

Biographical sources for 20th century astronomers and astrophysicists

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Biographical data are needed in a large variety of history of astronomy studies. For these, information not only about outstanding scientists but also about all other contributors to astronomy and astrophysics has to be retrieved. The usual sources like major encyclopaedias and biographical dictionaries of science are often not very helpful, because the number of persons covered by these is rather limited. However, there are many special sources containing biographical data for thousands of 20th century astronomers and astrophysicists: national, regional and special biographical dictionaries (general, of astronomy, of related fields, and of science in general); biographical appendices to books on history of astronomy; obituaries, biographies, papers on history of astronomy, personal notes, interviews, and data on authors (in journals, newsletters, newspapers, and books); membership directories of societies; annual reports of institutions and societies; Who's Who of science and in general; World Wide Web; and others.

The problem is, however, how to find these “hidden” sources. The main bibliographic compilations of astronomy (Astronomischer Jahresbericht, Astronomy and Astrophysics Abstracts, Astrophysical Data System) list only a minor part of the sources mentioned above. There are at least three online bio-bibliographical inventories [1–3] and a WWW link list [4] directing to biographical sources for several thousand 20th century astronomers. Nevertheless, the majority of sources is not covered by these.

To solve this problem to a certain extent, we compiled a “Biographical Index of Astronomy” [5], listing at least one biographical or bio-bibliographical source for more than 16,000 persons with relation to astronomy. Besides astronomers and astrophysicists, it includes also: other staff members of observatories and astronomical institutes; amateur astronomers; historians of astronomy and general historians, philologists, etc. with publications in history of astronomy; scientists from related fields (physicists, mathematicians, geodesists, geologists, meteorologists, etc.), who made astronomical research or popularised astronomy; pioneers of space flight (among these, e.g., the first rocketry engineers and the first astronauts in the Moon); instrument and globe makers; patrons of astronomy; science managers with important influence on astronomy; musicians, artists and writers, who worked on astronomical themes and did astronomical studies for this. Although the Index covers all times from ancient to modern, a very large part concerns 20th and 21st century astronomers.

We used mainly sources in German and in English, but also single works in Czech, Estonian, French, Hungarian, Italian, Russian, Spanish, and partially in other languages. Also the use of large dictionaries of science guarantees the internationality of this Index. German sources are indexed more completely than others, so that persons from German-speaking countries are present disproportionately, but none of the outstanding astronomers of the past from other regions of the world is likely to be missing. It should be mentioned, however, that a great number of today's astronomers is not listed, because dictionaries of the Who's Who type have not yet systematically indexed by us, and naturally also because biographical data have not yet been published for many of our contemporaries.

The paper will describe this Biographical Index, outline future prospects and give recommendations how to handle biographical information. We would also like to encourage historians of astronomy to compile further national, local and special biographical dictionaries as well as additional bio-bibliographies.

References:

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- [3] Krisciunas, Kevin: Name Index to Sky & Telescope, <http://www.nd.edu/~kkrisciu/st.html>
- [4] Dick, Wolfgang R.: History of Astronomy: Persons, http://www.astrohist.org/hist_ast/ha_pers.html
- [5] Brüggenthies, Wilhelm; Dick, Wolfgang R.: Biographischer Index der Astronomie / Biographical Index of Astronomy. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Harri Deutsch, 2005 (Acta Historica Astronomiae, vol. 26)