

# Molyneux, Samuel

(1689–1728)

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Molyneux, Samuel (1689–1728), astronomer and politician, born at Chester on 18 July 1689, was the third but only surviving child of the experimental philosopher [William Molyneux \(1656–1698\)](#) and his wife, Lucy (*d.* 1691), the youngest daughter of Sir William Domville, attorney-general for Ireland. His father zealously undertook his education on Locke's principles, but died in 1698, leaving him to the care of his uncle, [Dr Thomas Molyneux \(1661–1733\)](#). Having matriculated in his sixteenth year at Trinity College, Dublin, he there formed a friendship with the mathematician George Berkeley (1685–1753), who dedicated to him in 1707 his *Miscellanea mathematica*. Molyneux graduated BA in 1708 and MA in 1710, then spent two years improving his estate in co. Armagh. After leaving Ireland to visit England, he met the duke and duchess of Marlborough at Antwerp during the winter of 1712–13, and was sent by the former on a political mission to the court of Hanover, where he witnessed, in the Herrenhausen Garden, the sudden death of the Electress Sophia on 8 June 1714. He accompanied the royal family to England after the death of Queen Anne, and was made secretary to the prince of Wales, a post which he retained until the prince came to the throne as George II.

Molyneux married in 1717 Lady Elizabeth Capel, the eldest daughter of Algernon, second earl of Essex. She brought with her a fortune of £10,000, and she inherited £18,000 with Kew House, on the death, in 1721, of Lady Capel of Tewkesbury, her great-uncle's widow. They had no children.

Molyneux now turned to the study of astronomy and optics, sciences which had also attracted his father. He made the acquaintance of James Bradley, and together they experimented, from 1723 to 1725, on the construction of reflecting telescopes of Newtonian design. Their first successful speculum, completed in May 1724, was of 26 inches focus. They afterwards turned out one of 8 feet, and Molyneux presented to John V, king of Portugal, a reflector made by himself. He explained his method of speculum manufacture to Edward Scarlett, the king's optician, and George Hearne, a mathematical instrument maker of Fleet Street, London, which helped to bring reflecting telescopes into general use.

Molyneux was a privy councillor in both England and Ireland, he represented the boroughs of Bossiney and St Mawes and the city of Exeter in the English parliaments of 1715, 1726, and 1727 respectively, and was returned in 1727 to the parliament of Ireland as member for the University of Dublin. He was a man of winning manners and obliging temper, uniting Irish wit to social accomplishments. He was elected a fellow of the Royal Society in 1712.

In 1725 Molyneux and Bradley resolved to repeat Robert Hooke's supposed detection of annular parallax for the star Gamma Draconis, for which purpose they ordered a zenith sector of 24 feet radius from the noted instrument maker George Graham. It was set up on 26 November 1725 in Molyneux's observatory at Kew House, but their observations did not confirm those of Hooke. Bradley later obtained a sector with a larger angular range, and made further observations which led to his discovery of the aberration of light, but Molyneux, after his appointment on 29 July 1727 as one of the lords of the Admiralty, was no longer able to assist him.

Molyneux's proposals for the improvement of the navy were actively opposed by his colleagues, and these difficulties perhaps hastened the onset of a disease, supposedly inherited from his mother. He was seized with a fit in the House of Commons, and, after lingering a few days in stupor, died on 13 April 1728. Some time before his death he gave his optical collections and papers to Dr Robert Smith of Cambridge, whom he invited to live in his house and complete his proposed investigations. Smith's book, *A Compleat System of Opticks* (1738), included one chapter by Molyneux on the grinding and polishing of telescope lenses, and another begun by him but finished by John Hadley on the casting and polishing of telescope mirrors. Molyneux's widow married Nathaniel St André in 1730; Kew House was leased to Frederick, prince of Wales, and demolished in 1804.

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