



Professor Brian Warner (1939–2023)

The celebrated astronomer, astrophysicist and past Director of the BAA Lunar Section passed away on 2023 May 5.

One of the Association's most distinguished members, Professor Brian Warner, passed away at the age of 83 after 68 years of membership. He was an active amateur astronomer, serving for a brief period as Director of the Lunar Section, as well as establishing a long and successful career as a professional astrophysicist, specialising in cataclysmic variable stars.

Brian was born at Crawley Down, Sussex, on 1939 May 25. At school he developed an interest in chemistry, but his passion was astronomy. He became a very keen amateur astronomer, joining the Association on 1955 Feb 23. He contributed observations to several of the planetary Sections, including those of Mars and Jupiter. He was especially active in the Mercury & Venus Section in the mid-1950s. During this time, he assisted the Director, Patrick Moore, by extracting and summarising all references to work on Venus from *The Observatory* and *Popular Astronomy* magazines. Patrick also showed some of Brian's drawings of Venus at the 1956 March Members' Meeting. Around this time, Brian was using BAA instrument 144: a 7-in (~18-cm) reflector with a mirror by H. Wildey mounted on a clock-driven equatorial.

However, it was lunar observing that attracted much of Brian's attention. One of his earliest publications was on banded craters, in which he presented observations made with his 7-in reflector during 1956. He called for others to observe these formations under different angles of illumination. He went on to publish many reports in BAA publications. For example, during the 1960-'61 Council Session, he contributed four papers to the *Journal*, covering subjects such as the craters Linné and Plato, as well as craters with inner ring structures. He contributed to a Lunar Section project to observe lunar domes, making 120 observations in 1961. He was also active in 'Project Moonhole' – the aim of which was to measure lunar crater depths – both as an observer and by analysing data contributed by others.

Given his keen interest in the Moon, it was natural that Brian was invited to become Director of the Lunar Section, a position in which he served from 1962-'64. He resigned as Director when he moved abroad as his professional astronomical career developed. Patrick Moore took over the Directorship at that point.

Brian studied astronomy at University College London where he obtained a BSc in 1961 and a PhD on 'Abundances in late-type stars' in 1964, the latter part of which coincided with his Lunar Section Directorship. During this period, he used the 18-in (~45-cm) refractor at the University of London Observatory to continue his observations of the Moon. At this time,

► Brian at the meeting of the Royal Astronomical Society of New Zealand at Tauranga in 2004. Left to right: John Toone, BAA VSS; Elizabeth Waagen, AAVSO Interim Director; Brian Warner. (John Toone)

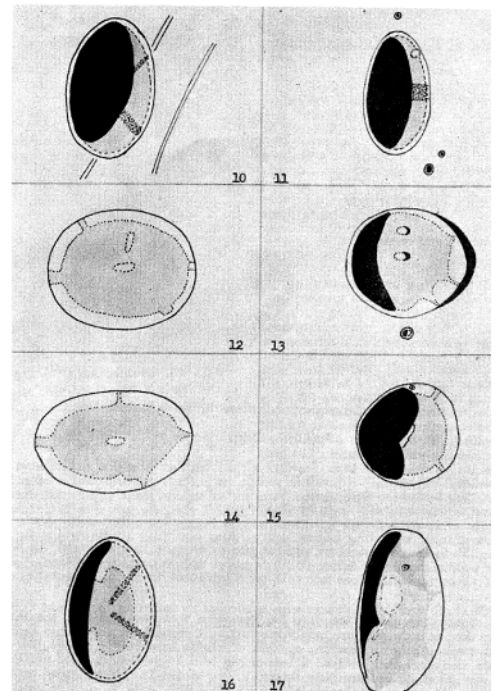


he wrote a letter to the renowned journal *Nature*, calling for a 'Holistic Approach to Selenology', in which he advocated for more detailed studies to elucidate the origins of lunar features (*Nature*, 191, 586, 1961). He suggested that careful studies of this nature, taking a range of data into account, might resolve the ongoing debate as to whether the lunar craters were volcanic or impact in origin.

After his PhD, Brian was a senior research fellow at Balliol College, Oxford University and Associate Professor at the University of Texas at Austin. He brought the then-novel technique of high-speed photometry to the South African Astronomical Observatory, using it to study cataclysmic variables and in measuring the radii of stars.

Brian became one of the most distinguished astronomers in South Africa. He was the founding Chair of Astronomy at the University of Cape Town on his arrival in 1972. He held the post until his retirement in 2004.

Over his academic career, Brian received numerous honours and awards. He was a Fellow of the University of Cape Town, and an Honorary Fellow of both the Royal Astronomical Society and University College London. He received the Science-for-Society Gold Medal from the Academy of Science of South Africa, the John F. W. Herschel Medal from the Royal Society of South Africa, ►



Drawings of banded lunar craters made by Brian Warner during 1956 with a 7-in (18-cm) reflector. 10, Moore; 11, Damoiseau; 12, Menelaus; 13, Pytheas; 14, Thaletus; 15, Conon; 16, Moore; 17, Eimmart. (*The Strolling Astronomer*, 1956 Apr edition)

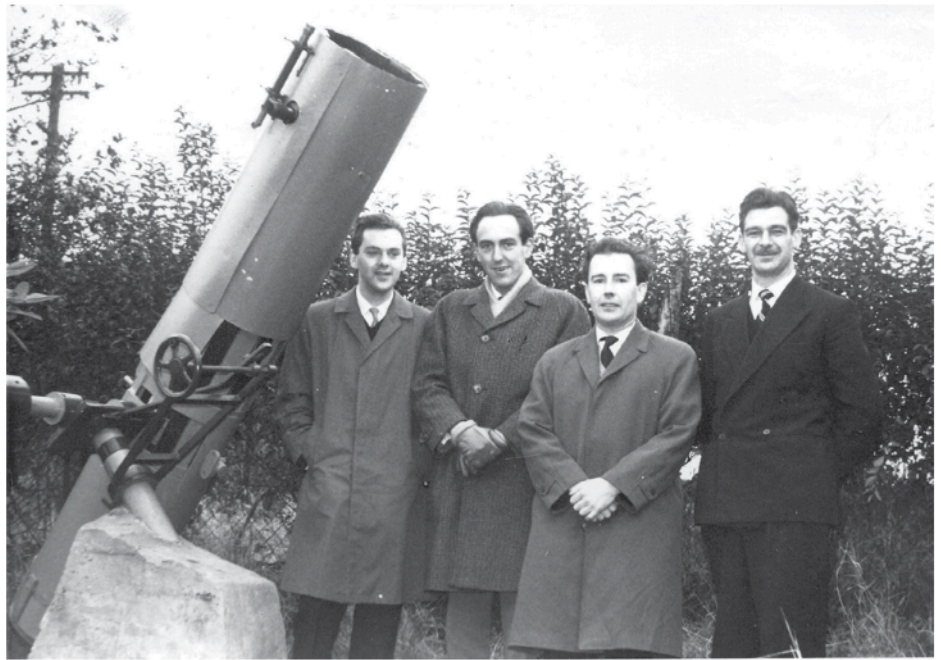


► and the Gill Medal from the Astronomical Society of Southern Africa. He was Vice President of the International Astronomical Union from 2003 to 2009.

Brian is best known for his work on cataclysmic variable stars, publishing many papers on the subject. In 1995, he completed his magnum opus, *Cataclysmic Variable Stars* (Cambridge University Press). Even today, this tour de force remains essential reading for all who are fascinated by these objects.

Given Brian's origins as an amateur astronomer, it was perhaps not surprising that he encouraged amateur variable star researchers. For example, he attended the meeting of the Royal Astronomical Society of New Zealand at Tauranga in 2004, which was held to mark the retirement of one of the world's most prominent amateur variable star observers, Frank Bateson. The following year, Brian also gave two talks at the BAA Variable Star Section Meeting held at the University of Sussex. This meeting was specifically arranged to coincide with the time and location of one of Brian's visits to the UK, so that VSS members could benefit from his presence and knowledge. His first talk was 'Cataclysmic Variables in Perspective', explaining how our understanding of these objects had developed, emphasising the value of amateur observations. He explained how his early observations of U Geminorum using time-resolved photometry provided new insights into the underlying binary system and its accretion disc, propelling him to conduct photometry at higher time resolution using the MacDonald Observatory 82-in (2.08-m) telescope in 1971. He then proceeded to discuss 'Rapid Oscillations in Cataclysmic Variables' in which he showed how high-resolution photometry had revealed a low-amplitude, 71-s period in DQ Herculis. DQ Her is an important object as it is the type-star of a group of magnetic cataclysmic variables known as intermediate polars.

An observer of the night sky at heart, Brian maintained a broad interest in astronomy. He described how on 1964 Nov 25, he was using the 74-in (~1.9-m) Radcliffe Telescope in Pretoria in poor conditions with passing cloud. Frustrated, he decided to step outside the dome, at



Brian as Lunar Section Director. Left to right: Brian Warner; John Bestwick, Assistant Director; Alan Heath, Secretary; Leslie Rae, Editor. Taken on 1963 Nov 24, at John Bestwick's house in Leek. The telescope is Bestwick's 12-in (30-cm) Newtonian. (Alan Heath)

which point the skies cleared, revealing a major meteor shower in progress. In a 15-min period he saw 25 meteors coming from the vicinity of Orion, which was overhead (he wondered if these were from the α Monocerotid shower which had exhibited previous outbursts, but the solar longitude was not consistent). He observed many other meteors later that night from the same direction, some leaving trails.

Celestial visitors to the South African night sky were not Brian's only nocturnal concerns in those earliest days in the country, for he related another anecdote to Alan Heath. Brian mentioned that he had worked at what he reckoned was the only observatory that kept a loaded rifle on the wall. He told the tale that roaming lions would occasionally take a peep into the observatory, probably looking for a meal! Fortunately,

there was no evidence that the rifle was used, at least while Brian was there. His humorous side also appeared in his two books of poems, *Dinosaurs' End* and *Scatological Verse*.

Brian's interests spanned both amateur astronomy and professional astrophysics, as well as astronomical history. He will be greatly missed by all who knew him.

The author gratefully acknowledges insights provided by Dr Alan Heath, John Toone, Prof. Bill Leatherbarrow, Tim Cooper (Astronomical Society of Southern Africa), and Dr Peter Jenniskens (SETI Institute and NASA Ames Research Center) during the preparation of this obituary. 🇬🇧

Jeremy Shears
Director, Variable Star Section

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