

OLD WORLD

Bad Blow for Optical Astronomy in Britain

PROFESSOR MARGARET BURBIDGE has resigned as Director of the Royal Greenwich Observatory. The announcement last week came as no great surprise to the astronomical community in Britain, but the news of her car accident on Saturday, the day after her resignation, was received with dismay. Fortunately, Professor Burbidge's injuries were restricted to a broken arm and multiple contusions and she was expected to be discharged from hospital in a few days, it was learnt earlier this week. Her husband, Professor Geoffrey Burbidge, was in California at the time but it was not deemed necessary for him to fly to Britain.

Margaret Burbidge will relinquish her position at the RGO on November 30 and will be succeeded by Dr Alan Hunter, the present deputy director at the observatory. She will then return to the University of California at San Diego where, once again, she will team up with her husband, who remained a member of the faculty there when his wife came back to Britain in the summer of 1972.

The resignation has caused despondency among British astronomers. Dr Hunter said this week that it was "a terrible pity that she had resigned, for there were high hopes that Margaret Burbidge would have made a successful director".

When Margaret Burbidge took up her appointment as director at Herstmonceux fifteen months ago she only took leave of absence from her faculty position at San Diego. It has always been clear that she might go back to California if the directorship of the RGO proved unsatisfactory.

According to the Science Research Council, Professor Burbidge resigned because she prefers to return to her own research rather than devote a large part of her time to administrative matters. But in an interview in *The Daily Telegraph*, reported before her accident, she put a slightly different slant on her resignation. She is reported as saying that she is the wrong person in the wrong job and that part of the trouble "has been the inability of the Science Research Council to provide a set-up where my husband and I could work together".

Several efforts have been made, however, to bring Geoffrey Burbidge back to Britain. Last year he was offered a specially created post at the Royal Greenwich Observatory at a salary of £7,500 which compares most favourably

with the top of the professorial salary range. But he declined. He was also offered a chair at the University of Sussex, which is not too far from



Professor E. Margaret Burbidge.

Herstmonceux where he could have carried on with his work in theoretical astronomy, but this he also declined to accept. It is difficult to see how greater efforts could have been made to attract him back to Britain.

Margaret Burbidge, according to *The Daily Telegraph*, is also disappointed that none of the expatriate astronomers who left Britain for clearer skies in the 1950s and 1960s was offered any of the chairs of astronomy which became vacant in Britain in the past couple of years.

The chairs which have been filled have been the two at the University of Cambridge, the Plumian Chair of Astronomy and Experimental Philosophy vacated by Sir Fred Hoyle and filled recently by Professor Martin Rees of the University of Sussex, and the Chair of Astrophysics vacated by Professor R. O. Redman which was filled by Professor Donald Lynden-Bell from the RGO. The other chair which has been filled most recently has been vacant twice during Margaret Bur-

FRENCH SCIENCE

Awaiting a Policy

from *La Recherche*

THE 1974 French science budget is one of recession, similar to that of 1973. The budget will allow research activities to be maintained at a constant level, but it is certain that very few new activities will be launched.

The *enveloppe recherche* for 1974 of Fr 4,056 million is 8.6 per cent more than it was the previous year. But an extra Fr 250 million has been put by for the L3S launcher which France has recently decided to construct. Because of the high rate of inflation in France last year, the increase barely covers present costs.

Basic research, however, gets more than the average increase, with the budget to be increased by 10.6 per cent. Those engaged in socio-economic research (transport, for example) will do even better with an 11.3 per cent increase in their budgets. Industrial research, on the other hand, does badly with a 5 per cent increase planned, but the government has decided to increase by 25 per cent the funds planned for improving the technological competitiveness of industry. But there is to be a cut-back in the funds for big nuclear programmes. Only 500 new jobs will

be created by the new budget, compared with the 700 which were created last year.

The inevitable part of the announcement of the plan by a representative of the Ministry of Industrial and Scientific Development was the acknowledgement that research no longer has as high a priority in France as it has been accustomed to in recent years.

The ministry had been forced to abandon the objectives of the sixth plan for research which covered the years 1971-75, and has substituted in its place a patchwork policy stressing different aspects every year. For example, aid to industrial research was sacrificed in 1973, but it is to be augmented substantially in 1974. It is clear that the Ministry of Industrial and Scientific Development, which exercises supervision over a great number of research bodies, such as the Atomic Energy Commission and the National Center for Space Studies, finds it increasingly difficult to define the broad lines of a science policy (or even of industrial policy). Unfortunately the minister, M. Charbonnel, has insufficient political weight in the present government compared with the Minister of Finance, M. Giscard d'Estaing, to argue persuasive enough a case for science to retain its priorities.