

Bookshelf

John Adams biography

John Adams, engineer extraordinary, by Michael Crowley-Milling, Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, ISBN 2-88124-875-6 (hardback), 2-88124-876-4 (paperback)

When John Bertram Adams died on 3 March 1984, CERN lost one of its principal architects. The late Sir John Adams was a very private person who rarely confided in his colleagues. This made the job of his biographer particularly difficult. Michael Crowley-Milling has succeeded admirably, and has performed a very important service.

Is it a potted history of CERN, or the story of the building of the PS, or of the SPS? Yes, all of these, but most of all it is a thoughtful and discerning biography and a fitting tribute to a veritable giant of European science and technology. The sub-title, 'Engineer Extraordinary' refers not only to John's outstanding ability as a builder of accelerators, but perhaps even more importantly, as a builder of teams and an 'engineer of opinions'.

The book describes how John's attention to detail and intuitive engineering skills developed during the early part of his career, when working in radar research, and how he emerged as a natural leader in the building of the CERN PS.

Then later, how his statesmanship enabled him to "...rescue it (the 300 GeV Programme) from seeming political disaster and nurse it through technical problems to a successful conclusion." One crucial part of this process described is the visit to CERN in 1970 by Margaret Thatcher, at that time UK Secretary of State for Education and Science, and her subsequent letters of thanks, not only to Bernard Gregory as Director

General, but also to John. It is interesting to speculate to what extent the good impression made on that occasion helped many years later, when as Prime Minister Mrs Thatcher decided that Britain should stay in CERN!

After the successful commissioning of the SPS, the book goes on to describe the period when the two CERN Laboratories were merged under two Directors General. Unfortunately I found this part a little too low key, given that John and Leon van Hove presided over what was undoubtedly CERN's 'finest hour', with the launch of the proton-antiproton programme leading to the discovery of the W and Z particles, the consequent award of the Nobel Prize to Carlo Rubbia and Simon van der Meer, and the conception of LEP.

Nevertheless, before reading the book, I had my own recollections of John, both as a member of his SPS team, and from our occasional walks and cross country ski outings in the Jura. I was very pleased to find that the book brought out clearly his most important qualities: meticulous attention to detail, love of nature, quiet authority,

In order to make the book more readily understandable to the general public, Michael has included a couple of appendices, covering the machines and the physics. These are extremely well written without sacrificing accuracy. To have covered accelerators from Cockcroft and Walton to CLIC and LHC in six pages is a considerable achievement, only surpassed by covering particle physics from Democritus to Rubbia and Higgs in a similar space!

I can highly recommend this book for anyone interested in CERN, or the development of post-war European scientific cooperation, or more

generally to anyone fascinated to learn about great men of our times. My only regret is that the book is not longer.

Roy Billinge

John Adams, engineer extraordinary.



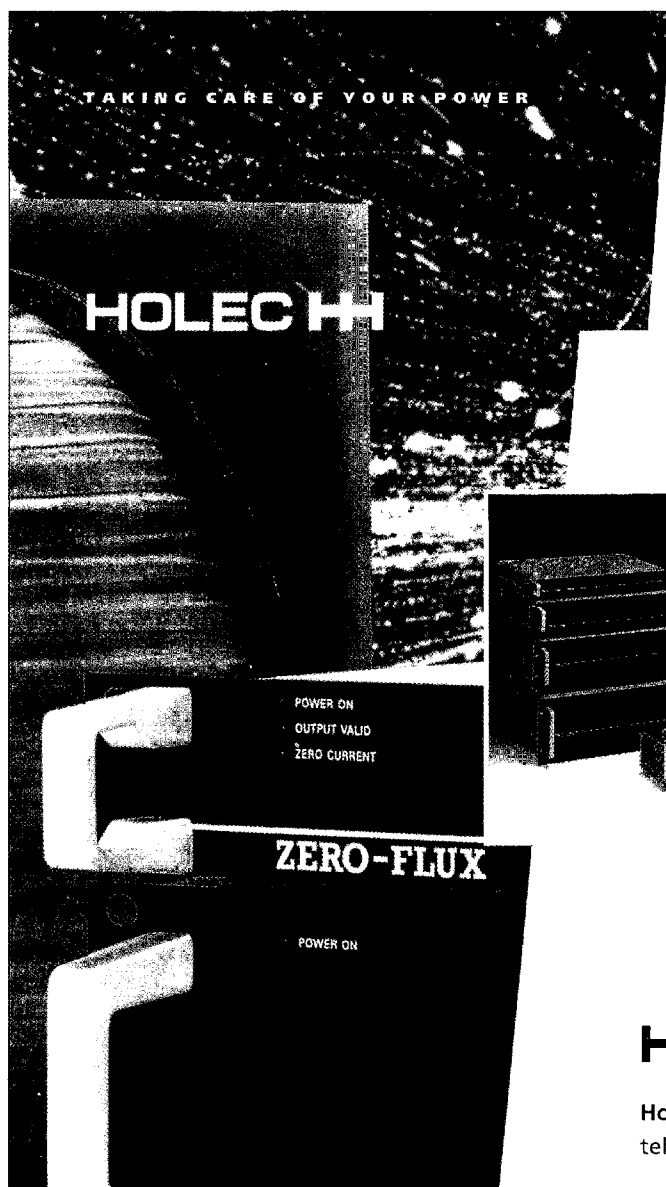
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