

***THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE
R.A.S.C. KINGSTON CENTRE:
Some Reminiscences On The First Twenty Years Of The Centre, From 1961 To 1981
by Leo Enright***

[The following is from the notes used for a paper presented to the Kingston Centre on January 12, 2001 to mark the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the Centre in 1961.]

Antecedents To The 1961 Founding Of The Kingston Centre

Records from the mid-nineteenth century show that, in the town of Kingston, Canada West, there was a strong local interest in astronomy at the time of, and following, the May 26, 1854 total solar eclipse.

The local amateurs of the time, who were called "gentlemen astronomers" undertook to build an astronomical observatory.

Land and building materials were acquired for the building of the observatory, at a cost of \$600.00. The site was at the west end of the city, in what is at present MacDonald Park. A new 160cm (6 ½ inch) Alvin Clark refractor was purchased for \$600.00. Soon a transit telescope was purchased also, in order to determine time precisely.

Observations of many kinds were made after the completion of the frame structure in 1855.

The observatory was taken over by Queen's University in 1861, and it was replaced by a brick structure in 1862.

Under the Queen's University mathematician, Nathan Dupuis, many kinds of observations -- barometric, surveying, and time-related -- were made at the observatory.

In 1881 the observatory was moved to the Queen's University campus where Astronomy had been taught since 1863. Observations continued for many years.

The observatory was demolished in 1946.

Twelve years later, in 1958, plans were approved for a new 38cm (15 inch) Cassegrain telescope on Ellis Hall.

Early Astronomy "Explorers" In Kingston, Prior To The 1961 Founding Of The Centre

John F. Baker of Queen's University had corresponded with the Toronto "Astronomical Society" (the predecessor of the R.A.S.C.) in 1892 regarding the teaching of astronomy.

Lt.-Col. McGill of The Royal Military College wrote to the Toronto group on a similar topic in the 1890's. He was particularly concerned with the teaching and testing of astronomy in the university and in the schools.

In 1907, very close to the time when Dr. C.A. Chant began the publication of the Journal and the Handbook of the Society, Professor Matheson and Professor Dupuis, both of Queen's University, became R.A.S.C. members. (The Society had just a few years before received its royal charter.)

William Findlay of Toronto, in 1939, referred to a group of "capable members in that vicinity" when he said that Kingston was "one important university city where I feel sure there is a possibility of a good branch being organized." He was the National President at the time.

1939 was a significant year for two other reasons:

(1) Dr. A. Vibert Douglas (B.A., M.Sc., Ph.D., and L.L.D. - all from McGill University, and an internationally recognized authority in spectroscopic absolute stellar magnitudes and stellar atmospheres) moved from being lecturer in physics and astronomy at McGill University to Queen's University where she becomes Professor of Astronomy from 1942 to 1964 and Emeritus Professor of Astronomy from 1965 to 1988. (She was also recognized for her work on stellar astronomy done in collaboration with Sir Arthur Eddington, of whose official biography she was the author.)

(2) Dr. A. Vibert Douglas became the Second Vice-President of The Royal Astronomical Society of Canada. Later, in 1943 and 1944, she was the National President of the R.A.S.C..

The Founding Events Of The Kingston Centre in 1961

Thursday, January 19, 1961:

- There was a meeting of 20 Queen's University faculty members and students in Room 221, Ellis Hall at 7:30p.m. The meeting was chaired by Dr. A. Vibert Douglas, Professor of Astronomy, who outlined the history and the goals of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada.
- Dr. George Harrower talked about the Ellis Hall Observatory
- The feature talk of the evening was by Dr. Douglas, and the topic was "Telescope and the Universe They Reveal".
- An observing session was scheduled for the following week, for Thursday, January 26, 1961.
- Nine people joined the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada. The annual fee was \$5.00 for adults, and \$3.00 for students.
- A report of the meeting was sent to the National Executive Secretary of the Society on January 23, 1961.
- Meetings continued to be held on the second and fourth Thursdays of each month.

February 1, 1961:

- A letter of reply was written by the National President, Dr. Peter Millman, expressing the National Council's appreciation for Dr. Douglas's efforts.

March 9, 1961:

- A meeting (the fifth for the group) was held in Room 221, Ellis Hall, to elect the officers for 1961. Those elected to executive positions were as follows: Honorary President: Dr. A.V. Douglas; President: A.K.F. Turner; Vice-President: M.R. Edwards; Secretary-Treasurer: F.M. Taylor.
- (In a letter of the following day, March 10, 1961, Dr. Douglas reported the business of the meeting to the National Executive Secretary, Mrs. Marie Fidler.)

March 23, 1961:

- The Constitution for the Kingston Centre was approved at the second meeting in March.
- The National Council Meeting, which had been held in Toronto on March 17 and 18, had approved the election to membership in the Society of the twenty Kingston members who had joined the Society both at, and subsequent, to the first meeting in Kingston in January, as reported in a letter written by Professor Kennedy, the National Secretary, also on March 23, 1961. In the letter, he suggested that either Dr. Douglas or Mr. Turner submit a letter for Centre status, as required by the National Constitution, so that it might be approved at the June National Council Meeting.

April 10, 1961:

- Dr. Douglas submitted the letter for Centre status, and submitted the proposed Constitution for the Kingston Centre.

April 13, 1961:

- A letter of acknowledgement was sent from Professor Kennedy to Dr. Douglas. It expressed delight with the progress that had been made during the past winter. The request for Centre status would be brought before the National Council at its meeting on June 2, 1961.

June 2, 1961:

- The National Council approved the creation of the Kingston Centre as the sixteenth Centre of the Society, and also approved its Constitution.
The Kingston Centre now existed as the sixteenth Centre of the Society, and during that first year, 1961, it had 23 members. It was a good beginning.

A "University Club--Centre" In The 1960's

- In the following few years and throughout the remainder of the 1960's, maintaining membership proved very difficult, in spite of the efforts by Dr. Douglas and several visits to the Centre by National Executive Members. In 1962 there were only 7 members of the Society in the group. Several reasons are given for the difficulties in maintaining the numbers of members:
 - the pressures of university life, with the constant demands of study,
 - the short school year, with students arriving in September and leaving in March or April,

- the changing executive from year to year,
- the Queen's University Astronomy Club (Q.U.A.C.) "co-existing with the Centre" and being the more "student visible" aspect of the organization,
- the Q.U.A.C., rather than the R.A.S.C.-Kingston Centre, being responsible to the student government on campus - certainly a unique arrangement among the Centres of the Society..

In spite of these difficulties for the young organization, a number of dedicated individuals put forward a tremendous effort to maintain an active group on campus. There was a real effort to have WEEKLY events: biweekly meetings, alternating (in the other weeks) with observing sessions in the dome in Ellis Hall. Often the topic for a meeting was a presentation by a group member, or a film, or a presentation by a member of the Queen's faculty, or a talk by a member of the National Executive.

In addition to paying tribute to the efforts by Dr. Douglas, I wish to mention the efforts of certain Queen's students of that era, whom I had the opportunity of knowing: Mr. Paul Brown, Mr. Sandy McHattie, Ms. Susan McDougall, Mr. Chris Sargeant, and Mr. Doug Baker.

A "Turn-Around" In The 1970's

Several very important events occurred in the 1970's, events which marked a renewal and surge in membership of the R.A.S.C. Kingston Centre:

- People from outside the Queen's University community began to join the Centre, though membership of Queen's students continued, and meetings continued to be held in Ellis Hall, Room 222, and the Ellis Hall Observatory continued to be used, as it had in the past.
- A bright morning comet (Comet West) inspired student observing in 1976.
- Efforts to recruit members at the annual Queen's Clubs' Nights (held each year in September or early October in Grant Hall) were quite successful. (I personally remember that David Levy was first spotted at one of these events, and he soon began attending our meetings, joined the Kingston Centre, and became an active member of the group. He had just become an M.A. student in the English Department, and was working on a thesis concerning the writings of the great English poet of the Victorian Age, Gerard Manley Hopkins, who occasionally referred to particular comets of the period and other celestial objects in his beautiful poetic descriptions of the natural world.)
- Astronomy Day started to be observed in Canada; it was promoted in Mall Displays at various Kingston Shopping Centres.
- The General Assembly (the "G.A.") became an increasingly popular annual event of the Society in the 1970's. The Kingston Centre had good representation at the Toronto event in 1977 and the London event in 1979.
- Centre activities were promoted as never before, and new ones were added:
- Holleford Crater Tours were started.
- "Summer Solstice Celebrations" were initiated at Leo Enright's place in Sharbot Lake..
- Visits to Jarnac (David Levy's cottage in the Gatineau Hills) were enjoyed by members.
- Informal observing sessions were held at members' homes.
- Member projects were initiated: telescope making was promoted by Larry Manuel, and observatory construction was undertaken.
- Members participated in eclipse trips to several places in Manitoba for the Total Solar Eclipse of February 26, 1979.
- The "Third Big Magazine of Astronomy" took off with Kingston Centre involvement:
 - David Levy was a regular "variable star columnist" for "STAR AND SKY".
- Kingston Centre members won major awards for significant contributions to astronomy:
 - Warren Morrison won the Chilton Prize in 1979; David Levy won the Chant Medal in 1980.

References:

- R. Peter Broughton: **Looking Up, A History of the R.A.S.C.**
- **Regulus**, The Newsletter of the R.A.S.C. Kingston Centre, particularly the first three issues of the year 1986.
- slides in the personal collection of the author.