

The Era of California's Eclectic Technoculture

Strange Angel: The Otherworldly Life of Rocket Scientist John Whiteside Parsons

George Pendle
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Reviewed by David H. DeVorkin

George Pendle's *Strange Angel: The Otherworldly Life of Rocket Scientist John Whiteside Parsons* may well be the best attempt yet to appreciate John Parsons as an interesting and revealing figure in the social and cultural aspects and origins of southern California's aerospace community. The book may be less satisfying for some as an illustration of one mode of technological innovation, but it is exactly that illustration that adds greater value to Pendle's book.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Parsons was a member of an informal group of rocket propulsion experimenters in southern California. Through luck, circumstance, and dogged perseverance, the members developed a practical expertise that was at first of theoretical interest to aeronautical engineers and scientists at Caltech and then became directly applicable to military demands in World War II. The rapid expansion of the demand for rocket technology soon rendered people like Parsons and his cohorts obsolete and unable to meet the demands of mass production and classified security measures. They were

marginalized, left to their own devices. Parsons thereafter chose to parlay his equity and expertise in rocketry to further indulge his obsession with the occultism of Aleister Crowley.

The biography, written by a science and culture reporter, is interesting on several levels. On a basic level, it paints a reasonably good portrait of a maverick experimenter swept up in certain aspects of southern Californian technoculture: aeronautical engineering, high explosives technologies, science fantasy and fiction, and pseudoscience occultism. The author provides enough detail to help the reader appreciate how these seemingly disparate worlds were intertwined in Los Angeles culture. Pendle even exposes the inner political and social workings of cult formation among true believers like Parsons and his more opportunistic and entrepreneurial fellow travelers, including L. Ron Hubbard.

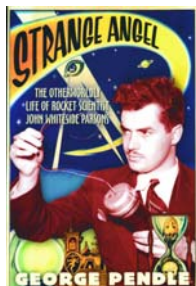
At another level, *Strange Angel* is a compelling case study of technical innovation and factors that promote or inhibit it. Although the author's enthusiasm and embellishments might lead an uncritical reader to suppose that the emergence of rocket technology inevitably depended on people like Parsons, he is sophisticated enough to demonstrate that technological development is so contingency-driven that no responsible writer can draw absolute conclusions as to how technology really starts. Rather, the book tells how rocket technology happened in one place and at one time. It is an artfully told story that in rather curious and refreshing ways brings Parsons and his informal group of Caltech experimenters to life.

Pendle develops other historical characters to help give us somewhat different but intriguing views of such people as Clark Millikan, Theodore von Kármán, and Robert Cornog. Readers come to know Cornog without his colleague Luis Alvarez being mentioned, we read Swiss astrophysicist Fritz Zwicky's testimony about Parsons without any inkling of who Zwicky was, and we explore Frank Malina's realized dream of a prototype-sounding rocket named the WAC

Corporal without any mention of its parentage. Even so, the author went far beyond oral testimony from family, colleagues, critics, and disciples to explore contemporary reports, technical memoranda, FBI files, and archival records in both private and public collections. He makes some use of reliable, secondary literature—but not enough for my full satisfaction, given what is available on the history of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) and the early years of rocketry and spaceflight. Iris Chang's fascinating book *Thread of the Silkworm* (Basic Books, 1995), which Pendle references, covers that era from the perspective of the life and career of Tsien Hsue-shen, who started the Chinese missile and space program after the US accused him of being a Communist and deported him in the 1950s. Pendle makes light use of Clayton Koppes's seminal work *JPL and the American Space Program: A History of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory* (Yale U. Press, 1982). Koppes's research would have helped Pendle better appreciate the military, corporate, and academic core of mid-20th-century technical innovation and adaptation that surrounded Parsons.

Nevertheless, the citations Pendle gives are useful and largely complete; most, but not all, of the more critical passages in the text are referenced. One odd omission, in light of Pendle's goal to "free Parsons from both establishment censure and mystical titillation" (page 19), is that he fails to cite recent literature on Parsons by fringe writers and offer explicit corrections. If he had done so, readers might have better appreciated his observation on page 143, which still applies today, that "if ever there had been a place to begin a religion, it was Los Angeles in the first half of the twentieth century."

Strange Angel is a welcome addition to the history of the pioneer years of rocket culture in southern California. It provides a sober account of the era that hopefully will help balance, or perhaps even deflate, the ever-burgeoning occult literature parasitically attached to Parsons, a man who lived his last years, according to Pendle on page 285, "playing to the void."



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