



Star clusters and how to observe them

by Mark Allison

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Mark Allison is clearly an enthusiast and keen amateur observer of the Deep Sky, and in *Star clusters and how to observe them* the reader is persuaded that he has observed many star clusters over the years, one suspects visually, using binoculars and telescopes typical of the new observer. Many of the cluster observations describe their appearance in 4- and 8-inch telescopes. His style is friendly and welcoming to the newcomer to the field, although his enthusiasm can be over-punctuated with exclamation marks.

The book divides into two parts; the first discusses the astrophysics of stellar associations and open and globular star clusters in the Milky Way galaxy, then mentions asterisms and extragalactic clusters. In the second half Allison surveys equipment, observing techniques and resources such as paper and electronic star atlases. Some information is specific to star clusters but much is general Deep Sky observing advice, and may be surplus to requirements.

Just under half the book and most of Part Two is a ‘comprehensive observing list’ of 110 open and globular clusters and a couple of asterisms, ranging from ‘easy’ to ‘hard’ targets. Most on the list are visible from northern temperate latitudes, although Omega Centauri and 47 Tucanae are also described. Most well-known clusters get a mention, but there is a good range of challenge here for the more adventurous or veteran observer. Perhaps it is not made clear enough that there are very many more clusters of both varieties on show to the owner of a modest telescope. Clearly Allison’s selection policy must have been a personal one and understandably it would be impossible to include all clusters, especially of the open variety, but a few fairly obvious omissions in the ‘comprehensive’ list include IC 4665, NGC 6819 and NGC 7789.

The observing aspect of the book is more successful than the astrophysical which has many interesting things to say but which is littered with somewhat dubious statements throughout. One such assertion suggests the open cluster NCG 559 contains a supernova remnant – dubious indeed.

The text also contains a lot of mistakes that would have been spotted if the book had been more carefully prepared. Samples include the description of the nomenclature of M34 as also being named NGC 2362, the Praesepe and Beehive (these refer to M44 of course – p.60); M.82 is said to be a Local Group galaxy which it is not (p.49); Kemble’s Cascade is not just ‘near’ Camelopardalis, it is well within

it (p.44); that ‘the nearest genuine cluster is the Pleiades at 400 light-years with the Hyades coming a close second at 1,540 light-years’ which is nonsense – the Hyades are at 147 light-years, a fact that is stated later when each object is described (pp.19 and 125 respectively). Such carelessness misleads, and distracts from the book.

As with some other volumes in Springer’s series, the illustrations could be better. The book is not designed to be a coffee-table eye-catcher, but in the age of modern imaging, many pictures are poor. That of the Coathanger (Brocchi’s Cluster), one of the easiest Deep Sky objects of which to obtain a good image, is awful. Several others are trailed, blobby, or under-contrasted. This is partly due to selection of images, partly to reproduction. But it would have been a simple matter to have obtained better pictures from a wide variety of sources.

The few maps are of limited value. They are taken from Software Bisque, and are accurate but could have been so much more useful. Most observers will have an atlas, charts or an electronic programme with the ability to generate charts that will serve better. The Cygnus map misses off many accessible clusters; so do those of Vulpecula and Auriga. The Taurus map shows NGC 1647 but doesn’t label it, and omits NGC 1746 completely; that of Perseus labels NGC 1245 but doesn’t show its position – irritating.

The book will not displace Archinal & Hynes book *Star Clusters* for astrophysics and a comprehensive catalogue, or Kepple & Sanner’s *The Night Sky Observer’s Guide* for observing (both Willmann–Bell), but for the newcomer to star clusters looking for a relatively inexpensive alternative, it may serve.

Nick Hewitt

Dr Nick Hewitt, a former President of the Association, directed the Deep Sky Section from 1992 to 2005.

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