

John Caister Bennett 1914-1990

A life member of the Association (he joined in 1966), John (Jack) Bennett was best known for his discovery of Comet Bennett 1970 II. Born in Estcourt, Natal, South Africa, his interest in astronomy was encouraged early on by his mother, who pointed out the southern stars to him and described the return of Halley's Comet in 1910. He later moved to Pretoria and in 1934 joined the civil service where he remained for most of his working life. This was interrupted by World War II when he did a number of years service. However, this did not stop him from observing comet DeKock-Parskevopoulos, discovered in 1941 by his fellow countrymen. Later in the war he served in Egypt and Italy.

Returning to South Africa after the war, he began regular comet observing with a 60-mm refractor. He took an active role in the Moonwatch program started in 1958 to observe the new artificial satellites. Low power 'apogee' altazimuth telescopes were used for this and in 1961 he acquired a lightweight 125-mm version which was ideal for comet work. He began searching in the early sixties, making an independent discovery of Comet Everhart in 1964. This was followed by further disappointments in 1965 and 1966 when poor conditions prevented him from confirming two shortlived comets; in both cases they

were never recovered. In 1967 he made a further independent discovery of Comet Rudnicki. The effort was not wasted however; during this time he systematically catalogued all the objects that could be mistaken for a comet in his own telescope. He stepped up searching to around 150 hours per year and during one sweep on July 16th 1968 noticed that the centre of M83 looked unusual. This was soon confirmed as a supernova by local professional astronomers; this was many years before visual discoveries were made regularly.

By this time, Jack was highly regarded as an observer and in 1968 he was elected President of the Astronomical Society of Southern Africa (ASSA). The same year he took over as Director of the ASSA Comet and Meteor Section.

Jack's searching paid off again on December 28th 1969 when he came across an 8th magnitude comet near Achernar. Confirmation was soon obtained and early predictions indicated that it might reach second magnitude. Unlike many comets this was bettered by at least a magnitude: as it swept north in the early morning skies of March/April 1970 Comet Bennett provided observers all over the world with one of the great comets of this century.

In recognition of his discoveries, Jack was awarded the Gill Medal by the

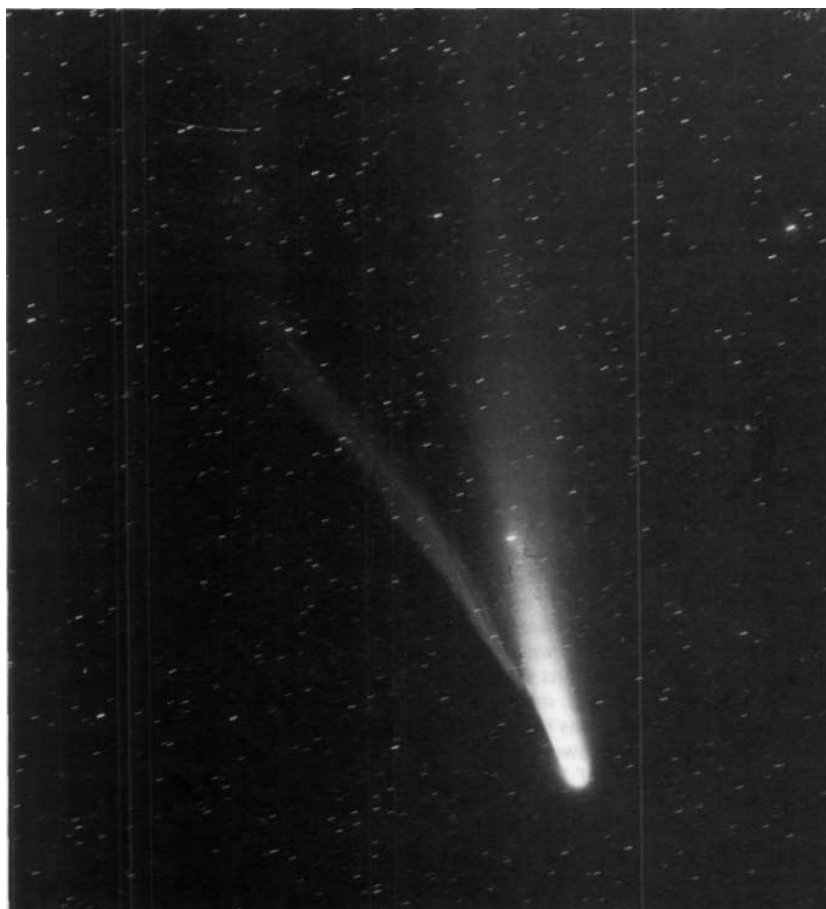
ASSA and during a trip to England in 1971 was able to receive the BAA's Merlin Medal in person. This gave him the opportunity to meet a number of members and he spoke kindly of the reception that he got.

Jack carried on searching at the rate of about 100 hours per year, subsequently discovering the rather shortlived Comet Bennett 1974 XV. That year he retired from the civil service. He later acquired a Celestron 8 to supplement observations with the 'apogee' telescope. Although comets were his main interest he did observe some variable stars, among other things. He continued comet searching from his home despite growing problems with light pollution. He averaged some 30 or 40 hours searching per year for the next ten years but without further success. More overseas travel came in 1976 when he visited America. During this trip he was able to collect his AAVSO Nova Award for the discovery of SN 1968L.

As Director of the ASSA Comet and Meteor Section, Jack actively encouraged new observers and for some years ran a nova search section. He supported the local astronomical society in Pretoria, being secretary/treasurer for many years and serving as chairman several times. In 1977 they recognised this by naming their new 32-cm telescope and



Jack Bennett with his comet-seeker (Photo: P. Moore)



Comet Bennett 1970 II. (Photo: M. J. Hendrie)

observatory after him. Apart from his astronomical activities Jack was active in the local Methodist Church, being in the choir and teaching in the Sunday School for many years. He never married and is survived by his brother Gordon and his sister Nan.

Because of indifferent health he stood down as Director of the ASSA Comet Section in 1985. It was typical of Jack that he should do so in good time for his successor to have a clear run for the return of Comet Halley. Fortunately, he was able to observe the comet that triggered his interest. Sadly however, crippling arthritis forced him to give up observing and eventually his home.

Further recognition came when the University of Witwatersrand awarded him an honorary MSc for his contribution to astronomy. This was followed in 1989 by the naming of Minor Planet 4093 Bennett (discovered by Rob McNaught) after him.

Despite serious health problems, Jack continued correspondence with amateurs worldwide as best he could and his letters remained cheerful and encouraging. He retained an active interest in astronomy right to the end.

Although best known for his comet, in his quiet way Jack made a very positive contribution to astronomy over many years.

Richard Fleet

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