

WILLIAM ALFRED PARR

William Alfred Parr was the son of William Parr, a member of a Westmorland family and East India Merchant with his business in Gracechurch Street. His first home was in Hampstead, where his family life with his parents and sister was of the happiest. His mother was a brilliant pianist, and through her care his natural aptitude for music, which became the dominant factor in his life, was fostered and developed. His general education, too, was well provided for, early tuition by a German governess followed later by long periods spent abroad—especially in Germany and Italy—giving him that facility in Continental languages which so greatly helped to broaden his knowledge of men and literature, and of which during the Great War he was able to make effective use for the

benefit of his country. Astronomers, too, profited by his linguistic powers. His help was invaluable to the delegates from this country to the meeting of the International Astronomical Union at Rome in 1922, and—his assiduity in reading foreign scientific publications keeping him abreast of scientific work on the Continent—he was able to communicate valuable reviews of German and Italian books to the *Journal* of the B.A.A. His knowledge of languages was also of great help to him as Librarian of the Association—a post which he held for several years.

In his school days he studied at Stuttgart, the capital and great educational centre of Württemberg, and later took his Ph.D. degree at the University of Berlin. His love of music, however, was too strong to allow him to follow permanently a purely business career, and accordingly, after working for some time in the London Agency of the Deutsche Bank, he returned to Berlin to prepare for a musical profession. Entering the Hochschule für Musik he studied under Professor Heinrich Barth the distinguished pianist, and attended the weekly practices conducted by Professor Joseph Joachim, the great master of the violin and head of the college. On completing his course and obtaining his diploma he moved with his mother and sister—his father was at that time in America—to Florence, where he made numerous friends among the English and American residents and obtained many pupils. His mother died in 1899, and in 1903 he married in Florence Miss Agnes Beatrice Hitchins, daughter of Colonel Charles Tatham Hitchins.

Leaving Italy in 1910 he returned to London, where he continued his profession as a teacher of the piano and also engaged in literary work. He revised Bannister's *Text-book on Music* and contributed articles on the two subjects of music and astronomy, which he always regarded as closely connected, to *Knowledge* and other publications.

When the war with Germany broke out, being already beyond fighting age, he offered his services to the War Office as an interpreter either on the lines of communication or elsewhere, and was assigned to the Post Office censorship in London. At the end of the war he obtained the position of foreign science reader and librarian at Messrs. Vickers Ltd.—the armament builders at Westminster.

But it is as an astronomer and member of the B.A.A. that we shall specially remember him. His love of astronomy had begun quite early when his father—during a short sojourn of the family in New York—showed him stars through his small tourist telescope, and the interest once aroused remained a controlling factor in his life to the end. Among phenomena of special interest which he observed while still at school at Stuttgart were the transit of Venus on 1882 December 6, and the great comet of the same year. He also—about that time—began recording and charting sunspots with the aid of the small telescope with which his father had first introduced him to the stars. In 1891 he obtained a 3-inch altazimuth refractor to which he soon added Zöllner star and Hilger prism

spectroscopes, spectroscopy and solar phenomena having a special attraction for him.

While on the Continent he visited many of the principal observatories and became personally acquainted with a number of the leading Continental astronomers. In Florence he was in close friendship with A. W. Benn—a man of wide scholarship and student of Greek philosophy, who was also a member of the B.A.A. and the possessor of a good equipment of astronomical instruments. He also became very friendly with Professor Antonio Abetti—then Director of the Arcetri Observatory—and his family, from whom he received much kindness.

One incident of his life in Florence may be given particular notice. The Cathedral contains the great gnomon built into the sill of the southern window of the lantern of the Cathedral by Paolo Toscanelli about 1461 for the purpose of transmitting a beam of sunlight through an orifice on to the floor 360 feet below. It was Toscanelli's intention to determine the obliquity of the ecliptic by measuring the position of the spot of light on the day of the summer solstice. At the solstice of 1905 Parr obtained leave for the removal of the brass covering which normally protects the solstitial marble disc, and in the presence of the British Consul General and a party of English residents the observation was repeated.

Shortly before leaving Florence in 1910 he had the opportunity of observing Halley's Comet, which he saw under splendid conditions. Whereas in the British Isles, in consequence of adverse circumstances, its appearance was anything but impressive, in the Italian sky, it presented a magnificent spectacle with its long straight tail.

On settling again in England he was able to take a more active part in the proceedings of the B.A.A. of which he had been a member since 1893, and to which he had contributed numerous papers. He also soon became an energetic member of the Hampstead Scientific Society, and made good use of its astronomical equipment.

He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society in 1913, and at one time he served as a member of its library committee. He also represented the Society as delegate at the celebrations of the eleventh centenary of the founding of the University of Pavia in 1925. But it was to the B.A.A. that his activities were specially devoted. His work as Librarian, which he undertook in 1919, was a great source of interest and pleasure to him as well as of benefit to the members attending the Library; and he was much gratified at being elected President of the Association for the years 1932-34. At the conclusion of his term of office he again became Librarian and continued to hold the post till illness compelled his retirement from it last year.

In 1927 he moved from London to St. Albans, where he set up a small but beautifully equipped observatory containing a 4-inch Cooke photovisual refractor with spectroscope for solar work. He has bequeathed this to St. Albans High School for Girls.

In general, it may be said that his contributions to astronomy

were mainly on the historical and literary side. He had not sufficient time to devote to systematic and continuous observational work, even if his inclination and instrumental equipment had always been adapted to it. But his reading was wide and he possessed an extensive knowledge of scientific literature from the writings of the early philosophers to the latest researches in astronomical physics; and the reviews he contributed to the *Journal* from time to time were of great value to many readers. The amateur who devotes all the time he can spare to telescopic work needs to be kept informed of what is being done in other fields and is greatly indebted to those who supply his requirements in this respect.

One of his last reviews was on *Aristotle, Galileo and the Tower of Pisa*, by Professor Lane Cooper, published in the *Journal* for October 1935. It is of particular interest as dealing with the legend—which seems to be quite unfounded—of Galileo's experiment with falling weights from the leaning tower.

In his desire to promote a general knowledge of astronomy Parr from time to time, in communications to the Association and elsewhere, urged the desirability of setting up a Planetarium in London, knowing full well from his knowledge of those he had seen in Germany how great is their educational value.

In his public utterances he was always ready and polished, and he made an excellent President. He also had a facile pen. The writer has had the opportunity of reading the autobiographical notes he had been putting together during his last illness and which extend to the year 1927. They are beautifully composed and bring out well a striking feature of his retrospect. "I have written this sketch of my life partly in response to a suggestion made by my son when we were travelling together through Germany in 1926, and partly, if I may so put it, as an act of grateful acknowledgment for all the benefits of love and devotion I have received as well as for the many beautiful things it has been my privilege to see in this wonderful world." And that was his attitude of mind throughout his long and distressing illness. The writer of this notice had the privilege of seeing him from time to time up to within about a week of his death, and found him always cheerful, with his interest in B.A.A. affairs unabated, mentally as alert as ever, full of gratitude, and full of courage.—T. E. R. P.