

W. F. Denning:
In Quest of Meteors

A biography

by

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Introduction

Each chapter of human history is highlighted by its greater thinkers and achievers. Be it in the political, literary or scientific domain, history has repeatedly shown that it requires just a few special individuals to significantly change the direction of human thought and understanding. Not least among the sciences, astronomy has recorded its fair share of luminaries; the intellectual giants who outstripped their contemporaries in analytic skill or far reaching observations.

For obvious reasons historians of science tend to direct their attention towards the most distinguished scientists of an era. While the selection of key individuals does allow for a more clear understanding of the advancements that were made, such an approach can overlook the contributions made by lesser, but equally important and interesting workers in the field. This study turns to one such lesser luminary; lesser, that is, only in degree rather than kind. We shall present in this short work what is essentially an emerging profile of an astronomer whose influence has often been acknowledged but whose life has never been fully explored. Our study is concerned with the life and works of William Frederick Denning.

Although he was considered an amateur astronomer, Denning made significant contributions to the development of meteor astronomy. Not content with observing just meteors, however, Denning also studied the planets and was an avid ‘sweeper’ of comets. In practice his field of interest was wide and his enthusiasm for observing inexhaustible. Denning was an acknowledged inspiration to many of his contemporaries, both professional and amateur, and his contributions to astronomy have been long-lasting and profound.

We can not hope to review all of Denning’s works in a study such as this. Likewise, we can not hope to present an in depth review of his life. Indeed, the details concerning much of Denning’s early life are still obscure and very little material relating to his personal thoughts has survived. There are threads, however, and a patchwork, rather than a tapestry of his life is emerging. It is our hope to piece together as much of this patchwork as is possible.