

Thomas Elliot Geary

Thomas Geary was born, grew up and received his early schooling in Mafeking. After matriculating he served his apprenticeship as a turner and machinist with the South African Railways, completing the requisite courses in the first class. On completion of his apprenticeship he remained with the Railways for a further three years. A future with the South African Railways at Koedoespoort was not appealing to the young Geary, who by now was married with two children. Looking for opportunities in Johannesburg, he applied for a position at this University.

Geary joined the staff of the University in June 1958 as a technician in the Department of Civil Engineering. At about that time the University and the City Council of Johannesburg embarked on a joint venture to build a Planetarium to be completed in time to celebrate the City's 75th anniversary. The first Director of the Planetarium, appointed in a part-time capacity, was Professor Arthur Bleksley, Head of our Department of Applied Mathematics, and one of the University's best known teachers. In 1960 Geary, in response to a countrywide advertising campaign, applied for and was selected for a fiercer post on the staff of the now newly completed Wits Planetarium. Bleksley encouraged the eager Geary to further his knowledge in amateur astronomy and to study the intricacies of the operation of a Planetarium. Geary, with little experience, had also to learn the radio and television broadcasts. The extremely limited staff establishment (a continual state at the Planetarium) imposed staff duties on him in addition to those of the upkeep of the intricate and sensitive equipment. Geary responded to these challenges with enthusiasm and in April 1966 in recognition of his efforts with Professor Arthur Bleksley, he was appointed Director on 1 January 1968, a post which he has now held for almost 23 years.

While researching various aspects of optical equipment engineering, Geary became particularly interested and gained considerable expertise in the science of thin film deposition under high vacuum. He has also acquired a wide knowledge of electronics, which has enabled him to keep the Wits Planetarium at the forefront of relevant technology. As a consequence of his many unique developments in the running of the Planetarium, Geary has established an international reputation among the planetaria community, for the Wits Planetarium and for himself. He has been invited to deliver many papers at international conferences all over the world. His views are regularly sought by press, radio, television and the public at large.

Over the years Geary has gained a wide knowledge of many allied fields and today gives public lectures on such varied topics as

cosmology, astro-physics, earth and space science. Often these lectures are delivered while operating the complex consoles of the main instrument and ancillary projectors which make up our modern planetarium. He is regularly called upon to provide information on eclipses, phases of the moon, calendar dating, time zones and even unidentified flying object sightings.

In 1961, in recognition of his contribution to the field of astronomy, Geary was elected a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society. He has, for many years, been on the editorial board of *Astronomy Today* and has been an external examiner for the Transvaal Education Department on several occasions.

In recent years, in an effort to bring the wonders of the universe to children of South Africa, Geary has written and created many upwards. Each year tens of thousands of children from 5 years old and first visit to the University of the night skies. For many this is their regularly exploited the opportunity to promote not only his great love of the night sky, but also for this University and all that it stands for.

In recognition of Thomas Geary's significant contribution to society and his years of promoting a greater understanding of the University as well as for his substantial contribution to the development of the Wits Planetarium, this University takes pleasure in conferring on him the degree of Master of Science *honoris causa*.