



Cometography: A catalogue of comets. Volume 3: 1900–1932

by Gary W. Kronk

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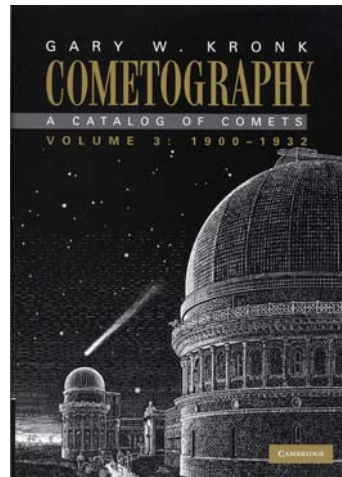
Cometography is a series of books for comet enthusiasts. Volume 3 runs to 650 pages, and there are still three more volumes to come, as the series has been lengthened to keep the volumes down to a manageable size. This volume contains all the descriptions that you could ever want of the comets of the first decades of the twentieth century. What it doesn't contain are any illustrations of these comets, nor any interpretation of what the descriptions actually mean. Interpretation was less of an issue for earlier volumes, but as scientific knowledge increases, so too does the need to put observations into context.

Sadly many of my comments made in reviews of the previous volumes apply in spades to this one. The physical descriptions of the comets are ever more detailed, but the comets do not come alive. Take for example comet 1913 Y1 (Delavan). This was widely observed by the public in 1914 September, as

it was well placed in the evening sky, hanging below the body of the Great Bear. Its appearance was often mentioned in diaries of the time (see for example my paper on diaries from the Great War in *JBAA* 113,5), but the spectacle doesn't come over at all in *Cometography*.

Periodic comets are equally frustrating – what happened to comet Westphal to give it the designation 20D/? The answer is that it hasn't been seen again since its 1913 apparition and is thought to have disintegrated, but this isn't at all clear from the text. A similar fate befell comet Ensen (1925 X1), but again there is no mention of it. Knowledge of the percentage of comets that disintegrate is an important aspect of the study of their physical behaviour.

Several paragraphs are often given to orbits, with details of who first calculated them, and on what basis. On occasion peri-



ods are given to the nearest 1000 years for some long-period orbits. It is a valuable lesson to look at how published cometary elements change as more observations accrue, and all too often it is clear that the number of decimal points given does not reflect the closeness of the orbit to the truth.

Despite these failings the book is an invaluable reference, being a compendium of most of the readily accessible descriptions of comets of

the early twentieth century. It is a must for comet anoraks, and in particular for this Section Director.

Jonathan Shanklin

Jonathan directs the Comet Section and is finding it hard to keep up with the huge number of comet discoveries of recent years. He suspects that four more volumes of Cometography may be needed before the series is up to date.