

# WHISPERS FROM THE SHELVES

Jennie McCormick, 2003.

I have always known that the science of astronomy was as diverse as life itself. So much so that keeping up to date with the latest news stories doesn't leave a great deal of time for anything else. There is always a school group to teach, a telescope to sell or a meteorite to check for authenticity. Of course, if you have an observatory at home and a faint and completely unknown Cataclysmic Variable star erupts into 'outburst', a mad dash ensues to gather as much data as possible, leaving the evening meal to burn. In fact, my days and evenings are already so full of diverse astronomical drama that I never imagined I could find another exciting area in this science, let alone have time for it. After all, what can really better the "Flattest star known," "Is there life on Mars?" or the famous WMAP's "13.7 billion year old visible Universe?"

Imagine my surprise then, when changing offices earlier this year, a new world of astronomy I never thought existed almost jumped off the shelves behind me. Ever since, I've been spiralling back through time amongst a myriad of dusty mustard coloured, heavy print pages - skipping through the works of authors formerly held in such regard, that merely mentioning their names, or displaying their books in ones drawing room could have resulted in the family mixing in the right circles for quite some time.

The Auckland Astronomical Society and the Auckland Observatory have a wonderful collection of rare astronomical books. Hundreds of volumes sit silently behind me, each book whispering stories of a time now sadly forgotten. They not only tell the story of their authors, their specialised fields and their accomplishments, but also recall past owners, who obviously cherished these books as I am learning to do. The diversity of the collection is overwhelming not just for the breadth of subject matter covered but also for the list of accomplished astronomers, professional and amateur alike.

Cataloguing the books has been labour intensive with approximately three hundred on file and a further two hundred or so to log. Again, time is a major hurdle as almost every book holds a surprise or two and it takes some time to inspect each carefully. The excitement of opening a book has me looking to the next in the pile with anticipation of what I might find.



Old and New Astronomy – R.A Proctor & A.C Ranyard

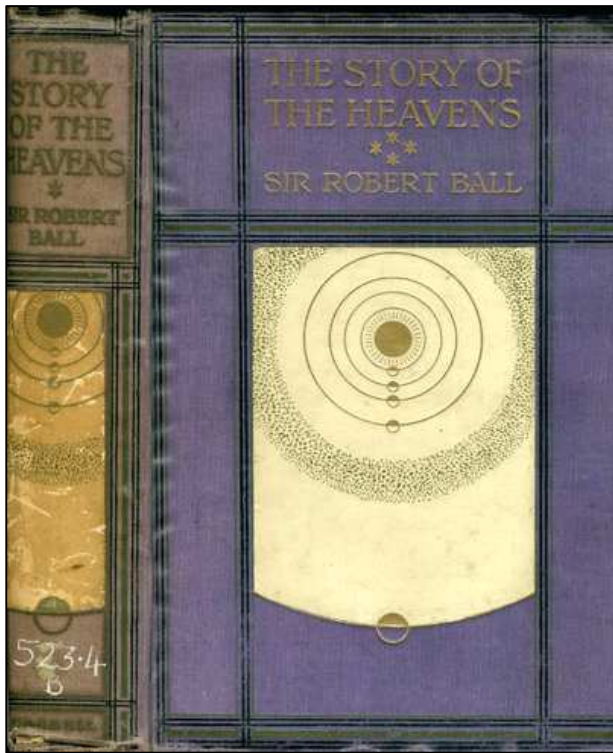
The 1936 copy of "Stars and Telescopes" written by James Stokley includes a 'love letter' written by the owner's wife. I felt like an intruder reading her thoughts, but human nature had me intrigued and it almost brought a tear to my eye as I imagined her writing it. The hand written note is still where I found it, where it deserves to stay as an important part of this book's history.

Many of the books in the collection contain old newspaper clippings, articles about the authors and reviews of their work. Advertisements for telescopes and optical equipment feature heavily and make amusing reading just for the style in which they have been written. It never ceases to amaze me, how sophisticated advertising has become in such a short period of time. We have certainly lost the simplicity and innocence of that long gone age

Meeting and lecture notices are also included, especially those of Richard Anthony Proctor who, in 1879, gave a public lecture series in New Zealand. By all accounts the lectures were a great success; so much so, that the New Zealand newspapers gave stunning reviews. This prompted his astronomer daughter, Mary Proctor, to

tour here also. Another affinity Proctor had for New Zealand was in the banking industry, though by all accounts, his ventures were not successful.

In 1865 he wrote his first book, "Saturn and its System"; The book was published by Proctor at his own expense and received favourable reviews by the astronomers of the day. However, the public did not share their enthusiasm and the publication was a major financial loss. At the time of writing the book, Proctor was the key shareholder in a New Zealand bank but unfortunately the bank failed, consuming all his capital and leaving him to ponder his future.



The Story of the Heavens (1886) - Sir Robert Ball

The AAS and Observatory collection boasts a great number of Proctor's books, all are fully illustrated and in wonderful condition. We are lucky enough to own one of his last and most important works, the large and impressive "Old and New Astronomy" 1895. He died before its completion but left a considerable amount of material to finish it, which his old friend A.C Ranyard did successfully. This copy is one of the most sought-after books in the collection.

Sir Robert S Ball was also a prolific astronomical author who wrote many popular books on the subject. His "The Story of the Heavens" 1886 is one of those I felt compelled to spend extra time with. Heavily bound with a simple but enticing cover, it takes the reader on a comprehensive tour of the solar system, (Pluto excluded of course) and includes several chapters on miscellaneous stellar objects. Ball includes a fascinating chapter on the Astronomical Significance of Heat, perhaps the best chapter in the book.

It begins,

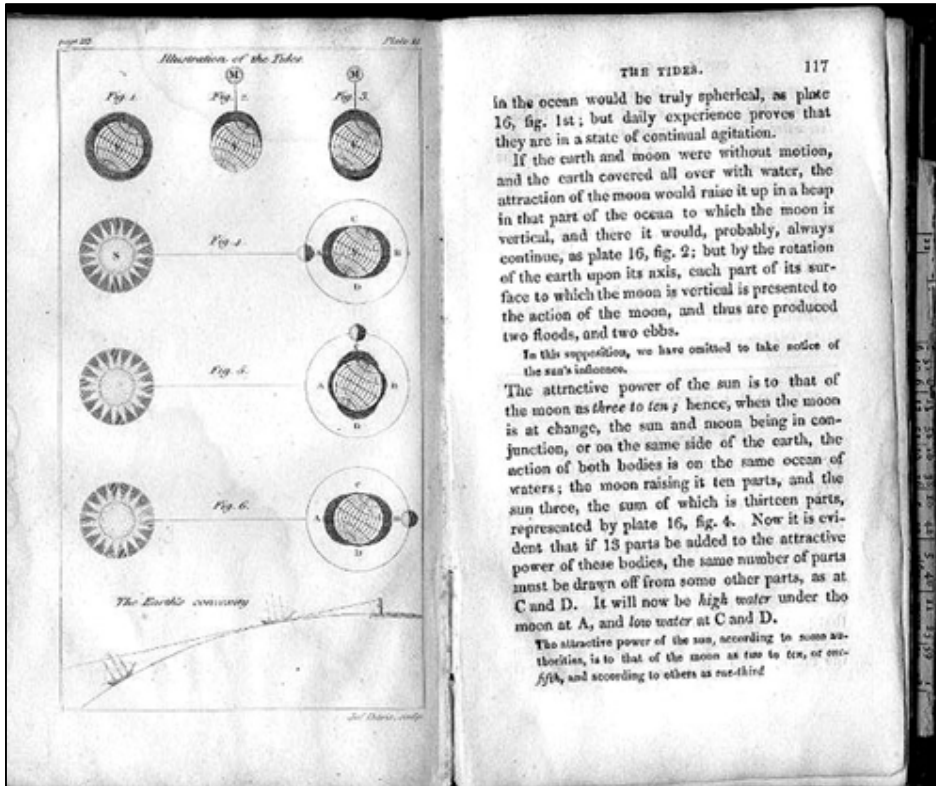
*"That a portion of a work on astronomy should bear the title placed at the head of this chapter will perhaps strike some of our readers as unusual, if not actually inappropriate." .....*

*"What ever weight such objections might have once had need not now be considered. The recent researches have shown not only that heat has important bearings on astronomy, but that it has really been one of the chief agents by which the universe has been moulded into its actual form." - a great testimony to the exciting science of Infrared astronomy.*

This wonderful book with its 24 richly coloured plate photographs really is a joy to read or to just flip through the pages and marvel at the illustrations. \*Eventually Ball became professor of Astronomy and Geometry at Cambridge University, where his talents were used to mathematically correct the Rosse reflector, at the time the largest reflecting telescope in the world. Interestingly, Ball was renowned less for his astronomical work than for his mathematical abilities, which were acknowledged by E T Whittaker, (Chair of Mathematics at Edinburgh in 1912) who ranked Ball as one of the greatest mathematicians of his age.

One of the oldest books in the collection, "Guys Astronomy" 1821-second edition, is a quaint pocket book in very fragile condition. It gives simple explanations for general astronomical phenomena and provides a comprehensive explanation of the theory of tides. The many black and white illustrations add to the book's charm.

Professor Joseph Guy, has been rather difficult to trace, not even the reliable Google search engine was able



Guys Astronomy (1821) - Professor Joseph Guy

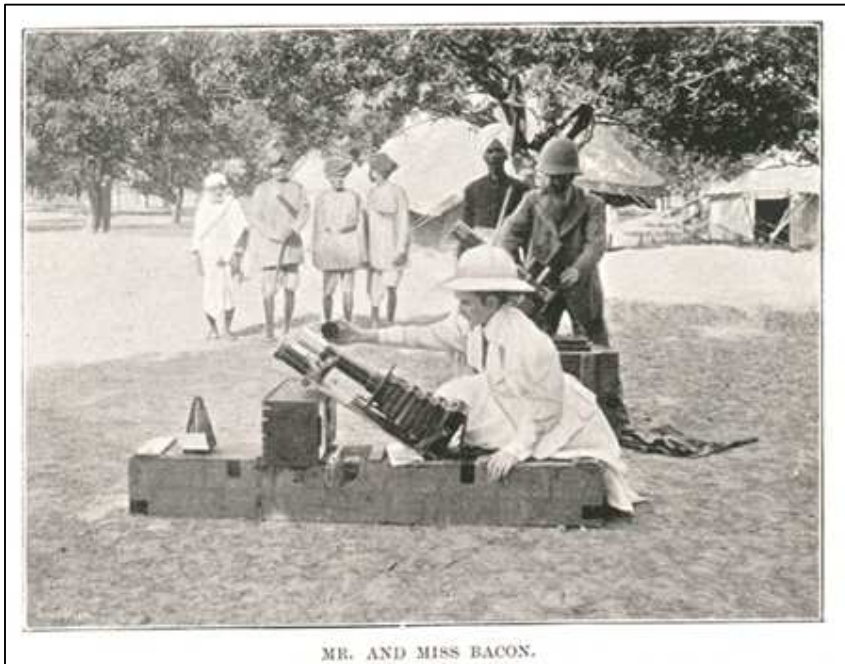
to throw any light on him or his work. However, this anonymity does not stop his books from commanding very high prices in the world of rare astronomical book collections.

As I flipped carefully through the delicate pages, I could imagine this little book sitting firmly inside the coat pocket of a well-to-do gentleman, as he rode his steed along a mud sodden track deep in thought about the astronomical lecture he was about to attend.

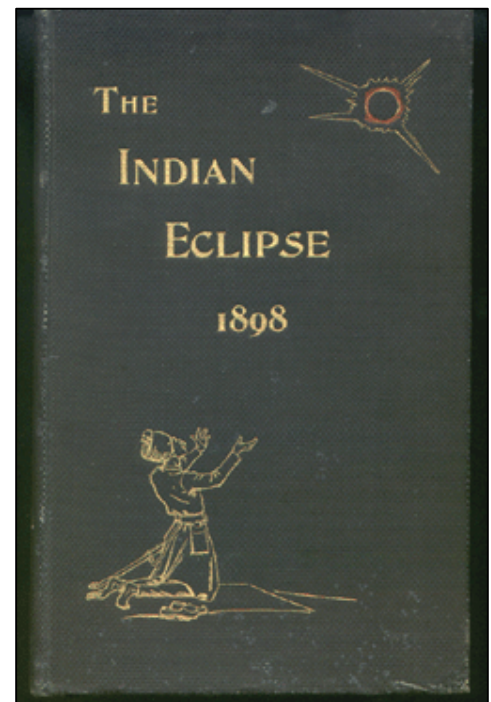
Metaphorically speaking of course, who said time travel was impossible?

The British Astronomical Association (BAA) has published many quality publications and "The Indian Eclipse 1898" is no exception. The quality of this book is truly remarkable. At 105 years old, it is a credit to the editor in chief, E. Walter Maunder FRAS. Its numerous like-new photographs, brings the book alive and complement the extensive diarised account of the second solar eclipse expedition organised by the BAA, (the first was to Norway in 1896.)

Both expeditions were made up entirely of volunteers who sought to record valuable observations of the event. Unfortunately, the 1896 expedition was hampered by bad weather and the anticipated scientific results did not eventuate. However, to the BAA's surprise, despite the terrible weather encountered, the expedition was a tremendous success. Not only did it boost membership numbers considerably, but cemented many fruitful, life long friendships. This helped bring to the new association, its own sense of purpose as well as public recognition as a powerful and prominent scientific institution. Its success laid the way for the January 22nd 1898 Total Solar Eclipse expedition to India, where this book originated.



MR. AND MISS BACON.



As I complete this article, I have almost finished reading the book and have been inspired to go on my own expedition someday. The South American Total Solar Eclipse in 2006 looks promising. Anybody interested?

As with all 'labours of love,' the time spent on the activity becomes insignificant when compared to the satisfaction derived. Not only have I received a great deal of satisfaction from getting to know these books but I have also gained insight into the authors' lives and their work.

I have been able to take a peep back in time to an era when the masculine pronoun was used in reference to all but the planet Venus and the Moon, and political correctness was thankfully, unheard of. I have seen how well intentioned librarians, have graffiti'd beautiful books in an attempt to deter theft. Defacing every illustrated page with the institution's stamp has devalued the books and impacted terribly on their appearance, leaving me growling with retrospective disapproval.

The Auckland Astronomical Society and Auckland Observatory book collection is by no means large, especially when compared to private collections or to those held by large institutions around New Zealand and the rest of the world. Nevertheless, the books are important windows to the past and a timeless testament to those who preceded us in the field of astronomy. In time I'm sure, an appropriate home will be found for the collection and we will all be able to enjoy what it has to offer.

Until then, my ears are attuned to those gentle whispers from the shelves.....

*\*R.A.Proctor obituary - Royal Astronomical Society Report of the Council 1889.*