

## Book Reviews edited by Joshua Parker

### ***Heaven's Harsh Tableland: A New History of the Llano Estacado.***

**By Paul H. Carlson. Texas A&M UP, 2023, 386 pp.**

“Twelve thousand years ago in a wet, frigid climate, huge Columbian mammoths sauntered across a marshy Llano Estacado. Monstrous armadillos and giant ground sloths the size of old Volkswagen Beetles walked through the Llano’s tall, coarse grasses” (1). With these words, Paul H. Carlson, professor emeritus of history at Texas Tech University, begins his opus on a region whose name may be familiar, but that is still shrouded in mystery. Just as Alex Hunt states in the book’s foreword, Carlson does not characterize the volume as “environmental history, but the book comes pretty close, demonstrating the degree to which human history and change are essentially connected to the bioregional realities” (xi). Carlson here illustrates the chances and the problems related to such an approach: We can imagine a region devoid of humans, populated by mega-sloths and other long-vanished animals, but it is often necessary to make comparisons to our own present (or at least a past we can relate to). Likewise, we can be sure such megafauna did not think about the Llano Estacado as Llano Estacado. Like basically every region on Earth, this area in what is now eastern New Mexico and western Texas – and its meanings – were constructed by the people living there, thinking about it or simply interested in its resources. As Carlson reminds us, the name Llano Estacado itself is quite young, dating back only to the late 1700s or the first half of the nineteenth century (his volume unfortunately does not say much about Native American concepts related to this specific area). The author goes on to describe the physiography and cultural spaces of the modern-day Llano Estacado, mentioning the variety of cotton or cattle agriculture, oil wells, and sprawling urban areas such as Amarillo or Odessa. While Carlson refers to Euro-American views when stating that “little had changed” (7) in the area three hundred years after the *conquistador* Coronado had described it as devoid of landmarks, it can be assumed that indigenous groups would have differed in their opinion. In a study on the nineteenth-century *Comanchería*, Daniel Gelo states that while information on its spatial features may indeed be based on physiography, an “areal breakdown does not reflect known Comanche categories” (278). The author goes on to deal with dinosaurs, bison, and the Clovis culture “of highly effective hunters and foragers” (23). Its shortcomings

notwithstanding, the chapter represents a laudable integrative approach to early human and environmental history. Part 1 (like subsequent chapters) concludes with a very concise and helpful summary.

Carlson's second chapter provides an overview of regional history from about 8,500 years BP to the eve of the first Spanish *entradas* in the sixteenth century. Observations on the issue of non-human animals such as canines being integrated into local populations or the topic of the Medieval Warm Period hint at the trans-regional aspects of history in eras long before the advent of "globalization." Even before contact with European migrants became closer, the acquisition of horses, new weapons, and tools heavily influenced relations between indigenous groups. "Horse technology allowed for larger loads, larger tipis, larger collections of personal possessions, and larger concerns for the grassland environment and the grazing requirements" (51). Carlson presents a clear argument for a re-conceptualization of the region by non-European groups. The book lays out the complicated history of European intrusions, mentioning, for example, the 1581 Rodríguez-Chamuscado expedition "of twenty-eight people: missionaries, soldiers, and servants" (67) as well as a slave-hunter; or the story of María de Ágreda, who allegedly bilocated to America from Spain in the seventeenth century to further the missionization of indigenous groups. The importance of animals for the history of the region is again exemplified by Carlson's mentions of beaver hunting or the "enormous demand for horses and mules" (94) that would only continue to increase after the 1830s, and the central role of the Comanche in an integrated raiding and horse trade economy. He fails, however, to outline reasons and strategies behind the rise of the "Comanche Empire" during the 1700s as clearly as, for example, Pekka Hämäläinen has done by focusing, among other things, on forms of movement (trading, migration etc.) as an "instrument of power politics" (99). Chapters five, six, and seven deal with the region's history during the second half of the nineteenth century, characterizing the US Civil War as a reprieve for indigenous groups – interrupted by events like the Sand Creek massacre of 1864, which is strangely labeled "unnecessary but horrific" (112). During the 1874 Red River War, "soldiers did not kill many Indians, but their destruction of homes, horses, and winter supplies produced economic catastrophe and social breakdown" (132). Intrusions of buffalo hunters and "hidemen," followed by the introduction of a sheep and, a little later, open range cattle economy, resulted in the forced creation of a "rural, settled agriculture commonwealth" (139). When Carlson mentions a European bragging about the skinning of a Native woman, but immediately afterwards states that while often being "brutal and insensitive, [adventurers] tended to be loyal and trustworthy hunting companions" (148), one could definitely accuse the author himself of a lack of sensitivity. He deserves more credit when it comes to the depiction of environmental history, describing, for example, the scarcity of water: "Even in

years of high average rainfall, good water remained scarce . . . Ogallala Aquifer, of course, held plenty of sweet water, but getting it to aboveground holding tanks proved challenging until ranchers drilled wells and erected windmills” (179). Carlson dedicates more than 100 pages to the Llano in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries (chapters eight to ten). Among other things, he excels in describing the development of cities such as Lubbock, “a transportation hub . . . and center of a highly productive agricultural area” (249) during the 1920s, or the “blowing dirt” problem of the 1930s. Oddly, Carlson states that Second World War started “when England and France challenged Germany over the latter’s aggressive advance through western Europe” (267). It is in the context of war-related changes that some of the very few mentions of African Americans in the Llano area can be found (the book does include, however, a number of pages on the regional history of the Ku Klux Klan). After a veritable tour-de-force through war and post-war social, cultural, and economic developments (such as investments in military infrastructure or the history of music in the region), the epilogue includes a sober note on an “expanding desert environment with less rainfall, more heat, and shifting plant and animal life” (310) and a call for soil conservation to preserve the Llano’s identity and enable the survival of its (human and non-human) inhabitants. *Heaven’s Harsh Tableland* features a useful bibliography (21 pages) that includes not only academic publications but also interviews, government documents, and manuscripts from university collections. The index refers to geographic terms, animals, scholars, historical characters, and ethnic groups, and is an important tool for readers. The author sometimes lacks the ability to honor non-European perspectives and some topics beyond the regional history of the “Staked Plains” tend to be handled imprecisely. However, Carlson’s knowledge of “cowboy culture,” rural and urban western Texas, and (even more so) his excellent observations on the complex interplay between ecology, economy, and culture in this important contact zone, make this book worth reading.

## Works Cited

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