Mars and the public imagination around 1900

The Martians: The True Story of an Alien Craze that Captured Turn-of-the-Century America. David Baron (Liveright Publishing/W. W. Norton, New York, 2025). Pp. xii + 321. $32. ISBN 9781324090663.

In May 1906, a New York reporter asked H. G. Wells if interplanetary communication was possible. "Why not?" the British author replied. After all, hadn't the famed Boston astronomer Percival Lowell recently produced evidence that "seemed to place the habitable condition of [Mars] almost beyond a doubt" (p. 157)?

By the early 1900s, Wells was hardly alone in this belief. Sir Robert Ball, Royal Astronomer of Ireland, was one of numerous public intellectuals who endorsed Lowell's view that dark straight lines observed on the red planet were *literal* canals—artificial waterways that were, in Ball's judgement, "the work of the Martians, the inhabitants of Mars" (p. 117). Richard Gregory, Assistant Editor at *Nature*, ventured that the canal builders were likely to be "a race with immense chests," whilst Edward Morse, the eminent zoologist and antiquarian, proffered the theory that the Martians might resemble large ants (pp. 153–56). In December 1907, a *Wall Street Journal* editorial declared that "the most extraordinary event" of that year had been "the proof afforded by [astronomers] that conscious, intelligent human life exists upon the planet Mars" (p. 177).

As surprising as this may all sound, it will not come as news to many of the readers of this journal. The canals of Mars have been a prominent feature of our discipline since at least 1976, when William Graves Hoyt published his foundational study, *Lowell and Mars*. Subsequent historians have filled out further aspects of the story: William Sheehan on the problems of telescopic observation and perception; David Straus as Lowell's biographer; Michael Crowe and Steven Dick in their seminal studies of extraterrestrial life; Maria Lane, Robert Markley, and various others on the cultural connections between Mars, Martians, and *fin de siècle* public culture.

What we have not had, until now, is a synthetic account of the whole story. The time is certainly ripe, with Mars once again a target for manned exploration and interest in extraterrestrials now a matter of political discussion, at least in the U.S. David Baron's *The Martians* is much more than merely timely, however; it is a brilliant and definitive history of one of astronomy's most remarkable episodes.

It should be noted first that, despite its rather sensational subtitle, this is not a work of popularization. Baron, a journalist and author specialising in astronomy, certainly has synthesized a huge range of scholarship and he does write in a breezy, often exhilarating style. But this book is also a significant achievement of historical research. Forty-seven archives are cited and Baron provides a huge range of new archival discoveries, as well as a wealth of new finds from amongst the era's voluminous newsprint records.

Many of these discoveries serve to helpfully de-centre the place of Lowell in the story of Mars and its Martians. Baron is brilliant at capturing public interest in Mars in all its diverse interpretations, between the year of the discovery of the canals in 1876 and the death of Lowell in 1916. Within this tight chronological framework, the book skilfully weaves between its central cast of characters—Lowell, of course, but also Camille Flammarion, Nikola Tesla, David Todd, Garrett P. Serviss, and Eugene-Michel Antoniadi—and the wider cultural contexts through which debates about Martians were inevitably filtered. Baron's commitment to a pacey narrative inevitably sidelines some key actors—two of my personal favourites, William H. Pickering and Simon Newcomb, barely feature—but such omissions are easily forgiven as the necessary price for consistently brisk and compelling storytelling.

One way in which the book is evidently not a work of academic scholarship is in its lack of any overt argument, beyond the obvious value in retelling such a strange and captivating story. But the book's brilliance lies very much in this commitment to showing rather than telling.

Baron does not fall into the trap of taking sides or offering retrospective admonishments, and he is very much attuned to the ways in which interest in Martian life reflected social features of the age, from Darwinism to racist anthropology to public captivation with polar exploration and the building of the Panama Canal. The dexterity with which *The Martians* moves through these worlds represents a model for the effective engagement of a wide readership with cutting-edge historical research. It deserves to be the entry point for any student or scholar interested in knowing more about this remarkable story.

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