

Title: *A Single Sky: How an International Community Forged the Science of Radio Astronomy*

Author: David Munns

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Length: 247 pages including 5 chapters, 40 pages of notes, 20 pages of bibliography and 2 pages of index

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Reviewer: Whitham D. Reeve



“One larger argument of this book has been that the radio astronomers inverted the standard technocratic superpower metanarrative of the Cold War state, with its secrecy, its parochial material immediacy, its rampant nationalism, and most of all its delusional bluster.” If you can decipher the foregoing gobbledygook and like it, then this book is for you. If not, then do not bother with it. The above passage is a direct quote from the last chapter, but unfortunately it is not an isolated incident. This type of writing distracts me and my first thought was “What the...”. The book is additional proof, if we really need it, that editors no longer exist at publishers, in this case MIT Press.

The author is an academic – an assistant history professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. His book is written in a true style of obfuscation, making it hard to read and understand. The author spends a lot of time attacking “*50 years of American materialism*” and persistently goes after and bashes the “*military-industrial establishment*”. He completely wears out the words “pedagogy” and “community” in all their forms. I started to count the number of times the word pedagogy appeared. Many pages would go by with at least one and sometimes several uses of the word on each page. Occasionally, there would be a gap of a few pages when the word was not used at all. I eventually lost count. Ironically, it has something to do with the practice of teaching, but I have to say this book taught me nothing and I wonder what anyone will learn from it.

When I started reading **A Single Sky**, I soon realized it was unlike any other I had read on radio astronomy. It has only a few photographs and it appears their only purpose is to break up the text. I wondered if I wasted 35 bucks. I kept reading, hoping it would get better. It occasionally did get a little better but I still wondered when I would get to something really interesting and new. I never did. I read the entire book and at the end I realized I did not know any more about radio astronomy than when I started. That should not be surprising, given the book is not about radio astronomy. **A Single Sky** does talk about radio telescopes, in particular those with large parabolic dish antennas, and throws a glance at other types, but it is not a technical book.

A Single Sky is a sociological study of the people involved at the early stages of radio astronomy, the first 30 or so years, in what the author constantly refers to as a “community”, thus the subtitle of the book and the constant whipping of the reader with that word. I could go along with part of the “community” idea except it becomes boring through repetition and soon wore thin with me, as it would with any ordinary reader. It is kind of like the worker who only has a hammer and, wanting to do some work, sees everything as nails. The author of **A Single Sky** apparently wanted to write about some kind of social framework and so everything looked like a community.

Obviously, teaching about radio astronomy is not the point of this book. Well, then, what is the point? I am guessing here. I believe the author tries to make the point that the so-called “radio astronomy community” beat those games of materialism and the military-industrial establishment to become a great industry in and of itself. Not guns and butter, not guns or butter, just butter. If you think this might be revisionist in at least some ways, then you and I think alike. The US military has done its share of radio astronomy.

I have read many books written by the original radio astronomy pioneers, which the author of **A Single Sky** calls “disciples.” All are mentioned in **A Single Sky** (except, oddly, John D. Kraus) and I do not recall any of them mentioning a sense of “community” or any other social framework. They routinely compared their work with others and discussed and argued results but none of them wrote about belonging to some kind of radio astronomy community. Maybe they just did not realize it.

Another worthwhile question is who is the intended audience for this book? The author does not say, at least in a way I could understand. Perhaps it would be easier to describe who this book is not for. It is not for anyone interested in radio astronomy as science nor is it for anyone interested in the discoveries and paths to discovery followed by the many pioneers of radio astronomy.

Maybe this book is worth measuring: At what school grade level was it written? If I really cared, I would put a few passages like the ones at the beginning and end of this review into language analysis software to see what happens. I am speculating, but I can see the “language level” gauge slamming the needle over like a 6 V analog voltmeter connected to a 600 V circuit.

I will close this review with another quote from the book. This one is from the Introduction: *“The book’s third thematic axis concerns the reality and rhetoric scientific communities transcending boundaries, especially disciplinary and national boundaries. Particularly for the Cold War era, the history of American science remains the dominant narrative.”* Yes, I did waste 35 bucks, but you do not have to. If you really want to see for yourself, I will send you the book for the cost of postage (about US\$3.50).