



BENGT STRÖMGREN (1908–1987)

Bengt Strömgren, former President of the ESO Council (1975–1977) died on 4 July after a brief illness. His presidency occurred at a particularly difficult moment in ESO's history. Thanks to his wisdom and the self-confident and decisive way in which he dealt with ESO matters, many perils were avoided and a high degree of harmony was established between the delegations of the member countries which has endured up to the present.

Bengt Strömgren was a distinguished scientist. He published his first results on Baade's comet 1922c in *Astronomische Nachrichten* (217, p. 345) in 1922 when he was fourteen years old. One of his last preprints appeared a few days before his death. The son of Elis Strömgren, Director of Copenhagen Observatory, Bengt obtained his Ph.D. in 1929 and became Professor of Astronomy in 1938 and Director in 1940. From 1951–57 he was Director of the Yerkes Observatory of the University of Chicago. The next ten years he was a member of the faculty of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. In 1967 he returned to Copenhagen to occupy the "House of Honor", to be Professor of Astrophysics and for several years Director of NORDITA, the joint research institute of the five nordic countries. From 1970 to 1973 he was President of the International Astronomical Union. For more than a decade he was Presi-



dent of the Danish Cancer Committee, which shows the width of his interests.

The thread that runs through his research is an interest in the chemical composition of celestial bodies. In the thirties this led him to studies of the internal structure of stars in which he showed that hydrogen must be a major constituent. In 1940 he published an important article on the composition of the solar atmosphere in the *Festschrift* for Elis Strömgren. Later he perceived the need for efficient methods to deter-

mine stellar luminosities, temperatures and metal abundances in order to study the distribution of stars of different composition and age and thereby to probe the history of our galaxy. This led to the development of the "Strömgren photometric system", the four colour uvby system which is widely used. In this system the pass bands defining the colours have been selected with great care to maximize the information about the essential stellar parameters. Also to be mentioned are his earlier researches on the ionization of interstellar gas by hot stars. Such ionized regions are now known as "Strömgren spheres".

Bengt Strömgren was low key but decisive. If he strongly doubted what you told him, he would very mildly ask if you were quite sure. He was modest in claiming credit and generous in giving it to others. But if he felt it important to reach a particular aim, he was persistent. Most Danish astronomers are in some way his students, and many of us elsewhere have been influenced by him as post docs or associates. And very many have enjoyed the warm hospitality of Bengt and Sigrid Strömgren.

If it is the mark of a successful life for a scientist to have had a significant impact and to have made lasting contributions to science, then Bengt Strömgren has been a fortunate person, indeed. He will be missed by all who knew him.

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