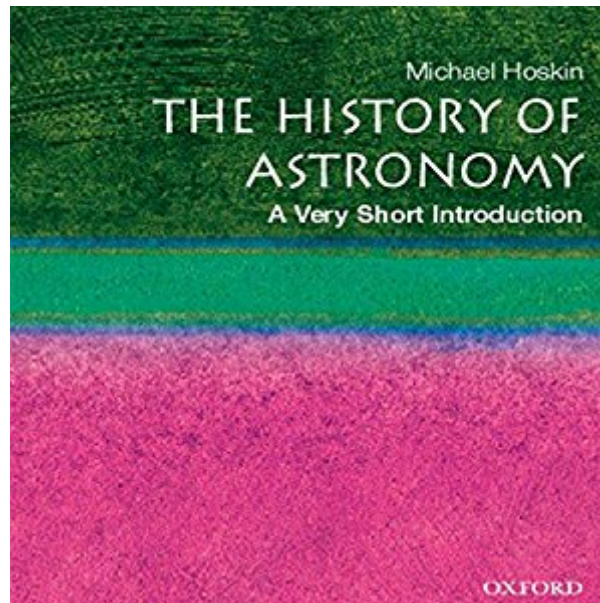




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The History Of Astronomy: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

This is a fascinating introduction to the history of Western astronomy, from prehistoric times to the origins of astrophysics in the mid-nineteenth century. Historical records are first found in Babylon and Egypt, and after two millennia the arithmetical astronomy of the Babylonians merged with the Greek geometrical approach to culminate in the *Almagest* of Ptolemy. This legacy was transmitted to the Latin West via Islam, and led to Copernicus's claim that the Earth is in motion. In justifying this Kepler converted astronomy into a branch of dynamics, leading to Newton's universal law of gravity. The book concludes with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century applications of Newton's law, and the first explorations of the universe of stars. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I enjoyed reading this book, and I like the short and to the point format. If you are interested in astronomy I think it would be worth your time and money to read it.

The book, in spite of being only a hundred and some pages long, covers the topic comprehensively. It is also a very enjoyable read.

This "Short Introduction" was certainly informative for me. And it was what I expected. Now, I hope that there will be a sequel that picks up where this one ends, updates us readers into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

I love this Oxford "A Very Short Introduction:..." series. I have quite a collection and have yet to find an edition I didn't enjoy reading or learn something new from. If you want an accessible introduction to a new difficult subject, this series is the place to begin from.

This book is part of the OUP's Very Short Introduction series of 100+ page books that can fit into your jacket pocket. It is somewhat misleadingly titled as it's not a "History of Astronomy" but a history of West Eurasian astronomy until about the mid-19th century when astrophysics began to develop. Chinese and Indian astronomy are ignored. We are told on page 10 that ever since the time of Eratosthenes "everyone with a modicum of education has known that the earth is spherical". Everyone in Christendom and the Islamic world, perhaps, but when the Jesuits reached China they found that the consensus view amongst the highly educated elite was that the earth was flat. (Chinese astronomy produced a large mass of observational data but little useful theory). After a brief review of what little we can know of what was known in prehistoric times there is a solid chapter on Babylonian and Greek astronomy. Here I feel the author is remiss not to mention Aristarchus as knowing that the geocentric theory was around for almost two millennia before it was widely accepted puts the reluctance of people to accept Copernicus's resurrection of it into better perspective. This is followed by another good chapter on medieval Islamic and Christian astronomy. (After this the author is on safer ground in ignoring non-Western astronomy as from the mid-1400s the history of Western astronomy is the history of astronomy). Chapter 4, "Astronomy Transformed" covers Tycho, Kepler and Galileo. This leads on to a chapter on "Astronomy in the age of Newton" where Hooke receives generous treatment. The final chapter takes us out of the Solar System and into the exploration of stars until the point where astrophysics takes off. There follows a brief and appropriate epilogue on light which is, after all, what we see rather than the object itself. The book is well written and I would recommend it to the general reader. I noticed only one factual error, a small one. On page 72 we are told that John Harrison sailed to Barbados in 1764. In fact it was his son William who undertook the trip on behalf of his elderly father. However I am no expert and there may be other errors of which I am unaware.

This is an excellent short history of developments in astronomy from prehistory to the 19th century. And there is perhaps no one better suited than Michael Hoskin to write it: he is the editor of the

‘Cambridge Illustrated History of Astronomy’; he has also been the long-standing editor of the ‘Journal for the History of Astronomy.’ He if anyone can distill millennia of stargazing to under 125 pages. The six short chapters cover the sky in prehistory, astronomy in antiquity, astronomy in the middle ages, the Copernican revolution, astronomy in the age of Newton, and developments in stellar and nebular astronomy (looking beyond our solar system). The book also provides a number of useful illustrations. This is a great primer, a perfect pocket introduction to the history of astronomy.

Lucid overview of the development of astronomy as a science, from ancient times till the mid-19th century.

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