

ASTRONOMER ROYAL

New Astronomy

A NEW twist occurred last week in the search for a new Astronomer Royal with the announcement that the post is to be dissociated from the directorship of the Royal Greenwich Observatory. This move will please those who have been arguing for just such a break between the two jobs, which will take effect at the end of the year, with the retirement of the present Astronomer Royal and director of the Royal Greenwich Observatory, Sir Richard Woolley.

Now that observational astronomy is no longer the prerogative of optical observatories, the argument goes, it is anachronistic to insist that the Astronomer Royal should also be equipped to manage the optical telescopes associated with the Royal Greenwich Observatory. Indeed, as one astronomer has remarked of the quest for a suitable replacement that has been going on since Sir Richard's retirement was announced a year ago, logically there ought to be astronomers royal for X-ray and radio as well as optical astronomy, a post which, it has been suggested, might have the title of Master of the Queen's Astrophysik.

Such tongue in cheek proposals during the past year have, however, gone hand in hand with real concern that the best decision be made about the role of the Astronomer Royal and of the Royal Greenwich Observatory. One view has been that the post of Astronomer Royal should die when Sir Richard Woolley retires, but most astronomers would probably prefer to keep the old name, either linked to the Royal Greenwich Observatory or as an honorary title that can be held by any British astronomer, perhaps for a set period only.

Whether last week's announcement will make any easier the task of finding a successor to fill Sir Richard Woolley's second role as director of the Royal Greenwich Observatory is a debatable point. The overt explanation for separating the two posts is that it throws open the directorship to foreign astronomers—the Astronomer Royal cannot be non-British, although oddly enough the post of Astronomer Royal for Scotland has only once been held by a Scot. But Sir Brian Flowers may now find that some potential candidates will be discouraged by what amounts to a downgrading of the post. It is believed that a Dutch astronomer has already been unsuccessfully approached.

More important than the personality of the next Astronomer Royal, however, is that this watershed is being taken as an opportunity for a reappraisal of British astronomy. The time

is particularly appropriate, for during the next few years many of the grand old names of British astronomy will reach retiring age, so that several crucial chairs will become vacant. To the extent that the Science Research Council can influence appointments within the universities, decisions taken during the next few years will affect British astronomy for several decades. Traditionally the Royal Greenwich Observatory has been at the heart of British astronomy, but since the war the new branches of astronomy that have developed outside the Royal Observatory system have called into question the wisdom of giving such a prominent role to an organization that was established primarily to provide astronomical information for mariners. This question came to a head a year ago when the Science Research Council was handed a review of the future of astronomy in the northern hemisphere that it had commissioned from a group of scientists that included astronomers, a space scientist, a nuclear physicist, and the two astronomers royal. As usual the report is being treated in a typically close-handed way by the Science Research Council, and is now unlikely to be published.

It is, however, understood that the most contentious proposal is that a British observatory to be established in the Mediterranean area be managed not by the Royal Greenwich Observatory, but by a new institution that would be linked with a group of universities. An association similar to the federation of ten universities that manages the Kitt Peak observatory in the United States is what the review committee had in mind, and is thought to have been accepted by all members of the committee with the exception of the two astronomers royal.

Although on paper at least the Royal Greenwich Observatory does not have control of the only large telescope that is available to British astronomers—the 98-inch Isaac Newton telescope—or the 150-inch telescope that is being built as a joint venture with the Australians, there seems to be a widespread feeling that the observatory exerts an influence on the running of the telescopes that is inimical to the progress of British astronomy.

In any case, the staff at the Royal Greenwich Observatory saw how the wind was blowing as long ago as November 1968—before the northern hemisphere review began in earnest—when all the scientific staff of the observatory signed a petition to the Queen to seek assurances that the directorship of the observatory would continue to be linked with the post of Astronomer Royal. At about the same time, Sir Brian Flowers wrote to the staff at the observatory saying that the

staff would be consulted if there were any proposal to dissociate the directorship from the post of Astronomer Royal, a promise which the Institution of Professional Civil Servants says has not been kept.

In other words, the staff of the observatory are rightly concerned that the announcement last week marks the beginning of a downgrading of the observatory. The staff expect the first consequence to be that greater difficulty will be experienced in finding a strong candidate for the directorship. But at the backs of their minds is the fear that the Science Research Council will encourage the Royal Greenwich Observatory to become a service organization, at the behest of the universities.

Views on the appropriateness of such a future for the observatory depend on what attitude is taken to the usefulness of scientific institutions that are divorced from the universities and from industry (although the staff of the observatory will point to their strong links with the vigorous astronomy department at the University of Sussex). But for the time being at least, the plan to set up a new institution linked with a number of universities appears to have been shelved, apparently because of the cost although this is thought to have been modest. On the face of it, then, the present arrangements for managing the large optical telescopes will continue. Nevertheless, the next director of the Royal Greenwich Observatory will have to be prepared for criticism of the establishment from many astronomers who see the observatory as a white elephant. In particular, the £1.2 million which the Science Research Council spends on the Royal Greenwich Observatory, the Royal Observatory at Edinburgh, and on the observatories in South Africa is widely held to give poor returns compared with the running costs of the Hale Observatories of \$1.7 million per year. In addition, the siting of the 98-inch Isaac Newton telescope adjacent to the Royal Greenwich Observatory a mile or so from the Sussex coast is still felt to be the most short-sighted decision in the management of British astronomy. The small amount of astronomy that it has been possible to carry out with the telescope compares unfavourably with the productivity of the Hale Observatories, for example, and many astronomers would be happy to see the telescope moved to the Mediterranean area at the first opportunity. It is true that there is little hope now that a site can be found in the Mediterranean that will produce the rapturous praise that astronomers reserve for the skies of Chile, but almost anywhere, the saying goes, will be better than Sussex.