

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Leonard Pitt, Dale Pitt. *Los Angeles A to Z: An Encyclopedia of the City and County*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997. xix + 605 pp. \$31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-20530-7; \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-20274-0.

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## Wish Book

*Los Angeles: A to Z* aims to be an encyclopedia of the city and county, and by many measures it succeeds admirably. With over 600 pages of text and illustrations, accompanied by maps, appendices, and bibliographical lists, the book offers a wealth of information about a region that has proved notoriously difficult to sum up in any concise fashion. Despite the immense variety within its pages, however, it may be more valuable for a general audience than for urbanists. The book falls short of fulfilling its considerable promise.

The authors of *Los Angeles: A to Z* wrote their book for a large audience: “specialists in history, political science, urban planning, ethnic studies, law, architecture, and education...students, scriptwriters, journalists, businesspeople, history buffs, and community activists” (p. xiii). Any encyclopedia about this country’s *other* big city, however, inevitably begs comparison with the remarkable *Encyclopedia of New York City*.<sup>[1]</sup> This comparison is unfair because the two books are different in almost every way, but it is instructive because it demonstrates both what an accomplishment *Los Angeles: A to Z* is, and that a more thorough encyclopedia should exist for the region. The abundantly funded *Encyclopedia of New York City* took dozens of historians thirteen years to compile, and it demonstrates superbly what a scholarly encyclopedia can be.

*Los Angeles: A to Z* represents the modestly funded efforts of two scholars to cover an only slightly less ambitious project in less than half the time, and as a result

is an praiseworthy volume.

The authors, historian Leonard Pitt and freelance writer Dale Pitt, explain in their introduction that the book grew from their casual pack rat behavior, unlike the *Encyclopedia of New York City*, which was almost from the beginning a large, well-funded project. After years of collecting clippings about Los Angeles city and county, past and present, the Pitts decided to organize their entries, collect sources and compose sketches in order to compile a comprehensive reference work. The organizing effort took over five years, and no wonder: the scope of their project was immense. There are thousands of entries encompassing almost every topic imaginable, and it is easy to spend hours browsing through its pages following a trail of references. There is also excellent scholarship in the longer historical essays that serve to unify the many shorter entries. Even though these essays must be brief, they clearly and quickly orient the reader in search of guidance. For two people to have created such a rich text in such a short time makes their accomplishment even more impressive.

That the book was a labor of love rather than a work of committee occasionally shows to its detriment, unfortunately. The authors’ attempt at comprehensive coverage of a famously diffuse region is laudable, but the encyclopedia sometimes shows how the resources of two independent scholars are scarce in comparison to a committee of well-funded historians and an army of research assistants. For example, the book contains entries on

each of the county's municipalities, but some of the entries are so perfunctory that they convey almost no interesting information in their few sentences. While the Pitts may serve their general audience by not dwelling overmuch on the obscure, this uneven coverage may frustrate urbanists, as one has the distinct suspicion that most of the information presented in these short entries is either already readily available or simply conventional wisdom.

Perhaps because of a need for brevity, perhaps because of assumptions made about their readership, the book also suffers from a larger tendency to embrace common and persistent views about Los Angeles, such as its supposed exceptionality, artificiality, and impermanence. Some of the raised quotes peppering the book's pages represent this kind of sentiment: architect Jon Jerde claimed that "L.A. is not a fixed thing. It's a moving target, an elusive energy psyche that is not physical" (p. 408). However, there are also areas in which the authors do provide a needed corrective to conventional wisdom about the region. Their many entries on Latino history are excellent, because they portray not a romantic, idealized vision of the Californio past, but the social and political transformations within the Chicano community over the course of 200 years. This is not surprising, given Leonard Pitt's substantive and excellent work on nineteenth century Southern Californian Latino history. It is refreshing to see this body of research incorporated into a general reference work.

In other places, however, the authors reinforce traditional ideas about Los Angeles by downplaying its history. The book's obvious bias for the twentieth century is the most persistent example of this problem. It is not that the authors neglect the nineteenth century; they simply make it easy to miss. The historical essays which pepper the book almost uniformly devote the most space to the twentieth century, especially the years since 1945. In addition, most of the historical entries on the nineteenth century have no apparent connection to the longer historical essays, and there is inadequate cross-referencing to connect them. While the lack of cross-referencing is a problem endemic to the entire book, it is especially damaging in this instance. If the reader were not already familiar with the nineteenth-century history of Los Angeles, this book would not be the best place to find it.

Certainly, a focus on the contemporary is appropriate in an encyclopedia about a city that has come into global prominence only recently; but the overwhelming preference for the recent found in *Los Angeles: A to Z* does detract from the book's importance as a work of history.

Worse, it helps reinforce the already far too popular notion that Los Angeles is a city without history, a kooky late twentieth-century aberration with no proper historical context at all. It is no sin to frustrate historians, of course, but *Los Angeles: A to Z* focuses on questions of contemporary political interest, with comparatively little attention paid to the city's historical urban problems. Although coverage of such broad thematic topics may not be the province of a general reference work, a scholarly encyclopedia about an urban area probably should attempt it. Issues such as poverty, unemployment, inequalities of race and ethnicity, municipal funding and infrastructure, and the governance of a politically complex and spatially diffuse region, are all difficult to find in this book. Despite a generous entry on the Los Angeles Police Department, crime receives little coverage. In comparison to the excellent work on Latino politics, the politics of other ethnic minority groups are hard to trace. Except for the excellent coverage of city charter reform, discussion of the complex political landscape tends to be perfunctory, covered mostly by charts banished to the appendices section. Most importantly, the book's coverage of the region's economics is sorely lacking: there is no entry for "manufacturing," a pretty serious omission for an encyclopedia of a city with one of the country's largest manufacturing districts.

Instead, the authors focus on the cultural aspects of the region, and these entries are some of the book's best. Leonard and Dale Pitt do a marvelous job of covering the history of Los Angeles art and architecture; the long essays on painting and architecture in Los Angeles are outstanding, and the short entries on individual artists, architects, and their work are profuse and fascinating. Still, this choice to focus on the cultural face of the region reinforces common and persistent notions that Los Angeles is not an economic and political entity like any other city, but is rather a Getty Center for the whole continent: culturally innovative, aesthetically controversial, unnaturally wealthy, jauntily perched on the edge of the Pacific, but perceived as having little to do with the rest of the world.

This strong emphasis on the region's cultural heritage, however, is ultimately self-defeating. Although the authors strive to prove that Los Angeles is not a cultural wasteland, they seem to have done so to the detriment of a more complex understanding of the region's politics, economy, and history. Ultimately, any weaknesses the book might display are instructive because they stem from the challenges of such a project; they remind us that Los Angeles is a difficult subject not simply because the

region is so diverse, but also because scholars must constantly fight against the city's oversimplified popular image. *Los Angeles: A to Z* reminds us that we must take seriously the land of sunshine and *noir*,<sup>[2]</sup> swimmin' pools and movie stars, and the release of such a rich scholarly encyclopedia is a crucial step in that process.

[1]. Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *The Encyclopedia of New*

*York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

[2]. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p.15.

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