

# Space fact and space fiction

By G. J. AITCHISON

*THE COMING OF THE SPACE AGE.* By Arthur C. Clarke. Victor Gollancz. 301pp. Price \$4-35.

**I**T was only a decade ago — on October 4, 1957, to be precise — that the Space Age began. On that day the Russians launched Sputnik I into orbit. But although that event is so recent, the amount that has subsequently been written about space, both fact and fiction, is immense.

In this volume, Arthur C. Clarke, himself a science fiction writer, has selected and edited an anthology of some 36 articles and extracts about space by a wide variety of authors. Here we have both space fact and space fiction; for, while we are told on the

for, while we are told on the dust cover that "it is science we have here, not science fiction", it must be said that some of the authors gave their imaginations rather free rein before they penned some of the passages that are reproduced.

The range of material presented is wide, in several regards. Chronologically, it ranges from 'Mars as the Abode of Life', written in 1896 by the well-known astronomer Percival Lowell, to several articles dated 1965. In content, the range is from the 'Declaration of Legal Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space' by the UN General Assembly, to the conjectured results of the Interplanetary Olympics contested on Moon, Mars, Earth, and Jupiter.

Two of the more informative articles are 'The First V-2' by Walter R. Dornberger and, 'German Rocketry', by Wernher Von Braun. The

by Werner von Braun. The one tells the story of the first

successful launching of a V-2 (or an A-4 as they were then known); the other the story of the development of rocketry in Germany from 1928 onwards, culminating in the work at Peenemunde. Two points of interest emerge from Von Braun's article, which incidentally displays a command of the English language possessed by relatively few whose native tongue is English. One is the degree to which the work at Peenemunde was hampered by official red tape (and for this the Allies may well be profoundly grateful). The other is the way in which men whose minds were set on space research and space travel were caught up and swept along in the Army machine. There seems no reason to doubt von Braun's assertion that "there is not a shred of truth in any statement that the A-4 or V-2 was originally conceived as a weapon with which to devastate London".

All this, and much more, is plain fact. In the longest article in the book, 'Life Forms on Other Worlds', we are taken into the realm of speculation, but reasoned speculation, regarding the occurrence of life elsewhere in the universe. and

elsewhere in the universe, and the various ways in which life may have evolved there. But speculation does seem to have run riot in the articles, 'Beyond the Solar System', and 'A Vision of the Galaxy'.

One of the gems of the book is the little 3-page article 'UFO' (Unidentified Flying Objects) by Leslie C. Peltier. This is a masterly piece of debunking.

C. S. Lewis, writer both of space fiction and of religious works, is included twice, once in each of these roles. 'The Caves of Venus' is sheer space fiction. 'God in Space' attempts to deal with what seems to Lewis to constitute a problem for orthodox Christianity. He looks at the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation: "Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven . . .", and

asks, "Why for us men more than for others?" Are there other beings with "rational souls" elsewhere in the Universe, and if so, are they "fallen"? He contemplates the possibility that "Redemption, starting with us, is to work from us and through us", and there is even a suggestion of the missionary - spaceman sallying forth to take the Gos-

sallying forth to take the Gospel to far-flung parts of the universe.

Lewis does not fully solve his problem, indeed, he barely comes to grips with it. But the problem may well seem less acute to Christians whose positions are less rigidly bound to the precise credal formulations than Lewis' appear to be. Perhaps the most important sentence in this article is "I think a Christian is sitting pretty if his faith never encounters more formidable difficulties than these conjectural phantoms".

Having been told at the outset that this is a book of science, not science fiction, it is rather a relief to find Olaf Stapledon, in 'Interplanetary Man', telling us quite clearly when he is making a "surmise of the wildest sort", and bringing us back to earth with the truism, "Whatever the immensities beyond our familiar sphere, for us, who are so deeply implicated in this sphere, the supreme concern must continue to be life here and now. What we have to do is to make the best of this planet of ours, and perhaps of other worlds also". When we read the statement, "Astronautics will soon be the largest industry in the solar system,

industry in the solar system, and already it employs a labour force of several hundred thousand", we may wonder whether Stapledon's truism is universally accepted. He himself is quite explicit: "It would be far best for man to postpone his exploration of alien planets until he has concentrated seriously on improving terrestrial conditions".