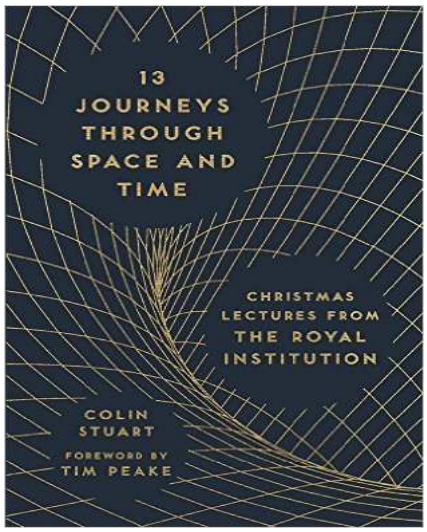
Book Review

by Nalayini Davies, 12 February 2017

13 Journeys Through Space and Time – Christmas Lectures from the Royal Institution

Colin Stuart

2016
Michael O'Mara Books Limited, London, United Kingdom
Hardcover: 224 pages; ISBN 978-1-78243-687-4, £7.89 from Amazon
Kindle Edition £4.31



I specially selected this book for this month's Journal to commemorate the 50th anniversary the Stardome Observatory. The mission of Stardome is "to share knowledge of space in ways that inspire, challenge and educate" and there is much focus on encouraging participation by school students. This book presents and discusses condensed versions of 13 Christmas lectures by the Royal Institution on the theme of space and time. The goal of these lectures is very similar to the mission of Stardome i.e. introduce a young audience to science and inspire, challenge and educate them through lectures (accompanied by spectacular demonstrations delivered by an expert in their field).

Established in 1799 by leading British scientists to promote scientific education and research, the Royal Institution has had 10 chemical elements discovered there and 15 of its scientists have won Nobel Prizes. The Christmas lectures were begun in 1825 by Michael Faraday and today "they bring the magic of science to a global audience through the live shows, television broadcasts and online distribution".

Stuart discusses 13 of these Christmas lectures that fit in with the theme "space and time" and delivered over a period spanning 1881 to 2015. The lecturers selected for inclusion in the book include Nobel Laureates Sir George Porter, Sir Martin Ryle and Anthony Hewish; legendary science communicator Carl Sagan; Astronomers Royal Sir Harold Spencer Jones, Sir Francis Graham-Smith, Sir Martin Ryle; and the 2015 lecture had astronaut Tim Peake participating from the International Space Station.

Pitched at the younger audience who are new to the topics, the lectures are very accessible and Stuart uses archival material such as handwritten letters, lecture notes, photographs, descriptions of the experiments as well as first person feedback from those in attendance to bring to life 13 selected enthralling lectures. As Stuart says, he had "unprecedented access to the RI's treasure trove of historical artefacts in order to write a book about these striking demonstrations of the beauty and enormity of the universe". Through this he has managed to capture some of the personal touches, personalities and the innovative approach of the lecturers.

I found this book very easy and fun to read, providing an insight into the lecturers and describing some of the clever demonstrations devised by them. It is an unusual science book but one that I feel will appeal to all ages and will provide particularly useful insights for those involved in astronomic education.