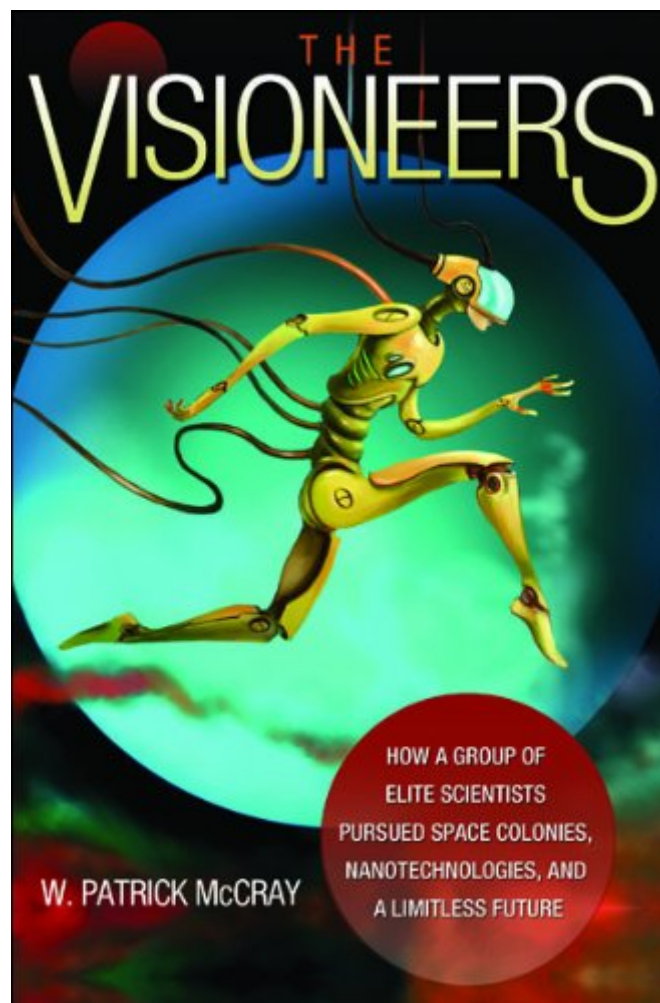


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# The Visioneers: How A Group Of Elite Scientists Pursued Space Colonies, Nanotechnologies, And A Limitless Future



## Synopsis

In 1969, Princeton physicist Gerard O'Neill began looking outward to space colonies as the new frontier for humanity's expansion. A decade later, Eric Drexler, an MIT-trained engineer, turned his attention to the molecular world as the place where society's future needs could be met using self-replicating nanoscale machines. These modern utopians predicted that their technologies could transform society as humans mastered the ability to create new worlds, undertook atomic-scale engineering, and, if truly successful, overcame their own biological limits. *The Visioneers* tells the story of how these scientists and the communities they fostered imagined, designed, and popularized speculative technologies such as space colonies and nanotechnologies. Patrick McCray traces how these visioneers blended countercultural ideals with hard science, entrepreneurship, libertarianism, and unbridled optimism about the future. He shows how they built networks that communicated their ideas to writers, politicians, and corporate leaders. But the visioneers were not immune to failure--or to the lures of profit, celebrity, and hype. O'Neill and Drexler faced difficulty funding their work and overcoming colleagues' skepticism, and saw their ideas co-opted and transformed by Timothy Leary, the scriptwriters of *Star Trek*, and many others. Ultimately, both men struggled to overcome stigma and ostracism as they tried to unshackle their visioneering from pejorative labels like "fringe" and "pseudoscience." *The Visioneers* provides a balanced look at the successes and pitfalls they encountered. The book exposes the dangers of promotion--oversimplification, misuse, and misunderstanding--that can plague exploratory science. But above all, it highlights the importance of radical new ideas that inspire us to support cutting-edge research into tomorrow's technologies.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In the early 1970's, after the cancellation of the Apollo lunar exploration program, a sense of gloom pervaded the popular culture. Movies like 'Logan's Run' and 'Soylent Green' showed life in the future to be either nasty, brutish and short or decadent, meaningless and short. Into this, the Club of Rome released its work, Limits to Growth, a statement on the futility of attempting better living through technology. Most people would be discouraged by such a work, but the heroes of this book took it as a challenge. Along the way, they managed to develop many of the technologies, such as nanotech, personal computing and advanced space travel, that are making a difference today. I feel honored to have met some of these people. This book is an interesting history of that time.

Visioneers presents a well documented history of two people who were strongly motivated to make substantial improvements to man's future, and were not necessarily noticed by the popular press / media. A great book!

America is suffering from a vision deficit. It doesn't know where it is going or why. But one of the biggest visions in the history of humanity arose in the 1980s. And that vision is about to be the very picture of a paradise that we need to give our lives meaning today. This book is the story of that vision and its makers. Read it. And think big.

Book review by Richard L. Weaver II, Ph.D. Before choosing to review this book, I had a chance to fan through it quickly. There, I found 26 pages of a thorough (fine print) index, 41 pages of (842 total) highly credible, wide-ranging, footnotes that revealed, depth, breadth, and an incredible wealth of knowledge. Footnotes included numerous interviews (in-person and by telephone). Just knowing, in advance, that the book was published by the Princeton University Press (2013) will give many

potential readers pause, just as knowledge that the author is a professor of history at the University of California, Santa Barbara. I realize, however, that a well-prepared index, thorough footnotes, a credible author, and a prestigious press, doth not a whole book make, but it was, indeed, these features that caused me to select this book. For myself, an interest in science began as early as the eighth and ninth grades when my passions directed me toward a career in medicine, passions that did not cease until I was a sophomore in college--six years of predominantly math and science courses. Although the academic pursuit of math and science ended, the lifetime interest in these subjects continued unabated. I found the author's writing style to be friendly and accommodating. It could have been a stilted, awkward, difficult academic book, but it wasn't. McCray is accurate, thorough, and insightful--and a very good writer to boot. The word "visioneering" means, "developing a broad and comprehensive vision for how the future might be radically changed by technology, doing research and engineering to advance this vision . . ." (p. 13). Although the book is expertly written, it should be clear that it is not for those who do not have a reasonable vocabulary. Here is a random excerpt to give you an example of McCray's language: "O'Neill's plan for settlements in space was an amalgam of engineering-oriented conceptualizations coupled with established ideas about how technology had helped create modern American society. As a hybridized and evolving vision, O'Neill's advocacy of space settlements blended his fascination with large-scale engineering and his belief that technology could offset cultural stagnation. He also believed his plan offered pragmatic solutions to social issues" (p. 68). The stories are fascinating, well-described, and fast-moving, the information is unique and unlikely to be found elsewhere, and the detail, depth, and intellectual significance of the material is overwhelming. McCray's credentials are appropriately and effectively displayed throughout the book, and, if you're a techie, this is a "must read." It is truly a technology-driven book whether it be space technology, bio-technology, microelectronics, or nano-technology. What I found most fascinating was following the careers of these scientists--Gerard O'Neill and K. Eric Drexler. Where they began their education, what their interests in college were, what events or situations changed their lives, then what trajectory they chose to follow and how they did it, including, of course, the people, magazines, books, studies, articles, and experiences that caused them to contemplate or change directions. I loved following their publishing careers. Having been in "publish or perish" educational institutions myself, it was enjoyable seeing these men satisfy university requirements to publish and then some. McCray is an historian, and this is a history book. How these scientists fought against conventional wisdom, countered mainstream thinking, and dealt with those who disparaged them or their work, added to the addiction I had to this book. In addition, I found it fascinating how these scientists, "by combining

their broad views of the future with technical skills, experience, and research took speculative ideas out of the hands of sci-fi writers and technological forecasters and put them on firmer ground" (p. 273). This is truly a five-star book.

McCray's storytelling captivated me. *The Visioneers* whisks us back in time to unveil miraculous fantasies of a technological future--a place where visionary engineers like Gerard O'Neill and Eric Drexler prophesized an imminent techno-paradise made possible by our increased mastery and control of nature. These visioneers, as McCray christens them, worked to make their dreams about space colonies and nanotech-assemblers a reality. In the process, the power of their visions inspired a generation of patrons and practitioners of science, as well as a public longing to leap beyond the rhetoric and cultural confines of an era of limits. *The Visioneers* breaks new ground by advancing a theory about technological visioneering and its importance to the culture and conduct of contemporary science. And, unlike journalistic appraisals of the wonderfully eccentric but sometimes tragically brilliant characters in this story, McCray roots his narrative in extensive and well-cited historical research. *The Visioneers* synthesizes vast reading in diverse fields of science and technology studies. The lively and refreshing writing paints delightful pictures of progressive science intersecting in surprising ways with popular culture, and it tells terrific tales about our recent past and present. If we still think of the 1970s as an era of limits, McCray shows us how some visioneers sought to break those chains and create a limitless future of radical abundance. Even if their speculations haven't (yet?) created our techno-utopian future, their pursuit of visionary engineering helped shape the present trajectories science, policy, and the popular imagination. I highly recommend this book. Not only is *The Visioneers* smart and interesting, it makes for utterly engaging reading. Check it out.

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