Loneliness is a crowded room

I stepped back to allow my PHD supervisor to take all the accolades. It seemed the right thing to do in this male dominated world at the time; after all, I was the machinery behind the façade, not the anointed leader. I was the one who made things happen – you know, the silent unassuming one. Truth was, my supervisor, who had signed off my thesis, knew next to nothing of the basis of my discovery and the effect this would undoubtedly have on our thinking going forward. He was caught in a time warp of stiff upper lipped professors with fading ties and brown suits, of scuffed brogues and strange combovers that were a feature of middle-aged profundity.

'And the Nobel Prize for Physics goes to Professor Antony Hewish for the discovery of pulsars.'

I felt sick.

Let's just roll back the film and start at the beginning. In 1965, I received my BSc in physics at the University of Glasgow. To get to this stage had been a long path. My parents had fought the education elite in my native County Armagh to enable me to study science in preference to home economics. By the time I graduated with my BSc, I was well advanced in my study of stars and new questions formed in my mind as to their behaviour. Why did stars appear to shine and fade?

I entered New Hall, Cambridge, in 1966, and was assigned Professor Hewish as a supervisor. He received my PHD proposal and insisted I work out of the Mullard Radio Observatory in nearby Lord's Bridge. Hewish was sceptical as to the worth of my research, but I diligently built a receiver and went about checking volumes of observations and running new enquiries.

On the night of 28 November 1967, the printer started furiously to throw out charts – my "Heath Robinson" antennae had picked up radio pulses, one and three seconds apart, coming from the faint constellation of Vulpecula ("the little fox"). I rechecked previous charts. I enquired as to possible radio interferences including aircraft movements. All possible interferences were subsequently discounted over the following days.

It seemed I had discovered pulsars!

That wasn't entirely the full story. Hewish got excited at what was fast being described as a major detection of extra-terrestrial life; and so, the discovery, whilst not immediately owned by Hewish, became known as the "Little Green Men." The humour soon wore off when other pulsars started to be detected. I cannot state how enthusiastic I was to continue my research. It also dawned on me that I was the first woman since Henrietta Swan Leavitt, to make a real groundbreaking discovery concerning the evolution of stars. Astrophysics had truly arrived.

Walking to New Hall one morning in December, a close friend called out and asked if I knew about Hewish's discovery?

'What discovery?', I replied.

Hewish had wrongly claimed my discovery and stepped forward into the light.