

Schaefer, B., 2001. The transit of Venus and the notorious black drop effect. *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, 32:325-336.

Starry Night: Astronomers and Poets Read the Sky, by David H. Levy (Prometheus Books, New York, 2001), 203 pp., ISBN 1 57392 887 9, soft cover, price US\$18.00, 184 × 133 mm.

In astronomy the night sky is treated as a subject for dispassionate inquiry. A more universal response, long articulated by artists, and in particular poets, is awe and wonder at the spectacle of the heavens. This artistic response is the subject of *Starry Night*. The author's basic thesis is that the scientific and poetic responses spring from the same underlying creative impulse and are but opposite sides of the same coin. This attitude is perhaps not the usual one, but surely has much to commend it.

Probably wisely, the author largely restricts himself to quoting and discussing poetry written in English. There is a brief mention of astronomical references in the Bible and Chaucer (who, in addition to his better-known works also wrote *A treatise on the Astrolable*), though most of the material dates from Elizabethan times or later. The astronomical allusions in the works of Shakespeare, Tennyson, and Gerard Manley Hopkins are covered in particular depth, as are the astronomical paintings of Van Gogh.

Starry Night is not primarily a book on the history of astronomy, though inevitably it contains quite a bit of historical material. It is written for the general reader and the style might not be to the taste of some. There is the occasional blunder (Messier did not catalogue comets, as the author, of all people, well knows), but these do not seriously detract from the whole. The author needs little introduction: he is well known as a comet-hunter and was the co-discoverer, with the Shoemakers, of comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 which impacted Jupiter in 1994. The book is a complete revision and expansion of his earlier *More Things in Heaven and Earth* and the chapter on Gerard Manley Hopkins is adapted from his Thesis.

Some of the poems discussed are well-known, others less so, but part of the book's charm is the opportunity it offers to revisit old friends and make new ones (I've known the couplet: 'Two men looked out through the prison bars / one saw mud, the other stars' since I was a student, but now I've finally learnt its attribution). Other old favourites are absent, but any collection is necessarily personal and selective. The book is an easy read and thoroughly enjoyable. It makes a refreshing change from the technical minutiae of professional astronomy and can be recommended as an introduction to poetry on an astronomical theme.

Clive Davenhall

Historical Supernovae and their Remnants, by F. Richard Stephenson & David A. Green (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002), xiv + 252 pp., ISBN 0 19 850766 6, hard cover, £65.00, 240 × 160 mm.

Those of us with a passion for radio astronomy have a special place in our hearts for the discrete source, Taurus-A. One of the first 'radio stars' to be discovered, this was soon associated with the Crab

Nebula. Later it assumed even more importance when a pulsar was discovered near the centre of the radio source, and optical and X-ray correlates were subsequently detected. But what makes Taurus-A particularly remarkable is its association with the supernova explosion of AD 1054 that was described in some detail by Chinese and Japanese astronomers. This is one of a mere handful of recorded historic supernovae (Sne).

Stephenson and Green discuss these and other possible historic SNe in their book, *Historical Supernovae and their Remnants*, recently released by Oxford University Press. No simple reincarnation of Clark and Stephenson's *The Historic Supernovae* (1977), this new volume presents additional historical material, and Green has been able to assimilate a wealth of new radio data accumulated over the ensuing quarter-century.

The new book begins with introductory chapters on the historical records and the nature of supernovae, supernova remnants and pulsars, followed by a discussion of whether Flamsteed observed a SN in AD 1680 that is associated with the strong radio source Cas-A, before launching into detailed accounts of the SNe of AD 1604, 1572, 1181, 1054, and 1006. Then follow chapters on possible pre-AD 1000 SNe, reported 'new stars' or 'guest stars' which were not SNe, and "Future prospects". Closing out the book are a glossary of Chinese astronomical terms, a few pages on modern astronomical terminology, a summary of the SNRs in Green's electronic catalogue (www.mrao.cam.ac.uk/surveys/snrs) and thirteen pages of references for those wishing to pursue this topic in more depth. In a little over 250 pages, Stephenson and Green provide a fascinating mix of historic astronomy and modern astrophysics, and show how historical data can be used to address contemporary astronomical issues.

Historical Supernovae and their Remnants is a *tour-de-force*, and like the Clark and Stephenson predecessor will long remain the standard work in this field. The fascinating interweave of historical, optical, X-ray, and radio data makes for entertaining reading, and the book is well illustrated and is supplied with a useful Index. Despite the high price, this book should be essential reading for all those with an interest in SNe, SNRs, pulsars, Oriental astronomy, or the basics of 'Applied Historical Astronomy'.

Wayne Orchiston

100 Years of Observational Astronomy and Astrophysics. Homage to Miklós Konkoly Thege, edited by Christiaan Sterken & John B. Hearnshaw (Vrije Universiteit, Brussels, 2001), xii + 268, paperback, ISBN 90 805538 3 2, €35.00 & US\$30.00, 240 × 155 mm.

This volume derives from a 3-day workshop that was held at Tihany, Hungary, in 1999 August, the second in a series "... dedicated to the rise of observational astrophysics in the nineteenth and early twentieth century ..." This particular workshop coincided with the centenary of the Konkoly Observatory, Hungary's national observatory.

Konkoly Observatory's origins can be traced back to the talented and well-endowed amateur