

P. Devadas (1923–2015): An appreciation

The Indian amateur astronomer P. Devadas died in 2015 December. He was a BAA member of long standing, having joined the Association on 1958 November 26. After leaving for a brief period, he rejoined on 1973 November 28 and then remained a member till the time of his death. In the 1990s he was often joined at the telescope by his daughter, Mrs Komala Muruges. I am grateful to her for kindly sending a copy of her father's Autobiography booklet, published in 2010, from which some of the following details of his life are taken.

The subject of this note was born on 1923 June 9 in a Hindu family in the village of Maruvathur, adjacent to the temple town of Vaitheeswarancoil. His parents belonged to agricultural families and were S. Ponnambalam and Sampurnam. Devadas had two older brothers. He became interested in science at High School. Graduating from a Madras college with a BSc degree, Devadas gained paid employment as a Secretary in a British company, which later came into Indian ownership. By 1951 he had married, and had come into contact with the owner of a mirror-grinding machine, and from him acquired books on optics.

Hand-grinding a 15cm mirror and flat, he also made the telescope around it, and silvered the mirror. A 20cm telescope followed. By 1953 we find him building the house where he would spend the rest of his life at 2/3 Chakrapani Road, Madras, overlooking the Guindy racecourse. The instruments would live upon its roof terrace. Devadas had three children with his wife



P. Devadas on the roof terrace of his house at Guindy, Madras, India in 1993 with the 355mm telescope that he constructed himself. The main mirror is f/8, and the polar axis shaft is 10cm in diameter.

in suggesting that the less bright rays were older. He enjoyed some unusually good daytime seeing upon Venus, having the real advantage of low latitude. He reported in detail upon the 1961 western elongation (*Journal*, 73(4), 165–169 (1963)). Soon he would be building his own mirror-grinding machines in his workshop, turning out mirrors up to 36cm diameter for himself and for other astronomers, and eventually trading in complete telescopes under the name Devadas Telescopic, producing more than 4,000 telescopes with the help of several employees. Devadas became a visiting lecturer in Astronomy in several colleges, giving hundreds of talks and courses during his lifetime.

Understandably there would now be a long gap in his contributions to our *Journal*, till he described the total solar eclipse of 1980 February 16 (90(4), 384–386 (1980)). Devadas

Veerammal: a son Chandramohan, and two daughters Pathmini and Komala. In 1957 he visited Kodakal Observatory and gained some experience in solar physics.

Joining several Sections of the BAA in 1958, Devadas was doing most of his work for the Lunar, Mercury & Venus and Mars Sections. He became very interested in the lunar rays, and had his first BAA paper published in 1962 (*Journal*, 72(8), 380–383), though his conclusion that the rays' association with craterlets suggested the latter to be volcanic vents was not correct. He was right

led an expedition of college teachers and students to Raichur in Andhra, taking with him a 15cm solar telescope, and successfully observing totality as well as the shadow bands. The 1995 October 24 total eclipse was observable from India, and again Devadas travelled to see it, though from a different location to that chosen by a large group of BAA members that included the writer. The weather conditions were again excellent.

In the early 1990s Devadas started doing planetary work again and sending the BAA his data. He made some excellent drawings of Mars, some of these being published in the reports of the Mars Section. His largest telescope, a 36cm Newtonian, had been ready for use in 1984. His other main interest at that epoch was Jupiter, and again the low latitude of Madras came in handy in 1994 at the time of the impact of the fragments of Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9. Visual work was done on all of the key nights July 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21. The public were well aware of the special event and arrived in such numbers to look through the telescopes at Chakrapani Road that the assistance of the local police in regulating their attendance was quickly needed! Devadas was able to follow the planet until October 29, then picked it up in the morning sky as early as December 13 (see the *Journal*, 105(3), 109–111 (1995)), where there is a photograph of Devadas with his daughter). Devadas was always a very good correspondent.

In 1996 Devadas published a booklet (with supplements in 2002 and 2006) on the origin of the lunar craters, favouring the volcanic theory. He also wrote a textbook about Astronomy, belonged to several scientific organisations, and received the Tamil Nadu State Award for the popularisation of science. He did a great deal of popularisation of Astronomy, and the newspaper *The Hindu* said this about him in an article: 'He just turned 84, but speaks with the enthusiasm of a teenager.' Devadas had been the first President of the Madras Astronomical Association in 1967, served as the President of the Tamil Nadu Astronomy Association and was elected a Fellow of the RAS in 1995.

In 2006 March the writer was sorry to learn from letters that Devadas had spent five days in hospital after another motorist had caused a serious vehicle accident, while he had been en route to another conference. Although he suffered no serious lasting injury, his hearing was impaired. He had missed the 2005 Mars opposition and was looking forward to the next, but in fact his final observations of the Red Planet were made in 2003. He nevertheless continued with his lectures and optical work.

Helped in his old age by Komala, Devadas died on 2015 December 18. Our condolences go to his surviving children and grandchildren.

Richard McKim

New Honorary Members

Congratulations to the following, who have been members of the Association for a continuous period of fifty years at the start of the 2016–2017 session, and therefore now become Honorary Members:

	<i>Date elected</i>		<i>Date elected</i>
Mr Christopher J. Coplestone	1965 Oct 27	Mr Guy N. Fennimore	1966 Apr 27
Mr Ronald H. Dunnett	1965 Nov 24	Mr Peter R. Macdonald	1966 Apr 27
Mr Robert H. Gordon	1965 Nov 24	Dr Jacqueline Mitton	1966 Apr 27
Mr David Gray	1965 Nov 24	Mr Roger D. Pickard	1966 Apr 27
Mr David R. Keedy	1965 Nov 24	Mr William J. Williamson	1966 Apr 27
Mr Nigel P. Fudge	1965 Dec 29	Mr Michael J. Gainsford	1966 May 25
Dr Richard Miles	1966 Jan 02	Mr Jack Black	1966 May 25
Mr Philip R. Hilburn	1966 Feb 23	Mr William D. McCarthy	1966 Jun 29
Mr Kenneth C. Thomason	1966 Feb 23	Mr George H. Spalding	1966 Jun 29