

Starlight Stimulation

The new star that suddenly appeared in late February - readily visible in the southern sky — lies far away in a satellite galaxy to our own, at 160,000 light years distant. An explosive outburst has made it 100 million times brighter than the sun - the first 'nearby' supernova to be sighted for 400 years.

Astronomers are excited, for it's changing rapidly and showing unusual behaviour. They have urgently turned the best instruments to search for details that can reveal the explosion mechanism, effects of the flash on surrounding material, and to study interstellar matter lit up by the intense beacon. Material ejected by the supernova is expanding at up to 20,000 km per second, so details of its structure will be detectable after a few weeks.

The event is a spur to new research programmes and to new instrumental projects, like the proposed European gamma-ray telescope. Many radio-isotopes created in the star's interior or under the extreme explosive conditions will be identifiable through their gamma-rays for some years to come. The supernova is thought to be a giant star that's exhausted most of its nuclear fuel, and has to shed much of its mass before it can settle down into old age as a compact neutron star.

The explosive release of a huge stock of energy strongly stirs up part of the galaxy. The pressure wave may be vital for initiating new stellar systems. Heavy atoms that are usually locked inside the stars, are spewed out into the surrounding medium - where they condense into solid grains, ready to be incorporated into future stars, planets and comets.

Just as Halley's comet gave a great impetus to cometary astronomy and understanding of the solar system's origin, so will the supernova stimulate another huge research effort and advances in astrophysics •

Max Wallis

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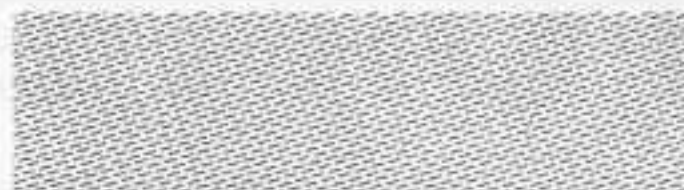
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For further details please ring or write to Trina Nicholls, Publicity Officer, quoting ref MT/April.



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