

## LOOKING UP

### *A History of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada*

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#### **Chapter 14**

While new Centres were being established in the West and the East, others were popping up in the Society's original home province of Ontario.

Of course, there was interest in astronomy long before the RASC came along. A number of examples could be cited as evidence of early astronomical activity in southwestern Ontario. William Barker of London claimed, falsely as it turned out, to have discovered the nova T Coronae in 1866 and actually got reported in the pages of two British journals, the *Observatory* and the *Monthly Notices of the RAS*. In 1867, Edward Flood, also of London, was trying to sell his father's telescope – a 14-cm Fitz refractor with a mahogany tube, equatorially mounted with 10-cm setting circles. The observatory at Woodstock College, equipped with a 21-cm refractor, opened in 1879. During the 1880s, a Mr H. Petit of Belmont had a large telescope and corresponded with A.F. Miller and other members of the A&P Society of Toronto. Teaching of Astronomy began at the Western University in London in 1883 and in the 1890s, Charles Clark, an Associate member of the A&P Society, tried unsuccessfully to start a branch in London.

As happened in a number of other places, however, the eventual organization of the London Centre awaited the spark of a dynamic individual who had already promoted astronomy in some other part of the country. Like Marsh in Peterborough and Hamilton, and Asbury in Guelph and Montreal, Professor H.R. Kingston moved from Winnipeg where he had been secretary-treasurer and president of the Centre to London, Ontario, where he became the motive force behind the establishment of a new Centre. Soon after taking up his duties in 1921 as Head of the Mathematics Department at Western University, Kingston gave some popular public lectures in astronomy which aroused great interest and enthusiasm. As a direct result, in February, 1922, the London Centre of the RASC was formed with thirty two charter members. By the end of the year, the numbers were up to fifty, and in fact, for almost the entire history of the London Centre, membership has remained in the thirty-two to fifty range.

During the first year, Kingston lectured at two of the six meetings. To get the members off on the right foot, he prepared typewritten lists of all the astronomy books available in the university library and invited members to borrow, read and learn. In the years ahead he would educate, entertain and encourage his audience in a wonderful

variety of ways. In 1924 he illustrated his address on “The Recent Eclipse of the Sun” with moving pictures taken on the Island of Catalina and in Mexico. In 1925, his talk entitled “A Month on the Moon” was followed by an enjoyable game of jumbled astronomical names. During 1926, he gave five of the seven lectures. He hosted many council meetings at his home, he gave radio talks over CJGC, and he prepared a booklet of star maps. His energy seems to have been boundless and he was much in demand, not only in London, but also in Toronto and elsewhere as a public speaker who could exemplify how to popularize astronomy. Yet he did not dominate the Centre to the point of excluding others. In fact the London Centre has always had a strong involvement by a large number of members and in the early years many novel ideas like songs, games, contests and debates characterized the meetings.

While some of the Centre meetings took place at the university, many were held at the Normal School and the Public Library in the 1920s. Starting in 1927, a member connected with London Life Insurance Company arranged for Centre meetings in the company conference room with observing afterwards from the roof of their newly built head office building. Annual Meetings and social evenings were sometimes held at such local establishments as The Blue Dragon Inn and Wong’s Cafe. This latter spot was the venue for entertaining visiting lecturers W.E. Harper and S.A. Mitchell who came to town in 1930 and 1931. An audience of 360 turned out to hear Mitchell’s after-dinner lecture on Solar Eclipses in the London Life Auditorium, attracted by his renown for delightful speeches on this subject and by plans for the Canadian eclipse the following year.

Centre picnics followed by an evening of observing were an annual tradition. For the first few years they were held at the farm of Dr and Mrs W.E. Saunders at Pond Mills whose fine 10-cm refractor (later donated to the Centre) was put to good use. Dr Saunders was a well-known druggist and naturalist. Mrs Saunders became Centre vice-president in 1925. In subsequent years other members, including Dr Ainslie at St Mary’s and Thomas Wonnacutt at Delaware, were hosts for the picnic. Wonnacutt’s farm was the scene of a joint get-together with the Ontario Field Naturalists in June, 1938, when everyone enjoyed a campfire talk by Dr Kingston.

As in most Centres, observing in the 1920s and 1930s usually meant that a few members would set up telescopes following the regular meeting and everyone would enjoy a couple of hours viewing the planets, the Moon or some double stars. The one planned program was meteor observing which became popular in the mid 1930s as a result of Dr Millman’s enthusiasm. In London, John Middlebrook organized teams of meteor observers, usually drawing a dozen or so participants for the Perseid shower in August.

Programs for the public were especially successful in 1939 thanks to the spectacular arrival of the 40 kg meteorite at nearby Dresden and extensive publicity in The London Free Press. One of six star-nights that year alone attracted 3,000 people who came to view Mars, Jupiter and the Moon through members’ telescopes. A very important development for astronomy in London was the dedication of the Hume Cronyn Memorial Observatory on October 25, 1940. This came about as the result of a \$40,000 donation to the University of Western Ontario by Mrs Cronyn in memory of her husband who, as a Member of Parliament during World War I, had pressed the government to establish what was later to become the National Research Council. The

Observatory was equipped with a 25-cm refractor and a Schmidt camera, and was intended “to aid in the teaching of Astronomy in the University, to encourage the work of the London Centre of the RASC, and, in general, to stimulate in the public mind an interest in Astronomy.”

For the next twenty years or so, the Centre met monthly at the Observatory. A short discussion on some aspect of The Observer’s Handbook normally opened each meeting and observing with the 25-cm refractor was scheduled after the meeting, weather permitting. The main speaker was usually a London member, but Canadian professional astronomers generally visited once or twice each year, a tradition which continued until very recently. Joint meetings were an innovation in the 1950s and early 1960s, sometimes with Windsor or Hamilton Centre, sometimes with another organization like the Canadian Association of Physicists or the Geophysical Group of the university. Co-operation with these latter groups brought outstanding scientists of the calibre of Harold Urey who spoke on the origin of the Solar System.



The London Centre of the RASC sponsored a display of astronomical instruments in the William’s Memorial Library, London. The exhibit lasted one week, from April 18 to 25, 1952 and was manned **constantly** by members of the Centre. (EJC Note: This might possibly be the Centre’s first “Astronomy Week” display)

*Photo with names, originally published in JRASC 46, 172.*

The 1960s saw a number of changes in the London Centre. There was a brief span from 1966–68 when little was done to attract new members or to retain old ones. The number of meetings declined from five, to three, and then only to two per year. The number of members fell to an alarming low of eighteen, but the Centre, under strong leadership, rebounded with programs offering more member-involvement than ever before. Three groups were formed in 1969 – one for observers, another for telescope makers and a third for junior members. The Centre newsletter which began the same year did a lot to develop camaraderie and cohesiveness. Each year, at least one members’

night provided an opportunity for a number of speakers to talk for a few minutes about some aspect of their own astronomical activities. The tradition of an annual banquet began in 1973, and there was a picnic and a barbecue in 1974 and 1975. Excursions added some excitement as trips were planned to the Ontario Science Centre and McLaughlin Planetarium in Toronto, to the Abrams Planetarium and the Observatory at Michigan State University, to astronomy meetings in Syracuse, New York, and Stellafane in Vermont, and even to Cape Canaveral for the first launch of the Space Shuttle.

The regular meetings continued to be held on campus, though not at the Hume Cronyn Observatory. Following Kingston's death in 1963, a bequest from his estate provided for a guest lecturer nearly every year. Perhaps the most outstanding of these occasions was the sixtieth anniversary of the Centre when Bart Bok addressed the London members and several guests from other places on the subject "The History of Milky-Way Research 1920–82." In recent years there have been fewer lectures delivered by visiting professionals, but more by exchange speakers coming as amateur members from other Centres.

On the observing front, more members started to take an active role in the late '60s. The university opened another small campus observatory containing a 15-cm refractor in 1966 and members made some use of it, especially for the series of Pleiades occultations in 1969. But with greater interest in telescope making and dark-sky observing, there was a growing desire for independence. With meetings every other week, the Amateur Telescope Makers produced a number of reflectors for personal use and undertook some larger projects for the Centre. The head of the group, Peter Andreae, offered courses at a community college. A 40-cm f/13.5 Cassegrain instrument with 25-cm guide scope was completed in 1974. A 20-cm Dobsonian was completed recently, and it, along with a 10-cm refractor made by Joe O'Neil and a 40-cm commercially made telescope which was purchased second-hand, are all available for rent by members at a rate of ten dollars per month including eyepieces and sky atlas. Interest in observing picked up in proportion to the greater accessibility of telescopes. Deep-sky and variable star work were the most popular, but meteor showers, eclipses and occultations attracted some attention. A number of dark sites were used not far from the city, but on occasion, members would go further a field on camping weekends at Mount Forest.

Public education was also enhanced by the great increase in telescopes and observing experience. Starting in the 1970s there were public star-nights in parks and conservation areas, educational sessions at the library, information booths at shopping malls, talks to Guides, Scouts and recreational groups, and at schools, camps and at the London Regional Children's Museum. Project Zubenelgenubi ran during at least three summers. This government-funded endeavour was highly successful in bringing astronomy to the general public not only through presentations, displays and star nights, but by means of a 100-page programmed learning guide prepared in 1973 and a series of television programs produced in 1980 by five students and based on the Astronomy and Aerospace industry in Canada. No one did more for public astronomy education in London than Peter Jedicke. Besides being committed to the regular programs of the Centre, he initiated a popular course at Fanshawe College, spoke often on CKO radio and hosted a cable television show called "Telescope" from 1976 to 1984.

All these activities were signs of a healthy Centre and indeed membership reached a record sixty-eight in 1980. Though numbers have not matched that level in the decade

since, the Centre looks forward with confidence to a permanent observatory and sustained growth in the years ahead.

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H.R. Kingston is at the eyepiece of the 25-cm refractor of the Hume Cronyn Observatory. W.G. Colgrove is at the top of the ladder.

*Photo by A.A. Gleason, Jr., Regional Collection, D.B. Waldon Library, University of Western Ontario, London*

**Harold R. Kingston** (1886-1963) was born in Picton, Ontario. After high school, he taught for a few years before commencing university studies. Following his MA at Queen's University in Kingston, he again taught, this time at an Indianapolis high school. He embarked on a PhD program at the University of Chicago and completed it one year after accepting a position in the Department of Mathematics, University of Manitoba, where he was Lecturer and Assistant Professor from 1913 to 1921. He then moved to Western University in London where he had a distinguished career as Head of the Mathematics Department, Dean of Arts and Science and Principal of University College. Queen's and Western both honoured him with LID degrees in 1953. Throughout his career he maintained a strong interest in education at the high school level, served as President of the Ontario Educational Association and wrote (with J.E. Durrant) widely-used Geometry textbooks. His only son, John, was a Professor of Mathematics at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Kingston also taught some Astronomy courses and consequently became actively interested in the Society. During his years in Winnipeg he was Secretary-Treasurer and President of the Centre there, and in London he was the founding President from 1922 to

1930 and Honorary President thereafter. Through his influence, Astronomy was put on a solid footing at Western and the Hume Cronyn Observatory was established. In the National Society he was Vice-President in 1927 and President in 1930-31. His role in the London Centre would be hard to over-estimate as he was consistently involved in meetings and activities for nearly 40 years. As a result of a bequest from his estate to the London Centre, many outstanding speakers have come to London to deliver the HR Kingston Memorial Lecture.

**Reverend W.G. Colgrove** (1872-1958) grew up on a farm adjacent to what is now the campus of the University of Western Ontario. From childhood he took a keen interest in nature; he had a gift for drawing as well as an innate mechanical talent. His first employment was as a lithographer where his artistic ability was highly regarded, but he abandoned this career for further academic studies. After receiving his BA degree at UWO, he went to McGill and the Boston Theological Seminary for post-graduate work. He served a church in Worcester, Massachusetts before returning to south-western Ontario where he was minister of several United Church congregations.

Two spectacular events started his life-long interest in astronomy - the great comet of 1882 which he saw stretching across the sky day after day, and a meteorite fall in 1885 which he witnessed. A gift of a telescope about this time allowed him to pursue his hobby on a more regular basis. Colgrove joined the London Centre soon after it formed; certainly he was on the Council in 1928. He served the Centre as President in 1939-40 and Vice-President in 1951-53. During this period of 25 years, he contributed much to the popularizing of astronomy through talks, articles and booklets. His unique contribution which led to his receiving the Chant Medal for 1942 was the design and construction of a series of excellent instruments which demonstrated relationships and motions of solar system objects, stars and the Galaxy. H.R. Kingston described them as being "of inestimable value in the teaching of astronomy." Following Reverend Colgrove's retirement from the ministry he acted as unofficial curator of the Hume-Cronyn Observatory, giving demonstrations and lectures to many groups. It was also through his initiative that the Observatory acquired the Dresden meteorite, a treasured possession.