

# Giovanni Battista Lacchini: An Amateur Astronomer from Italy

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Twenty years ago, on the 6th January 1967, the astronomer Giovanni Battista Lacchini died in Faenza, a town near Bologna where he was born 82 years before, on the 20th May 1884. But, as we shall see, he spent most of his life very far from Faenza, moving his residence all around the Italian peninsula and also over other countries.

After completing his studies, the 22-year-old Lacchini was appointed bookkeeper at the Mixed Court of Cairo (Egypt). Two years later, called as a postal office employee, he came back to Italy. During that period, reading the Camille Flammarion's production, Lacchini learned to read the poetry of the sky. Since then, he devoted most of his spare time to the study of astronomy and to the observation of any astronomical event falling under his eyes. Soon, he found the most congenial field of application in the study of the variable stars.

Lacchini was one of the earliest members of the American Association on Variable Stars Observers, to which he contributed more than 53,000 magnitude determinations between 1911 and 1963. His contribution was so outstanding that AAVSO lent him a 8 inch reflector for his private observatory. In fact, Lacchini made most of his observations by naked eye or using small instruments (e.g. binoculars or refractors). He always carried some of them with him during his frequent journeys around Italy. Moreover, he often performed a timely observation through the open window of a moving train. He became so skilled in evaluating the magnitude of a star that he could estimate the figure to nearest decimal using only one comparison star !

Some variable stars, such as T Orionis and Z Camelopardalis, were observed for a long time only by Lacchini : for that and other valuable contributions his work received international recognition in 1922, when he became a member of the Variable Stars Commission of the International Astronomical Union. Contrary to the rule "*nemo propheta in patria*" the outstanding contribution of Lacchini to the progress of astronomy was recognized in Italy. In 1928 a special law was promulgated which appointed him to the staff of the Italian astronomical Observatories. Previously he had been to Catania, where the clear sky allowed him to carry out a great number of solar and variable stars observations. From 1930 he was at Pino Torinese, the Observatory of Torino University, where he discovered a new asteroid, 1930 AB, and carried out many observations of telescopic meteors. Finally, in 1933, he moved to Trieste Observatory where he observed novae, comets, double stars and lunar occultations.

After his retirement, in 1952, Lacchini returned to Faenza and became a valuable co-worker of Guido Horn d'Arturo, the Director of the Bologna and Lojano Observatories. In this period he discovered tens of variable stars, analyzing the plates taken by Horn d'Arturo and himself at the moving focus of the fixed multi-mirror reflector of 1.8 m diameter, which antedated by thirty years the present interest in giant multi-mirror instruments.

During his entire career Lacchini enthusiastically contributed to the popularization of Astronomy, following his ideal, Flammarion. He held many conferences and wrote hundreds of papers, published mostly in the journal "Coelum", edited in Bologna by Horn d'Arturo. Virtually all Italian amateur astronomers possess his most popular book, the "Atlante Celeste" covering all the naked eye stars to magnitude 6.5 and which had four editions : 1948, 1954, 1960 and 1969. Another important publication was the "Atlante Celeste spettroscopico", reporting the spectral classification for all the naked-eye stars.

The example of Lacchini stimulated a number of Italian amateurs, who devoted their spare time to the study of variable stars. Among these we find Luigi Jacchia, Giuseppe Loreta, Giovanni Bernasconi (better known for his work on comets), Giuliano Romano (discoverer of hundreds of variables and three supernovae), Luigi Baldinelli, Marino Perissinotto and Italo Dalmeri. Let us hope that these examples will be followed by many amateurs from later generations.