

AAS Historical Astronomy Division Annual Report 2008

Sara J. Schechner, Chair

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This report describes the activities of the Historical Astronomy Division (HAD) from its division business meeting in Seattle in January 2007 through its most recent meeting in Austin in January 2008. It also includes recent decisions made by the HAD Committee since then.

Membership

As of April 2008, HAD has 285 active members (245 regular and 40 affiliate). We are sad to report the death of Donald Osterbrock shortly after our January 2007 meeting. Don was a past chairman of HAD and Doggett Prize winner.

Officers and Committee

Current officers of the Division are Sara J. Schechner (Harvard), Chair; Thomas Hockey (University of Northern Iowa), Vice Chair, and Joseph S. Tenn (Sonoma State University), Secretary-Treasurer. Committee members-at-large are Jay Holberg (University of Arizona) and Eugene F. Milone (University of Calgary). Donald K. Yeomans (JPL) remains on the Committee as Past Chair. Terms of all except the Secretary-Treasurer (who is appointed for an indefinite term) run from January 2007 until January 2009. We thank Ron Brashear for his six years as Secretary-Treasurer and Peter Abrahams and Daniel Green for their past two years of Committee service.

An election for a new vice chair (who is also the chair-elect) and two new committee members is scheduled for early fall 2008. The Nominating Committee consists of Donald Yeomans (JPL) as chair ex officio, with JoAnn Palmeri (University of Oklahoma) and John Briggs (Clay Center Observatory).

Finances

HAD finances are in good shape. At the end of 2007 HAD had \$25,258.61 in its account, and the Doggett Prize fund had \$33,291.00. With the AAS financial manager writing all checks, the small HAD checking account has been closed.

Meetings

The HAD holds its annual meeting in conjunction with the January AAS meeting. We typically have one day of special HAD sessions with invited speakers addressing thematic topics. This is followed the next day by two scientific sessions of contributed papers and a poster session.

We had an excellent meeting in Seattle in January 2007 with a special session of “Case Studies in How 20th Century Observatory Directors Got Chosen.” There were two special sessions at our meeting in Austin in January 2008. The first commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the “International Geophysical Year and the Dawn of Space-Based Astronomy.” The second

examined “Astronomy at the Time of Jamestown and Its Role in the Exploration of America.”

We are now planning our special sessions for Long Beach in 2009 with an eye toward topics relevant to the history of telescope making, photometry, and the International Year of Astronomy.

Prizes

Every two years on even-numbered years, the Historical Astronomy Division awards the LeRoy Doggett Prize for Historical Astronomy to an individual who has significantly influenced the field of the history of astronomy. The 2008 Doggett Prize was awarded to Dr. David H. DeVorkin. DeVorkin is well-known to AAS members for his numerous activities on behalf of the society and to scholars for his path-breaking research. Since 1981, DeVorkin has been the curator of the history of astronomy and space sciences at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum. His many research papers, books, and monographs—including a definitive biography of Henry Norris Russell—provide a detailed and fascinating study of twentieth century space science and astrophysics and the roles of the military, religion, and government in their development. The prize citation read: “To David DeVorkin for his seminal work in illuminating the origins and development of modern astrophysics and the origins of the space sciences during the twentieth century.”

At the Austin meeting, HAD Chair Sara Schechner presented the 2008 Doggett Prize to David DeVorkin, who then delivered an invited plenary lecture on “Astronomy and Its History on the Nation’s Mall.”

The 2007-2008 Doggett Prize selection committee was chaired by the immediate past HAD Chair, Donald Yeomans, and also included the current HAD chair, Sara Schechner, the HAD Secretary-Treasurer, Joseph Tenn, and members-at-large Michael Hoskin (University of Cambridge) and Robert W. Smith (University of Alberta). A new member-at-large to replace Robert Smith, who has finished his four-year term, will be appointed by the HAD Committee shortly.

The Division has also decided to establish a new HAD prize. As originally instituted, the Doggett Prize could be awarded for either a lifetime effort or a significant publication. In practice, however, only lifetime achievements have been recognized, and worthy books could not compete effectively. The playing field was not level. Being empowered to change these rules by majority vote, the HAD Committee is redressing the situation. Starting in 2012, the Doggett Prize will be reserved for lifetime contributions to the history of astronomy. The Committee also announces the establishment of a new prize—the HAD Book Award—to be given in odd-numbered years, beginning in 2011, to honor a recent book that significantly illuminates the history of astronomy.

Publications and Website

Thanks go to Joseph Tenn, the Division’s new Secretary Treasurer for expanding the HAD website (www.aas.org/had). The website now contains pages about all recipients of the Doggett Prize, scans of all back issues of the HAD newsletter and of the history of astronomy

bibliographies which were attached to the newsletters from 1988–2001, the histories of both the AAS and the HAD, and titles of all papers presented at all HAD meetings together with a number of history of astronomy papers presented to the AAS outside the HAD sessions or before HAD began in 1981. All of these titles have links to online abstracts. There is also an index to AAS members' obituaries, which have been produced by HAD since 1991. There are links to the actual obituaries which are online except for those published in the *BAAS* in 2003–05. The AAS Executive Officer has promised to see that these obituaries are soon posted.

Under Tenn's editorship, the Division has issued two newsletters per year. These have been twelve pages packed with information, articles, and photographs. They are available online in both low and high resolution formats.

Obituary Committee

The Historical Astronomy Division is responsible for the preparation of the memorials to deceased members of the AAS that are published annually in the *BAAS*. Under the editorship of HAD vice chair Tom Hockey, 29 obituaries were published this past year. As a result, we are caught up on a long-standing backlog of unwritten obituaries save one. In this work, Hockey was assisted by Virginia Trimble, appointed by the AAS Council as a member of the HAD Obituary Committee.

Other News and Initiatives

We are pleased to report our close liaison with a new AAS Working Group for the Preservation of Astronomical Heritage, which was established by the AAS Council in January 2007 in response to an initiative from HAD. It is charged with "developing and disseminating procedures, criteria, and priorities for identifying, designating, and preserving astronomical structures, instruments, and records so that they will continue to be available for astronomical and historical research, for the teaching of astronomy, and for outreach to the general public." The chair of the WGAH is nominated by the HAD Executive Committee and confirmed by the AAS Council. HAD wishes to thank Steve McCluskey (University of West Virginia), the current WGAH chair, for his excellent job in launching the working group. The HAD Executive Committee has nominated Jim Lattis (University of Wisconsin-Madison) to take his place in June 2008.

The HAD Committee has also been considering the creation of a short cultural astronomy summer school or workshop. The idea is to give astronomers early in their careers some experience with historical methods and a cultural understanding of past astronomy, which might be of use in their teaching careers or interaction with the general public. Planning for this outreach program is in the preliminary stage, and we invite comments and suggestions.