

NEVIL MASKELYNE

(1732 - 1811)

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On October 6th occurs the bicentenary of the birth of Nevil MASKELYNE — the worthy successor of FLAMSTEED, HALLEY and BRADLEY — who for forty-six years held the office of Astronomer Royal and will always be remembered as the founder of the *Nautical Almanac*. A man of mild and genial temper, MASKELYNE was admirably fitted for the post he occupied so long, and at Greenwich steadily pursued the aims for which the Observatory was founded. Ever ready to acknowledge the work of others and to further the interests of science, he gained the esteem of all who knew him, and when, after his laborious experiments on the slopes of Schiehallion, Perthshire, made to determine the density of the earth, he was awarded the Copley Medal of the Royal Society, Sir John PRINGLE in addressing him said that the Council presented him with the medal not only as a token of their acknowledgment of his work but as a "sincere pledge of their affection".

MASKELYNE was born in London on October 6th, 1732, being the son of Edmund MASKELYNE of Purton, Wiltshire. At the age of nine years he was sent to Westminster School, and it is said that, like LALANDE and MESSIER, he was attracted to the study of astronomy by the solar eclipse of 1748. From Westminster School he proceeded to Cambridge, entering first Catherine Hall and then Trinity College, graduating as seventh wrangler in 1754. The following year he took holy orders and was appointed to a curacy at Barnet. He next took the degree of M. A., was made a fellow of Trinity, and in 1758 became a fellow of the Royal Society. Already known to BRADLEY, in 1761, MASKELYNE was sent to St. Helena to observe the transit of Venus in order to determine the parallax of the sun, and two years later sailed as chaplain of the *Princess Louisa* on a voyage to Barbadoes, during which he tested the accuracy of HARRISON'S chronometer. The death of BLISS in 1765 leaving the office of Astronomer Royal vacant, MASKELYNE was appointed to it. He had already in 1763 published the *British Mariner's Guide*, and he was now able to prevail upon the Government to issue that eminently useful work the *Nautical Almanac*. The almanac for 1767 was published in 1766, and for the succeeding forty-five years subsequent editions were superintended by MASKELYNE. In connection with his constant efforts to improve navigation, he edited the important lunar tables of the German astronomer Tobias MAYER (1723-1762), and obtained for MAYER'S widow a grant of £3000, and for EULER, whose lunar theory he used, a grant of £300. Though in early life MASKELYNE became a clergyman and afterwards received the degree of D. D. and was given the livings of Shrawardine, Shropshire, and North Runcton, Norfolk, most of his time was spent at Greenwich Observatory and it was there he died on February 9th, 1811.

