

OBITUARY: HILMAR WILLI DUERBECK (1948–2012)



Born in 1948 in Klarenthal (near Saarbruecken in Germany), Hilmar Duerbeck studied physics from 1966 to 1969 at the Universität des Saarlandes (University of the Saarland) in Saarbruecken. He then went to Bonn University to study astronomy and physics, where he graduated in 1972 with a thesis entitled “Astronomical observations with a photoelectric area photometer”. In 1974 he obtained his Ph.D. with a dissertation on “The eclipsing binary VV Orionis”. From 1975 to 1985 he was Scientific Assistant at the Hoher List Observatory in Germany, and during the same period he was astronomy Lecturer for the European Division of the University of Maryland in Germany. During that period he obtained his habilitation in astronomy from Bonn University with a dissertation on “Eruptive variables — observations, analyses, models”.

From 1985 to 1991 he was a Lecturer in astronomy at the University of Muenster, Germany, and from 1996 on he was an honorary Professor at the same university.

From 1994 Hilmar occupied various educational and research positions abroad: Exchange Professor at the Universidad Catolica de Chile in Santiago and at the Universidad Catolica del Norte in Antofagasta (Chile). He was repeatedly Senior Visiting Scientist at the European Southern Observatory in Chile and at the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore, USA. For more than a decade he was Senior Scientific Collaborator at the Vrije Universiteit in Brussels Belgium, and a couple of years ago he was appointed as an Adjunct Professor at James Cook University in Australia.

Hilmar was a member of several international organisations and commissions, including the International Astronomical Union (Commission 42, Close Binary Stars) and the Historical Astronomy Division of the American Astronomical Society. He

served on numerous panels and commissions (viz., the Hubble Space Telescope and the International Ultraviolet Explorer), and he served on scientific organizing committees of IAU Colloquia and other meetings. From 2003 on he also was Secretary of the “Arbeitskreis Astronomiegeschichte” of the Astronomische Gesellschaft in Germany, and he also chaired the IAU Working Group on Venus Transits.

He was an expert on novae, nova remnants and supernovae, and on cataclysmic variables and flare stars. His best-known papers are catalogs and atlases of eruptive stars. He was also a keen observer: for example, in 1975 he visually noticed Nova Cygni (V 1500 Cyg) at declination +48 degrees from ESO La Silla Observatory located at –30 degrees latitude, and promptly secured sequences of crucial spectrograms.

Hilmar was a very prolific writer (ADS lists more than 450 entries), and a very active editor: he was a member of the Editorial Board of the *Information Bulletin on Variable Stars* (Budapest, Hungary) and of the Editorial Board of the book series *Acta Historica Astronomiae* (Frankfurt, Germany). As Associate Editor of the *Journal of Astronomical History and Heritage* (James Cook University, Australia), and as Co-Editor of the *Journal of Astronomical Data* (University of Brussels, Belgium), he helped and coached many authors.

From 1975 until her death in 2007 Hilmar was married to astronomer Waltraut C. Seitter. Hilmar died suddenly and unexpectedly on Thursday, 5 January 2012 at his home in Schalkenmehren, Germany.

Besides his professional dedication, and his legendary encyclopedic knowledge, Hilmar will be best remembered as a quiet and caring personality and as a very helpful and friendly person, who was always kind and generous to his colleagues. In addition, he was most encouraging to students — his own students as well as others’ — and at any time was ready with good advice, always topped with a big smile.

The main-belt asteroid 1989 SW2 has been named 9327 Duerbeck.

Christiaan Sterken
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Hilmar Duerbeck served as an Associate Editor of the *Journal of Astronomical History and Heritage* from 2007 until his untimely death on 5 January 2012. I joined the journal later that year, and for more than four years I had the pleasure of working with him to help Editor Wayne Orchiston publish as accurate and error-free a journal as we could.

I never had the pleasure of meeting Hilmar in person, but we exchanged hundreds of e-mails, and I grew to admire his many excellent qualities: his broad knowledge of so many areas of the history of astronomy, his command of English that enabled him to correct grammatical and spelling errors of native

speakers, his wide knowledge of the astronomical and historical literature in several languages, and his good humor and patience. I feel that I have lost a good friend as well as an able colleague.

Joseph S. Tenn
Sonoma State University, USA

The late John Perdrix and I established the *Journal of Astronomical History and Heritage* in 1998 following the 1997 General Assembly of the IAU, but it was only when I moved to James Cook University in 2005 and John stepped down as Managing Editor (at the time I was the Papers Editor) and the University and I took over full responsibility for the journal that the need for an Associate Editor emerged. It did not take me long to identify Hilmar Duerbeck as the ideal candidate, and although he already had a heavy schedule he immediately accepted my offer. After that, Hilmar and I worked closely together, and in 2007 we were joined by a second Associate Editor, Joe Tenn. Hilmar's role in the production of a successful journal was monumental, not just in deciding on policy, reviewing papers, dealing with authors and referees, but especially in proofreading and providing corrections for bibliographical entries in German, French and other languages. Although Richard Strom has kindly stepped into the vacuum created by Hilmar's very sudden and totally unexpected death, he will be sorely missed.

But Hilmar's association with James Cook University did not end there, for we also appointed him as an Adjunct Professor in the Centre for Astronomy, and in this capacity he was busy co-supervising the thesis research of two off-campus Ph.D. candidates. Clifford Cunningham (USA) and Keith Treschman

(Australia) respectively were investigating British observations of and comments about the first four asteroids, and historic total solar eclipses observed from Australia and their contribution to solar physics. We will all miss Hilmar's valued input.

My other close association with Hilmar was through the IAU. In 2000 we formed the IAU Transits of Venus Working Group and I served as the inaugural Chairman. I subsequently passed this office on to Steve Dick and when his term expired it was Hilmar who inherited it. He was still serving in this role when he died, and it is sad that I have had to step in and carry the WG through to the August 2012 Beijing General Assembly of the IAU when it will be wound up. The WG has served its purpose: it has been the driving force behind several international meetings and has been the catalyst that encouraged many of us to write up and publish papers on the historic transits of Venus. Hilmar's role in all this has been monumental.

For me personally, Hilmar was a never-ending source of encouragement and support in my day-to-day astronomical life. He was always quick to provide feedback on my ideas, or respond to my urgent requests for help when such occasions arose. If a paper arrived for the journal and I could not think of a suitable referee, Hilmar was always (well, almost always) able to suggest one. And as Chris Sterken and Joe Tenn have said, Hilmar had an encyclopaedic knowledge of astronomy and of the astronomical literature, which I was frequently able to tap into. Hilmar was a close friend and a wonderful colleague to work with, and I will miss him terribly.

Wayne Orchiston
James Cook University, Australia