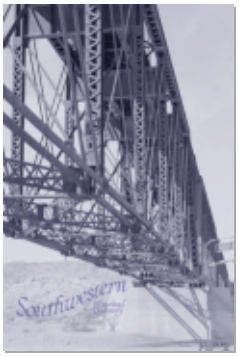
Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Space, Place, and Region (review)



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The historical sweep is likewise broad. It is more general than specific, but the author maintains a balance in coverage between northern and southern plains states. In some depth he considers women and other minorities, he looks at rural areas more than cities and towns, and he reviews agricultural activities in detail. There is an emphasis on conservation and environmental concerns. In reading the early chapters, one is left with a general impression that all is economic disaster on Great Plains farms. Considering agricultural economics of the 1920s and 1930s perhaps there is good reason for the pessimistic tone.

The book is about more than agriculture. The author covers oil and gas booms in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. He examines the impact of World Wars I and II on the Great Plains and its people, and how residents of the region responded to the wars; the section on World War II is particularly well done and full of insight. He looks at politics and rightly notes how the region is largely conservative and in modern times Republican, but he also discusses the liberal tradition that has appeared from time to time—Wobblies, the right to vote for women, and the Nonpartisan League, for examples. He writes about discrimination and racial prejudice, immigration, government Indian policy, grasshopper plagues, radical farm groups, shelterbelts, city growth and rural population decline, mining, drought, irrigation, dam building, and many other relevant topics. He does not write much about education, literature, or art.

The author is at his best when he writes about agricultural policy. His discussions of agricultural law are thorough, including the many laws passed and agencies created for farmers during the New Deal years of the 1930s. But he also handles with proficiency the role of federal government assistance on the Great Plains, including topics like military bases during World War II and strategic defense initiatives in the 1960s and afterwards.

The book represents economic, political, and to lesser extent social history. The epilogue very briefly mentions some of the region's writers and their works, but the book otherwise contains little cultural history. Although, granted, it is unfair to criticize a book for what it does not cover, one wishes that for Texas there was more about the effect of school consolidation on rural communities, more about the consequences—short and long range—on agriculture of the shift from horse power to tractor and truck power, and something on the impact of the Farm to Market Road system after passage of the Colson-Briscoe Act in 1949.

As the subtitle implies, the book is a general survey. Nonetheless, it is often marked by careful analyses and competent reflections. The idea of the "Big Empty" in the title might be overdrawn, but clearly there are large regions of the Great Plains where population decline or rural emptiness inspired the book's title and central theme. Finally, the writing is unadorned, direct, and straightforward; except for sometimes convoluted topic sentences, it is effective. In short, *The Big Empty* is an impressive book.

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Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Space, Place, and Region. Edited by Michelle Nickerson and Darren Dochuk. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. Pp. 480. Illustrations, tables, notes, index. ISBN 9780812243093, $49.95 cloth.)

The Sunbelt, as this volume's deft title suggests, is ever on the rise. However broadly defined as a place, and the editors here embrace the prevailing wisdom that its geographical reach extends from Southern California to Northern Virginia, the region's political muscle has been precise and pronounced: its favorite sons have captured the White House in all but two elections since 1960. Its political religiosity has also had a profound impact on public life and private belief, just as its auto-centricism has spawned a new kind of city, a sprawling dynamic that pushes outward and depopulates the central core (think Atlanta, Houston, and Los Angeles). And its service economy—fueled by a demographic surge and capital flow to the south and west—has been the mainstay of the nation's growth since the 1970s. There is a reason why in popular culture its foil has been dubbed the Rustbelt.

But as the editors and contributors to *Sunbelt Rising* know well, the uncritical conceptions of the region's import are flawed. The deep-seated belief that it is the center of white, right-wing politics is only partly true: in Texas, for example, the GOP dominates state politics, but Democrats govern its major cities. Orange County, California, once synonymous with the John Birch Society, is increasingly Hispanicized, a pattern that holds true across the Sunbelt; this change in particular, as Sylvia Manzano notes, will prove paramount in the coming years.

Indeed, to read her chapter against those that assess civil-rights politics and policies in the mid-twentieth century is to bear witness to the dramatic alterations in communal aspirations, economic opportunities, and social justice that have occurred over the past sixty years. It is also to recognize that these real gains have come with no-less-real complications: notably, the emergence of a color-blind conservatism that is "a late-century means of entrenching racial inequality in the logic of economic and civil rights" (18). This logic was evident in the mid-century battles over California fair-housing legislation and Miami's urban-renewal projects. It is also richly explicated in Carl Abbott's examination of southwestern literature, in which real-estate development becomes symbolic of the "modern methods of dispossession" (289).

At the heart of these stories, factual or fictional, are the ubiquitous boosters. Usually male, invariably rich, and always well connected, these figures draw on dense networks of like-minded (and self-interested) colleagues—developers, media magnates, business bigwigs, automobile dealers, political elites—to forge coalitions that have wielded public capital and private investment to build up the modern city state. San Antonio's Good Government League had its analogs in Dallas, Albuquerque, and Denver. These local power bases, as Andrew Needham demonstrates, also could extend their authority into the national legislative arena. In probing the capacity of Phoenix's growth machine to pursue energy production on tribal and federal lands, he focuses on the emerging collective clout of three individuals: Barry Goldwater, a Phoenix city councilman turned U. S. senator; attorney Orme Lewis, who became assistant secretary of the interior for Public Lands; and Lewis's appointee, banker Walter Bimson, who was charged with reorganizing the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Among other ambitions, in Goldwater's words, they wanted "to unlock the natural resources known to exist on the reservations" (244), to power their hometown's growth and development. They succeeded.

Sunbelt Rising succeeds in turn precisely because its individual chapters offer

sharp new interpretations of this most powerful region's foodways, its mega-cities and monster churches, its contested landscapes. As such, the anthology offers as well a wonderful tribute to the late great David Weber, who as director of SMU's Clements Center for Southwest Studies, helped nurture its creation.

Pomona College Char Miller

Kit Carson: The Life of an American Border Man. By David Remley. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011. Pp. 320. Illustrations, maps, bibliographical essay, index. ISBN 9780806141725, 24.95 cloth.)

Few western figures are as well-known as Kit Carson. This small-of-stature, illiterate man was a trapper, mountain man, Indian fighter, army officer, Indian agent, and family man. His travels took him many places, including the American Southwest, Plains, Rockies, and west coast region. Stories of Carson's travels were popularized during the nineteenth century, particularly in the form of dime novels and a dictated autobiography published in 1858. Many twentieth-century works, including standard biographies such as *Kit Carson: A Pattern for Heroes* by Thelma S. Guild and Harvey L. Carter (University of Nebraska Press, 1984), have also been published. However, *Kit Carson: The Life of an American Border Man*, by David Remley, offers an engaging new biography that takes a fresh look at answering a basic question: Who was Kit Carson? Remley begins to answer this question by stating Carson was "a man of his culture and a product of his times" (xxvii).

Remley seems determined to impart a sense of reality to Carson's early romanticized reputation as an almost superhuman hero. In this respect, the author succeeds in providing a balanced biography of this border man who was sometimes a hero, but always a human. This is accomplished by highlighting Carson's bravery, and his personal and family struggles. Remley also successfully disputes the later revisionist treatment of Carson as an Indian killer. For example, when Remley writes about Carson killing a "California Indian" for being a horse thief, he convincingly explains that the killing was "by the rules of border justice" and "was not a racial matter" (81).

Carson was many things, including a rough frontiersman, loving husband, shrewd fighter, man of uncompromising morals, and man of duty. These characteristics were defined by his life as a border man. By interweaving each of these characteristics into the book, the reader discovers that, although an uneducated border man, Carson was not a simpleton. His good reputation was also not above reproach. Remley makes it clear that Carson should be held responsible for his actions, including those that might tarnish his reputation. For example, some writers suggest that Carson was not responsible when he oversaw the killing of three unarmed "Californios" during the opening acts of the U.S.-Mexico War in California. They argue that he had no choice but to follow an earlier order given to him by his commander, John C. Frémont, to take no prisoners. However, Remley is not distracted by Carson's hero reputation and dismisses the argument that Carson was simply following orders as a justification for the brutal murder of the three unarmed men. The author emphasizes that Carson had a choice, stating "Both Carson and Frémont must bear responsibility for the bloody affair" (160).

An award-winning author of books and articles on the history of the Ameri-