

## LANGUAGE

## Phonetic Way of Writing Thai Language Helps Foreigners

**A**N AID to Western nations dealing with Thailand in the Far East is the new official system of spelling and writing the puzzling Thai language phonetically in our occidental A, B, C's.

Remember how Americans tried to say the name of the late King Prajadhipok, when he visited this country? If so, you can imagine diplomatic and commercial language problems encountered in Thailand, the land we used to call Siam. The king's name is correctly pronounced Prachathipok. And it is spelled that way in the new phonetic system.

Transcribing Thai into our type of alphabet is for foreigners and for people in Thailand who have occasion to write in a Western alphabet, explains Murray Sheehan, who directs the Student Department of the Thai Legation in Washington. Thai people themselves, generally speaking, will continue to read and write in their own characters, as usual.

The latest official directory for Bangkok and Thailand looked extremely queer to the Legation staff, including Mr. Sheehan, when they first met names of Thai royalty and officialdom in the new-style spelling.

Opening the big red directory, Mr.

Sheehan pointed out the present ruler's name. It used to be H. M. King Ananda Mahodol. But now the name in English is spelled Anantha Mahidon, which is the way it has been pronounced all along.

Even the new phonetic system does not make Thai a simple language for foreigners, it seems. Thai language has borrowed somewhat from ancient Sanskrit and Pali, and its peculiarities include the hard-and-fast rule that a word can be pronounced only with a few final sounds. However it is spelled, it must be pronounced to end with a vowel or diphthong, or the consonants, m, n, ng, k, t, or p. The present King's name is an example.

But the most difficult feature of the Thai language, says Mr. Sheehan, is the tonal system. Short, one-syllable Thai words do multiple duty by having many meanings, according to the tone of the voice in which they are spoken.

Mr. Sheehan once asked an attaché of the Legation how many words could be made out of the monosyllable "khao." He himself knew that it meant white, rice, and mountain. But the Thai official reeled off 12 words, some so faintly different in tone that a Westerner would not detect the voice change.

*Science News Letter, December 13, 1941*

ical artillery, the 200-inch reflector for Mount Palomar, will probably not be completed in 1942, but satisfactory progress is reported on both the great saucer-shaped mirror and its massive mounting.

"The effects of war are beginning to be more and more felt in the field of astronomy," Dr. Bok reports. "Many astronomers in the United States are now working on defense projects and the total output of scientific research is accordingly reduced."

The slowing down of astronomical work has been reflected in the reduced volume of publication of astronomical research reports. In Britain, only about half the normal number of papers on astronomical subjects have appeared, and the German output has been even less, though the quality of work reported holds up. Surprisingly enough, in the conquered and occupied Netherlands, astronomers are apparently fully at work on their research programs again, and even in France interrupted observation schedules are being resumed.

Despite communication difficulties, astronomers manage to keep in touch with each other, and still maintain a considerable degree of the exchange of information that is indispensable for progress in what is probably the most completely international of the sciences.

*Science News Letter, December 13, 1941*

## ASTRONOMY

## Doctor Harlow Shapley Receives Pontifical Honor

**T**HE PIUS XI Medal in Astronomy, one of the most distinguished among scientific honors, has been conferred by Pope Pius XII on Dr. Harlow Shapley, director of Harvard College Observatory. The award was announced at a meeting of the Pontifical Academy of Science on Nov. 30. In addition to the medal, there is a grant of 50,000 lire (about \$2,500) in cash.

The award was made to Dr. Shapley in recognition of his distinguished work in developing means for measuring the immense astronomical distances that separate galaxies in the universe, based on the discovery that peculiarities in the behavior of variable stars give a clue to their remoteness in space.

In his address before the Academy, the Pope said: "In the school of God we are all brothers. May all men become brothers again in love and concord, in the victory of good over evil, in justice and in peace."

Dr. Shapley is vice-president of Science Service.

*Science News Letter, December 13, 1941*

## ASTRONOMY

## War Slows, But Does Not Stop Astronomers' Search of Skies

**W**AR on the earth has not prevented astronomers from moving forward in their conquest of the heavens. A round-up on astronomical progress during 1941 by Dr. Bart J. Bok of Harvard College Observatory shows a formidable battery of five new great telescopes getting into action: two already in use, one finished and being tested, two more due for completion early in 1942.

The two instruments already in action are a 20-inch Ross refractor at Lick Observatory in California and a 24-inch Schmidt telescope at the Warner and Swasey Observatory of the Case School of Applied Science in Cleveland, Ohio.

Twin 24-inch Schmidt telescopes are being constructed, one for Harvard College Observatory, the other for the new Mexican National Observatory at Tonantzintla, Puebla, which will be formally dedicated by President Camacho, late in February. The latter instrument will contribute importantly to astronomical research because of its favorable location at high altitude in low latitude.

The fifth wide-angle telescope under construction is also of the Schmidt type, but with a diameter of 48 inches. It will be mounted at the Hale Observatory on Mount Palomar in California.

The mightiest of all pieces of astronom-