
My first scan through AURA and its U.S. National Observatories left me with the impression that it might be sub-titled as an autobiography of the author. Frank Edmondson was closely associated with the founding of AURA (the Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy), and he certainly looms large in the text. The number of photos that include him does nothing to dispel that impression. Edmondson was a vice-president and later president of the Board of AURA that oversaw its early years, and he has a unique perspective of the organization’s development. Reading the account of the growth of AURA and its subsequent choice by the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF), and still later by NASA, to take over the operation of other facilities, suggests that his role deserves attention. One has to be impressed by the fact that the book was based on more than 90 interviews conducted by Edmondson of some 85 astronomers and science administrators, including Helen Sawyer Hogg; the individual comments of the interviewees are not generally obvious though.

This volume is an administrative history of AURA with little scientific content. The book’s organization basically follows a time line, and the story is developed in five divisions: The beginnings, AURA is created. New directions for AURA, Cerro Tololo’s neighbors, and Epilogue. The illustrations are primarily of individuals, including a few in which there are facilities or equipment in the background. AURA arose as a result of the creation of the NSF in 1950 and, in the wake of the success of the Hale 200-inch telescope, as a result of the eagerness of American astronomers to expand the number of large instruments at their disposal. The book is mostly devoted to optical facilities, but, in the early 1950s, the establishment of the National Radio Astronomy Observatory and National Astronomical Observatory were also issues preoccupying and influencing AURA’s establishment, which occurred in 1957. Eventually AURA expanded to include Kitt Peak National Observatory, Cerro Tololo Inter-American Observatory, Sacramento Peak Observatory, and finally the National Solar Observatory.

There is little doubt that AURA’s observatories, as well as the astronomers using their facilities, have had a major impact on astronomical progress in the last half of the 20th century. This volume provides historians with a more detailed view of the issues with which astronomers had to wrestle, written as it is by one of those closely associated with the institution’s first decades. Here one encounters and discovers the roles played by many of the top astronomers of the mid-twentieth century — Victor Blanco, Geoffrey Burbidge, Art Code, Leo Goldberg, W. A. Hiltner, Geoffrey Keller, Nicholas Mayall, Alen Meinel, and C. D. Shane, to name a few. It was a period of unmatched expansion and growth in both optical astronomy and astronomical knowledge, and Edmondson is rather forthright in his presentation of the roles played by the various participants. He is not shy about noting problems with personalities or styles that had an impact on the way that AURA developed.

AURA’s early space programme, called the Satellite Telescope Subcommittee, became active in 1959, less than two years after the launch of Sputnik. The ARPA programme, as it was called, did not come to fruition as hoped, but it did produce the Orbiting Astronomical Observatories (OAO), including successes like the Copernicus satellite, and was the conceptual beginning of the Hubble Space Telescope project — a very long story in itself, as we all know, and ultimately and arguably more important to the history of astronomical knowledge. Edmondson also includes chapters on the origin of the European Southern Observatory, early plans for South Africa, and the subsequent decision to share a site on Cerro Tololo with AURA’s facility. Although Edmondson’s account of AURA’s activities ends in the mid-1980s, the last chapter, written by current AURA President, Goetz K. Oertel, attempts to look toward the future of AURA and its observatories.

The audience for the book is, I suspect, rather limited to those who have a specific interest in one of AURA’s facilities or one of the key players. The narrow focus on the administrative history and development of AURA, though of interest to some, is primarily of value in that it provides a look into the forces that shaped an important and influential segment of American astronomy in a period of rapid expansion. One can envisage that the book, because of the very thorough documentation of events (over eighty pages of notes!), will become a primary reference for historians of science interested in the further analysis of astronomical endeavours since the 1950s.

Is there a Canadian connection to the book? Yes, in the sense that in the mid-1960s astronomers were debating the establishment of a national observatory for Canada loosely based on the AURA model. The Mount Kobau National Observatory was the result, but with