

RASC History Committee Report

NC172

2017 June 30

image of the total solar eclipse of 1963 July 20 by Dr. Geoff Gaherty

- *the RASC Archives have acquired a very rare example of what may be the earliest observational lunar map by a Canadian astronomer (amateur) printed in a Canadian publication (1879)!; p.2*
- *the literary production of an industrious—and scandalous!—figure of Victorian science popularization is found among recent gifts; pp. 3-4*
- *a distinguished visitor to the Archives; pp. 4-5*
- *varied range of Committee members' activities; pp. 7-8*

COLLECTIONS MAINTENANCE

The Society's archival copies of *SkyNews* have been professionally bound, to insure their preservation as a reference set as issued. All told, the run of issues covers twenty-seven years, in two different modes, under four successive management regimes. The organ originated as an illustrated information newsletter, *Sky News*, produced by the National Museum of Science and Technology (NMST, now the Canada Science and Technology Museum/Musée des sciences et de la technologie du Canada) in Ottawa, under the editorship of Mary W. Grey, the Curator of Astronomy.¹ It did public service in this mode from 1989 to 1994, chiefly fulfilling the function of a "what's up in the sky", with monthly all-sky star charts, easily comprehended tables of ephemera, and advice on what to observe—analogue to the similar sections in *Sky & Telescope*, *Astronomy*, and the present *SkyNews*, among others.² The next stage in its existence was marked by a redesign and expansion under the editorship (1995-1999) of Terence Dickinson with the NMST still as publisher. Now self-styled as "The Canadian Magazine of Astronomy and Stargazing",³ it had become a magazine proper with short articles by various authors, and glossy graphics, and it was at this point *Sky News* became *SkyNews* (appearing as volume I, issue 1 [1995 May/June]). In 1997 the magazine began to be included on a trial basis as a benefit of Society membership (1997). As befitting an EPO organ of a crown corporation, the magazine appeared in both English and French editions (the later named *Ciel-Info*). The third stage (1999-2015) in its existence was when *SkyNews* (with volume V, issue 1 [1999 May/June]) ceased to be published by the Museum, and became a wholly private enterprise; this brought about no discernible change in content, or in the stable of writers, but it did mean the end of *Ciel-Info*. The final stage (thus far), is the continuance of the magazine under the RASC's ownership (2015-), with long-standing contributor Gary Seronik serving as the new editor (2016-).

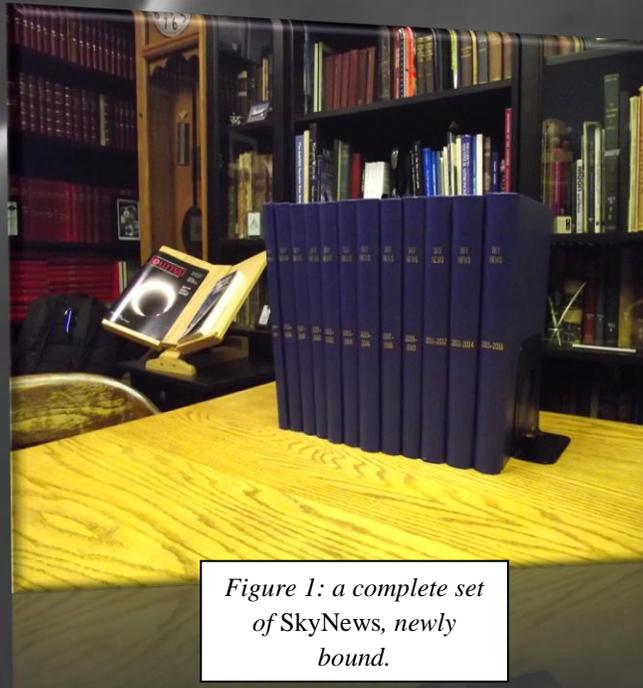


Figure 1: a complete set of SkyNews, newly bound.

¹ For a brief obituary, see Anon., *JRASC* 90, 4 (1996 August), 238; <https://tinyurl.com/y8og3tgv>.

² The observing advice in *Sky News* while under the Museum's aegis was chiefly aimed at novices, so in that respect it differed from the target audience for the observing sections of the more substantial commercial American amateur-astronomy magazines. It should also be noted that the NMST's *Sky News* itself had a pre-history; it existed in largely the *Sky News* form for several years before it bore that name.

³ Note, *SkyNews* was never intended to be the Canadian astronomical periodical of record; that was, and is *JRASC*.

We have also had archival copies of *JRASC* (2014-2016), and the *Observer's Handbook* (2015-2017) bound, continuing our customary practice with those two venerable flagship publications.

ACQUISITIONS

The most notable acquisition during this period is a rare original of what may prove to be the first observational lunar map by a Canadian astronomer (amateur) printed in a Canadian publication; A. Sommer, "The Moon", in *The New Dominion Monthly for 1879* 24, 1 (January 1879), 58-73. Little is known about the Rev'd Dr. Alfred Sommer, who worked as a Lutheran minister in later 19th-century Quebec, and Ontario. He doesn't appear in the (admittedly limited) literature on the history of Canadian astronomy, nor does his map. The text accompanying the map displays a fair amount of erudition, and the map itself is broadly in the style of what is encountered in the *Selenographical Journal* 1878-1882. A study of the map is currently in preparation.

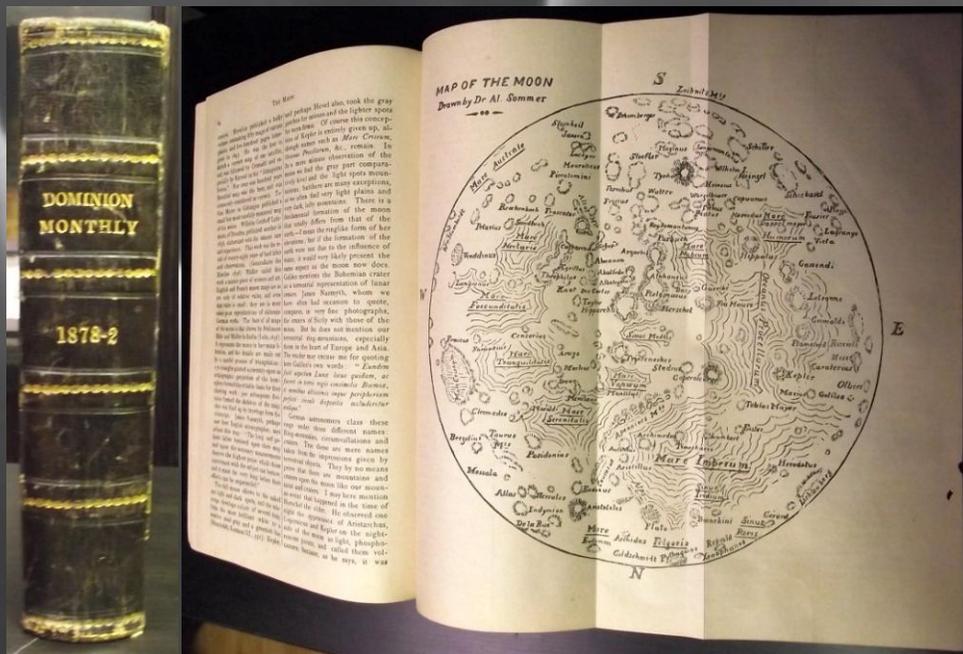


Figure 2: possibly the earliest observational lunar map by a Canadian astronomer (amateur) printed in a Canadian publication

A noteworthy donation was received from long-time member Angelika Hackett; Dionysius Lardner, *Popular Lectures on Science and Art, Delivered in the Principal Cities and Towns of the United States...*, I (New York: Greeley & McElrath, 1845). The volume is dominated by its astronomy content, and is a fine example of the popular literature of promoting general scientific literacy (broad but not deep) directed at the lower end of the mid-Victorian market. Beyond his

role as a science populariser, Lardner is also interesting as a "colourful" figure of the time (Thackeray's "Dionysius Diddler").⁴

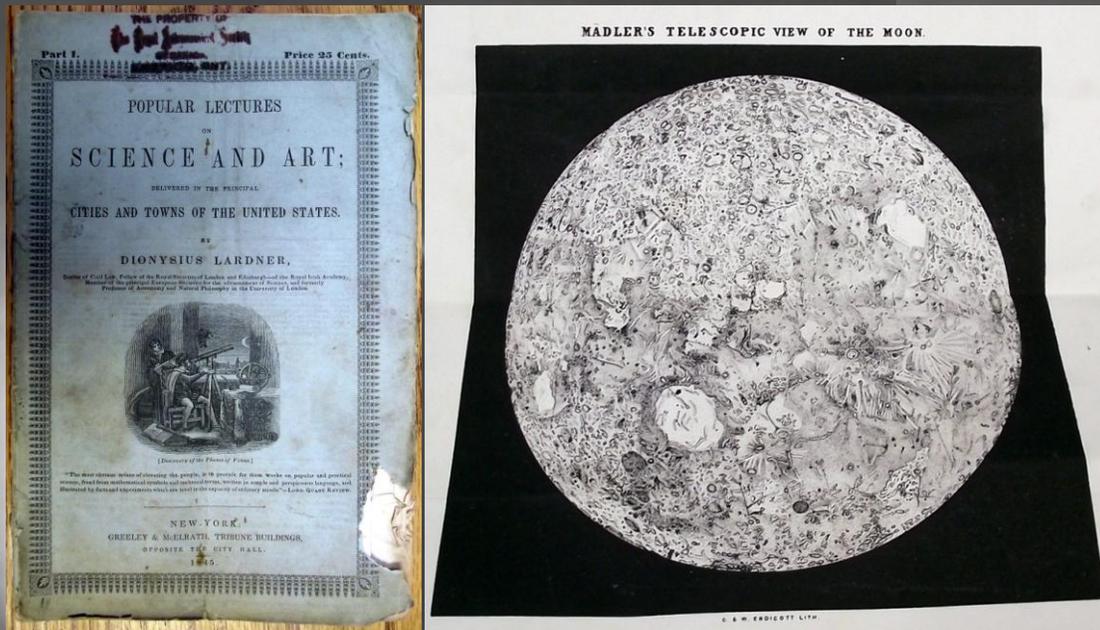


Figure 3: a representative example of a well-used tool of Victorian EPO. The lunar map claims to be based on Beer and Mädler's epochal maps of the 1830s. As in most such cases, the resemblance is superficial at best—it was a way to claim scientific authority for the cartography, most likely in the interests of reputation and sales.

Finally, we acknowledge the gift from the Society's Executive Director of the entire run of NMST's *Sky News*, mentioned *supra*.

ARCHIVES USE

Most inquiries directed to our Archives are met by supplying requests for digital facsimiles, answering other queries via electronic communications, or simply directing people to the materials of RASC history and heritage already present on rasc.ca. These positive developments made possible through present technology do mean that fewer people have to be physically present to query documents and artifacts, but it should be remembered that consultation on site is always an option.

Over several days this month the Archives played host to Professor Jasper Wall, former director of the Isaac Newton Group (ING) of Telescopes at La Palma, and last Director of the Royal Greenwich Observatory (RGO), before Tony Blair did the unthinkable and closed the 323 year

⁴ Look him up: J.N. Hays, "The Rise & Fall of Dionysius Lardner", in *Annals of Science* 38 (1981), 527-542.

old institution in 1998. The Society is pleased it can help fulfill part of its mandate by providing a setting for the pursuit of work on the recent history of astronomy.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS' ACTIVITIES

This past spring Chris Beckett taught "The Universe from Your Backyard" for the University of Regina's Lifelong Learning Centre, in the course of which instructor and students had to grapple with the surprising gaps and uncertainties in our knowledge of the origins of the western European constellations.

Roy Bishop has been (and is) involved in the establishment of a Heritage Centre for Hantsport, Nova Scotia. On May 10 he showed the Society's Archivist around the home built by the owner of one of Hantsport's two 19th-century shipyards. The connection to astronomy, of course, is navigation. The Hantsport & Area Historical Society (H&AHS) has many artifacts from that era, including a few quadrants and sextants. In May the H&AHS took possession of a building at an excellent site, and in the earlier part of June launched its public fund raising campaign to top up two major donations already received. The goal is to acquire enough investment income to support the Heritage Centre indefinitely.

Eric Briggs is continuing to pursue the development of a citizen-science initiative to increase the effectiveness of data mining the digitized holdings important for Canadian astronomical history and heritage. He has received a positive response from the Department of Astronomy and Astrophysics of the University of Toronto that a project involving trained volunteers to index the DDO logbooks is "definitely a worthwhile project". The success of the endeavour, besides increasing the potential of the data on the DDO glass plates to play a role in modern science, would benefit any effort to index RASC materials, through the experience gained. Eric will be discussing this further with other Committee members at the GA.

Peter Broughton's major biography of John Stanley Plaskett is expected in book stores by mid August; R. Peter Broughton, *Northern Star: J.S. Plaskett* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017, ISBN 9781442630178; <http://www.utppublishing.com/Northern-Star-J.S.-Plaskett.html>).

Chris Gainor continues researching and writing the official history of operations of the Hubble Space Telescope (HST) for NASA, in addition to his work as editor of *Quest: the History of Spaceflight Quarterly*.

Heather Laird and the Archivist have been working on some historical projects for RASC 2018, some of the contours of which will be revealed at the GA.

Clark Muir has discovered earlier instances of the use of the term "star party" than those reported recently by the Archivist in *JRASC*. Clark and the Archivist plan on formally publishing the new material to supplement the earlier article.

Andrew Oakes spoke at the meeting of the Canadian Society for the History and Philosophy of Science, at Ryerson University, Toronto, within the 2017 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences. His presentation was on "John S. Plaskett—Leadership in Early 20th-Century Astrophysics in Canada, 1903-1935", as part of the History of Astronomy session, 2017 May 27. He will also be speaking on Plaskett at The Thirteenth Biennial History of Astronomy Workshop (ND XIII) 2017 July 5-9, at the University of Notre Dame (this will be more fully noted in the next Committee report).

Mark Tovey reports that he has:

"...been designing a second period room in the basement of the Cronyn Observatory, to complement the 1940s period room. This room is staged to 1967, in honour of Canada 150. The model for the exhibit is the early control room in Elginfield Observatory.

I recently applied to the London Heritage Council for a Community Heritage Investment Program (CHIP) grant on behalf of RASC London Centre, to help stage the new period room and related historical displays in commemoration of Canada 150, working towards the August 21st, 2017 eclipse. I am happy to report that the grant was accepted, and awarded \$5,500. I was prepared to design the room on a shoestring, but this budget will allow scope for some terrific additional features. Be sure to stop in the basement of the Cronyn Observatory during a public star night, say hello, and see how this room develops over the summer.

The CHIP grant builds on a Canada 150 Staff and Faculty grant that [Director of the Cronyn, Professor] Jan Cami, Peter Jedicke, Parshati Patel, and myself received earlier in the year. The CHIP grant couldn't have happened without first having secured the Staff and Faculty Canada 150 grant as matching funding. Many thanks to Parshati Patel, Jan Cami, and Peter Jedicke.

Jan Cami and Peter Jedicke supplied materials during the preparation of the current grant. Rick Saunders also pitched in with timely help".

The Society's Archivist was a guest of the Halifax Centre on May 12, and spoke on "Music of the Spheres: Astronomers as Musicians & Musicians as Astronomers". On May 13, he spoke to the Minas Astronomy Group, on "Truth at the Eyepiece", addressing some of the history of changes in the canons and practices of "accuracy of depiction" of astronomical objects, and phenomena. The conversation which ensued after the talk was particularly lively, and beneficial to the speaker.

PUBLICATIONS

Chris Gainor, "Hubble Space Telescope and the Shuttle: Advancing Satellite Servicing," in *Spaceflight* 59, 7 (2017 July), 262-268

Chris Gainor, "The Hubble Space Telescope in Cyberspace," in *Quest: The History of Spaceflight Quarterly* 24, 2, 2017, 4-12

R.A. Rosenfeld, "Earliest RASC Star Party Antecedents?", in *JRASC* 111, 3 (2017 June), 124-128

R.A. Rosenfeld, with Roland Dechesne, "The Great War and the RASC", in *The Royal Astronomical Society of Canada National Newsletter* 2, 1 (2017 July/August), 3

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Respectfully submitted,
R.A. Rosenfeld, Chair

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 - Dr. Karen Finstad (Ottawa Centre)
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 - *Dr. Robert Garrison (Toronto, consultant)
 - *Renata Koziol (Office Administrator)
 - Heather Laird (Calgary)
 - Eric Briggs (Toronto)
 - Peter Broughton, FRASC (Toronto)
 - *Craig Levine (President, London)
 - *Barry Matthews (Ottawa Centre, observer)
 - Clark Muir (Kitchener-Waterloo)
 - Andrew Oakes (Unattached)
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 - Dr. Mark Tovey (London)
- *=non-voting members