

From Pukekohe to the Nautical Almanac

NOBODY, said Cromwell, goes so far as the man who does not know where he is going. When Leslie John Comrie, of Pukekohe, and Auckland University College, boarded a transport in 1918, he only knew that he was going to the war, and the circumstances of his going were so peculiar that he must have thought it a miracle that he was there at all. Although he had been actively interested in astronomy, he can hardly have thought that one day he would be Superintendent of the *Nautical Almanac*, the most important publication of the kind in the world.

Dr. Comrie is now back in New Zealand with his wife, after 30 years' absence. At our request he told us something about his career, including the work in which he has specialised.

He was born at Pukekohe 50 odd years ago (the son of a farmer) and educated at Pukekohe High School and Auckland Grammar School. At the Grammar School he was top in mathematics, but he took chemistry for his Honours subject at Auckland University College. Now, at A.U.C. there was a telescope, presented many years before by an Auckland resident. The telescope wasn't much used. Comrie and some of his pals at A.U.C. thought they would play round with it. One upshot of this interest was that in 1914 Comrie found a new comet with the naked eye. We asked him if he got the honour of discovery, and he said, "No, I was beaten by two days by someone in South Africa, and someone in South America, and C. J. Westland, of Christchurch. The comet was called 1914e."

Then came the war. Comrie had suffered since childhood from deafness which made it very difficult to become a soldier. He offered himself again and again, but they wouldn't take him. At last he got in by a mixture of good luck and guile, and was chosen for a N.C.O. course at Trentham. Unfortunately one day the instructor, Captain Cheator, whom many veterans of the first war will remember, gave him an order on his bad ear. "I didn't hear a word of it, and Cheator let off a volley of language. He never forgave me. I was put into office work, but I kept begging to be sent to the front. They said: 'What's the good? A German may come up behind you and bayonet you and you won't hear him.' However, I got away in the end, and on the ship I hid myself until we were out of sight of land."

Plotting the Course

Meanwhile Comrie had been playing round with another telescope, the one at the Observatory in Wellington. He quickly found an astronomical interest on board ship. The route of the transport was kept a dead secret. "The Captain wouldn't tell us where we were going. When we left Wellington we sailed east and everybody thought we were going through Panama. Then we doubled back at night, and went through Cook Strait westward. However, I was able by observations and the aid of my tables to make a pretty accurate plot of the course. We went south of Tasmania to Albany and then to Colombo



DR. L. J. COMRIE
He knew where he was going at one stage

and Egypt. I was able to ascertain that we went south of Tasmania and not through Bass Strait." Dr. Comrie explained to us how this was done. For instance, you strolled along just before mid-day to a position where you could see the Captain and an officer taking the noon sights and you knew when they disappeared into the chart room that that was 12 o'clock ship's time. Your watch was kept on Greenwich Mean Time, and it was an easy calculation from that to find the ship's longitude. Latitude was found by measuring the length of the day from sunrise to sunset, which depends on the time of the year and the latitude.

We murmured something here about it being easy to do if you knew how, like a lot of other things.

Then service in France. During an attack a shell—and a British one at that—wounded him so badly that a leg had to be taken off. The next thing was hospital in England. "While I was in hospital somebody came along and told us about training servicemen for jobs after the war—bootmaking, wool-classing, and that sort of thing. I said I was an M.A. of New Zealand and could they make it possible for me to continue my University studies? So they sent me to University College, London, where I spent eight months. I was under the famous Professor Karl Pearson, mathematician, statistician, and authority on genetics. He was the man that influenced me most. I was having my first lesson from him on a Brunsviga calculating machine at precisely 11.0 a.m. on November 11, 1918 (Armistice Day).

"I was on the point of returning to New Zealand in 1918 when I heard of the N.Z.E.F. Scholarship scheme. I got a scholarship to St. John's College, Cambridge, and meant to sit for the Mathematical Tripos. However, there was a snag. They wouldn't take my New Zealand M.A. as the equivalent to Cambridge matriculation, because, so they said, I hadn't done enough languages. But my tutor said I was too old to worry about this now, and found a way out.

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