

An Interview with Bernard Eccles, Sun-Sign Astrologer

by Tore Lomsdalen

Bernard Eccles has been teaching and lecturing on astrology for more than 20 years. He is a life member of the Astrological Lodge of London and was its president from 1988 until 1994. He was a founding member of the Sophia Project and the MA programme in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology. His Sun-sign columns are published in nine different languages around the world.

Tore Lomsdalen: Bernard, you are a highly respected astrologer in Great Britain and have been strongly involved in bringing astrological education onto a university level. You are an academic with a degree in Classics, one of the very few astrologers today capable of reading Ptolemy's work in its original language. Please tell me: How can a person like yourself end up writing Sun-sign columns, which are regarded by many astrologers as detrimental to astrology's reputation — even unethical?

Bernard Eccles: On a simple, practical level, it pays well enough for me to live and feed my family. You have to make a living, and this is what I do. It also gives me time around the edges to do my studies and to do things that do not pay, like the Sophia Project, which is involved in bringing astrology back into British universities. It allows me to travel around to teach and give lectures on astrology at all levels. Plus, if you are an academic, you need time to do the reading, the research, and the thinking, which in an ordinary job would be difficult.

In terms of astrology itself, I think that Sun-sign columns can teach people a simple lesson, and that is what I am trying to do. I believe, as most astrologers do, that life is cyclical: It goes around in circles. In the modern scientific worldview, one tends to see

everything as being linear, meaning that everything goes in a straight line only. The idea of progress is that, as you go forward, you also go upwards — there is a kind of a slope to it. Unfortunately, there are a lot of people who fall off the slope somewhere along the line and get left by the wayside. They might have been ill, or they might have been fired from their job, their marriage might have broken up, or something like that. Due to certain unforeseen circumstances, these people are no longer up with the winners. They are the “losers,” or at least that is how they see and feel about themselves at that stage in their life.

The strength of astrology is that it says to you: “Maybe you had a setback, but the next time the planets come around, you'll get another chance.” Life is cyclical. If you can't catch this bus, there is always a next one to take. This is a very important message to give. People also need to know that there is a pattern to life, and it is still worth living, even when you think you have hit the very bottom. Newspaper astrology must cheer you up; it must give you hope and convince you that you are individual and special. It should also make you smile as you encounter the little twists and turns in your life.

One famous astrologer says that newspaper astrology must be like candy, given free with the paper. The rest of the paper is screaming with horrible things like wars and death around the world, but this little candy is for you to unwrap, put into your mouth, and chew for a couple of minutes. Just for those few minutes, you are at the centre of the universe. In making a newspaper horoscope something to chew over and something cheering, I hope and believe that I am doing something good and useful to people. At least, all the letters I get from the readers encourage me to believe so.

TL: Aren't you just creating false hopes and expectations?

BE: Not at all. Astrologically, I give people a series of footnotes to the ephemeris. What I am saying, though not quite explicitly, could be (if Mars and Jupiter are in good aspect to each other): "There is a chance to start something

that is going to be quite big, that could be paying you benefits in three or four years' time." I base this statement on Jupiter's making a trine to its present position in three or four years. I would also add, "If you don't do this now or in the next two to three weeks, it's okay. You'll get another opportunity later on" — that is, when Mars has moved to another sign, when it is sextile from where it is now. During this fortnight (meaning while Mars is still in its current sign), "You have a real opportunity, and you should go forward with it, if you feel this is something you want to do." What I am actually doing is posting the best timetable of destiny, telling you when the good bits are coming.

TL: Don't you think people can get scared?

BE: No. I never say this or that is going to be bad. I always phrase it as, "Here is an opportunity, or here is a good time." If things are a little difficult, like with a square or a hard aspect, I say, "You must beware that this or

that doesn't happen, or you must be careful of ... not spending too much, or buying something which is not really a good idea, or dealing with people who might deceive you" — something like that.

TL: To be a Sun-sign columnist, do you have to be a capable astrologer? Or is it just enough to be a good writer, saying what you might think people would like to hear?

BE: Absolutely not! You have to be a good astrologer as well, because you have to know what the planets are doing. It *does* matter if a planet is in its dignity or in its fall. It *does* matter if the planet is on the top or the bottom of the chart. You have to develop a different vocabulary for different celestial situations. Remember, whatever you write must be based on what the planets are doing. You can't just make it up! If you actually do make it up — let's say, you do not bother to look at the ephemeris — it comes back and bites you, and you soon start to run out of ideas. It is obviously much better to take the real symbolic meaning from the planets and their positions in the sky. Keep it true to the planets. If you have something to say, the planets will use you to speak to people. Newspaper astrology rewards integrity, honesty, and transparency. You have to try to make yourself a cosmic window between the sky and the reader.

TL: Can you understand that many astrologers are sceptical about this type of astrology?

BE: They have never tried to do it. It is surprisingly hard, once you get down to it. They have mistrust because they think you are deceiving people in some way or another. Newspaper horoscopes work in a particular subset of the language. If astrology is a language, then it will work with any vocabulary, whether it is a limited or full vocabulary or even a specialised one. Sun-sign astrology uses a vocabulary of the planets, but it does not use a vocabulary of time in the same way as a chart with an Ascendant does. Still, that does not make it invalid. It just takes it back to an earlier era. Babylonian astrologers used the planets' positions simply as they were observed. They saw whether they were in opposition or conjunct and made their prognostications from that.

This is exactly what Sun-sign astrology does. It sees what signs things are in, whether those particular planets are strong in those particular places and the angles between them, and it makes a little scenario out of that. It is *true* astrology, and any person who says it isn't should try writing a newspaper column!



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TL: Many people, even some astrologers, think it is hardly valid for you to divide the whole population of the Earth into twelve equal parts. How can that be right for me as an individual?

BE: You see, you are in a way representing that part of the zodiac. If the zodiac is the model of the sky divided into twelve through the signs, then the world “as above, so below” can be divided into twelve parts as well. This can be done geographically, or you can divide a nation into twelve or everybody into twelve tribes. You can also divide the population according to their seasonal birthdays. Each and every one of us will represent or resonate to that part of the zodiac. Then, for example, if you find Mars passing over that part, or Saturn is opposing it, you write about the archetypal significance of that event. The thing is that people *do* notice the effects of these planetary passages. They will notice the energising effect of Mars passing over their particular part of the zodiac.

Astrology is arbitrary in the way it divides things. We know it divides the zodiac equally into twelve along the ecliptic, which does not match the constellations — and still it seems to work out very well for most astrologers. We arbitrarily decided that we will create aspects from the factors of twelve. Why didn't we, for example, decide to divide it into families of nine? We could, but we don't. Not usually, anyway. There is no reason you cannot say that you resonate to one-twelfth of the year.

Actually, astrology is symbol manipulation. When you make your astrological interpretations, you are basically saying, “Symbol, speak to me!” and you write what it seems to say. It is a mistake to assume that there must be some physical link between one and the other, because then you get into the fallacy of celestial influence. The whole thing is an exercise in symbols.

TL: There is no absolute truth in astrology.

BE: There is no *physical* truth. People who seem to provide one are, I think, misleading themselves. It is really difficult to get out of the objective mindset, which we have been in for

the last 300 years. There would have been no difficulties in the Middle Ages to see all these symbols as manifestation and to view creation as proof of a creator. We should step back into that way of looking at it.

TL: Bernard, do you get anything out of writing Sun-sign columns on a personal level, or do you do it just for the money?

BE: There are a lot of levels to this. I like to think that I have done something that is worth reading. When I sit and read my columns out loud to myself, I see that they have little resonances, little echoes in them, which makes me think, “Well, that's quite good.” They are tiny pieces of writing: You have only about 80 words to tell a whole story. I quite like doing that. And I am very happy if I can make them funny, so people can smile or laugh a little. There is definitely a kind of craftsmanship in it.

In an astrological sense, while I am writing the columns, I am in a way meditating on the positions of the planets as they move along. I am living the year through, not only in my own life, but also working with the planetary cycles day by day. All the time, I am researching, learning, pondering, and thinking. “Meditating” is probably the wrong word, but it is a tremendous mental exercise. It is like, if you are a musician, why do you practise every day? You do it because you just like playing. It is not necessarily that you are practising for a concert; it is just that you like playing. You love the music, and I love working with the symbols the planets represent. If I can make a living from that, then great!

TL: Do you see yourself as a kind of social service worker?

BE: It would be a little grand of me to say yes. But I don't think I am doing people a disservice. I am hoping I can make them aware that they are a part of a larger pattern. The more they recognise and engage with it, the better it will be for everybody. If that can also give them hope, then so much the better. I am really just putting astrology's point of view out to them, but it must be very low key and very gentle.

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TL: Everybody knows their Sun sign. Isn't there a danger that the so-called newspaper astrology is the only kind of astrology people will relate to?

BE: I think people are quite happy to discover that there is more to astrology than only Sun signs. For example, you would say in a consultation, "You know you are a Virgo, but actually all the other planets are in different signs, so that gives more sides to yourself than you ever knew." People are very happy with that. They love to be told they are complex, fascinating individuals. I don't think I have ever met anyone who said, "I am a Virgo, and that's all I am" or somebody who refused to acknowledge the rest of their chart.

TL: When did Sun-sign astrology, as we know it today, start being featured in newspapers and magazines?

BE: In the U.K., it started in August 1930 when Princess Margaret, Queen Elizabeth's younger sister, was born. She was born towards a weekend, and by Sunday it was old news, so Lord Beaverbrook, the owner of the *Sunday Express*, had this great idea of letting astrologer R. H. Naylor write an article about "what the stars foretell for the young Princess." This turned out to be tremendously popular, so Beaverbrook asked Naylor to find a way to do something similar every week, but which all the readers could identify with.

The result was the Sun-sign column, which strips away the houses, the Moon, and planets to create a horoscope with only one thing in it: the position of the Sun, which every

reader would know because of their birthday. This assumption — that the Sun is the heart of the horoscope and of the individual — is actually a Theosophical one; Naylor learned it from the books of Alan Leo, who modernised astrology at the end of the 19th century. Putting the Sun at the centre, with its Theosophical implication that it represents the divine light in all of us, is quite a big change in astrological thinking. It is also quite modern, a sort of early New Age idea, and that is partly what has helped Sun-sign astrology to flourish in the way it has.

TL: Is there a future for Sun-sign astrology?

BE: Yes, of course. It is still very popular, though it might now be past its peak. Only 10 to 15 years ago, I was regularly asked by editors to make astrological interpretations of political events, and that doesn't happen anymore. It's a generational thing, too. The generation who loved reading their Sun signs in the 1960s and '70s are older now, and the present generation of 30- and 40-year-olds don't find it so attractive. But I find that the generation beneath them, now in their twenties, have a real thirst for spiritual knowledge. Newspaper horoscopes will probably have to change a little to speak to this generation in a way that meets their particular needs, but as long as the columns are written with care and honesty by astrologers who know their craft, then there will be newspaper horoscopes for a long time yet. The appeal of the little candy — two minutes of personal reflection where you are the centre of the cosmos — is still as strong as ever.



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