



PRIME FOCUS

Volume 4 Issue 4

May 1999

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PRESIDENT'S REPORT

It seems to be all happening. The Seminar and Open Night of the 1st May was a great success for all involved. My congratulations to Ragbir and the organising committee, the people who chaired the sessions, Bobbie & Peter Elston who worked hard with the registrations and the morning & afternoon teas, and all those who gave of their time and telescopes at the Open Star Night.

Everyone did MAS proud.

For those who didn't attend the seminar, you have no idea what you missed. Rubbing shoulders and talking at a personal level to professional astronomers of the highest calibre was an exciting experience.

Phil Ainsworth ■

VICE-PRESIDENT'S REPORT

Due to recent overindulgence, I've suffered a burn-out of astronomic proportions and have confined myself to light duties for a while. This has given me an opportunity to enjoy the recent seminar without any organisational responsibilities, except for the requirements of the public star night.

I found the daytime seminar a most wonderful experience and the calibre and eminence of the 11 lecturers was not lost on any of the attendees, and indeed many of us were hanging off every word, notes were taken and ideas jotted down. Some things went over my head but most of the content was absorbed.

The refreshments served at selected intervals were of the highest order.

I have summarised my personal impressions of just two speakers. I originally reviewed the entire day, but Bob says space is at a premium. (*That's right, blame the editor... Ed.*)

WARNING! These reviews are loaded with personal preference and bias.

1. 'Astronomy's Inspirational Role' by Dr David Malin (AAT):

I have to say that this talk reached into my heart and soul – the emotion of it all, the glory, inspiration and imagination runs wild. Nothing stirs me more than to peer into the darkness and vastness of space. Dr Malin gave some insights, so consider this:

What is out there we barely know. We as human beings rely on our senses to exist on

this earthly plane but with space we cannot touch or feel it, cannot smell it, cannot hear it, can't taste it either. Only one of our senses can detect it and it does a rather bad job at that.

Our instrumentally unassisted eyesight needs almost totally black conditions even to get a glimpse at it. Yet why does it evoke an interest, passion and emotional response that is curiosity bound in the extreme? ie what is out there?

Since that lecture, I've been out every night, even for a minute, just to make sure the mystery is still there.

2. 'Amateur Astronomers in Education' by Peter Druery (MAS and Sydney Institute of Technology).

Our own Peter Druery gave such a good talk that many requested a repeat at one of our own meetings.

Essentially, what roles do amateurs play? How can educational bodies tap into Astronomical Societies, what linkage can be formed and is the amateur astronomer restricted by lack of professional training and experience?

Of particular interest was the skills, qualities and limitations of amateurs. I agree Peter was very accurate in these analogies.

Peter's assertions that meaningful aperture relates to 6" (150mm) and above caused

quite a stir. Peter should be mindful that 50% of our membership is based in the lesser sized apertures. Good natured retorts followed but I have to concur that the recognised standard is the minimum of 6" and has been for decades. That light grasp is essential to view many faint clusters, nebulae and galaxies and the 6" is the basic starting point for serious deep sky work.

Having said that, many improvements such as eyepiece selections, finders and personal technical skills can enhance any telescope (no matter what size) to make meaningful contributions.

Peter will expand on his discussions and make presentations to our Society. I enjoyed his talk immensely. Well done Peter!

Other Matters:

Our membership stands at 51, which does not include families, so I guess 60 is nearer the mark. That's really good news.

Don't forget the Cobbitty Star Nights. We should have two next month. (See the dates in the box.)

Bring your scopes to the monthly meetings for the popular Car Park observing and technical skills workshop.

Noel Sharpe

Official Dates for Cobbitty

Field Nights

12/6/99	10/7/99
14/8/99	11/9/99
9/10/99	6/11/99
11/12/99	

PUBLIC STAR NIGHT

I cannot thank enough the 15 or so members who gave it their all to provide telescopes for the Public Night. We have agreed that 300 eager star gazers were in attendance and without your support we would have been swamped.

I'm very pleased that the instructions I gave were carried out and many different objects were on show as attested to when, after observing at my telescope, I'd ask "and what have you seen tonight?", the replies were 'Jewel Box, Orion Nebula, Mars, the Moon, Canopus and Sirius, Alpha Centauri etc.'

Well done, guys and gals. You came through when we needed it the most. And the comments I got back were that you enjoyed it too. A personal breakthrough occurred that night and it's been a long time coming. For the clues, read 'The Sky Hunter' in the next issue.

Noel Sharpe

Many thanks to **Don Whiteman** for bringing his 10" scope and expertise to the Open Night.



SOUTH PACIFIC STAR PARTY

Off to the 1999 South Pacific Star Party, caravan in tow with Norman the telescope inside and our eight year old son Nicholas. We went up to Ilford on Wednesday, but the event did not officially start until the Friday. A comfy 3½ hour drive to Wiruna the ASNSW dark sky site at Ilford. The site is great, with hot running water, flushing loos as well as the traditional types! Club house and kitchen and a fantastic observing field. There was plenty of space for camping and caravans. My wife Bobbie and our two daughters arrived on the Thursday night about 10pm.

The weather was cloudy the whole time except we had half an hour's viewing, just long enough to take in a spectacular image of Mars, through Geoff Zenner's 10" Dobsonian. Eric Brown from Macarthur Astronomical Society arrived on Friday and along with some fellow astronomers enjoyed some port from Eric's elegant silver port glasses and we also partook in some guitar playing

and singing around the fire, as well as good conversation.

There were many children at the event and they became a happy band of 'ferals' having a great adventure, they also had a great find as they excavated a real old tractor wheel of a steam driven tractor.

Friday night was the official opening of the star party and over the weekend there were some interesting speakers talking on the subjects such as variable stars, the large Magellan Cloud as well as some displays by the Binocular and Telescope Shop and York Optical with some really good party specials, and a swapmeet with some interesting items for sale. There were astronomers from far and wide, England, Switzerland, USA and our own Rev. Bob Evans popped down to our van for a bite of lunch.

Courtesy of Mike Smith of the B&T Shop we were treated to some hands-on rocket launching with miniature rockets which reach altitudes of about 300 feet in the blink of an eye, before parachuting back to earth.

The rain gods were not appeased by the sacrificial burning of the telescope, and a considerable amount of volatile fluid was used to entice the telescope to incinerate but it was a slow burn and we can only assume that would be why it stayed

cloudy for the whole weekend! (A good theory!).

After talking Eric into staying on Sunday night for what we were sure would be a good night's viewing we ended up under the annexe with rain pouring. A DVD system was set up in the clubhouse so we were treated to rather fantastic showing of the movie 'Contact'.

I wish I could report a weekend of great viewing and observing experiences, however even with inclement weather the Star Party is well worth attending and it would be lovely to see our Macarthur Astronomical Society members joining in the astronomical fun.

Pete Elston. ■

ANCIENT MYSTERIES

How would a native tribe know about the skies above us? This riddle has left astronomers and archaeologists puzzled.

An African tribe in Mali, called the *Dogon*, had known about the dog star Sirius and its invisible companion (Sirius B) for centuries. Astronomers had suspected Sirius B since the early 1800s which was thought that it must be an incredibly dense but invisible star. We all know now that this star is a white dwarf in which the atoms have collapsed within themselves.

But it was not until the late 1920s that astronomers postulated the existence of white dwarfs.

According to the *Dogon* tribe's legend, Sirius B's existence (which they called Digitaria) was brought to their knowledge by fishlike creatures (called Nommo) that came to them thousands of years ago from Sirius.

Another surprising fact was that the *Dogons* had a detailed knowledge about our solar system. They knew that the planets revolved around the sun and that the moon was dry and lifeless and that Saturn had rings.

Similar associated mysteries were found on 10,000 year old *samaritan* tablets. The writing found on these tablets indicated Earth being the 7th planet and had information about the Pyramids.

It is difficult for us in our modern society to imagine that thousands of years ago, there was once a civilisation that surpassed our own. Maybe some day we will have the knowledge to solve the many questions left unanswered.

Attila Kaldy ■

(Someone has to say it, so... I'll be doggoned! Sorry... Ed)

NOTICE OF MOTION

Notice is given of a Motion proposed by the Committee to move the date of future AGMs from March to April.

In the June MAS meeting this Motion will be moved, debated and put to a vote.

The prime reason for the proposed change is to provide the Treasurer with the necessary time to finalise the accounts of the previous year for auditing and presentation to the AGM.

EXTRA STAR NIGHT

As well as the scheduled Star Night on 12th June, there will be a Lunar Observing Night at Cobbitty on 19th June. (We will also observe anything the moon hasn't washed out.)

NEXT ISSUE:

* **The Sky Hunter** – an heroic tale of the search for the South Celestial Pole.

* **The Sun Pt 1** – another epic article by John Casey, about our own G Class star.

MACDOB, the Society's own 6" Dobsonian telescope, is feeling very neglected and looking for temporary homes. See Bob Bee at MAS meetings or call 46 251623

SECTION LEADERS

The following members have offered themselves as leaders (or co-ordinators) of those members with special interests in particular fields

DEEP SKY:

Pete & Bobbie Elston
Phone 02 46474491
e-mail:
eclipse@lightstorm.com.au

ASTRO COMPUTING:

Daniel Ross (02 9790 5838)

AMATEUR TELESCOPE

MAKING: Dick Everett
Phone 02 96051564

COBBITTY OBSERVING

SITE: Noel Sharpe
Mobile 0410 445 041

BEGINNERS:

Noel Sharpe
Mobile 0410 445 041

If anyone is interested in being a Section Leader, let Bob Bee or another Committee member know a topic you are interested in helping people with.

PINK HOLES?

Dr Rachael Webster (who spoke at UWS on her special subject of Gravitational lensing) and Dr Paul Francis of ANU have discovered hundreds of pink 'black holes'. "About the only thing most people know about black holes is they are black, and now we have stuffed that up."