



The Moon, Observed through the Fry 8-inch Cooke Refractor 1862, ULO (After William Herschel)

ASTRONOMY INTERVIEW

Peter Thomas is the observatory manager at University of London Observatory. I asked him about observation and learning in Astronomy at ULO.

G.A.- Do you think the use of digital technology in Astronomy is preventing the students from the experience of direct observation, and from observational recording methods like drawing?

P.T.- When looking at current CCD images students have to learn to subtract visual noise, it is a very different technique and way of looking, they get so much information from digital images without much observational effort. Drawing teaches the students to look and look again. It is surprising how many get good accurate results from drawing.

G.A.- Is drawing part of the Astronomy degree course?

P.T.- Yes- It is for the first years. We ask them to look through the telescope, move the telescope to find an object and then to draw it.

G.A.- What do you see as the purpose of the drawing exercise, is it a mnemonic device?

When I asked students about their experience of drawing through the telescope, most students said it was beneficial helping them observe more actively and remember what they were observing. Does ULO encourage students to continue drawing during their BA?

Whereas in the mid nineteenth century knowledge, was a very slow process, an endeavour. Drawing is a slow process and a slow way of getting to know something, requiring concentration, patience, imagination and acute observation. Do you see the value in the analogue approach to knowledge formation?

P.T.- The purpose is to orientate and memorize position of stars and show relative distances within the field of view, so, I suppose it is a mnemonic device. They all do this practical, and if they wanted to continue working on a drawing observation project, this would be valued.



Drawing the Moon- I visited ULO a number of times in 2010. Thanks to the staff at ULO I made drawings of sunspots and the moon using the Fry 8 inch Cooke Refractor. The longer I observed, the more I could see and the more comparisons I could draw between the moon and forms I had drawn before. I found drawing the moon through direct observation helped me remember its anatomy and deepen my interest in the moon as a subject.

G.A.- I believe there is a value in the slow process of creating the analogue document compared to the speed of the digital document. The time spent observing and recording helps the memory and develops interest in the subject. In contemporary culture, the means through which we attain knowledge is changing rapidly. We can now "know" about anything very quickly using the internet. Whereas in the mid nineteenth century knowledge, was a very slow process, an endeavour. Drawing is a slow process and a slow way of getting to know something, requiring concentration, patience, imagination and acute observation. Do you see the value in the analogue approach to knowledge formation?

P.T.- Yes- Look at monastic life- there is a lot missing but a tranquility that is aimed for- you have time to study and time to think and decide what is important morally and worthwhile, modern life doesn't give you much opportunity to do that. I'd like to see the astronomy students balancing analogue and digital methods, keeping the history of astronomy and observation in mind.



