

Neon Metropolis: How Las Vegas Started the Twenty-First Century. By Hal Rothman. New York: Routledge, 2002. xxviii + 340 pp. Photographs, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$27.50. ISBN 0-415-92612-2.

Reviewed by Michael S. Green

Books about Las Vegas tend to fall into one of two categories: solid scholarship—like John M. Findlay's *People of Chance: Gambling in America from Jamestown to Las Vegas* or Eugene Moehring's *Resort City in the Sunbelt: Las Vegas, 1930–2000*—both of which use traditional historical sources. Or popular treatments, ranging from an account of a visit to the city to an all-out muckraking attack that fails to delve very far beneath the surface. Some recent books have effectively and interestingly merged these two stereotypes: Gary Elliott's *The New Western Frontier: An Illustrated History of Greater Las Vegas*, a coffee-table book with a highly analytic bent; and Sally Denton and Roger Morris's *The Money and the Power: The Making of Las Vegas and Its Hold on America, 1947–2000*, an investigative work that uses standard historical sources and considers the city from a broader perspective.

Hal Rothman's *Neon Metropolis: How Las Vegas Started the Twenty-First Century* is all and none of these, carving a unique niche for itself in the mushrooming field of Las Vegas studies. Rothman is a professor of history at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, the former editor of the journal *Environmental History*, and a prolific author of works on his adopted city and on western and environmental history. Thus, the book reflects its author's academic viewpoint, linking the city to broader cultural trends in a more scholarly way than is found in magazine articles and journalistic studies that also proclaim Las Vegas, as Rothman does here, "the first city of the 21st century." But *Neon Metropolis* fits the popular genre as well: it has no footnotes and only a select bibliography; it includes first-person accounts of Rothman's adventures; and it is his take on the basis of looking at and thinking about the place where he has lived for the past decade.

Rothman offers much food for thought about Las Vegas. He links it to the postindustrial society, but with the addendum that the city "fulfills the desires of the baby boomers, reflects the abundance that they take for granted and the selfish indulgence, the hedonistic libertarianism, that is the legacy of the American cultural revolution of the 1960s," and that it benefits from the growing availability of easy credit and cash from automatic teller machines (p. xiii). He explains the local commitment to growth, both at the heyday of organized crime and in today's highly corporate climate, with the correct observation that "Las Vegas hungered for fresh capital, no

matter what its origins” (p. 17). He shows how the more broadly defined term “entertainment” has supplanted casino gambling as the key to the tourist economy. He muses on the meaning of freedom and what the desire in recent decades for the freedom to do as one wishes has meant to Las Vegas. He examines Las Vegas’s efforts to redevelop its downtown, suggesting that part of the problem has been that “Las Vegas didn’t have a downtown at all. . . . Las Vegas was many cities masquerading under one name,” with the result that the city has a notable lack of public spaces (p. 109). He assesses the difficulty inherent in building a sense of community in a burgeoning center of new arrivals. He harpoons the notion that Nevada’s claim to a libertarian, low-tax style of government is suitable for its wealth of business and residential arrivals. Whether he is discussing why union membership grows in Las Vegas or the environmental impact of building up a desert oasis, Rothman combines a variety of statistics, first-hand observations, and anecdotes to create an evocative picture of Las Vegas.

The problems with *Neon Metropolis* can be attributed to the publisher, Routledge, rather than to Rothman. Especially in this age of computers and spellcheckers, misspellings like “Malcom X,” and missing words and letters should be blamed on lax copyediting, not on the author. Redundancies creep into the text: four different references to Las Vegas as “the last Detroit” hardly seem necessary, and some of the phrasing shows that Routledge harbors a Jeffersonian belief that the editor is best who edits least. Rothman’s already readable prose could have been tightened and his facts more carefully scrutinized. For example, contrary to the claim on page 20, Howard Hughes acquired most of his Las Vegas land holdings before he moved to town and started buying casinos. Although Rothman describes Nevada politicians as “usually Mormon,” only one of the half-dozen leaders he cites belongs to that church (p. 145). Some of the organized-crime figures he mentions as having been forced out of Cuba by Fidel Castro already were operating in Las Vegas at the time of the Cuban revolution. Building Highway 91 in the 1930s certainly provided an important connection between Las Vegas and southern California, but to say that it “pulled Las Vegas into Los Angeles’s orbit” is to ignore the turn-of-the-century railroad construction that created the town of Las Vegas in the first place (p. 238).

One of the book’s strengths or weaknesses, depending upon the reader’s point of view, is Rothman’s use of the sweeping phrase or broad generalization. For example, he notes that “women swear that the Bellagio makes the best Cosmopolitan anyone’s ever tasted” (p. xviii). He describes the Las Vegas populace of the 1960s as “comprised of casino workers who regarded legalized gaming as the solution to legal woes they experienced elsewhere” (p. 17), while “[I]ocals worked in the casinos, hung out on the Strip, cruised it with their kids in the back seat, and dreamed of hitting it big. Their children aspired to show business, not to medical school. . . .”

(p. 18). This description may apply to some of the populace, but hardly to all of it. Correctly assessing the importance attached to coach Jerry Tarkanian's championship college basketball teams, Rothman wrote, "A generation of Las Vegans had grown up near the Tarkanian family, played at their house, and went to school with their kids" (p. 137). No doubt he means that figuratively, not literally. He makes other far-reaching claims: The migration of Hispanics grew so large that "[i]n Chinese restaurants, the cooks were Latino" (pp. 181-2). "People go into work at five in the morning to find a parking place that will stay in the shade all day" (p. 292). Some are unsupported; some are unsupportable. A good editor would have required Rothman to back up these comments, delete them, or, more important, qualify them. Instead, the reader is left with either a mistaken impression or misinformation.

While Routledge's poor editing detracts from the pleasure the book provides, *Neon Metropolis* is nevertheless an important study. Of course, it is not the last word on Las Vegas; that is unlikely ever to be written. But those who want to understand the last couple of decades of the city's unparalleled growth will find Rothman's work indispensable.

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