

BOOK REVIEW

## Matthew Shindell, *For the Love of Mars: A Human History of the Red Planet*

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Since the late nineteenth century, a number of books have sought to provide a comprehensive history of human observations and perceptions of Mars. Many of these books offer only a superficial account of Mars in ancient culture – often conflated with the culture of Greece and Rome – before descending into exhaustive, blow-by-blow accounts of the breakthroughs permitted by modern telescopes and spacecraft. The standard Mars narrative is teleological, telling a simple story of superstition displaced by science.

Matthew Shindell's *For the Love of Mars* differs from these accounts in several respects. Shindell aims to guide the reader through 'the changing "world systems"' (p. 17) constructed by humans to make sense of Mars. For him, the main reason why these systems changed is not because more information became available – obtained through new observations of Mars, for example – but because new questions were viewed as important, and novel 'ways of asking and answering those questions' came to be regarded as superior (p. 17). This perspective leads Shindell to engage seriously with the history of Mars in ancient and medieval cultures, a topic that occupies roughly a third of his book. It also leads to richly multi-causal explanations for the evolution of one world system into another – explanations that show how ideas informed one another, coexisted, fragmented and gradually faded or strengthened for reasons that extended well beyond new observations and discoveries. To craft these explanations, Shindell shows his mastery of a diverse, multidisciplinary and fast-growing scholarship on the history of human engagement with Mars and other worlds.

Shindell describes, for example, how the refinement of the printing press in Renaissance Europe combined with the depredations of European colonizers to permit the emergence of the idea that Mars was a world like Earth. He shows that the rise of geography as a colonial science joined a global wave of canal construction to strengthen the nineteenth-century notion that Mars was a dying world with an ancient civilization. And he explains why the quest for hegemony on Earth encouraged and was supported by the 'big science' of Mars exploration in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Although *For the Love of Mars* traces the evolution of ideas across millennia, in different world regions, involving diverse ways of knowing, it is a slender book and written in plain prose. This helps to make it perhaps the most accessible book ever written about the history of human engagement with the red planet. Yet both its brevity and its reliance on existing scholarship constrain its narrative in unavoidable ways. As *For the Love of Mars* advances in time, the story it tells comes to focus ever more on the locus of Western power – first the wealthy nations of Europe, and then the United States. Meanwhile, the human subjects

of its analysis encompass an ever-broader substrate of society. At first, they include only priests and rulers. Literate elites join the fray in the Renaissance, and then, to a limited extent, ordinary people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (though only through a consideration of science fiction movies or NASA's social-media accounts).

To his credit, Shindell acknowledges that *For the Love of Mars* is neither complete nor comprehensive (p. xv). Yet it is fascinating to consider whether a broad history of Mars *must* follow the narrative structure of Shindell's book. As historians gaze further into the past, the limitations of existing textual sources in particular can force them to use the ideas of a dwindling share of elites as a proxy for broader societal perceptions of, in this case, Mars. Although breakthroughs in disciplines such as historical linguistics and palaeogenomics have shed new light on the experiences of ordinary people, it may well be that tracts written by Greek philosophers or Babylonian scribes provide our only window into ancient understandings of Mars. It also seems undeniable that developments in Europe and America were primarily responsible for the emergence of new Martian world systems from the sixteenth century to the present. Or do we think so only because historians have not sufficiently explored changing attitudes towards Mars in other world regions?

In its short conclusion, *For the Love of Mars* considers the possible futures of the red planet. Although it engages briefly with the dreams for Mars settlement that were proposed by pioneers in the history of human spaceflight, such as Wernher von Braun, it is here that the book first mentions the ambitions of today's 'NewSpace' tycoons. Naturally, the likes of Elon Musk have not yet set sail for the red planet. They may never do so. Yet the most important developments in the recent, human history of Mars may be the growing popularity of their visions of Martian settlement, and their development of technological systems that can, perhaps, realize those visions. A deeper analysis of this history might have further elevated an already important book.

As it stands, *For the Love of Mars* is a uniquely engaging, accessible and nuanced introduction to the human history of the red planet.