

AHS London Lecture Thursday 19 January 2017

David Rooney

The Politics of Precision: Standard Time and Violent Protest, 1884–1914

In January 1885, a few weeks after the conclusion of the International Meridian Conference in Washington, DC, astronomers at the Royal Observatory Greenwich asked the government for advice on how to protect the observatory buildings from a bomb attack. It was not until nine years later that the scientists' worst fears were realised. In January 1894, the observatory suffered a break-in. Nothing of value was stolen but the astronomers called again for extra protection, recognising how vulnerable the institution was to possible attack. The burglary might have been a reconnaissance visit, since five weeks later, Martial Bourdin, a French anarchist, blew himself up outside the observatory's north-west corner in a terrorist attack that made international headlines.

But the Bourdin bomb, which inspired Joseph Conrad's 1907 novel *The Secret Agent*, was not the only violent attack on a British observatory building in this period. In February 1913, the Astronomer Royal reported to police that two suffragettes had been overheard on a local tram discussing a possible bombing of the Greenwich Observatory. The observatory was placed under 24-hour police protection and no attacks took place, but a few weeks later the Royal Observatory Edinburgh was attacked by a time bomb. While nobody was injured, a clock was destroyed. A note left at the scene read 'how beggarly appears argument before defiant deed'.

Precise standard time, as measured and disseminated by national observatories, is political. It represents national identities and demonstrates the reach of global empires. It stands for the power of nation states, and the uses to which it was put – navigation, communication, standardization and regulation – expressed government control and domination. For activists seeking to change global political structures, standard time was seen as a legitimate target for violent protest – the 'propaganda of the deed'. In this illustrated lecture, David Rooney will examine the role of the Royal Observatory in *fin de siècle* political protest and its aftermath.



Dr David Rooney is Keeper of Technologies and Engineering at the Science Museum, London. His latest book, *Mathematics: How It Shaped Our World*, looks at the politics, technologies and economics of mathematical practice from 1600 to the present. Photo © Science Museum, London

TICKETS

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