

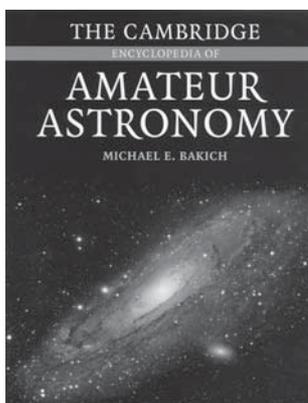


The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Amateur Astronomy

by Michael E. Bakich

Cambridge University Press, 2003. ISBN 0-521-81298-4. Pp xii + 342 (hbk), £35.00.

This book was totally different from that which your reviewer expected from the title. The term 'Encyclopedia' may conjure up a vision of an exhaustive, dull, alphabetical list of topics, but this book is far more readable than that. The author has already written two other Cambridge books, on Constellations and Planets, and is described as an astronomy lecturer and eclipse tour guide. He is certainly familiar with the world of amateur astronomy and this book very much captures the modern essence of the hobby, especially the telescope, equipment and modern observing aspects. A more accurate description of the book would perhaps be 'A comprehensive introduction to the hobby of amateur astronomy, at the start of the 21st century'. Despite being a Cambridge publication, published and printed in the UK, the book has a heavy United States bias and the overall flavour is distinctly 'Sky and Telescope' / US star party.



This is not a book which the advanced observer will feel is an essential acquisition, but it is a very potent, hard to put down, comprehensive introduction for the beginner. The layout of tables, facts and helpful illustrations is very pleasing to the eye, in keeping with other modern Cambridge astronomy books.

The book is divided into seven chapters covering, in this order: the basics (positional

astronomy and time etc.), equipment, observing methods, observing tips, sources of information, the solar system and deep sky/variable stars. Following the seven chapters are eighteen very useful appendices covering mainly planetary data but including information on the constellations, the thirty brightest stars and Messier and Caldwell objects.

I rarely find anything in a modern astronomy book that makes me stop dead in my tracks and mutter 'well, I've never seen one of those before'. But this book, with its many attention-grabbing photographs, held quite a few. For example, on page 75, there is a picture of the 'CosmicOne SCT Cooler', a device you insert in the eyepiece end of a Schmidt-Cassegrain, to cool it down. This was a new one on me! Similarly, on pages 232 and 233, the pictures of the El Paso fireball detection camera (a video camera staring at one of those alleyway 'blind-spot' fish-eye mirrors) had me

thinking 'Hmm, I could build one of those myself'.

This book is especially thorough in its coverage of the solar system, but a revised version would benefit from a section on planetary webcam imaging, which has revolutionised the hobby in the last year and superseded video work. Strangely, the lunar occultation section lives within the Deep Sky chapter, presumably as these events involve mainly stellar objects: it feels distinctly out-of-place.

Not everything Bakich says will go down easily with advanced observers. For example, on page 108, the comment 'the days of obtaining magnitudes of variable stars through visual observations are nearly at an end' could cause a riot at a BAA VSS meeting. Nevertheless, the book's easy-going style and excellent illustrations certainly gripped my attention for five cloudy nights in October and there are very few books, outside Stephen King novels, that can manage that.

Martin Moberley

Martin is a compulsive CCD imager of anything new and spectacular in the night sky and has never been able to kick the habit. He presents the monthly 'Sky Notes' at the BAA's London meetings.