

Hon. Alexander William Roberts, D.Sc., F.R.A.S.

ALEXANDER WILLIAM ROBERTS was born at Farr, in Sutherland, of a crofter family, on December 4, 1858. His father was of Irish extraction, but on the maternal side he claimed descent from the Gordons of Huntly. His parents came south in 1864 and settled in Leith. A "lad o' pairts," Roberts was destined for the teaching profession and received his education at Moray House, then the Free Church College for the training of teachers, and at the Heriot-Watt College. From boyhood he had been keenly interested in astronomy, and in 1878 he applied to Piazzi Smyth, then Astronomer Royal for Scotland, for an assistantship in the Royal Observatory. Piazzi Smyth for some reason or other dissuaded him from adopting the career of a professional astronomer, and he accepted a teaching appointment at Wick. Three years later he returned to Edinburgh and entered the University. In 1883 he accepted a post on the teaching staff of the Free Church Mission College at Lovedale, Cape Colony, which position he retained for many years. He was a devoted missionary teacher, and became a recognised authority on native questions. His appointment as a Senator of the Union of South Africa was in itself a tribute to his wide knowledge of affairs and also to Lovedale College.

Throughout his strenuous career Roberts retained his early love for astronomy. Soon after he settled at Lovedale he began observation of the southern skies. He erected a small private observatory, and in 1891 commenced a systematic search for variable stars, which was rewarded within four years by twenty discoveries. Later he concentrated on the study of eclipsing variables, more especially RR Centauri, one of his own discoveries, and V Puppis. Roberts was a pioneer in the study of eclipsing variables, and from the light-curves of these two stars he succeeded in getting approximate elements of their orbits, masses and densities. Roberts was a visual observer only, working with neither spectroscopic, photometric or photographic aid, and his friend Sir David Gill did not exaggerate when he said that he knew "few instances of more successful devotion of small means and limited opportunity to the attainment of great scientific ends than the work of Dr Roberts." The excellence of his work was recognised by the degree of Doctor of Science conferred by the Cape University.

Roberts was a man of varied interests and charming personality. He was elected a Fellow of this Society in 1898, and died at Alice, Cape Observatory, on January 27, 1938, in his eightieth year.

H. M.