



StarGAZER

After a career spent at the Smithsonian Institution and at NASA, George S. Robinson offers a no-holds-barred take on how to get space law back on solid ground

George S. Robinson has always charted his own path. The first person to graduate with a DCL from the Faculty's Institute of Air and Space Law (IASL), Robinson later became legal counsel at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. In Montreal with his wife, Ann, for an IASL conference this past May, he sat down with Focus Law to talk about the connections between evolutionary biology and space law.

How did you become interested in air and space law?

Because I was afraid of flying! I overcame the fear by earning my pilot's license while at the University of Virginia School of Law in the 1960s. I would fly male classmates to a couple of local all-women's colleges for quick dates. Compensation helped pay my law-school tuition.

After law school, I worked with the Federal Aviation Agency's Office of the General Counsel in Washington. About two years into the job, I met George Gleason and Steven Doyle, who also had attended McGill's Institute of Air and Space Law. They convinced me to apply to the Institute. So, I trekked to Montreal with my wife Ann and completed the LLM degree in 1967. We later attended McGill again to earn my DCL in 1970.

What was life like as a student here?

The second time around, Ann and I rented a reasonably decent apartment on Milton Street, but student living in those days was tough ... we had very little money, it was a particularly cold winter, and we couldn't afford much in the way of food. Eating out meant going someplace on the outskirts of the city and buying a hot dog with



all the free trimmings ... and indigestion. To splurge for dessert, we walked down to a local drug store off Sherbrooke for chocolate caramel turtles. Two for 50 cents.

We made many good friends both times we were in residence. In between, I worked for the FAA, and then NASA after my DCL residency.

That must have been an exciting time to be at NASA!

Yes. I was there when Apollo 11 landed on the moon, and worked on collaborative space programs with five nations, including Canada. I remember having to answer endless letters of congratulations sent to NASA and the U.S. from people around the world, and being asked to respond to many of the letters sent personally to aerospace engineer and space architect Dr. Wernher von Braun.

Some of the most philosophically articulate letters of congratulation and explanation of what the Apollo 11 was really all about came out of remote tribal areas in Africa, as well as from average citizens of India, Pakistan, remote areas of Latin America, and the like.

In the United States, we had very good scientists, engineers, economists, and financial management types, but very few who gave any serious thought to the philosophy—very few who were willing to say that space migration generally is an integral survival component of all biology, and that space migration ultimately is critical for survival of humankind.

I'm an evolutionary biologist, both by training and interest. That is what I studied at Bowdoin College in Maine, and relied upon to guide my practice of law for over 50 years.

It sounds like working for the Smithsonian Institution would have been right up your alley, then.

My job at the Smithsonian, as I saw it, was to protect and represent the Institution, and particularly its scientists carrying out basic research around the world.

In addition to an extraordinary and bizarre variety of tasks, I helped put together a number of research centres, including the National Zoological Park's 3000-acre Conservation and Research Center in Virginia, and a 50,000-acre research centre for protected and endangered species in Kenya. I also worked in various centres in Panama, Tunisia, and the former Yugoslavia.

In fact, I sometimes found myself protecting our scientists who, themselves, were somewhat endangered! There were occasions when I exchanged places with the scientists in local jail houses. Some local officials "retained" scientists in remote areas and took "gratuities" in exchange for their release.

In all, however, my greatest interest and pleasure was in working closely with the Secretary of the Smithsonian and the Director of the National Air and Space Museum in building the new Space Museum on the Mall and its offspring at Dulles International Airport.

The conference you are attending here is the 2nd Manfred Lachs Conference on Global Space Governance. Your thoughts on what it means to govern space, and to do so globally?

In this context, I often borrow a Spanish classmate's utterance in reference to ownership and governance of lunar resources: "The one with the biggest stick makes the law!"

I have used that expression to explain my view of what really happens in the legal world, and to explain that all laws are transitory. Laws are designed to develop a level playing field until some person or nation can take advantage of it, withdraw in whole or in part, and then attempt domination. It's a genetically coded dictate of all life forms, individually and collectively, and that includes what we refer to as "altruistic" behaviour.

We humans are exploring space to find a better place to live. We must survive or become extinct.

For developing the laws that are necessary, negotiating changes in treaties, or formulating new laws that are domestic, international, global, and even transglobal, it is important to understand why you are doing it and what it really responds to, in the context of the laws themselves, but also, ultimately, in the context of the survival of our own species. ■

Established in 2014 by friends and family of Dr. George S. Robinson, the George Robinson Prize is awarded to a graduating student at the Institute of Air and Space Law on the basis of his/her successful doctoral thesis exhibiting advanced research capabilities and constituting an original contribution to space jurisprudence. To learn more about the prize, or to make a contribution, contact Katherine Knitel at katherine.knitel@mcgill.ca.