

British University Observatories 1772–1939

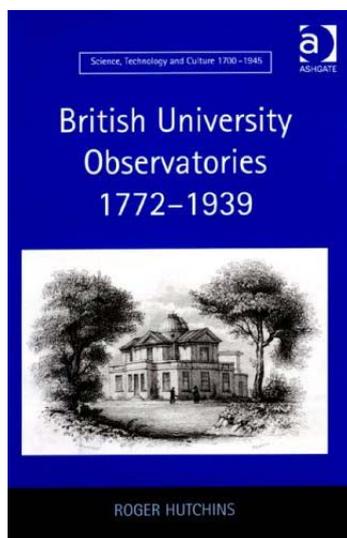
by Roger Hutchins

Ashgate, 2008. ISBN 978-0-7546-3250-4. Pp xxiv + 533, £60 (hbk).

British University Observatories chronicles the histories of the observatories at Cambridge, Oxford, Dunsink (Dublin), Durham, Glasgow and London. The book is based on the author's Oxford University doctoral thesis and is clearly the result of many years of research. Hutchins is a historian by training and *British University Observatories* is aimed at the academic market, but much of it is very readable. A particular delight is the large number of fascinating illustrations – not only of observatories and equipment, but, just as importantly, of the astronomers who made it all happen. Indeed, the human side of the story of each observatory comes out very strongly in this book.

Hutchins starts by describing how the various observatories were founded, and then further sets the scene with a description of the organisation of nineteenth-century astronomy. He then tracks the observatories' fortunes during the course of the nineteenth century. An important theme to come out of this book is how the observatories constantly struggled to function, due to a chronic lack of funding and also because the observatory directors were astronomy professors with heavy teaching schedules. However, in Chapter 5 Hutchins includes an overview of the work of observatories in other countries, in which he shows that lack of funding was by no means a purely British disease. Hutchins also assesses the impact of astrophysics on university observatories, and he ends with how they faced the challenges of the inter-war years. He shows how astrophysics was gradually taken over by the universities and ceased to be a pursuit for the 'grand amateurs' of the Victorian era.

Much the largest part of the book is taken up by the Oxford and Cambridge observatories, which is inevitable, given that Hutchins



himself is based at Oxford and that it was these observatories that became the largest and most important institutions of their kind in the British Isles before 1939.

The chapters are arranged partly by theme and partly by period. While this approach has its strengths, I feel that it would have been better to have told the story of each observatory in separate chap-

ters, and to have used the introduction and conclusion to set the historical context and draw comparisons. The layout that Hutchins has used means that it is sometimes difficult to pick up the thread of a story which was left off several chapters before. For example, the foundation of the Oxford University Observatory in 1873 is described in Chapter 1, but the observatory is not referred to again until Chapter 4, more than a hundred pages later, and we have to wait another hundred pages before the full narrative is taken up.

For the most part, the book is clearly written and very accurate. Hutchins meticulously acknowledges his sources in more than a thousand footnotes, many of them relating to primary sources. Particularly impressive is the range of material covered as well as the depth of the research. I recommend *British University Observatories* to everyone with a serious interest in the history of astronomy between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Lee Macdonald

Lee Macdonald is a long-time BAA member and solar observer, and recently graduated from St Edmund's College, Cambridge with a Master's degree in the History and Philosophy of Science. As part of the degree, he wrote a dissertation on the origins and construction of the 98-inch Isaac Newton Telescope at Herstmonceux.

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