

QUEST

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THE HISTORY OF SPACEFLIGHT

Q U A R T E R L Y



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AND THE
"RIGHT STUFF"**

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HOMER BOUSHEY AND THE
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Clockwise, from top left:

Dick Gordon, Pete Conrad, Neil Armstrong, and Dave Scott

Credit: NASA

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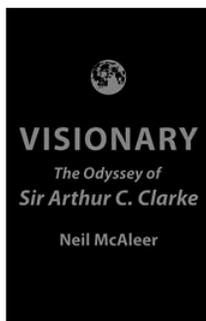
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BOOK REVIEW

VISIONARY: THE ODYSSEY OF SIR ARTHUR C. CLARKE



By Neil McAleer

The Clarke Project, 2012

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Visionary is an updated version of Neil McAleer's *Arthur C. Clarke: The Authorized Biography* (1992). It carries the story through to Clarke's death in March 2008 at the age of 90. Several chapters have been added, and seven of the earlier chapters were also revised substantially and expanded, notably regarding the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

This book, like its predecessor, is very much a popular, rather than scholarly, biography, obviously from a friendly viewpoint. There are 17 pages of notes in the new edition, using the reference system of short quotations in the back, but almost all the citations are to published sources. Nonetheless, it is apparent that the author did have access to parts of the Clarke Papers, which are still in Sri Lanka awaiting the resolution of various legal questions, or to the papers of some of Clarke's huge number of correspondents. McAleer quotes from letters frequently, but where those letters are is left unexplained. He also lists several dozen interviews with many of Clarke's friends and colleagues in the realms of science fiction and space advocacy, the product of more than two decades of work. Although Clarke published one short autobiographical book (*Astounding Days*, 1989) and many memoir articles, McAleer's book provides the only comprehensive biography of the writer that exists.

Clarke made himself famous for both science fiction and space advocacy, which gives him an almost unique place in the 20th century—virtually every one of his contemporaries was successful in only one of those genres. (Isaac Asimov is one of the few exceptions, but his nonfiction writing was mostly not about spaceflight.) Born in late 1917 in the west of England and growing up in the interwar years when American pulp science fiction was just reaching those shores, Arthur C. Clarke became infatuated with the idea of space travel. He became one of the earliest members of the British Interplanetary Society (BIS) after it was formed in 1933. Born into a farm family without means, the talented Clarke was sent into accounting work in the civil service, but his technical ability allowed him to become a radar officer in the Royal Air Force during World War II and to earn a mathematics and physics degree afterward. Almost all of his spare time was spent in the company of his B.I.S. friends or in writing, and by the end of the 1940s he was so successful at the latter that he was able to give up his job as a technical editor for the financially chancy life of the professional author.

In the early 1950s, Clarke found the second great passion

of his life, scuba diving and underwater exploration, thanks to a friendship with diver Mike Wilson. This led to joint books and films about Australia's Great Barrier Reef and the waters around Ceylon (later Sri Lanka) and to a permanent move to the latter country in 1956. Not only diving lured him; he also much preferred the tropics to cold, rainy Great Britain. An unanswered question is whether his sexuality had any influence—fleeing a repressive culture for a more relaxed one. A quotation to that effect in the first edition of McAleer's biography does not appear in the second. While Clarke had bisexual experience and was disastrously married to an American woman in 1952 (they lived together only a few months, although they did not divorce for a decade), it seems fairly clear from the book that he was basically gay. If he had lived in a less repressed age, he might have had an easier time in his early life, although that is only a surmise from a biography that does not offer a very coherent interpretation of either his emotional life or his sexuality. One thing we can say for sure: the accusations of pedophilia in a London tabloid in 1998 were a nasty, underhanded invention of that newspaper. That is made clear in a new chapter for this edition.

For Clarke, even greater fame as a prophet of space travel came after *Sputnik* was launched, but it was not until *2001* was released in 1968 that his name reached the general public in a way that all his earlier work had never done. To this day, it is as the writer of *2001* that the non-science-fiction/non-space-enthusiast public identifies him, although the most important thing he did was to conceive of geostationary communications satellites. His post-movie fame led to a newfound financial freedom, in part through innumerable well-paid speaking opportunities, too many of which are described in the latter parts of the book, particularly in the new edition. But it also led to a renewal of his science-fiction career and such classics as *Rendezvous with Rama*. Late in his life, age and post-polio syndrome (he had been paralyzed for months after he caught the disease in Ceylon in 1962) led him to collaborate on a number of novels as co-author. None of these seem to have lived up to his earlier work.

Visionary, like its predecessor, is a very readable and interesting account of Clarke's life, and I would recommend either if you want to understand the man—although the high price of the new edition is off-putting,* as is the somewhat rambling character of the added chapters. I am not sure another standard biography needs to be written. But there is certainly room for much more rigorous and critical intellectual evaluations of his work, as is clear from several recent scholarly articles about him. Arthur C. Clarke's place in the history of space advocacy and science fiction is secure and worthy of much further exploration.

Michael J. Neufeld
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* Via email, the author has indicated that he plans to offer a \$9.99 e-book later this year.

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