

**Dunkin, Edwin** (b. 19 Aug.1821 – d. 1898), astronomer, born at 10 Paul's Terrace, Truro, Cornwall, the son of William Dunkin (d. 1838), a computer (mathematical calculator), for the *Nautical Almanac* and his wife, Mary Elizabeth Wise, the daughter of a Redruth surgeon. He was always deeply proud of his old Cornish ancestry, and, after receiving an elementary education in Truro, it was with great regret that he accompanied his parents on their reluctant move to London in 1832, following the reorganization of the *Nautical Almanac* office and the abolition of provincial computers, which made it necessary for his father to work in the almanac's London office. Here he attended Wellington House Academy, Hampstead. In July 1837 Dunkin and his younger brother were sent to M. Liborel's school at Guînes, near Calais, where no doubt, he acquired the spoken French which was to be so useful in his later life as an astronomer. The death of his father in the summer of 1838 caused him to be recalled to London to find employment. Although his father had warned him of lack of prospects for a mathematical computer, he abandoned the idea of following his maternal relatives into a medical career, and entered the Royal Greenwich Observatory. At Greenwich he was taken on by George Airy, Astronomer Royal, to complete the reduction of outstanding Greenwich observations. His autobiography records the arduous twelve-hour days through which the young computers were expected to stay at their desks, where they 'might not even munch a biscuit' (*Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society*, 59, 1898–9, 222), and where his abilities quickly impressed Airy. In 1840 he was promoted into the observatory's newly founded magnetic and meteorological department, and in 1845 he became a permanent member of the observatory staff. On 4 April 1848 he married Maria Hadlow of Peckham, the daughter of Joseph Hadlow, a stockbroker. One child of the marriage, Edwin Hadlow Wise Dunkin, survived his parents.

Dunkin was pre-eminently a practical astronomer and mathematical calculator, and his dependability and meticulous accuracy led to his being placed in charge of a number of painstaking physical investigations at the Greenwich Observatory. These included the adjustment and error quantification of new Greenwich instruments, such as the altazimuth (1847) and the transit circle (1850), the conveyance of chronometers, and the expedition to Norway to observe the total eclipse in 1851. He was also employed by Airy to act as his reliable man on the spot in a number of extra-Greenwich enterprises: among them were the gravitational pendulum experiments at Harton colliery, South Shields (1854), and the telegraphic longitude determinations of the Brussels (1853) and Paris (1854) observatories, where his ability to communicate on easy terms with Quetelet, Faye, and other continental astronomers stood him in good stead. Upon Airy's retirement in 1881 Dunkin was promoted to chief assistant, or Deputy Astronomer Royal, which post he held until his own retirement in 1884.

Perhaps by way of relief from his fastidious work at the Greenwich observatory, Dunkin was a highly sociable figure. He was elected to the Royal Astronomical Society (RAS) in 1845, served on its council, and in 1884 was elected president. He was delighted, in 1868, to be elected to the RAS Dining Club, and in 1880 became the club president. He was elected FRS in 1876, and later served on its council. Although he resided in London for his entire adult life, he always maintained his Cornish associations, naming his Blackheath villa Kenwyn after the village near Truro, and in 1890 and 1891 he served as president of the Royal Institution of Cornwall, where he discussed astronomical matters in his two presidential addresses. Dunkin was a prolific writer and popular communicator of astronomy; in addition to his

professional scientific papers he produced numerous articles for the *Leisure Hour* and other periodicals. Perhaps his most famous work was *The Midnight Sky* (1869), with its detailed charts of the sky visible from London, all of which had been computed by Dunkin himself. Dunkin died on 26 November 1898, at Brook Hospital, Kidbrook, after a short illness. For forty-six years he did much of the work that kept the Greenwich observatory running on a practical daily and nightly basis (*ODNB*).