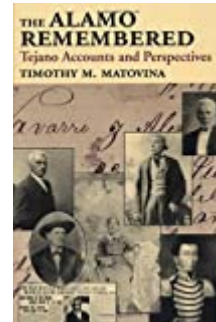


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Timothy M. Matovina. *The Alamo Remembered: Tejano Accounts and Perspectives.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995. xii + 146 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-292-75186-6; \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-75185-9.



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The Alamo Remembered represents the first compilation of known Tejano accounts of the events surrounding the fall of the Alamo. The thirty-seven accounts in the book (approximately half of the accounts found by Matovina) are arranged according to the document type. The first four represent contemporary accounts of the Alamo's fall. Included is a rather dramatic transcription of Juan Seguin's oration at the internment of the ashes of the defenders ("I invite you to declare to the entire world, Texas shall be free and independent or we shall perish in glorious combat" [p. 21]) that deserves the same reverence as William Travis' famous letter ("To the people of Texas and all Americans in the World"). Though they lack many specifics on the battle itself, these documents do show that Tejanos took an active role in the dissemination of the news.

The next three documents represent what Matovina calls "Conversations with Local Tejanos." These are second-hand reports of what citizens of San Antonio had to say about the battle in the 1840s. Essentially diary entries by travelers visiting the Alamo, they speak clearly about the feelings of residents both for and against the defenders ("the brutalities of Santa Anna" [p. 25] versus the "wonted temerity of the Texans" [p. 27]).

The next seven accounts mainly consist of documents filed in land claim cases. After the rebellion, the Repub-

lic of Texas offered land grants to veterans. These grants still existed after Texas became a state. Depositions were filed by citizens of San Antonio who saw the bodies of the defenders soon after the battle's end. Their depositions on who died at the Alamo and on who survived (women and children) were necessary to secure rights to the land reserved for veterans.

The last section, the published accounts, is the largest part of the work. It consists predominately of newspaper interviews conducted beginning in the 1890s. Many of those interviewed were only young children at the time of the battle. They do, as Matovina states in the introduction, "reflect the diversity of vantage points from which Tejanos observed ... the Alamo," yet contradictions abound in their statements of fact when compared with each other, themselves at different points in their lives, and with other scholarly works on the Alamo. For example, in a March 6, 1892, interview with the *San Antonio Express*, Andrea Villanueva (aka Madam Candelaria) states that she was at the Alamo and Bowie died in her arms before the Mexican army entered his room (p. 53). Yet, in an 1899 interview, she states that as the Mexicans entered Bowie's room, she begged them not to kill a sick man (p. 62). It was in this account that she also recounts the famous line in the sand episode (p. 59). Another survivor, Enrique Esparza, who was eight years old when

the Alamo fell, disputes that Villanueva was even in the Alamo during the battle.

These contradictions lead to two comments I have on the usefulness of the work. While not attempting to criticize the author for not including something that he states at the outset is not included, I do think that the use of editorial notes to point out the known inaccuracies of the accounts would make the work more useful in the classroom, especially in undergraduate and lower levels. The author clearly states in the Preface that he made no attempt to “provide a complete historical analysis of the historical accuracy” of the accounts (p. xi). In the Introduction, he again states that the accuracy of the accounts is “beyond the scope of this work” and that “critical assessment” is needed in reading these sources (p. 9). Yet, though the reading level is easy enough and the subject important enough for this text to be included at all education levels in Texas, only those teachers current on the scholarly works in the field could separate many of the inaccuracies in the accounts.

This, in turn, leads to a second comment, one that those outside of Texas, or those not from Texas, may have trouble understanding. This work has significant cultural and social implications that cannot be ignored by anyone using this work. In this era of partisan societal fragmentation in the name of multiculturalism, there might be a tendency to rely on this work alone as the Tejanos’ “true” story of the Alamo. This is not the purpose of this work and using it without the inclusion of other standard works would give a distorted view of the events in question.

The Alamo has achieved mythical stature in popular culture. It goes deeper in Texas, even among scholars. Those who attended the session on the Alamo at the 1996 Texas State Historical Association annual meeting saw the deep feelings of cultural identity evoked by any mention of the Alamo. Recently a new battle of the Alamo has begun. This is a battle for how its history should be told, with the DRT (Daughters of the Republic of Texas) on one side struggling to retain control over their “shrine” and, on the other, many groups, including Tejanos, who want history revised to include themselves. Many Tejanos also see (with some merit) the cry “Remember the Alamo” as the beginning of institutionalized racism in Texas.

The myths surrounding the Alamo have become so ingrained in popular perception that it is hard to separate facts from fiction. *The Alamo Remembered*, while bringing new sources to the fray, does not clarify any of the controversies, and actually reinforces some of the myths.

The death of Davy Crockett is a good example of this problem. Myth, especially as shown by the John Wayne movie, tells us that Crockett died on a pile of dead Mexicans, swinging his rifle “Old Betsy” after his ammunition ran out. Recent works refute this notion. The De la Pena diary (*With Santa Anna in Texas: A Personal Narrative of the Revolution*, trans. and ed. Carmen Perry [College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1975]) states that Crockett and several others were captured and later put to death by direct order of Santa Anna. Stephen Hardin’s *Texian Iliad: A Military History of the Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994) also relates this story of Crockett’s death (some historians, however, believe the de la Pena diary to be a forgery). Yet the accounts in Matovina’s work tell other stories. Some follow the myths, others say Crockett died early in the fighting. Exactly when in the battle Davy Crockett died may not seem particularly important to many historians, but it is very important to those who have iconized the Alamo.

Crockett’s location in the struggle is also at issue. Hardin states that Travis placed Crockett and his men along a picket between the chapel and the south wall. Hardin also states that the Mexican army breached the northern outer walls first, and the defenders fell back to the chapel and the long barracks. The Tejano accounts generally agree with where the walls were breached but vary from this point. The Ruiz account (April 1861, pp. 43-44) states that after the battle Santa Anna called together the leading citizens of San Antonio in order to identify the bodies of Travis, Bowie, and Crockett. This was so that Santa Anna could be sure they were actually dead, because he could not identify them himself with certainty. Ruiz states that he found Crockett’s body in a building at the northwest corner of the compound, where the walls were first breached and making it impossible for him to have been captured in the long barracks and reinforcing the idea that he died early in the fight.

What does this mean for the use of *The Alamo Remembered*? At face value, this work is the end result of careful research and masterful organization. It is interesting to read and presents a new viewpoint for viewing one of the most noted events in North America. It would make an excellent companion reader in any study of the Texas rebellion. It cannot be used alone, since the accounts themselves can be confusing and contradictory. But the accounts contained in this work need to be included in any study of the Alamo. While the documents cannot be taken as “the truth,” they do add significantly to the body of knowledge available to scholars.

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