

Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers

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Ball, Robert Stawell

Born Dublin, Ireland, 1 July 1840

Died Cambridge, England, 25 November 1913

Robert Ball was a noted lecturer and popularizer of astronomy. He was the eldest son of Irish naturalist Dr. Robert Ball. His preliminary education was completed at Abbot's Grange, Chester, after which he entered Trinity College, Dublin, in 1857. As an undergraduate, Ball was a gold medalist in mathematics, in the experimental and natural sciences, and was awarded a University Scholarship in 1860. He graduated in 1865

Ball served as assistant astronomer (1865–1867) to William Parsons, the Earl of Rosse, at Parsonstown, Ireland, where he observed and measured faint nebulae with the 6-foot reflector at Birr Castle. In 1867, Ball was appointed professor of applied mechanics at the newly opened Royal College of Science at Dublin and wrote a text on experimental mechanics. He married Frances Elizabeth Steele in 1868; the couple had six children

Upon the resignation of Franz Brünnow in 1874, Ball became Astronomer Royal for Ireland and Andrews Professor of Astronomy at the University of Dublin. His principal work in astronomy concerned the investigation of stellar parallax; he employed visual methods with the 12-inch refractor at Dunsink Observatory. Ball's search for stars of large parallax, however, netted only two (out of some 368 stars examined). More successful were Ball's mathematical investigations into the theory of screws (a study of the dynamics of rigid bodies under particular constraints), on which he published widely between 1871 and 1904. For these efforts, Ball received the Gold Medal of the Royal Irish Academy (1879). He was likewise the recipient of two honorary degrees - an M.A. (Cambridge University) and an LL.D. (University of Dublin).

Ball's popular writings included *The Story of the Heavens*, *Starland*, *In the High Heavens*, *Time and Tide*, *A Romance of the Moon*, *The Cause of an Ice Age*, *The Story of the Sun*, and *Great Astronomers*. He likewise wrote a standard textbook, *Elements of Astronomy*, along with *A Treatise on Spherical Astronomy*. Ball also did popular lecturing: on one occasion (1907), he addressed a group of convicts at Dartmoor Prison

In 1892, Ball was appointed to the Lowndean Chair of Astronomy and Geometry at Cambridge University (succeeding John Adams) and director of its observatory, a post he retained until his death. Ball received the honor of knighthood in 1866. He served as president of the Royal Astronomical Society (1877–1879) and of the mathematical section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, among other titles. Politically, Ball remained a strong Unionist.

Jordan D. Marché, II

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