

Willy Ley, the Science Writers, and the Popular Reenchantment of Science

Buss, Jared

URI: <http://hdl.handle.net/11244/10374>

Date: 2014-05-08

Abstract:

This dissertation explores the life and career of Willy Ley, a science writer and popularizer of spaceflight technology in Germany and the United States during the twentieth century. By following his various “campaigns” to popularize a future of interplanetary travel and promote a vision of science that was inclusive and open, this dissertation highlights the cultural influence of an intermediary and “outsider,” who operated as a media-savvy scientific celebrity. A focus on Ley as an important figure in the history of technology helps to correct an imbalance in existing historiography, which traditionally sheds light on engineers, astronauts, and politicians. It demonstrates that the history of spaceflight is a history of media, popular representations, and artifacts. Additionally, it situates the history of spaceflight within broader avenues of science popularization, which could include efforts to celebrate the future of technology, as well as the past accomplishments of scientists and engineers. An analysis of Ley’s books, tactics, and perspectives will demonstrate that histories of popular science should include key efforts to popularize the history of science. These efforts will help to reveal the open, cosmopolitan, and socially engaged roots of an academic discipline, particularly in the publishing world of New York City during the Second World War and early Cold War. A focus on Ley will help to contextualize the maturation of the history of science, by relocating our perspectives from a narrow view of disciplinary formation to a broader appreciation of the circulation of texts, ideas, and representations. A biography of Ley serves as a case study that will invite further revisions to many traditional narratives.