

## FAMILY MEMORIES OF A VERY SPECIAL UNCLE

### Robin Lindsay, Jack Lindsay, and Mary Lindsay

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**Abstract:** Robin started with an inscription from the Valley of the Kings “speak my name and I shall live”, and said this was happening that day for Mervyn. He then showed the photograph of the Lindsay family taken about 1912 when Mervyn was about five and talked about some members of the family. Robin and his brother Jack described the various stories about a meteorite landing in Northern Ireland near Armagh and Mervyn being asked to value it. In a discussion, Mervyn told Robin that his knowledge of the stars had strengthened his belief in a Divine Creator. Robin described Mervyn as a very caring man who made anyone talking to him feel special. He concluded that those who sought a monument to Mervyn should look around them at the Observatory in Armagh.

**Keywords:** Eric Mervyn Lindsay, Lindsay Family, Armagh Observatory, amateur astronomy, Irish astronomy

#### 1 FAMILY SUMMARY OF AN ORAL CONTRIBUTION BY ROBIN LINDSAY

The thought that immediately came into Robin’s mind as he listened to the Lindsay Centennial Symposium presentations was an inscription in the Valley of the Kings: “Speak my name, and I shall live”. The name of Eric Mervyn Lindsay was spoken many times that day, and this gave him—and other family members—great pleasure.

Robin introduced his subject by presenting the Lindsay family into which Mervyn had been born, with reference to the photograph shown here in Figure 1. This was probably taken around 1912, at The Grange, Loch Gall, where Mervyn’s father, Richard, was headmaster. The School had been given to him on

his marriage to Susan Best, one of several sisters of Lord Justice Best (two of whom each had a grandson at the Symposium; five of Susan’s grand-children and one great grandson were also present). The photograph shows the twelve surviving children (Frances Herbert, born in 1886, had died aged six months), and their parents, Richard and Susan.

They were quite a family, and must have taken some bringing up! Standing in the back row on the left is George Edwin who served as a doctor in the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) in the Great War. Doctors were scarce and he exasperated his seniors by rescuing patients under fire; however he got a medal. After the war he settled down as a General Practitioner in Penarth.



Figure 1: The Lindsay family c.1912. Shown (left to right) are: Pooler (Indian Army, retired as Brigadier); George Edwin (Doctor); James (Lawyer); Bea (travelled widely before returning to Hannavale); Flo (the eldest of the family, who married an Episcopalian Minister); Susan (née Best, mother of the family and Robin Lindsay’s grandmother); Fred (Headmaster of a preparatory school in Dorset, surrogate father to the family and Robin Lindsay’s father); Eric Mervyn Lindsay (about the age of five); Cecilia (Business Woman); Gwen (Nurse); Richard (father of the family and Robin Lindsay’s grandfather); Harold (Medical Missionary); Norman (Indian Army, retired as Captain); and Robert (Civil Engineer).

Next to him is Flo, the eldest of the family, born in 1885. She was very bright and got a university scholarship. She married an Episcopalian minister, later a Canon, and died quite young from pneumonia. (She was not divorced, as suggested by Robin Lindsay, but her daughter was.)

In the middle is Robin's father, Fred, whose three surviving children, Mary, Robin and Jack, were at the Symposium along with one grandson, Jack's son, James. As the eldest boy, Fred contributed to the upbringing of the younger members of the family. He bought Hannavale House near Portadown for his parents to live in after they retired, and for other members of the family. He was head of a preparatory school in Dorset. Robin described him as a great personality who had a remarkable way with people.

On his left is Gwen who became a nurse. She nursed a famous cricketer, Lord Harris, and then retired to Hannavale.

Standing on the right is Norman, who was an extremely kind man. He was in the Indian Army and retired as a Captain. He worked in Belfast and lived at Hannavale. Known as "The Captain", he was pleased that the local Orange Lodge asked him to take the salute when they marched past on 12 July. He organized the New Year's Day Hunt for the Harriers from Hannavale.

Pooler is sitting on the left in the front row. He made his career in the Indian Army, fought in Burma during the Second World War, and then was Commander of the Quetta area. He retired as a Brigadier and lived with his family in Suffolk.

James, standing next to Bea, was a successful lawyer and followed his uncle as Assessor to the Primate and Chancellor to the Diocese of Armagh. He was Editor of the *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly*.

Bea travelled and held various posts, but found her métier when she came back to take over from her mother as Chatelaine at Hannavale, where she loved having family and friends visiting, and took a particular interest in her nephews and nieces—and made sure we all learnt to swim!

Cecilia, sitting between her parents, was a very able business woman in Ireland and Australia. She married and had children.

Harold was the other doctor in the family and qualified at Belfast. He was a medical missionary in Moma Boya, Peru, for twenty years, and a park there was recently named after him. He came back to Scotland and lived with his family at Dornoch as Medical Officer of Health for Sutherland. Two of his three surviving children, Susan and James, were at the Symposium.

Robert took a degree in Civil Engineering at Queen's University, Belfast. He had a successful career in charge of the railways in Northern Ireland and building bridges for them, including one over the Bann at Coleraine which lifted up to let ships go by.

Eric Mervyn aged about five is in the centre of the picture, his mother holding his hand.

This, then, was the family in which Eric Mervyn Lindsay grew up. They looked after each other, with the older ones helping with education of the younger

ones. When Mervyn started at Queen's University, his eldest brother, Fred, gave him ten pounds—the equivalent of about a thousand pounds today—to be used in an emergency. After Harvard, when he had qualified as an astronomer, Mervyn proudly offered it back to Fred but was told to keep it.

Mervyn's fascination with the stars does not seem to have been greatly encouraged at home. When he was young, his father would sometimes beat him when he found him up looking at the stars when he should have been in bed! He evidently did not realize that this was a family trait, as his first cousin, John McConnell's father, became interested in the stars quite independently and handed this on to his son (see John McConnell's paper, "Dr Eric Mervyn Lindsay: A Personal View", on pages 191-192.)

Mervyn's older nephews and nieces used to enjoy staying at the Observatory with Mervyn and his wife Sylvia. She was an astronomer in her own right and an important part of his life. She was fiercely protective of him and his work, and helped him to keep a balance between his research and his enjoyment of meeting people from all walks of life. After Mervyn died, Sylvia returned to the United States, and was very good to Patrick and Norman, and also Mary, when they visited her in America.

Mervyn was also an extremely kind man. When, after the war, he heard that Professor Öpik (who had examined him for his Ph.D.) was in an internment camp, he secured his release and brought him to Armagh. This led to a great contribution both to astronomy and to Armagh.

Mervyn had great charm and we used to enjoy talking to him and listening to him. He had a nice sense of humour and the capacity to make everybody he met feel they were special. His nephew, Alan, the son of Robert Lindsay, recalled that although Mervyn was so intelligent, he never seemed to mind questions that arose from ignorance or lack of knowledge, for he was a humble man. Another nephew, Norman (the son of Harold), said that Mervyn was his hero and remembered him talking about a discovery that he had missed, which was found later by somebody else, and telling his father, Harold, that instead of answering the whole paper in his final examination at Harvard he had only answered one question, but had still passed. Susan remembers that he quite often came to Hannavale and would sit down at the piano and play hymns. Yet another nephew, Patrick (the son of Pooler), remembers that Mervyn believed that art and science were intellectually inseparable. All of Mervyn's nephews and nieces have recalled the pleasure of being shown round the Observatory by him, and all enjoyed talking to him and listening to him.

Mervyn loved the stars and wanted to share this love. He instigated and encouraged local amateur astronomy groups; he lectured to prisoners; and with Patrick Moore he founded the Armagh Planetarium. He wanted the Northern and Southern governments to work together for the good of astronomy in Ireland and achieved this to a remarkable degree, enhanced perhaps by his friendship with De Valera, who was a mathematician as well as a politician.

There is an apocryphal story that a meteorite once fell in the garden of an old lady in Ulster, and when

someone from Queen's University asked if they could have it she said "Certainly not". Mervyn then went to see her and was asked in for tea. They talked, and as he left she gave the meteorite to him. Robin did not know if this story was true or not, and so he asked his brother, Jack, to give his version of it.

**Jack Lindsay:** Well I remember Mervyn came over for our mother's funeral, and he told us that a meteorite had fallen recently in a field and was retrieved by the farmer. Mervyn was invited to tea by the farmer, but no mention was made of meteorites until after the tea had been consumed and partially digested, at which point Mervyn was asked for his opinion on its value. He said that on the one hand it is a rock and as such valueless, but on the other hand it had come from the celestial spheres and was invaluable, so he was forced to conclude that its value lay somewhere between those two extremes. The farmer was so grateful that he presented the meteorite to the Observatory. Uncle Mervyn then said that Queen's University borrowed the meteorite in order to carry out a non-destructive examination of it, but when it came back to the Observatory it had a large chip out of it. That's the story I heard from the horse's mouth! What I hadn't realised until today was that perhaps the meteorite had split up into two pieces, which would correlate with what you've just told us.

**Robin Lindsay:** Did anyone see the broadcast which Mervyn made one Christmas about the Star of Bethlehem? It was on Ulster TV. I was sitting in Hannavale and suddenly Mervyn appeared on the television. This is what he said: "The Star of Bethlehem could not have been a conjunction of planets because those men from the East knew what the planets were going to do and that would not have made them get excited. It would have been, he thought, a supernova, which blew up into great brightness and then later faded away and left a black hole." That was his view, and I remember ringing him up and talking about it, and he said that the Chinese kept very good records of the stars and they recorded a supernova around the time of the birth of Jesus. So there is something for us to think about. I also said to him in this context: "Does your knowledge of the stars help you or make you believe in a Divine Creator?", and he replied with an unhesitating "Yes". I found that most moving.

And so, as I look again at my family, I see Mervyn as an extraordinary person. He had a quality with people similar to that which was found in the Queen Mother: when he was with them he totally concentrated on them, and they felt that they were the only

person in the world that mattered. He was a great man and could walk with Kings, but at the same time keep the common touch.

Finally, if we are seeking a monument for Mervyn we should look around at Armagh Observatory and let "Si monumentum requiris, circumspice" be testimony to the marvellous man whom we have been honouring today.

## 2 NOTES

1. To his nieces and nephews, Eric Mervyn Lindsay was known as Mervyn rather than Eric.

Robin Lindsay attended his father's preparatory school in Dorset, and after Cambridge he started teaching and gradually took over the school from his father and set his own stamp on it. His Headmastership was characterised by the school excelling in scholarship and sport. His particular interest in the teaching of mathematics led to his being an advisor to the Incorporated Association of Preparatory Schools (IAPS), and he arranged conferences for them on this subject. He was given a "Services to Schools' Rugby" award, and was a selector for schoolboy and adult teams, including those against South Africa and the All Blacks. He is an enthusiastic member of the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC).

Another son of Fred Lindsay, Jack Lindsay, also went to his father's school, and after Cambridge he, too, became a schoolmaster. He was an active member of the Association of Science Teachers and demonstrated at the annual Members Exhibitions of the Association. He contributed papers concerned with research and teaching, including some on the Moon and tides, and carried out some experiments in electricity for Brian Chapman (the brother of Allan Chapman). He is interested in Natural Sciences and is a keen ornithologist.

Dr Mary Lindsay also attended her father's school (she was the only girl at the time). She subsequently qualified in medicine at Queen's University, Belfast, and worked in paediatrics, general practice, adult psychiatry and child psychiatry. She was a Consultant in Child Psychiatry in the NHS for twenty-five years and was elected an FRCP. She continued to work for another fifteen years after retirement. She married Tony Balfour, FRCPATH, FRAS, a pathologist who was Chairman of the local astronomical society for several years and President of the Federation of Astronomical Societies (FAS) for a while.