



A passion for Mars

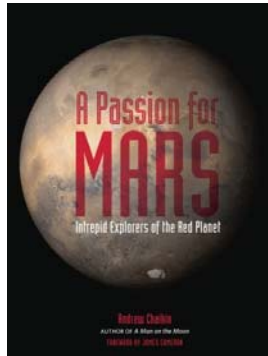
by Andrew Chaikin

Abrams Books (New York), 2008. ISBN 978-0-8109-7274-2. Pp 280, £19.99 (hbk).

This is an account of the exploration of Mars (mostly by modern spacecraft) as witnessed through the eyes and ears of Andrew Chaikin, currently an advisor to NASA on space policy and public communications.

We begin at the beginning. As with so many texts, the pre-Space Age part is predictably slanted towards Schiaparelli and Lowell, with many important figures hidden from view. However, the book records Chaikin's *personal* involvement with the Red Planet, and doubtless in his youth he experienced the lure of the martian canals which persisted so strongly in his native America as late as the 1960s.

The Space Age sections (comprising most of the book's 11 chapters) are where the author's intimate knowledge comes into its own. There will be many who will like to read about the mannerisms and quoted remarks of famous figures, past and present. There will be others, like your reviewer, who



found some of the characterisations overdone and, in a few instances, tasteless. Indeed, the pamphlet *How to write Fiction* given away recently with the *Guardian* came instantly to mind, where Robert Harris quotes a maxim of Tom Stoppard's: 'Just because it's true doesn't mean it's interesting.' However, there is a great deal of detail here about how and why particular space missions came about, and this will undoubtedly be both interesting and useful to some readers.

Chaikin's book is full of excellent pictures, many unique or rare, and its visual impact is very strong. I wanted to like it. But the book is neither martian text nor formal biography, and it simply did not appeal to my personal taste. Others may love this sort of writing, but if I had leafed through *A Passion for Mars* in a bookstore instead of receiving it as a review copy, I'm afraid that I wouldn't have parted with my money.

Richard McKim

Dr Richard McKim is Director of the Mars Section and has analysed all BAA observations of the Red Planet from 1979–80 onwards.

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