

By Margaret Cairns

OBSERVATORY'S ASTRONOMER... WILLIAM REID

HOW many people are aware that Rondebosch holds a significant place in the world of astronomy and that the link concerns the planet Saturn?

To most Capetonians the word Observatory means the famous institution standing on the little knoll between the Liesbeek and Black rivers at the suburb of Observatory which obtained its name initially from the presence of what was once known as the Royal Observatory but is now called the South African National Astronomical Observatory.

Although still the headquarters of the astronomical world in South Africa the ever-increasing street and other illumination in this part of the Peninsula, together with the inevitable pollution of the atmosphere due to the presence of man and his way of living today, has forced the transfer of the observational section of the enterprise to the little town of Sutherland lying high on the Roggeveld Mountains of the Karoo. This field station outside the town enables observations to be made in the clear atmosphere of the isolated plateau on which it is situated.

The building complex at Observatory remains, as has been said, the centre of the system with all administration and records contained in these buildings whose foundation stone was laid in 1828. An interesting morning spent with the librarian and these records resulted in finally tracking down the details of this elusive William Reid whose name, coupled with his achievement is still mentioned under the Encyclopaedia Britannica entry on Saturn.

Amateurs have always played an important part in the world of astronomy and William Reid of Pitcaple in Aberdeenshire made a place for himself, and Rondebosch, in the history of this science.

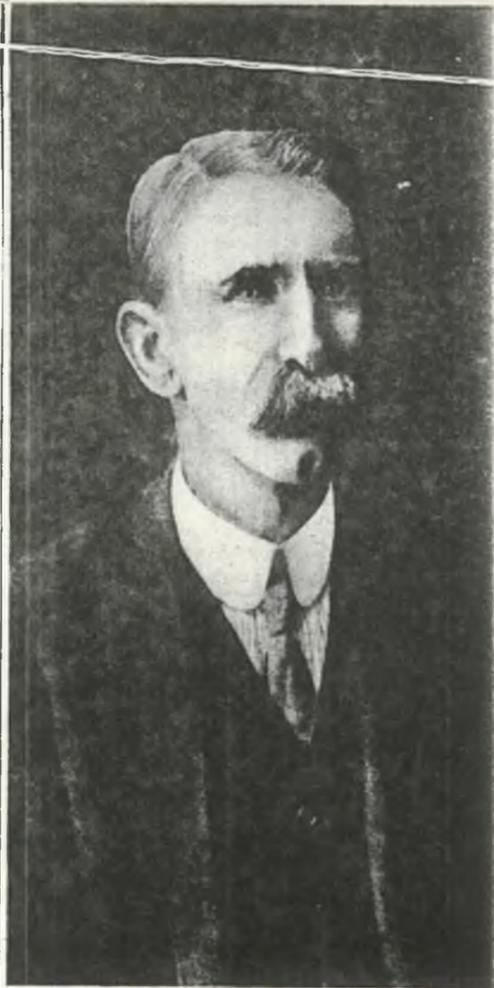
Like many Scots he possessed a keen and enquiring mind and his interest in astronomy was awakened at the age of thirteen. However with little chance of developing this hobby he turned temporarily to entomology and so great became his expertise that a rare Scottish moth was named after him and, before he left his native land, a small book on the moths and butterflies of Aberdeenshire was published under his name.

When still a young man his health dictated that he live in a less rigorous climate than that of Scotland and he decided to join his brother-in-law, James Chalmers on the staff of what was then John Forrest and Co, millers, now SASKO on the Belmont Bridge at Rondebosch. Milling filled his days but his nights were devoted to astronomy which had now practically taken over his life. At his home, Glen Logie, almost at the apex of the triangle formed by Palmyra and Camp Ground Roads, he set up what is referred to as "Reid's Observatory" and he very soon gathered round him others with similar interests. Night after night (When DO amateur astronomers as opposed to the professional variety, sleep? from dusk till dawn his telescopes were trained on the skies. On the night of March 14 1920, he and his son and two fellow observers, Donald McIntyre and J Dutton, made the discovery that the A ring encircling the planet Saturn was translucent. That the B ring had similar properties had been observed but three years previously. This exciting finding of Reid and his friend while working in his amateur observatory made astronomical history and the name Reid and Saturn are forever linked in this connection. McIntyre, also of Scottish descent, was then only at the beginning of a long and distinguished career, also as an amateur, in the same field and he too became an international figure in this fascinating science.

This event was not Reid's only noteworthy achievement. His knowledge of the southern skies was very extensive indeed with a particular interest in comets. The discovery of no less than six of these heavenly bodies has been attributed to his expertise.

He received many medals and prizes for his work but his culminating triumph was the receipt of the Jackson Gwilt medal and gift which was presented to him only a few months before his death in 1928, thus honouring a man who had been a foundation member of the old Cape Astronomical Society and who had served as a council member and also president on many occasions.

Reid's enthusiasm was infectious and his encouragement to younger men enabled them in later life to reach heights they might not have attained had it not been for his inspiration. He was a villager of the best type and one who should be better known.



William Reid

Letters to the Editor

Famous neighbour

SIR: I was very interested in reading the article in Tatler of July 26 1984 regarding Mr William Reid's activity in Amateur Astronomy, as when I was a young boy of around 11 or 12 years of age, I lived next door to him for quite a few years.

I knew the Reid family very well indeed, there were five children, one boy and 4 girls, and it was due to one of the girls, Jean, persuading her father to show myself and my brother, the view of the heavens through his telescope, which I believe was the largest privately owned telescope in South Africa.

I was a member of the

4th Rondebosch Scouts and Mr Reid used to give us lectures in Astronomy to obtain the Astronomy Badge. These lectures took place in his private observatory which was situated in the corner of his garden.

I well remember Mr Reid dashing over to our place in the early hours of the morning to use our telephone to report the discovery of his first comet. He was very excited indeed, as he had been searching the heavens for years. By the way he lived in Newlands not Rondebosch.

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