

RASC History Committee Report

2017 April 22



RASC seal 1914



RASC seal 1915

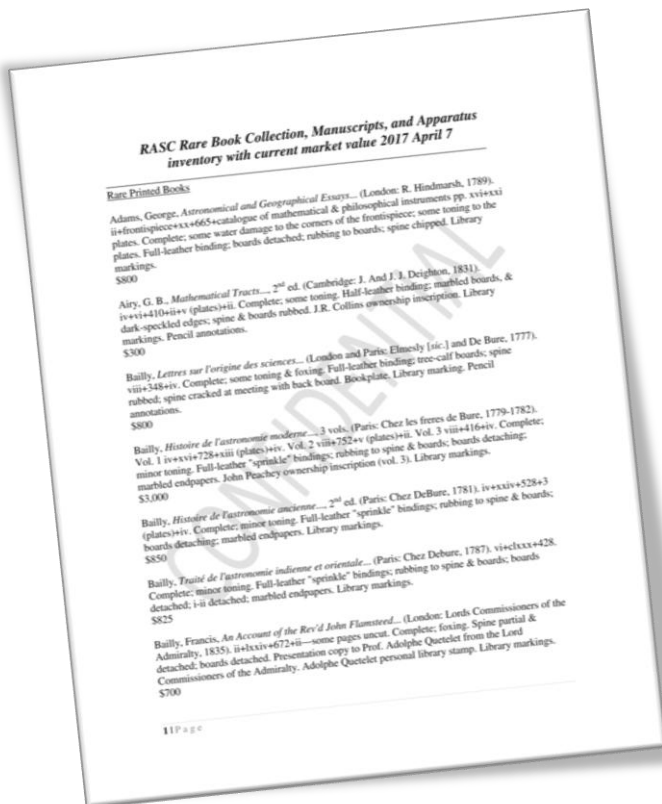


RASC seal 1917

Cover: in recognition of the centenary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge (1917 April 9-12), some artifacts from the period of the Great War are featured on the cover. Most **Observer's Handbooks** from the war years included a mag 4 star atlas, with uranography attributable to R.K. Young. The atlas is open at the 0h-9h a chart. Also shown are a mechanical pencil from the period (turned bone and copper-alloy), and one of the Williamson pocket watches supplied to the British, Canadian, and other Commonwealth forces (the watch belonged to an ancestor of one of our current members, and was passed on to him by a member of Bomber Command who participated in Operation Hydra to cripple Germany's production of V-2s in WWII). It is engraved with a British Ordinance number, and broad arrow. The three RASC seals shown were successively current 1914-1918—probably at no other time did the iconography of the effective sign of our legal identity change so rapidly (star or crown at the apex of the legend?). The atlas and seals are reproduced courtesy of the RASC Archives, the pencil and watch are reproduced courtesy of the SPECULA MINIMA ASTRONOMICA. For more on the RASC and the Great War, see R.A. Rosenfeld & Roland Dechesne, "The Great War and the RASC", *The Royal Astronomical Society of Canada NATIONAL NEWSLETTER*, 2017 July-August (forthcoming); also see Peter Broughton, "The War's Positive Impact on the Canadian Astronomical Community", delivered in the session **The Impact of the Great War on Astronomy and Other Sciences** organized by Prof. Virginia Trimble for the History of Astronomy Division (HAD) of the AAS, at the AAS 225th meeting, Seattle WA, 2015 January 4 (https://had.aas.org/membership/had_meetings/2015/abstracts).

Archives Rare Book Inventory, and Valuation for Insurance

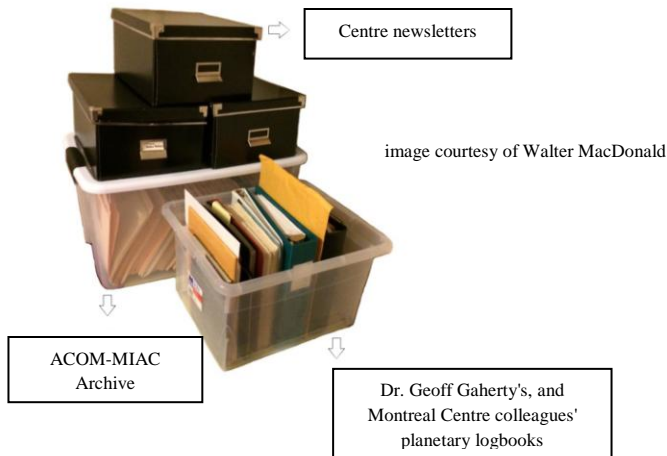
A recent major project has been the first scientific description of the items comprising the Archives'



Rare Book Collection, including a brief account of the physical composition of the text blocks, brief technical descriptions of the bindings, present states of preservation, and provenance notes. The Archivist has been responsible for compiling this document. A research tool in its own right, the inventory, once completed, was used to determine the current market value of the collection, based on recent trends at auctions, and antiquarian book sellers' catalogues. This knowledge allows us to seek insurance for the collection. The initiative to finally explore obtaining insurance for our Rare Book Collection is due to our Executive Director, in conjunction with the Accounting Manager. The Society's Board of Directors approved the initiative. This project is currently ongoing.

Archives Digitization

The RASC's Webmaster, Walter MacDonald (Kingston Centre), continues to efficiently digitize the Archives' holdings, placing our Committee, and the Society, further in his debt. Walter is clearly one of



the most efficient users of cloudy-night opportunities on the North American landmass. The number of Centre newsletters scanned hovers around the 5,000 mark, and since the last report of this Committee 1,000s of pages of the Geoffrey Bell *fonds* have been scanned, as have the logbooks of Dr. Geoff Gaherty, and Montreal Centre colleagues, recording their planetary patrols (1950s and 1960s). The ACOM-MIAC Archive has also been digitized (for permission to consult this collection, and restrictions on use, please apply to the Archivist).

Walter has begun a project to assay digitizing the Archives "chronological", and "people" files.

Regarding the searchability of our Archives, Walter remarks that:

"All of the content of the Archives we have on the website is indexed by Google. Only the Centre newsletters and the "Canadian Astronomy Archive" (our catchall designation for the professionally generated grey literature) are not. Even then, some Centres post their newsletters in publicly accessible form, so Google gets that subset.

Handwritten documents are not machine readable, so that is one area that needs transcription work (logbooks are the bulk of this material). I think we [*i.e.*, Walter & the Archivist] transcribed much of the 19th-century correspondence on rasc.ca, so Google already has that".

(Which naturally leads to the next item in this report...).

Crowd-Sourcing Access to the Archives

The last decade or so has witnessed the coming-of-age of participatory data analysis and data mining using the power of citizen science over the internet. Crucial to the success of this mode of work are the projects' training and mentoring protocols. The most notable of these programs are gathered under the umbrella of Zooniverse (www.zooniverse.org/), which started with Galaxy Zoo 1.

Eric Briggs (Toronto Centre) has justly recommended that, to render fully accessible the rich materials for the history and heritage of astronomy contained in the RASC Archives, it is necessary to have the texts fully indexed (and, one might add, the non-textual artifacts indexed through key-words as well). Citing the example of Astronomy Rewind (www.zooniverse.org/projects/zooniverse/astronomy-rewind), which aims to extend the time series data for astronomical phenomena through providing

astrometric metadata for astronomical images published over the last century, enabling them to be queried along with modern images using current search tools.

Naturally, to ensure success, such a project would require a developed and practicable proposal, specifying goals, transcription protocols, training procedures, personnel structure, desired appearance on the web platform, a target database for a trial, and a strategy for recruitment. A key component is enthusiastic volunteers, willing to devote their time, develop suitable skills, and interchange ideas. Volunteers would probably be largely drawn from the Society's membership.

Eric has agreed to explore developing a pilot project to test the concept. One possibility is to cooperate with the Department of Astronomy and Astrophysics of the University of Toronto, to transcribe the relevant information from the David Dunlap Observatory's logbooks into an Excel file to allow utilization of the astronomical plates taken there between 1935-2008. If this proves successful, the volunteers can turn their skills and experience to the data in the RASC Archives.

Presentations

Dr. Roy Bishop, FRASC, "Sky Perspectives: Notes from a 77-orbit Visit to the Third Planet", 2017 January 16, Blomidon Naturalists Society, Acadia University

Dr. Chris Gainor, "Hubble History", 2017 March 16, RASC Calgary Centre, Kirby Centre

R.A. Rosenfeld, "Astronautical Founders: a 19th-Century Kingston Connection?", 2017 March 23, Physics Colloquium, Department of Physics, Royal Military College of Canada

Publications

R.A. Rosenfeld, "Time on Display in Civic Landscapes: Québec City", *JRASC* 110, 6 (2016 December), 242-246

R.A. Rosenfeld, ACOM & MIAC Calendar of Documents (Toronto: RASC Archives, 2016)

R.A. Rosenfeld, "The Records of the NRC's Associate Committee on Meteorites (ACOM), and the CSA's Meteorites and Impacts Advisory Committee (MIAC)", *JRASC* 111, 1 (2017 February), 30-32

R.A. Rosenfeld, "An Inventive Account of the Astronomy of van Gogh's *La nuit étoilée* of 1888", *JRASC* 111, 2 (2017 April), 76-78

Committee Members' Activities

Peter Broughton (Toronto Centre) is continuing to actively contribute to the American Astronomical Society's Historical Astronomy Division's Astronomy Genealogy Project (AstroGen; <https://had.aas.org/astrogen>). He is also eagerly awaiting (as are the rest of us) the appearance of *Northern Star: J.S. Plaskett* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), due for release in August.

Chris Beckett (consultant) continues to teach his astronomy classes for older adults, which feature a respectable history of astronomy component.

Eric Briggs is harbouring several historical projects *in potentia*.

Chris Gainor's (Victoria Centre) time in scholarly pursuits is largely devoted to writing *the* book on Hubble for the NASA History Office. He has developed several papers out of this larger work, including one on Hubble and the internet, which will appear in *Quest*, and another on Hubble and satellite servicing, for *Spaceflight*.

Heather Laird (Calgary Centre), in her capacity as a member of the RASC 2018 Working Group, is developing several projects with a historical dimension (fuller details will be revealed at the 2017 Ottawa GA). The Archivist appears to be somehow involved in that work as well, according to reliable sources.

Clark Muir (K-W Centre) is leading a project to highlight the work of astronomical imagers of the RASC Kitchener-Waterloo Centre across time, in an exhibition for RASC 2018. One of the themes this show will explore is how approaches to graphically portraying astronomical phenomena has changed within the practice of the RASC locally.

Honours

Two members of the Committee have been nominated for the RASC Service Award, which will be bestowed on them at the 2017 GA banquet in Ottawa, on the Canada Day weekend. Congratulations to Eric Briggs, and R.A. Rosenfeld. The citations can be viewed at: https://www.rasc.ca/sites/default/files/Service%20Awards_2017.pdf

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Julia Neeser, RASC Marketing Co-ordinator, Renata Koziol, Accounting Manager, and Randy Attwood, FRASC, Executive Director, for advice, assistance, and administration during the period covered by this report.

Respectfully submitted,
R.A. Rosenfeld, Chair

History Committee Members

- Randall Rosenfeld (Unattached), Chair
- *Chris Beckett (consultant)
- Dr. Roy Bishop, FRASC (Halifax)
- Eric Briggs (Toronto)
- Peter Broughton, FRASC (Toronto)
- Dr. Karen Finstad (Ottawa)
- Dr. Chris Gainor (Victoria)
- *Dr. Robert Garrison (Toronto, consultant)
- *Renata Koziol (Office Administrator)
- Heather Laird (Calgary)
- *Craig Levine ex officio (RASC President, London)
- *Barry Matthews (Ottawa, observer)
- Clark Muir (Kitchener-Waterloo)
- Andrew Oakes (Unattached)
- Dr. Mark Tovey (London)

* = non-voting



Visitors hanging out in the Archives