

Preface

Approximately 5,000,000,000 years from now the Sun will exhaust its supply of hydrogen and turn into a red star so bloated that it swallows the planet Mercury and so hot that it melts the Earth's surface. That much is generally agreed upon. But what the Sun will do next year, let alone the next decade, is not at all clear. It will not be much bigger or nearer to us than now, and its net output will probably not depart from the average of the last few decades by more than a few tenths of one percent, but by how many tenths, and will the contribution of ultraviolet rays increase or decrease, and in either case how rapid will the departure be?

The answers bear not only on climate change but also on human health and the many activities—including the rest of astronomy, radio and satellite communications, geodesy and Space travel—where small changes in the Sun can have a disproportionate impact. To tackle these questions we require a secure grasp of the Sun's entire evolution so that long-term trends as well as short-term fluctuations can be properly assessed.

But solar history needs no utilitarian justification. It bears on our planet's evolution, and that of its occupants; it reflects events throughout the solar system; it illuminates the fate of the billions of stars in the Milky Way and beyond; and it illustrates the noble achievement of those who are making sense of an incandescent ball of gas with a volume a million times the Earth's and distant enough for its light to take 8 min to reach us. D. W. Hamlyn once suggested that a history of philosophy, apart 'from the strictly historical sense....ought to provide a due sense of the complexity and many-sidedness' of its subject. That is what I had in mind when writing *Solar History*.

Solar history is extremely uneven. Documentary sources are available for only 0.00001 % of the Sun's existence. For the remaining 4.5 aeons we depend on analogy with other stars, computer modelling, data derived from meteorites, polar ice caps and tree rings, the fossil record, and other indirect guides to solar behaviour. In *The Sun—a User's Manual* (2008) I hinted at these matters but necessarily focused on the present day while claiming that a history of the Sun was beginning to fall into place. There had in fact been three magisterial multiple-author surveys of the solar past [1–3], but much new information has been skilfully

(and expensively) secured in the last two decades which bears on parts of the narrative.

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