

## The IAU, astronomical archives and Commissions 41 and the ICHA\*

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The year 1998 marked the 50th anniversary of the creation of International Astronomical Union Commission 41. It was formed in Zurich during the VIIth General Assembly (GA), the first one after the 1935 GA in Paris. The Commission was named *History of Astronomy* and it had less than 20 members. At the VIIIth GA in Rome in 1952 about a dozen new members joined the Commission, and three years later at the Dublin GA, reports and a bibliography were given for the 30 members.

The first apparent interest in astronomical archives was included in the Report of Commission 41 and in the sessions, under the proposal of Kulikovskiy, at the Moscow GA in 1958, when "... the desirability of publishing short accounts of the archives of astronomical observatories and institutions, with special reference to letters from astronomers of their countries who have worked there ..." was discussed, but there was no follow-up at the GAs held in Berkeley in 1961 or Hamburg in 1964.

After the destruction of some papers and documents of a notable astronomer of high standing, Commission 41 submitted a resolution about instruments and documents of historical interest and this was passed by the GA in Prague in 1967. The resolution included the following statement:

"It laments the fact that the personal papers of some astronomers have been destroyed by those unacquainted with their value, and therefore urges individuals and observatories to protect and preserve such manuscripts and letters."

Forbes and others in Commission 41 supported the microfilming of documents on the history of astronomy.

From this time the number of members of Commission 41 began to increase, showing a growing interest in this field of astronomy. There were 54 members in 1970 (at the Brighton GA), 59 in 1973 (Sydney), 66 in 1976 (Grenoble), 73 in 1979 (Montreal), 79 in 1982 (Patras), and 102 in 1985 (Delhi). Meanwhile, "C41 consultants" were introduced in 1967 for those who were not IAU members but were actively involved in history of astronomy activities, and by 1976 their number had risen to 41. During these growth years of the 1970s and 80s, the "preservation of twentieth-century astronomy", "preserving written records" and "microfilming of documents in several countries" were mentioned at various times, and in 1982, "the use of historical records in astronomical research". Another important development was the founding of the *Journal for the History of Astronomy* in 1970, and almost from the start descriptions of important astronomical archives featured in its pages.

During meetings of Commission 41 at the Baltimore GA in 1988, Débarbat "... raised the question of library and archives conservation, and noted that despite our lamentations in 1967, and similar regrets expressed in 1977 by Commission 5 (Documentation and Astronomical Data) personal papers of great importance to the history of astronomy continue to be dispersed or destroyed." At that time it was resolved that she be invited to act on behalf of the Commission "... in setting up a working party to explore the problem jointly with Commission 5."

Three years later at the 1991 GA in Buenos Aires, a resolution proposed by Commissions 5 and 41 was passed after discussions between Débarbat and Hauck (President of Commission 5). The first objective was to stop the wholesale destruction of material of historical value, and

\* This is the first of what we hope will be a series of on-going reports by the various C41/ICHA Working Groups.

the second objective was to make the whereabouts of such material better known to scholars. Many instances were reported at this meeting of situations where directors of institutes, librarians, and others invested great care in the preservation of materials over a long time intervals, only to be followed by others who were entirely without any feeling for the past and were prepared to sell or destroy our astronomical heritage. Resolution C4 on "Astronomical Archives", which was endorsed by the GA, recommended that the Union supported the initiatives taken by Commissions 5 and 41

- "1 to establish a register of the whereabouts of all extant astronomical archives of historical interest;
- 2 to impress on observatories and other institutions their responsibility for the preservation, conservation, and where possible, cataloguing of such archives;
- 3 to search for an institution that will allocate space and funds for maintaining such a register and publishing it."

The following Working Group (WG) was established to action this resolution: S Débarbat (as the up-coming President of Commission 41), S J Dick (Commission 41), E Proverbio (Commission 41), B Hauck (President of Commission 5), D Dewhirst (Commission 5).

At the 1994 GA in The Hague, Débarbat reported that during the triennium the members of the WG were not able to meet, but information was circulated and the President of Commission 41 had discussions with a number of people responsible for astronomical archives. Meanwhile Professor Blaauw (a former President of the IAU) published a book titled *History of the IAU: The Birth and First Half-Century of the IAU*, and because some of the funds allocated for its preparation were unspent, Commission 41 successfully submitted the following resolution (B2) on "Funding the archival organization of the IAU":

"Suggests to the Executive Committee that these remaining funds be used for the archival organization and cataloguing of the early IAU files in preparation for depositing them in a suitable archive."

The following related resolution (C4) on a "Search for an Inventory of Existing Archives", also proposed by Commission 41, was endorsed:

"Noting that Professor Blaauw's recent "History of the IAU" shows the great value of astronomical archives, Encourages a search for an inventory for all archives related to the history of the IAU, to be undertaken by members at their home institutions and other places and reported to Commission 41."

It should be noted that during the 1994 GA, Commission 41 also organized the celebration of "Seventy-Five Years of the IAU" in the form of a Joint Discussion, and among those who attended were at least six past General Secretaries or Presidents of the IAU, all of whom were interested in the archives of the Union.

By the Kyoto GA in 1997, the number of members of Commission 41 had risen to 155, while at the 2000 GA in Manchester the President reported there were 179 members and 27 consultants, showing the increasing interest of astronomers in the history of their discipline.

At this last GA, Commission 41 joined an initiative of the Commission on Bibliography and Documentation of the Division of History of Science of the International Union for History and Philosophy of Science (DHS/IUHPS) in running a Special Session on "Inventory and Preservation of Astronomical Archives, Records and Artifacts". At this meeting it was announced that the archives of the IAU, which had been catalogued by Professor Blaauw as a result of the resolution taken in 1994, were now housed at the Archives de l'Académie des Sciences in Paris and were available to *bona fide* researchers upon the approval of the General Secretary of the IAU.

Drawing on the momentum generated by this Special Session, Commission 41 reactivated the Archives Working Group, with a new Committee comprising Suzanne Débarbat (Chair: France), Dan Green (USA) and Peter Hingley (UK). In 2002, two further Committee members,

Wolfgang Dick (Germany) and Wayne Orchiston (Australia), were added. At the Manchester GA, Commission 41 also formed three other Working Groups (on Astronomical Chronology, Historical Instruments, and Transits of Venus), and another feature of this GA was a very successful Joint Discussion on "Applied Historical Astronomy", attended by more than 100 people.

During the last three years members of the Archives WG have continued to build up national inventories of astronomical archives in different countries, and to document, research and disseminate information on individual archives, and on individual archival records. Meanwhile, in 2001 the IAU and the DHS/IUHPS formed the Inter-Union Commission for History of Astronomy (ICHA), and it was decided that the four existing WGs would be shared by C41 and this new Commission.

The first archives initiative under this new structure occurred in 2002 July when the Archives WG joined with the Historical Instruments WG in organising a highly-successful four-day conference on "Astronomical Instruments and Archives from the Asia-Pacific Region" which was held in Cheongju, Korea.

The next opportunity for members of the C41/ICHA Archives WG to report on their work – either through verbal papers or poster papers – will be at the 2003 July GA in Sydney, when a half-day WG Meeting has been scheduled.

At the Korean Conference a number of our members highlighted the fact that archives underpin most historical research projects. This being the case, we hope that in the long run the activities of the Archives WG will prove to be of great benefit to the rank and file membership of C41 and the ICHA.

