



## The Haunted Observatory

### Curiosities from the astronomer's cabinet

by Richard Baum

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*The Haunted Observatory* is a collection of essays on unexplained or erroneous observations of the planets and other Solar System bodies by astronomers of the past, mostly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Seven of its chapters were originally published in 1973 in *The Planets: Some Myths and Realities* by the same author, but at around twice the length of the original work, this is much more than a new edition. The essays from the old volume, covering subjects from searches for a satellite of the Moon to a suspected planet beyond Neptune, have been revised and expanded so extensively as to have been effectively rewritten. For example, we now learn that a body that was wrongly recorded as a new planet in 1831 was used by John Couch Adams to predict the position of his supposed trans-Uranian planet, greatly reducing the accuracy of his prediction and so slowing down James Challis' hunt for Neptune by giving him a much larger field to search. Baum also enlivens his narratives with colourful mini-biographies of the various

astronomers whose work is described in each essay.

There are four new chapters – on strange appearances of Venus, possible nineteenth-century sightings of near-Earth objects, moving objects seen near the Sun and a possible explanation of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's lines about 'The hornéd Moon, with one bright Star / Almost atween the tips'. Each chapter is meticulously documented with many bibliographical references, presented as endnotes at the rear of the volume, some of which are essays in their own right. For example, in the chapter on Schröter's observations of Venus, we learn in an endnote of the sad fate of his observatory, a victim of Napoleon's armies. Both the main text and the endnotes are written at a level accessible to general readers and scholars alike. There are also many illustrations, including a central section of colour plates. The text is very accurate, and the very few errors are all merely typographical.

In addition to being a historian of astronomy, with many papers published in this *Journal*, Richard Baum is a former Director of the BAA Mercury and Venus Section and is a renowned visual observer of the planets. His experience as an observer is evident throughout the book. For example, when discussing nineteenth-century observations of Venus, he demonstrates that although the interpretations of detached spots on Venus as high mountains have turned out to be fanciful, these early observers were honestly recording what they saw. Modern observers see detail on Venus similar to that recorded by their forebears, and spacecraft discoveries have shown that

the features seen may well have been real detail in Venus' clouds.

I greatly enjoyed *The Haunted Observatory*. I recommend it to anyone with an interest in the history of Solar System astronomy, and also to the modern planetary observer, who will find in its pages much fascinating reading and valuable instruction.

**Lee Macdonald**

*Lee Macdonald has observed the planets and the deep sky visually for many years. He is currently doing postgraduate work in the history of science at Cambridge University.*

