



Nightwatch: A practical guide to viewing the Universe (4th edn)

by Terence Dickinson

A & C Black, 2006. ISBN 0-7136-7939-5. Pp 192, £29.99 (pbk)

The reviewer has seen many books devoted to showing the newcomer the way round the night sky. They all have their respective merits but this one positively scintillates. Now in its fourth edition and boasting sales in excess of 600,000 copies, it is very useful book for the newcomer. *Nightwatch* is up-to-date and the spiral binding makes it suitable for taking outside under the stars with you.

It has chapters introducing the cosmos and the Universe. It then has a chapter called 'Backyard Astronomy', which explains *inter alia* the motions of the stars, their names and how to measure the distances of objects in the night sky, for example ten degrees being about the width of a fist at arm's length. Simple star charts are then given for the different seasons. The star charts look very easy for the newcomer to use. A night view with traditional black stars on a white background is then given on the facing page. Only the brightest stars are shown, so novices are encouraged to go out and learn their way around the most prominent stars and constellations, a very important skill. (More detailed star charts are given later, when the reader has learned more.)

It is also interesting to note the inclusion of a small section on light pollution. Oddly, this is not generally found in such books, despite the fact that unless action is taken then the view of the night sky might become something for the history books. Moreover, many amateur astronomers seem to think that it is someone else's problem.

The chapter on stargazing equipment is very good; it outlines the advantages of binoculars – again, something not always done. Of course investing in a pair of binoculars means more for your money if on a low budget, for a cheap telescope might do more to put one off the hobby, whilst the same money may buy a pair of quite reasonable binoculars, that may also be used for non-astronomical purposes, and are easy to trans-

port to dark skies. The horrors of 'trash scopes' are discussed, and the different types of instrument commonly found on the market today are outlined as are important matters such as eyepieces, focal length and avoiding too high a power. Indeed tables are given which list the types of instrument and their suitable uses.

The book then goes on to outline the different types of object to be seen in the sky, such as nebulae, galaxies and globular clusters. It is then and only then, that the book gives more de-

tailed star charts, this time with deep sky objects and the Milky Way (for those in the UK lucky enough still to see it). These star charts are for sky regions and build upon the earlier charts which show the novice how to find their way across the night sky. A section on southern stars is given which will be useful for BAA members who

live further south, or those going abroad. Further chapters then deal with Solar System objects and practical data are given on each. Sound advice is given on viewing the Sun, including binning the dangerous screw-in eyepiece filters still found on some cheap telescopes. Projection and mylar filter type viewing is discussed.

Meteors, a wonderful sight for the experienced as well as newcomers have their own chapter, with aurorae and comets. There is then a brave move to show how the night sky may be photographed. Star trails are dealt with, as is the effect of different focal lengths on objects. It is excellent to see the 'barn door tracker' covered, for permitting a camera with a short focal length lens to follow the stars, which makes such a good project for the DIY enthusiast.

Many similar books in their n'th edition have old photographs, which due to the rapid advance of imaging techniques might as well have been taken in the nineteenth century. *Nightwatch* uses current images and current imaging techniques. It may have too many glossy Hubble images, but the reader should have enough diagrams and images taken with more earthly equipment so as not to expect a technicolor Trifid Nebula through the eyepiece.

Enough material discussing digital cameras and CCD chips is given to whet the appetite of those whose interest has been truly fired. Having read this book, I am confident that it will do just this for quite a number of people.

Martin Morgan-Taylor

Martin Morgan-Taylor was recently appointed by the BAA to the new position of New Members' Coordinator, responsible for helping new members to get the most from their hobby and from the Association. He can be contacted at mart@dm.ac.uk.

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