

## Frank Robbins

When Frank Robbins died last year, 1945 May 4, our Association lost a very good friend. Few of our members know or realise how good a friend he has been, for Robbins had one of those rare characters which preferred to do good deeds solely for their own sake and kept his name suppressed. For this reason I am unable to say in what way and to how great an extent we have benefited by his actions. Joining the B.A.A. in 1926 he became our Treasurer for some years (1927-31), and afterwards Vice-President. He became a Fellow of the R.A.S. in 1890, joined the Mathematical Association in 1922 and, until his health began to fail, was a very regular attendant at the meetings of these societies.

Robbins was a good all-round astronomer, though he preferred to call himself rather a computer, for he took a keener interest in positional astronomy with its entailed mathematics than in observation. He had acquired, purely for the love of it, very considerable mathematical skill and knowledge, and was never happier than when working on the solution of some new and knotty problem, often with the aid of his calculating machine. As a fact, however, his opportunities for observing during most of his life were probably rather meagre, for he was in the service of the City Corporation, in a scientific capacity as gas examiner, and lived in London. He had his laboratory within three minutes

of Sion College, the home of the B.A.A. for many years. It was only when he paid an occasional visit to his daughter and son-in-law at Haywards Heath that he could use his  $3\frac{1}{2}$ -inch refractor which he kept there.

Immediately on retiring from his City post at the age of seventy he joined the staff of the Mill Hill Observatory of the London University in an honorary capacity, and there had the use of the 8-inch refractor with which he undertook a considerable amount of observational work, particularly lunar occultations which he reduced and communicated to the R.A.S., and the photography of star fields with a fine 5-inch lens which he acquired and mounted on the equatorial. He lived within a stone's-throw of the observatory, so that he could spend any night-time there when weather permitted. Latterly he took a keen interest in accurate time-keeping and in the new quartz clock.

Robbins always made the very best use of his opportunities; for instance, his great friend Dr. R. T. A. Innes asked him to act as "Clerk of the Works", as he put it, in connection with the 26-inch refractor then being made here for Johannesburg. Robbins calls this "a great experience" as it put him "behind the scenes", and he came into contact with many famous people, such as Sir Howard Grubb, Blumbach, Hertzsprung, de Sitter, Sir Charles Parsons and Conrady. He availed himself of *this* opportunity by studying intensely the mathematical aspect of the computation of large lens surfaces, and has left pages of formulæ and calculations concerning this particular object-glass and others.

He was a very thorough, careful and painstaking mathematician; he hated mistakes, especially in figures, and was always ready to point out and criticise errors and omissions or carelessness in accounts or calculations. He was outspoken, and never interposed diplomatic tact before blunt truth, sometimes perhaps to his own disadvantage, but those who knew him found him a deep thinker and a dear and very much-respected friend.

In 1930 Robbins was co-opted as a member of the B.A. Tables Committee. He was author of communications to the R.A.S. *Monthly Notices*, *Ephemeris of Eros, 1899*, *Tables for Computing Secular Perturbations*, Notes added to a mathematical paper by Innes, etc., etc., and many articles to the *Journal*, mostly mathematical, but including, for years, an account of the R.A.S. Gold Medallist.

Robbins was born in London and lived there all his life, except the last three and a half years when, owing to ill-health, he went to his daughter Mrs. Goodman, at Chard, Somerset, where he died at the age of eighty-four.—F. J. S.