

## DR ERIC MERVYN LINDSAY (1907-1974): A PERSONAL VIEW

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**Abstract:** Images, anecdotes and personal reminiscences of meetings with Eric Mervyn Lindsay are related by an amateur astronomer and second cousin to Lindsay.

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

### 1 INTRODUCTION

It was always a proud delight of mine when I discovered in the 1960s, that Dr Eric Mervyn Lindsay was related on my father's side of the family. This was also a bonus as I had started my interest in amateur astronomy in 1957, the year of Comet Arend-Roland, which I shall say more about later. Mervyn—as he was known to the family—was the youngest of the thirteen children of Richard and Susan (née Best) Lindsay, and was born on 26 January 1907 at the Grange, near Portadown, County Armagh.

Figure 1 in the preceding article (see page 187) shows Mervyn, standing front centre, at the age of four or five.<sup>1</sup> His mother, Susan, is in the centre of the photograph, holding his hand. For whatever reason, one member of the family is missing in this photograph; I have never managed to find out why.

My grandmother, Elizabeth (née Best) McConnell and Mervyn's mother were sisters, and their brother (Mervyn's uncle) was the Rt. Hon. Richard Best (see Figure 1 here), Lord Justice of Appeal (1925-1939), and the first Attorney General in what was the 'new' Northern Ireland Parliament in 1922.



Figure 1: The Rt. Hon. Richard Best, Lord Justice of Appeal (1925-1939).

### 2 RECOLLECTIONS OF DR LINDSAY

Elizabeth married John McConnell in 1895 and my father, William, was born in 1904 three years before Mervyn Lindsay. As I gained my first knowledge of

astronomy from my father it was inevitable, with this background, that it should surface somewhere. I can well remember the long conversations Mervyn and my father had about family history, and numerous times I was told off by both for butting in. Indeed, my father used to say, "You could have told Mervyn was a Best by looking at the back of his neck!" I have to say that I never noticed this; I might have the same characteristic myself!

Figure 2 shows the McConnell family taken about 1910. My father is pictured centre, wearing what appears to be a sailor outfit with a big hat, while the youngest member, Emma, who was also born in 1907, is standing front left. The resemblance between Mervyn's mother and my grandmother is striking.

I don't remember my grandfather, as he died in 1921, nor my grandmother who died in 1947, a year after I was born. But I did get the opportunity to quiz my aunts many times; sadly, the last died a few years ago while well into her nineties. Unfortunately, it can also be sad that people don't take the opportunity of putting their family history down on paper, so inevitably there are gaps, but I feel lucky to have made some progress.

Back in the 1960s the old 10-inch Grubb refractor at Armagh Observatory wasn't in the gleaming condition it is today, but I will never forget my first look at the Moon through this excellent instrument, with Dr Lindsay by my side! What a pity I didn't have a camera. My family and I visited the Observatory on many occasions, and I shall always hold those memories very dear.

On one occasion shortly before his death, Mervyn sat in the lovely Drawing Room telling stories of how he and other members of staff had removed a telegraph pole that happened to be in line of sight with the Schmidt Camera and Comet Arend-Roland. The resulting plates of Comet Arend-Roland 1957 III (e.g. see page 185) are said to be among the best in the world showing the famous 'spike' emanating from the head, which is caused by material spread out along the comet's orbit. Mervyn also mentioned his novel attempts to deter courting couples from using the observatory grounds: he cut holes in a sheet, and with this over his head he rode round the grounds on a bicycle!

On this last visit, I was lucky enough to have a small black and white camera with me, and asked if I might take his photograph. He led the way to his study, and I gingerly squeezed myself into the corner of the room in order to get him seated at his desk. I was just about to take the shot when a shout rang out, "Hold on till I get a pencil and make myself intelligent looking"! The resulting photograph is shown as Figure 3.



Figure 2: The McConnell family ca 1910. Note the resemblance between the author's grandmother, Elizabeth (left) and Mervyn's mother (see Figure 1 on page 187). William McConnell (John McConnell's father) is shown third from the right, while his sister, Emma, is third from the left.

Finally, in Figure 4 is lunar crater Lindsay, which was named in his honour. I look at it often, and remember three things about Dr Eric Mervyn Lindsay:

- his enormous intellect;
- his infectious dry sense of humour; and
- a great friend who is still sadly missed.



Figure 3: Mervyn Lindsay at his desk in 1971.

### 3 NOTES

1. For more information on the people shown in this image see the article "Family Memories of a Very Special Uncle" on pages 187-189.

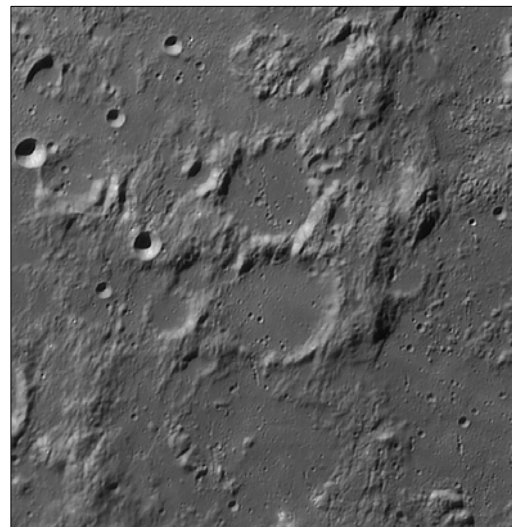


Figure 4: Lunar crater Lindsay is the upper of the pair of craters at centre. Image specially taken for the author by Wesley Higgins of Tecumseh, Oklahoma, USA, using an 18-inch reflector and Infinity 2-1m camera, Multiple Alignment Point Processing (40 points), stack of 500 frames, 2007 August 3.

John McConnell, a second cousin to Eric Lindsay, has been interested in astronomy for more than fifty years. He has a keen interest in the Moon, particularly lunar chemistry and geology, and also in the history of astronomy in Ireland. These interests are complemented by a photographic collection which includes images that illustrate the many changes that have occurred in Irish astronomy over the past half-century. John has

been a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society for many years, and he served as Chairman of the East Antrim Astronomical Society for eight years. His work for the Northern Ireland astronomical community was recognized by the award in 1999 of the Aidan P. Fitzgerald Medal of the Irish Astronomical Association. In 2001, he was honoured by the IAU when minor planet (9929) was named 'McConnell'.