

Impressions of Parkes 1968/69

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Dick and I travelled to the Radio Telescope in November 1967 so Dick could talk to founding Director, John Bolton, about becoming a radio astronomer.

As we drove out from the town of Parkes towards the telescope in the early evening, we suddenly realised we could see lights ahead and in on the right. "That must be it." Its huge size became more and more evident the closer we got. We had not appreciated just how big it was, and how impressively it dominates the farming landscape it sits in.

Our welcome at the Quarters from John Bolton was warm. We enjoyed the first of many amazing evening meals cooked by the staff, and learnt that he had given us his own room for our stay. It was the only one with private facilities and was a very special and kind gesture, typical of the man we came to know well and admire.

Next morning we toured the telescope, the site, and associated workshops and then sat around the table on the ground floor of the telescope with everyone for morning tea. It was here that John Bolton spelt out Dick's options for becoming a radio astronomer, as he has described so many times over the years. By the end of that morning tea, Dick had been offered and had accepted a position, initially to program the telescope's first computer, and in the process to work with astronomers and learn the ropes. The future pattern of our lives had been set.

In February 1968 we moved to Parkes so Dick could commence work. John and Letty Bolton invited us to stay in their house on Clarinda Street while we got settled and looked for somewhere of our own. They were overseas. Part of the deal was that we would look after their cat Sweetiepie, who only ate lamb's kidneys from the best butcher in town. She (the cat) was in the habit of leaving her meat and milk until it had "matured" and, as it was regularly 35°C or higher both inside and out, I remember vividly the sight and smell of curdled milk and rancid kidney. A little later we moved into our own flat in town.

At the time I was completing an MSc, in the throes of writing up my thesis, but once that was out of the way, I began to work part-time as a research assistant at the telescope. I worked with various people, including John Bolton himself, in particular on colouring in the map of the Galaxy that featured in Nigel Calder's "Violent Universe" (TV program and book), and with Miller Goss, measuring flux densities of southern Galactic sources. Also at the telescope were other young astronomers, mostly PhD students, including Canadian astronomer, Jasper Wall, who, with Miller Goss and his wife Libby, became lifelong friends.

In March 1969 we moved to Sydney, in preparation for travel in July to the US where Dick would take up a two-year post-doc position at the National Radio Observatory in Charlottesville, Virginia. I continued to work part-time as a research assistant with Miller at the Lab in Marsfield.

My main impression of that time is of the easy-going and egalitarian nature of the culture at the telescope. Of course there were those in charge, but overall it didn't matter what your role was, astronomer or technician, research assistant or housekeeper/cook, young or old, graduate or not, everyone mucked in, everyone had their say, everyone's contribution was recognised – it wasn't just your qualifications that counted, rather your ability to contribute – and practical skills were as valued as theoretical ones. It was still possible then to enter the field of radio astronomy by the back door, so to speak. There were famous people and local characters. It was a wonderful place to work where you felt you played a small part in the development of radio astronomy.