

COMMISSION 41: HISTORY OF ASTRONOMY (HISTOIRE DE L'ASTRONOMIE)

PRESIDENT: M.A. Hoskin

VICE-PRESIDENT: O. Pedersen

ORGANIZING COMMITTEE: S.M.R. Ansari, J. Dobrzycki, J.A. Eddy, E.G. Forbes
(representing Division of History of Science of IUHPS), P.G. Kulikovsky

At the end of the General Assembly in Montreal, the membership of Commission 41 comprised 79 full members and 32 consulting members. Many of the consulting members, not being professional astronomers, find it difficult to attend the General Assemblies in person. As a result, the most valuable activities of the Commission lie in the initiation and organization of ongoing projects and the sponsoring of specialist meetings, while the sessions at General Assemblies are most successful when they are also of interest to astronomers outside the Commission.

A significant development in organization has come about with the formation of the History of Astronomy Division of the American Astronomical Society. A further sign of fruitful interaction between astronomers and historians has come with the invitation to an historian to give an Invited Discourse at the forthcoming General Assembly.

Much of the effort of the world-wide community of historians of astronomy has been devoted to the *General History of Astronomy (GHA)*, which is jointly sponsored by IAU and IUHPS and is being published by Cambridge University Press. *GHA* is planned as a four-volume work, but each volume will be issued in either two or three parts. This is for the convenience of librarians, but it does reduce the delays resulting from defaulters among the authors. It is expected that the first part will be sent to the printer early in 1982, and that two or more parts will follow each year.

The "Greenwich List of Observatories", organized by H.D. Howse and comprising a detailed catalogue of observatory instruments in the period down to 1850, is now almost complete. It is designed for inclusion in vol. 3 of *GHA*, and will be a major reference work for the history of astronomical instruments.

A significant development in the period under review has been the microfilming of archives for sale to interested institutions, these primary materials thereby becoming generally available to historians. The papers of William, John and Caroline Herschel held by the Royal Astronomical Society are now available on microfilm, and the correspondence of Ejnar Hertzsprung is to be published on microcard; and it is hoped to make the papers of the third and fourth Earls of Rosse similarly available. Access to such materials at institutions scattered throughout the world is a major stimulus to historical research, and if the sale price is chosen so as to allow for some contribution to the initial outlay, the cost to the owners of the papers is small.

Intense interest continues to be shown in 'archaeoastronomy'. An Archaeoastronomy Bulletin is published in the USA, and *J. Hist. Astron.* now has a fourth issue each year which is designated the Archaeoastronomy Supplement. A remarkable number of books and articles have appeared dealing either with megalithic astronomy or with archaeoastronomy of the New World, and several conferences have been held devoted to one or other area. The methodologies required are however very different. In the New World, it is possible, even necessary, to consider written evidence and oral traditions in addition to examining the archaeological remains, and the

approach is inevitably interdisciplinary. By contrast, the evidence from the megalithic culture consists very largely of stone remains, whose purpose has to be inferred from archaeological and astronomical considerations. As the stones have often been disturbed, statistical treatment is required. Many archaeologists find the astronomical and statistical techniques difficult of access, while the mathematicians and astronomers sometimes blunder in matters of archaeology. Yet in both cases, because of the paucity of the evidence, they are forced to adopt a more rigorous stance than many of their New World counterparts. To bring all interested parties together, a meeting was arranged by Commission 41 and cosponsored by IAU and IUHPS, on "Archaeoastronomy in the Old and New Worlds". It was held at Oxford, 4-9 September 1981, and attended by some eighty astronomers, archaeologists, historians and anthropologists, many of whom took the opportunity constructively to focus attention on the shortcomings of workers in other disciplines.

Other meetings attended by historians of astronomy included a symposium on Christiaan Huygens held in Amsterdam, 22-25 August 1979; a celebration in honour of Aristarchus of Samos held in Samos, 18-20 June 1980; a conference on astronomy in the Middle Ages held in Aarhus, 20-21 November 1980; and the sessions on history of the physical sciences at the XVIth International Congress of the History of Science held in Bucharest, 26 August - 3 September 1981.

The bibliography of articles and books in history of astronomy is edited annually by P.G. Kulikovskiy on behalf of the Astronomical Council of the USSR Academy of Sciences and under the auspices of Commission 41, and this is distributed privately to over two hundred addresses, including all members of the Commission. Other bibliographical sources of value include the annual critical bibliography published in the history of science journal *Isis*, and the relevant sections of *A & A Abstracts*.

It is invidious to single out for special mention individual books and articles, and this is especially so when so much effort is being invested in writing for *GHA*. It is however pleasing to note two books on the history of recent astronomy: the substantial *Source Book in Astronomy and Astrophysics*, edited by K.R. Lang and O. Gingerich, and *The Expanding Universe: Astronomy's Great Debate 1900-1931*, by R.W. Smith.

M.A. HOSKIN
President of the Commission