

ALAN H. BATTEN, FRSC

Graham James Odgers
1921-2008



Graham James Odgers was born on 29 December 1921, in Melbourne, Australia, and died on 23 June 2008, in Victoria, British Columbia, at the age of 86. He was elected to Fellowship in our Society on 1980. Upon graduating with an honours BA from the University of Melbourne in 1942, he served during the remainder of World War II first in the Australian Aeronautical Research Establishment and then in the Ionospheric Prediction Service, which work introduced him to the dependence of short-wave radio communication on solar activity, thus influencing his future choice of career in astronomy. When he later came to Canada, he also served in the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve with the rank of Lieutenant Commander from 1951 until 1962. After the war, he returned to Melbourne University, gaining an honours MA in 1946. From 1946 to 1950 he held an Isaac Newton Fellowship at the University of Cambridge (UK), graduating MSc in 1952, after spending part of 1949 as an Assistant professor of Physics at Ohio State University. He was first appointed in 1950 as an astrophysicist at the Dominion Astrophysical Observatory, Victoria, then part of the Department of Mines and Technical Surveys, later a part of the National Research Council, but went to the University of California, Berkeley, from 1953-1955 to complete his PhD. Thereafter, he remained attached to the Dominion Astrophysical Observatory until retirement in 1986, although his work frequently took him elsewhere for extended periods.

Like all astronomers on the Observatory staff in those days, Graham was expected to observe with the 1.8-m telescope, but his interests and abilities were primarily theoretical. His early work was concerned with the structure of stellar atmospheres and the nature and cause of stellar variability. In 1962, however, the addition of a modern 1.2-m telescope to the Observatory's equipment stimulated Graham Odgers and Harvey Richardson to think of constructing a much larger instrument for the use of Canadian astronomers, one to be comparable with the 5-m telescope on Palomar Mountain in California, then the largest optical telescope in the world. They won over the then Director of the Observatory, R.M. Petrie, to their point of view and he assigned Graham to the task of testing sites in Western Canada (principally in British Columbia) to see if one could be found suitable for so large an instrument. At that time, it was rare for any country to build a major scientific facility outside its own borders, and Petrie, Odgers, and Richardson believed that a large telescope would be funded by the Canadian Government only if it was built in Canada. In fact, in 1964, during a visit of HM the Queen, the then Government agreed to fund a 3.9-m telescope which was to be known as the Queen Elizabeth II Telescope and to be situated on Mount Kobau, overlooking the Okanagan valley. A large blank was acquired for the mirror, and an optical shop was built in Victoria for the grinding and polishing of the primary mirror.

Several Canadian astronomers, however, doubted that any site in Canada was good enough for so large an instrument to realize its full potential and opposition to the project increased when an unusually bad winter in the Okanagan strengthened those doubts. The project also suffered from the sudden death of R.M. Petrie in April 1966, and it was cancelled in the summer of 1968. Odgers and Richardson offered their resignations, but were persuaded to stay on. Odgers took leave of absence in Marseille, France, and was there in close contact with French astronomers, particularly Roger Cayrel who was looking for ways to obtain a large telescope for France. Together they proposed a joint project for Canada and France: the construction of a 3.6-m telescope to be situated on Mauna Kea on the island of Hawaii. With the assistance of K.O. Wright, and later J.L. Locke, an agreement was reached for Canadian participation in this project which became known as the Canada-France-Hawaii Telescope. The mirrors for this telescope

were ground and polished in Victoria and the telescope was commissioned in 1979, and has since been successfully used by many Canadian astronomers. During this period, Odgers was seconded as Associate Project Officer, and later Associate Director. Since his retirement, Canadian astronomers have gone on to be involved in projects for even larger telescopes –the twin 8-m Gemini telescopes, and now a projected 30-m telescope. Their ability to participate in these major international projects owes much to the persistence of Graham Odgers at a time of great personal disappointment when the “QEII” was cancelled. The last paper he gave was on 23 May 2008 during a meeting of the Canadian Astronomical Society meeting in Victoria, celebrating the ninetieth anniversary of the Dominion Astrophysical Observatory, a few weeks before his death. The paper, contains reminiscences of some of the events recorded here, and was read in Graham’s presence by his wife Pamela, because his voice was already too weak for him to read it himself.

Graham could lapse into “Strine” when he chose and never quite lost his “Aussie” bluntness which, together with his somewhat wry sense of humour, sometimes led to misunderstandings. Those of us who knew him well, however, enjoyed his company and often learned from him. He is survived by his wife and their son and two daughters and was predeceased by another son living in Australia.

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(Author’s title given as of the time of writing)