

The girl who named a planet

By Paul Rincon
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Hades, I'm not sure**
Venetia Phair

Venetia Phair isn't a name that immediately springs to mind when you mention astronomy.

But the retired teacher from Epsom in Surrey has left an indelible signature on our map of the Solar System.

Now 87 years of age, Venetia Phair (née Burney) is the only person in the world who can claim to have named a planet.

In 1930, at just 11 years of age, Mrs Phair suggested the title Pluto for the newly discovered ninth planet.

On 17 January, the US space agency (Nasa) will launch the first ever space mission to this distant world from Cape Canaveral in Florida.

Pluto, the Roman god of the Underworld, turned out to be a particularly apt title for the enigmatic object, which resides in the outer reaches of the Solar System.

Mythological name

The name proposed by the then Oxford schoolgirl was seized upon at the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona, where the planet was discovered by young American astronomer Clyde Tombaugh.

"I was quite interested in Greek and Roman myths and legends at the time," Mrs Phair told the BBC News website.

"At school, we used to play games in the university park, putting - I think they were lumps of clay - at the right distance from each other to represent the distances of the planets from the Sun.

"Some of the distances I can still more or less remember, so it was probably a good lesson to have had."

On the morning of 14 March 1930, the young Venetia Burney was sitting down to breakfast in

the dining room of the house in north Oxford where she lived with her grandfather Falconer Madan.

Mr Madan, who was retired as librarian at the Bodleian Library, was with her reading The Times newspaper.

When he got to an article on page 14 about the new planet's discovery, he remarked on it to Venetia.

Excellent suggestion

"I can still visualise the table and the room, but I can remember very little about the conversation," Mrs Phair said.

The article mentioned that the planet had not yet been named, prompting Venetia Burney to suggest her own.

Mr Madan was so impressed with the name Pluto, he went straight to his friend Herbert Hall Turner, professor of astronomy at the University of Oxford, and one of the leaders in the worldwide effort to produce an astrographic chart.

"It was incredibly lucky in a number of ways," Mrs Phair explains. "Firstly, I was lucky in having a grandfather who pursued the matter and knew Professor Turner.

"And it is extremely lucky that the name was there. There were practically no names left from classical mythology. Whether I thought about the dark and gloomy Hades, I'm not sure."

Interestingly, her great uncle Henry Madan had suggested the names Phobos and Deimos for the moons of Mars.

Though retired, Falconer Madan continued to visit the Bodleian library to pursue his interest in Lewis Carroll and see former colleagues.

"He walked down to the Bodleian as usual and on the way he diverged sufficiently to drop a note in at Professor Turner's house," says Mrs Phair.

Five pound reward

Ironically, the professor was out at a meeting of the Royal Astronomical Society in London where there was much speculation about the naming of the new ninth planet.

"None of them came up with Pluto. That was another stroke of luck," says Mrs Phair. When Mr Madan eventually caught up with Herbert Hall Turner, the astronomer agreed Pluto was an excellent choice.

Professor Turner promised to send a telegram, forwarding the suggestion, to the Lowell Observatory. Mrs Phair then heard nothing more on the matter for more than a month.

On 1 May 1930, the name Pluto was formally adopted. When the news went public, Mr Madan rewarded his granddaughter with a five pound note.

"This was unheard of then. As a grandfather, he liked to have an excuse for generosity," says Mrs Phair.

Mrs Phair is keen to scotch one rumour that grew up in the years after Pluto's discovery; namely that she had named the planet after Disney's cartoon dog, which also debuted in 1930.

"People were repeatedly saying: 'Ah, she named it after Pluto the dog'. It has now been satisfactorily proven that the dog was named after the planet, rather than the other way round. So, one is vindicated."

Predicted discovery

The name was apparently adopted for the ninth planet not only because it was one of the few noteworthy names from classical mythology not already taken, but also because the first two letters were the initials of Percival Lowell, the astronomer who gave his name to the observatory where Clyde Tombaugh worked.

With fellow astronomer William Pickering, Lowell had predicted the existence of a Trans-Neptunian planet. Clyde Tombaugh had found Pluto during a systematic search for such an object.

Venetia still has the press cuttings collected by her grandfather on the adoption of the name Pluto, and a kind of fame has followed her ever since.

"The professor who built the planetarium at the Leicester Space Centre was very kind and had spent quite a long time trying to trace us. When we went to visit, we were treated more or less like royalty," she says.

Over the years she has tried to follow developments on the planet she named, which is now the subject of calls from some astronomers for a demotion in status.

Since its discovery in 1930, astronomers have discovered an entire region of distant icy bodies much like Pluto called the Kuiper Belt. As such, some scientists now put Pluto amongst these Kuiper Belt Objects rather than among the planets.

Mrs Phair has been sent an invitation by Nasa to watch the New Horizons launch from Cape Canaveral, but she says she will probably have to decline the offer due to her age.

"It's interesting isn't it, that as they come to demote Pluto, so the interest in it seems to have grown," she says.

"At my age, I've been largely indifferent to [the debate]; though I suppose I would prefer it to remain a planet."

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