

# The Society's "Royal" Charter

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## Abstract

Since early in the last century the Society's "Royal" Charter has figured large in the consciousness of many members. The fact that we are in the select company of institutions enjoying the privilege of using the adjective Royal has been and continues to be a source of pride. This paper recounts the story of how we achieved that distinction, and reproduces our "Royal" charter for the first time in these pages. Given the momentous changes in Society governance currently underway, the present is an opportune time to place our royal appellation in its true context.

## I know a fellow who knows a bloke who saw it

The Archives have received more than a few requests for information on our "Royal" Charter, the most frequent of which is "why have I never seen the original?," or "why is such an important and symbolic document not posted in a prominent place on our website?" These requests seem reasonable, and the mystery surrounding the "Royal" Charter all the less fathomable given the references to it in various RASC publications, both print and electronic.

Dr. A.D. Watson (1859-1926), RASC President in 1916-1917 (Broughton 1994, 101), expressed sadness that long-time member Mungo Turnbull (1817/1825-1902) "...died before the incorporation of the Society under its present *royal charter*" (emphasis mine, as throughout; Watson 1917, 52; Broughton 1994, 101; Barr and Walter Meyer zu Erpen, Watson; on Turnbull, see Rosenfeld 2012, and Rosenfeld & Luton 2012).<sup>1</sup>

At the dedication ceremony for the historic Miller-Brydon refractor after its transport to British Columbia, Eluned Williams recalled to his audience "...that our Society is almost as old as the Dominion of Canada...under Dr. C.A. Chant's fostering aegis it received a *Royal Charter*" (Williams 1950, 182).

The late Jim Low, addressing the 1965 General Assembly, stated that "...the society decided to petition the government for permission to prefix...the word "Royal"...King Edward VII was pleased to grant the request, and on March 3, 1903, the *Royal Charter* was granted" (Low 1965, 267).

In 1990 Minor Planet Circular 16247 announced that asteroid 1982 BQ, discovered by Dr. Edward Bowell, had been named 4113 Rascana (1982 BQ) by the IAU's Committee for Small-Body Nomenclature to honour the RASC, and mark the centenary of the 1890 revival of the Society (Dr. Bowell is now Emeritus Astronomer at the Lowell Observatory, and former director

of the highly productive LONEOS project [Lowell Observatory Near-Earth-Object Search]) . The citation “prepared by the Council of the RASC at the request of the discoverer”, stated that “the RASC received the *Royal Charter* in March 1903” (Schmadel 2012, 330; Tatum 1990a, 233-234; rasc.ca rascana). In relation to that propitious naming, the respected and capable *Journal* editor of the time published a note on the “Royal” Charter (Tatum 1990b, 356-357).

In *Astronomy Canada*, a supplement to the *Journal* published towards the end of 1995, one could read that the Society "received its *Royal Charter* in 1903" (RASC 1995, 40).<sup>2</sup>

The “Royal” Charter statement with the rest of the Rascana citation was reprinted in Dave Lane’s excellent observing proposal to secure more observations of the Society’s asteroid in an effort to improve its ephemeris (Lane 1997, 176—note that Dave highlights Chris Spratt’s efforts in achieving the honour, a fact hidden in earlier publications).

The subject or all these references can be found reproduced in Figure 1. This is the first time the Society’s actual “Royal” Charter has been reproduced in the pages of the *Journal*, or anywhere. RASC members are entitled to print one (1) copy of the charter from the electronic publication, or to cut out the image from the print copy for framing and display. Any RASC member wishing to examine the original in person is welcome to make arrangements to visit the Archives for that purpose.



*Figure 1. The Society’s “Royal” Charter is a document of almost mythic properties. Its wording offers unique scope to the imagination.*

### **Seeing is believing, or so they say**

When the author became RASC Archivist, one of the things he looked forward to was finally setting his eyes on the “Royal” Charter. He vowed that he would have it published, and proudly placed on rasc.ca for all to see. A minor problem was soon encountered in his quest, however. That problem is obvious from even the most cursory glance at Figure 1.

There is no "Royal" Charter. In fact, there never was one.

We are, nonetheless, the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada, and have been legally entitled to that name since 1903.

In the listing of RASC publications referring to the “Royal” Charter, two noted authorities are missing. That fact should have been a clue to those who wrote as if the “Royal” Charter was a reality, that they themselves required a reality check—as did the present writer when he became

Archivist. Neither C.A. Chant in his manuscript autobiography, nor R. Peter Broughton in the authorized history of the Society, make any reference to a “Royal” Charter (Chant 1950, 289; Broughton 1994, 5). The wonder is that A.D. Watson, a man who was prominent in the Society when it became Royal in 1903, and who ascended to the Presidency thirteen years later, should have fallen under the spell of the desire for a “*Royal*” Charter (Watson 1917, ix). That a Society member, Eluned Williams, three decades later would refer to Chant as the man who made the “Royal” Charter happen is highly ironic, particularly given Chant’s scrupulousness in that regard, and the fact that he was still very much alive in 1950!

### **The true story, please**

On 1903 January 3 a petition was addressed to “His Excellency [Lord Minto<sup>3</sup>] the Governor General of the Dominion of Canada” by The Astronomical Society of Canada, which

“...has instructed its Council to solicit from His Majesty the King [Edward VII] the privilege of prefixing to that new name the word “Royal;” for your Petitioner believes that such gracious permission would strongly stimulate its efforts in the promotion and diffusion of Astronomical Science and that its influence in this direction would be greatly extended thereby throughout His Majesty's Dominions,¶ YOUR PETITIONER [*i.e.*, the Astronomical Society of Canada] THEREFORE PRAYS that Your Excellency may be pleased to lay at the foot of the Throne this its humble prayer for the privilege of prefixing the word “Royal” to its name” (Harvey 1904, xiii).

At the time Robert Frederick Stupart (1857-1940, knighted 1916), director of the Toronto Magnetic and Meteorological Observatory, was Society President, and John Robinette Collins (1865-1957) was Secretary (Broughton 1994, 3, 71).

Their prayer was answered with considerable dispatch by a letter addressed to Stupart:

“OTTAWA, 27th February, 1903. ¶ Sir, Referring to the recent petition of the Toronto Astronomical Society of Toronto to be allowed to use the prefix “Royal,” I have now the honour to inform you that the Governor General has received a despatch from the Secretary of State for the Colonies [the Rt. Hon. Joseph Chamberlain<sup>4</sup>] acquainting His Excellency that His Majesty the King has been graciously pleased to grant permission to the Toronto Astronomical Society to adopt the title of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada.¶ I have the honor [sic] to be, Sir, Your obedient servant, JOSEPH POPE, UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE” (Harvey 1904, xiii).

It was the King’s assent to our petition which made it possible for us to call ourselves “Royal,” rather than the issuing of any document, and that act was signalled, not through a formal Royal charter, but rather by a letter addressed to the Governor General from the Secretary of State for

the Colonies. It was not a letter the RASC was to see. The King's will was conveyed to us in a further letter from the Dominion of Canada's Under-Secretary of State, Joseph Pope (1854-1926, knighted 1912).

It is possible that the influence of that particular civil servant was crucial to the success of our petition, for Joseph Pope was a long-time amateur astronomer and member of the Society (Pope 1960, 18, 120, 289; Waite, Pope). And Pope was influential. From 1882 (the year of the transit of Venus) to the death of Sir John A. Macdonald in 1891 he was the Prime Minister's Private Secretary, and afterwards became his official biographer. Serving as Under Secretary of State, Deputy Registrar General, and Assistant Secretary to the Alaska Boundary Tribunal at the time of the Society's petition, he was arguably the most capable and experienced senior civil servant in the Dominion.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, the original of his letter does not appear to be extant in our Archives. That we know its exact content is due to the fact that it was published in the contemporary predecessor to the *Journal*.

One further step was necessary to give the new name, the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada, legal force: "Application was thereupon made to the Hon. the Chief Justice of the Common Pleas Division of the High Court of Justice for Ontario [Sir William Ralph Meredith, 1840-1923], to sanction the change of the title of the Society" (Harvey 1904, xiii; Dembski, Meredith). This was duly done on 1903 March 3.

1903 March 3 was also the night of the regular meeting of the Society at which the successful completion of the business was formally reported to the membership:

"The President [Stupart] announced that the petition to his Majesty the King praying that this Society be granted the privilege of using the prefix "Royal" to its name had been graciously ~~//// acceded to~~ acceded to and that the Society will now be known as "the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada.[]" ¶Official Letters conveying this information were read from the Hon[.] R.W. Scott[,1825-1913, knighted 1909] Secretary of State[,] and Joseph Pope[,] Under Secretary of State[,] Ottawa[;] also the necessary legal confirmation of the same by his Lordship Chief Justice Meredith[.]" (RASC 1903, *n.p.*; Clarke, Scott).

The Society's minutes provide the only evidence that a letter from Pope's superior, Scott, was also received by the Society, but as it too is no longer extant, its exact wording is unknown. It is curious that Scott's letter is not referred to in the published account of the meeting (Harvey 1904, xi-xiv).

The statement in *Looking Up* of what actually took place is succinct, highly accurate, and definitive (Broughton 1994, 5). Upon publication it ought to have put an end to any misapprehensions that we had received a "Royal" Charter. It didn't, though. This present attempt

will prove no more successful. The RASC “Royal” Charter is fully analogous to the fictitious knighting of the Rev’d Dr. Edmund Halley (Rosenfeld & Edgar 2010). Expectation, nescience, and desire will undoubtedly ensure that the myth of the RASC “Royal” Charter will never die.

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<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of the present, Watson appears a most curious figure to head a nationally significant scientific society. From that perspective his profession was admittedly unobjectionable; a licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, he was a successful fixture in Toronto's medical establishment for decades. Flourishing in the generation after the "Confederation Poets," he had a reputation as a serious versifier with a turn for romantically nationalistic verse tinged with mysticism, but a poetic inclination would hardly seem a bar to the fulfillment of such an avocational office, then or now. It was Watson's taste for spiritualism which makes him seem odd today. From 1918 to the early 1920s, he was a leader in Toronto's psychic community—a period which followed immediately on the end of his term as Society President. Would this combination of interests—astronomy and spiritualism—have seemed as strange now as in the period after the Great War? Probably not; the physicist Sir Oliver Lodge (1851-1940; Kant 2007), the great astronomical dynamicist Admiral Simon Newcomb (1835-1909; Moyer 1992, 166-182), and the noted astronomy populariser Camille Flammarion (1842-1925; de La Cotardière & Fuentes 1994) all dabbled to varying degrees in spiritualism. It was, as it were, in the air, although it would be surprising if there were not members of the RASC who considered such interests *outré*, or worse.

<sup>2</sup> For those unaware of this shard of Society history, *Astronomy Canada* was floated as a rebranding and reformatting of the Journal. It was one of the sequellae of the revolt of the young Turks crusading under the millenarian name RASC 2000. The millennium has come and gone, the revolutionaries are no longer young, and the Journal's ancient name has endured; *fugit irreparabile tempus, nova dum capti circumvectamur insipientia*.

<sup>3</sup> Lord Minto does not appear to have had a particular passion for astronomy, although he did support progressive education in Canada and some Canadian scientific endeavours; Miller, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Minto.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Chamberlain (1836-1914), was Secretary of State for the Colonies from 1895 June 29 to 1903 September 16. He was the father of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, notorious for his role in the Munich agreement on the eve of WWII.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Briggs has pointed out that Pope was responsible in 1909 for the Society *removing* the crown from our seal, it being his (Pope's) personal opinion that although we were now a Royal Society, we had not been authorized to assume the device of the crown, and therefore its appearance on our seal was "improper." A motion of Council on 1909 March 9 removed the crown from the seal, and a subsequent motion of Council on 1909 April 27 ordered the seal re-cut and the crown replaced with a star at a cost of \$2. Mr. Briggs has established that the crown returned to our seal Crown during the winter of 1915-1916, just in time for the Battle of the Somme, and quite reasonably speculates that the return of the crown was a pro-Unionist measure in the year before the 1917 "conscription" election; private communications of 2013 May 21 & 25.