

THE LATE MR ROBERT ELLERY.

FORMER STATE ASTRONOMER.

FINE CAREER CLOSES.

The news will be received with regret of the death of Robert Lewis John Ellery, C.M.G., F.R.S., F.R.A.S., for many years Government Astronomer of Victoria and Director of Melbourne Observatory, which occurred at his residence, Observatory House, Domain, South Yarra, on 14th January.

Mr Ellery had attained the age of 81 years, and about twelve months ago fell a victim to a severe illness, from which he never completely recovered. Up till a few weeks ago, however, he was in possession of a reasonable degree of health and activity, but the recent extreme heat, acting on his enfeebled frame, proved too severe a strain, and he succumbed as stated.

The deceased gentleman was a native of Surrey, where his father, John Ellery, was a surgeon. As a boy he was educated in a neighboring grammar school, and trained for the medical profession. He early exhibited a taste for astronomical work, and, when he came to Melbourne in the early fifties, he was, although a young man, already regarded as an amateur astronomer of some promise.



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Mr Ellery's first official appointment as astronomer was owing to the desire of Governor Latrobe to make Melbourne a safe port for shipping. With that object he wished to see established a small observatory wherein accurate astronomical time could be discovered, and to which the chronometers of ships could be sent for regulation, so that in their long voyage back to Europe their captains would at any rate feel tolerably certain of their longitude. The work of establishing such a small observatory at Williamstown, close to the shipping, was entrusted to the young surgeon-astronomer. Here he labored in the interests of navigation for two or three years, but in 1856, when a geodetic survey of the colony was commenced, the Williamstown observatory was made the starting point, and during two years preliminary observations were carried on there. In 1858 Mr Ellery was transferred to the Survey department, and, with the Surveyor-General, Mr Ligar, superintended the important work.

During these years Mr Ellery was an active member of the Royal Society of Victoria, then a very active institution, to which he contributed informative papers on astronomy and military science.

In the meantime a second Observatory had been founded in the Flagstaff Gardens by Neumayer, an agent of the then King of Bavaria, who was an enthusiast in the work of scientific mapping out of the entire globe, and for observations of general importance. Neumayer completed his work and departed, and in 1857 a committee of the Royal Society of Victoria was appointed to urge on the Government the necessity of founding a first class observatory to combine the functions of the two existing observatories.

In 1863, accordingly, in the Botanical Gardens just off St. Kilda road, there

rose an observatory, then inferior to only a few of the great observatories of the world, and excelling them all in one feature, the possession of the largest telescope constructed up till that time, for which the Legislature granted the sum of £10,000. Of this establishment, Mr Ellery, by that time secretary of the Royal Society, was appointed director. His work at Williamstown had not only been successful from a nautical point of view, but had been quite surprising in its more distinctly scientific aspects. By co-operation with Mr Stone, of the Greenwich Observatory, Mr Ellery had assisted in deducing the correct distance between the earth and the sun. Till then it had been estimated at 95 millions of miles, but these observations showed it to be only 91½ millions of miles.

In the Observatory in the Botanical Gardens Mr Ellery labored for thirty-two years, converting the minute standpoint from which he watched the stars into an important unit in the series of observations by which the world is encircled, and earning for himself many scientific honors. In 1895 he retired from his post.

Of such a man one speaks at length and naturally of his chief life work. But in other directions his activity was great. For nearly twenty years the presidential chair of the Royal Society was filled by the subject of these remarks.

In 1873 he found time to organise the Victorian Torpedo Corps, afterwards the Submarine Mining Engineers, and commanded the corps till 1885, when he retired with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. His interest in military matters never flagged, and was secondary only to his love of astronomical investigation.

For many years Mr Ellery had been one of the Trustees of the Melbourne Public Library, Art Gallery and Museum, and he held that office to the last.

Since 1895, when he retired from control of the Observatory, Mr Ellery has led a quiet, unobtrusive life. His second wife, a Tasmanian lady, and his only daughter, who is the wife of Mr Alexander Maclean, Engineer of Ports and Harbors, survive him.

Harbors, survive him.

The remains were interred in the Williamstown cemetery on 15th January.