

HENRY C. KING (1915–2005)



The scholar who gave us *The history of the telescope* (1955) and *Geared to the stars: The evolution of planetariums, orreries and astronomical clocks* (1978) died in England in secluded retirement on 30 July 2005. These two books are veritable monuments of a rare kind, and they will remain as classics in our field. Henry King was also involved in the dissemination of knowledge of astronomy amongst the general public through serious planetarium presentations over several decades. The history of his subject was almost as important to him as the subject itself: in 1956 he published *The background to astronomy* and in 1964 *Exploration of the universe: From the astrolabe to the radio telescope*.

Born in London on 9 March 1915, Henry's father was a baker and his mother a hobby artist. His interest in history was aroused at an early age by a teacher who taught nothing but the history of the Pharaohs year after year. The King family moved to Marlow, where Henry was educated at Sir William Borlase School. His interest in astronomy was aroused when his father gave him Robert Ball's *The story of the*

heavens for his thirteenth birthday. With assistance from an optician and his science teacher he constructed the first of several telescopes and began to explore the night sky. In the late 1930s the family moved to Slough, and Henry made contact with Lady Constance Lubbock, grand-daughter of William Herschel, and obtained permission to use books, letters and papers in the Herschel Library. He was not able to attend university but this did not prevent him from doing a B.Sc. in astronomy and mathematics at the University of London *by correspondence*, followed by an M.Sc. and Ph.D. in the history and philosophy of science. During the War years, he was Inspector of aeronautical instruments for the Ministry of Aircraft Production and he cycled from Slough to Ruislip and back several times a week to lecture on meteorology and air-navigation to Army Training Corps cadets. In its first manifestation *The history of the telescope* served as his doctoral thesis in 1951. The work is the more remarkable in that it was based on resources restricted to London and Oxford or made available at Slough Public Library.

Henry married Mary *née* Wilson in 1939 and the couple had two children in the early 1940s. At the same time he built an observatory in his garden at Slough, fitted with a sliding roof and housing a 9-inch reflector that he had made himself. His observations of variable stars were contributed to the British Astronomical Association (BAA).

In the 1950s Henry was Senior Lecturer in ophthalmic optics at the Northampton College of Advanced Technology in London. In 1956, now residing at Amersham, he became the first (and last) *Scientific* Director of the new London Planetarium. During 1958–60 he was President of the BAA. The commercial interests of those administering the London Planetarium (Madame Tussaud's) were completely at variance with his own interests in astronomy education, revealed in a large number of popular books. It was no small relief to him in 1966 to be invited to be the first Director of the new McClaughlin Planetarium in Toronto, a serious institution securely linked to a museum and a university. During his time in Toronto he wrote *Geared to the stars*, in collaboration with John R. Millburn. The two scholars maintained contact over many years thereafter and Henry was co-author of Millburn's *Wheelwright of the heavens: The life and work of James Ferguson, FRS* (1988). (They died within a few weeks of each other.)

Henry and his wife retired back in England in 1980, surrounded by books and gardens. His interests changed to social life in Victorian England, and he remained an avid reader until he was about 90. His wife died in 1989, and he is survived by a son, David, a daughter, Margaret, five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

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