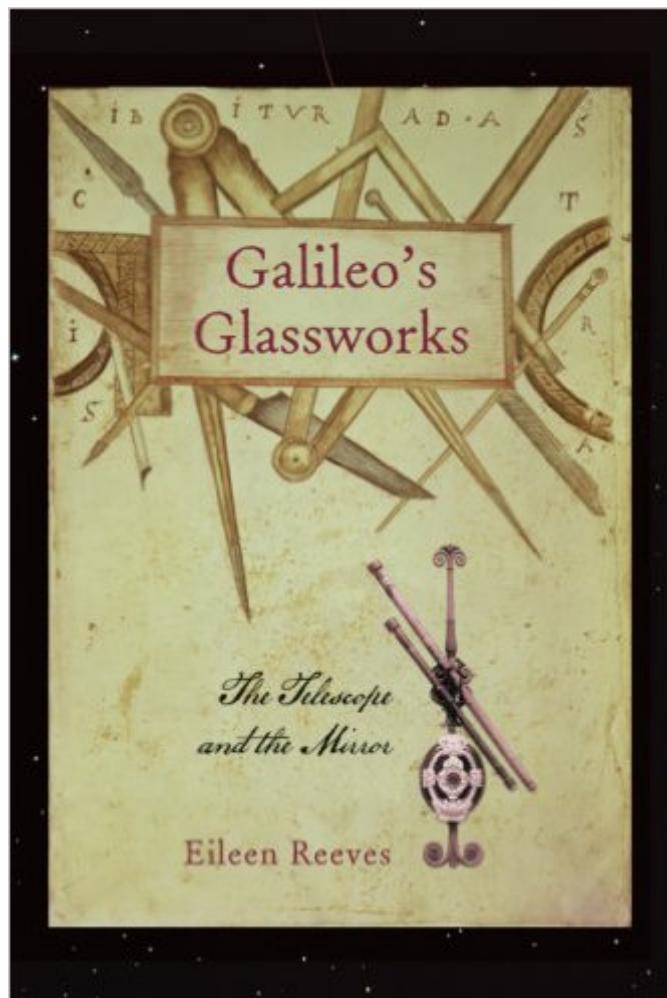


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Galileo's Glassworks: The Telescope And The Mirror



Synopsis

The Dutch telescope and the Italian scientist Galileo have long enjoyed a durable connection in the popular mind--so much so that it seems this simple glass instrument transformed a rather modest middle-aged scholar into the bold icon of the Copernican Revolution. And yet the extraordinary speed with which the telescope changed the course of Galileo's life and early modern astronomy obscures the astronomer's own curiously delayed encounter with the instrument. This book considers the lapse between the telescope's creation in The Hague in 1608 and Galileo's alleged acquaintance with such news ten months later. In an inquiry into scientific and cultural history, Eileen Reeves explores two fundamental questions of intellectual accountability: what did Galileo know of the invention of the telescope, and when did he know it? The record suggests that Galileo, like several of his peers, initially misunderstood the basic design of the telescope. In seeking to explain the gap between the telescope's emergence and the alleged date of the astronomer's acquaintance with it, Reeves explores how and why information about the telescope was transmitted, suppressed, or misconstrued in the process. Her revised version of events, rejecting the usual explanations of silence and idleness, is a revealing account of the role that misprision, error, and preconception play in the advancement of science. Along the way, Reeves offers a revised chronology of Galileo's life in a critical period and, more generally, shows how documents typically outside the scope of early modern natural philosophy--medieval romances, travel literature, and idle speculations--relate to two crucial events in the history of science.

Book Information

Hardcover: 240 pages

Publisher: Harvard University Press (January 31, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674026675

ISBN-13: 978-0674026674

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.8 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (4 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #2,280,992 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #62 inÂ Books > Science & Math > Astronomy & Space Science > Telescopes #597 inÂ Books > Science & Math > Astronomy & Space Science > Star-Gazing #2217 inÂ Books > Textbooks > Science & Mathematics > Astronomy & Astrophysics

Customer Reviews

Although this book's subtitle is "The Telescope and the Mirror", there is very little discussion on the technical evolution and actual uses of these devices. Instead, the author focuses on the myths and legends about "magic mirrors" allowing the ancients to see what people were doing a great many miles away. The evolution of such myths over the centuries is also discussed, culminating with the invention of a real telescope, knowledge of which eventually reached Galileo. This is indeed a scholarly work. It is focused and heavily annotated, i.e., 166 pages of main text are supported by 50 pages of notes/references. However, scholarly works that are also aimed at general readers should be written in a style that is accessible, friendly and engaging. In my view, this is where this book misses the mark. Although I found the writing style to be authoritative, I also found it to be rather dry and awkward, due in no small part to the many very long-winded and often complex sentences. Consequently, it is very difficult to say what the book's target audience is. In my opinion, this is a work that should be studied rather than simply read for pleasure. It would likely be of interest to scholars who may be involved in research along related topics. However, I suspect that general readers, and even many history buffs like me, may find the book confusing and rather boring.

Actually, I was looking for a description of how Galileo was able to improve the telescope from 5x to 30x. There are no Glassworks in the book; no descriptions of how lenses were made. Galileo himself figures very little here: it is everybody else who had any claim to the invention of the telescope.

Not meant for those who want a systematic exposition of the technical development of the telescope. It is, however, a fascinating, detailed, deeply researched and novel approach to the history of the telescope. Conjures up and immerses the reader in the the complex zeitgeist of the 16th and early 17th centuries from which emerged the telescope. Sets the invention in the context of bitter scientific, religious and politic rivalry, scheming for patronage and superstition. The work emphasizes the role of slow and garbled communication of the time and the still rampant superstition, which combined to cause the conflation and confusion of rational and supernatural explanations of the telescope and other cotemporaneously emergent technologies (like the camera obscura and altimetry). The book is scholarly, but somewhat convoluted, at times testing the patience of the reader. In the end, it rewards the effort of the reader.

Great book for the amateur astronomers library.

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