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## NEWS FROM THE BANCROFT LIBRARY

### CARL SAGAN: A LIFE

Keay Davidson

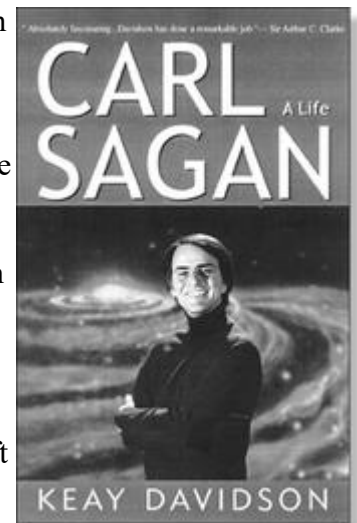


Keay Davidson

In late 1961 a small band of researchers met at Green Bank, West Virginia, to discuss a then-bizarre idea: radio communication with extraterrestrials. The gathering included Otto Struve, a distinguished representative of a famed family of astronomers, and Carl Sagan, a young Ph.D. from the University of Chicago-Yerkes Observatory who had recently won the coveted Miller Fellowship at the University of California, Berkeley. The conferees debated whether intelligent beings inhabit planets that orbit other stars; whether those beings might develop radio technologies akin to our own; and whether they would feel compelled (as have a few terrestrial scientists) to transmit greetings to other worlds. They also debated--it was the High Noon of the Cold War, a tense interlude between the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban missile crisis--whether technologically advanced societies tend to self-destruct. If so, and if Earth's history parallels that of other worlds, then there might be no aliens to communicate with; rather, the Milky Way might be littered with the radioactive ruins of civilizations.

Sagan, of course, went on to fame. He became an influential (and often controversial) figure in the then-young field of space science, as well as a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, anti-nuclear activist, and creator of the TV science series *Cosmos* and the 1997 Jodie Foster film *Contact*. In writing Sagan's biography for the publisher John Wiley & Sons (*Carl Sagan: A Life*, 1999), I have explored a realm rarely entered by daily newspaper writers like myself--university archives. Growing up in an age before e-mail, Sagan maintained written correspondence with almost anyone who was anybody in American science. I visited the Bancroft Library at Cal to see what, if anything, of Sagan's correspondence survives in Struve's papers.

As the song goes: "You don't always get what you want, but you sometimes get what you need." In the Struve papers--several fat boxes of documents--I found no mention of Sagan. Yet the search was worthwhile because I discovered unexpected "background" for my book: numerous quotes and anecdotes that recapture the atmosphere of American astronomy at mid-century. At that time, the era of astronomers who worked alone at remote



Book jacket of *Carl Sagan: A Life*. Design by Susan Olinsky.

observatories was ending. Propelled by NASA funding and Cold War competition with the USSR, American astronomy was rocketing toward Big Science status, i.e., with multi-million-dollar budgets, large staffs with numerous technicians and graduate students, airborne and orbital telescopes, and once-unthinkable links to sciences such as meteorology, geology, even biomedicine. The planets and stars were no longer seen as Never-Never Lands; now (argued Sagan and others) they were part of Earth's backyard, and their origin, evolution, and fate might yield clues to our own. Space science was the New Frontier, a noble alternative to terrestrial squabbles.

In exploring the skies, though, scientists lose none of *Homo sapiens'* other traits: pettiness, jealousy, and a taste for scheming. Consider the December 15, 1949, letter written by Struve--then at the University of Chicago's Yerkes Observatory--to campus president Robert M. Hutchins. Struve, one of the brightest lights of modern astronomy, vehemently attacked fellow staffers, including two whose lights were even brighter than his: Gerard C. Kuiper (later Sagan's thesis adviser) and S. Chandrasekhar (a world-famous astrophysicist and instructor of Sagan).

"Kuiper is incompetent to do the administrative work, and will not let anyone else do it," Struve complained to Hutchins. The observatory risks "increasing ill-repute because of exaggerated and even false claims," including Kuiper's "failure to acknowledge properly" his intellectual debts to others and his "untrue claims" in a *Time* magazine article. Struve also cited the "intolerance of Chandrasekhar toward ideas other than his own; . . . Kuiper's secretiveness in his recent work and constant preoccupation with his personal fame . . ." and so on for many angry pages, bristling with accusations and suspicions. "I hope I shall never see them again as long as I live," Struve snarled.

Such memos aren't merely gossip about scientific titans. Rather, such "gossip" helps me to put my subject, Sagan, in a broader historical context. When Sagan arrived at Yerkes in 1956 to begin work on his doctorate, he was entering an observatory already noted for its internal political battles. Such battles would affect his career directly and indirectly--directly, by toppling his thesis adviser, Kuiper, from power a few years after Sagan's arrival; indirectly, by molding Sagan's perception of science as an enterprise in which combat is the norm rather than the exception. This perception strengthened Sagan's will for many future debates, debates that might have driven weaker scientists into hiding--particularly his debate, in the 1980s, with the US nuclear weapons complex and its scientific apologists.

The Struve papers are not unique in the history of science. Consider the vitriol exchanged in, for example, the battles between Newton and Leibniz, and Salk and Sabin. Yet popular culture--particularly TV and Hollywood films--keeps alive the myth of the "cold, objective scientist" (a myth so resilient that it deserves psychoanalytic scrutiny). True, scientists battle mostly over ideas; but not ideas alone. Sometimes--like the rest of us--they simply hate each other.

Key Davidson is the chief science reporter for the *San Francisco Examiner* and has written feature articles for *National Geographic* and *New Scientist*. He was also coauthor of the acclaimed book *Wrinkles in Time* with George Smoot.

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