

# Through My Eyepiece

## Sing we and Chant it!

By Geoff Gaherty, Toronto Centre (geoff@foxmead.ca)

*Sing we and chant it  
while love doth grant it,  
fa la la, etc.*

*Not long youth lasteth,  
and old age hasteth;  
now is best leisure  
to take our pleasure,  
fa la la, etc.*

*All things invite us  
now to delight us,  
fa la la, etc.*

*Hence, care, be packing!  
no mirth be lacking!  
Let spare no treasure  
to live in pleasure,  
fa la la, etc.*

— Thomas Morley

One of my major non-astronomical interests is early music, and this famous madrigal by Thomas Morley has long been a favourite of mine. I thought I would use it as a jumping off point to talk a bit about the Chant Medal, which I was awarded at this year's General Assembly in Toronto.

My first reaction, when I received notification of my award from Peter Jedicke in an email on April 1, was that it had to be an April Fool's joke. I have known a number of Chant Medallists over the years, and I did not feel I belonged in that league.

The Chant Medal was named in honour of Clarence Augustus Chant, who guided the RASC and the University of Toronto's astronomy department through most of the first half of the 20th century. According to our Web site, "This medal is awarded...to an amateur astronomer resident in Canada on the basis of the value of the work carried out in astronomy and closely allied fields of the original investigation...." To me, this description has always implied some sort of major research project, which was why I was puzzled to receive it. In truth, I am something of an astronomical dilettante, dabbling in many different aspects of astronomy. Later Peter J. explained to me that in his view, the Chant is thought of nowadays as a lifetime achievement award.

Receiving the Chant Medal has caused me to reflect on the

Chant Medallists I have known during my life, and how strongly they have influenced me. The first recipient in 1940, a year before my birth, was Bertram J. Topham (1893–1962) of the Toronto Centre.



Figure 1 — Bertram J. Topham at the eyepiece of his refractor.

He was a variable star observer (like me) and used a magnificent 165-mm refractor from his observatory in northwest Toronto. Although I never met him, I spent many evenings observing through his wonderful telescope, which had been purchased by the Montréal Centre a few months before I joined the RASC in 1957. To a teenager with a 4.25-in Newtonian, this was my first close encounter with a *real* telescope! Here is the note in my log of my first visit to the Montréal Centre's observatory on 1957 October 5:

"Tonight I joined the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada for \$2.50 (half year). Very impressed with their 6.5" refractor with drive clock etc...Looked at the Moon through 6.5" and, although the sky was very hazy, image was very good. I will get my *Observer's Handbook* when I go next time as librarian was not there and Mr. DeKinder could

not find a copy. Borrowed copies of July *Sky & Telescope* and January-June *Strolling Astronomer*. Also got a copy of *Skywards* [sic].”

The Mr. DeKinder mentioned was Frank DeKinder (1892–1970), who received the Chant Medal in 1955 for his decades of regular solar observations for the AAVSO. Frank used to live near his work, and would go home for lunch every day to record sunspots. He later went on to become president of the AAVSO.

At the meeting the following Saturday, I met two important members of the Centre who had been down in Cambridge for the AAVSO annual meeting the previous week: Charles M. Good (the missing librarian) and Isabel K. Williamson (1907–2000), the Montréal Centre’s other Chant Medallist and driving force. She had received the Chant Medal in 1948 for her work in organizing and analyzing meteor observations.

Isabel (though none of us ever dared call her anything but “Miss Williamson” to her face) was a “computer” by profession: she was employed in the actuarial department of the Sun Life Assurance Company and spent her working life performing calculations and working with the earliest electronic computers. In astronomy, she was a true “Renaissance woman,” who was an expert in all forms of astronomical observation, and a genius at designing training programs and encouraging beginners. Her most famous contribution to astronomy was her creation of the world’s first Messier Club in the early 1940s.

Here is a photograph taken at a Centre meeting a few weeks before I joined, which brings back warm memories to me of my earliest days at the Montréal Centre:



Frank DeKinder is standing to the left of the blackboard, and George Wedge and Isabel Williamson are standing to the right. Seated around the table are many “regulars” at the Centre’s Saturday night meetings, who would, only a short time later, become some of my closest friends for many years. Frank and Isabel in particular both became mentors to my burgeoning interest in astronomy.

I will return to the subject of later Chanters in my astronomical life in a future column! For the present, I will just add what an incredible honour it is for me to join the “order of the Chant.” ●

*Geoff Gaherty is currently celebrating his 50th anniversary as an amateur astronomer and as the 2008 recipient of the Society’s Chant Medal. Despite cold in the winter and mosquitoes in the summer, he still manages to pursue a variety of observations, particularly of Jupiter and variable stars. Though technically retired as a computer consultant, he is now getting paid to do astronomy, providing content and technical support for Starry Night Software.*

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