

A knight's tale

Visiting Britain's legendary Patrick Moore

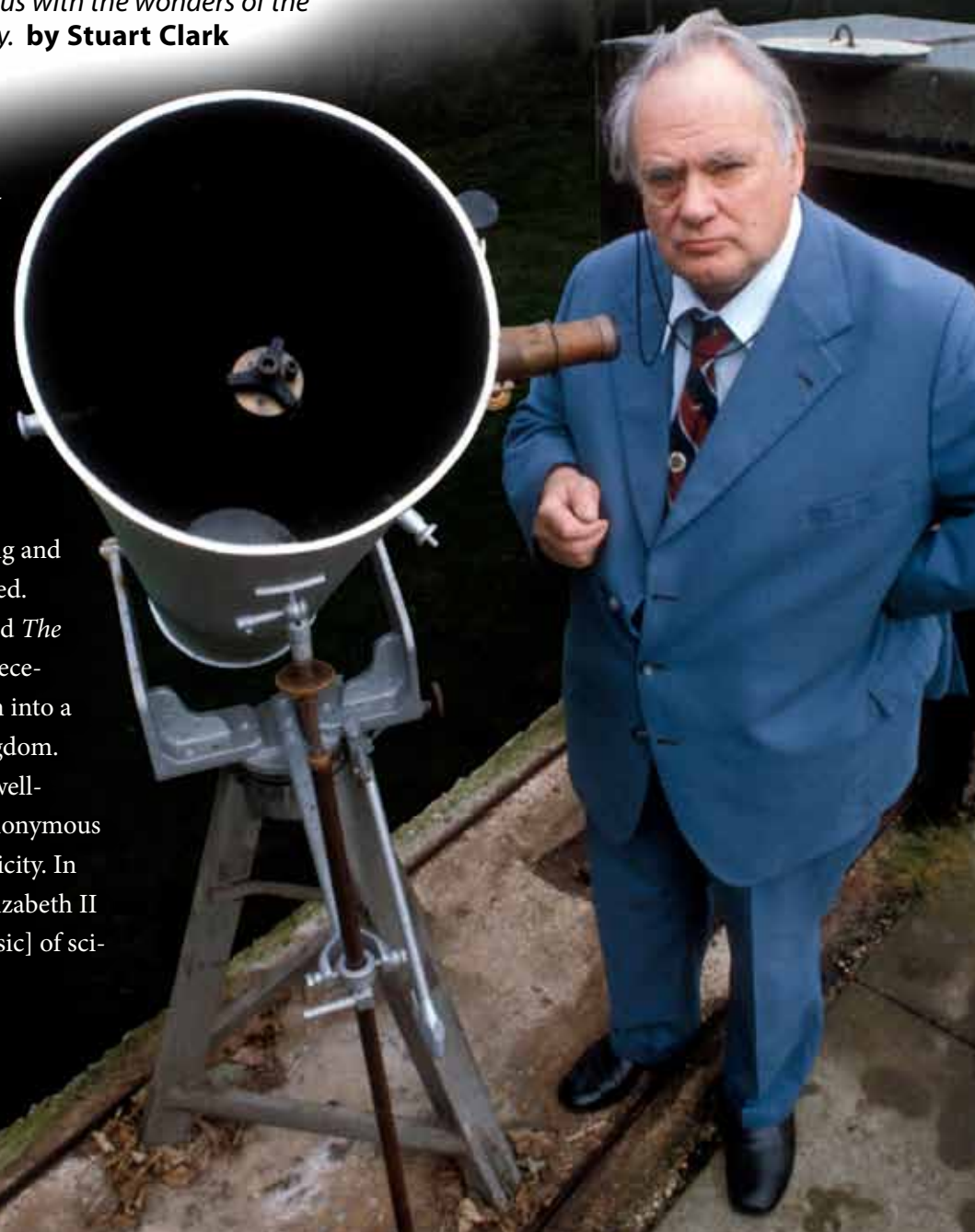
With countless books and a 55-year-old monthly TV program, Sir Patrick Moore is synonymous with the wonders of the cosmos and British eccentricity. **by Stuart Clark**

If you have ever seen the television program, you would be forgiven for thinking Sir Patrick Moore delivered *The Sky at Night* from a film set. Globes and equipment, books and charts surround him — all decidedly antique in flavor. Yet this is no set. This is Patrick Moore's home, suitably lit for filming and without any real set dressing required.

For 55 years, Moore has presented *The Sky at Night* for the BBC. This unprecedented achievement has turned him into a household name in the United Kingdom. Monocled and brusque, yet with a well-developed sense of humor, he is synonymous with astronomy and British eccentricity. In 2001, he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II for “services to the popularisation [sic] of science and to broadcasting.”

Patrick Moore's 12-inch telescope at his home observatory in Selsey, England, has been his instrument of choice since World War II.

BBC Photo Archive



The weather vane at his home in Selsey has become an iconic symbol of Sir Patrick Moore in Britain's astronomy community.

Of cats and planets

To step inside Moore's house in Selsey, England, is to walk through decades of astronomical history. Everywhere you look, books, photos, or other memorabilia commemorate a lifetime of astronomical work.

Before going inside, though, first you see a handwritten sign on the front door. It explains that cats live in the house, so the porch door and the front door must never be open at the same time, lest they escape.

“I'm very much a cat man,” explains Moore. “I've had cats all my life.”

In April, he published a book called *Miaow! Cats really are nicer than people!* (Veloce Publishing Ltd.). “I chose the title for my book quite deliberately,” Moore writes in its pages. “Obviously, it is dangerous to generalise [sic], but given a choice between the average person and the average cat, I would opt for the cat, and in this book I will try to explain why.”

The short, sharp anecdote is a trademark. Moore's thoughts are distilled into

Stuart Clark (www.stuartclark.com) is a noted astronomy journalist and the author of *The Sun Kings* (Princeton, 2007).

TIMELINE: Astronomy; William Zuback (1929); Hemera Technologies/PhotoObjects.net/Thinkstock (1939); BBC Photo Archive (1940)

To step inside Moore's house in Selsey, England, is to walk through decades of astronomical history.



Patrick Moore and the BBC premiered *The Sky at Night* in April 1957. The broadcast company originally slated the monthly program for three episodes to see how viewers would receive it; it has been running continuously in mostly the same format ever since. BBC Photo Archive

sound-bite sentences and uttered with a dry sense of old English humor. Although the voice is quieter now, and occasionally a little tremulous, his delivery is unmistakable.

He points to the mantelpiece, where carved bookends hold together a collection of small blue books. “One of those is called *The Story of the Solar System* by G. F. Chambers,” Moore explains. “I picked that up when I was 6 and read it through, and I was hooked. My education was completely knocked out through no one's fault. The idea was: prep school, Eton, Cambridge. I never made it to any of them. I was laid low by a wretched heart problem, which I overcame when I was 15, but then the war came.”

Astronomical exploration

It is part of the lore that surrounds Moore that he lied about his age to join England's Royal Air Force during World War II. “Swindled my way in,” is how he describes it. “I was nowhere near the right medical grade either.”

After spending those war-filled years as a navigator in Bomber Command, he still held an offer to study at Cambridge University, but he chose not to pursue it. His

all-consuming interest in astronomy hadn't wavered, though.

Between his early bouts of illness, Moore had joined the British Astronomical Association. “I was their youngest ever member at 11,” he says. “I published some research about the Moon — my first paper was ‘Small Craterlets in the Mare Crisium,’ when I was 13.”

Yet it took until Moore was in his 30s for his first book offer to come along. “I was darn lucky. The publishers found me. W. W. Norton wanted a book about the Moon. I wrote it, and it took off, so they wanted another.”

A knight's life

1923
Born Patrick Alfred Caldwell-Moore on March 4 in Pinner, Middlesex, England

1929
Reads *The Story of the Solar System* and becomes fascinated with astronomy

1934
Joins the British Astronomical Association

1936
Publishes first research paper, “Small Craterlets in the Mare Crisium”

1937
Invited to run a small observatory in East Grinstead, Sussex, England

1939
Begins to wear a monocle after an oculist tells him his right eye is weaker than his left

1940
Becomes a navigator in the Royal Air Force Bomber Command

1943
Fiancée Lorna, a nurse, is killed during a German bombing



Numbering more than **700 episodes** and counting, *The Sky at Night* is the **longest-running** television program in the world.

Patrick Moore covered many events of the Soviet Union's and the United States' Moon exploration programs for the BBC, from the first Luna missions in 1959 to the Apollo missions of the 1960s and 1970s. BBC Paul Johnstone

That was in 1953. Reviewing the book in the August *Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada*, R. J. Northcott noted that he was "not convinced of the need or advisability of speculation concerning space travel" that Moore included in *Guide to the Moon* — ironic considering what was around the corner with Sputnik in 1957.

"I thought space travel would come along much faster than it actually did. It changed the public perception of astronomy," says Moore, who had been a member of the space advocacy group the British Interplanetary Society since the 1930s. "I was a teenager, and that's where I met [the now-famous British science-fiction author] Arthur C. Clarke for the first time. We struck up an immediate friendship that lasted all our lives."

Clarke died in 2008 at age 90. Moore celebrated his 89th birthday March 4.

Although Clarke made his name as a novelist, he wasn't the only one interested in science fiction. Moore, too, wrote fiction about space exploration for decades, though

none of it remains in print now. "My science fiction was only for boys, teenagers," Moore says. "I only wrote one novel for adults. Having written it, I sat in here, and I read it through. I held it over the wastepaper basket and dropped it. It wasn't very good."

An icon is born

Moore's transition to TV came when *The Sky at Night* began in 1957. The BBC decided to make an astronomy program and contacted Moore to be the presenter. That was 55 years ago. Numbering more than 700 episodes and counting, it is the longest-running television program in the world.

"I choose the guests — always have done and always will," Moore says. "I view the program as theirs, not mine. We used to have one guest per program, just them and me." Today, each episode consists of a central interview that Moore conducts, bolstered with other items and interviews led by other presenters.

When I ask him about having inspired so many people to take an interest or even

pursue a career in astronomy, he will have nothing of it. "I don't inspire them. It's the subject. I just happen to be there. I'm surprised at the way the audience has held up; more than a million people still watch us every month. I've made a lot of friends."

Is there anyone he wishes he could have interviewed?

"Halley," he says immediately, referring to the 17th-century English astronomer and adventurer Edmond Halley. "He was a great man. His very last words were to call for a glass of wine and drink it. He was everything. Undoubtedly, he would have been a great man to go out for a drink with."

An aging knight

Ptolemy the cat appears, with an exquisite jet-black coat. Moore drops his hand beside his wheelchair, and the cat does the rest, stroking itself to and fro. The astronomer began to lose the use of his hands and legs to arthritis about a decade ago. After his confinement to a wheelchair, the BBC started recording *The Sky at Night* in his home.

"Since this has hit me, I can't type anymore," Moore says. "I used to do all my own typing. I was very quick, 90 words a minute on that machine." He points to an iconic 1908 Woodstock typewriter, the typescript of which is as characteristically Moore's as his own handwriting. "Now it's very different. I can't write with a pen, I can't play the piano, I can't compose. But I've had a long run. Just 12 years ago, I was still playing cricket." His bat is part of the collection in his study.



Using his famous 1908 Woodstock typewriter, Sir Patrick Moore has written more than 100 books, mostly about astronomy. Before arthritis set in about a decade ago, he could use just two fingers to type 90 words per minute. BBC Jane Fletcher

"I've written more than a hundred books, but I've just written my last, I think."

The Sky at Night: Answers to Questions from Across the Universe (BBC Books, 2012) celebrates the 55th anniversary of the show by collecting answers to questions that viewers have sent in over the years. One includes a dispute between an 11-year-old girl and her father. She appeals to Moore to settle the argument over which is the better galaxy: grand-design spiral M81 or starburst irregular M82. Always happy to supply an opinion, Moore lists the attributes of M81 before finally siding with the girl and M82.

"I don't want to stop writing," he adds with a plaintive hint noticeably different from the rehearsed anecdotes, "but I've been stopped. I can't type anymore. I have to dictate. I'm not very good at dictating. It does upset your fluency."

He also claims to have delivered his last public lecture. "About two years ago, I did a lecture at Herstmonceux [in East Sussex, England] about the Moon. About halfway through, I realized I was so far below my old standard that the time had come to give up. So I've never given another."



Sir Patrick Moore now tapes *The Sky at Night* from his home in Selsey. He has done so since his confinement to a wheelchair in 2004. BBC Photo Archive

"My one contribution, if I have made one, is my interest in other people," he continues. "Bringing them onto the show, it's all I can do. I'll never retire. I'll go on as long as I can. But I feel now that anything I can do I have done. I think that's it now. I don't see what else I can do except the program."

Moore has lived his life as part of the community in Selsey without celebrity pretension. He has shown many friends and strangers his astronomical collection and his observatory. If he had his way, they would continue to be able to visit after his death. "I'd like this place to be a retreat for people to come and work in, or just to meet in at weekends," he muses. "But I've no one to leave it to, and it would cost so much to run. I hope they don't flatten the place after I'm gone."

Ending an era

It's impossible not to feel a sense of sadness that an era in British astronomy may be drawing to a close. As I walk through his home, I pass a rack of perfectly ironed Hawaiian shirts, these days a Moore sartorial standard. It serves to reinforce that there is no pretense here, that what you see of Moore on television is what you get in real life. In an age of celebrity grooming, there is a refreshing honesty about it.

Before I leave, I wonder how different his life might have been had he followed his intended path of education. "I would have taken science," Moore says before a gleam lights his monocled eye, "and then I would have done exactly what I have done." ♣

Learn more about Moore's Caldwell Catalog at www.Astronomy.com/toc.

1945 Elected a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society

1953 Publishes first book, *Guide to the Moon*

1957 First episode of *The Sky at Night* premieres in April

1959 Is the first Westerner to see and share the photographs from the Soviet Union's Luna 3 probe to the Moon

1961 In September, becomes the first person to show a live broadcast of a telescopic view of a planet during the 50th episode of *The Sky at Night*

1965 Appointed director of the Armagh Planetarium in Northern Ireland

1968 Returns to England and settles in Selsey

1975 Composes and performs the opera *Perseus and Andromeda*

1982 Becomes president of the British Astronomical Association through 1984

1986 Releases *The Music of Patrick Moore*

1995 Compiles Caldwell Catalog of 109 deep-sky objects

2001 Knighted by Queen Elizabeth II

2004 Earns a Guinness World Record as the "most durable TV presenter"

2004 Misses his first (and only) *The Sky at Night* episode in July due to a near-fatal bout of food poisoning

2011 Celebrates 700th episode of *The Sky at Night*