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The Optical Aurora

with 54 figures



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Preface

The aim of this book is to describe and discuss the aurora as an optical phenomenon, one which can be observed by the naked eye as well as with more sensitive optical detectors. It continues the tradition of studying that impressive and imaginative play of nature, the northern lights, seen and discussed by the Greek philosophers as early as the sixth century B. C.

Today the study of the optical aurora is only one of many ways of acquiring information about a major phenomenon: the ejection of plasma from the sun, the interaction of this plasma with the geomagnetic field and the injection of fast particles into the earth's atmosphere. Hence, the separate treatment of the optical aurora is justified by the particular scientific approach: detection and interpretation of electromagnetic radiation, approximately in the 1000–100 000 Å region, produced through interaction between the auroral particles and the earth's atmosphere.

Other techniques, such as radio observations, X-ray observations, direct particle detections from rockets and satellites, studies of magnetic storms, and measurements of the magnetic field and plasma properties in the magnetosphere, are as important or more important than the classical way of studying the optical aurora. Nevertheless, it was felt worthwhile to treat the optical aurora in a separate book, perhaps mainly because today one author cannot master the whole subject with sufficient competence. This book is thus one volume in a series of books giving a more complete picture of physics and chemistry in space.

The study of the optical aurora has two distinctly different major purposes; first, to consider the optical radiation as one of several end results of a vast phenomenon extending between the sun and the earth. In this connection the earth's atmosphere may be considered as a scintillating screen, and the purpose of the study of auroras is to acquire information about the particle streams penetrating into the atmosphere and the fundamental processes which produced them. Second, to use the information concerning optical radiation to deduce the effects of primary particles on the ionosphere, and hence to study the perturbations of the ionosphere caused by these particles. These studies are important in regard to the propagation of radio waves and other radio phenomena.

Both aspects will receive due consideration in this book, although it is neither possible nor appropriate to keep them separate, chapter by chapter, or to present the book in two separate parts.

Many of the subjects treated in this book have been comprehensively dealt with in an excellent book by J. W. Chamberlain (1961)*. However, since 1960, when that book was written, many important publications have appeared, and the state of our knowledge has advanced considerably. Here we shall emphasize the progress made since then, rather than repeat general descriptions and knowledge which was available at that time. Hence the reader will, for many detailed discussions, be referred to that book.

No historical treatment will be given. Brief summaries of the history of the study of the aurora have been published by Chapman (1967, 1969). Further information may be found in the above mentioned book by Chamberlain (1961).

Blindern, Norway
June 1970

Anders Omholt

* For references, see under Chapter 1.

Contents

Chapter 1

The Occurrence and Cause of Auroras: a Short Introduction

1.1 Local Auroral Forms	1
1.1.1 Geometry	1
1.1.2 Intensity	5
1.1.3 The Local Auroral Display	7
1.2 Auroral Morphology	9
1.2.1 Magnetic Guiding of Auroral Particles; Coordinate Systems	10
1.2.2 Worldwide Auroral Morphology	16
1.2.3 Mid-Latitude Red Arcs	18
1.2.4 Polar Glow and Mantle Auroras	19
1.3 Particle Behaviour: Reflection, Absorption and Scattering	20
1.3.1 Mirror Effects	20
1.3.2 Absorption and Scattering of Particles in the Atmo- sphere	21
References	21

Chapter 2

The Electron Aurora: Main Characteristics and Luminosity

2.1 Introduction	24
2.2 N_2^+ Emission and Ionization	25
2.3 Theoretical Height Distribution of the First Negative N_2^+ Bands	27
2.4 Height Distribution of Other Emissions	31
2.5 Electron Energies Inferred from Height Distribution of Auroral Luminosity	32
2.6 Geometry and Motion of the Electron Aurora	36
2.7 Latitude Variations in Auroral Heights	42
References	44

Chapter 3

The Proton Aurora

3.1	Introduction	47
3.2	Theory of Hydrogen Line Emission	49
3.2.1	Auroral Protons, the Solar Wind and the Magnetosphere	49
3.2.2	The Proton Beam in the Atmosphere: Charge Exchange	50
3.2.3	The Proton Beam in the Atmosphere: Diffusion.	52
3.2.4	Excitation of the Hydrogen Lines.	53
3.2.5	The Relation Between Hydrogen Lines and the First Negative N_2^+ Bands	57
3.2.6	The Hydrogen Line Profiles	59
3.2.7	Height Distribution of the Hydrogen Emissions.	63
3.3	Observations on Hydrogen Lines	64
3.3.1	Techniques	64
3.3.2	The Intensity Ratio Between the Hydrogen Lines and the First Negative N_2^+ Bands	65
3.3.3	Absolute Intensities and Balmer Decrement	66
3.3.4	Geometry of Proton Aurora	68
3.3.5	Morphology of Proton Aurora.	69
3.3.6	The Doppler Profiles	71
	References	76

Chapter 4

The Optical Spectrum of Aurora

4.1	Description	79
4.1.1	Introduction	79
4.1.2	The Auroral Spectrum	80
4.1.3	Forbidden Atomic Emissions	87
4.1.4	Permitted Atomic Emissions	88
4.1.5	Molecular Emissions.	89
4.1.6	The Intensity Distribution in the Spectrum	91
4.2	Local Variations in the Spectrum	93
4.2.1	Introduction	93
4.2.2	The I (5577)/I (1 neg) Ratio	94
4.2.3	Other Forbidden Emissions	96
4.2.4	Permitted Atomic Lines	98
4.2.5	Permitted Molecular Bands	100

Contents	XI
4.3 Latitudinal and Zonal Variations	101
References	103

Chapter 5

Physics of the Optical Emissions

5.1 Excitation	105
5.1.1 Fast Particle Impact	105
5.1.2 Thermal Collisions	111
5.1.3 Excitation by Thermal Electrons	115
5.1.4 Discharge Mechanisms and Heating by Electric Fields	116
5.2 Deactivation	117
5.3 Interpretation of the Spectrum	119
5.3.1 Atomic Lines	120
5.3.2 The Intensity Distribution within Molecular Band Systems	122
5.4 The Lifetime of Metastable Oxygen Atoms	126
5.5 Helium Emissions	132
5.6 Sunlit Aurora	135
Appendix (References to Data on Cross-Sections)	137
References	138

Chapter 6

Temperature Determinations from Auroral Emissions

6.1 Introduction	143
6.2 Doppler Temperatures	144
6.3 Rotational Temperatures	148
6.4 Conclusions and Prospects	152
References	153

Chapter 7

Pulsing Aurora

7.1 Introduction	155
7.2 Pulsating Aurora	156
7.2.1 Definition	156
7.2.2 Observations	159
7.3 Flaming Aurora	165
7.4 Flickering Aurora	165
7.5 Streaming Aurora and Horizontal Waves	166

7.6 Correlation with Pulsations in the Magnetic Field and Telluric Currents	167
7.7 Correlation with Pulsations in X-Rays	168
7.8 Morphology of Pulsating Aurora	169
References	173

Chapter 8

Optical Aurora and Radio Observations

8.1 Introduction	175
8.2 Radio Absorption	175
8.3 E-Layer Ionization	180
8.4 Radio Auroras	182
8.5 VLF Radio Emissions and Radio Noise	184
8.6 Polar Cap Absorption (PCA) Events	185
References	186

Chapter 9

Auroral X-Rays

9.1 Production of X-Rays in Aurora	189
9.2 Observations	190
References	193

Subject Index	195
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Frequently used Symbols

Standard spectroscopic nomenclature is used throughout. Some symbols are occasionally used for other quantities, in agreement with current literature. This use should be clear from the text.

α	recombination coefficient
A_{nm}	transition probability
\mathbf{B}, B	magnetic field (vector, scalar)
e	electronic charge
E	specific particle energy
\mathbf{E}, E	electric field (vector, scalar)
Φ	geomagnetic latitude
H	scale height
$H\alpha, H\beta$	Balmer alpha, beta lines
h	height
I	surface brightness, integral invariant
$4\pi I$	Auroral brightness
L	McIlwain invariant parameter
Λ_L	invariant geomagnetic latitude
λ	wavelength
m	particle mass
μ	magnetic moment
ν	frequency, collision frequency
Ω	solid angle
ω	angular frequency, gyro frequency
Ψ	wave function
R	Rayleigh (photometric unit)
R, r	radius, space coordinate
σ	cross section (atomic or molecular)
t	time
T	universal time
τ	lifetime
Θ	pitch angle
\mathbf{v}, v	particle velocity (vector, scalar)
v', v''	vibrational quantum number
W	kinetic energy
ξ	penetrated air mass (STP)
ζ	penetrated air mass in number of particles