johnson in the Dept of Zoology at Cambridge University, working for a Cancer Research Campaign project on skin cancer. He remained in Cambridge for three years. During this period his relationship with his wife to be, Gina, blossomed and the couple were married in the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Apuldram, near Chichester, West Sussex on 1988 April 23. The couple subsequently had two children, Miranda and George.

Also while at Cambridge Neil's long association with *Astronomy Now* magazine began. Someone was needed to put together a monthly column called 'Society News' and Neil was the obvious choice for this as he was already a popular and sought-after speaker on the local society circuit. As Robin Scagell recalled, 'He was one of those people that you could call upon when your



Noctilucent cloud photographed by Neil Bone from Chichester in 2008.



speaker let you down at short notice, and would come and give an excellent talk – the Peter Cook of the astronomy circuit! He was an ideal person to compile the amateur news for *Astronomy Now* for that reason.’ Through his monthly column, Neil successfully promoted astronomical societies across the country, helping and encouraging many new societies to start up and gaining many new members for existing societies. Neil contributed his first feature article – on noctilucent cloud (NLC) – in the second issue of *Astronomy Now* (May 1987), and following the great auroral display of 1989 March 13 he was in even greater demand.

Neil became a well-loved regular on the lecture circuit, touring astronomical societies up and down the country, giving talks about meteors and the aurora in particular, and even continuing to do so in spite of his illness. He was giving a lecture once, when a mobile phone went off, playing the jingle from the William Tell Overture. Said Neil, ‘It is the mark of an educated man that when he hears that tune he doesn’t think of the Lone Ranger.’

Neil moved down to take up a post with Dr Julian Burke in the Dept of Biochemistry, School of Life Sciences at the University of Sussex in Falmer in 1989, commuting daily from the family home at Apuldram, just south of Chichester. He remained a Research Fellow at Sussex until ill-health forced his retirement in 2008. In Neil’s own words, ‘I now enjoy the rather grand appellation of ‘Research Fellow’, but it just means that I

am another scientist chained to a lab bench.’

In 1992 Neil joined Dr John Armstrong’s group at Sussex and worked on a series of projects supported by the Cancer Research Campaign, the Wellcome Trust and the Medical Research Council. Although his original background was in molecular biology, Neil became an expert in microscopy and helped pioneer the use of advanced techniques in the Department. Countless undergraduate and postgraduate students were instructed in these methods by Neil, indoctrinated by his mantra of ‘an experiment is only as good as its controls’.

Many of Neil’s friends in the BAA will recall the wonderful parties which he and Gina threw at their home – New Year parties, birthday parties and a particular favourite, Bonfire Night parties. Neil took great pleasure in deciding who would be the ‘Guy’ to be placed atop the bonfire each year – evidence of his rather wicked sense of humour. Neil was noted for his devotion to real ales, and was fairly contemptuous of wine drinkers; one such tippler once threw a glass of wine over him after a lively debate on the topic.

Neil became Director of the BAA Meteor Section in 1992, and his contribution to the work of the Section during his tenure as Director was enormous. He presided over the Section for almost 17 years, and revitalised the observing programme at a time when many people were feeling that observations of the regular annual meteor showers were rather ‘old hat’. With characteristic energy, Neil set about showing the value of continued, well organised visual observing, both during the major showers and at other times, and how the results could be tied in with the work of photographic and video observers. His tenure included the period of high activity of the Leonid meteor shower between 1998 and 2006, and it is testimony to his very considerable efforts that the BAA Meteor Section has such a fine unbroken run of observations, meticulously written up and published in the *Journal*, throughout this period. His paper on the 2002 Leonid meteor shower appeared in the *Journal* the month that he died.

As all Meteor Section members will recall, Neil was an amazingly dedicated correspondent. He would spend hours writing letters and emails of encouragement to beginners and those who contributed work to the Section. He always found the time to help others get the most out of their interest, even as the cancer took a grip on him over the last few years.

Neil received the Fred Best Award of the Junior Astronomical Society in 1981 in recognition of his excellent observing record. He was awarded the BAA’s Merlin Medal in 2004 for his

many outstanding contributions to observational astronomy, and everyone was delighted when, in 2009, an asteroid (7102) Neilbone was named in his honour. A few days before he died, Neil was presented with a framed certificate announcing the naming of ‘his’ asteroid.

Neil himself pointed out that the unusual nature of ‘his’ asteroid indicated that it could very well be an extinct comet nucleus. Subsequently, at the instigation of Section Director Dr Richard Miles, the BAA’s Asteroids and Remote Planets Section began ‘Project Neil Bone’ in his memory, the objective being to observe and characterise asteroids passing through very low phase angle at opposition, just as asteroid (7102) Neilbone did in January 2010.

Neil was the author of several well-respected books on astronomical subjects, and he continued writing regular articles for the *BAA Journal* and for *Astronomy Now* until the very end. His *Observers’ Handbook on Meteors*, published by Philip’s Astronomy, remains an indispensable guide for the amateur meteor observer. Other works included *The Aurora: Sun-Earth Interactions* (Wiley, 2nd edition, 1996); *Observing Meteors, Comets, Supernovae and Other Transient Phenomena* (Springer-Verlag, 1999); *Mars Observers’ Guide* (Philip’s Astronomy, 2003); *Deep Sky Observers’ Guide* (Philip’s Astronomy, 2004); and *Aurora: Observing and Recording Nature’s Spectacular Light Show* (Springer-Verlag, 2007). Neil said that his favourite writing job was his ‘Observations’ column in *Astronomy Now*. He delighted in having the opportunity to be a bit controversial and in having a poke at certain people who he thought ought to be ‘stirred up’; we shall all remember fondly his keen, rather dry sense of humour. He once scornfully described ‘Messier Marathons’ as akin to astronomical train-spotting.

Throughout his illness, Neil was incredibly positive and he remained cheerful to the end – an absolute inspiration and example to us all. A few months before he died, he exclaimed, ‘I always wanted to be able to retire and devote myself full-time to astronomy; now at last I have got my wish.’

Everyone who knew Neil will remember him for his infectious enthusiasm, his wonderful sense of humour and his willingness to share his passion for all things astronomical with anyone and everyone who was interested. The astronomical world, and the BAA Meteor Section in particular, will be a much poorer place without him.

John W. Mason, Acting Director, BAA Meteor Section

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Neil with his wife Gina and baby Miranda in the early 1990s. Photo by Ron Arbour.