

Astronomical Society of Australia - President's Report Darling Harbour, Sydney, 21 July 2003

The activities of our Society in the past 12 months have been dominated by the planning, organisation and now participation in the 25th General Assembly of the IAU. The ASA has played a major role in the organisation and management of the General Assembly. As the only widely representative and incorporated Australian astronomical institution sporting an ABN number, the Society had and has financial responsibility for the General Assembly. With the \$2.4M budget vastly out-weighting the resources of our Society, this responsibility weighed heavily on the Council and especially on its office bearers. Fortunately, the SARS epidemic subsided and the war in Iraq was deemed over before people made their final decision about traveling to Sydney and we ended up with over 2000 registered participants. This more than balanced the budget, so instead of having to face the daunting and potentially divisive issue of how to cover a loss, we have the much more pleasant task of deciding how to deal with a modest surplus. The size of the surplus will not be known for several more weeks, but our best estimate at present suggests that, after repayment of the float money to the various institutions, it will be between \$50K and \$100K.

Members of the Society have contributed to the planning and organisation of the General Assembly in many ways. The student volunteers have been ubiquitous and have done an excellent job of helping participants in a myriad of ways from welcoming people at the airport to helping speakers load up their Powerpoint presentations. Many members have contributed to the Astro-Expo, both organising exhibits and manning them. A number of us served on the National Organising Committee for the GA which had a total of 36 meetings over the past three years or so planning all aspects of the GA including the "Associated Events" program. John O'Byrne took special responsibility for overseeing the budget of the GA on behalf of the ASA, an important and sometimes onerous task. Shaun Amy and Vince McIntyre were responsible for the superb internet facilities at the GA. Harry Hyland, John Whiteoak, Ron Ekers, Rachel Webster and I were members of the NOC Executive which met twice monthly and more often in the last month or so and was responsible for most of the decision-making about the organisation of the GA. Finally, I give credit to our conference organisers, ICMS Australasia Pty Ltd, who have shown themselves to be a professional group, capable of bringing off a large and complex meeting. In particular I recognise the tireless efforts of our Conference Manager, Lee Christopher. Without her skill and dedication, the General Assembly certainly would not have run as smoothly as it has.

Another major event this year with a much less desirable outcome was the destruction of much of Mount Stromlo Observatory by the January bushfires. Fortunately no lives were lost, but our hearts went out to those who lost valued possessions and facilities in the fires. The ASA contributed in a small way to overcoming these losses, writing a letter to the Prime Minister in support of rebuilding the facilities and organising a fund to provide direct support to members and students who suffered losses. As our Treasurer, Bruce Dawson, will discuss in more detail, we distributed a total of \$11,600 to two staff members (Mike Bessell and Ken Freeman, both of whom lost their houses) and six students. We also offered a year's free membership of the Society to all students at RSAA.

With the General Assembly now almost behind us, the Society remains in a healthy position, both in terms of number of members and financially. We have just over 400 members, up from 382 last year. This increase includes 15 new student members whom we are very pleased to welcome to the activities of the Society. Each year the Society is able to elect one member or fellow for honorary membership and it is my pleasure to present John O'Byrne with his Certificate of Honorary Fellowship. This recognises many years of service to the Society, including nine years (so far) as one of our two Honorary Secretaries. I should also mention that at its meeting last week Council voted to give Frank Bateson complementary membership of the Society for life. Frank was a

Foundation Member of the ASA and has led the Variable Star Section of the Royal Astronomical Society of NZ for more than 75 years.

This year has also been a big one for our journal, PASA. After more than seven years as Managing Editor, Michelle Storey resigned in March this year to take on other responsibilities at ATNF. During the last couple of years she, in collaboration with the staff of CSIRO Publishing, oversaw the difficult transition to fully electronic publication. The fact that PASA remains in a healthy state with a good subscription base and a full publication schedule after this transition is a tribute to her efforts.

We were fortunate to attract Louise Hartley, currently a post-doc at the Space Telescope Science Institute, to take over the job of managing Editor. Louise has been attending the General Assembly, helping with the ASA/PASA booth at the Exhibition, and will start full-time in October. We welcome her to Australia and to the ASA and urge you all to make her task easier by submitting quality papers to PASA! We thank John Lattanzio, Chair of the PASA Editorial Advisory Committee, for stepping in to bridge the gap between Michelle's departure and Louise's arrival.

The Australian Astronomy website was launched this year after considerable planning and development by Michelle Storey, Cormac Purcell and CSIRO Publishing. Maintenance and development of this site was formerly part of the PASA Managing Editor's job, but with the transition to the new regime this task was split off. We are very grateful to Sarah Maddison for volunteering to take on this job and for her sterling efforts in upgrading the site before production of the CD distributed to General Assembly participants. It is planned that this website will take over the functions of the ASA Newsletter. We thank Sarah and Brad Gibson for producing what was probably the final issue of the Newsletter.

This year the General Assembly has of course subsumed our Annual Scientific Meeting. However, next year things will return to normal. Michael Drinkwater has kindly offered to host the 2004 ASM which will be held on the St Lucia campus of the University of Queensland in the week July 5 – 9. We look forward to this meeting in the exotic north, the first since the 1981 meeting at Noosa Heads. We expect that, as usual, the Harley Wood School, will be held in close association with the ASM.

The ASA awards a number of prizes for work in various aspects of astronomy. The Bok Prize, to reward excellence at the undergraduate level, was this year awarded to Darren Croton of RSAA.

It was my pleasure on Saturday morning to award the David Allen Prize, recognising excellence in communication of astronomy to the general public, to Fred Watson, Astronomer-in-Charge at Siding Spring Observatory. Fred is an expert communicator with two regular radio programs, giver of numerous interviews, writer of librettos, and other activities publicizing astronomy. Of several worthy nominations for this award, I also mention Martin George, who does excellent work, especially in Tasmania, and ABC Science On-line, who are pioneering a new medium for science communication.

We also congratulate Dr A G (Geoff) Fenton who received an AM in the Queen's Birthday Honours for almost 60 years contribution to Cosmic Ray astronomy research.

Unfortunately we were not able to have an Ellery Prize Lecture at its usual place in the ASM this year. We propose to have it later in the year on a suitable occasion, yet to be chosen. However, it gives me great pleasure to acknowledge a generous donation to the Foundation for Advancement of Astronomy by Ben Gascoigne which puts the Ellery Prize on a sound financial footing and allows us to increase the value of the Prize. We hope that others will follow Ben's good example! Donations to the Foundation are tax-deductible and allow us to continue to reward excellence in various aspects of astronomy.

Finally, I would like to thank the retiring members of Council, Mike Bessell (the Immediate Past-President), Matthew Bailes, Jamie Biggs, Brian Schmidt, John Storey and our student representative, Diana Londish, for valued contributions to the Society. Although the incoming members have not yet been announced, I think it is no secret that Anne Green will be our next President and I congratulate her on achieving this high office and wish her well.

R N Manchester

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