

The May sky

MAY HAS two interesting astronomical events — a total eclipse of the moon early in the morning of May 5, and the yearly meeting of the professional Astronomical Society of Australia on May 13. I will be attending the latter in Melbourne, and expect to have a few reports of recent research from Australian observatories.

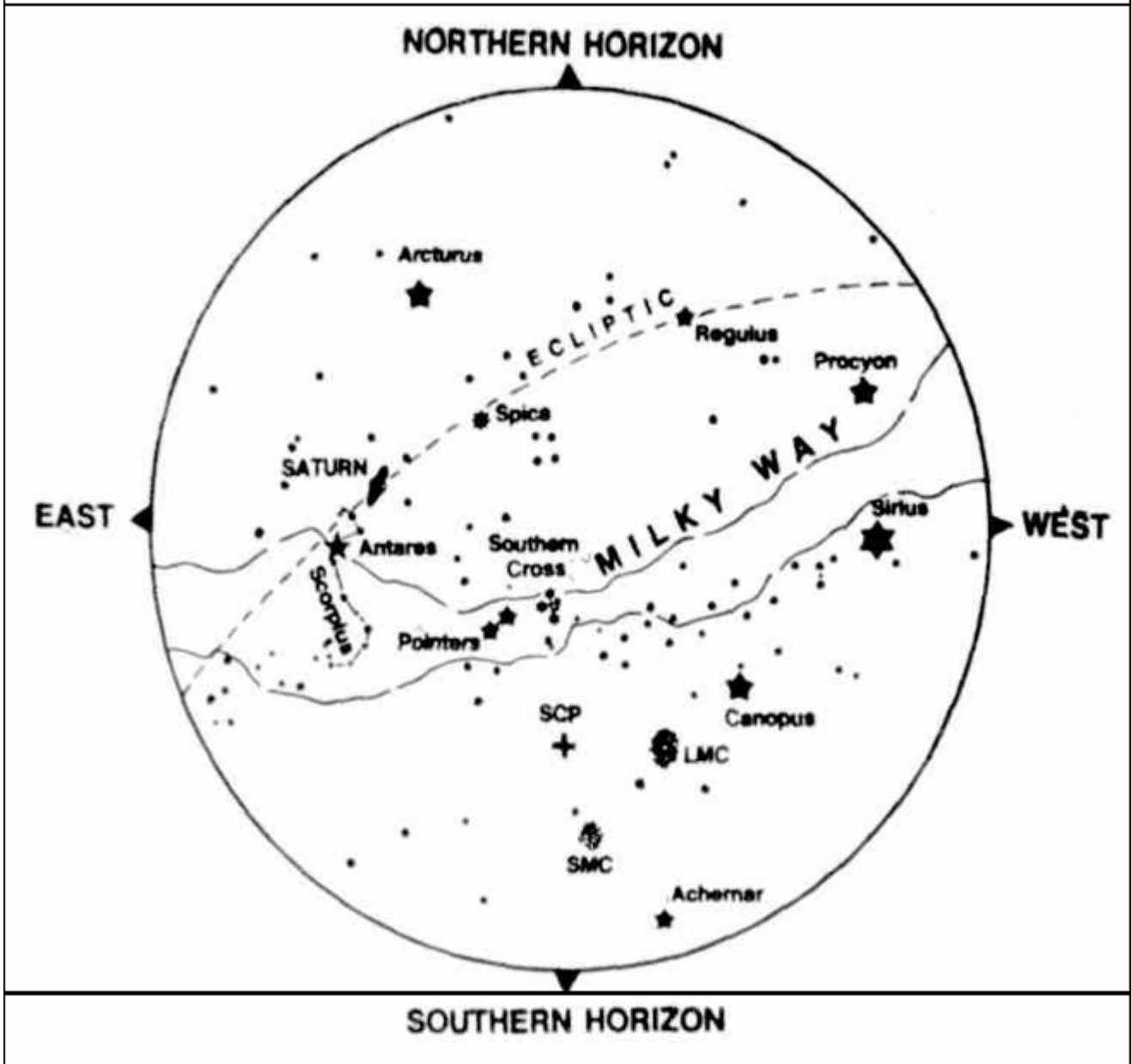
The lunar eclipse begins at about 3.20am on Sunday morning and will still be in progress when the sun rises, except in Western Australia. The moon enters the denser part of the earth's shadow, the umbra, at about 4.15, and mid-eclipse comes just before 6am. An event like this can be inspiring and absorbing, or cold and boring, depending on the attitude of the viewer. I certainly believe that everyone should see at least one total eclipse of the moon in a lifetime, and I must

point out that some are bound to occur on balmy summer evenings when viewing can be more of a pleasure!

Two of the naked-eye planets are only to be seen in the early morning; these are Mercury and Venus. The latter will be very bright on May 9. I suspect it has been often mistaken for a "UFO" on such occasions by people not used to the appearance of the night sky.

Eclipses run in groups

By MALCOLM MILLER



hemisphere on May 20. Its occurrence has some relation to the earlier lunar eclipse. Mars is still very low in the west after sunset and difficult to spot. It will be near the young crescent moon on May 21. Saturn, in the constellation Libra, or "families" as a result of the geometry of the orbits, which vary slowly and regularly. An eclipse of the sun, *not* visible in Australia (and a partial one only) will be seen from the far northern hemisphere on May 20.

in the constellation Libra, is to be seen very well all night. It is most easily picked up by its closeness to the curving constellation of Scorpius, for it is not far from reddish Antares, the brightest star in that constellation. In colour, it is not very different, though orange rather than red. Jupiter

rises near midnight in the constellation of Capricorn.

The astronomical conference in Melbourne will include a public lecture on a most appropriate topic — Halley's Comet. A more serious paper on the comet's origin and composition will be given in the scientific program by Dr A. R. Prentice, a speaker noted for his imagination and zany humour, who has specialised in solar system problems. Another subject which has excited plenty of general as well as scientific interest will be addressed by Professor J. Monaghan, who will read an invited paper on 'Astronomical Causes of Species Extinction'. I expect there to be plenty of

pect there to be plenty of other interesting material discussed at this meeting,

but that, as usual, I will be the only science writer from the media present.

Halley's Comet is out of sight still, roughly in the direction of the sun, and located near the border of the constellations Orion and Taurus. But be patient, it's still coming, and it could be bright enough for ordinary people to glimpse it next April.

On the map, which corresponds with the sky when we look up at it, we see the night sky as it appears at about 8.30pm on May 15. SCP is the South Celestial Pole, while LMC and SMC are our neighbour galaxies, the Large and Small Magellanic Clouds. Scorpius is the most easily recognised constellation, and a good point to start a naked-eye tour of the sky.