



How to use a computerized telescope

by Michael Covington

Cambridge University Press, 2002.
ISBN 0-521-00790-9. Pp xvi + 223 (pbk)

Celestial objects for modern telescopes

by Michael Covington

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£39.99 for both

This brand new pair of books, by experienced astrophotographer and astro-author Michael Covington, is advertised as a set of 'companion' volumes, but your reviewer found that it all depends on your experience, interests and on what telescopes you own.

How to use a computerized telescope is divided into two main parts. The first part (Telescopes in general) explains, with great clarity, how the sky moves, how computerised telescopes track the stars, how the op-

tics work and how to do astrophotography. There is also a useful section on troubleshooting some of the simpler problems a newcomer might encounter.

The section on astrophotography will certainly get you started with photographing the night sky, but Covington advises the reader to purchase his earlier book for more information. Where this section really did disappoint was in the microscopic amount of space devoted to CCD imaging. As someone who switched from film to CCDs ten years ago (and never shed a tear) your reviewer is undoubtedly biased here; but, even trying to be objective, the most exciting accessory on any computerised telescope is, quite often, the CCD camera and this book only devotes one page to it! Also, Covington states that digital cameras are not suitable for deep sky work, but, in fact, stacking multiple short digicam exposures together can give instant results just as good as most beginners' first attempts with fast colour film.

The second part of *How to use a computerized telescope* is, essentially, an expert guide to using the Meade LX200, the Meade ETX-90 EC Autostar and the Celestron NexStar 5. As Covington says, 'None of them is still the manufacturer's latest and greatest. Technology is progressing so fast that new models appear almost every month'. This is a major problem for all equipment book authors and Covington is taking a big gamble in devoting half of the book to these ageing instruments. Also, he assumes the reader will have the telescope manuals to hand. Undoubtedly this part of the book will be useful to the thousands of existing users of these telescopes and to future Autostar and NexStar users, but it is of little use to owners of completely different telescopes.

While *How to use a computerized telescope* will be of value mostly to visual observers with LX200, Autostar and NexStar equipment, Covington's *Celestial objects for modern telescopes* will have a much broader appeal. Most readers will not have missed the similarity of the book's title to T. W. Webb's legendary *Celestial Objects for Common Telescopes*, originally published in 1859 and still available. Part I of Covington's second book covers a comprehensive range of topics: from choosing observing sites and judging the

weather prospects to observing every category of object in the night sky. By every category I mean the moon and planets, comets and asteroids, stars and constellations, artificial satellites and deep sky objects. There are also tables of data and diagrams, for events such as planetary oppositions and eclipses, up to 2010.

While Part I of the book will give a solid introductory grounding in finding each type of object and understanding what you are looking at, so many different subjects are covered that there is not enough space for a detailed master-class on observing each object. For example, five pages are devoted to comets, but the BAA's own excellent 56-page *Observing Guide to Comets* is what would really set the potential comet observer up.

Part II of Covington's book contains a well thought out catalogue of 200 interesting multiple stars, variable stars and deep sky objects, all of which can easily be seen visually with a 20cm telescope from suburban skies. The catalogue is split into six two-monthly periods; e.g. the January–February period is for late evening objects from six to ten hours of Right Ascension. LX200 and NexStar designations are provided, where appropriate, for each object. This is a fine list of objects (though, sadly, there are hardly any charts and no images) and it will certainly have many new telescope owners slewing their GOTO telescopes till the tiny plastic motors fall apart! Unfortunately (if my experience is typical) the smaller GOTO scopes will often miss the target, which is where a set of finder charts would be very useful.

In conclusion, both these books are very well written and have their merits, but they will be of greatest use to absolute beginners and visual observers owning LX200, Autostar and NexStar telescopes.

Martin Mobberley

Martin Mobberley was BAA President from 1997–1999 and is a regular CCD imager of anything new or spectacular in the night sky. Since escaping from his 22-year prison term as a software engineer (in August 2002) he devotes all his waking hours to things astronomical: a blissful situation!

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