



Obituary

Iain Nicolson (1945–2020)

A personal tribute by **Peter Cattermole** to 'Dan' (b. 1945 April 20), who died on 2020 September 3.

On hearing of his sudden death, it was said by friends that one could not meet a nicer man – a man who, to quote, was 'caring', 'unassuming', kind and had 'twinkly eyes'. It was so sad that (due to the pandemic) all his friends, colleagues and multifarious acquaintances were unable to give this clever, humble, immensely likeable man the loving send-off he truly deserved.

Ever since 1959, when Sir Patrick Moore and I called upon him in Tillicoultry *en route* to northern Scotland in search of the non-existent Morsgail meteorite (which we subsequently described in the *Journal*), he was an integral part of my life. He had written Patrick a letter expressing an interest in astronomy and in true Mooreian style, Patrick insisted that we call on his home. Since that time I have not encountered a more honest, calm, supportive, witty and ever-constant friend. I still cannot believe that I will never see him again.

When Iain was interviewed for admission to his first primary school in Aberdeen, he calmly informed the headmaster that there were double-decker buses on the Moon. Several years later he was loaned a telescope from the BAA which was installed in the garden of the family home in Tillicoultry. However, his career in astronomy really kicked off in 1963, when PM (as we both knew Patrick) asked him to join a group visiting observatories and planetaria in both the Germanies of that time. It was during this escapade that a visa mix up recorded him as 'Dan' Nicolson, a nickname by which we knew him ever since.

Also in 1963 he went up to St Andrews and began studying physics and astronomy, precociously writing his first books during a successful final year. In that same year he met Jean, aged 18 and a mathematician, during a night-time hike. They shared many common interests and in 1969 she became his wife; later she was the mother of his children to whom he was both devoted and extremely proud. Their golden wedding anniversary was in 2019, and by way of celebration they visited one of Iain's most sought-after locations – Antarctica.

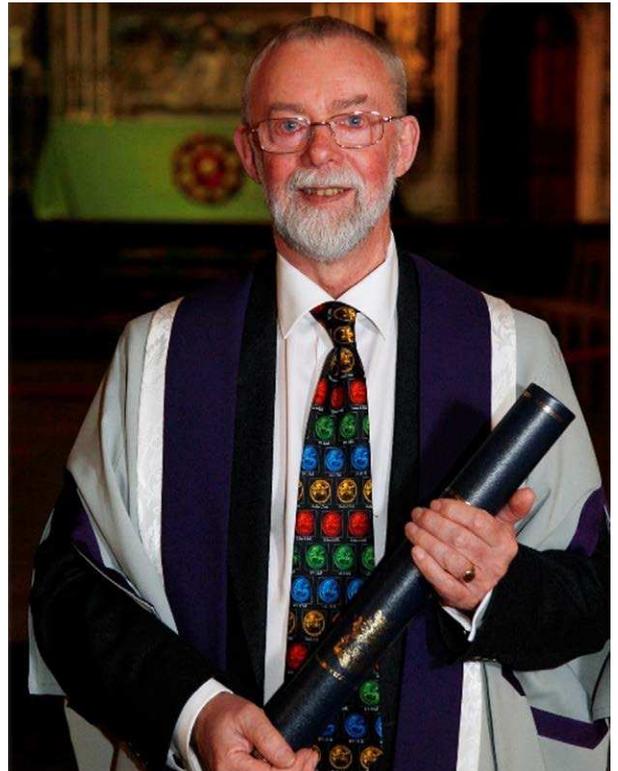
While Iain appeared to be very quiet and unassuming, beneath that calm exterior was a passion for astronomy that burned throughout his life. He developed into a brilliant lecturer; it was said in the eulogy given at his funeral that the person delivering the difficult words needed to be a world-class speaker, however the only one capable of filling that role was, regrettably, unavailable! He enjoyed that rare skill of being able to explain difficult scientific ideas in terms understandable by the layperson. I shared the lectern with him many times at residential centres such as Wansfell, and it was a privilege to have done so. His talks were always stimulating and

frequently quite challenging, but always much looked forward to by the regular attendees. His social conversation was dry and witty and he always had the time to answer questions, never making anyone feel foolish for asking simplistic things. He was neither judgemental nor did he have illusions of grandeur and he had not a mendacious bone in his body.

He set out on his academic life in 1969, having been appointed as a lecturer in astronomy at what became the University of Hertfordshire (then the Hatfield Polytechnic). He was the first person to be appointed solely to teach astronomy, largely due to the efforts of John Hall and Lou Marsh and, of course, on the back of his instantly recognisable skills. Students were very important to him and he taught from undergraduate to MSc level with equal facility. He also ran observatory open evenings for the general public, lectured to audiences beyond the University and, in the early 1980s, was the main instigator in getting astronomy offered within what was then the Combined Studies degree. His superb lecturing and teaching skills, together with immense enthusiasm for the subject, saw him being systematically promoted. He took early retirement in 1995, having attained the status of principal lecturer.

With typical Nicolson application, over the years he managed to get more and more astronomy courses accredited within this scheme and eventually it became one of the major options, enabling a student to obtain a degree in astronomy and physics, or astronomy and mathematics. After his retirement, these courses were expanded further to produce a degree in astrophysics as part of a Combined Sciences programme – a direct legacy of Iain's tireless efforts in this direction. As a result of his work, in 1995 he received the Eric Zucker Award of the Federation of Astronomical Societies, and in 2011 was awarded a fellowship at the University for his contributions to astronomy and its teaching.

By way of a brief aside: when Sir Norman Lindop, who was the head of Hatfield Polytechnic for many years, left the college in 1982 he wished to do an MSc in astronomy and astrophysics; Iain acted as his project supervisor. An outstanding study of the life and works of solar astronomer Richard Carrington was produced, which has been quoted/referenced several times in subsequent public-domain articles. Whilst Lindop undoubtedly did a very good job, it was



Iain Nicolson at the University of Hertfordshire. (Photo supplied by Steven Young)

Iain's help and guidance which pushed the thesis to the top of the scale.

During Iain's tenure at the University it acquired several fine telescopes and three planetaria, largely due to the hands-on, shovel-and-spade efforts of Iain and his colleagues. His colleague Prof Chris Kitchen observed how he patiently refound objects with the then non-computer-controlled telescopes when a clumsy student knocked the tube out of alignment, uttering not a cross word. He was not only a fine teacher, but also a skilled observer and in 1989, alongside Bob Forrest, he observed a very rare occultation of a star by Saturn's moon Titan, which considerably contributed to our understanding of that moon's atmosphere. In honour of his services to observational astronomy, on 2010 May 8 one of the University's telescopes was named in his honour – the Iain Nicolson Telescope, also known as 'The other INT'.

In the words of Prof Kitchen: 'it is quite fair to state that without Iain's contributions, astronomy at the Hatfield Polytechnic/University of Hertfordshire would only be a pale shadow of its current leading position'. This seems to very succinctly acknowledge his legacy.

His ability as a speaker and his integrity as a scientist were quickly recognised by Patrick Moore, who encouraged him greatly and held him in high esteem. Iain's friendship with Patrick led to the latter being invited to give several public open lectures at the Polytechnic/University, attracting huge public interest and filling the main college hall.

Iain was a regular guest on BBC's *The Sky at Night*, usually invited when some stellar event needed a clear explanation, or a black hole had done something unexpected. A television ►



▶ appearance I shared was for the notorious 1999 UK total solar eclipse, filmed on a totally cloudy, wet August day on the cliffs above Falmouth. The day before had been cloudless and the day after was similar, but on eclipse day the cameraman managed just one shot of the crescent Sun before the clouds closed in. Iain's ability to find something meaningful to say under these adverse conditions was typical!

Besides his immense contribution in preparing students to become professional astronomers, he was also active in the amateur field. He was, for instance, a very popular lecturer with several cruise companies, giving both him and Jean an opportunity to visit many exotic places. He accompanied one of my own specialist trips as a guest lecturer, which was memorable not only for his fascinating talks and knowledge of the night sky, but also for the experience of sharing a tiny sleeping compartment on the overnight Ghan train, singing dubious songs under the influence of copious glasses of excellent Shiraz in the train's lounge, and keeping BBC television's favourite astronomer under control as we crossed the seemingly endless Australian Outback.

In addition to his university work and outside lecturing, Iain was a prolific writer, authoring more than twenty books. He regularly contributed articles to numerous scientific journals, encyclopaedias and magazines, also writing book reviews and many peer-reviewed astronomical papers. His work ranged from in-depth studies of the Sun, black holes and dark matter, to books for young people about the planets and stars. He also wrote an excellent concise dictionary of astronomy which I have found invaluable. One of his later books was published by Dunedin Press in 2014 and was part of a series of introductory texts. Entitled *Introducing Astronomy: A Guide to the Universe*, it embodied all of Iain's hallmarks as a writer: clarity, readability and accuracy. Just before he died he completed a revision of his 2007 book *Dark Side of the Universe*, which will be published soon. It will be a fitting reminder of his skills as a communicator.

Iain, Patrick and I became a very close trio and, when commitments allowed, we arranged

short trips together. When in London we used to foregather at either an Indian restaurant in Soho or a Greek taverna in Shepherd's Bush. In both of these establishments the management considered Patrick a celebrity worth plying with free brandies at the end of a meal. This typically extended to his guests, whereupon Iain usually thanked them profusely but politely requested a single malt – always a man of good taste and a true Scot!

During one of these gatherings the conversation turned to an article in *Sky & Telescope*, whereupon Patrick bemoaned the absence of a comparable magazine in the UK. After several more digestifs it was decided to arrange a meeting of like-minded people to discuss possibilities and in early 1987, in an Indian restaurant in West London, Patrick, Iain and I together with Ron Maddison, John Mason, Paul Doherty and Angelo Zgorelec (the owner of Intra Press) discussed the notion over an extended lunch. All those present were enthusiastic that a UK-based magazine should be available to the British astronomical community, both by subscription and at newsagents. The question was – would it work? Earlier attempts had failed.

Driven by the amazing enthusiasm of Patrick and the business acumen of Angelo, the first monthly edition of *Astronomy Now* was published, with Patrick as editor-in-chief and John Mason as deputy editor, while the late Paul Doherty became the excellent art editor. Iain, Ron Maddison and I made up the editorial board. The rest is history – it soon became a monthly publication, with Steven Young becoming editor in 1993 June. Iain was a frequent and much-valued contributor over the following years and, as Steven observed to me, continued to support and advise the staff of the magazine after retiring from official duties.

One of the important achievements of *Astronomy Now*, apart from its success, was its founding and organisation of the annual European AstroFest which, until COVID-19 came along, took place in February every year since 1992. Iain was hugely involved in this and acted as chairperson for almost 20 years. He was a frequent speaker and, as any of the thousands of past

attendees will tell you, was very accomplished. For his amazing input into the conference he was awarded a special, richly deserved lifetime achievement award.

Apart from astronomy, Iain's other passions were two in number: his family and sailing. His love of family life grew from his own very happy childhood in Aberdeen, Broughty Ferry and, later, Tillicoultry, with his parents Caroline and John. An only child for the first 15 years of his life, he was overjoyed to have a brother in 1960. In later years they both lived in the same part of the world and enjoyed meeting up and sharing a wee dram (or two)! With Jean and later his children, Shona and Alastair, he spent many a week sailing amongst the waters of his beloved Western Isles. I know they all have many fond memories of those seafaring days, some enjoyed under a low Hebridean sun, others spent soaked to the skin in a howling gale. Iain apparently showed the same calmness and efficiency as a skipper as he did in the rest of his life, and while being quite a cautious man, he clearly had a flair for adventure. It was only months ago that they sold their last boat, *Billy Blue*.

For reasons that space prevents me from explaining, over many decades Iain, Patrick and I paid visits to the North Nibley Monument, in rural Gloucestershire. For Patrick, regular visits were essential for his spiritual well-being, as he felt that it exuded a beneficent aura that eradicated all things bad in his life. Over the years we walked around it, climbed it, photographed it, lit sparklers beneath it and, in 2014, Iain and I scattered some of Patrick's voluminous ashes from the monument's balcony. The picture I took of us celebrating this unique event is the last I have of my very dear friend, appropriately with Brian May's 'Who wants to live forever' playing in the background and a glass of bubbly to hand. Thank you Dan for so many wonderful memories, for your dry humour, your integrity and your huge contribution to astronomy. We all will miss you but rest assured your legacy lives on, as will many fond memories for a very long time.

Peter Cattermole

Notice

Nominations for the Ballot for the BAA Council & Board of Trustees

An election will be held in 2021 October for the Council of the Association and the Board of Trustees. A ballot list will be sent to members with the August *Journal*.

Under the constitution approved in 2015 May, the elected Council comprises the President, Treasurer, three Secretaries, and up to five further members of the Association. Additionally, all Section Directors, Postholders, the elected Board members and the Vice-President (*ex officio*) are automatically members of the Council.

The Board of Trustees comprises the President, Vice-President, Business Secretary, Treasurer and five elected members, all of whom will also be Council members. You can stand for election to Council without being considered for the Board, but you cannot be elected to the Board without also becoming a member of Council.

If you would like to be nominated as a Trustee or a member of Council,

you must be a paid-up member. Please ask two other paid-up members to propose and second you and then sign the letter or form yourself to show you are willing to stand. If you wish to nominate someone else, the same conditions apply. If standing as a Trustee, you must confirm that you have read and understood the responsibilities of the Trustees of a Charity as set out on the website of the Charities Commission and that you are prepared to accept and fulfil these responsibilities to the best of your ability.

All nominations must be in writing and sent to the BAA office to arrive by Sunday, 2021 May 9. A suitable form (if wanted) may be downloaded from the BAA website at: britastro.org/nomination2021. Signed and scanned forms or letters may be returned to the office by e-mail [office@britastro.org] or by post. 📧

Bill Tarver, Business Secretary