

Epilogue.

We have now to conclude our brief look into the life, and works of William Frederick Denning. The patchwork that constitutes the legacy of this great amateur observer is by no means finished, but at least some structure and colour has been added to its form.

The profile that has emerged places Denning among the great practitioners of 19th century astronomy. He was unflinching in his enthusiasm for observing, and he found beauty in the world both above and around him. As Sir Robert Ball (President of the Royal Astronomical Society, 1897 - 1899) once remarked of Denning, "who among us would not be proud to imitate his single hearted and enthusiastic devotion to the discovery of truth." Indeed, to Denning the search for truth was paramount. His search, however, was not always tempered by a critical rationalism. He was a Baconian scientist in the truest sense of its meaning, and he accepted nothing other than that which he believed he saw. It was, however, a lack of critical reasoning that allowed Denning to formulate and staunchly defend the stationary radiant concept. It is unfortunate that Denning is mainly remembered today for this erroneous idea, his many other important contributions now being mostly forgotten. His life-long dedication to the pursuit of knowledge should, at the very least, offer inspiration to us all, irrespective of his actual scientific contributions.

The apparent observation of stationary radiants certainly added great confusion to the developing field of meteor astronomy, and Denning's dominance was to ultimately become stifling. He was nonetheless the most important figure in late-nineteenth century British meteor astronomy. His reverence, and acceptance as Britain's foremost meteor astronomer was no doubt initially justified, but his later dominance is more difficult to understand. It may well be that the all too human need to create heroes and icons is at the root of his later influence.

In spite of all that has been written in previous chapters, it is still not entirely clear why Denning chose astronomy as his main field of study. He might just as easily, for so it appears, turned to subjects such as animal behaviour, meteorology, or natural history. We are simply left with Denning's statement that he started observing celestial objects in 1865. Certainly the field of meteor astronomy was ripe for an observer of Denning's calibre when he started observing. The spectacular Leonid meteor storm of November 1866, and the discovery, by Giovanni Schiaparelli, that meteoroid streams were derived from comets were sufficient reasons to promote meteoric studies to the forefront of astronomical research.

The motivation behind Denning's studies are reasonably clear. Not only was he interested in furthering his own understanding and that of science, he was also drawn to the excitement of discovery. He was to comment in 1895, for example, "while observing, the constant feeling of expectation that a new discovery, or at least an important observation, may be made at any moment, induces a little excitement and keeps one active." Here we find the essential Denning. A man confident that success will follow in the footsteps of application and self-sacrifice, and a man who is prepared to endure discomfort, poverty, and celibacy for the cause of science; that "ceaseless running stream". Indeed, Denning was a Victorian man of principle, self-confidence and passion. His passion, however, was that for the opportunity to study the universe in all its many guises. I do not think that Denning had any delusions of greatness, although I do believe that he was a great amateur astronomer. In this manner our parting image of him should be one of a passionate and dedicated astronomer, a man enthralled by the heavens and a man who was dedicated to the act of observing. Denning's image is not one of a great and revered genius of science, rather it is one of a gentleman who found his peace amongst the stars. He found joy under the dark Bristolian skies while those around him slept snugly in their beds. It is a shadowy image that we see moving at the telescope, an earnest observer silhouetted against the crisp dark sky, and it is with Denning's contented words that we conclude our imagery: "I have supped and imbibed moderately, and even had my 'weed' at the telescope. When I discovered the periodical comet of 1894, on March 26 of that year, I was enjoying my pipe, and it is fortunate for me that the little stranger was not blotted out amid the wreaths of smoke.