

American Astrophilately : The First 50 Years by David S. Ball

Book Review by Jim Reichman

I have to admit, up front, that I harbor misgivings about some of the tenets that form the foundation of the philatelic study field being labeled "astrophilately". In particular, these concerns relate to the exclusionist guidelines these collectors have adopted which disqualify otherwise world-class, philatelic exhibits relating to the history of spaceflight. On the other hand you have to admire the tenacity these astrophilatelists employ to seek out and document the details of philatelic, commemorative, space covers and their backgrounds. Such attention to detail is the "right stuff" that turns any regular space collector into a true cosmic-philatelist.

David Ball's book on American astrophilately is one that few aspiring astrophilatelists should be without. Although narrowly focused on the space programs of the United States, it does provide guidelines and useful examples of how astrophilatelists around the world should address and model their own philatelic research and documentation energies. I would even go so far as to recommend the book to the rest of the space collectors/philatelists, i.e., those of us whose cosmic collecting and exhibiting interests tend to violate one or more boundaries of the astrophilatelists' precepts.

One of the main reasons for these recommendations is that a major portion of David's book is filled with an interesting collection of philatelic monograms, vignettes, and even some short theses written by the experts and first-hand participants in the field of astrophilately. These articles address a wide variety of philatelic subjects related to the American space program. Although not a new approach¹ to adding authenticity and scope to a space book's content, it certainly enlivened the discussions of what could have quickly devolved into a matter-of-fact documentation of acceptable and unacceptable astrophilatelic exhibition materials.

One of these articles was of particular interest to my own Russian spaceflight philatelic interests. This was a fascinating story about how one enterprising stamp dealer was able to get two, same-day postmarks (one from Moscow and one from Cape Canaveral) on the same covers commemorating both launches (Soyuz and Apollo) of the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project. Given the number and variety of these types of discussions in the book, it would be fair to say that almost every space

Mercury

MA-6



One row of postmark samples for the Mercury-Atlas 6 launch. The book contains 300+ similar rows for other US space events.

collector will find at least one and probably many of these articles that will pique their own personal interests.

Interspersed in and around these articles are others written personally by David that introduce and supplement those astrophilately subjects. Included in his writings are discussions supporting the foundations for and justification of the astrophilatelic tenets that deal with issues like acceptable postoffices, time zones, postmark classifications, and backdating.

Interestingly, some of these discussions address the problems associated with blindly applying some of these tenets. One case in point, brought up by the author, is the astrophilatelic tenet requiring covers be postmarked on the event date at/near the ground station controlling the spacecraft. Strict adherence to this requirement makes no sense when, e.g., postmarking philatelic covers commemorating a deep-space probe event when telemetric news of that event (i.e., whether it actually happened and/or was successful) would not reach the ground station until the day after these covers were required to be postmarked because of how far out in deep-space the probe was at.

Since this book is being billed as a resource that would help novice collectors identify envelopes which meet the International Philatelic Federation guidelines for exhibiting, I went on eBay and randomly selected US space covers being offered there that fit within the timeline and space-mission boundaries addressed in David's book. Each such cover selected was then compared against the reference materials and guidelines of the book. Many were fairly easy to categorize and were, in fact, even included in the hundreds of the full-color, example covers shown in the "World of Covers" section. Unfortunately, there was almost as many for which an assessment was in doubt or could not be made. Were it not for an open email dialog with the author to help resolve these issues, I would have been left wondering. My

¹ Highly recommended, for those interested in the Soviet space program, is the non-philatelic book *Roads to Space, An Oral History of the Soviet Space Program*, which is a compilation of short memoirs written by many behind-the-scenes participants of that nation's space program. This book was edited by John Reed and published by the Orion West Group in 1995.

concern is that other readers/collectors will probably not have such access to help resolve their questions.

From my perspective, these problems arise because of two issues. First is the lack of adequate introductory explanations on how to read, interpret, and relate the information, matrices, postmark/cachet images, and associated comments found in Parts II and III of the book and the files on the accompanying computer disk (CD). Without such information, the average reader will easily get lost amidst all the philatelic details. Second is the lack of an adequate editorial review which should have caught and resolved those deficiencies as well as several other mistakes that were found in the book.

Bottom line is that this is probably too valuable a resource to pass up, especially for committed astrophilatelists. However, readers need to buy it with the understanding that the book does have a number of content issues. My recommendation is for purchasers to first read the Part I astrophilatelic articles and similar materials located in the "Articles" folder on the CD then read the seminar briefing slides (also on the CD) labeled "Section for Astrophilately" before venturing into the other materials in this book. With any luck, even die-hard, cosmic-philatelists like myself can learn a thing or two from these astrophilatelists.

As advertised in our last issue

A must have Reference
Introducing a new Book and Bonus Resource DVD
From Space Unit member, David L. Bell

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ASSS Members at Scottish Congress

The 81st Annual Congress of the Association of Scottish Philatelic Societies was held at its customary venue, the Dewar's Centre, Perth on Friday 16th and 17th April.

In attendance representing The ASSS were Scottish members Chairman, Margaret Morris, Treasurer Harvey Duncan and Orbit Editor Jeff Dugdale who manned a section of the Societies Tables. Also spotted was George Fox.

A small number of astrophilatelic items were included in the competitive displays.



Our Chairman Mrs Margaret Morris beside her exhibit in the Inter-federation competition "Under an Artificial Sky". Margaret's other frame, in the Postcard Competition, "The Zeiss Planetary Projector" was Highly Commended with 91 pts. Left an overview of the Congress showing dealers' tables and displays.