When the landing legs of the Apollo 11 Lunar Module *Eagle* touched the Moon on July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong’s first words were, “Houston, Tranquility Base here, the *Eagle* has landed.” In the city of which he spoke at that instant, flight controllers monitored the telemetry sent by the ungainly machine nearly a quarter of a million miles away. Some of the most pivotal figures in making human spaceflight possible looked on from the Manned Spacecraft Center (MSC). In the suburb of El Lago that contained his home, his neighbors who had spent years swept up in the excitement of human spaceflight followed the events. For this native of Wapakoneta, Ohio, the path to the Moon had gone through Texas. The US government had made sure of this by directing NASA dollars to the southern part of the country, so that a region once synonymous with agricultural jobs would now contain jobs on the cutting edge of aerospace technology. To this day, thousands of NASA employees call the states of Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas home, owing to the federal decisions placing field centers there more than six decades ago. Brian Odom (the chief historian of NASA) and Stephen Waring (a professor at the University of Alabama Huntsville) have devoted their book *NASA and the American South* to this reality. The two of them previously edited a collection of chapters on NASA's relationship to the civil rights movement (*NASA and the Long Civil Rights Movement*, 2019). This time, they have expanded their focus by gathering fifteen scholars to write chapters that reflect on what the presence of NASA has meant for an entire sector of the country, in terms of politics, economics, and culture. In Odom’s words, the book “builds on a narrow historiography” by considering the space program in the context of a region of the United States (p. 4). In other words, the authors of this book want to emphasize how the space program shaped life on Earth, as opposed to the many other more traditional books that emphasize the people and machines of spaceflight in isolation from the outside world.

The first section of the book especially draws out the political and economic themes of NASA’s presence in the South. Roger Launius, one of the most renowned scholars of aerospace history, explains in the first chapter that the focus of the federal government during the 1960s was not only about using NASA to explore outer space. The focus was also about bringing economic uplift to downtrodden citizens, a key theme of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society. The federal dollars that flowed into southern states would create well-paying jobs in parts of the country that had not progressed much economically in recent years. Launius shows how southern states indeed
enjoyed enormous economic returns from the dollars that flowed to them, although the goal of recruiting minorities remained elusive. People of color comprised less than 3 percent of NASA’s workforce through the 1960s, and the situation at southern facilities was even worse. Andrew Dunar expands on this with a chapter that explains Johnson’s role in bringing about this vision, first as Senate majority leader during the birth of NASA and then as vice president and president. Odom’s own essay then explores how Richard Morrison attempted to expand opportunities in technical education for students of color as president of Alabama A&M University.

The remaining three sections of the book explore NASA’s influence on the South from more of a cultural perspective. The presence of NASA facilities had positive effects in the sense that outsiders flocked to southern communities, spurred the building of impressive homes, schools, and churches, and formed community traditions that persist to the present. Jennifer Ross-Nazzal explains this well in her chapter on Clear Lake, Texas. Rachael Kirschenmann and Stuart Simms point to more negative effects, as seen in the dispossess of land that residents of Florida and Mississippi dealt with when NASA facilities entered their states. Despite all of the literature that presents Apollo in triumphant terms, Simms makes a valid point when he states, “By examining people’s connections to places on the land such as fishing holes, gravesites, and home sites, historians can highlight counternarratives to the traditional, government-approved stories of ‘progress’ and ‘development’ that pervade discussions of government projects” (p. 161). As NASA’s presence in the South grew, southerners also began to think of how they could display the artifacts of spaceflight in tourist attractions. Two chapters in the book focus on tourism ventures that did not succeed as planned, but Emily Margolis explains in another chapter how the efforts of Walter Linde and the Huntsville-Madison County Chamber of Commerce successfully produced an Alabama Space and Rocket Center in 1970 that has since enthralled millions of visitors. The final section of the book then delves into the ways that NASA’s presence influenced art and architecture in southern locales, whether in the flourishes of a church or courthouse in Huntsville or the inflatable artwork in Houston.

The book as a whole should appeal to readers who want to study spaceflight history in ways that are fresher than the standard mission-, astronaut-, or hardware-centric studies. It also demonstrates that scholars from a wide variety of backgrounds can contribute to this. Although the contributors include renowned scholars such as Launius, they also includes scholars near the beginning of their careers and those whose expertise is in subjects far removed from more traditional spaceflight literature. Odom and Waring express the hope that their volume will stimulate new research, and future scholars should have room to do this, particularly because this volume focuses almost entirely on the early days of NASA (the one exception being Waring’s chapter on the Challenger accident). Shifting the focus forward in time would allow scholars to consider questions such as: How did southerners respond to the loss of jobs that came with the end of the Apollo era in the 1970s or the end of the space shuttle era in 2011? How did southerners respond to the increased number of women in NASA workplaces, or the foreigners who came with the International Space Station project? Besides NASA, how has the presence of the SpaceX Starbase in Boca Chica, Texas, affected this community on the United States-Mexico border? Whatever scholars produce in the twenty-first century will benefit from this promising effort to integrate spaceflight efforts into regional studies.
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