

Armchair Astronomy No.8 - The Literature of Comets

Heavens Above! Astronomy from your armchair. (© R Bee 2007)

The Literature of Comets

Comets have been a fact of Earth's life long before man started seeing them and trembling at the sight. Most astronomers feel that Earth's oceans are a legacy of early bombardment by a plethora of comets, as a major component of a comet is frozen water ice. So while superstitious people may fear comets and see them as signs of impending disaster for kings and princes, we have much to thank them for. That's until the next big one hits, of course.

Comets, usually originating in the giant Oort Cloud that surrounds the outer reaches of the Solar System, come in all sizes, degrees of brightness, length of tails and periods of return. Some, like the recent spectacular Comet McNaught, will never return. One thing that all naked eye visible comets have in common is they've stirred the hearts of writers and poets over the ages. Especially those comets with more spectacular heads and long swooping tails. Here is a very small sample of the comet 'literature'.

The Bible, I Chronicles 21:16.

"And David lifted up his eyes and saw the angel of the Lord stand between the earth and heaven, having a drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem..."

In Shakespeare's Julius Caesar Act II Sc.II, Calpurnia says:

*"When beggars die there are no comets seen,
The Heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes..."*

Comets are more benign in the opening lines of Shakespeare's Henry IV Part I:

*"Hung be the heavens with black, yield day to night;
Comets importing change of Times and State,
Brandish your crystal tresses in the sky,
And with them scourge the bad revolting stars,
That have consented unto Henry's death..."*

In his Paradise Lost, Milton uses popular images of comets, particularly the idea of malevolence, fire and swords.

*"Incens'd with indignation Satan stood
Unterrified, and like a comet burn'd
That fires the length of Ophiucus huge
In th'arctic sky, and from his horrid hair
Shakes pestilence and war..."*

Powerful stuff. It helps if you know that Ophiucus is a large constellation north of Scorpius and Sagittarius. Then...

*"The brandished sword of God before them blazed
Fierce as a comet; which with torrid heat...
Began to parch that temperate clime..."*

Daniel Defoe, in his historical fiction A Journal of the Plague Year wrote the following about the comet of 1664:

"It passed directly over London so that it was plain that it imported something peculiar to the city alone... it was of a faint, dull languid colour, that its motion was very heavy, solemn and slow, and it accordingly foretold a heavy judgement, slow but severe, terrible and frightful, as was the Plague."

But Jonathan Swift didn't share the superstitions of his peers:

"Old men and comets have been revered for the same reason; their long beards and their pretenses to foretell events."

Of course, Alfred Lord Tennyson had a lot to pen about comets, as in these lines from The Lady of Shalott, even though he confuses a meteor with the comet:

*"All in the blue unclouded weather
Thick-jewell'd shone the saddle leather,
The helmet and the helmet-feather
Burn'd like one burning flame together,
As he rode down to Camelot.
As often thro' the purple night,*

*Below the starry clusters bright,
Some bearded meteor, trailing light,
Moves over still Shalott."*

When Halley's Comet returned in 1910, the modern scientifically savvy were more rhymesters than poets. Paul West, of the New York World wrote:

*"No more politicians,
No more tariff schemes,
No more trust conditions,
No more quick-rich dreams!
Bang! Annihilation!
Smash! We fly to bits!
There's some consolation
If the comet hits!"*

On a personal note, the view of Comet McNaught from Belanglo Forest in January 2007 even moved this humble astronomer to poetry:

*"In the fading gold of sunset
As the velvet evening falls,
The stars appear with Venus all a'glow.
Then a hand-span to the south
O'er the rusty clouds a'sprall,
The name-sake of McNaught puts on a show.
The comet head is plunging
T'wards the horizon, blazing white,
While its tail plumes like a fountain in a blow
Sending ribbons streaming northwards,
Like a curtain in the night
As we stood in quiet awe at Belanglo."*