

# Some extra thoughts on Ernst Julius Öpik

Francis J. Heyden, S.J.

Manila Observatory,  
UP P.O. Box 122, UP Post Office,  
Dilliman, Quezon City, Philippines.

As a young graduate student arriving at Harvard in 1938, I was still recovering from working through the long studies of the Jesuits for my degree in Philosophy and Theology while carrying an interest in adding a doctorate in Astronomy. My introduction to Harvard was to their summer school in which there were many names I had only heard about. There was Finlay-Fruendlich who was known at the time for his suggestion that the light quantum was leaky and lost some of its energy over the years of transit. That was the explanation of the red-shift. Then there was Jan Oort from Holland who convinced me, along with Bart Bok, that statistical astronomy was best because there were too many stars in the sky for individual study. I was a bit overwhelmed by the papers of Rossel on the nature of a star. This seemed too far ahead of me at the time.

In the course of the meetings I met some of the young men who had finished their studies and were just sitting around for the summer sessions. None of them were taking notes the way I was. But I did get to know Freeman Miller, Jim Cuffey, Eric Lindsay and several others who made my first real acquaintance with astronomy as a professional topic.

In the course of those summer days I got friendly enough with Bart J. Bok to hear some of the details about former students and the tricks that were played on them at the observing site. He warned me against getting caught in the Snipe Hunt while working there. Then he told me some of the stories about the trip to town on a Saturday for purchases in the bargain counters. He told me of Eric going there one night and, after he saw all of the odds and ends that others bought, he joined the crowd by purchasing a stalk of leaks or thin onions.

Through Bok I learned more about events that happened at Harvard. One day he told me about the final examination for Eric Lindsay's doctorate. Eric did the same thing I did later. At a certain point he could not answer any more questions. Rather than call for a halt and postponement to

another time, Dr. Shapley suggested that the examiners take Eric down to a bar on Harvard Square where they could loosen him up with at least one drink. Eric drank a coke while the rest took something more ephemeral. As the exam renewed Ernst Öpik, who was one of the board, began with the question "What is the average color index of a Hollywood Star?" Eric passed the exam but not particularly on the reply to the above question.

I was interested in Ernst's methods for counting meteors with his rotating mirror. The device was quite foolproof except for the demand it put on the observer to keep an eye open every minute. He was also counting some very fast meteors which made some doubters wonder if his alertness was as good as it should have been. But he had spent many an hour out in the western desert with nothing but the stars and the spiraling meteor to pass his time. I envied him.

When he would come to Harvard for a visit, I always managed to speak with him because I had come to like his writings on statistical astronomy in the Tartu Publications. He was a brain that could cover almost any topic and in an unusual way that showed no indication to copy from someone.

Once I mentioned his method for eliminating accidental errors from data like proper motions with a tabular method. I liked it better than that of Eddington. Mrs. Cecilia Gaposchkin exclaimed, "You must realize that Ernst Öpik is one of the great minds of this century in astronomy!"

Some years later I had been assigned to the Department of Astronomy at Georgetown and learned that Ernst Öpik was spending a half semester at the nearby University of Maryland. Before I had really met him he called me one day with some very good advice. I owe him for that. But when I mentioned that I was trying to run a forum on astronomy once every month for the area, he pitched in and helped me in many ways either by giving papers himself or by providing topics.

We became quite friendly and I learned of his