

The Moonlandings – an eyewitness account

by Reginald Turnill

Cambridge University Press, 2002. ISBN 0-521-81595-9. Pp xix + 456, £19.95 (hbk).

Reginald Turnill's book is as revealing about Aunty BBC as about the *Apollo* project itself. I had not realised that some launches were covered from London, not Cape Canaveral. I had forgotten the *Apollo 7* 'mutiny' and that none of the astronauts on that flight ever flew again.

Having given us the necessary background of the *Mercury* and *Gemini* projects, Turnill reaches '*Apollo's* Bad Start' on page 121. He records the deaths of Grissom, White and Chaffee in simple, quiet prose and accords the same dignity to Komarov, who died during the re-entry of the first *Soyuz* spacecraft. His chapter 'Overtaking the Russians' puts this during the *Gemini 8* mission of March 1966 – I was surprised, then convinced.

The precautions against astronauts contracting infections before flights are amusing – and the omissions in the precautionary programme are lunatic. Of course, *Apollo 11* takes centre stage in the narrative. Turnill is right that it would be hard to better Arthur C. Clarke's often quoted 'The last day of the old world'. Perhaps it is only my prejudice



that the climax of the story seems to be *Apollo 13*. The remaining *Apollo* flights, *Skylab*, *Apollo-Soyuz* provide a sort of anti-climax with the final epilogue being John Glenn's flight at the age of 77 in October 1998.

Turnill was 83 at the time of John Glenn's last flight, but his book has none of the 'old-man-remembers' feel. It is a fascinating account, by turns personal, thorough, perceptive and recommended. The illustrations are all

black and white and mostly familiar and nostalgic. There are four useful appendices, an index and a bibliography. If you want to find out more, you will be able to.

The characterisation of Wernher von Braun as a modern 'Faust' struck me as both fair and perceptive. Although he died in 1977, he is present throughout the book as a genially infamous figure, transported from some ancient epic. Appendix 2 covers von Braun's detailed plan to land men on Mars in 1982. When I read that, I sighed.

Roger O'Brien

Roger used to work in a bank and do astronomy in his spare time. Now, he teaches astronomy and still does astronomy in his spare time.

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