

David Dunlap Doings, January 1981

By Helen Sawyer Hogg

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The Stars
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The Astronomy Column in the Toronto Star

On January 10, 1981 I completed thirty years of writing a weekly column on astronomy for the Toronto Star, and my final column appeared on that date. This is an appropriate time to record the history of the column over its nearly forty-one years.

Dr. Peter M. Millman, now of Herzberg Institute of Astrophysics, is really responsible for the existence of the column. As an undergraduate at the University of Toronto, he contributed some 100 weekly columns on astronomy to the Toronto Star before he moved on to Harvard for graduate work. Some years later, after he returned to U. of T. as a staff member, he began writing the column again on May 18, 1940. World War II interrupted his regular life however, and he joined the Royal Canadian Air Force on January 20, 1941, two days after his last column appeared. (Later Millman started on September 15, 1951 a weekly column in the Toronto Telegram which lasted until the Telegram ceased publication October 30, 1971. The last two years of the column were monthly.)

My husband, Dr. Frank Hogg, also in the Department of Astronomy at U. of T., was invited to take over the column and beginning February 1, 1941 wrote it for ten years, until his sudden death on January 1, 1951. At that time, he was Director of the David Dunlap Observatory and head of the Department of astronomy at U. of T. With the sudden loss of the columnist the fate of the column seemed in doubt. Members of the Toronto Centre of the RASC conducted a fervent and energetic letter writing campaign to the Toronto Star suggesting that I be invited to write the column.

My first column, on my husband's work as Director of the Observatory, appeared January 13, 1951. Fred Troyer of The Star had kindly written the column for January 6. The column always appeared in the Saturday paper. In the early days it could be anywhere in the paper, thus competing with the last minute news. For the past decade or so, along with other regular columns, it has been gathered onto the Leisure Page and I could count fairly well on the amount of space I would have.

I always tried to present my readers modern astronomical

discoveries and developments, with special emphasis on Canadian astronomers and their accomplishments. Naturally I had to select subjects which I could handle in about 400 words. (In this kind of writing you can not assume much background knowledge.) By mutual agreement with the editor, once a month I described the sky for the ensuing month. The star maps appeared monthly, bought by The Star from Science Service. After Science Service discontinued making them, we used the bi-monthly set prepared by John Perkins under the auspices of John Percy for the Observer's Handbook.

Apart from the monthly sky column, only once in thirty years has an editor suggested a subject to me. It proved to be a very tough one, so I have been thankful that the editor did not often have this inspiration.

More than 1500 of my columns have appeared in print. In sixteen years out of the thirty the column has appeared every week. In several years the Features Editor was asked to omit different columns on a weekly rotating basis, and this accounts for most of the three dozen weeks that the column did not appear in the thirty years. The other misses were from a variety of causes, - the column was delayed or lost in the mails or lost by the editor.

Only once in the thirty years have I failed to send in the weekly column when The Star expected me to do so. That was on January 12, 1963 when no column appeared. In those years I was being driven hard by various responsibilities, family, teaching, research, organizations and newspaper writing. I decided that the Star column was the activity I could give up. This I did with my column of January 5, 1963 with a farewell to my readers. A week went by and I learned that The Star had not replaced me. Furthermore I had received a flood of touching letters, each one of which made me feel more guilty at abandoning the column. So on January 19, 1963 with a cheerful response to my readers, I resumed the column.

In my final column this year I expressed my appreciation to the editors and to my readers. My by-line would never have lasted thirty years without the interest of my readers. Members of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada have formed a veritable nucleus of support all these years.

The Editors of The Star (for the past decade, Stratton Holland) have usually dealt very gently with the copy submitted. Many of the columns have appeared without so much as a change in punctuation. I never had anything to do with the headlines, - the Star staff always wrote them. A few of these were badly done. For example, on November

17, 1979 the erroneous apostrophe in "Cycle of sunspots could be at it's peak" led my disillusioned readers to send me lessons in grammar.

The material for my column came from many scientific meetings I have attended and from my extensive perusal of all the literature that comes into the David Dunlap Observatory library. The weekly acquisition sheets of this library, so carefully prepared by the librarians, have been of inestimable value to me for the column and continue to be so for my cluster research. Actually the column represents a great deal of work on my part. A year ago I realized that two opposite forces were relentlessly forcing downward my curve of enjoyment of writing the column. These are the incredible explosion of literature and of space astronomy, and my decreasing ability to work very long days. Because of the complexity of modern astronomy the column was demanding more of my working time in absolute hours; because of my decreasing stamina, it was demanding an even greater proportion in relative hours.

It is never easy to come to the end of a good thing. To me, the 30 years made a neat cut-off. On September 11, 1980 I submitted my resignation to the Toronto Star as of January 1981, along with suggestions for new writers of the column. The Star itself is in a changing state, and as of this writing I have been unable to obtain any information as to the continuance of the column.

January 12, 1981

Helen Sawyer Hogg