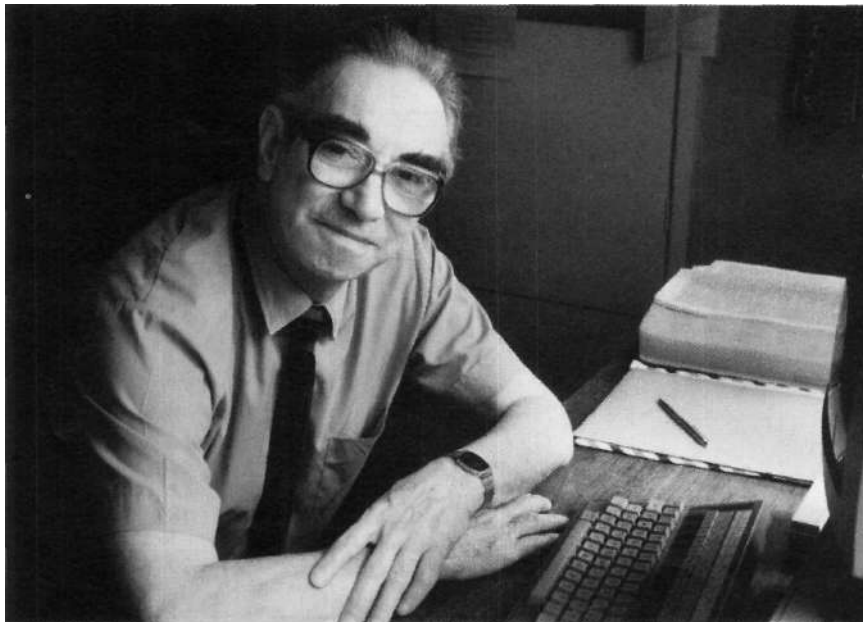


Colin Alistair Ronan (1920-1995)

Colin Ronan died suddenly, of a heart attack, on June 1. Nothing of the kind had been expected. In the previous year he had been badly injured after being knocked down by a car, but he seemed to have made a full recovery, and there was no hint of anything amiss. Earlier in the week he and I had been discussing the residential course which we have presented at Wansfell College annually for over forty years, and when I heard the news over the telephone I found it almost impossible to believe.

Colin Ronan was born on 1920 June 4, in London; his father Amos Hudson Ronan was a lieutenant-colonel in the Army, while his mother, nee Aileen Nathan, came from New Zealand. Her grandfather Joseph Nathan had founded the famous Glaxo firm. Colin Ronan was educated at Abingdon School, Oxford, and at an early age showed an aptitude for science, particularly optics. His first paper - concerning star scintillation - was published in the *Journal* when he was still at school. After a brief period working for the Glaxo company, he joined the Army



and became attached to the scientific staff, rising to the rank of major. During this period of his life he made a very important contribution to the war effort, inventing a new method of blooming lenses to increase light transmission. His work was (and still is) used by the Armed Forces everywhere, and it is fair to say that Colin Ronan never received proper recognition for it.

At the end of the war he left the Army, and took a BSc in astronomy in London. Clearly his main role lay in science, and he

took up a position on the secretariat of the Royal Society - for which he was admirably suited, both because of his technical knowledge and because of his personality; he was popular everywhere and was the soul of tact when a difficult situation had to be resolved. His sense of humour was never far below the surface, and generally well above it!

During his stay at the Royal Society he took an MSc degree in the History and Philosophy of Science at University College London. In 1960 he made an important decision: he resigned from the Royal Society in order to devote his life to scientific writing. He was as successful here as he had been in administration, and in all he published over 40 books, most of them on popular science but also some very learned works. In addition he became involved with the Needham Institute in Cambridge, and with the abridgement of Joseph Needham's monumental work, *Science and Civilisation in China* - a task which took years, and which he had not yet fully completed at the time of his death.

Quite apart from this work he was an outstanding lecturer who was always in great demand. In 1991 his historical researches led him to an unexpected announcement. It had been widely assumed that the earliest telescopes were made in Holland in the first decade of the 17th century, and that the first serious use of them astronomically was made by Galileo in 1610. Colin Ronan believed otherwise, and produced evidence that a telescope was made in England, by Leonard Digges, some-

time between 1550 and 1560, thereby anticipating Galileo by more than half a century. The Digges telescope was a curious instrument, using both mirrors and lenses, and we have to admit that we do not know what it looked like; neither can we be sure that it was turned skyward. But it is now generally accepted that the Digges telescope did exist - and but for Colin Ronan's persistent searching for evidence, this would never have been known.

Few people have contributed more to the British Astronomical Association than Colin Ronan. He joined when a young man; in 1953 he became director of the Historical Section, and retained this position until 1965, when he was appointed Editor. Prior to his appointment the *Journal* had been experiencing problems. Colin swiftly redressed the situation, and remained Editor for twenty years. It was during his regime that the old, small format was changed.

In 1989 he was elected President in succession to Commander Hatfield, and proved to be one of the most popular Presidents in our history. After the end of his Presidential term he remained a member of Council, and was always on hand with help and advice.

He had many other interests. One of these was music, and with the well-known singer Donald Francke he devised a weekend course, 'New Ears for New Music', which has delighted audiences everywhere - even those who (like myself) are not in tune with composers such as Stockhausen and Xenakis, two of Colin's favourites! He was an expert magician who was for a time a member of the Magic Circle (an honour afforded to few amateurs), and he was involved in theatrical activities. Bernard Miles consulted him on accepting Brecht's play *Galileo*, and it was due to Colin that in the first performance Galileo did not come on stage brandishing a reflecting telescope! He was also involved with the Molecule Club of the Mermaid Theatre, which provides science shows for children.

Colin Ronan received many honours. He was a member of the International Astronomical Union, he served on the Council of the Royal Astronomical Society, and an asteroid was named after him. But perhaps above all, Colin was a loyal friend; he and I have been on terms of very close friendship since 1940. It is most unlikely that he had any enemies, and his death leaves a gap which can never be filled.

He was twice married, and is survived by his three sons Mark, Stephen and Nicholas, to whom all of us will offer our deepest sympathy.

Patrick Moore