



Jared S. Buss. *Willy Ley: Prophet of the Space Age*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017. Illustrations. xiii + 321 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-5443-8.

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If you peruse a used bookstore, you will likely stumble upon the name Willy Ley. The German-born writer was prolific and his books on fossils, space, and history fill the nooks and crannies of many bookshops. My first Ley book was a gorgeous Technicolor book about rockets, published in the late 1950s. As a teenager, I assumed that Ley was the pen name of a scientist who moonlighted as a science consultant for films that I adored (like *Frau im Mond* [1929]) and television programs (like Disney's *Disneyland* space films). But then I stumbled upon his short stories in pulp science fiction magazines and a factual column in back issues of *Galaxy* magazine. "Who was Willy Ley?" I always found myself wondering.

Thankfully for me, Jared S. Buss's stellar biography *Willy Ley: Prophet of the Space Age* answers all of my questions about this quiet, modest pioneer of the Space Age. Even more important, Buss successfully argues for Ley's inclusion as an important link between the two cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt's and Carl Sagan's romantic naturalism. Ley, Buss shows, was spellbound by the work of German romantic naturalists in the 1920s. When he immigrated to the United States and started writing for popular magazines, he brought with him a rich style of science writing that emphasized an enchantment with the universe. Helpfully, Buss grounds us in the ways that Ley learned

about science while he was a young man. His descriptions of Ley's reading habits, museum visits, and lecture attendance are themselves astounding. Not since James A. Secord's *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (2001) has a historian given us such a close account of how an individual interacted with science in their daily life. By focusing so closely on Ley's interests, Buss offers a valuable window into the influences on an influencer.

Buss's second argument concerns Ley's shifting identity as a writer. As he notes in the introduction to the text, there is a surprising lack of current literature about the people who shaped the public understanding of science in the United States. Most of this literature has been focused on antagonism between scientists and media producers. Yet the story is a bit more complicated than that. There were a number of positive collaborations between scientists and cultural producers in the 1950s and 1960s, as David A. Kirby (*Lab Coats in Hollywood: Science, Scientists, and Cinema* [2011]) has shown. Indeed, as Buss points out, some individuals became expert facilitators between scientists and media titans—and Ley was one of these. While he lacked formal credentials, he was a skillful storyteller and a gracious promoter, who worked to boost colleagues like Wernher von

Braun. By the time that Ley made it “big,” he had spent twenty years networking among public relations and publishing teams. He achieved success because of his hard, tireless work convincing his peers of his expertise as a science communicator.

Buss’s third argument focuses on Ley’s contribution to a genre of science popularization in the 1950s and 1960s: books that promoted science as a form of democratic expression. As Buss points out, although this historiographical outlook makes historians cringe, many science writers wrote books that intertwined scientific research and democratic principles. At the same time, Buss tracks how popular science writers like Ley eagerly wrote about the history of science—until their optimistic texts eventually fell out of favor with the general public and historians of science.

So, who was Ley? He wasn’t a scientist or an engineer (per se) but a starry-eyed romantic who helped a generation of baby boomers dream about the stars. Ley was one of a group of movers and shakers who, behind the scenes, created the visual metaphors of the Space Age. I am grateful that Buss has written such a complete, detailed biography. His nuanced perspective on Ley’s role in the larger science communication scene helps us understand how non-scientists served important roles as communicators in the 1950s and 1960s. Ley’s lack of scientific credentials might have initially slowed him down but did not stop him from eventually publishing hundreds of influential articles that inspired other writers and scientists. For proof of that influence, visit a used bookshop and pick up one of his many excellent books, still wonderful to read decades later.

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