

Glen E. Swanson, ed.. *Before This Decade is Out: Personal Reflections on the Apollo Program*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. x + 377 \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8130-2537-7.



Reviewed by James Holton

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An Oral History of Apollo *Before This Decade is Out: Personal Reflections on the Apollo Program* is an oral history of the 1960s-1970s space program associated with the moon landings. This book will be of interest to Florida historians interested in the space program's social history and those wanting to better understand the personal and political side of America's lunar effort. This book won the 2000 Pendleton Prize for history on the federal government, and it is easy to see why because of its deft handling of oral history.

The book is comprised of oral histories compiled by NASA historians from the space program's inception to the early 1970s. Selection and editing was done under the auspices of the Johnson Space Center Oral History Project. NASA photographs illustrate the chapters.

The book takes readers from the days of the pre-NASA National Advisory Council for Aeronautics to the sunset of the Apollo moon program in the early 1970s. James Webb, the NASA chief administrator (1961-1968) whose career spanned from the New Deal to the space age, begins this largely chronological account. Webb discusses the

management concepts used to coordinate the space effort in light of President John F. Kennedy's promise that the United States would land a man on the moon by 1969.

Other officials whose names will not be recognized by the general public include: Thomas O. Paine, NASA's administrator during the Apollo 11 moon landing; Geneva Barnes of the Office of Public Affairs; and, Charles M. Duke, Jr., an astronaut on Apollo 16 and one of the last men to walk on the moon. Their stories tell how the American space program delivered on President Kennedy's promise. More well-known among the narrators is Wernher von Braun, the famed German scientist from Nazi Germany's rocket program, later a driving force behind the U.S. rocket program. Von Braun describes the construction history of the massive Saturn V rockets, and makes pointed observations on why the American moon effort succeeded and the Soviet effort failed.

Before This Decade is Out places the history of the American space program in its social and political context. The narrators place their observations beyond the stand-alone technological ef-

fort of the space program. This is the book's chief strength. Through the well-applied use of oral history, Swanson fleshes out a social history in the space race.

Thoughtful and diverse accounts from critical yet often unrecognized players in the Apollo program fill out what has largely been a story biased toward technology. The emphasis in this work is not limited to the astronauts, but encompasses engineers, bureaucrats, scientists, and politicians working behind the scenes and out of the public eye. The end result is an introspective mosaic of space exploration, the Cold War, and the domestic social situation of the 1960s. It contains a gripping narration of the abortive Apollo 13 mission in 1970 and humorous accounts about building NASA facilities in mosquito-plagued Mississippi, where mosquito swarms could suffocate cattle. Editor Glen E. Swanson has done an excellent job at selecting and editing the book. Narrators are allowed to speak for themselves, using the questions as starting points for their own important stories. The weakest chapter is a speech given by one of the narrators, which in a roundabout way demonstrates the value of oral history.

Readers should be aware that this is not a "gee-whiz" account of space technology or space flight. The narrators often speak in technological jargon (a glossary for the uninitiated would have been helpful) but their main emphasis is on the larger societal picture of space travel. The narrations include personal and thoughtful reflections on triumphs, tragedies (the 1967 fire which killed three astronauts and the near-disaster of Apollo 13) and progress of the space program from offices and laboratories to the launch pad and space. Readers will find this book's format instantly accessible and informative.

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