PUBLICATIONS OF THE

WILLIAM HENRY PICKERING, 1858–1938

By Leon Campbell

The death of William Henry Pickering at Mandeville, Jamaica, B.W.I., on January 16 removed from the ranks of planetary observers of the old school one of its best-known members. Although within a month of having completed eighty years, he was active to the last, as he would have wished to be.

He was born in the ancestral home on Beacon Hill in Boston, Massachusetts, February 15, 1858, the son of Edward and Charlotte (Hammond) Pickering, and the great-grandson of Timothy Pickering of Revolutionary fame. Their lineage dated back to John Pickering, who settled in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1636. His older brother was Edward C. Pickering, for forty years the director of Harvard Observatory.

Both William H. and Edward C. began their scientific careers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the field of physics. William H. Pickering graduated from this institution in one of its earliest classes, that of 1879, and was immediately appointed assistant, later instructor, in the department of physics, an appointment which he held until 1887, when he joined the staff of Harvard Observatory as assistant professor of astronomy. Even while connected with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he collaborated with Professor Edward C. Pickering at the Observatory in pioneer work with dry plates, and helped to lay the foundation for the extensive photographic survey of the sky which today is the largest in the world.

Although William H. started his astronomical work in the field of stellar photography, most of his research, especially in later years, was concerned with visual observations of the Moon and planets, in which field he was doubtless best known.

In the pursuit of his investigations of the Sun, Moon, and planets, he traveled far and wide, to southern and western United States, the Azores, Hawaii; Europe, Chile, and Peru, and the West Indies. He was responsible for the erection of the Boyden station of the Harvard Observatory at Arequipa, Peru,
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on the site previously tested and selected by Professor S. I. Bailey. Here he made special studies, under excellent seeing conditions, of the planets Venus and Mars.

In 1900 in Mandeville, Jamaica, with a telescope 135 feet in focal length and 12 inches in aperture at his disposal, he made the first large photographic atlas of the Moon, consisting of some eighty plates with descriptive notes. His lunar observations by visual methods led him to detect regular changes on the Moon's surface, particularly in such locations as Eratosthenes and Linné. He attributed such changes—with arguments not always convincing to other astronomers—to a sort of hoar-frost condition dependent on the lunar day. The excellent seeing conditions at Mandeville permitted better observation of such faint lunar markings than was then possible at most observing stations.

In 1899, Professor Pickering discovered, from specially obtained photographs, the ninth satellite of Saturn, Phoebe, and showed that it, unlike most members of the solar system, possessed a retrograde motion. He was convinced, also, of the existence of Themis, a tenth satellite, but the astronomical world as a whole was reluctant to accept this discovery without further proof; such additional proof has never been obtained.

In 1911 Professor Pickering established a substation of the Harvard Observatory in Jamaica in order that he might make more detailed observations of the planets, of Jupiter's satellites, and of the Moon. In 1925, upon his retirement to emeritus rank, this station became his private enterprise, and, save for occasional visits to his native haunts, he spent the remainder of his life in Mandeville, following whatever line of research his fancy dictated.

Probably Professor Pickering is best known, to the amateur astronomer at least, for his continued studies of the surface markings on Mars. His reports, published in Popular Astronomy, cover the years 1914–1930, and his drawings of this interesting planet are works of art, as well as a progressive study of Martian seasons and changes.

As a computer, especially by graphical methods, William H. Pickering attained considerable success. He not only computed
the probable location of the planet which later proved to be Pluto, but he predicted the probable location of other trans-Neptunian objects similar to Pluto. As to the reality of the existence of one or more of these, only future observation can demonstrate.

He was active in the formation of the Appalachian Mountain Club and not only scaled the heights of Half Dome in the Yosemite, and El Misti in Peru, but also one hundred other peaks in various parts of the world.

Recognition of his scientific work took the form of the Lalande Prize in 1905, the Janssen Medal in 1909, two medals of the Astronomical Society of Mexico, and election as Chevalier of the Order of Saint James, Portugal. He was a member of the American Astronomical Society, the British Astronomical Society, Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Associate of the Royal Astronomical Society, honorary member of the Astronomical Society of Mexico, and a life member of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific. He was also a member of two commissions of the International Astronomical Union, numbers 16 and 17, Physical Observations of Planets, and Lunar Nomenclature. He holds the distinction, with his brother Edward C., of having a lunar crater named in his honor.


Professor Pickering is survived by his wife, of Mandeville, Jamaica; a son, William T., of San Marino, California, and a daughter, Mrs. Merton S. Harland, of Alberta, Canada, besides several grandchildren.

To those of us who were more intimately associated with William H. Pickering, his death carries with it a sense of personal loss. He will long be remembered as a gentleman of gracious and kindly manner, ever ready to explain and demonstrate the facts of astronomy, as well as to relate his own experiences.
as an astronomical observer. His life may be said to have been devoted to a profession which was also his hobby, a combination that gave him a full half-century of activity and of mature satisfaction as to something really accomplished.

Harvard Observatory
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