Selections From the New Book Room

_**Astrology: A History** / Peter Whitfield
BF1671 W55 2001

Peter Whitfield’s remarkable book, _Astrology: A History_, is, as he states in the preface, “the history of an idea.” Beginning with a look at the early development of astrology in Babylonia near the beginning of the Common Era, the book moves forward through time, tracing astrology’s rise and fall up to modern times. Throughout the book Whitfield considers astrology as a cultural force, examining the role it has played in politics, religion, and science.

The book is divided into five chapters entitled “Babylonia: The Dawn of Astrology,” “Greece: The System Perfected,” The Middle Ages: Eclipse and Re-emergence,” “The Renaissance: Triumph and Downfall,” and “Undefeated: Astrology in the Modern Era.” Each of these is an historical essay which could easily stand on its own merit; they are well-researched and contain many fascinating examples of the uses of astrology in the lives of people and nations from each time period. Considerable interest and breadth is added to the book by a number of shorter “sidebar” essays sprinkled throughout each chapter, which address specific topics such as “The Sources of Indian Astrology,” “The Planets as Gods,” “Chaucer and the Stars,” “The Black Death and the Astrologers,” and “Shakespeare – for or against Astrology?” While focused mainly on astrology within the western tradition, Whitfield does venture out at times to examine the use of astrology within eastern cultures as well.

Whitfield is an independent scholar who has written extensively on the history of maps, as well as on the history of science. A history of astrology seems like a natural outgrowth of these interests, and the depth of his research is immediately evident. At the same time, Whitfield’s writing is clear and accessible, never pedantic or obscure. He also scores major points for his objectivity toward his subject. Most people who write on astrology fall into one of two categories: scientists who have never studied the topic but who nonetheless are willing to lend their scientific credentials to debunking it, or “true believers” who tend to approach the topic uncritically. Whitfield’s deep interest in astrology is apparent, but he focuses his interest on historical fact and seems to be free of any personal agenda.

No review of this book would be complete without mention of its marvelous illustrations. Medieval horoscopes and zodiacs, paintings of Persian astronomers, illustrations from alchemical texts, and eighteenth-century engravings – over a hundred and fifty illustrations in all – serve as visual examples of the history Whitfield discusses in his essays. These illustrations, most of which are in color, come from the British Library, from other European library and museum collections, and from private collections. Their impact is considerable and the book well deserves the hackneyed description of “lavishly illustrated.”

_Astrology: A History_ is quite unlike anything which has come before it. It will please both the casual browser and the reader seeking an in-depth consideration of the history of the fascinating, illuminating, and controversial “science” of astrology. — reviewed by Alison Lewis