

NEW OBITUARY POLICY FOR THE AMERICAN ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

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Abstract. The American Astronomical Society has a permanent website with obituaries of nearly all its members who have died since 1990. The Vice Chair of the Historical Astronomy Division (HAD) is tasked with selecting authors and editing the obituaries, which are posted by the AAS headquarters staff on a site¹ linked to the top-level AAS page²; an alphabetical index appears at the Historical Astronomy Division's site³, which is linked from their top-level page⁴. The HAD was asked to be in charge of obituaries by the AAS Council in 1990. Most obituaries are in the vicinity of 800 words, but longer essays are allowable for selected individuals.

1. Introduction

In 1984, historian John Lankford harangued that essential information about deceased astronomers was being lost to historians. His piece, "A Crisis in Documentation: The Decline of the Obituary as a Source for the History of Modern Astronomy," appeared in the *Bulletin of the American Astronomical Society*, then a print publication (Lankford 1984). He provided statistics of obituaries over past twenty-year intervals and listed desiderata.

The Historical Astronomy Division (HAD) of the American Astronomical Society (AAS) was asked in 1990 by the AAS Council to be in charge of obituaries. Most obituaries are in the vicinity of 800 words, but longer

¹<http://aas.org/baas/obits/all>

²<http://aas.org/>

³<http://had.aas.org/obits.html>

⁴<http://had.aas.org/>

essays are allowable for selected individuals and the new, electronic format of not only the obituaries but also the entire *Bulletin* allows more text and more photographs.

2. The Current Situation

Since 1991, obituaries have been printed in the *Bulletin of the American Astronomical Society*. As of 2011, that publication is strictly online. The online nature of the obituaries now allows them to be expanded beyond the titular limit of 800 words each, and to include pictures in color as well as links to other online obituaries (from newspapers, for example) or other biographical information.

The Vice Chair of the Historical Astronomy Division (HAD), currently me, has the task of selecting authors of the obituaries and of editing the selected information (Pasachoff 2011). The results are then passed on to AAS Headquarters in Washington for posting on the web by the Director of Communications, currently Judy Johnson, and the Membership Communications Manager, currently Crystal Tinch. They also notify the Vice Chair of HAD of members' deaths, which occur, unfortunately, at a fairly steady weekly rate⁵. The transition from the previous Vice Chair (Jarita Holbrook, now HAD Chair) to the current Vice Chair left an overlap of solicited but not yet submitted obituaries and a backlog of postings resulting from the paper-to-electronic transition, which required methods of posting to be reconsidered at AAS Headquarters.

The obituaries are posted, as they become available, by the AAS headquarters staff at a site⁶ linked to the top-level page⁷; a list appears at the Historical Astronomy Division's site⁸, which is linked from their top-level page⁹. At present, there are over 500 obituaries posted. At the Historical Astronomy Division's site you can find an alphabetical list of obituaries, including name, birth and death years, and the publication information in the (formerly print and currently online) *Bulletin*. All the obituaries since 1990 have been available on NASA's Astrophysics Data System (ADS), hosted at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory by the High Energy Astrophysics Division at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics¹⁰. For

⁵The rate corresponds roughly to the calculation of 5,000 AAS members (now 7,500) with an average lifetime of 100 years, or 50 deaths per year; of course, there were fewer members in the past though the average lifetime at present and in the past is substantially less than 100 years.

⁶<http://aas.org/baas/obits/all>

⁷<http://www.aas.org/>

⁸<http://had.aas.org/obits.html>

⁹<http://had.aas.org/>

¹⁰<http://adswww.harvard.edu/>



Figure 1. This photograph accompanying the obituary of Brian Marsden (1937-2010), late of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, charmingly shows him during his graduate-student days at Yale. The caption reads “Brian leaning on his bicycle during their years as graduate students at Yale. (Photo by Gene Milone).”

the last few years, the AAS has not included the obituaries in the online version of the *Bulletin*, so they were available only via ADS.

Obituaries are limited to former members, the list of which includes some distinguished foreign associates. Occasional exceptions can be made by the Obituary Committee, which includes the Vice-Chair of the Historical Astronomy Division (me), the American Astronomical Society’s Executive Officer (Kevin Marvel) and President (Debra Elmegreen).

The main website¹¹ also includes a link to obituaries; as of this writing, it also displays a list of the ten most recently posted. The link¹² shows, in reverse chronological order names, date of the decease, and the date of publication of the obituary. The list can easily be alphabetized by clicking on the column head. All obituaries are now posted on the AAS website.

Though the *Bulletin of the American Astronomical Society* is now

¹¹<http://aas.org/>

¹²<http://aas.org/baas/obits/all>

strictly online, the AAS office will provide bibliographical reference material for each obituary under the name(s) of its author(s).

3. Permanence

The question often exists these days between the permanence of digital data (on line, on DVDs, on hard drives, in the “Cloud,” etc.) and print. The American Astronomical Society’s *Astronomical Journal*, for example, published by the Institute of Physics (UK), promises that the Supplemental Data supplied by my co-authors and me for our paper about the transit of Venus (Pasachoff *et al.* 2011) will be available for 100 years. I have replied that we hope that the data are available to scientists preparing to observe the next transit of Venus, which won’t occur for over another 105 years, in 2117, and that I hope that they could extend the guarantee to at least that date. We have been looking at observations printed in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Astronomical Society* from the transit of 1761, 250 years ago, and even at the report of observations of the transit of Mercury of 1661, printed by Hevelius (1662) along with the first printed report of Jeremiah Horrocks’s observations of the transit of Venus of 1639, 372 years ago. The images of comets in the *Nuremberg Chronicle* (1493) from 520 years ago, however, though assigned to real dates, turned out to be stylized rather than accurate (Olson & Pasachoff 1989a&b), even though some had been referred to as actual images.

With this issue of centuries-long future accessibility in mind, I recently received a suggestion from Ronald Shorn, formerly a *Sky & Telescope* editor (Shorn 2011). He wrote: “Glad to read that the obits are now recorded on ‘electronic’ media, presumably in some computer memory ... Speaking from hard won experience, that resource is, and will be, a godsend to anyone working on the recent history of astronomy ... There is another reason for this missive, which is to encourage recording of this information in more permanent format(s). I can’t help thinking that, if this were the 1960s, the data would be recorded on punch cards (remember them?). Alternatively, one could use the latest 18-inch diameter, 1-inch thick spinning magnetic discs (remember them too?). As of 2011 both of these media are, or will soon be, lost, for nobody is making the equipment to read them. This trend will no doubt continue ... What to do? The optimal solution would be to find a smooth, very tall, very very wide granite cliff and carve things into it. This should preserve information for at least 5,000 years, but the AAS probably couldn’t afford the expense. Possibly some printed books would be useful.”

I responded that “Solar Dynamics Observatory sends down about 1.5 TB a day. If we have 1 sq mm per byte, then $1 \text{ TB} = 10^{12} \text{ bytes} = 10^6 \text{ mm}$

square = 1 km square of mountain cliff needed per day per TB, and roughly 25 km square of cliff face needed per year.” The need for cliff storage for AAS obituaries would be much less, given perhaps 100 obituaries at 1 MB each, or 100 MB per year. At 1 sq mm per byte, then we would need only 10^8 sq mm or a 10 m square per year, which could be easily accommodated on a variety of cliff faces. Present and future technologies could write with much smaller areas, even 0.3 nm square per letter¹³; the nanotechnology emphasis can be traced back to a 1959 lecture by Richard Feynman¹⁴, “There’s Plenty of Room at the Bottom.” The Planetary Society¹⁵ has flown the list of members into space, and often additional names, on at least 13 different spacecraft that flew to a variety of solar-system objects (Moon, Mars, Jupiter, comets, asteroids, Pluto)¹⁶. Perhaps, to ensure their long-term survival, the AAS should emulate the Society to arrange periodically for the obituaries to be flown into space on some compact media.

4. Comments

A hurdle that has to be often overcome is the fact that recently deceased individuals are often retired, and that the AAS directory therefore shows home addresses and does not reveal their former institutions, which would give clues to how to find suitable individuals to ask to write or supervise obituaries. It would be helpful if the AAS *Membership Directory*, or at least a master file at AAS headquarters, included former institutions (perhaps submitted voluntarily as the result of a routine request, at least for retired members), which would require nontrivial programming changes for the online version. This associated institution’s name could also be added to the yearly print directory (which, for the moment, survives, since a new one, the *2011 Membership Directory*, arrived during the week of this writing, mid-2011). The former addresses are not easily available at AAS Headquarters, though the librarian at the US Naval Observatory is among those who have offered to refer to old Directories, an indication that the decision to phase out hard copies of things can lead to future deprivation.

In my finding an appropriate person to write an obituary, I have often made use of NASA’s Astrophysical Data System¹⁷.

Overall, the task of writing an obituary has been readily accepted, though the submission of the actual obituaries is not often prompt. As

¹³<http://www.nature.com/nnano/journal/v4/n3/full/nnano.2008.415.html>
<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/01/090130154918.htm> from 2009

¹⁴<http://www.its.caltech.edu/~feynman/plenty.html>

¹⁵<http://www.planetary.org/>

¹⁶http://www.planetary.org/programs/projects/international_mission_participation/messages/namesinspace.html

¹⁷<http://adswww.harvard.edu/>

the old, standard joke goes, “Of course, if you want your own obituary to be accurate, fully informative, and timely, you can and should write it yourself.” This humorous comment led to the suggestion above, and its subsequent adoption, that some standard biographical information can be requested, perhaps at membership renewal time, to be put voluntarily on file, and possibly even with the name of one or more colleagues or former students who would be desirable obituary writers.

We can hope that the astronomers and historians of the future will find the AAS obituaries to be interesting and valuable.

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¹⁸<http://adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/1984BAAS...16..560L>

¹⁹<http://had.aas.org/hadnews/HADN78.html>