

# O'Connell, Daniel Joseph Kelly

(1896–1982)

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O'Connell, Daniel Joseph Kelly (1896–1982), astronomer, was born at 143 Clifton Road, Rugby, Warwickshire, on 25 July 1896, one of the three children of an Irishman, Daniel O'Connell, an Inland Revenue officer, and his wife, Rosa Susannah Helena, formerly Kelly. Following the deaths of both his parents, at the age of twelve he was sent to Ireland and was educated at Clongowes Wood College. When he was seventeen he joined the Irish province of the Jesuit order and attended University College, Dublin, gaining the degree of MSc in mathematics in 1920. The long years of training for the priesthood included three years at the Jesuit house in Valkenburg in the Netherlands and three years teaching at Riverview College, near Sydney, Australia. He was ordained in Dublin in 1928.

In 1931 O'Connell was sent to continue his scientific studies at Harvard University, where he joined Harlow Shapley's vibrant school of astronomy and astrophysics. There he began the researches on variable stars and in particular on eclipsing binaries, which were to remain his main astronomical interest throughout his life. O'Connell was exceptionally happy at Harvard, but his indifferent health caused his superiors to send him back in 1933 to the better climate of Australia. Under the influence of the geophysicist Father W. O'Leary SJ at the observatory which was attached to Riverview College O'Connell turned his hand to seismology, and got on so well in this field that he was put in charge of Riverview Observatory on O'Leary's death in 1938. All the while he continued diligently with his own researches on variable stars using the observatory's modest photographic cameras, for which he was awarded the degree of DSc by the National University of Ireland in 1949.

O'Connell's active years in Australia ended in 1952, when Pope Pius XII appointed him director of the Vatican observatory. The appointment came at an auspicious time for O'Connell, since it coincided with the Rome assembly of the International Astronomical Union and gave him an opportunity to meet many of the world's astronomers on what was now his home ground. Being an excellent linguist as well as a man of warm personality, he built up and retained a wide circle of devoted astronomical friends.

At the observatory, the 'Specola Vaticana', situated on the upper floors of the pope's summer residence at Castel Gandolfo, O'Connell found a well-equipped institution with some first-class instruments. In 1957 he added a fine Schmidt telescope, which he installed in the beautiful Barberini Gardens, and which was used by his young Jesuit assistants principally for objective prism spectroscopy.

O'Connell's scientific concerns were closely bound up with his *ex officio* membership of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, where he consorted with scientists of many fields of learning and could work for an improvement in the often misunderstood relations between the Roman Catholic church and the scientific community. As a member of the academy—of which he was president from 1968 to 1972—O'Connell organized two conferences devoted to astronomical problems, the proceedings of which (edited by him), *Stellar Populations* (1957) and *Nuclei of Galaxies* (1970), became classics of astronomical literature. In a different vein, O'Connell published *The Green Flash* (1958), a scientific account with colour photographs of that elusive phenomenon as observed from the roof of the observatory at Castel Gandolfo before the encroachment of smog from the city of Rome.

Living in the papal palace from 1952 until his retirement in 1970, O'Connell was on close personal terms with three popes—Pius XII, John XXIII, and Paul VI. When the first man landed on the moon on 20 July 1969, Paul VI, escorted by O'Connell, followed the event on television from the dome of the Schmidt telescope and transmitted live from there his greetings and blessing to the astronauts. Pope John Paul II visited O'Connell during his last illness at Jesuit House, the headquarters of the Society of Jesus, at Borgo di Santo Spirito, Rome, where he died on 14 October 1982.

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## Archives

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## Likenesses

- photograph, 1952, Vatican Observatory, Castel Gandolfo; repro. in Maffeo, *In the service*
- photograph, repro. in Haynes and others, *Explorers*