

Book review

Mars - Uncovering the secrets of the Red Planet
by Paul Raeburn

National Geographic Society (1998) ISBN 0-7922-7373-7 pp 231

This is not a recent book (it was first printed in 1998); however, with the current high degree of interest in Mars exploration (particularly in the USA), my first impression was that it might be a good introduction to the planet. It is well illustrated, with plenty of photographs from the key missions to that date (Mariner, Viking, Pathfinder, Global Surveyor). As an amateur geologist these images were particularly alluring and held the promise of some sound debate on Martian geology. Apart from a forward and introduction, the book is organised into 6 chapters, an index and suggested further reading list.

I found chapter 1 on “Why do we dream of Mars ?” an entertaining introduction to the book. It touches on the major historical players such as Ptolemy, Aristarchus, Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo. But this is a whistle-stop tour, and has no depth. The old story of Lowell’s canals is given yet another airing, only for his work to be dismissed as “... the product of [his] misguided scientific imagination ...”. This seems an unduly harsh summary and a more balanced view of Lowell can be gained by considering Sheehan and Dobbins’ letter in the October ’02 copy of *Sky and Telescope*. There they describe how Lowell’s erroneous observations of spokes on Venus could have arisen by him pushing his equipment to the limit and actually recording images of his own ocular blood vessels. The chapter rounds off with a look at science fiction writing about Mars, a welcome distraction for any sci-fi fans.

The following chapters look into the Mariner missions, Viking and Mars Pathfinder in some detail. However, the detail tends to be closely focussed on the hardware, upsets and NASA politics, rather than the science returns from the missions. The quality of the photographs is good, but overall I think the Internet is a better source for “hard” facts on Mars.

The closing chapters on “Is there life on Mars ?” and “Continuing the Mars journey” came across to me as somewhat clumsy attempts to justify continued exploration of the planet to the US taxpayer, but perhaps by then I was a little too jaded by the lack of scientific depth to the book.

I can recommend it as a light reading, or as a quick source for some high quality photographs. Beyond that, and particularly in the case of the Mars Pathfinder mission, I think that we are still waiting for a good mainstream book on the discoveries that have been made.

Lee Russell, 20th March 2003