

Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers

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Glaisher, James Whitbread Lee

Born Lewisham, Kent, England, 5 November 1848

Died Cambridge, England, 7 December 1928

James Whitbread Lee Glaisher was a pure mathematician and mathematical astronomer who served in leadership positions in the Royal Astronomical Society for 55 years

The eldest son of the English astronomer/meteorologist James Glaisher, young Glaisher attended Saint Paul's School in London and then Trinity College, Cambridge, where, in 1871, he graduated as second wrangler. He won the Campden Exhibition in 1867 and the Perry Exhibition in 1869. In 1871, Glaisher was elected to a fellowship and a lectureship in mathematics at Trinity College and held these positions until 1901. He received a D.Sc. degree from Cambridge in 1887, the first year that the degree was offered at the university.

Glaisher became a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society (RAS) shortly before his graduation in 1871, and was elected to the society's council in 1874. He was reelected to the council continuously and was in the middle of his 55th year of service when he died. Glaisher served two terms as president of the society (1886–1888 and 1901–1903), several terms as vice president, and as secretary from 1877 to 1884. He served as president of the Royal Astronomical Society Club (an informal but exclusive dining arrangement) for 33 consecutive years. In 1875, Glaisher was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society

Despite Glaisher's notable service to the RAS, he came under attack as secretary, as did Arthur Ranyard, during a decade-long struggle by professional astronomers who wished to appropriate the RAS as a strictly professional organization. The dissidents, led by William Christie, characterized themselves as "working astronomers" and "practical astronomers" and objected to having their papers screened by anyone less qualified. Efforts were made at different times to recall both secretaries and replace them despite their obvious qualifications. The recall elections failed in both cases, but after Christie became one of the secretaries, control of the society by the professional astronomers accelerated.

Upon the retirement of George Airy as Astronomer Royal in 1881, the position was offered to Glaisher because of his eminence as a mathematical astronomer, but he declined. Instead, the appointment went to Christie

In his mathematical career, Glaisher published approximately 400 papers, mostly on the history of mathematical subjects. He was well known and respected for his history-of-mathematics papers, especially on the history of the plus and minus signs, and his *Encyclopedia Britannica* article on logarithms. Many of his papers provided detailed analyses and uses of various elements of mathematics. Overall, Glaisher's papers were rated by scholars as generally good, but of uneven quality. In the first two years after his graduation from Trinity College, he published 62 papers. Glaisher served as the editor of the *Quarterly Journal of Mathematics*

(1879–1928) and the *Messenger of Mathematics* (1871–1928). He authored the 174-page report by the Committee on Mathematical Tables for the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1873. This paper detailed the history of mathematical tables, cataloged existing tables, and updated many other tables as necessary. Glaisher edited the *Collected Mathematical Papers of Henry John Stephen Smith*.

In 1872, Glaisher joined the London Mathematical Society and was elected to the society's council in the same year. He served on its council until his retirement in 1906. Glaisher served as the society's president for the years 1884 to 1886.

The earliest of many mathematical-astronomical papers that Glaisher wrote was his 1872 paper "The Law of the Facility of Errors of Observations and on the Method of Least Squares," published in the *Memoirs of the Royal Astronomical Society*. His interests in astronomy probably came from his father, who served under Airy at Cambridge Observatory (1833–1838) and at Greenwich (1838–1874), until he retired in 1874 after being offended by Airy.

In 1900, Glaisher served as president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. He served on several of the association's mathematical committees and edited volumes 8 and 9 of its Mathematical Tables.

Among his numerous awards and honors, Glaisher received the De Morgan Medal from the London Mathematical Society in 1908, the Sylvester Medal of the Royal Society in 1913, and honorary D.Sc. degrees from Trinity College of Dublin (1892) and Victoria University of Manchester (1902). He was an honorary fellow of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society, the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and the National Academy of Sciences in Washington.

Glaisher was a renowned collector and authority on English pottery. He wrote parts of several books on the subject and left his collection to the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge. His extensive collection was considered one of the finest collections of slipware in the world. Glaisher also collected Valentines Day and children's books; these were also donated to the Fitzwilliam Museum.

Glaisher never married. He died in his college room at Cambridge. None of the referenced works cite the actual cause of death, but state that he was a robust man who loved hiking and cycling, yet suffered from failing health in his last few years.

A nearside lunar crater at latitude 13.2 N, longitude 49.5 E was named in the 1860s to honor the father, James Glaisher, based on a lunar map by Dr. John Lee. James Whitbread Lee Glaisher was named in part to honor Dr. John Lee and Samuel Charles Whitbread, who were friends and fellow founders with James Glaisher of the British Meteorological Society (now known as the Royal Meteorological Society), in 1850.

Robert A. Garfinkle

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