Mrs. Fiammetta Wilson - Forgotten Meteor Observer
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The history of astronomy is full of little-known women astronomers who have made sizable contributions to the field. Such is the case with British amateur astronomer Fiammetta Wilson (1864-1920). The daughter of a physician, she was educated by governesses in her early years and later spent four years at Lausanne and one year at a German school. Not surprisingly, languages were her strong suit. She also showed proficiency in music, and was trained in Italy. She later taught at the Guildhall School of Music and became a conductor. Her interest in astronomy came as a result of a series of lectures by astrophysicist Alfred Fowler in 1910. Meteors, aurora, comets, and the zodiacal light became her astronomical interests. In fact, she had a wooden platform built in her garden so she might observe above the obstructing treeline.

Fiammetta’s greatest contributions to astronomy were her meteor observations. Between 1910 and her death in 1920 she observed more than 10,000 meteors and was able to record the paths of the majority. She collaborated with famed British meteor expert W. F. Denning on radiant computations. For the 1918 Quadrantid shower, Fiammetta observed 66 meteors and recorded 44. Denning himself recorded only 11 meteors from his station in Bristol. In a joint article in the Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society, Wilson and Denning discussed the possible 13 year periodicity of the shower as well as radiant positions. Wilson also contributed data on the 1916 Lyrid shower allowing Denning to demonstrate the motion of the radiant point.

Since her observations spanned World War I, it is amusing to note how the war affected her work. According to Denning’s obituary of her, “during the war astute special constables detected the flashlight she used for recording meteors, and severely threatened her with arrest as a German agent. With zeppelins dropping bombs in the neighbourhood, Mrs. Wilson calmly pursued her vigils on several occasions. Falling splinters from shrapnel once made things highly dangerous, but she managed to get good records.”

Of note are a few of her other contributions to astronomy. She was co-discoverer of Westphal’s comet at its 1913 apparition (following only a few days behind Delevan). She contributed three scientific papers, two on meteor showers and one on “Clusters and Nebulae visible with small Optical Means”, which included the magnitudes of nebulae suitable as comparison objects for faint comets.

Fiammetta Wilson was very active in the astronomical community. She became a member of the British Astronomical Association in 1910 and became (along with A. Grace Cook) co-director of its Meteor Section during world War I. She was a member of the Leeds Astronomical Society, the Société Astronomique de France and the Société d’Astronomie d’Anvers. Of special note is her status as one of the first women to be elected a fellow of the Royal Society (1916). Her final honor came in July, 1920 when she received the Edward Pickering Astronomical Fellowship for Women from Harvard College Observatory. Unfortunately, she died that same month and never learned of the honor. It is fitting that the fellowship was then given to Fiammetta’s friend and colleague, A. Grace Cook.

References:

A. Grace Cook, “Mrs. Fiammetta Wilson,” Journal of the BAA, 30 (1920) pp. 330-1

