



The Construction of the Heavens – William Herschel's cosmology

by Michael Hoskin

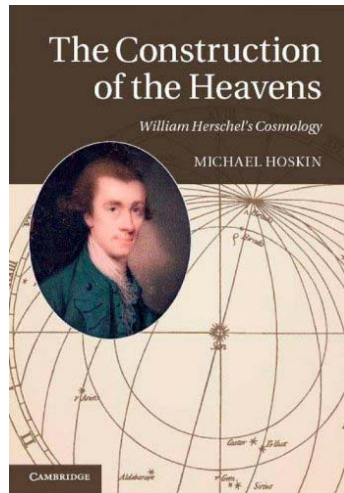
Cambridge University Press, 2012. ISBN 978-1-107-01838-9. Pp viii + 205, £65 (hbk).

Michael Hoskin, historian of astronomy at Cambridge University, has been writing about the Herschel family for most of his professional career. This work revisits his first book on William Herschel, with the same title, written nearly fifty years previously.

The book takes the same form as the earlier work – a critical appraisal of Herschel's most significant papers on the structure of the universe, followed by republication of the papers themselves. As in the 1963 book, Dr David Dewhirst of the Institute of Astronomy, Cambridge, offers astrophysical and astronomical insights, and this time round there are also contributions from Dr Wolfgang Steinicke, who has extensively researched historical catalogues of nebulae.

Dr Hoskin feels that, just as Herschel's ideas on the nature of the universe evolved during his long observing career, his own assessment of which of Herschel's papers are most important, and what weight to give to the ideas therein, has developed over the years.

The book is a pleasure to read. Hoskin's style is unhurried, informative and above all authoritative. The book is put together stylishly and the subediting, footnoting and indexing are impeccable.



For a non-Herschel specialist, there are gems to discover. For example, I was surprised to find out that Herschel's famous diagram of the purported shape of the universe, assembled from laborious star counts, and reproduced in astronomical histories ever since, was disowned within a few years by Herschel himself, who by then had seen deeper. And I was amused by Hoskin's observation

that Herschel almost always claimed that any questions he raised would be resolved by the next telescope that he built – for which he was inevitably trying to find funding.

So I'd recommend the book unhesitatingly to anyone who wants a deeper understanding of the ideas and thought processes of one of the most significant figures in astronomical history. Historians of science will find an invaluable selection of primary sources, in tandem with exemplary biographical and historical analysis. But I wonder if the audience will be limited, for two reasons: first, the closeness to the earlier volume of the same name. And second the price, which at sixty-five pounds is steep.

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