

Apollo: The Epic Journey To The Moon

David West Reynolds {Tehabi Books, San Diego}

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Reviewed by James Oberg

Thirty years after the end of the Apollo man-on-the-moon program, readers may wonder why new books about the project keep appearing. Here's one good answer. This book, an 'illustrative retrospective' of the program, provides a good example of the new insights, new images, and new assessments that such new books can provide.

It proves itself justified, and well worth the read and the view (more than 400 fine illustrations). Hopefully it can become a 'classic' and go into subsequent reprintings. And that's good, since there were far too many factual errors to leave uncorrected.

What it tells is an engaging, unified narrative of how the engineering challenges were overcome, how the space vehicles were built and flown, and what the astronauts experienced along the way. Aimed at "a generation [which] has grown up to whom the moon landings are ancient history," it provides a very satisfying modernistic account.

The illustrations of flight profiles during launch and landing (both on the Moon and on Earth) look three-dimensional, and the pop out of the page with a depth and clarity I've never seen before. The combination of a large-format book with many two-page photo spreads is a visual delight for readers who encounter the subject for the first time, or the hundredth.

Where the author is on target with his analysis, his words are stirring. "Without a human proxy, space exploration can accomplish good science but achieves limited public engagement..." he writes. "There is something irreplaceably inspiring about a human presence on the frontier of exploration." Regarding Neil Armstrong, the civilian commander of the first landing mission, he writes: "His personal qualities would shape the character of Apollo-11, making this a mission that bore the mantle of history with soft-spoken honor rather than superficial humor or brash ego." What did the victory in the 'Moon Race' mean? "America, like no other nation, WAS capable of the Moon."

The author seems to have fallen under the spell of various vonbraunophiles among the space history community, since he basically portrays the Apollo program as having been accomplished by German rocket expert Wernher von Braun and a few associates (there are twenty photographs of von Braun, compared to one or two each for all the others). He mentions that von Braun was "heartbroken" that his rockets were used against civilians in WW2, but makes no mention of how many actually were killed. Nor is it true that by the late 1960's von Braun had solved 'the greatest technological problems' of manned flight

to Mars – these problems are only now being recognized and appreciated. The book is thrilled with the ‘vision thing’ that President Kennedy brought to the program, but on the other hand, the author clearly despises Republican presidents such as Eisenhower and Nixon, as well as current space projects such as the shuttle and the space station, which both ‘lack purpose’.

Probably because the author came to the subject from the outside (he had no personal experience or education in space technology), one can almost see a boundary of his familiarity with the details of the missions. The text stops short of specifics in some areas. What was the cause of death of the Apollo-1 astronauts? When Armstrong placed “his boot” onto the Moon, he had two boots – which one was it (the left one, by the way)?

This often can be frustrating, but not nearly so much as when erroneous information is used to fill in such gaps. In the introduction to astronaut Wally Schirra’s rah-rah introduction, he is introduced as the man who “proved out the Saturn V Moon rocket” (he rode a Saturn-1B instead). The book has a picture of a daytime launch of a Soviet ‘Vostok’ rocket and calls it the launch of the ‘Sputnik’ rocket (which occurred at night). The author describes a military space shuttle launch pad for ‘soldier-astronauts’ built at “Edwards Air Force Base” (the pad was at Vandenberg AFB and it was for ordinary NASA astronauts). “The first US Moon probes were the Rangers”, he writes (they were the ‘Pioneers’). “Collins. . . had ridden a rocket stage like a cowboy during his Gemini 10 space walk” (that had been Gordon, on Gemini-11). A Soviet rocket failure in July 1969 created a fireball that killed over 100 people (the fatalities were in a military missile test a decade earlier). Apollo-16 was delayed in lunar orbit “for a dozen extra holding rounds” (24 hours), but it actually was less than 6 hours. On the return leg from the Moon on Apollo-17, one astronaut went outside to retrieve mapping camera film, and “Mission Commander Cernan watched from the open hatch” – except that it was Lunar Module Pilot Schmitt who was watching from the hatch.

Any technical book contains errors in details, and there are others which are clearly typos. But there are just too many of such errors to ignore (hence my desire to see a new edition in which the errors are fixed), and readers need to remain aware that any particular fact they are surprised or charmed by ought to be verified elsewhere (a good idea in any book, of course). Meanwhile, this book’s ‘big picture’ of Apollo remains reliably informative and refreshingly inspirational for modern readers.