

Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers

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Brinkley, John

Born Woodbridge, Suffolk, England, January 1767

Dublin, Ireland, 14 September 1835 Died

John Brinkley was an observational astronomer, mathematician, and director of the Dunsink Observatory. The illegitimate son of Sarah Brinkley, a butcher's daughter from Woodbridge in Suffolk, he attended a school in Benhall before going to Caius College, Cambridge. There he graduated as senior wrangler in 1788 and was the first Smith Prize winner in 1788. Brinkley was a fellow of Caius College (1788–1792) and was awarded an M.A. from Cambridge in 1791 and a D.D. from Dublin in 1806. He took holy orders while a fellow at Cambridge

Brinkley had to work his way through university. One of his summer vacation jobs was as an assistant at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, while Nevil Maskelyne was Astronomer Royal. Brinkley stayed at the observatory from 23 June to 9 November 1787, and again from 27 January to 28 March 1788, before returning to Cambridge to complete his studies. In 1790, Maskelyne recommended him for the post of professor of astronomy at Dublin. Two years later, Brinkley was appointed Andrews Professor of Astronomy and director of Dunsink Observatory. Later that year he was given the title Astronomer Royal for Ireland. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1803, was president of the Royal Irish Academy (1822–1835), and was president of the Royal Astronomical Society (1825–1827 and 1831–1833). In 1826 he was appointed Bishop of Cloyne

When Brinkley arrived in 1792, Dunsink Observatory contained only a transit instrument and was awaiting the arrival of an 8-ft. alti-and-azimuth circle that had been ordered from Ramsden but which did not arrive until 1808. In the meantime, Brinkley made many contributions to mathematics, publishing in the *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* and the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*

In 1808, Brinkley began to become more interested in practical astronomy and by 1810 reported the discovery of an annual parallax for Lyrae of 2.52 arcseconds, which he followed in 1814 by announcing similar results for other stars. Brinkley's results were disputed by John Pond, Maskelyne's successor as Astronomer Royal. But while their disagreement on the issue went on for some years, it was always conducted with moderation and politeness. Brinkley was awarded the Copley Medal by the Royal Society for his work on stellar parallax, but he was ultimately proven wrong, and the incident brought about recognition of the need for a closer scrutiny of instrumental defects.

In 1814, Brinkley published a new theory of astronomical refraction, along with tables for its calculation, and published a catalog of 47 fundamental stars. He also made contributions to the determination of the obliquity of the ecliptic, the precession of equinoxes, and the constants of aberration and lunar nutation. His textbook, *Elements of Astronomy*, was first published in 1813 and went through numerous editions to become a standard reference work.

Mary Croarken

Selected References

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