

## A TRIBUTE TO THE MEMORY OF BRIAN G. MARSDEN

by John T. Ramsey

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Brian Marsden was a gentle, kind, and generous man who wore lightly his considerable learning. The success of my research on the subject of ancient comets owes a great deal to his ever-ready encouragement and counsel, a debt that I could never adequately repay. Now that he is gone, I can only signal what a great loss Brian is to all who had the privilege of knowing him. Over the years, he and I became good friends, and the frequent inclusion of his name in footnotes and prefaces to my interdisciplinary publications signals the considerable impact he had on my work.

Brian and I became acquainted through postal correspondence and telephone conversations in 1993. I approached him soon after I began collaborating with Lewis Licht, a physics professor at the University of Illinois, Chicago, on a study of the comet of -43. When Lewis and I commenced our investigation of that great, daylight-visible comet, which appeared a few months after the murder of Julius Caesar on the Ides (15th) of March in 44 BC, we quickly realized that our research would benefit greatly from enlisting the advice of one of the leading authorities on comets. I can attest at first hand, as I have heard others relate, that no matter how busy he was, Brian was always cordial and willing to take as much time as necessary to give advice whenever I rang him up on the phone. No question was ever dismissed out of hand as being too trivial, and he was always willing to help me think through any problem I cared to present to him.

To be sure, I required a great deal of guidance because my training was in Ancient Greek and Latin and ancient history, not astronomy. For that reason, I was extremely fortunate to have had as my co-investigator Lewis Licht, a gifted and imaginative physicist. Our collaboration was quite serendipitous; Lewis, a fellow faculty member, just happened to be taking an ancient-Greek course from me when I mentioned my intention of making a study of "Caesar's comet" as a small part of a larger project for which I had been awarded an NEH Fellowship for 1993-1994. It turned out that the subject of Caesar's comet was much more complex than either of us had anticipated, and our work on it ultimately resulted in a co-authored book in 1997 (*The Comet of 44 BC and Caesar's Funeral Games*), to which Brian contributed a Foreword (pp. xi-xiii).

One of the first things Brian did to assist Lewis and me was to send us photocopies of the treatment of the comet of -43 in Alexandre Pingré's *Cométographie* (Paris 1783; vol. 1, pp. 277-279 and 579), a work that always occupied a place of honor on Brian's bookshelves. Of that two-volume treatise on comets, Brian once wrote "It may be one of the oldest scientific books never reprinted that is still useful" (in his Foreword to Gary Kronk's 1984 book titled *Comets: A Descriptive Catalog*, p. vii). This is a view that Brian continued to hold in later years, remarking in an e-mail of 2007 April 23, in which he acknowledged receiving a presentation copy of my 2007 "Descriptive Catalogue of Greco-Roman Comets": "I was particularly pleased that you said such good things about Pingré, which is still far superior to more recent works." Pingré, a French cleric, in addition to being a first-rate astronomer of his generation, was also educated in the fields of Greco-Roman literature and history, and so he is one of the few past scholars to control both sides of the research equation in dealing with reports of comets in Greek and Latin sources.

What Brian particularly liked about our book on Caesar's comet, and said so in his Foreword, was that it corrected the common misapprehension on the part of astronomers (under the influence of an old mistake going back to Edmond Halley) that the Roman sighting of the comet in -43 occurred in late September. No Classicist in the present age subscribes to that outdated view, but the failure of the two fields to communicate with each other meant that the standard treatments of the comet of -43 by astronomers continued to base their conclusions on a decidedly false premise. As a consequence of our placing the apparition of the comet in late July, where it belonged, and fixing its probable position in the sky, it was possible to show that it was in all likelihood the same comet as the one seen from China in May-June of 44 BC. Next, by doing some further detective work and by postulating some logical hypotheses about the behavior of the orbit, Lewis Licht was able to devise a novel approach for determining the comet's probable orbit. Brian helped further this innovative thinking by proposing a set of orbital parameters very similar to ours. In the end, we published a narrow range of hypothetical orbits, among which we included in a diagram one of Brian's reconstructions (p. 127, fig. 7a).

It wasn't until November of 1997 (some eight months after the publication of the book on Caesar's comet) that Brian and I met face-to-face. The occasion was a visit my wife Sarah and I made to Harvard, where our son David was a sophomore. I had been invited by the Harvard Classics Department, my old alma mater, to give a lecture on the subject of the book, and Sarah and I took Brian to lunch beforehand at the Hasty Pudding Club. Brian and his colleague Dan Green kindly attended my lecture, and in parting, Brian presented me with a copy of the 1997 (12th) edition of his *Catalogue of Cometary Orbits*, to which he and his co-compiler Gareth Williams had added orbital figures for Caesar's comet (p. 10) based upon our research. The imprimatur thus accorded to one of the contributions of our study was truly appreciated, coming as it did from the astronomer who functioned as the gatekeeper of cometary sightings by holding the position of Director of the Central Bureau for Astronomical Telegrams (from 1968 to 2000).

Over the next two and a half years, while our son was finishing his degree, Sarah and I came to see more of Brian when we visited Cambridge, and soon we were included in gatherings at his house in Lexington. I especially remember one Easter when Brian's wife Nancy served a delicious turkey dinner, and we spent part of the afternoon with Dan Green and his family, who came over for dessert and coffee. Gradually, there developed a tradition of holding an annual luncheon reunion, even many years after our son had graduated from Harvard. On our vacation visits to Kennebunk, Maine, Sarah and I always arranged to meet Brian and Nancy for lunch on our way through Boston. These lunches were typically in early August, and so sometimes they happened to coincide with Brian's birthday on the 5th, which caused

those occasions to be extra special. Sadly, this past August, our annual reunion with Brian and Nancy had to take place at the Lahey Clinic, where Brian had been admitted shortly before our arrival. Still, he was in fine spirits, and when we said goodbye on that occasion, and then spoke by phone some months later on October 25, there was no sense that it would be goodbye forever. Indeed, we sincerely hoped to renew old times once more the following August, but this was not to be.

Over the many years of our friendship, Brian was always a faithful correspondent. To give but one example, when I returned to my old Oxford college Balliol in Hilary term 2008 as a visiting fellow and gave the Oliver Smithies Lectures on the subject of ancient comets, Brian reminisced in one e-mail about his student days at New College. That college is in close proximity to the house once occupied by the great astronomer Edmond Halley, and concerning that little clapboard house Brian wrote (2008 Feb. 15): "As for his house, I don't know whether it still is, but in my time in Oxford it was the New College sanitarium, and I was sent there for a couple of days to recuperate in November 1957 when it was thought I might be suffering from that year's 'Asian' flu. The real thrill for me in going there was that Halley had once lived there." I suspect, although I never pressed him on this point, that I may have owed to Brian's recommendation the invitation I received the year I returned from Oxford to give the Webster Lectures on ancient astronomy. What I can say, however, without any hesitation is that without Brian's suggestion and encouragement, I never would have thought to approach Michael Hoskins, editor of the *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, where I published (in 2007, vol. 38, pp. 175-197) for the benefit of astronomers a summary of the findings of my "Descriptive Catalogue of Greco-Roman Comets" and a tabular summary of the apparitions. Brian was a great believer in fostering interdisciplinary communication, and what better way to do so than to have findings published in two different venues, each targeted at one of the two fields relevant to the subject.

In thinking back on Brian, the characteristic that will always stand out the most in my recollection is his generosity in helping perfect strangers, such as myself, who turned to him for advice on the subject of astronomy, especially comets, which he knew so well. I suspect that his receptiveness to unsolicited inquiries was fostered, in part, by an incident that occurred during his student days at Oxford. As Brian relates in an article published in *SEVEN: An Anglo-American Literary Review* (1987, vol. 8, pp. 85-96), two years before he took his degree in 1959, he was presented with a set of questions about astronomy in the epic poem of the mid-first-century (AD) Latin author Lucan. These questions had been submitted to the University of Cambridge Observatory and passed along to a bright undergraduate (Brian) for a response. Soon after he sent back his set of answers, Brian learned that the submitter of the questions was none other than the famous English writer Dorothy Sayers, whose fictional detective, Lord Peter Whimsy, is of immortal fame. It gave Brian great pleasure to carry on the discussion of astronomy in Lucan through an exchange of letters with Miss Sayers during the last eight months of her life (six of her letters to Brian being included in vol. 4 [2000] of her collected letters, edited by Barbara Reynolds). That formative experience, it seems to me, may help to explain why Brian was so predisposed to help others who turned to him. It may also aid in explaining why he and I so easily came to strike up a friendship thanks to shared interests in astronomy and Classical literature. In fact, during the last few years of his life, I was occasionally able to reciprocate Brian's many kindnesses as a mentor on comets by helping with the translation of Medieval and scientific Latin texts that interested him. He used to submit these to me by e-mail, one or two a month, and I would do my best to give him reliable translations and to discuss any relevant historical points.

As I remarked earlier, however, my debt to Brian could never be adequately repaid. And so, the course I have taken is "pay it forward" (on the model of the 2000 Kevin Spacey film of that title, whose premise is that the world can be made a better place if each of us does a good service for three strangers, and then each of those three does a good service in turn for three further strangers, and so on, and so on). This is the philosophy I have adopted through the inspiration of my dealings with Brian, a gentleman and a scholar, who exemplified for me the epitome of human kindness and good will. The world has lost one of its best citizens, and the scholarly community is the poorer now that Brian is gone. *Requiescat in pace.*

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## REMEMBERING BRIAN MARSDEN AS MENTOR

by Gary Kronk

Brian and I began corresponding by mail in the mid-1970s. He quickly learned that I was a journalism student, with a passion for observing, researching, and writing about comets. I quickly learned that Brian was always willing to share his vast knowledge about comets, no matter who you were. It was easy to tell how passionate Brian was about the subject and it did not take long before I felt comfortable talking to him about the research I was interested in doing.

I had come up with an idea to write a four-volume set of books that would cover the history of every comet seen from ancient times to the present. During late 1979, I formally explained my concept to Brian in a letter that included several samples of my writing. Brian took the time to write back on 1980 January 10, describing his suggestion to the International Astronomical Union (IAU) in 1967 for a new, definitive "cometography", and then suggesting the way each story should be written to be valuable to both the amateur and professional astronomer.

My first book on comets was published in 1984, but it was far from the multi-volume history on comets that I wanted to do. During the next decade, Brian continued to encourage me, being quick to answer questions, and helping to point me in the right direction during my research. If I called him on the telephone, he always answered and always seemed to have plenty of time to talk, even though I knew he was probably busy. As my research expanded in the early 1990s,