

Preface

Second Edition

I was only knee-high to a tripod when, on a fateful night in April 1957, the first episode of the BBC television series, “The Sky at Night,” presented by Patrick Moore, was broadcast on British TV. In the program he mentioned that the comet Arend-Roland was visible to the naked eye, and my father decided that this was something I ought to see. I don’t actually remember seeing the comet, but I do recall being carried out in my father’s arms, under a pitch-black sky in South Wales. From that moment on my life’s purpose and direction were mapped out for me: I wanted to learn about the stars. So it is only right and proper that I begin this preface by thanking Patrick for providing the inspiration and desire (as he has also done for countless other people) to become, eventually, an astronomer.

The initial idea for a book of this type had been with me for many years, but it was only after meeting John Watson – of Springer-publishing – at the London Astrofest that I finally could begin work. John’s knowledge of publishing, editing and indeed astronomy was of incalculable worth during the writing of the first edition. It is easy to have a mind full of ideas, but to actually get these onto paper in a coherent manner so that they are understandable by everyone and not only those with astrophysics PhDs has been achieved only with the steady hand of John guiding me.

Special mention must also be given to Maury Solomon, at Springer New York, who suggested writing a second edition of the book, who is a good friend and knows all there is to know about scientific publishing. She is also a very patient person, especially when dealing with astronomers when deadlines are long past.

I began my journey into astronomy as an amateur, and to this day, it remains a very important part of my life. The number of amateur astronomers I have met is enormous, and some of these meetings have developed into deep friendships. I refer, of course, to those two erstwhile members of the South Bayfordbury Astronomical Society, Mike Hurrell and Don Tinkler. The observing sessions I have had with these characters are some of the most unique and unforgettable observing experiences of my life (I am still in therapy), and to this day I cannot recall them without breaking out into a smile, and more often than not, hysterical laughter. Their outlook on astronomy is enviable, as they just enjoy the subject for what it is, amazing and beautiful, a viewpoint that is often overlooked by focusing too much on the science of astrophysics and the obsession with the latest observing aids and equipment.

During my apprenticeship as a professional astronomer I have been fortunate enough to meet many wonderful people, not necessarily involved in astronomy but rather as colleagues working at the same university. Between them they managed to keep me sane, by listening to me complain about the injustice of life in general, buying me beer (an excellent source of contentment) and just being there. They remain to this day my dearest friends and are indeed part of my extended family. Firstly I want to thank my dear friend, Karen Milstein, whose smile made life a happier time, and whose compassion and understanding when, sometimes, I complained bitterly about life, was a source of strength and comfort. I also want to thank, Bill Worthington, Peter Harris and Stuart Young.

Since moving to the New World, I have been fortunate enough to meet many people, both teachers and students, whose desire to learn about the universe and then pass this knowledge on to others matched my own. They make the often-bureaucratic nature of academia bearable. Thank you, Sean Tvelia, Matt Pappas, Tom Breedon, Gerry Schnall, and Dana D'Ambrosia.

However, all that I have achieved as an astronomer would have been for naught if it weren't for the astronomers at the University of Hertfordshire. Their knowledge of the way the universe works, and how to impart this knowledge to a student, is astounding. In my opinion they are the finest educators I have ever met. That they had the patience to teach me is something I still wonder about, as I remember only too well the number of mistakes and errors I made. But they took it all in good spirit and with humor, and to be associated with them is something that I look upon with humility. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge publicly the debt I owe these people: Iain Nicolson, Jim Hough, Alan McCall and the late great Lou Marsh.

It is also important that I single out and mention Professor Chris Kitchin, who was both Head of Physics and Astronomy, and Director of the University of Hertfordshire Observatory at Bayfordbury, and Bob Forrest, who was its principal technical officer. Their depth of knowledge about all matters astronomical, theoretical and observational is without parallel, and to be allowed to use the amazing variety of superb telescopes at the observatory was definitely a privilege afforded to few. Chris's knowledge of astronomy and astrophysics is very wide-ranging and impressive, and he has been my mentor in all that I have done. If it hadn't been for

Chris, I would have never found out how much I like to teach astronomy, and I have learned from him many of the techniques that make teaching a pleasure and not a chore. Bob is an astute observer and I learned most of my observational skills at his side. He is also a patient and long-suffering man (especially where I am involved), as on many occasions when I could not get the telescopes to work (the declination control just came off in my hand, Bob, honest!), Bob would wander over, twiddle a control so that the object sprang magically into view, then walk away, shaking his head and sighing deeply. Suffice to say that I owe both these astronomers a lot!

Writing a book is, strangely enough, just like observing. They are both, more often than not, solitary pastimes, and occur during the night hours. However, I have not been alone during either of these times, as I have had the music of the American Steve Roach as a companion. His musical tone poems are wonderful and inspiring, and it can truly be said that he has created the music of the spheres.

Finally, I have to thank those people who are closest to me, and whose presence makes life tolerable. Firstly, I want to say a few words about my brother Bob. It is true to say that without his help, I would have never become an astronomer. He also enjoys a pint of beer as much as I do, which is an excellent measure of someone's character. (Can I buy you a pint Bob, and we'll call everything quits?) I also want to thank Mam and Dad. My father, who bought me my first astronomical telescope, always encouraged me to seek out my dream of becoming an astronomer, and the memory I have of showing him the rings of Saturn in the telescope, and his subsequent true and real joy, is something I will treasure forever. My mother, who has been with me all the way, with unconditional love, food parcels and clean socks, and has also been there for me during those times when not everything was going according to plan.

To everyone I have mentioned, thank you all!

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