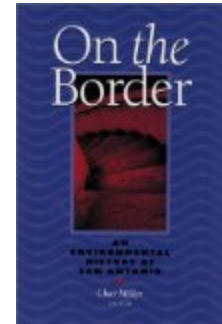


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Char Miller, ed. *On the Border: An Environmental History of San Antonio*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001. 304 pp. \$32.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8229-4163-7.

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## The Alamo City from the Ground Up

San Antonio is famous the world over as the Alamo City. But few know that *alamo* is Spanish for “cottonwood.” What San Antonio history looks like when climate, water, trees, animals, and diseases are placed front and center—in other words, from the point of view of environmental history—is the subject of this anthology.

American culture tends to view cities as places where nature is most noticeable by its absence; to find it, you must escape the city to the countryside, leaving San Antonio for the Hill Country, San Francisco for the Sierra, New York for the Adirondacks, and so on. This is a conception that hides more than it reveals, for cities not only transform nature, but are shaped by it in fundamental ways. Cities must get their water from somewhere, must find places for their waste, must manage the rain or snow that falls on them. Their roles as market and finance centers shape the countryside around them. Their residents often demand environmental amenities close to home, whether in the form of city parks or prim suburban lawns. Animals, including those that bear deadly epidemic diseases, still live in their bounds. Environmental history is thus important in the making of cities, and cities play an important role in the field of environmental history.

*On the Border*, nicely addresses a wide range of environmental themes in San Antonio’s history. After an opening chapter that places the city at the crossroads of several ecological zones, two chapters deftly analyze colonial Spanish views of the area that became San Antonio and the ways in which the nineteenth-century city

and its hinterlands mutually evolved. Part 3, “Social Ecology,” turns to the interactions between the urban environment and different racial and ethnic groups, treating such topics as the creation of city parks, rates of homicide and infant diarrhea, and the environmental legacy of the city’s many military bases. Part 4, “Water Fights,” examines the controversies over urban water supply, efforts to protect the critical Edwards Aquifer, and recent mediation efforts to reconcile the goals of the increasingly diverse and fractious set of water-users. The last section, “Land Marks,” turns to the built environment and the connections between its history and San Antonio’s natural setting.

San Antonio’s environmental history, as treated in this volume, has some distinctive features that should make it of interest to a wide range of urban and environmental historians. Like so many western cities, San Antonio must contend with highly and unpredictably variable rainfall, a pattern which sometimes leaves the city parched and other times subjects it to destructive floods. But unlike many western cities, it has not gone to extraordinary lengths to secure itself surface water supplies. Early in the last century, Los Angeles pioneered this strategy by famously capturing the Owens River and bringing it over hundreds of miles and several mountain ranges. Even smaller and less powerful sunbelt cities like Phoenix and Albuquerque have taken aggressive steps to gain access to the waters of major regional rivers such as the Colorado. In contrast, San Antonio continues to rely exclusively on the Edwards Aquifer for its water, making it the largest city in the United States to be entirely de-

pendent on groundwater for its public water supply (p. 32). This reliance makes San Antonio deeply reliant on the continued purity and abundance of the aquifer, which has been threatened by the last few decades of suburban growth, most of which has occurred near the aquifer's recharge zone north of the original city boundaries.

The social and environmental histories of San Antonio are bound together in distinctive and important ways as well. Unequal distribution of its public water supply and the lack of a modern sewage infrastructure took an enormous toll on the traditionally Hispanic west side until the 1940s. As David Johnson, Derral Cheatwood, and Benjamin Bradshaw show in their essay, for example, in the 1930s the city's mortality rate from infant diarrhea was the highest in the nation, with Mexican-descent children almost seven times more likely to die than Anglos (p. 103). On the other hand, Char Miller and Heywood Sanders show that a powerful black political machine, whose support was critical in municipal elections, secured black San Antonio comparatively high public health indicators and a fine system of neighborhood parks, even at the height of Jim Crow in Texas (p. 86).

While the strongest contribution of this volume lies in the ways in which it entwines the social and environmental histories of the city, it is also notable for its integration of the built environment with such classic environmental history questions as the control of water. The historic preservation movements that saved the Alamo, the missions, and other notable public sites from destruction also had environmental aspects, according to Lewis Fisher and John Hutton in their chapters. The city's famous river walk is the best indicator that San Antonio has been able to manage environmental threats and create useful and attractive public spaces in the process; although a massive flood control dam has transformed the flow of the San Antonio River, the city never reduced the waterway to a merely utilitarian use. The contrast with Los Angeles is again telling (although not mentioned): L.A. flood control meant the destruction of public green spaces in the total paving of the Los Angeles River, with its virtually complete transformation into the sterile concrete bed familiar to millions as the scene of races in

*Grease Lightening and Terminator*.

*On the Border* has its shortcomings as well. Like most edited volumes, the essays are uneven in quality. The chapter on epidemic disease and homicide as well as several of the chapters on water control are written from a more narrowly technical and policy orientation than is the rest of the volume. The book would have held together better as a cohesive whole had the essays been better integrated with one another. The main attributes of the Edwards aquifer, for example, are described in at least four of the chapters. Some of the essays could have been much more explicitly tied to environmental questions. Lewis Fisher's description of efforts to preserve San Antonio's built environment, for example, could have been much more explicit about the environmental ideas and impulses connected to them. Finally, more direct comparisons between San Antonio and other cities in Char Miller's opening and concluding essays would have allowed readers to better assess the importance and distinctiveness of the author's specific conclusions.

But one can only go so far with these critiques, for it is surely difficult to assemble a volume on a single city's environmental history, let alone one as insightful and provocative as *On the Border*. (While writing this review, I repeatedly asked myself if I could pull off a similar feat for my current home of Dallas, and the answer is clearly "no.") It is worth the attention of all scholars of urban environmental history and anybody interested in the history of San Antonio or south Texas. Some of the specific essays would work quite well as assignments in urban studies or regional history classes.

The subscribers of H-Texas have particular reason to pay attention to collections such as this. Although regions are the combination of a distinctive environmental place and its human cultures, Texas historians tend to pay much less attention to the environmental attributes of Texas history than they should. That place matters—that the past even of transformed environments like cities must account for the interactions between humans and nature—is the premise of environmental history. Its usefulness is on display in this volume and deserves far more attention from Texas historians than it generally gets.

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