

OBITUARY

JOHN JACKSON

British Astronomy has lost one of its most admired adherents in the person of Dr John Jackson, C.B.E., F.R.S., who died on 1958 December 9, in his seventy-second year. He had been a member of the British Astronomical Association for thirty-seven years and served on the Council as recently as 1951-52. Like so many others who have adopted astronomy as a profession, he did not, at first, intend to specialize in the science, but was strongly attracted to it while studying at Glasgow University, where, under the guidance of Professor L. Becker, he had a notable career. Then, at the age of 22, he went up to Cambridge and enrolled at Trinity College. There he achieved much distinction as a mathematician, especially in Spherical Astronomy and Celestial Mechanics, gaining among other high awards a Sheepshanks Exhibition and the coveted Smith's prize. In 1914 he was appointed to one of the two Chief Assistantships at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, serving under (Sir) Frank Dyson, Astronomer Royal, and having as his senior colleague Dr H. Spencer Jones. He thus took his place in the line of the many distinguished astronomers who have temporarily held the post of Chief Assistant to the Astronomer Royal. A period of service in the Survey Section of the Royal Engineers during the 1914-18 War interrupted the development of his chosen career, but upon demobilization he ardently resumed his duties at Greenwich. He took his full share of routine observational and administrative work, though his special talents were soon to be devoted to a more rewarding occupation—the researches in positional and dynamical astronomy with which his name will be long associated. Among them were an investigation of the retrograde orbits of certain planetary satellites, especially the eighth satellite of Jupiter, and a determination of the orbits of a number of binary stars, for which he collated and used the large accumulation of observations which had been made with the Greenwich 28-inch refractor.

An important piece of work (in which he collaborated with Dr Knox-Shaw, Director of the Radcliffe Observatory, Oxford) was a re-reduction of the large number of careful meridian observations which had been made at that observatory by Hornsby in the years 1774 to 1798. The resulting revision of the positions of planets and stars at that period forms a basis on which improved knowledge of planetary orbits and the proper motions of stars can be founded.

In 1933, after having served as Chief Assistant at Greenwich for nineteen years, Dr Jackson was appointed H.M. Astronomer and Director of the Royal Observatory, Cape of Good Hope, in succession to Dr Spencer Jones, who had become Astronomer Royal. Consequently his slight, alert figure and friendly smile were rarely seen at astronomical gatherings in Britain during the next seventeen years.

His work at the Cape Observatory was especially concerned with the photographic survey of southern stars, and particularly with a much-needed improvement in the accuracy of observing their magnitudes and proper motions. He retired from the Government Service in 1950, with the honour of Commander in the Order of the British Empire, and returned to England—finally settling at Ewell, near Epsom, in Surrey, whence his astronomical interests were maintained unabated until his death.

Dr Jackson served the Royal Astronomical Society in various capacities over the years. Elected a Fellow in 1913, he was Secretary from 1924 to 1929 and was from time to time a Councillor. He was President of the Society from 1953 to 1955.

Many honorary appointments and awards came to him in recognition of his outstanding abilities. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1938; he received the Gold Medal of the Royal Astronomical Society in 1952 for his work on stellar parallaxes and the problems of star positions and proper motions generally; he was president of the Commissions on Parallaxes and Proper Motions and on Meridian Astronomy, appointed by the International Astronomical Union between 1938 and 1952. He was also President of the Royal Society of South Africa in 1949. His record as an observer of total eclipses of the Sun was no small one. Altogether he was present at five, beginning with the English eclipse in 1927 and involving travel to places as dissimilar as the jungle of Malaya (1929), the lake-tangled scrub of Quebec Province (1932), the high plateau of south-west Africa (1940) and the boulder-strewn plains of south-west Sweden (1954).

Dr Jackson was the most unassuming and approachable of men. His genial smile and sometimes slightly quizzical expression and—not least—his delicious Scottish accent (which he retained throughout his life) will be greatly missed by his large circle of friends.

He was married in 1920 and his wife survives him.—W. M. WITCHELL

The writer is indebted to the obituary notice which appeared in *The Times* on December 12, 1958, for many of the foregoing details.