

Heavens Above - A Chronicle: 00 Introduction

Introduction:

Heavens above! It certainly hadn't crossed my mind ten years ago that I would be writing this anthology of articles. At that time, I was more than happy to have received agreement from the then Acting Editor of the Macarthur Chronicle, Alison Taylor, to contribute material for a fortnightly column, to be called 'Heavens Above!'

And that happened as a matter of serendipity. In 1998 I attended the presentations of a writing competition held by Wollondilly Writers Group, to receive my humble 3rd prize for the poetry competition. (Poetry, would you believe?) The sponsor of the Poetry Section was the Macarthur Chronicle and Alison, as the Acting Editor, was there to present the prizes. I shook Alison's hand, thanked her and sat down. But from that moment my mind was in a whirl of possibilities.

My main recreational interest was astronomy, and more to the point, writing and editing Prime Focus, the monthly Journal for my local Macarthur Astronomical Society. Here was an opportunity to hobnob with the local newspaper editor and put forward my long nurtured idea of a regular column on astronomy for the local masses.

One cup of tea, a scone and a long conversation later, Alison had agreed to my submitting a draft column. The rest is history. The column 'Heavens Above!' has been running in the Chronicle regularly for the last ten years and is continuing. If the readers haven't tired of reading it, neither have I tired of writing it. After all, astronomy is an endless subject and there is always something new happening.

My main purpose of the column was to try to share some of my love for astronomy with a wide audience, particularly an audience who may have no current active interest in the subject, but who still may be niggled from time to time with the question 'what is it up there?' The average person, regardless of his or her occupation, a domestic duties person, a student, retired or unemployed, with or without a knowledge of science, may still be inspired by stories of the goings on in our solar system or the universe at large. My challenge was to translate my enthusiasm for things fantastic and scientific into terms that any person could understand – and get a buzz from. It would be a challenge to my writing and communications skills.

I like to think that the continuing existence of the column, and the encouraging letters, phone calls and emails I have received from time to time is a sign that the column has succeeded. My favourite was a gentleman who came up and spoke to me at a function and said he always found and read my column before he read the rest of the Chronicle. That's hard to top.

It was a short logical hop to the idea that a book containing a collection of the columns, with some additional material, may be a source of entertainment and even information for a wide range of readers, even going beyond the current readership of the Chronicle. It would be called 'Heavens Above! – A Chronicle' (Boom Boom!). For various reasons the book didn't eventuate. Here it is instead on-line as a series of articles. I hope you find this series at least as entertaining and informative as you did my columns. If you haven't read any or all of my columns, then of course it should be an all new experience. And it is my fervent hope that by reading this, you are continued to be encouraged to get out of your lounge chair, step outside, look up and be awed by the Heavens Above.

One of the challenges of writing a column for a newspaper, especially a column on a fairly obscure subject such as astronomy, is to say what you want to say in no more than 350 words, or so many column inches. Space is a precious commodity, not just to the stars and planets that occupy it, but to newspaper editors who want to put paying advertisements in it. And guess who usually has the final say? Yep, your 350 words often end up as 200 words or less.

My routine was to choose my subject for that week (usually drawn from my ephemeris, the latest issue of an astronomy magazine or news in the paper), write a draft of what I wanted to say, type it up and then check the length. More often than not, it exceeded 350 words and I would have to cut it back, often with a heavy heart. From time to time, what was published in the column ended up being heavily edited by the paper for reasons as mentioned above. And that was their perfect right. And it was my right to be privately disappointed that you, the reader, wasn't able to read my original brilliant unedited text. Such is pride!

On this website, even though it portends to be a reproduction of the column published over the past ten years, I have been a little naughty. I have actually reproduced the earlier columns as originally written and submitted by myself, not as finally edited and published by the Chronicle. Also, though for later columns I started submitting much shorter articles to meet the current length requirements, I have expanded them (or plan to in the near future) in this forum to what I would have written if I had been granted the space. Thus, I ultimately get my way! Such is self-publishing!

The format of these articles is simple. It is a chronological collection of all the columns from its inception to the current time, broken into separate articles for each month of the year. The idea is that for the month you are visiting the website, that month's article will show all the Chronicle articles that I wrote for viewing in that month. A monthly one-stop-shop of backyard astronomy, if you like. This is applicable to those topics which occur exactly the same time each year, such as constellations overhead and particular stars. I will add to it from time to time as the Chronicle column continues. In the future, and where useful, I will add some simple diagrams and sketches to help illustrate the point. It is true that a picture is worth a thousand words, especially a thousand of my words.

I have provided contents list at the start of each month's article, so if you are interested in a particular subject, you may scan down the page for that article. I have omitted entirely those 'Heavens Above!' articles that dealt with one-off events, such as attractive patterns of planets and stars, occultations of the Moon with some star or planet, and solar or lunar eclipses, which will not be repeated in exactly that form or timing again.

The first article is titled 'General'. This contains a very long set of articles that describe things visible in the sky or about astronomy generally that are not dependent on the time of year. They are 'timeless'. Because there are so many of these, I have broken them into a number of 'General' articles, individually numbered.

So there it is. I trust this series will inspire you to leave your chair from time to time, go outside, look up and find yourself saying – 'Heavens Above!'

I wish to take this opportunity to offer my sincere thanks to all those who have helped and encouraged me in the writing of the column over the years. Particularly I'd like to thank Alison Taylor who had the courage to initially set 'Heavens Above!' on its course in May 1998 and to Mandy Perrin who in resuming the helm of the Chronicle in October 1998 continued to enthusiastically support my column. Also a particularly special thanks to Melissa Page, Amanda Tesler, Joanne Vella, Donna Dawson, Melanie Carswell, Joseph Corey, David Campbell and Luisa Cogno who shepherded my column into print every fortnight. Naturally, a galactically great thanks to my family who, though not sharing my enthusiasm for astronomy, never failed to support me in my pursuit of it and the writing of the column. They are the true stars in my life.

Good Seeing.

Robert Bee

TABLE OF CONTENTS FOR ALL YEAR SECTIONS

ALL YEAR - PART 1.

1. Getting Started
2. The Colours of Stars
3. Time Travel
4. The Names of Stars
5. Suns are Stars, Sol
6. Life, Europa and Everything
7. Shooting the Stars (Meteorites)
8. How Far Little Star?
9. Taking the Mickey Out of Pluto
10. Slippery Little Sucker (Black Holes)
11. The Way South
12. Seeking Sister Earths
13. Simple the Best
14. Pluto Dogged by Luck
15. Just and ordinary Star

ALL YEAR - PART 2

16. New for Old
17. Solar Pin Balls
18. Asteroids Galore
19. It Takes two to Tango
20. The Southern Aurora
21. Kuiper by the Dozen 23.
22. Forever New
23. Asteroid Hermione Potters Along
24. Blame it on the Hypernova
25. The Age Old Story26. Stellar Tool Box
27. Dutch Treats
28. Sizzling Meteorites, Batman
29. Tale of Four Dwarves

ALL YEAR - PART 3

30. Midsummer Night Moons
31. Stars Trump Clouds
32. Why Don't Planets Twinkle?

33. So Much Space
34. 7 Up and 10 Down?
35. Close But Far Between
36. Littering the Solar System
37. Winging to the Stars
38. Pity Poor Pluto
39. Shades of the Terminator
40. To be continued...