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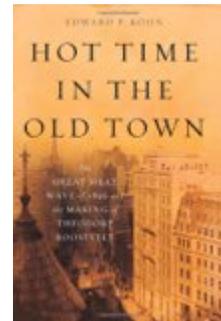


Edward P. Kohn. *Hot Time in the Old Town: The Great Heat Wave of 1896 and the Making of Theodore Roosevelt*. New York: Basic Books, 2010. 304 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-01336-4.

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## The Killer Heat Wave of 1896

When we think of the greatest natural disasters between the end of the Civil War and World War I, we recall such events as the Chicago Fire of 1871, the Galveston hurricane of 1900, and the great San Francisco earthquake of 1906. In *Hot Time in the Old Town*, Edward P. Kohn introduces us to a relatively unknown event that claimed the lives of over 1,200 people, a great heat wave that struck New York City in August 1896. "The heated term was the worst and most fatal we have ever known," Kohn writes in the prologue (p. ix). This is certainly untrue in terms of global history. A devastating heat wave in 2003 took anywhere between 14,000 and 30,000 lives, depending on how one calculates the figures. It is precisely this amorphous nature of heat waves that makes them difficult to study and might account for their lack of historical treatment. An enterprising graduate student could make a dissertation proving or disproving Kohn's assertion as it applies to U.S. history.

Kohn provides a narrative framework to remove as much of the amorphous effect of the heat wave as he can by supplying some definite information. For example, he provides a precise death figure, 1,281. His methodology is crude, but more or less effective: he compares deaths in 1895 and 1896 over the same date range. Something had to account for the large variance, and the heat wave is the likely culprit. However, the sample is rather small (one year), and there is nothing to indicate that there were no abnormal conditions in 1895, or to compensate for population growth or decrease (if such numbers are even

available). On a more atomic level, Kohn analyzed individual death certificates for August 11, 1896. He discovered that the average victim was an immigrant laborer who lived in the tenements.

The strongest point of the book are Kohn's accounts of how the excessively hot weather affected individual people at a time when there was no electricity, refrigeration, or air conditioning, and most of the poorest people, who lived in the stultifying tenements, could not afford skyrocketing costs of ice. Many took to sleeping on roofs and fire escapes to cool themselves down a few degrees. Some plummeted to their death while asleep, taking their small children with them. In one example of the heat's devastating effect, the author recounts the tale of the Russell family of Brooklyn. On August 12, the family patriarch, Patrick Russell, aged seventy-three, collapsed and died after visiting his daughter. His youngest daughter, who was already sick from the heat, expired that same day in the hospital. While making funeral arrangements for his father and sister, Patrick Russell Jr., the son, suffered heat stroke, and he too died, as did his wife. Four members of the same family carried off to eternity by the heat in a single day. Hospitals had no real treatment, other than an ice bath, which did not always work, largely because it ignored dehydration and could not reverse the toll taken on the internal organs. Kohn provides background into the medical treatments available and their limitations. Only late in the crisis did the city open parks for sleeping at night and public baths for

access to cooler waters. That was the underwhelming depth of the official response. In addition to the human suffering, the heat took a significant toll on the economy. People curtailed their shopping, tourism declined, and a significant amount of money was lost to food spoilage. Only the ice dealers made money.

Amid the multitude of individual stories of suffering Kohn interweaves an important political drama starring two of the era's towering figures. Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt emerges as the closest thing to a hero in the book. Mayor William Strong displayed no initiative and it fell to department heads to take decisive action on their own accord. Some departments reduced their daytime workforce, and the fire department hosed down the blazing hot streets in an effort to cool the city. As one of the few to take the crisis seriously, Roosevelt, who spent much of the time in more comfortable Oyster Bay, used the police department to distribute ice to the poorest of the metropolis's inhabitants. Kohn sees this as a key development in Roosevelt's progressivism, a viewpoint that leads Kohn into new historiographic terrain. Collectively the biographers of the soon-to-be Rough Rider, including H. W. Brands, William Harbaugh, and Edmund Morris, seldom mention August 1896. When they do, they comment on the police commissioner's headaches in dealing with the visit of the Democratic Party's presidential candidate, not the heat. If his argument is not entirely convincing, Kohn succeeds in rescuing a forgotten part of Roosevelt's career and successfully depicts him as a man of action and vision.

Another drama played out on the opposite side of the political aisle, and the subtitle of the book could just as easily have been "and the unmaking of William Jen-

nings Bryan." Kohn attaches great significance to the Great Commoner's abysmal speech at Madison Square Garden on August 12, 1896. Reading from an insufferably long, prepared text with the intent of demonstrating to Wall Street that he was not an economic anarchist, Bryan needlessly discarded his most potent oratorical and political advantages. The oppressive heat only compounded his dismal performance all the more, elevating it to the status of epic disaster. Kohn argues that Bryan's campaign suffered a significant setback as it limped west, and it never recovered. Once again, Kohn ventures from the established story, as he attaches more significance to the Madison Square Garden speech than such historians as Robert Cherny, Paolo Coletta, Paul Glad, William Harpine, and Michael Kazin.

There are no footnotes or endnotes providing citations. As is common in these cases, it is always easy to find an item in the text that cannot quite be paired with an entry in the bibliography. For example, Kohn writes that the heat wave potentially caused "a loss of as much as \$8 million" from a decline in tourism (p. 226). Where did that estimate, or any of the economic costs, come from? Also, what sources supplied the vividly detailed stories of the individual New Yorkers? I assume they are culled from newspaper articles, but when and which ones? There is a bibliography full of books on Roosevelt with some on Bryan, New York City, Gilded Age politics, and urban life. There is nothing on environmental history, something surprising given the book's theme, and very little on medical questions, which Kohn addresses in the text.

*Hot Time in the Old Town* is a fun book to read and it provides great insight into life in America's largest city.

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