

The History of *MNASSA*

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Before the existence of ASSA

Before ASSA and its predecessor the Cape Astronomical Association started in 1912, the news about astronomical events in South Africa was rather sporadic. There were only a few amateur astronomers such as LA Eddie (1845-1913), AFI Forbes (1871-1959) and AW Roberts (1857-1938) and they published in *JBAA*, *MNRAS* and certain other journals.

Two books of cuttings now at SAAO, compiled by HE Wood of the observatory in Johannesburg, which started as a meteorological institution, give an indication of what got into the press. There were meteorological reports from the "Government Observatory, Johannesburg". There were reports of bright meteors, even one about rain-making activities from the *Marico Chronicle*, in 1906! There is a bitter attack on Innes because he did not approve of a parliamentary proposal to put Cape Town time on 22½ degrees East of Greenwich! There were notes about comets and an earthquake in 1908. A report from *The Leader* of 13 April 1909 of a deputation from the SA Association for the Advancement of Science to the Minister of Lands (Rissik) advocated the equipping of the Transvaal Observatory with a visual telescope. There was a report (no reference given) of a ministerial inspection of the recently donated Franklin-Adams camera. Comet 1910 A1 – "The Daylight Comet" – was discovered in Johannesburg, possibly by some railway workers at Kopjies in the Free State and mine workers on the Premier Mine! It created international attention and was thought by many to be the much-anticipated return of Halley's comet. An "aerolite" fell on a house in the Waterberg (1911).

Cape Astronomical Association

The CAA was formed 8 Nov 1912. It held monthly meetings, supported by the few professionals from the Royal Observatory as well as by the local amateurs. Some meetings were reported in the sporadic *Circulars* that began to be published in 1918 and also contained items such as lists of officers, Council members and a list of ordinary members (69 in 1921). They included "Rules" and a list of the lantern slides collection. Eight *Circulars* were published in total,

ending in 1921. There were a few articles of general interest also, such as "Saturn" by AW Long and "The Equatorial Sundial at the Castle" by Joseph Lunt.

Journal of the ASSA

The Astronomical Society of South(ern) Africa was formed in July 1922 by the union of the Cape Astronomical Association and the Johannesburg Astronomical Association (formed in 1918), according to the first issue of *The Journal of the Astronomical Society of South Africa*, dated February 1923. It was stated that "The *Journal* will be published at irregular intervals, as funds permit". Eventually 20 issues were to be published, in 4 volumes, the last being in April 1939.

The contents of *JASSA* included didactic-type articles by members, presidential addresses, annual reports of the two Associations (now Centres of ASSA), reports of Sections, lists of lectures given, obituaries, correspondence, Council and committee members etc. At the date of the last issue, ASSA had 89 members.

MNASSA

Up till 1939, according to an article by WP Hirst (1970), himself an active amateur member for many years, AW Long had been publishing a monthly article in the Cape Argus, giving what was to be expected in the heavens and announcing Society meetings. However, with Long's death, this series came to an end.

Money being short, Hirst suggested that a short monthly publication printed on a duplicating machine could take the place of the newspaper articles. His wife offered to type the stencils and Harold Krumm, another keen member, borrowed a duplicator from his church. These two offered to be joint editors and it was decided to call the publication *Monthly Notes* to avoid clashing with *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society*.

Thus 1940 April can be regarded as the start of *MNASSA*, though at the top of the first page was "ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY OF SOUTH AFRICA, CAPE CENTRE" The first issue contained the warning "The notes that follow are in the nature of an experiment..."

Features of the early issues were reports on meetings of the Cape Centre and

a kind of “Sky Guide” for the following month. There were lists of new members and various serious didactic articles by the local professional astronomers and serious amateurs. Also occasional advertisements of telescopes for sale. Comet discoveries such as de Kock 1941a were reported.

The second issue had an article on preparations for the Calvinia eclipse of 1 Oct 1940. In fact there were several articles about the Calvinia Eclipse observations and their results during the year 1940. It is clear that this event stimulated a great deal of local interest in astronomy.

The November issue included in the title “MONTHLY NOTES: No. 8”, the first use of the phrase.

The 16th issue, in July 1941, starts with the remark “As the *Journal* of the Society is unlikely to appear for some little time ...”, indicating that it was not yet considered dead, though it never appeared again.

In March 1941 the “Cape Centre” was dropped from the title, reflecting the national outlook now adopted.

In July 1942 HE Krumm’s name appears as editor.

The December 1942 issue was marked “Vol. II, No. 1., the volume designation being given for the first time.

January 1943 a line drawing of the Royal Observatory’s Main Building appears at the top of the title page.

Post-WWII, various original papers began to appear in *MNASSA*. They were nearly all written by the professional astronomers from the Cape, Radcliffe, Boyden, and the other foreign-owned observatories that had been established in the 1920s and ‘30s. An interesting example was the reporting of Proxima Cen as a flare star by AD Thackeray (1949). Publication of an article in *MNASSA*, often effectively as a preprint before the final version in, for example, *MNRAS*, was a way of establishing priority of discovery.

In its middle years, *MNASSA* published large numbers of original papers, mainly from South African authors. AWJ Cousins, in particular, contributed many frequently cited papers over the years.

Before about 1990 astronomical publication was quite a slow business. Journals were frequently distributed by surface mail. The more startling news was distributed in concise “Astronomical Telegrams” and people working in the same field sent “preprints” to each other. But with the advent of the Internet, at first preprints and later complete journals have been distributed electronically. Paper journals that required metres of library shelving each year have become things of the past.

Since about 1984, pressure has grown on South African scientists to achieve a high degree of international recognition. They are “rated” by the National Research Foundation (NRF), based on the opinions of a number of referees. The availability of funding and indeed of academic promotion is based on these ratings. It has become more-or-less essential for scientists to achieve as much self-publicity as possible, mainly by publishing in journals with a high “impact factor”. The latter is based on the number of references to each article published. This has worked to the disadvantage of small-circulation journals such as *MNASSA* that deal for the most part with a subject that is inherently international.

In recent years, the original material in *MNASSA* has therefore lent towards observational papers published by amateurs, historical papers, news of the Society etc. Other matters of local interest, such as obituaries and reports of developments in the various observatories also find an important place.

It used to be that the various observatories published Annual Reports. The Royal Observatory published theirs in *MNRAS* or the RAS Quarterly Journal, understandably since it was a British owned institution. The SAAO issued a separate report from 1974 to 2003 but this ceased until 2018, although a summary of the years 2004-2009 was published by Charles & Glass (2011) in *MNASSA*. For many years various South African astronomy departments and even private observatories published reports in *MNASSA* but this has now ceased. It appears to the editors of *MNASSA* that publication in this journal would serve a useful purpose in drawing the attention of the community to what is happening in the professional area.

It is important to recognise, however, that *MNASSA* papers are listed on the NASA-ADS data system, so that papers on particular subjects or on particular astronomical objects are likely to be found quite easily by people researching them.

Though available freely on NASA-ADS, *MNASSA* articles are also well-indexed and are made available on Sabinet, as are many other South African journals.

Editors and Editorial Board members:¹

1941-1968 RH Stoy*	1979-1981 DL Block*
1941-1942 JBG Turner*	1980-1985 PAT Wild
1942-1949 H Krumm*	1982-1989 JHS Jones
1942-1943 WP Hirst*	1984- IS Glass*
1951-1985 DS Evans*	1985-1989 WL Combrinck
1967-1977 PAT Wild*	1986 -2019 MW Feast
1969-1984 J Churms*	1986- B Warner
1970-1972 H Lagerwey	1990-1993 J Churms*
1972-1973 AP Fairall*	1994-2005 A Slotegraaf*
1972-1975 RF Hurly	2000- M Soltynski
1975-1978 AD Thackeray*	2006- W Koorts*
1976-1985 RH Stoy*	2011- C Rijdsdijk*
1976-2002 MD Overbeek	2015 L Labuschagne

Production and Distribution

The format of *MNASSA* has been improved over the years. The earlier volumes produced on the duplicator were foolscap-sized but a smaller format was used later, until 1968. At that time the format changed to slightly bigger than A5 and a grey cover was introduced. Later this was changed to green.

The original was typed and the UCT Printing Department lithographed and bound each issue. At some point, possibly when PAT Wild became Editor, Mrs Penny Dobbie, Secretary of the Astronomy Department typed the originals.

In 1974 the headings were generated by a photo typesetting machine and applied to the typewritten text. In 1985 a daisy-wheel printer was used to produce justified text. In 1994 a typesetting programme was introduced. Offset printing continued at UCT Printing Department (later privatised as Koerikai Document Solutions)

The “look” of *MNASSA* changed further over the years. Because of printing limitations, early copies were limited to text, illustrated with graphs and line illustrations. Since 1983, black & white pictures started appearing, initially mostly in the “Centre Piece” section that had been introduced mainly to report

¹ An asterisk denoted that this person was editor for at least some of the time range quoted.

on amateur activities. In February 1986 a yellow cover with a photograph replaced the plain green one then used. In June 1986 Glass and Catchpole wrote a colour pamphlet about SAAO and made its page size similar to that of *MNASSA*, so that it could be included as a “colour supplement”. When Auke Slotegraaf took over editorship in 1994, production was fully computerised and the layout changed to a cleaner, more professional look, with a white cover. Another slight change in layout happened when Willie Koorts assumed editorship in April 2006 and he gave it another facelift in 2013. Since the switch to digital printing in about mid-2010, full colour pictures have been used quite frequently.

PDFs of issues since February 2010 (Vol 69) are available for free download online at www.mnassa.org.za.

At the present time Case Rijdsdijk edits the material received for *MNASSA* and IS Glass formats and prepares the layout in MS WORD. Willie Koorts finalises the material, prepares the PDFs and places the issue on-line. He also advertises when each issue is published.

In spite of the original intention, *MNASSA* has not been published every month but has since the mid-1970s been fairly consistently a bi-monthly, with a few exceptions when production difficulties arose!

International circulation

It is not very clear when *MNASSA* began to circulate internationally but the numbers subscribed to eventually reached about 150. Various people were involved as Business Managers in maintaining the subscribers’ lists which also involved the Treasurer and the Membership secretaries of ASSA. H Krumm, WC Bentley, Cliff Turk, Pat Booth and IS Glass undertook this activity for various lengths of time.

Since becoming on-line only, *MNASSA* is no longer printed and is made available freely on the Internet as described. It is presented in two formats, as a plain PDF and as a version that can be printed on a double-sided printer to form a booklet.

Acknowledgment

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References

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