The history of astronomy

by Heather Couper & Nigel Henbest

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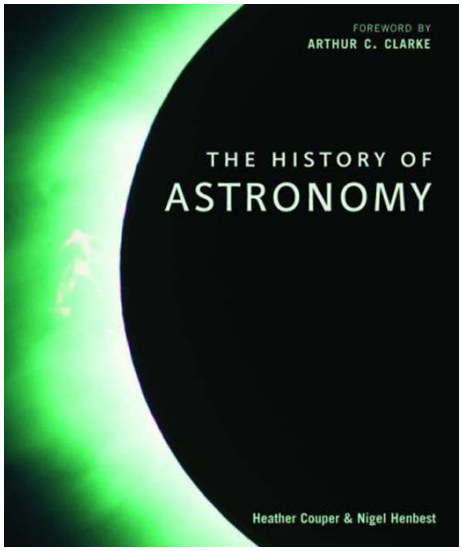

One of the great joys of the history of astronomy is that it can be treated on many different levels. You can delve deep and immerse yourself in four hundred page tomes on the significance of the observations of the comet of 1577, and you can wallow in a huge three volume set of the letters of John Flamsteed, our first Astronomer Royal, or you can flit briefly and joyfully from highlight to highlight.

Heather Couper and Nigel Henbest adopt the latter approach. They have travelled widely and interviewed many of the key players in recent astronomical and astrophysical history, as well as those who study the development of astronomy over the past few thousand years. The views of the authors and the people they interviewed have then been skilfully knitted together to produce an immensely readable, easily accessible and racy overview of mankind's stumbling attempts to understand the cosmos. From Stonehenge to SETI (the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence), and from black holes to Bethlehem's star, little has been overlooked.

Half the page-area in this 285-page book is covered with illustrations, many of which are refreshingly unfamiliar. I specially liked Joseph Haydn conducting *The Creation* (was he really inspired to compose this by peeping through William Herschel's telescope?), and the transit of Venus (a drunken synonymous lady being stretchered off to jail by two rotund policemen!) I leave it to readers to work out the relevance of Richard Burton's Hamlet and the trial scene of Kepler's mother.

I loved this book. It is unpretentious, and uncluttered by source references and extraneous detail. Heather and Nigel always look on the bright side. Astronomy is mysterious, often uncertain but always fun. Old astronomers are fabulous, and the pursuit of astronomical knowledge is clearly one of the greatest scientific adventures. But looking at some of the pictures of famous astronomical scientists, one can often pick up hints of the darker side. I wonder how frustrated Gustav Kirchhoff and Robert Bunsen felt trying to understand spectral lines before the electron had been discovered. Galileo Galilei looks very uncomfortable at his inquisition, moving the Earth from the centre of the cosmos clearly has its consequences; Carl Sagan's furrowed brow underlines just how difficult it is to find extraterrestrial life; and Martin Ryle might just be about to show that the continuous creation theory could not explain the distance between distant galaxies, but this discovery doesn't raise even the hint of a smile.

This book is a 'must read' introduction to an amazing human endeavour, our continuing quest for cosmic understanding. Start here, and then be prepared to spend the rest of your life diving ever deeper into one of the greatest scientific adventures.

Carole Stott

Carole was once in charge of Britain's foremost collection of astronomical instrumentation at the Old Royal Observatory, Greenwich. She now writes professionally in the field of space and astronomy.

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Astronomy - Astronomy - History of astronomy: Astronomy was the first natural science to reach a high level of sophistication and predictive ability, which it achieved already in the second half of the 1st millennium bce. The early quantitative success of astronomy, compared with other natural sciences such as physics, chemistry, biology, and meteorology (which were also cultivated in antiquity but which did not reach the same level of accomplishment), stems from several causes. First, the subject matter of early astronomy had the advantage of stability and simplicityâ€”the Sun, the Moon, the pl The history of astronomy is the study of astronomical observances that date back to antiquity, with its origins in the religious, mythological, cosmological, calendrical, and astrological beliefs and practices of prehistory: vestiges of these are still found in astrology, a discipline long interwoven with public and governmental astronomy, and not completely disentangled from it until a few centuries ago in the Western World (see astrology and astronomy). In some cultures, astronomical data was used Astronomy is the oldest of the natural sciences, dating back to antiquity, with its origins in the religious, mythological, cosmological, calendrical, and astrological beliefs and practices of prehistory: vestiges of these are still found in astrology, a discipline long interwoven with public and governmental astronomy. It was not completely separated in Europe (see astrology and astronomy) during the Copernican Revolution starting in 1543. In some cultures, astronomical data was used for astrological History of astronomy. Quite the same Wikipedia. Just better.Â In some cultures, astronomical data was used for astrological prognostication. Ancient astronomers were able to differentiate between stars and planets, as stars remain relatively fixed over the centuries while planets will move an appreciable amount during a comparatively short time. Trace the Earliest History of Astronomy. Share. Flipboard.Â Astronomy is humanity's oldest science. People have been looking up, trying to explain what they see in the sky probably since the first "human-like" cave dwellers existed. There's a famous scene in the movie 2001: A Space Odyssey, where a hominid named Moonwatcher surveys the sky, taking in the sights and pondering what he sees. It's likely that such beings really did exist, trying to make some sense of the cosmos as they saw it. Prehistoric Astronomy. Fast forward about 10,000 years to the time of the first civilizations, and the earliest astronomers who already figu