Irish amateur honoured

David Murphy reports on celebrations in Armagh, in honour of John McConnell.

Local amateur astronomer John C. McConnell of Maghaberry, Co. Down, Northern Ireland, was warmly welcomed by a host of select guests at the Armagh Observatory on Monday 17th September 2001. The reception was to celebrate the honour of having an asteroid named after him: (9929) McConnell. The asteroid, which was formally known as 1982DP1, was discovered at the Oak Ridge Observatory outstation of Harvard University on 24 February 1982, is estimated to be 8 km in diameter, and orbits the Sun close to the inner edge of the main asteroid belt. Famed for his role in popularizing astronomy in Northern Ireland and for his vast archives of astronomical historical photographs, John, currently the Chairman of the East Antrim Astronomical Society, said he felt “honoured that so many people had come to this reception”.

Present were Mark Bailey, the director of Armagh Observatory, who presented John McConnell with a book about the asteroid, and Alan Fitzimmons from Queens University Belfast who gave him a framed picture of the asteroid taken from La Palma. Also present were James O’Connor, President of the IAS, and John O’Neill, Secretary. John C McConnell is a member of four astronomical societies: the East Antrim Astronomical Society, of which he is currently the Chairman, the Irish Astronomical Association, the Irish Astronomical Society, and the Royal Astronomical Society.

At the reception, President of the IAA Terry Moseley, who has known John for over 30 years, described how passionate he is about astronomy and how much work he has done to promote it, while Walter Martin of the EAAS, who has only known John for less than a year, affirmed similar praises all to credit John as an excellent person with real merit for the citation.

John was touched, and humbly explained he did not expect such a warm reception and that he would never forget it, nor will he forget that there is a minor planet out there named after him. “Tonight is the first time in history,” he said, “that all three local astronomical societies had ever been represented in the Armagh Observatory at the same time.” He concluded by saying how he would always marvel at the beauty of the heavens, quoting the Armagh Observatory motto, “The heavens declare the glory of God.”

The 2002 Bullerwell Lecture

Paul Young is pleased to announce that Martin Sinha will present this year’s Lecture.

The 2002 Bullerwell Lecturer will be Prof. Martin Sinha of the School of Ocean and Earth Sciences at the University of Southampton. He will give the Lecture on Tuesday 23 April in Nice at the European Geophysical Symposium (EGS). The title is “Electromagnetic geophysics and the structure of mid-ocean ridges”. Seafloor electromagnetic methods are now a powerful geophysical tool for mapping electrical resistivity beneath the deep ocean floor. They are especially suitable for in-situ studies of fluids within the crust and uppermost mantle, especially within mid-ocean ridge systems.

If you are at the EGS, please come along. The RAS and British Geophysical Association are hosting a reception prior to the Bullerwell Lecture.

International honours for a forensic seismologist

David Booth reports on recognition of the career of one of the UK’s leading seismologists.

A leading UK forensic seismologist, Prof. Alan Douglas of the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE), was honoured by government agencies of the United States and France, and colleagues attending a RAS/BGA “G” meeting on 7–8 February 2002. “Forensic seismology” is seismology applied to the verification of arms-control treaties by the detection and identification of underground nuclear tests. Treaties must be verifiable to be effective; nearly 40 years of scientific research on verification, mostly by seismic methods, paved the way for the adoption of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) by the UN General Assembly in 1996. The work of Prof. Douglas and his group significantly assisted the successful negotiation of the CTBT and continues to meet new challenges (Douglas A&G April 2001).

The meeting was partly devoted to forensic seismology and partly to the lithospheric structure of the British Isles. The latter is relevant to CTBT verification since local seismic velocity models must be applied at source and receiver to allow accurate remote location of small seismic events. The meeting report is published in this issue (page 2.33).

The occasion also marked Prof. Douglas’s retirement from AWE. Several participants took the opportunity to acknowledge the benefits which they and their agencies had derived from the output of Alan’s group and their collaborative studies, and Dr R Blandford (AFTAC, USA), Dr S Mangino (US Dept of Defence, Centre for Monitoring Research and Defence Threat Reduction Agency), and Dr B Massinon (LDG, France) made presentations to Prof. Douglas. In his speech, Dr Mangino cited Douglas’s work on source location and improved signal detection and processing using records from medium aperture seismic arrays, pioneered by the Blacknest group, and praised “the unparalleled continuity of data from the UK-type arrays, which Alan fought many bureaucratic battles to ensure”. He noted Alan’s insight and experience in obtaining accurate yield determinations, and his interpretation of seismic signals from test sites over the globe, with an emphasis on modelling and understanding the effects of seismic attenuation on the observed signals.

Concluding, he remarked on the notable student “offspring” who have had their skills honed at Blacknest and moved on to influential positions around the globe.

The joint meeting was the suggestion of Prof. Paul Young; its success was due to the speakers and the RAS and British Geophysical Association for their organization and support. The meeting was an early beneficiary of the Gray-Milne fund (cf. A&G December 2001).