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Professor of Physics Wins Award to Study Astronomer's Life

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Illinois Wesleyan University Professor of Physics Linda French has been named a winner of the 2010 Herbert C. Pollock Award for her efforts to bring attention to the extraordinary life and work of 18th-century deaf astronomer John Goodricke.

The Herbert C. Pollock Award, bestowed by the Dudley Observatory in New York, provides encouragement and support for an innovative project in the history of astronomy or astrophysics. French won the award with her paper titled, "Hearing with the Eye: The Astronomical Education of John Goodricke."

French, who has been a member of the Illinois Wesleyan faculty since 2002, is known for her work in astronomy, and is often invited to the Cerro Tololo Interamerican Observatory near La Serena, Chile, to study asteroids. She became intrigued by the amateur astronomer Goodricke, who died in 1784 at the age of 22 of pneumonia.

"I've always been curious about him," said French. "How did he live? How did he get interested in astronomy? How did he do his observations?" According to French, Goodricke and his neighbor Edward Pigott discovered and measured the period of variation of stars by observing in the skies above their homes in York, England. "These stars are terribly important in modern astronomy," said French.

Goodricke's research earned him the Copley Medal from the Royal Society of London when he was just 19 years old. "His work was recognized right away as a great accomplishment," added French, who noted other recipients of the award include Charles Darwin, Dmitri Mendeleev, Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking. French added Goodricke's accomplishments were even more extraordinary considering he was profoundly deaf since the age of 5. "Many deaf children were sent away to institutions then," said French. "It is a testament to his family that he was able to stay with them and eventually perform his research."

Though honored in his day, history has largely forgotten Goodricke – something French is hoping to remedy. She spent the spring semester as an honorary visiting professor in the Physics Department at the University of York, near where Goodricke lived his short life. "His papers, letters and journals are in the York City Archives," said French, who has presented papers on the astronomer at Goodricke College of the University of York, Cerro Tololo, and Lowell Observatory in Arizona. "Even many people in York do not know who Goodricke is, so it was a privilege to be able to speak there and let them know about a hometown son," she said.

French is preparing the first results of her work for publication. She plans to continue the study of Goodricke's work in the context of his times and hopes eventually to publish a full biography. Her work on Goodricke has been featured on the British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust's series "Wicked 3."

According to the producers of the show, French is the first speaking part ever to appear on the show, which is a magazine show geared toward deaf people. The episode can be seen online at www.bslbt.co.uk/wicked/programmes/series_3/episode_five/episode_five/.

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