

MICHAEL GEORGE SUMNER

Michael George Sumner, who died on April 17th in his seventy-third year, was one of the senior members of the Computing Section. He was the son of Heywood Sumner, an artist and archaeologist, and a grandson of Mary Sumner, who founded the Mother's Union. His early education was obtained at Malvern College, and in 1901, following an interest in farming, he took a course at Wye Agricultural College, subsequently managing his own small farm, and later taking a partnership in a larger farm near Marlborough. At this period he joined the Wilts Yeomanry, so the outbreak of the 1914-1918 war saw him at once under canvas. He was married in 1915, a few months before his battalion was ordered to France, and in March 1918 was wounded and taken prisoner. Returning home in December of that year, his health much broken by his experiences, he took up farming again, but in 1926 retired to a bungalow which he had built at Bridport. For the next two years he and his wife embarked on a new venture, joining the touring company of his uncle, Sir Frank Benson. Sumner eventually became Assistant Stage Manager, but they grew tired of this kind of life, and returned thankfully to Bridport to grow flowers and fruit and vegetables. It was characteristic of Sumner that he should also grow his own tobacco, and make his own wines. Apart from his knowledge of astronomy, he was keenly interested in heraldry, and also organized a great deal of the Bridport amateur theatricals, both plays and operas; he loved riding, and was a keen cricketer.

Sumner seems to have turned to astronomy shortly after the Benson adventure, and in 1931 he was elected a member of the B.A.A., taking up computing with his usual enthusiasm. He soon attracted the attention of the late Dr L. J. Comrie, at that time Director of the Computing Section and Superintendent of H.M. Nautical Almanac Office. Comrie was then engaged in his pioneering experiments of computing the lunar ephemeris by punched-card machines, which in those days were less flexible than their modern counterparts. It was necessary to have the trigonometrical functions punched by hand, and Sumner took part in the laborious task of looking up and checking the sines and cosines of some thousands of angles. At a later date he shared with other members of the Computing Section in a large programme of reductions of occultation observations. During the war years he worked as an outside computer for the Nautical Almanac Office on certain ballistic tables, and later undertook single-handed the formidable task of computing the phenomena of Jupiter's satellites from Sampson's Tables. This problem arose because it was considered unlikely that the material would be available from its usual source in Paris, which was then under German occupation. Although a good deal of progress was actually made in this work, it proved unnecessary, the Paris material being eventually received in this country through a neutral agency. In all this work, comets were not forgotten, and

when he had time to spare, Sumner would produce a prediction for the *Handbook*. He would go to endless trouble to correct the orbits by means of published observations, and to make a suitable decision as to which perturbation method to employ. He was an indefatigable worker, and quite recently, lying in hospital recovering from a serious operation, he wrote to ask for some computing to do in bed.

Although for some years a Fellow of the R.A.S., Sumner was always an amateur at heart, and as a member of the Computing Section he has set an example which will be difficult to emulate. To his widow and sister we offer our sincere condolences, with the assurance that in his work for the Association, as in everything else that he did, he leaves the memory of many a difficult task well done.—J. G. PORTER