

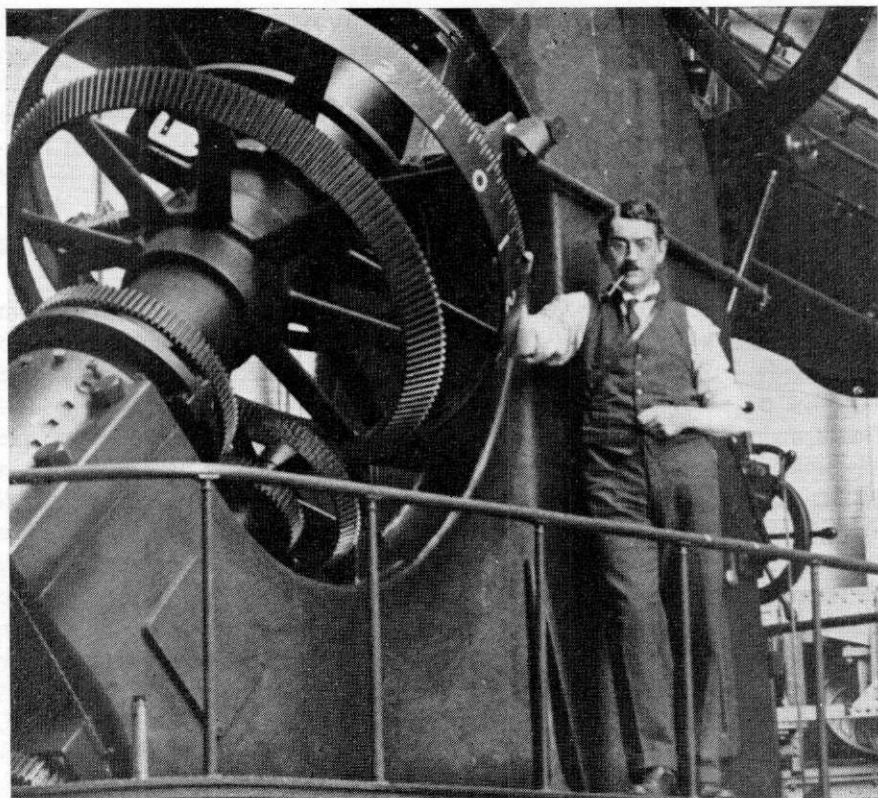
OBITUARY

WILLIAM HERBERT STEAVENSON, 1894–1975

By the death on 1975 September 23 of Dr W. H. Steavenson astronomy has lost one of the foremost amateur observers of the 20th century. Steavenson, known throughout the world as 'Steave', was born 1894 April 26, the youngest child of the Rev. F. R. Steavenson, Rector of Quenington, Gloucestershire. About 1904, owing to the severe illness of his father, the family moved to Cheltenham and Steave went to Cheltenham College, starting in the preparatory school. Here he won a classical scholarship. His interest in astronomy started while he was still at school, and in one of his observation books he noted on 1917 December 25 that this was 'the tenth anniversary of my astronomical birthday' when, in 1907, he was given a small telescope of 45 mm aperture with which he casually observed the Moon, and suddenly realized how much even a small instrument could show him. On 1908 January 1 he was given a 75 mm refractor mounted on a simple equatorial head on a wooden tripod, and started regular observations of the Moon, planets especially Jupiter and Saturn with their satellites, and any novae or comets that were within his reach.

As early as 1910 October 14 a letter from him appeared in the *English Mechanic* (his first publication?) in which he entered into discussion with long-standing contributors such as John McHarg (visibility of Hyperion in a 75 mm telescope; possibility of its variability) and F. Burnerd (detail visible on Saturn on a good night). Further such contributions appeared on 1910 December 16 (possible minute crater on the wall of Aristarchus) and 1911 January 17 (Encke's division in Saturn's ring). A year later (1912 March) he was discussing Nova Geminorum and reporting a meteor showing an interesting trail which he had picked up on the plate while photographing the region of the nova. Clearly the gift of a telescope at the age of 13 was bearing fruit.

In 1911 September he took a series of photographs of Brooks' comet (1911b), and on a plate taken on September 24 he noticed an object, probably another comet. This he confirmed on September 26, and it was recognized that he had made an independent discovery of comet 1911c, to which the names of Quéinisset and Beljawsky were already attached. This discovery by a schoolboy attracted a certain amount of publicity, which was noticed by F. W. Dyson, the Astronomer Royal, who was at that time President of the Royal Astronomical Society. Dyson proposed Steave as a candidate for the fellowship of the RAS, and he was elected on 1912 January 12. This also received some publicity, and by this time Steave was recognized as a very active and persevering amateur astronomer. How persevering we realize from his observation book, where we find that the famous photograph of Brooks' comet was taken with a 2 hour-exposure, with a camera mounted on a 76 mm telescope guided by hand on a simple equatorial mount. There was a simple slow-motion in RA but none in



W. H. Stevenson at the polar axis of the 40-inch Yerkes refractor in 1927. On the platform (lower left) is the small telescope he always took with him when away from home which, after this photograph was taken, he called his "Great Yerkes 1-inch refractor". (From an original print and with notes kindly supplied by Dr D. W. Dewhirst.)

declination so that, when guiding on a comet, it was only possible to follow in declination by the use of an awkwardly placed adjusting screw at the foot of the northern leg of the wooden tripod. In his observation book no. 2, in 1913 December, he lists eight 'chief drawbacks' of his photographic apparatus, yet he was prepared to guide by hand for 2 hours, and again two nights later for $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours to confirm a suspicious object on the first photograph.

Early in 1914 he got a much better mounting for his telescope, and in 1915 he started observing with a 380 mm equatorial reflector, the mirror of which (by Parish) was "good, if not very good". He continued observation during the war while a medical student at Guy's hospital, and during most of 1918-19 he was a civil surgeon at the RAMC Hospital at Millbank. In 1919 he became a Captain in the RAMC and went to Egypt for about 6 months in 1920. Here he made many observations with the simplest of instruments, and set up an excellent transit instrument consisting of two vertical threads set on the meridian. With

this he was able to maintain fairly accurate time keeping. He left the army in 1920, and early in 1921 started to erect a 150 mm Wray equatorial refractor, the gift of J. E. Drower, in his garden at West Norwood. This telescope was dismantled again in 1921 October, as he and his family moved temporarily to Streatham Hill, but they returned to another, permanent, house at West Norwood in 1922 April and the Wray was erected again on May 1. Here he had 17 years observing, up to the start of the second war, broken only by his visit to South Africa in 1930 January, where he spent six months surveying the seeing conditions at the possible site for the new Radcliffe Observatory.

Soon after his return from South Africa the Wray was supplanted by a 500 mm reflector presented to him by the maker, Mr J. H. Hindle. Many years ago Steave told me that this was the result of an argument between him and Hindle about the possibility of making a satisfactory mirror with a focal ratio of $f/4$. Hindle maintained that it was possible, and made the mirror as proof. He then said it was a pity not to mount it, and made the tube and mounting in his engineering works, and presented the whole instrument to Steave. With this new instrument he was well equipped for his observations of old and new novae, comets, and the satellites of Uranus which he had started observing with the Wray. It is clear from his observation books that very few fine nights were wasted. With the problem of handling such a large mirror for silvering, Steave quickly organized a 'silvering gang' amongst his friends, consisting of one foreman (Steave), two lifters (Will Hay and F. M. Holborn) and one 'Screwboy' (G. E. Patston). Later I joined as a lifter in place of Will Hay who retired. Minutes were kept of each meeting, in the hope that any faults might be corrected next time.

In the mid-thirties Hindle proposed to make a 760 mm mirror and mount it for Steave; this was started, and the first tests of the mirror were made in 1936. By this time the lights of London were becoming so bright that Steave felt that a 760 mm would be wasted there, and he obtained permission to install the new telescope in the grounds of the University Observatory at Cambridge. A dome was built and the Hindle 760 mm reflector was mounted in Cambridge in the summer of 1939, but with the outbreak of war in September Steave moved to Cheltenham where he stayed until the end of the war, helping some doctor friends who were very short-handed in their practice. In the summer of 1945 he moved to Cambridge and started observing with the new telescope on August 10. Though he had to cycle about $2\frac{1}{2}$ km to the observatory he missed very few opportunities of observing during the next ten years. He continued his observations of novae with unabated vigour; he also went back to the satellites of Uranus and, with the greater light-grasp available, started making observations of position as well as brightness. His home-made position angle micrometer, described in what was probably his last major publication (*J. Brit. astr. Ass.*, **74**, 54) was a model of simplicity with the added advantage that (to quote his own words) "it cost no pounds no shillings and nuppence".

In 1956, at the age of 62, he decided to give up observing and go back to Cheltenham. There seemed no adequate reason for this but, looking back,

one wonders if his left eye (he lost the right eye in boyhood through an accident) was beginning to feel the strain, and he felt that he was no longer able to observe as well as before. We shall never know but, whatever the reason, he gave his telescope to the Cape Observatory and went back to the Cotswold country of his origin. There he stayed, leading a rather lonely life, until 1971 when he went to live with a nephew and niece in South Marston, Wilts, where he spent the rest of his life.

Steeve was elected a member of the British Astronomical Association on 1913 May 28. He was acting Director of the Saturn Section 1917–1919, Director of the Mars Section 1922–1930 and Director of the Instruments and Observing Methods Section 1932–1961. Thus for 44 years he was almost continuously on the Council of the Association. This last post, with the Instruments and Observing Methods Section, was one for which he was ideally suited, with his immense practical experience and his knack of giving simple lucid explanations. I am told that he used to answer 200 or more letters every year—a total of more than 6,000 during his term of office. There must be many members who will remember him with gratitude.

The first public recognition of Steeve's outstanding observational work came when he was elected President of the British Astronomical Association for the years 1926–28. In 1928 he was awarded the Jackson-Gwilt Medal of the Royal Astronomical Society. I think he regarded as his highest honour his election as President of the RAS for the years 1957–59. He told me once that he feared he had missed achieving this honour as he was getting too old. Fortunately others thought differently. In 1961 he was awarded the Goodacre Medal of the BAA. I am told that his name had been put forward for this award many times before, but Steeve had always refused it as long as he was a Member of Council.

He was Gresham Professor in Astronomy from 1946 to 1964, and was astronomical correspondent to *The Times* from 1938 to 1964.

So much for Steeve the astronomer—what about Steeve the man? When I first met him he was a young man, lately out of school, who seemed to have a gift for knowing everyone and making friends wherever he went. He had a highly developed sense of humour, entirely his own, which strangers often found puzzling. Though a purist in matters of speech, for others, he reserved the right to alter words himself to make a small pun. Thus, throughout his life, 'anti-cyclone' was always "uncle-cyclone", and 'hygiene' became "lowgiene". On picking up an apple in the garden which had a hole in it, he would point to the hole saying "point one inch aperture by Grubb" an allusion that puzzled non-astronomical friends. He must have had hundreds of such jokes, which lasted him throughout his life.

Steeve was a remarkable mimic, both in action and speech. In his younger days he had a small dark moustache, and his imitation of the early Charlie Chaplin's walk was nearly perfect. He was a great admirer of Walt Disney, and could imitate many of the 'voices' from those films, especially Mickey Mouse. One evening in 1946 I was sitting in his room in Cambridge while he sorted out

an immense box of letters collected over the past many years. It was uncanny to hear T. E. R. Phillips and A. C. D. Crommelin, both dead by then, come to life again in their letters read to me by Steave in their own voices.

Dr R. L. Waterfield tells me that the Steavensons were a musical family and that Steave himself played the horn when young. I knew him as one who was fond of some music, chiefly that of Handel and Bach. I have however seldom heard him listen to music without contributing a musical background of his own. He had a good ear, and possessed a truly remarkable ability to whistle two notes at once, completely independently, so that he could whistle a tune in two parts. This I have heard many times, and it was done with perfect accuracy. I am told, again by Dr Waterfield, that one of his two brothers had the same facility, so that the two could whistle a tune in four parts. It is sad that there is no recording of this. Another way in which his musical talent appeared was in his search for 'boomoriums' (this is his own word). If he entered a building that was strange to him you might see him move over to some recess or corner where he would gently hum on a steadily rising pitch. If he had chosen his position well he would find the right note that would set up a reverberation audible through the whole building. I have heard him boom in many unlikely places, but he always maintained that the best boomorium was in the North Porch of Tewkesbury Abbey.

For many years he did *The Times* crossword every day, and very good he was at it too. Even on railway journeys, with no books of reference, he would usually finish it between Cambridge and London. He always admitted that he was weak on words derived from quotations, as he had never read any poetry since school, but in such cases he had a knack of making an inspired guess, on the grounds that "poets may say anything". In my family making such a guess and writing it in is known as 'doing a Steave'; but we do look at the answer the next day, which he never did! In literature Steave was a great authority on Sherlock Holmes, and could hold his own with any other experts on this subject. Another book which he knew by heart and from which he would often quote was *Vice Versa*. In his later years he read large numbers of detective stories, but apart from these I think he was content with astronomical books, especially old ones.

He had simple tastes in flowers, as indeed he had in most things. In his garden at West Norwood he always grew sunflowers, the bigger the better. He saved seed from these which he surreptitiously sprinkled about in the gardens of his friends. He loved to be driven out to look for the early purple orchis in Hardwick wood, or the oxlips in Knapwell wood, and in the early summer he would sometimes go back to Quenington to look for the butterfly orchis. But throughout his life, and especially in later years, his favourite was the common dandelion, which he loved to see in the fields and at the roadside. At his funeral last September there was a small bunch of dandelions on the coffin, put there by his niece who had looked after him for the last four years of his life.

We shall not look upon his like again.

R. /M. FRY