

OBITUARY

Henry McEwen

With the death, in his ninety-first year, of Henry McEwen, the Association loses, not only one of its Original Members, but also an amateur astronomer of distinction. McEwen was born in Dyke, near Forres, in 1864, the youngest of five children of the Rev. J. McEwen, who held the living of the parish. After early schooling in Dyke, he proceeded to the College of Science and Arts (as the Royal Technical College, Glasgow, was then called), becoming a Whitworth Exhibitioner in 1889. In 1892, he entered the service of the Glasgow Corporation Electricity Department, and until his retirement in 1933 he remained with this department as a constructional engineer concerned with the design and maintenance of large generating plant.

The careful draughtsmanship necessary for this post is evident also in the care with which he made his astronomical drawings and records. His interest in astronomy was evinced at an early age, and during his active membership of the B.A.A. he made observations with his excellent portable 5-inch Wray refractor, with which he customarily observed through the window of his home, at first at Mount Florida, Glasgow, and later (since 1916) at Cambuslang. The early volumes of the *Journal* contain many references to McEwen's observations in many fields, but his especial interests were the planets Mercury and Venus, and in 1895 he was appointed Director of the newly-formed Mercury and Venus Section of the Association. He was to remain Director for the sixty years until his death, a record which (in the words of the official History of the Association, written on his golden jubilee as Director) 'is worthy of the admiration of all members of the Association.'

The surface features of Venus and Mercury are, at best, elusive. In such a field, where the results of many patient hours of observing may seem meagre, it is easy to lose the faculty of criticism of observations. McEwen retained a highly critical faculty, and what is perhaps more important, a highly self-critical faculty, throughout his long Directorship. The true rotation period of Venus, still a matter of controversy, was a major theme of McEwen's work as Director; he was still working on this problem a few weeks before his death.

McEwen also took part in the activities of the West of Scotland Branch of the Association, being on its Committee on many occasions, and holding the office of President from 1919 to 1921. He was not known personally to many members of the parent body, however. His visits to London were rare, and more difficult since his retirement on a pension that failed to keep pace with the rising cost of living. An impediment of speech, for which he had an operation as a boy, caused him some embarrassment at meetings.

His interests were by no means confined to astronomy; his bookshelves were well stocked with works on geology and archaeology, and he was a keen player of golf and bowls. An affliction of his hearing prevented his taking an active interest in music, although his wife, Sarah Burgess of Grantown-on-Spey, whom he married in 1894, was an accomplished musician. For some while before his death, he had suffered from a recurrent chest complaint that developed into bronchial pneumonia. His wife died in 1931; he leaves an only son.

Henry McEwen was typical of the careful, gifted amateur observer on whose efforts the reputation of the Association so largely depends. His loss to the Association will be keenly felt.—M. W. OVENDEN