The Naming of Pluto

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SOME MONTHS AGO I had the pleasure of a visit from Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell Phair, who live in Epsom, outside London. They are not astronomers, but Mrs. Phair, née Venetia Burney, has left her mark on history. It was she who first suggested the name Pluto for the planet discovered by Clyde Tombaugh in 1930.

The names of the planets are, of course, mythological, and Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn received theirs in antiquity. Uranus was Saturn's father, and this name for William Herschel's 1781 discovery is now used universally, though there was a long period of hesitation. Up to about 1850 the terms "Herschel," "The Georgian Planet," or simply "The Georgian" were often used. There was less argument when Neptune made its entry in 1846. After all, Jupiter's brother and one of the senior Olympians was surely entitled to a planet of his own!

Satellite designations have caused some controversy, and until quite recently the terms Io, Europa, Ganymede, and Callisto were not generally used for Jupiter's companions, mainly because they had been suggested by Simon Mayr (Marius) rather than Galileo himself. Deimos and Phobos, Mars' two dwarf satellites, were named after two attendants of the war god as suggested in 1877 (shortly after their discovery) by Henry Madan, a housemaster at Eton College. Today the International Astronomical Union officially names all such objects (*S&T:* January, 1984, page 23). This leads me to my main topic — and to Mrs. Phair, then Venetia Burney, aged 11 when Pluto was discovered.

On the morning of Friday, March 14, 1930, English newspapers ran the news of Pluto's discovery. (Incidentally, this was Percival Lowell's birthday, though he had died in 1916.) The privilege of naming the object presumably belonged to Lowell Observatory, and its director, V. M. Slipher, was — in Tombaugh's words — "urged to suggest a name for the new planet before someone else did." Soon suggestions began to pour in. Constance Lowell, Percival's widow, proposed Zeus, then her own first name, then simply Lowell, none of which met with any enthusiasm at all. One young couple wrote to Tombaugh asking that the planet be named after their newborn child.

Mythological names were much to the fore. Cronus was one possibility and might have been seriously considered had it not come from T. J. J. See, who at one time had been on the observatory staff, but whose abrasive personality had made him universally detested. Minerva was also high on the list. Then there were Odin, Persephone, Erebos, Atlas, Prometheus, Cosmos, Athene, Hercules, Hera, Pax, Icarus, Freya . . . the list seemed endless. One complication was that many of the mythological names had already been allotted to asteroids. Virtually all the female names had been used up, but male names were reserved for objects with unusual orbits, and more of them were available.

Venetia Burney, who, as an 11-year old, suggested the name for Pluto.

On March 14, the following letter was delivered to the home of H. H. Turner, professor of astronomy at Oxford:

Dear Professor,

This new planet! As my older brother suggested the names Deimos and Phobos for the Martian moons, I was set wondering about a name for the big obscure new baby, at breakfast today.

It is of course most dim and gloomy. Blest if my little granddaughter Venetia Burney didn't up and suggest a name which seems to me thoroughly suitable: PLUTO.

I hope it has not been bagged for an asteroid. He was king of the murky and mysterious nether kingdom. You see Odin was a bright god, and far from appropriate, but Pluto is good. Don't trouble to reply. I am, sincerely yours,

F. MADAN

Later in the day Madan again wrote to Turner: "If the suggestion of Pluto strikes you as good, I would gladly pay for telegraphing it to America. Time is everything in such a case."

Turner was impressed and sent a telegram to Slipher at Flagstaff: "Naming new planet, please consider PLUTO, suggested by small girl Venetia Burney for dark and gloomy planet. TURNER." The wheels had been set in motion.

Madan's own previously unpublished account runs as follows:

The course of events on Friday, March 14, 1930, was this. When I came down as usual to breakfast, at 8 a.m., I saw the announcement in the *Times* and the *Daily Mail* of the discovery of a new planet beyond Neptune. My daughter, Mrs. (Ethel) Burney and her daughter Venetia, aged 11, were the only others at breakfast, and I at once said "What will be its name?" I thought of Odin, but did not like it. In a minute or two Venetia said "It might be called Pluto." The idea seemed good at once. She had learned about the old Greek and Latin mythologies, and also the relative distances of the planets, at school.

When I started my ordinary work at the Bodleian [Library] about 10.30 a.m., I left a hastily-written letter at professor Turner's house on the way, in Blackhall Road, not knowing that he was in London, having to attend an ordinary meeting of the Royal Astronomical Society on the evening of Friday the 14th. That afternoon I left another short note at his house, about 4 p.m., suggesting a telegram to America, if he thought fit. These notes he only read on his return in the early afternoon of the *next* day (Saturday). . . . F. MADAN, August 13, 1930.

As soon as Turner read the letters, he replied, writing from the university observatory:

My Dear Madan,

I think PLUTO excellent!! We did not manage to think of anything so good at the RAS yesterday. The only at all meritorious sugges-

It seems time now that this body should be given a name of its own. Many names have been suggested and among them Minerva and Pluto have been very popular. But, as Minerva has long been used for one of the asteroids it is really not available for this object. However, Pluto seems very appropriate and we are proposing to the American Astronomical Society and to the Royal Astronomical Society, that this name be given it. As far as we know Pluto was first suggested by Miss Venetia Burney, aged 11, of Oxford, England.† As a fitting symbol to go with the name we have suggested ♇, easily remembered because the first two letters of the name and not to be confused with the symbols of the other planets.

V. M. SLIPHER.

Flagstaff, Arizona
May 1, 1930.

† Kindly cabled by Prof. H. H. Turner.

The last part of the Lowell Observatory *Circular* in which the name Pluto was proposed.

tion was Kronos, but that won't do alongside Saturn.

I got your two notes at 3.30 on my return from London with my daughter Ruth. On our way to see the crocuses in New College garden I therefore sent the following telegram [the one quoted above] as a "week-end letter" which gives the favourable rates. So Miss Venetia will get the best chance I can give her. The telegram will arrive about the same time as the official telegram, from the RAS quoted in the *Times* this morning, which I sent by the same method. The decision must of course lie elsewhere, and we cannot urge those who have a right to choose. But I scarcely think they will find a better name. The minor planets are mostly female; though there are a few males, Endymion and Eros for example, and also Cupid! But they are pretty hard up by this time; 954 Li, 955 Alstede, 960 Leocadia, 978 Aidamina, 1027 Aesculapia, etc.

Yours, H. H. Turner

In a note to Turner on March 17th, Madan hoped that "we may bring off a British triumph, not to say Oxonian." The next correspondent was A. C. D. Crommelin, one of the most celebrated astronomers of the day. On the 17th he wrote:

55 Ulundi Road, Blackheath. London S.E.3.

Dear Turner,

Many thanks for your interesting letter. . . . The name PLUTO is excellent; it has not been used for an asteroid; it was suggested for Eros before the latter name was suggested (see *Observatory* for the end of 1898 and beginning of 1899) but it was rejected as being too gloomy a name for a planet so full of hope; but it is quite suitable for a planet lost in darkness; according to the Mythology he possessed a helmet which rendered him invisible; which this planet has been for a very long time; his symbol would be a two-pronged fork; like that of Neptune with the middle prong omitted. Oddly enough I received by the same post as your letter one from my sister Mrs. Masefield of Boars Hill suggesting PERSEPHONE, the wife of Hades or Pluto; but I think a masculine name suits the case better. . . . Some of the people at Greenwich Observatory suggested Chaos for the new planet; he was the father of Uranus and Gaea; I think this was suggested for Neptune before the latter name was given; Erebus strikes me as another possibility.

Crommelin added a footnote pointing out that asteroid 399 had already been named Persephone.

On March 18th, Turner wrote Madan:

I sent your letters to Dr. Crommelin, President of the RAS, and a world authority on names and discoveries of planets and comets. . . . I said nothing about the suggestion, but yesterday . . . I heard that the name Pluto had been independently suggested at Cambridge. I thereupon told my story of the small girl, which was well received — not *publicly*, but to those just around. I doubt whether any telegram will have been sent from Cambridge, so that at any rate Miss Venetia will probably have priority; and after all, that others should think of the name with approval is all to the good for its ultimate success.

On March 18th we have another letter from Madan to Turner:

The good horse Pluto is running well, in spite of some of its backers being "stunning Cantabs," as Lewis Carroll calls them. . . . Let me add that my granddaughter is 11 years old, and that at her school they were capable enough to see how interested young people are in astronomy; and they had given a lesson on the Solar System by starting from the Keble Gate in the Parks, and dropping a stone or piece of wood at the *right proportional distance* for Mercury, Venus etc, taking the Keble Gate for the Sun! Before they got to Neptune they were over the Bridge into Marston Field.

Support for the name Pluto came from various people, including Sir Archibald Garrod, ex-Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford, who wrote to Madan on March 22nd. At last, on April 8th, Madan himself wrote a letter to Slipher. On April 19th the American responded:

Lowell Observatory, Flagstaff, Arizona.

Dear Professor Turner,

Many thanks for the newspaper cuttings, which were read with interest here, and for your kind letter and the earlier cable giving the name "Pluto" suggested by the little girl. To my mind Pluto has long been my choice.

Very truly yours,
V. M. SLIPHER

Official action followed. In the Lowell Observatory *Circular* for May 1st, part of which is reproduced on page 400, the name Pluto was formally proposed. On May 3rd, Crommelin wrote to Turner expressing pleasure that the name had been favored by Slipher. On June 11th Crommelin wrote to Venetia herself:

Many thanks for your card. I take the opportunity of renewing in a more direct manner my congratulations about your successful suggestion of the name Pluto. It was suggested for the planet afterwards called Eros in 1898, but was rejected then as being too gloomy; but the gloom is appropriate in the present case; so is the helmet of invisibility. Believe me, Sincerely yours,

A. C. D. CROMMELIN

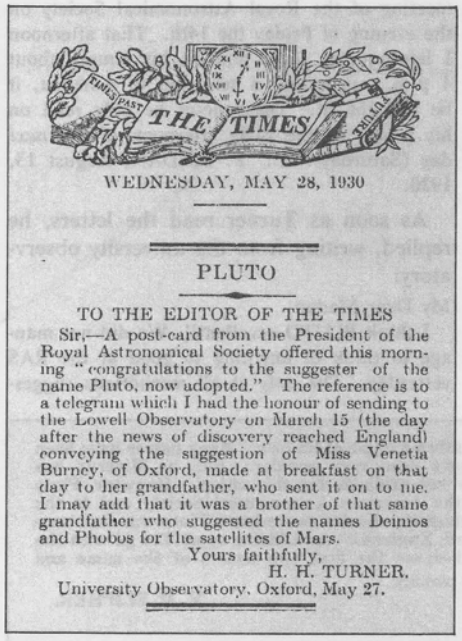
Inevitably there were counterclaims about priority, but these were disposed of in a letter to Madan written on October 10, 1930, by H. P. Hollis, a well-known astronomer:

The facts about the naming of Pluto are well known, and Miss Burney's claim to have been the first to suggest the name appears to be admitted by the authorities at the Lowell Observatory. Professor W. H. Pickering of Jamaica says that he suggested it quite early and independently and there are others who say similarly, but an article by Dr. Slipher of the Lowell Observatory, dated May 1, he said "As far as we know the name was first suggested by Miss Venetia Burney, aged 11, of Oxford, England."

The name Pluto was officially adopted as of May 1, 1930, the date of Slipher's announcement. It was fully supported by Tombaugh and has never been questioned. What Planet X will be named, if it is ever discovered, remains to be seen!

Patrick Moore, the well-known author of works on astronomy and space science and retiring president of the British Astronomical Association, thanks the Phairs for the generous loan of original correspondence and manuscripts, without which this account could not have been written.

Mrs. Maxwell Phair with the author, who provided the illustrations for this article.



THE TIMES

WEDNESDAY, MAY 28, 1930

PLUTO

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES

Sir,—A post-card from the President of the Royal Astronomical Society offered this morning "congratulations to the suggester of the name Pluto, now adopted." The reference is to a telegram which I had the honour of sending to the Lowell Observatory on March 15 (the day after the news of discovery reached England) conveying the suggestion of Miss Venetia Burney, of Oxford, made at breakfast on that day to her grandfather, who sent it on to me. I may add that it was a brother of that same grandfather who suggested the names Deimos and Phobos for the satellites of Mars.

Yours faithfully,
H. H. TURNER.

University Observatory, Oxford, May 27.

The May 28, 1930, London *Times* contains an error: "the previous day" should have appeared instead of "that day."