Alexander Missal

Seaway to the Future: American Social Visions and the Construction of the Panama Canal

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Julie Greene

The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal

New York: Penguin Press, 2009, 496 pp., 37 b/w illus. $30 (cloth), ISBN 9781594202018

The story of the Panama Canal's construction has been told many times, notably by David McCullough in his bestseller *The Path Between the Seas* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1977). Begun in May 1904, the forty-mile (64-km) canal was built by the Isthmian Canal Commission (ICC), a civilian branch of the U. S. Department of War. It was completed by August 1914 at a cost of $352 million. During that decade, 150,000 people, mostly West Indians, worked on the project. What Alexander Missal, a German journalist with a PhD in Anglo-American History from the University of Cologne, and Julie Greene, a professor of history at the University of Maryland, have achieved in their books is to add valuable new dimensions to our understanding of the canal's construction and reception, and of the daily lives of those who built it. In *Seaway to the Future* Missal recaptures the early significance to Americans of the canal and Canal Zone—a strip of land five miles wide on either side of the canal and by 1912 home to 62,000 people—by analyzing American books, magazine articles, photographs, and drawings of the era. Greene, in *The Canal Builders*, explores social and labor conditions for the workers who built the canal.

Both authors provide similar background information. The attempt to build a canal in Panama began in 1880 with the French Compagnie Universelle du Canal Interocéanique, under the direction of Suez Canal builder Ferdinand de Lesseps. That project was abandoned in 1889, as Greene explains, on account of "persistent disease, inadequate technology, insufficient funds, high labor turnover, and most damaging of all, unfortunate engineering decisions" (26). In 1903 assistance provided by the U. S. government and the American-owned Panama Railroad to the Panamanian independence movement resulted in Panama's independence from Columbia. The following year the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty was signed with provisions highly favorable to American interests.

The canal project got off to a rocky start. The first chief engineer, John Wallace, lasted only one year. During his tenure, rumors spread in the United States about cronyism in the ICC and the employment of prostitutes for the workers. Both Missal and Greene credit Theodore Roosevelt and his visit to the Canal Zone in 1906 with turning the situation around. In particular, both authors argue that the iconic photograph of Roosevelt in his tropical white suit operating a Bucyrus steam shovel was instrumental in aligning public opinion behind the canal project.[1]

John Stevens, a railroad engineer, was the second chief engineer for the ICC. He believed that the principal problem facing the ICC was labor. As Greene relates, Stevens advocated the use of Chinese workers, but for various reasons the ICC turned to West Indians (principally from Jamaica, Barbados, and Martinique). Later this unskilled labor force was augmented by Spaniards, Italians, and Greeks, recruited in the belief, widespread among the ICC's management, that white workers would be more productive than the black West Indians. White-collar and skilled blue-collar workers were recruited from the United States and paid 25 to 33 percent more than wages at home. To manage this workforce, the ICC developed a system of gold and silver payrolls. The gold roll included white-collar and skilled workers, mostly Americans, paid in U.S. currency, while those on the silver roll were paid in Panamanian dollars. As Greene points out, the distinction was not strictly based on race but, rather, "on class, gender, race and nationality" (72). Gradually the gold/silver payroll system "hardened into a system of segregation . . . [which] came to shape every aspect of life in the Zone, from work to housing, leisure activities, sexual relationships, and shopping" (63).

Here the interests of Missal and Greene diverge. Missal is primarily interested in what the project meant for the American people and how their views were affected by what he calls "the Panama authors." By this he means both book authors, such as Willis John Abbot, whose *Panama and the Canal in Picture and Prose* (1913) sold more than one million copies, and the authors of articles in popular new mass-circulation American magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *McClure's*. It was these authors, Missal argues, who gave reality to the Panama Canal. The Panama authors, for example, celebrated William Gorgas, the medical officer who minimized yellow fever and malaria in the Canal Zone, as "first of all a success of American civilization: through his work," one author praised, "a veritable valley of death has been converted into a land of health and comfort" (62). By painting portraits of figures such as Gorgas, the Panama authors sought to demonstrate that the canal was where "human technology triumphed over nature" (64). They wrote further, says Missal, of "the staggering dimensions of the Panama Canal and the wonder of the engineering work" (122). In developing this popular view of the canal, they frequently contrasted American know-how with supposed French ineptitude and moral inferiority. For example, they reported that the French shipped 20,000 snowplows to Panama and that they drank champagne instead of water—allegations denied at the time by high-ranking members of the ICC, but nonetheless popular with the American public.

Most crucially, the Panama authors described the Canal Zone as a tropical American Garden of Eden, a utopia; this view became popular and pervasive in the United States. Here both Missal and Greene raise the specter of Edward Bellamy's best-selling utopian novel of 1888, *Looking Backward, 2000–1887*, in which a time traveler from 1887 appears in Boston in the year 2000.[2] In the new society of 2000 he finds a "system of organized production and distribution" that has "eliminated private companies" and established "great distribution centers." "The working population has no voting rights" and "the state is ruled by an administrative elite" (as quoted by Missal, 136). Missal explains how Bellamy, like many other Americans, was "appalled by the transformation of American cities and the social tensions of his age" (136), and therefore celebrated order—the basis of his utopia—over democracy's perceived potential for chaos. In Bellamy's utopia, democracy is sacrificed to the order of what he calls a "perfect concert of action" (137). Many Americans saw the Panama Canal as the realization of Bellamy's utopia. Bellamy's "perfect concert of action" was, in fact, similar to ICC secretary Bishop's description of the Panama Canal project as a "perfect operation" (138). As in Bellamy's utopia, the Panama authors saw in the construction of the canal the "elimination of private companies," the existence of "great distributing establishments," a "general dining house in every neighborhood," and "much larger incomes" (136). To most readers of the time, these achievements seemed to outweigh the loss of democratic rights. As in Bellamy's utopia, where "the working population had no voting rights" and "the state [was] ruled by an administrative elite" (136), workers in the Canal Zone had order but virtually no constitutional rights.

Where Missal is interested in how the Panama authors portrayed the canal to the American population, Greene is interested in the workers' perspectives. "How," she asks, "does looking at the [Panama Canal] construction project from the perspective of the workers change our understanding of this moment in history?" (4). Greene explains that the engineers of the Panama Canal not only engineered a transportation corridor but also a social system that would ensure order and discipline among the workers and promote the canal's timely completion. The system of gold and silver rolls, through encouraging competition among social and ethnic groups, was one way to achieve this order. The ICC also achieved order through such negative measures as blacklisting, anti-loitering laws, police spying, extensive prison punishment, and deportation. Unions were opposed and union organizers deported. Along with these measures, the ICC developed amusements and diversions that were intended to keep the workers content, yet these were often less than satisfactory. One such effort was the development of YMCA clubhouses throughout the Canal Zone. Greene reports that in Gorgona, a machine-shop town, worker membership in the YMCA began at 72 percent in 1907 but fell to 44 percent by 1910. The workers turned instead to amusements and diversions operating outside the Canal Zone, particularly the saloons and brothels of Cocoa Grove, a district of Panama City. Greene describes how the tensions among American, Panamanian, and West Indian workers boiled over in the Cocoa Grove Riots of 4 July 1912, causing one death and twenty injuries. And death inside the Canal Zone was rife. According to official figures, some 5,600 workers died in the course of the canal's construction, although the actual total may have been closer to 15,000. Greene does not provide a breakdown of these deaths but indicates that the leading causes were pneumonia, nephritis (liver inflammation), and industrial accidents. Both authors are critical of the ICC's social policies, particularly the treatment of West Indian workers. Yet neither author provides a comparison with other contemporary construction projects, such as the New York Barge Canal (built 1903–1918), which would permit readers to assess this judgment more fully.

As Missal's discussion of the Panama authors indicates, most North American observers of the time viewed the project as utopian in its aims and achievements. From an architectural historian's point of view, it is disappointing that neither author included much material on the physical aspects of that "utopia," such as the ICC's architectural and city planning efforts. (In addition to building the canal, the ICC also managed the Panama Railroad Corporation—a separate entity also owned by the U. S. government—and built and managed the towns and facilities of the Canal Zone.) Also disappointing, and somewhat surprising, is the fact that neither author provides a broader discussion of nineteenth-century utopian planning schemes or literature beyond Bellamy's book. Moreover, both Greene's and Missal's books would have benefited from the inclusion of more illustrations. Captions in both tend to be minimal and credits for

photographers and delineators are sometimes omitted. While both books include the maps needed to understand the location and layout of the Canal Zone, those in Greene's book, drawn by Jeffrey Ward, are superior. Still, shortcomings aside, Missal's and Greene's books present important and complementary new perspectives on the construction of the Panama Canal, perspectives not readily available elsewhere.

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Notes

1. Roosevelt's trip to Panama marked the first time a sitting president had left the U.S.
2. Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1888).