

HUGH PERCIVAL WILKINS

Hugh Percival Wilkins died at his home at Bexleyheath in Kent, on 1960 January 23. A few weeks previously he had suffered a heart attack, but it had been thought that he was making good progress towards recovery, and his sudden relapse came as a great shock.

Wilkins was born on 1896 December 4 at Carmarthen, in South Wales. He was educated at Carmarthen Grammar School, and soon showed a marked aptitude for engineering. His love of astronomy also became evident while he was still a boy, and he began making telescopes. First he fitted small lenses into cardboard tubes, as so many boys have done before and since; then he undertook mirror-grinding, and began serious observation. The original drawings in his notebook date back to 1909.

He joined the Army during the 1914-18 war, and then continued to follow his engineering profession; for some years he remained in Wales, but then moved to south England, and settled in Kent. At his Barnehurst home he set up a 12½-inch reflector, and commenced his main astronomical work. Though he made planetary observations from time to time, he concentrated almost entirely upon the Moon, and became a regular contributor to scientific periodicals—including the *English Mechanic*. By 1924 he had completed and published a lunar map 60 inches in diameter, and eight years later undertook an even larger map to a scale of 300 inches to the Moon's diameter. A prodigious amount of work went into this project; except for occasional periods of ill-health, Wilkins was nearly always hard at work at his telescope whenever the sky was clear and the Moon visible. The map was finished in 1951, and he then undertook a further revision, which was completed in 1954. Yet another revision was planned, though unhappily he did not live to complete it.

Wilkins joined the British Astronomical Association in 1936, and wrote frequent papers for the *Journal*, always upon lunar matters. In 1941 he gave up practical engineering and joined the Ministry of Supply; he remained a

Civil Servant for the next eighteen years, and retired from the Ministry only at the end of 1959.

By the end of the war, the Lunar Section was almost non-existent. Wilkins was appointed Director, and given the task of re-building. He accomplished this magnificently; his personal enthusiasm was inspiring, and under his guidance the Section was transformed into an efficient valuable organization comprising over one hundred members. During his Directorship, which began in 1946 and ended ten years later, the Section accomplished a great deal of work. Numerous papers and reports appeared in the *Journal*; two *Memoirs* were produced; and at Wilkins' instigation the Section began to publish its own periodical, *The Moon*, which still flourishes under the skilful and vigorous editorship of F. H. Thornton, for whose unfailing support Wilkins was always quick to express his gratitude. In 1956 the new Director, E. A. Whitaker, inherited an active and smooth-running Section instead of the scattered and disorganized group which Wilkins had taken over ten years before.

During his Directorship Wilkins moved from Barnehurst to Bexleyheath, and his 12½-inch reflector was replaced by a 15½-inch. Even this did not satisfy him; his interest in charting fine lunar detail was as great as ever, and he began work upon a 22-inch mirror, which he had hoped to complete and instal by the end of 1961. He did, moreover, carry out extensive observations with very large telescopes in both Europe and America.

In other ways, too, his astronomical activities were growing steadily. He lectured; made numerous broadcasts and television appearances, and undertook a lecture tour across the United States. His old interest in geology re-asserted itself, and he descended the crater of Vesuvius in order to take some magnificent colour photographs. Though by now senior in age, he was essentially modern in his outlook, and served on the Council of the British Interplanetary Society. After retiring from the Directorship of the B.A.A. Lunar Section, he founded the International Lunar Society, and became its first President. Unfortunately his health, never particularly good, gave him increasing trouble; it was not in his nature to curtail his activities, and only a day or so before his death he was still busy dictating the last parts of his seventh astronomical book. He is survived by his wife and daughter.

Wilkins was above all a kindly man; he was unfailingly courteous, and could never understand those who were not. Many young (and, for that matter, older) enthusiasts have good cause to be grateful for his help and encouragement. The deep sense of personal loss felt by the present writer, who worked with him for twenty years on astronomical matters, will be shared by Wilkins' many friends all over the world.

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