

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTES RENDUS

Harvey J. Graff, *The Dallas Myth: The Making and Un-making of an American City*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 400 pp. \$US 34.95 hardcover (978-0-8166-5269-3)

In 1948, city leaders in Dallas were attempting to convince aircraft manufacturer Chance Vought to relocate to Texas from Connecticut. All looked set to go until Chance Vought general manager Rex Beisel suddenly realized that the runways at the Dallas airport were too short. Just three hours and forty minutes after Beisel had contacted “Deck” Huley, a local booster who was helping to expedite the corporate migration, Huley telephoned to report that the problem had been solved. City Council had met in emergency session, voted to allocate \$250,000 for a runway extension, and work would begin Monday morning.

In *The Dallas Myth*, his provocative analysis of “Big D,” eminent American historian Harvey Graff cites this anecdote as a fabled example of “the Dallas Way” in action. By this he means an ideology and mode of governance that equates the interests of its business elite with the public good. Since the 1930s, a gentlemen’s club composed of bankers, developers, land speculators, merchants, and the media mavens has ruled Dallas with a velvet fist. Graff characterizes this as “a bold and brash boosterism, espousing an ideology of growth at almost any cost” (p. 157).

If the Dallas Way seems to follow the template for the “urban growth machine” that dominates most every North American metropolis, it does have some unique features. Most notably, Dallas discourse has long denied its own history, except for a recurring collection of anecdotes about an assortment of colourful “characters.” As Graff observes, “Dallas myths imagine the city outside the normal bonds of time and space, exempt from history itself” (p. 89). Instead, Dallas is portrayed as a “can-do city,” with “no limits,” oriented to the future. This ahistorical “myth” sweeps quite a bit under the carpet, notably a powerful narrative of the racial segregation of residential neighbourhoods. “White Dallas,” Graff says, “was notable for its intolerance of diversity, acceptance of political extremism and frequent recourse to violence” (p. 94). This first spilled over into the national consciousness in the aftermath of the Kennedy

assassination in 1963 when Dallas was depicted in the media as an ultra-conservative “city of hate.”

To repatriate its tarnished reputation after the Kennedy shooting, local leaders embraced a pair of iconic images: the Dallas Cowboys (“America’s team”) and *Dallas*, the popular, long-running television series, especially the opening frame depicting a skyline of money and power in slick reflective glass. More recently, Dallas’s ruling citizens have channeled their energies into building a “private city” characterized by “mimetic monumentalism,” conceiving and constructing buildings on a monumental scale in imitation of other American cities.

The Dallas Myth is divided into two parts: “Searching for Dallas” and “Understanding Dallas.” Generally, I found the latter to be more compelling, especially Chapter 5 (“A Tale of Two Cities”) which deals with the conflict-prone spatial and racial relationships between North and South Dallas. By contrast, Part One tends to be repetitive at times — the three chapters might have been compressed into one long article suitable for a journal such as the *Journal of Urban History*. In large part, this probably reflects the author’s decision to eschew a more orthodox linear narrative in favour of a more meditative, “experiment in historical thinking, historical interpretation and historical writing” (p. xxii) where-in Graff mixes different historical eras, sometimes confusingly.

I have two other concerns here. While Graff scrupulously documents his material with nearly 60 pages of notes, I couldn’t find a single instance where he actually talked to anybody about Dallas, past and present. An exclusive use of secondary sources is not inherently problematic, but, in this case, the author relies too much on media accounts, especially on articles and editorials in the local press, one of the most aggressive purveyors of the “Dallas Way.” Predictably, historian Clay Reynolds (*Dallas Morning News*, September 7, 2008) delivered a somewhat negative review of *The Dallas Myth*, finding the book to be “somewhat muddled” with “no sense that he [Graff] actually lived here for nearly 20 years.” Also, Graff scarcely mentions Dallas’s churches. Surely, these congregations have played a significant role in that city’s history, both as a source of legitimation for the hegemonic power of its ruling elite and as a venue for the network relations that have bound them together. More recently, Dallas’s black churches have assumed a higher profile, most notably the 12,000-member Friendship West Baptist Church in South Dallas.

These caveats aside, *The Dallas Myth* is an articulate and intelligently argued deconstruction of the ninth largest city in the United States. It is especially suitable as a case study resource in graduate and senior undergraduate courses in urban political economy. *CJS* readers might find it worthwhile to consider whether Graff’s critique applies equally

well to Calgary, as suggested a quarter century ago in Chuck Reasons' edited volume *Stampede City: Power and Politics in Western Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1984).

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