

## OBITUARY

## ALPHONSO KING

The death of Alphonso King on 1936 April 18, at the age of fifty-four, has come as a shock to his friends, and although he only infrequently attended the meetings of the Association his work in the Meteor Section is so well known to members that many besides those most intimately associated with him will feel his passing as that of a friend. We knew that he had had a serious illness, but he was so active a worker that one assumed without question that he had many years of useful work before him; and besides, he had written recently saying that he was making good progress and looking forward to resuming work. But on April 15 his illness took a sudden turn for the worse, and he died three days later. He is survived by his wife, whom he married in 1920. He was born on 1882 January 17, and at an early age was carrying out observations in that branch of astronomy which he made his own, the study of meteors. His first published observations are included in the Seventh Report of the Meteor Section, which contains the results of work done in 1898. King, then at the age of sixteen, claims a share in fourteen of the thirty-nine accordances in that *Memoir*, and during the next seven years he contributed regularly to the work of the Section, his co-workers including such well-known observers as A. S. Herschel and W. F. Denning. When that group of observers was dispersed, about the end of 1905, King seems to have carried out very few observations for some time, but in the summer of 1918 he made more frequent observations; and from the Perseid epoch of 1919 onwards his name regularly appears in the Interim Reports of the Meteor Section as having contributed observations. When we come to the Fourteenth Report of the Section, containing the results of observations in 1922, we find King beginning to assume that place which he pre-eminently occupies in our estimation, as a computer of the true paths of doubly observed meteors, he having shared with Denning the work on true paths in this *Memoir*. From that time down to his death King had undertaken the whole of the computing for the Section, and while much of his work is still unpublished, his papers on outstanding fireballs which he communicated from time to time to the Association have given some of the interesting products of this work. The list of 155 true paths contained in the Fifteenth Report of the Section, just published, is however his best and most characteristic work; and it is worth while to glance for a moment at this and to note in particular the checking and plain disclosure of the inconsistencies in the observations, for both these things were typical of King.

How much of his leisure King devoted to this work it is impossible to estimate, but in recent years it was a very great deal, and although

he was as skilful and careful an observer as he was a computer he made few observations except of the major showers. It was his practice, latterly at any rate, to begin computing in the early evening and to work steadily on until past midnight; and in considering the amount of detail contained in the table of true paths in the latest *Memoir* one is able to appreciate the truth of a remark which he once made that the computation of a single accordance would take him about two hours *if the observations were favourable*. Over the solution of the path of a casually seen fireball, the accounts of which are apt to be many and vague, he would devote thirty or more hours, himself writing to the (usually inexperienced) observers, computing and carefully weighing their observations, and finally obtaining the results that the most meticulous care could extract from often meagre information.

The foregoing may give some indication of the magnitude of King's contribution to the work of the Meteor Section and to meteoric astronomy generally, but it cannot express the measure of his contribution to the small group of co-workers who shared his friendship, for he was always ready to help others and took great pains to encourage any observer who seriously undertook the study of meteors. For us who knew and admired him it must be sad to reflect that we shall no more receive those letters from King, crammed so full of the results of his own calculations, the occasional long lists of true paths after a few months of heavy computing, and those flashes of humour and those pithy comments on slapdash observations (which he abominated) with which his letters are interspersed. In re-reading those letters one is impressed alike by his knowledge and sound judgment, and above all by that frankness and open-mindedness which were characteristic of him.

In his astronomical work King was frankly and unrepentantly a specialist, as indeed he had to be if he was to make so useful a contribution; but outside that work he was a man of wide interests and attainments. He spoke Dutch and German well and travelled extensively, particularly in those countries; he was also a skilful chess player. His life's vocation was that of a schoolmaster, and he was for thirty years a master at the Council School at Ashby, North Lincolnshire: it is recorded of him that he was an able teacher but one who did not admire the tendencies of modern education; and this we can readily believe, for he was a man of strong convictions which he was not afraid to defend. Alike for his qualities and the excellence of his scientific work and for the way in which he helped them themselves he will be gratefully remembered by his friends.—  
J. P. M. P.