

Preface

How did a physicist who wrote a Ph.D. thesis on relativity and cosmology happen to publish articles that date a Vincent van Gogh night-sky painting, solve a mystery about the Moon and tides at a World War II battle, discuss Shakespeare's skies, or analyze the moonlit night when Mary Shelley conceived of *Frankenstein*? When did I become a "celestial sleuth" applying astronomical analysis to problems from art, history, and literature?

I can identify the precise moments more than 25 years ago when my research career changed direction. There were two such moments.

The first came when Edgar Laird, an English professor at Texas State, asked if I would work with him to understand some complex astronomical passages in "The Franklin's Tale," one of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Laird and I eventually published several articles (see Chap. 8) on Chaucer's celestial references, which are probably the most complex, sophisticated, and interesting in all of English literature.

The second moment came when a history professor, James Pohl, overheard us discussing the details of "The Franklin's Tale" and Chaucer's plot device involving the Moon and unusually high tides. Pohl, himself a former Marine, suggested that I try to solve the mystery of the tides at the Battle of Tarawa, the first major amphibious opposed landing of World War II in the Pacific and a legendary moment in the history of the U. S. Marines. A publication entitled "The Tide at Tarawa" became my first article to appear in *Sky & Telescope* magazine (see Chap. 7).

None of the projects described in this book would have occurred without those two initial conversations with Edgar Laird and James Pohl.

The chapters are arranged in three parts. Part I includes projects applying astronomy to art. This part is organized by artist and includes analysis of

night-sky paintings by Claude Monet, J. M. W. Turner, Vincent van Gogh, and Edvard Munch, along with moonrise photographs by Ansel Adams.

Part II looks at historical events influenced by astronomy, usually involving the effects of moonlight or ocean tides. Sometimes *both* moonlight and tides are involved, as on the night of the Boston Tea Party, the night of Paul Revere's ride, the sinking of the *Titanic*, and the D-Day invasion of Normandy. This part is ordered chronologically, from the time of the first Marathon run in ancient Greece, through American colonial times and the Civil War, and finally to important battles and events of World War II.

Part III analyzes astronomical references in literature, especially in cases where an actual celestial event apparently inspired the literary passage. This part is ordered chronologically and ranges from the skies above the Persia of Omar Khayyam, a supernova that Shakespeare could have witnessed, the moonlight shining on Mary Shelley's window as she conceived of the idea for *Frankenstein*, to a spectacular meteor procession observed by Walt Whitman and a meteor that dropped from the sky over James Joyce's Dublin.

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