

Au plus pres de la planète Mars

by Philippe Morel & Giles Dawidowicz (Eds.)

Société Astronomique de France/Editions Vuibert, 2003. ISBN 2-7117-5335-2. Pp 290 (pbk), 30 euros.

Un siècle d'Astronomie

by Audouin Dollfus, Roger Kieffer & Michael Sarrazin (Eds.)

SAF/Editions Vuibert 2003. ISBN 2-7117-5330-1. Pp 532 (hbk), 60 euros.

(Both books available through the Société Astronomique de France, <http://www.iap.fr/saf>)

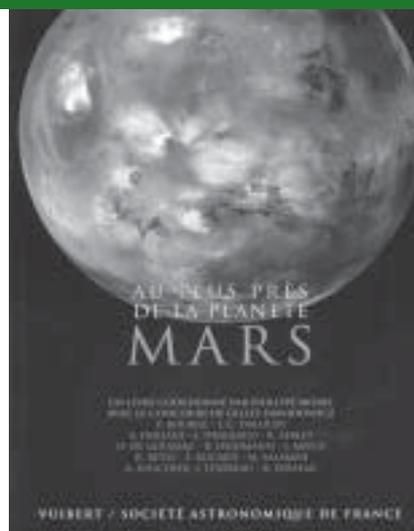
The Société Astronomique de France is a few years older than the BAA, and has been based in Paris all its life. There are many points of similarity between our two veteran societies. Now the SAF has collaborated with the science publisher Vuibert to produce two outstanding books.

Au plus pres de la planète Mars (already in its second edition) is a wonderful contribution to the art and history of Mars and martian observation, timed to coincide with the perihelic opposition of 2003. After a good introduction to the Red Planet, the major part of the book is devoted to a description of observational techniques ('Mars en pratique') and accounts of previous encounters with the planet at perihelic oppositions ('Souvenirs de missions'). I can vividly recall the excitement of a meeting at Meudon in July 1988 when the newly repaired Grande Lunette was first made available to a group of us for observing Mars that year; here Marc Salameh nostalgically recalls that summer and autumn. Audouin Dollfus recalls his early polarimetric work, Jean Dragesco his photographic techniques, and Philippe Morel publishes (for the first time) the 1890s correspondence between Eugène Antoniadi and Abbé Theophile Moreux. There is plenty of first-hand guidance for CCD observers and for those who want to observe visually. More than a dozen authors cooperated on the book. The text ends with a look at future space missions to the planet and at the search for possible life there. Your reviewer noticed that the illustration on page 59, from 1929, is wrongly dated, whilst the map on page 114 is not the standard Mars chart, but a summary one by ALPO.

Au plus pres de la planète Mars is comprehensive, attractive, and makes engaging reading. There is something for everyone here.

Un siècle d'Astronomie celebrates a century of the SAF's own journal. It is a large format coffee table book to be dipped into at random or read systematically. It

reprints, in a themed arrangement, many of the classic papers that appeared in the Bulletin of the SAF over the last century. Antoniadi (in a letter to Peek in 1940) once deplored the quality of the original paper, but this reprint contains a huge number of superb reproductions of the original illustrations (with reset text), and represents a truly magnificent achievement. So it is now easy to read, under one cover, the story of the early SAF and its observatories in Paris and Juvisy. We encounter again the remarkable Camille Flammarion (founder of the SAF) and his second wife Gabrielle (for many years the editor of the *Bulletin*). We spend nights with the Great Meudon refractor, days with Bernard Lyot and his coronagraph at Pic du Midi, take balloon flights with Audouin Dollfus, witness the results from French radio telescopes at Nancy, and are brought right up to date with... Well, you will see.



For anyone interested in the Red Planet or the history of astronomy these two books are well worth having for the illustrations alone, and just a nodding acquaintance with French will suffice to thoroughly enjoy them. The SAF and Vuibert are to be congratulated upon their timely publication.

Richard McKim

Dr Richard McKim is a former member of the SAF who once gave a seminar on 'les tempêtes de poussières' of Mars to that organisation at the Meudon Observatory. He received its Prix Flammarion in 1995. He has made numerous planetary observations with the 83cm OG at Meudon and the 1m Cassegrain at Pic du Midi. He has written extensively about Mars and the history of planetary astronomy, and has many old, yellowing copies of l'Astronomie in his library.