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should be made public  
only ten (10) years after my death.

F{PM}<sup>2</sup> v.2026.5.15

# **Ferocious Post-Mortem Professional Memories**

**meant for historians of astronomy**



**by**

**André Heck**



*Fig. 2: The astronomer and the Big Bear (Oregon, 22 September 2006).*

# Foreword to these Ferocious Post-Mortem Professional Memories

*I don't care if it's reviewed and I don't expect it to sell.  
I'm only printing enough copies to send to my friends [...]  
I'm only writing it to get all that material out of the way,  
and I'm publishing it because I think you can only tell  
what a thing's like when you see it in print.  
(Somerset Maugham, *The Razor's Edge*, 1944)*

On 20 September 1946, rocks from the US side of the Niagara Falls crumbled, making the headlines the next day all over the world (Fig. 3). Would adepts of the Butterfly Effect connect this with the birth – the same day – of a boy in a remote house of a remote village on the Belgian marshy High-Plateaux<sup>1</sup>? The 30y-old parents had waited for the end of WWII to get married and to start building a family.

Well, I might prefer a link with the opening, that very 20 September 1946, of the first Cannes International Film Festival. This would better fit a collection of several thousands recorded films I am currently holding at home.

A few days later, there would also be the *rebirth* of a “very Belgian<sup>2</sup>” character, Tintin, born initially on 10 January 1929 under the pencil of Cartoonist Georges Rémi using the pen name Hergé<sup>3</sup>. This character of a traveling reporter would be reborn on 26 September 1946 in the first issue of a periodical, the *Journal de Tintin*, a weekly magazine gathering together quite an assemblage of graphic heroes.

Tintin's adventures, especially “Objectif Lune” [Destination Moon] in 1950 and “On a marché sur la Lune” [Explorers on the Moon] in 1952 definitely fueled my appetite for space ventures and for what was happening “up there”.

My youth was a “no frills” one: countryside village, very modest family, no running water, no central heating, toilet in the garden, walking in wooden clogs or hand-made studded shoes, electricity sometimes not available in cold and snowy winters.

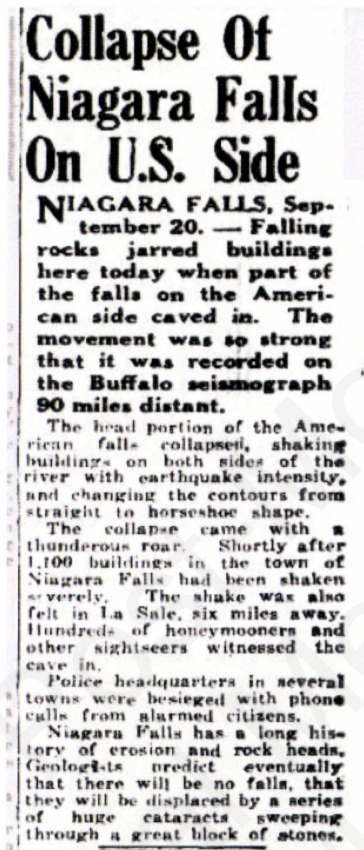
But the environment was fantastic: hilly fields, deep forests, marshy plateau, all then fully accessible, and wildlife all around. I was born in this, I found it “normal”. But it was a real treasure that city children ignored, even if they were from wealthier families and playing with sophisticated toys.

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<sup>1</sup>Fig. 7, 6 & 440.

<sup>2</sup>As qualified by Pierre Assouline in “Hergé” (Éd. Plon, Paris, 1996, 463 pp., ISBN 2-25918104X).

<sup>3</sup>Made of his initials R & G pronounced French-wise.



*Fig. 3: The collapse of part of Niagara Falls on 20 September 1946 made next-day headlines at the other side of the world as illustrated in this excerpt of the "The Barrier Miner", a daily newspaper published in Broken Hill (New South Wales).*

Nowadays the village is substantially different<sup>4</sup> and my past paradise is not so open anymore. The strong increase of population, the reign of motor vehicles, the always denser web of paved roads and freeways, the sudden universality of information networks coupled to the touristic massive wave and the large availability of free time, all this triggered invasions incompatible with a healthy preservation of nature in the area, in turn leading to access regulations.

What a difference today with what I knew in infancy! Scarce traffic, practically no light at night. Total immersion in Nature, on ground and in sky. And a lot of questions from a kid eager to discover world and cosmos beyond what comic books, no-nonsense peasants and those great countryside teachers could answer.

Good studies and opportunities brought me to a career in astronomy. I always had a certain idea of that science and of what it could mean for understanding the place and rôle of man in the universe.

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. Publ. 1231.



*Fig. 4: Taken on 14 June 2019, this picture shows the rented so-called Vicar House (left, longest part, with the door and five windows) where I lived from 01 May 1950 till 01 May 1956, at what time my parents moved into their own newly built house (cf. Fig. 7). There was no tree on the left, then the kitchen garden, lower than the road. A stream was flowing along its other edge, flooding sometimes the house basement. This residence saw the awakening of an innocent infant to many things feeding his imagination. My first puppet shows were played for the other kids on the doorsteps (cf. Publ. 866 & 971). The traffic was so scarce that we were allowed to walk alone to the school (Fig. 10) and to use the street as a sledding slope in Winter (cf. Publ. 889). It was still a dirt road when we moved in and I saw its first asphalt surfacing, still remembering the gravel smell and the tar fumes. All in all, I have mostly pleasant memories from that area, before a much more complicated adolescence in a conflicting family context at the next residence (cf. pp. 20 & 29). See also pp. 461ff. That picture has become historical as the road and space in the foreground have been recently modified.*

Thus, within the boundary conditions met along a complicated life, I did my best to serve a professional community and its links with the society at large.

But this was not always easy.

Praising comments about my publishing production<sup>5</sup>, my activities in favor of the Liège Astronomical Society<sup>6</sup>, the IUE satellite<sup>7</sup>, and even Strasbourg Observatory<sup>8</sup>, are in stark contrast with the difficulties created by my last successors as Directors of the latter place<sup>9</sup> and with the lack of recognition for what I did to the benefit of CDS<sup>10</sup>.

Let's face it: did I waste my life in astronomy, and especially in the French astronomical system? This was suggested by the title of Joe Hube's book<sup>11</sup> and supported by the unpleasant working conditions described in his volume for the last period – faithful to the truth and actually often tuned down courteously by the author.

Did I make the wrong choice when I decided to come to France after my term with ESA in Spain, when I had other work offers based on my qualifications? The idea crossed my mind, more and more frequently, more and more insistently during my last professional years at Strasbourg Observatory.

The historian will find a complex and detailed answer in the following pages and especially in my own epilogue (pp. 435ff).



These memories aim at contributing from actual experiences to the hidden history of professional astronomy, as an insider, with subjectivity and partial views reduced as much as feasible at this stage.

Hube shaped his book with the hope that it could be an incentive for scientists to share their professional memories. The current volume should be seen as a complement along those lines.

Hube departed from my professional file in the French system, a document generally entitled *Titres et Travaux* that astronomers have to provide regularly for evaluation and – in the best cases – for career progress. Hube expanded it to include various pieces such as that infamous exchange when one of my successors at the directorship of Strasbourg Observatory attempted to shorten my career (pp. 405ff).

I started from Hube's compuscript and inserted within his original text – in brown and signaled by a bar in the left margin for most of them – plenty of additions: facts, anecdotes, comments, etc., including some thousand footnotes, in brown too.

<sup>5</sup>E.g. "most published author in the history of astronomy" (Kurtz, p. 819).

<sup>6</sup>E.g. "renewal" (Gabriel, p. 129), "beginning of modern era" (Lausberg, p. 107).

<sup>7</sup>E.g. "most experienced" (Fitton, p. 153), "exceptional services" (ESA, Fig. 507).

<sup>8</sup>E.g. "done more than anyone else" (Florsch, p. 268).

<sup>9</sup>See for instance the various incidents mentioned in the last three chapters (pp. 301ff, 341ff & 395ff), topped by the section on my retirement (pp. 405ff).

<sup>10</sup>Cf. pp. 232ff, as well as the General Index under "CDS ▷ Lack of recognition".

<sup>11</sup>Hube, J. 2016, *45 Years of Heck in Professional Astronomy*, Venngest, Duttlenheim, iv + 638 pp. (ISBN 978-2954267739 – Fig. 5). "Heck" is an euphemism for "Hell" ... and a pun with my name.

With their text equally in brown, beyond the present *Foreword*, several new sections were implemented: my own *Epilogue* (pp. 435ff), 14 appendices including one with comments on a few individuals (pp. 567ff), and a list of post-retirement publications (pp. 963ff)<sup>12</sup>.

Private considerations were provided only for clarification or for throwing some light on the background of an event or a situation, and mostly keeping for myself the personal feelings triggered by some behaviors.

The number of illustrations is more than doubled, the new ones having their captions also in brown. Photographs of large colloquia and conferences, too crowded for identifying people properly, were avoided. When not personal ones, pictures were provided to me with an explicit authorization of usage or were downloaded from the web whenever reputed from the public domain.

As in Hube's volume, pointers allow to navigate to other parts of the book. Exhaustive indices were recompiled, also covering the complements. I am quite conscious that all this is making up a big and dense book, but it does not really matter since its availability should be mainly electronic through a searchable pdf file.



Given a few unflattering facts and comments involving some characters, this book should be circulated only well after my death. By then, most of the people mentioned will be gone too. Such a delay should also help readers, perusers, and especially historians, to view things in a more adequate light. It takes always some time for historians to state things in a proper perspective, *i.e.* as objectively as possible in their context.

In a few instances, the real life was quite different from what outsiders perceived. Hence why not tell the truth, describing the actual background and the motivations behind some behaviors? I was as precise as possible, especially in dates and chronology. As Hube did, I relied on facts as documented in my archives.

The reader fond of anecdotes will find many in the added material, but I refrained from being too intimate or salacious, such as talking about drinking or sexual habits. Of course, some gossipmongers might be keen to know who could be that astronomer usually getting drunk with red wine while lunching and cursing at the waitress in a place near the *Ponts Couverts* in Strasbourg. Or who could be that lady screwing whoever she could, but unable to reach the nirvana without self-help and in some specific positions.

No, nothing of the kind, even if such behaviors had a definite impact on the career of those characters as well as of the persons they happened to interact with.



My purpose was always to work for the benefit of the world-wide astronomical community. While in France during the last professional decades, I did consistently what I was initially hired for: let the system take advantage of my expertise.

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<sup>12</sup>As in Hube's book, due to their grouping in thematic sections, the numbering of publications is not necessarily chronological: thus Publ. 569 (2014) is listed before Publ. 570 (1967).

Besides, in the now fashionable international statistics of publications, the country could *ipso facto* include the tens of books and the hundreds of papers I produced during my French period, not to forget the databases I maintained (cf. pp. 452ff).

Paradoxically, the relevance of all this was much better perceived by foreign peers – as shown for instance by the wide range of top-level international contributors to my books – while quite a few French colleagues contemptuously declined the opportunity to be part of a prize-winning venture such as the OSA/OPSA volumes.

Once hampered by my disability, all I wanted was to be left doing quietly my job as I thought it best in my condition – all the more since my hiring into the French system was unconditional (cf. pp. 185ff). I was also financing my activities, including trips and material, out of my salary. This was apparently too much for some little aspiring kings succeeding me as Directors of Strasbourg Observatory since they took counterproductive measures as detailed in the last chapters of the book.



After more than thirty years spent in the French astronomical system, I cannot escape the feeling that its decision bodies have been manned by an always larger number of immature people, not up to exercising properly the responsibilities put in their hands, even less to handle the human component. It also baffled outside observers when the French astronomical professional society bestowed its scientific prize to a public entertainer<sup>13</sup>.

Beyond strong coteries and networks of graduates from elite schools promoting each other, and protecting each other's back from outsiders, foreigners who contemplate moving to France should also be aware of heavy administrative structures, never willing to recognize their possible mistakes, with no-one taking responsibility for them. On top of these are reigning the fiscal services, practicing bad faith whenever it suits them.

I repeat: as described in the following pages, nobody was responsible, nobody apologized, nobody was punished for the administrative blunders I experienced in France<sup>14</sup>. And finding – at a reasonable price – a reliable and honest lawyer willing to ensure an efficient representation is not obvious (cf. pp. 745ff).

Because of my short career in France, part of my salary was also devoted to build up a decent retirement scheme. But the taxes collected on the rents were significantly increased by the recent economic policies of the country, on top of freezing for years the global amount in a context of an always higher cost of living and the return of inflation – leading to a steady depreciation of the money received monthly.

Anyone not feeling like coping with all this should better think twice before coming to France as a quick improvement is unlikely.

André Heck,  
May 2026.

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<sup>13</sup>Alexandre Astier, in June 2016.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. entries under “Blunders” in the General Index – humiliating situations for a handicapped scientist who decided to devote all his time and financial resources to his research and publishing activities.

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