Space and the American Imagination  by Howard E. McCurdy
Review by: Walter A. McDougall
Published by: Organization of American Historians
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2568394
Accessed: 28/06/2012 20:22

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of
content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms
of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Organization of American Historians is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to
the book relies on a blend of both current and archival materials.

The shortcomings to the volume, although few, are obvious. The book lacks good maps and photographs. Although an attempt is made to include a map, it is, for all intents, not useful, and the photos are few and in the middle of the book. Presentation of more data in visual format such as graphs or charts would have been helpful. Finally, much detail is given to the tourist booms of the 1920s and 1950s, but only lip service is given to the current boom, which is expected to peak at two million visitors by the year 2000.

Overall, I feel this book is a good addition to anyone who studies tourism, especially in the Caribbean. It puts economic issues center stage, and it explores behind the scenes to show that the rosy pictures on the glossy fliers indeed have a not-so-rosy impact on the people who live in a tourist destination, although this one is off limits to Americans today. The book is nonpolitical, but it shows the historical impact of American imperialism and influence on local economies, as the three boom periods in Cuban tourism were either directly or indirectly influenced by American foreign policy.

This book is a good reference for many classes in the liberal arts including history, geography, sociology, and economics. If you ever want to read one book on the history of tourism, read this one. It will convince you that, in some respects, historical events do repeat themselves; only the context and actors are different.

Artimus Keiffer
Indiana University–Purdue University, Indianapolis
Indianapolis, Indiana


This latest volume in the Smithsonian's History of Aviation series must have been fun to write, for the role played by popular culture in the promotion of space technology is an unusually zesty topic for a professor of public affairs who confesses to having been a space enthusiast even before the first Sputnik in 1957. Howard E. McCurdy argues that modern government is often a matter of reconciling imagination and reality, that is, responding to the public's visions of desirable futures even as it tempers public expectations. Hence, Atoms for Peace or the War on Poverty can inspire euphoria only until spiraling costs and disappointing results breed disenchantment. Few programs were launched with greater excitement than the manned space program of the National Air and Space Administration (NASA), and few have fallen so short of their promise. Yet the dream and agency survive in the name of cosmic manifest destiny.

Why is that? Most space historians make a respectful nod toward the early science fiction writers and rocket pioneers but emphasize the Cold War competition that drove the United States and Soviet programs. By contrast, McCurdy remains focused on the promoters of space flight and depicts the Cold War as almost a distraction from the quest. Thus, Willy Ley and Wernher von Braun assured postwar Americans that spaceflight was not just Buck Rogers fantasy and appealed to their sense of wonder, not fear. And no sooner had the Cold War race to the Moon ended than Gerard O'Neill, Carl Sagan, the L-5 Society, Mars Underground, Planetary Society, and "Trek-kie" clubs began promoting space as the high road to global prosperity through solar energy, environmental salvation for an overcrowded earth, even preservation of Planet Earth from a comet on a collision course, warning that if the human race failed to conquer space it would someday become extinct.

Space enthusiasts invariably domesticate their outré agenda by invoking the nation's frontier tradition. But their dreams and nightmares are so varied and fantastic that one begins to suspect that they comprise a sort of cult. Hence McCurdy's allusion to "the winged gospel" of the early decades of aviation seems justified. His circumscribed focus, however, prevents him from answering whether the "imagineers" (a Disney neologism) really influence the budgets and projects of the engineers, the Pentagon, and the aerospace industry. And while the book's narratives flow nicely, its analytical passages are marred by opacity ("Although it is possible for a phenomenon [sic] that exists in the imagination for hundreds of years to come true, it is more
likely that imagination will launch programs that require altered expectations”) or dubious word choice, as when he alleges that I “expropriated” a concept from Daniel Bell in my own book. When? I gave full credit to Bell in a footnote and in the text.

Still, any pique of mine only lends credence to my favorable opinion of this enjoyable treatise on popular culture and progress, a useful companion to Thomas M. Disch’s The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World (1998).

Walter A. McDougall
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania


Business history does not seem to impinge very much on the editors, contributors, or, presumably, readers of the Journal of American History any longer. The last article on a business-historical subject appeared about two decades ago. The history of technology has fared even worse, economic history a little better. Even in the review section, major works of business history are often notable by their absence. It is not that these three areas of historical work have become stagnant backwaters, but rather that they often seem to be pursued as self-contained specialisms, producing many good but rather “internalist” monographs that do not speak to a larger readership in the same way as, presumably, the efforts of historians plowing the crowded fields of culture, gender, sex, and race.

If Journal readers cannot be expected to engage with key institutions underpinning the creation and distribution of wealth and power in American society, then it is doubly unlikely that many of them will feel compelled to read this book, which results from a symposium on the work of the doyen of United States business historians of an internalist persuasion, Alfred D. Chandler Jr. His last major book, Scale and Scope (1990), attempted to give his account of the rise of managerial capitalism something approaching global reach, by taking in comparative analyses of the nation’s only serious economic rivals through the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Britain and Germany. Most of this collection—over 90 percent of the text, including all the more substantial and original contributions—has a similarly transnational focus. It consists of essays on early (Great Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, Scandinavia) and later (France, Italy, Spain) European industrializing nations, on Asian (Japan, South Korea) latecomers, and on three cases where culture and politics have channeled and obstructed the developmental path (Argentina and the formerly centrally “planned” economies of the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia). These are sandwiched between introductory essays by Chandler and his fellow editors and five concluding essays that attempt, with varying degrees of success, to draw out common themes. Some of the authors, and many of their ideas, will be familiar to specialist readers from earlier symposiums on Scale and Scope and the rest of the Chandler oeuvre.

If Journal readers should wish to get a quick introduction to the literature on economic development and the growth of major businesses in this wide range of countries, they could scarcely do better than to get hold of this book. But if their concerns are more narrowly American, what will they get out of it?

Alfred Chandler’s contributions, by themselves, do not add a great deal—the introductory chapters, and the first substantive chapter, on the United States, do little more than summarize and restate the key arguments of his major books and his 1994 Business History Review article on “The Competitive Performance of U.S. Industrial Enterprises since the Second World War.” Readers would be well advised to go back to the sources rather than to rely on these edited highlights. In the concluding section of the book, which attempts to draw lessons from the diverse country studies (which show, in fact, how particular is the American story and how difficult it is to apply Chandler’s categories and explanations outside of the country, industries, and time frame they were devised to suit), Thomas McCraw’s sparkling essay on “Government, Big Business, and the Wealth of Nations” stands out. In a few pages, he says more about the exceptional cultural, social, and political framework