



The Lure of [Space] Exploration

Son of Apollo: The Adventures of a Boy Whose Father Went to the Moon (University of Nebraska Press, 2022). For further information see: www.roosa.com

I was privileged to meet the author of this book Christopher Roosa, quite a few years back now through a friend; the brother of Christopher's wife. Following his military retirement (as a US Marine Corps Reserve Colonel) I connected more recently during his family's Australian sojourn.

Growing up in a similar era, though in a very different environment, I found the now historical context fascinating. Stuart Roosa was Christopher's father and as the command module pilot for Apollo 14 flew to the moon with Alan Shepherd and Edgar Mitchell. This era is brought to life by Christopher's personal story about growing up as the eldest son of Stuart Roosa who had a stellar air force and space career before entering private industry and suffering an early death in 1994.

Apollo and Astronaut Context

While personal stories of Christopher and his family abound, the book is built around the trajectory that took his father to the Apollo 14 mission. There are helpful outlines of the earlier missions and in particular the circumstances of Apollo 13, the mission that his father was originally scheduled to be on. Jim Lovell, the Commander of Apollo 13 provides the foreword to the book, and it is a warm-hearted and apt introduction.

It was also interesting to note the reference to Paul Scully-Power (the first Australian in space), who provides a commendation for the book.

History in the Making

The decades of the 1960s and 1970s were the critical era for the space race and eventual times on the moon, with the program finishing with Apollo 17 in December 1972. US Presidents were key to the endorsement of the space initiative and its eventual conclusion, from John F Kennedy with his famous speech about going to the moon, to Richard Nixon, the President for all the moon landing missions, who eventually presided over the change of direction. The era coincided with significant social and world change and the Apollo missions stood out for what could be achieved by a single-minded focus on the new realm of exploration.

USA and Regional Life

I always find American autobiographies and biographies fascinating for the descriptions of ordinary local and regional life. They often reveal or illustrate the differences between the way of life for many Americans in the very diverse states of America. For Christopher and the family, there was a strong connection to the physicality of their local environment, especially hunting and outdoors activities. This also connects with the long military family tradition that was continued with each of the sons of Stu and Joan Roosa.

Celebrity Connections

The book highlights the then growing celebrity culture that is now an integral part of the American experience. Celebrity was not just for pop stars in the 1960s and early 1970s; astronauts were a distinct celebrity unit.

From the intriguing chapter on the Apollo groupie scene to the many stories about meeting celebrities and world leaders, including the events that Christopher recalls from being hosted by President Nixon at the White House and Camp David, one learns about the status and importance of the space missions in the USA and his father's own celebrity status.

It was illuminating to read that Christopher's mother started a group for the original wives of astronauts following the increasing divorce and separation among many of the other astronauts.

Religious Connections

While some (particularly Protestant) readers will not necessarily agree with all the remarks about prayer, I found these references to be a helpful reminder of the importance of prayer in exploratory missions and military service, and in the family that supports people in these contexts.

This is a very enjoyable read. The reasonably short connecting chapters lead one expectantly to the next part of the story. After I had finished, I was reminded of some aspects of the Jack Reacher books, particularly with the military family, the regular movements, and the internal political machinations of bureaucracy.

This is a book full of stories, intimate with detail as Christopher explores his family history, the dynamics of growing up in a way ‘in the shadow of the moon’, and the continuing lure of the most iconic period of the space age.

Peter Bentley, July 2023

Also posted on Christian Today Australia website July 2023