

another ground: does action follow the discussion? My experience is that, when specific technical problems are identified, they are solved by ESO in relatively short time. When a long-term action or a change in ESO policy are required, or when budget problems are involved, the Users Committee represents only one of a number of steps in the process, and things are obviously not so simple. In my opinion it is widely felt that the role of the U.C. in these circumstances could be better clarified.

In the past, some efforts have been made to improve the work of the U.C. and its effectiveness. It has become customary to have an informal gathering of the national representatives the day before the annual meeting. The issues raised by various members can be compared, and common and general problems can be more easily extracted and presented in the meeting after deeper consideration. Furthermore, it has been realized that pointing out a general problem in a wide, multinational community is often a slow process. Solving the problem can take a long time as

well. The overall process can barely be followed if its typical timescale is longer than the turnover time of the members of the Committee. For this reason it was proposed, and approved by the Director General and by the Council, to extend to four years, that is to four meetings, the term of the members of the U.C.

Looking to the near future, one can foresee several changes in our way of working at the telescopes: key programmes imply a different way of scheduling and using them; the availability of both the 3.6-m and the NTT will permit more flexibility in the instrumentation; remote observing is becoming a real possibility; flexible scheduling is currently proposed, in various observatories, as a way of better exploiting optimum sky conditions. These examples, only a few from a longer list, show a strongly evolving situation. The users can play a critical role in it, providing essential inputs and acting as a feedback. The Users Committee could be an important link in this process. Or, in absence of a continuous pressure from the community of users, it could slip

## Tentative Time-table of Council Sessions and Committee Meetings in 1989

May 2	Users Committee
May 10–11	Finance Committee
May 18–19	Scientific Technical Committee
May 30–31	Observing Programmes Committee
June 5	Committee of Council
June 6	Council
Nov. 13–14	Scientific Technical Committee
Nov. 16–17	Finance Committee
Nov. 30–Dec. 1	Observing Programmes Committee
Dec. 4	Committee of Council
Dec. 5	Council

All meetings will take place at ESO in Garching.

back to a not-very-interesting “safety valve for disgruntled astronomers”. The choice is mostly up to us.

# ESO'S EARLY HISTORY, 1953–1975

## II. SEARCHING FOR A SITE IN SOUTH AFRICA\*

### A. BLAAUW, Kapteyn Laboratory, Groningen, the Netherlands

#### Introduction

Over a time span of more than seven years, with several interruptions from late 1955 to the middle of 1963, young European astronomers and their assistants have been engaged in the search for a site in South Africa. By the end of that time, it became clear that the observatory would not be built on this continent; the South American Andes Mountains offered superior observing conditions.

Does it make sense, then, to devote a full chapter to the South African explorations? It does – not only because we want to do justice to the large effort made by many young astronomers and their assistants, but also because the South African venture was ESO's first exercise in European collaboration.

#### First Impressions

Already in January 1954, at the second meeting of the ESO Committee (henceforth to be denoted by EC), the

“--- observers are on duty from sunset till sunrise ---.”

From André Muller's instructions for the site tests, December 1960.

question of the best site for the observatory was taken up. As I explained in the previous article, the southern part of Africa seemed a natural choice. However, the major observatories in South Africa were all located in, or near, major cities or communities: the Cape Observatory, the Union Observatory – originally only at Johannesburg but later having its field station at nearby Hartbeespoortdam –, the Boyden Observatory near Bloemfontein, and the Radcliffe Observatory near Pretoria. This latter observatory had been created rather recently, in the early 1930's, as a result of the transfer of facilities from Oxford; yet also in this case proximity to a major city had been chosen, even for the planned 74-inch telescope [1].

For ESO, vicinity of a major centre of civilization was not an important criterion, and so, the EC decided to start from scratch. Needed was, of course, a place with a minimum of cloudiness and as free as possible from smoke and sky illumination. Moreover, astronomers

want good “seeing”. By this they mean, that the image of a star as observed in a telescope should show minimum distortion due to turbulence in the earth's atmosphere. This question of “seeing” is explained in some more detail in the box accompanying this article.

Apart from the experience collected over the years by the existing observatories, there was little the EC could go by. There was an interesting report by B.J. Bok of August 1953, dealing with a comparison of conditions at Harvard Observatory's Boyden Station in South Africa and its Agassiz Station in Massachusetts [2], in which Bok drew attention to what seemed to be a general characteristic: “All over the High Veld of South-Africa, with its remarkably clear and pure skies, the seeing deteriorates often about midnight or shortly after, with no recovery before dawn ---. The after-midnight deterioration of seeing happens as well at the Union Observatory in Johannesburg, at the Radcliffe Observatory near Pretoria

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