CHAPTER 11

WILHELM'S ILLNESS AND LAST YEARS

In youth and early manhood, Wilhelm had been physically very fit. His father had encouraged him in athletic pursuits when he was a child, and geodetic field-work had preserved the health of the mature man. After the childhood diseases, Otto wrote, Wilhelm had no illness except for occasional trouble with a tapeworm. After Wilhelm returned from his visit abroad in 1853, however, the preparation of *Arc du Méridien* for publication took all his energy, and his way of life became quite sedentary. By this stage of his life, Wilhelm had become a chain-smoker of cigars --his average was fifteen a day and he came to need a cigar in his mouth almost all the time. At first, journeys into St Petersburg for administrative duties and meetings of the Academy at least provided Wilhelm with much-needed fresh air and mental rest, but in January 1855 Paul von Fuss died and Wilhelm even cut down the number of these journeys and... attended sessions of the Academy only quite by exception. What contributed to this circumstance was the fact that, because of conflict of interest, a mood inimical to the Central Observatory had been developing since 1848 among the members of the Academy, which, however, came to light only after the death of Fuss.

Wilhelm never completely resolved this strife with the Academy; it persisted all through Otto's directorship and played an important role at the time of his retirement (Chapter 16). With the aid of the Grand Duke Konstantin, however, Wilhelm pressed for new statutes granting the Observatory greater autonomy. This anxiety was a further strain on his health and strength, and by the spring of 1857, when he had sent the first volume of *Arc du Méridien* to press and begun work on the second, Wilhelm "more and more began to complain of tension and fatigue and yearned for a long [period of] relaxation". That summer, he was granted indefinite leave of absence and travelled once again to the west with his wife, three daughters (Alexandra, Emilie and Anna) and his son Karl --who joined them in Berlin. Even now, his work was not left entirely behind. For some time Wilhelm had hoped to measure a great arc of a parallel of latitude --from Valentia on the west coast of Ireland, across the North European plain to Orsk in the Urals; now this project seemed to him to be practicable. "The pursuit of official business was no burden to him", wrote Otto "but only increased [the journey's] joy, since he generally found the friendliest response to the plan." Alexander von Humboldt in Berlin, the French war minister, Vaillant, and Airy in Britain all helped to secure the approval of their respective governments. Work done, Wilhelm was free to travel in the most beautiful parts of Germany, Switzerland and northern Italy. Once again, he saw Argelander in Bonn, and was so impressed by his friend's new assistant F.A.T.Winnecke, that he invited the latter to Pulkovo.

Wilhelm was, indeed, mentally refreshed by the journey, but he had 
overtaxed his strength by more than he knew and was delayed in both Munich 
and Zurich by outbreaks of virulent boils behind the ears, which, however, he 
did not regard very seriously. In November, negotiations about the proposed 
new status for the Observatory reached a crucial stage, and Wilhelm was 
urgently summoned home. Persuaded by Wilhelm and the Grand Duke, Tsar 
Alexander II not only agreed in principle to the new statutes, but also 
considerably increased the Observatory's budget. Wilhelm then plunged back 
into work on the second volume of *Arc du Méridien*, leaving the house only once 
in the next four weeks --to thank the Tsar personally. Soon after Christmas, 
Wilhelm developed catarrh, but welcomed the plausible excuse it provided for 
him to stay inside. Otto wrote:

On 26 (14) January 1858, still in a very lively humour, he [Wilhelm] took part in the 
celebration of my wife's birthday, and nobody suspected that illness was approaching him 
until, in the late evening, when he wanted to take himself to bed, the company noticed a 
great swelling had formed in his neck. Early next morning a physician was consulted, who 
immediately diagnosed the swelling as a virulent carbuncle. Careful treatment and many 
operations... could not delay the progress of the illness. 6

So much fluid accumulated in Wilhelm's body that the physicians 
expected him to die. On 15/3 February, the family gathered round Wilhelm's 
bed, but a favourable crisis in the illness removed immediate danger. By March 
1st, when Otto sent the first news of his father's condition to Airy, he could 
sound hopeful.

In the first time the malady offered nothing particularly allarming [sic], but about the 
middle of the last month the state of the sufferer changed so much that the physicians felt 
obliged to declare that they despaired of his recovery. Thank God a favourable crisis 
happened a few hours after this declaration and since that time he is gradually but very 
slowly advancing to the recovery. We cannot say that at present that he was allready [sic] 
out of danger, for his feebleness is extreme and the least inadvertency might have serious 
consequences; but at least it might be said that all symptoms are for a good end of the 
illness.

A few days ago he asked me to write to you and send his most affectionate remembrances 
to you and yours... 7

By early May, however, Otto wrote in a different tone to Airy:

Your letter of April 27th starts from the supposition that my father has regained his good 
health and strength. Alas I am sorry to say this supposition has been wrong; on the 
contrary his state is now subject to very serious apprehensions. The reason for which I 
have not written you before on this subject is that since 8 weeks we are in a constant 
agitation with regard to him; several times we have thought him quite out of danger and a 
few hours later new symptoms appeared that made us fear the worst. It appears that even 
for his unusual strength the attack of the malady has been too[o] strong. His forces are 
nearily exhausted, he cannot move without help, he has no appetite, he has lost the 
memory for all that has passed during the last 20 years; but at present he does not suffer 
from any pains, neither mental or physical, he is constantly of good spirits and ever of a 
good humour. The physicians have not yet quite lost the hope for his recovery, for still all