

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Iris Engstrand. *San Diego: California's Cornerstone.* San Diego: Sunbelt Publications, 2005. x + 300 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-932653-72-7.



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San Diego Revisited

Iris Engstrand's *San Diego: California's Cornerstone* is a local history of one of California's largest urban jungles that is accessible to both locals and nonresidents. The book, however, is not a definitive history of this enormous American city nor is it a probing analysis of urbanization. Engstrand's work is best understood as a well-written textbook designed for the lay person who has a genuine interest in San Diego. The primary value of Engstrand's work is its use as an encyclopedic reference for San Diego history. To add to this, a chronology of events at the end of the book is a ready-made and welcomed resource. Consequently, the book is most valuable for those involved with cultural resources management or historic preservation in San Diego because it provides an easily accessible historic context. While those interested in the broader patterns of urban history might be intrigued by San Diego's rise as a global city, Engstrand does not make those patterns evident and, thus, the book's use as a text for better understanding urban history is minimal at best.

To highlight the primary value of *San Diego* as a ref-

erence source is not to undermine the quality history Engstrand reviews and packages for the reader. Engstrand provides readers with a microscopic and detailed history of San Diego. At times, the mass of detail she offers can be overwhelming and unfortunately adds an aura of triviality to the topics she chooses to highlight. For example, she begins the story of San Diego in the familiar Californian pattern of Native American, Spanish, and Mexican rule, with the addition of a chapter on explorers to California. Often such histories seem obligatory and have the effect to somewhat marginalize the historical actors and recast them as simple caricatures familiar to the history of any town or city in California. Engstrand's histories of these periods and peoples almost read like a string of graduate student note cards cut and pasted from a California encyclopedia. In fact, Engstrand's history of the Native Americans, Spanish, and Mexicans is largely a story that could be transplanted to almost any city's history in California, with some exceptions regarding San Diego specifics. What makes this aspect disappointing is that Engstrand presents San Diego as a unique city, particularly because of its geographic isolation, with a

different development from any other city in California. The standard history of California before statehood so familiar to any California city, however, detracts from this notion of uniqueness. Additionally, her claim that San Diego's continuous struggle with water made it unique does not hold up.

Engstrand begins the history of San Diego's more common, American story with an aptly titled chapter called "Yankees Arrive: 1846-1870." As easterners came west to San Diego they, again, all too familiarly, began to publish newspapers, build infrastructure, such as churches, schools, and hotels, and established a city government. Engstrand details the establishment and growth of New Town (now downtown San Diego) by Alonzo Horton, New Town's competition with Old Town to become San Diego's civic center, the spark of growth caused by the railroad, and the further construction of city government and infrastructure. San Diego then went through a series of busts and booms, railroad expansion, and a quest for water through irrigation projects and canals. San Diego also experienced a time of growth from 1910 to 1930 before the economic blow of the Great Depression with the Panama-California Exposition in 1915 providing a spark. San Diego continued to expand, this time through the military, commercial aviation, the San Diego Zoo, an art gallery, banks, and hotels, as well as continued measures to deal with water problems. San Diego emerged as "A Global City" from the 1930s through World War II as it progressed through the Depression (rather easily it seems or, at least, without much description), established a college, opened a state park, hosted another exposition, experienced a fishing boom, and sharp population growth, including Chinese, Japanese, and Mexican immigrants. After the war, with more booms and busts, San Diego grew more with aviation and the aerospace industry. City parks and a university were also built. The suburbs spread and Sea World began to attract visitors who could now shop at strip malls. Major league franchises in baseball, football, and basketball lured more to the city and spread San Diego's reputation nationwide.

In her introduction, Engstrand confesses that *San Diego* is based largely upon her two previous works *San Diego: California's Cornerstone* (1980) and *San Diego:*

Gateway to the Pacific (1992). These two standard San Diego reference works are now out of print and do not cover the last twelve years of San Diego's development. To be sure, one can pick up a copy of these previous works, place them side by side, and read nearly identical chapter titles and text. Indeed, Engstrand's latest work appears to be simply the third edition of a previously written history that seeks to update the contents of her work to modern times, to address the concerns of her critics and to resolve format issues. For example, some of San Diego's prominent business and promotional organizations, such as the San Diego Chamber of Commerce, sponsored her previous books. While Engstrand's newest version does add some depth to the later chapters in *San Diego: Gateway to the Pacific*, particularly through an exploration of politics and repositioning information for a better flow, she simply integrates her two previous works and brings them up to date by tracing San Diego's political landscape, sports, and the media.

Engstrand's latest work does differ from these other two previous works in two fundamental ways. First, Engstrand abandoned the sponsorship of local businesses and organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce and media outlets. Second, she reformatted her work from two oversized, hardbound, picture books to a more lightweight, paperback, text-dominated book. By doing these things, Engstrand can hope to avoid academic scorn, whether justified or not, for writing her history in cooperation with corporate sponsorship and give her book a more scholarly feel with its loss of picture overload and awkward size. Still, the lack of any notes, and a selected bibliography that features primarily modern secondary sources, detracts a bit from such a scholarly feel.

San Diego: California's Cornerstone is a thorough collection of San Diego historical facts, figures, and peoples. With enormous detail on a vast number of local topics, Engstrand's book will appeal to anyone interested in San Diego history. Broader links to California and U.S. history, with the exception of the pre-statehood years, are sorely lacking, with the effect of making Engstrand's book seem more like an encyclopedia—although a well-written one. Engstrand's book then can be celebrated as a quality ready-made reference for San Diego history.

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