The Final Mission: Preserving NASA’s Apollo Sites

Reviewed by Donald C. Elder


In 2014 Christopher Nolan directed, co-wrote, and co-produced the big-budget Hollywood movie “Interstellar.” Set in the future, the film focuses on a character portrayed by Matthew McConaughey. At one point in the movie, he has a confrontation with administrators at his daughter’s school over his teaching her about the American success in putting astronauts on the moon during the Apollo program. They remind him of the government’s position that NASA had faked the landings and warn him of the consequences of believing otherwise.

While some individuals in today’s day and age do indeed believe that the moon landings never happened, most Americans scoff at such a notion. They do so in large measure because of the physical evidence that proves that a robust American space program did indeed exist. But what if the tangible reminders of the American space program someday disappeared? Could the future of moon landing denial envisioned by Nolan actually occur?

Hoping to insure that such a future never happens, Lisa Westwood, Beth Laura O’Leary, and Milford Wayne Donaldson have written The Final Mission: Preserving NASA’s Apollo Sites. In it, they present a powerful case in favor of the need for the identification and preservation of the places that played a role in one of the greatest achievements in history.

Westwood, O’Leary, and Donaldson begin their work with a discussion of the cultural milieu in which the Apollo Program developed and thrived. Quite properly, they note the impetus that the Cold War provided for the decision to make placing a person on the moon before the decade of the 1960s ended a national priority for the United States. They also show how the model used to create the Apollo program proved impossible to sustain after NASA successfully placed astronauts on the moon. But if the nation once again decides to send astronauts on missions into outer space, the authors hope that the sites utilized in such ventures will be better preserved than most of those that played a role in the Apollo program.

The authors then turn their attention to the types of sites that they consider important to the success of Apollo. These range from the propulsion sites the program utilized to the landscapes where NASA trained its astronauts. Virtually every part of the nation had some connection to Apollo, ranging from rocket test stands in Alabama to signal receiving stations in California. Moreover, the authors assert that important sites can actually predate the actual Apollo program per se. For that reason, they suggest that Robert H. Goddard’s laboratory in New Mexico merits preservation efforts just as much as Cape Canaveral does. These chapters remind us that Apollo represented a vast undertaking that involved activities of a remarkable depth and breadth.

Having discussed the types of sites that the Apollo program used, the authors then examine the subject of preservation. Quite fittingly, they note that the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 has allowed the federal government to protect certain sites associated with that program, and suggest that it will offer the best hope moving forward of saving other important facilities and locations. According to the authors, those interested in preserving the past can draw heart from similar efforts previously undertaken in other realms, most notably the world’s oceans. While ominously noting in the eighth chapter how every year that goes by witnesses a further degradation of sites not currently falling under the protection of NHPA, the authors conclude with both an overview of the successes that preservationists have accomplished in protecting historically significant locations, and a call for those interested in space history to redouble their efforts in this regard.

In their effort to alert the public to the potential loss of valuable historical assets, the authors have largely succeeded. At times the book reads more like a catalog of an antique store than an engaging monograph, but because they hope to build a case for their crusade, perhaps this stylistic choice was necessary. Thoroughly researched and filled with engaging photographs and illustrations, The Final Mission: Preserving NASA’s Apollo Sites serves as an effective call to action for those who hope to stave off Christopher Nolan’s dystopic look at a future devoid of Apollo.

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