Perspectives from the Directors General, Past and Present

ADRIAAN BLAAUW, ESO Director General, 1970–1974

Reflections on ESO, 1957–2002

Nearly half a century ago, I witnessed Walter Baade and Jan Oort dreaming of a joint enterprise which would lift observational astronomy in Europe from the level of their modest national efforts to that of the leading observatories in the United States. I have been privileged to see, and to have been able to contribute to, the realization of that dream. This half century has left a wealth of recollections and sentiments from which it is difficult to select for this occasion.

My direct involvement with ESO began in 1958, upon my return from the US where I had lived in the years 1953–1957. Seventeen years later, in December 1974, I concluded my five-year term as Director General. I was slightly involved as a Council member for the Netherlands in the late 1970's and early 1980's, but became pretty deeply involved again when I started writing ESO's history, which first appeared as installments in the *Messenger* in the years 1988–1991 and then as my book *ESO's Early History* of 1991.

When, in 1953, I left for the States, I had earlier that year witnessed the first moves toward establishing a joint European observatory at the occasion of IAU Symposium No.1. This led to the "declaration of intent" signed in January 1954 by astronomers from Belgium, France, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (it has been reproduced on pages 2 and 3 of my book). However, by 1957, little progress had been made, mainly due to the great difficulties encountered in obtaining the governments' agreement and financial support. These efforts continued and led to the signing of the Convention in September 1962. (By that time the UK had dropped out, Denmark was about to join.) But, behind this simple statement lie that immense patience and perseverance of ESO's founding fathers. It should not be forgotten by today's students of astronomy.

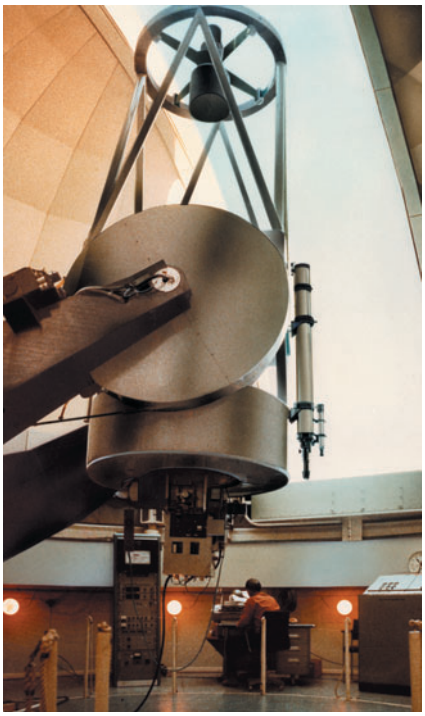
In search of a site, 1963.

Meanwhile, I had become a sort of Executive Secretary of the ESO Committee (the precursor of Council) and in this capacity became deeply involved in the organization of ESO's site testing expeditions, first for several years in the South African desert, and then briefly in Chile until, in November 1963, ESO resolved to settle in the Andes. Satisfaction about this excellent choice by ESO is mixed with the recollection of the devotion to the cause of ESO on the part of all those who in South Africa, so remote from home and European culture, devoted years of effort and time to our cause.

My involvement was renewed when, from January 1968, I became Scientific

La Silla before…

… and after.

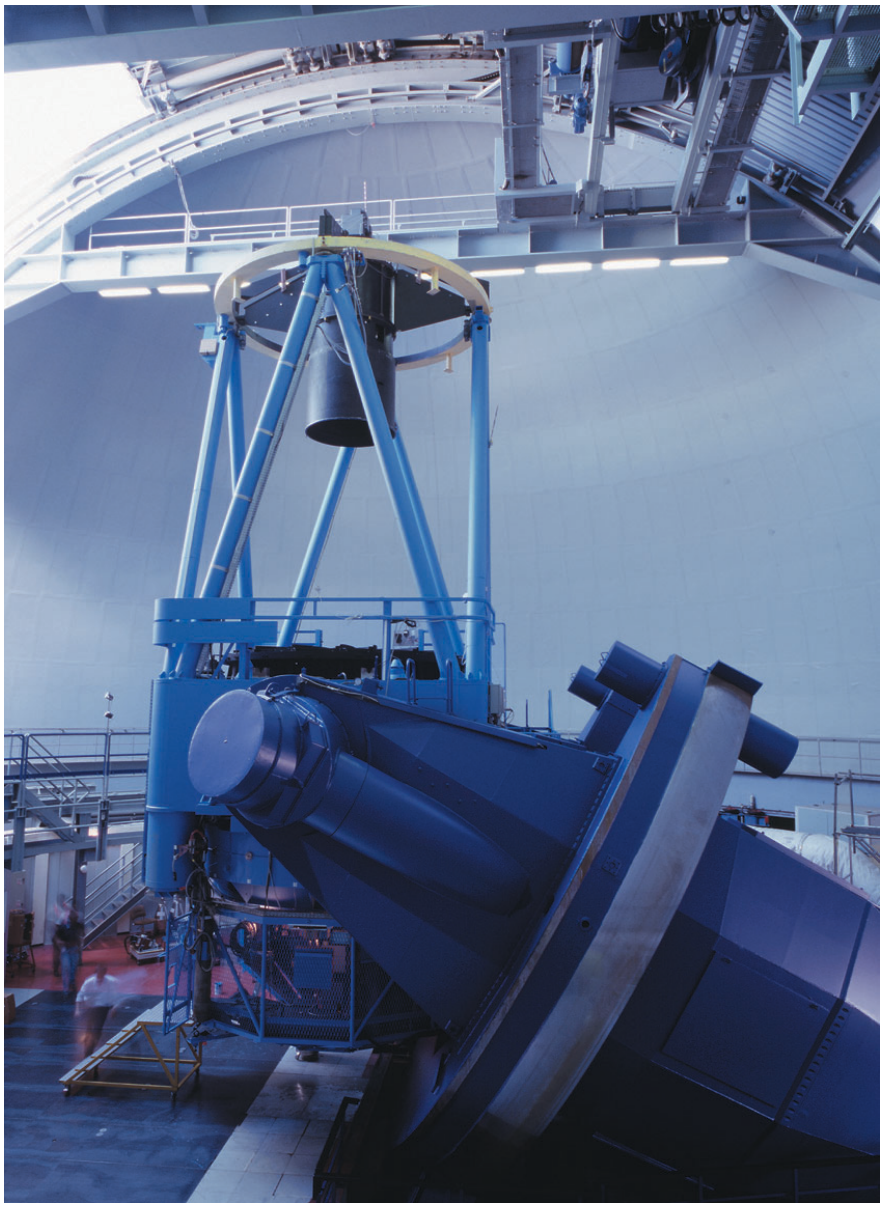


The 1-metre Photometric Telescope started operating in 1966.

Director of ESO, formally for half of my time, but in practice soon for a larger share. While ESO's first General Director, Otto Heckmann continued his efforts to complete ESO's instrumentation programme as outlined in the Convention and with administrative and personnel matters, my task was to initiate the scientific work, i.e. the observational programmes with the telescopes that had become operational. Principal among these were the 1,52-m "Spectrographic telescope" and the 1-m "Photometric Telescope". In March, 1969 ESO dedicated, on La Silla, the completion of this "First Phase". It crowned an effort to which both Chilean and European staff in Chile had essentially contributed, for some of them not without considerable personal sacrifice under very demanding conditions.

When, two years later, Heckmann retired, I was appointed his successor for a term of five years. There was no mistake about my principal assignment: realizing the main telescope project and the Schmidt telescope. These two projects, unfortunately, had been lagging far behind schedule. Whereas Heckmann had admirably and successfully laid the foundations for ESO with all its political and logistic aspects, he had not succeeded on these two topics, and serious doubts had begun to arise among the supporting governments. In retrospect, we know that the scope of a project of this size was far beyond what collective experience of European astronomy had learned to handle. We had to call on those scientists and engineers used to tackling projects of a size comparable to our big telescope in costs and engineering challenge, whatever the nature of the instrument. When I reflect on my years as DG, I realize how fortunate we were to be able to engage in a collaboration with CERN for our Telescope Project, on the CERN premises near Geneva. By the time I handed ESO over to my successor Lodewijk Woltjer, the 3.6-m telescope was nearing completion. In another respect our collaboration with CERN was equally successful. After ESO's Schmidt telescope project had also been reorganized and successfully put into operation – an accomplishment inconceivable without the perseverance and patience of some of my close collaborators – we could establish on CERN premises our unique Photographic Laboratory, capable of undertaking the extremely demanding job of producing the Sky Atlas for ESO and for the UK Schmidt. It is, to me, a source of great satisfaction that these two essential parts of the ESO programme made such excellent progress during my directorate. But perhaps even more fundamental, I believe that by the end of my term, those gnawing doubts that marked its beginning had been removed and ESO had won the full confidence of the funding governments.

Of course, many more recollections come to my mind, too many to dwell upon within this limited space. I feel happy to have contributed, through ESO's status and its administrative services, to the creation of *Astronomy and Astrophysics*, a European Journal, in 1969. And last, but not least, I feel proud to have initiated half a year before my retirement as DG, the *ESO Messenger* – at that time meant as a means to promote communication between ESO's various departments – now serving the astronomical community at large.



The 3.6-metre telecope, completed in 1976.