

OBITUARY

FRANCIS JOHN SELLERS

The Association has lost in the death on 1959 October 22 of Frank Sellers one of its most indefatigable members. From boyhood he was always interested in astronomy but did not take it up seriously until middle life. He was born on 1875 January 7 at 125 Westbourne Grove, London, and was Educated at Emanuel School, Wandsworth Common. In 1888 he was too young to take the matriculation examination but was third in class amongst his colleagues, all of whom were over sixteen years of age.

He left school when he was thirteen and became a junior clerk to a firm of City merchants, but the hours were so long and he generally finished his work after eight o'clock at night with the result that his health could not stand the strain. In 1889 he became assistant to the London Manager of Brown and May, a firm of agricultural engineers at Devizes, which post he retained for two years. He then entered the Finsbury Technical College and took a course on Mechanical Engineering and passed out with a First Class Certificate. Then in 1892 he was apprenticed to Tangyes Ltd of Birmingham, a firm of gas engineers. As a boy he was very clever at model making and made scale models of the old South Eastern and Chatham Railway locomotives, and it was soon evident his talents were such that he should devote his business career to engineering; but while he was in Birmingham in lodgings he took up the violin, an art which throughout his long life was a source of never-failing enjoyment and, when he moved to London in 1895 as manager to a Birmingham firm of manufacturers, he studied the technicalities of the violin at Battersea Polytechnic. This was to bring him great joy and happiness as he came in contact with Kate Runciman (a niece of the late Lord Runciman) whom he married in 1903.

His period with the Birmingham firm convinced him the work was not quite in line with the career he had chosen, so he resigned and in 1896 joined the firm of Capel & Co. of Dalston, London, who were manufacturers of gas and oil engines. Here he was engaged in designing, testing gas and oil engines, early motor-cars and general research work. On the death of Mr Capel he was appointed Assistant Manager and in 1902 General Manager with full control of the technical and commercial side of the business. A very considerable export business was worked up with Germany, France, Sweden, Australia, and New Zealand and other countries and colonies which was very successful. Sellers designed and completed a new series of continental-type gas engines and suction gas plants which did exceptionally well in all parts of the world. The business was now almost entirely export and was increasing rapidly until the 1914 war put a stop to it all. During the war the firm manufactured shells but a very promising business was wrecked.

After the war, export business having gone, a new opening was gradually built up mostly in petrol and paraffin high-speed engines and electric lighting sets for country houses. In 1925 the business was taken over by Sellers and a colleague and a new Limited Company formed, but the Grid system for supplying electricity all over the country soon crippled the business and when an opportunity occurred Sellers decided to retire in 1928, but for some years he carried on a private consulting and contracting business.

From boyhood Sellers had always been interested in astronomy but could not take it up seriously until 1909. He had occasion to visit some optical works where his firm were doing some work and picked up a 3-inch objective by Ross and built his first telescope. As a budding astronomer he was truly caught and soon added a 6-inch mirror and then an 8½-inch. He converted an attic in his house at Muswell Hill into an observatory and designed and built his first solar spectroscope. In 1920 he joined the Association and up to his death he was a most versatile member. His first paper was published in 1925 entitled 'A plea for the Glaciation Theory of the Lunar Surface' (Vol. 36, p. 51). He occupied the office of Secretary from 1928 to 1938, Director of the Solar Section 1937–1951, and was President 1940–1942. During his Presidency he undertook the Editorship of the *Journal*, and it is safe to say it is doubtful if it would have survived had Sellers not stepped into the breach and kept it going. To many members the *Journal* is the Association since so many members live at too great a distance to attend the meetings. The Jubilee of the Association took place during his Presidency and he conceived the idea it would be fitting to publish a short history of the B.A.A. to commemorate the first fifty years. Another signpost was also passed in 1942 when the Association moved from Sion College to Burlington House for the monthly meetings, a move which originated with Prof. Sydney Chapman.

Sellers's two Presidential Addresses were devoted to work on the Sun, the first dealing with his own conception of the Sun and its mechanism. The second address dealt exhaustively with the spectroscope.

Mention should be made of his Solar Section Memoir, in which he described very fully the spectroheliocope and his own design for oscillating slits as an alternative to the Anderson prisms which are incorporated in the Hale instruments ('Memoirs', *B.A.A.*, vol. 37, part 2).

When the Rev M. Davidson wrote his book *Astronomy for Everyman*, he invited Sellers to write the chapter on the Sun, a review which, so far as space allowed is very thorough.

Besides his musical attainments which he shared with his wife, he was also an artist in water colours—a talent they both shared—and spent many holidays sketching, but after his wife's death in 1949 he gave up painting except for one memorable occasion when he was invited to join a party of astronomers in a B.O.A.C. Hermes aircraft to view the total eclipse of the Sun on 1954 June 30 from the air north of the Shetland Islands, and he made several sketches recording his impressions. He was then nearly eighty years of age and had never flown before but the trip was most successful and he

enjoyed every minute of it. To the end of his life he maintained his love of music and every week took part in musical evenings with his friends and these gatherings were, as always, a source of joy and inspiration to him.

The Association awarded him, in 1945, the Goodacre Medal and Gift 'as a mark of our admiration for your astronomical work and of our appreciation of the valuable services you have rendered the Association'.

He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society in 1927 and served on the Council during several Sessions, and Vice-President from 1944 to 1946.

A. M. NEWBEGIN

The writer is indebted to his brother, Mr W. G. Sellers, for much of the foregoing information about the early life of F. J. Sellers and to some autobiographical notes found amongst the subject of this obituary's papers.

HUGH PERCIVAL WILKINS

Hugh Percival Wilkins died at his home at Bexleyheath in Kent, on 1960 January 23. A few weeks previously he had suffered a heart attack, but it had been thought that he was making good progress towards recovery, and his sudden relapse came as a great shock.

Wilkins was born on 1896 December 4 at Carmarthen, in South Wales. He was educated at Carmarthen Grammar School, and soon showed a marked aptitude for engineering. His love of astronomy also became evident while he was still a boy, and he began making telescopes. First he fitted small lenses into cardboard tubes, as so many boys have done before and since; then he undertook mirror-grinding, and began serious observation. The original drawings in his notebook date back to 1909.

He joined the Army during the 1914-18 war, and then continued to follow his engineering profession; for some years he remained in Wales, but then moved to south England, and settled in Kent. At his Barnehurst home he set up a 12½-inch reflector, and commenced his main astronomical work. Though he made planetary observations from time to time, he concentrated almost entirely upon the Moon, and became a regular contributor to scientific periodicals—including the *English Mechanic*. By 1924 he had completed and published a lunar map 60 inches in diameter, and eight years later undertook an even larger map to a scale of 300 inches to the Moon's diameter. A prodigious amount of work went into this project; except for occasional periods of ill-health, Wilkins was nearly always hard at work at his telescope whenever the sky was clear and the Moon visible. The map was finished in 1951, and he then undertook a further revision, which was completed in 1954. Yet another revision was planned, though unhappily he did not live to complete it.

Wilkins joined the British Astronomical Association in 1936, and wrote frequent papers for the *Journal*, always upon lunar matters. In 1941 he gave up practical engineering and joined the Ministry of Supply; he remained a

Civil Servant for the next eighteen years, and retired from the Ministry only at the end of 1959.

By the end of the war, the Lunar Section was almost non-existent. Wilkins was appointed Director, and given the task of re-building. He accomplished this magnificently; his personal enthusiasm was inspiring, and under his guidance the Section was transformed into an efficient valuable organization comprising over one hundred members. During his Directorship, which began in 1946 and ended ten years later, the Section accomplished a great deal of work. Numerous papers and reports appeared in the *Journal*; two *Memoirs* were produced; and at Wilkins' instigation the Section began to publish its own periodical, *The Moon*, which still flourishes under the skilful and vigorous editorship of F. H. Thornton, for whose unfailing support Wilkins was always quick to express his gratitude. In 1956 the new Director, E. A. Whitaker, inherited an active and smooth-running Section instead of the scattered and disorganized group which Wilkins had taken over ten years before.

During his Directorship Wilkins moved from Barnehurst to Bexleyheath, and his 12½-inch reflector was replaced by a 15½-inch. Even this did not satisfy him; his interest in charting fine lunar detail was as great as ever, and he began work upon a 22-inch mirror, which he had hoped to complete and instal by the end of 1961. He did, moreover, carry out extensive observations with very large telescopes in both Europe and America.

In other ways, too, his astronomical activities were growing steadily. He lectured; made numerous broadcasts and television appearances, and undertook a lecture tour across the United States. His old interest in geology re-asserted itself, and he descended the crater of Vesuvius in order to take some magnificent colour photographs. Though by now senior in age, he was essentially modern in his outlook, and served on the Council of the British Interplanetary Society. After retiring from the Directorship of the B.A.A. Lunar Section, he founded the International Lunar Society, and became its first President. Unfortunately his health, never particularly good, gave him increasing trouble; it was not in his nature to curtail his activities, and only a day or so before his death he was still busy dictating the last parts of his seventh astronomical book. He is survived by his wife and daughter.

Wilkins was above all a kindly man; he was unfailingly courteous, and could never understand those who were not. Many young (and, for that matter, older) enthusiasts have good cause to be grateful for his help and encouragement. The deep sense of personal loss felt by the present writer, who worked with him for twenty years on astronomical matters, will be shared by Wilkins' many friends all over the world.

PATRICK MOORE