

---

Mansel G. Blackford. *Columbus, Ohio: Two Centuries of Business and Environmental Change*. Columbus: Trillium, an imprint of The Ohio State University Press, 2016. xii + 232 pp. ISBN 978-0-8142-1314-8, \$69.95 (cloth).

---

The urban dimension of environmental history has become an increasingly important focus of the field's literature. A number of good case studies on U.S. cities now exist, but nearly all of them—including works on New York, Boston, San Francisco, and Los Angeles—focus on large coastal cities. Mansel Blackford, Emeritus Professor of History at Ohio State University, meaningfully extends the scope of this scholarship by examining a medium-sized midwestern city: Columbus, Ohio. His tight but detailed volume argues that Columbus is both typical and atypical in reflecting the contours of environmental and midwestern history. The two major themes he sees throughout the city's history are the tension between the demands of business and environmental change, and the relationship between private business and public policy—"Politics," Blackford insists, "always mattered" (2).

The structure of the book is primarily thematic, focusing in turn on business growth, water use, and land use throughout the city's history. Regarding business, Blackford argues that although the actions of both private and public actors contributed to the city's economic growth—something typical of most cities—Columbus was in many ways atypical because of its status as a planned city built explicitly to serve as the state's capital. The presence of governmental institutions—including the state government itself and government-supported establishments such as Ohio State University—guaranteed a certain amount of population and social capital that could be pressed toward commercial expansion. In addition to both public and private contributions, joint private–public initiatives (such as the downtown market) also played a role in the city's growth. Manufacturing lagged behind commerce in economic importance compared with cities such as Cleveland and Cincinnati; and Columbus remained smaller than them (until recently), with a more diverse economy. This helped Columbus weather both the Great Depression and the late twentieth-century deindustrialization of Ohio's economy better than other major Ohio cities. By the turn of the twentieth century, Columbus's status as a financial, educational, and service center made it an atypically growing city in the middle of the "Rust Belt."

In exploring the theme of water use, Blackford argues that Columbus was not only a national leader in defining modern water and sewage treatment policy but also that "water use issues largely defined Columbus" (3). Both an inadequate supply of water and its "hard"

nature contributed to the relatively slow growth of the city early on; and frequent occurrences of water-borne diseases vexed the city until the turn of the twentieth century. Water use dramatically affected the way the city grew, with northern expansion (in part toward cleaner water sources) accelerating at the same time that industrial and sewage outputs downstream stunted southern expansion. By the late 1800s, the water system proved inadequate and harmful both to Columbus citizens and to the Scioto River that served as both a source of water and receiver of waste. U.S. Senator Marcus Hanna's death by typhoid fever, contracted from Columbus water in 1904, was a catalyst for Progressive Era city planners' major overhaul of the city's water system in "The Great Columbus Experiment": simultaneously establishing a new reservoir, a new state-of-the-art treatment plant, and a new waste-reduction plant (76). Such a large-scale integrated approach had never been tried before, and served as a model for other communities. The need for even more water as the city expanded into the twentieth century contributed to another distinctive feature of Columbus's development. Political leaders and city planners used the lure of the city's expanding water supply to annex surrounding areas into the city at the same time that other major Ohio cities, including Cincinnati and Cleveland, became boxed-in by suburbs, preventing further geographic growth. Late twentieth-century environmental issues continued to challenge the burgeoning city, as did continuing environmental justice issues surrounding water and waste policies in more minority-heavy portions of Columbus's south and east sides. Blackford maintains that all of these illustrated that "politics were as important as engineering matters" in determining water policy (115).

As was true with business and water issues, Blackford demonstrates that both public and private actors shaped how the land was used. Nevertheless, he holds that unlike "the Great Columbus Experiment" with water, the city followed rather than led national trends in terms of urban land use. As a city built to host the state capital, political realities always deeply affected the city's development. This was most visible in the placement of state government buildings and other state-supported institutions such as the state penitentiary; The Ohio State University; and the facilities for the blind, the deaf, and the mentally ill. Municipal decisions also played a role—including the development of a park system in the late 1800s—but Blackford insists that private decisions in land use usually turned out to be more important than public ones. New immigrant neighborhoods, for example, helped shape the burgeoning city, as did the growth of privately owned transportation infrastructure, including railroads and streetcars. These increasingly helped drive the expansion of the city

even as the rise of the automobile caused more congestion and accelerated the development of early suburbs—including Upper Arlington, which serves as an illustrative case study. When an ambitious 1908 “City Beautiful” urban plan failed to gain support, city planners increasingly turned to more modest zoning codes to influence development. Blackford maintains these accomplished less than the private covenants that limited who could live in which neighborhoods (until the U.S. Supreme Court struck them down), and much less than the actions of the Federal Housing Authority and private real estate developers. Blackford also traces the typical stories of how interstate highways and suburban shopping malls took their toll on downtown businesses and neighborhoods, as they did in most cities in the late twentieth century. By the turn of the twentieth-first century, more creative public land use initiatives, including park expansion and remaking of the riverfront, also followed national trends in urban renewal.

Blackford backs his convincing arguments with an ample array of primary sources, including municipal and state government records, contemporaneous newspaper coverage, and the correspondence of various figures. Helping to enliven his narrative are a variety of writings from individuals, from early settlers and businessmen to relatively recent humorous columns in the *Columbus Dispatch*. He also admirably situates his research at the nexus of several existing fields of study. Making good use of the urban environmental historical literature—especially Martin Melosi’s *The Sanitary City: Environmental Services in Urban America from Colonial Times to the Present* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000)—he also extends its reach through his unusual focus on a medium-sized midwestern urban area. His periodic return to issues of environmental justice—especially concerning poorer and more ethnically diverse city neighborhoods—is consistent with the focus of much recent work on this issue. In addition, Blackford draws heavily on—and contributes to—contemporary scholarship on business history, environmental history, midwestern history, and Ohio history, helpfully organizing his sources by topic in a bibliographic essay. This brief volume will thus be a welcome addition to several different historical literatures.

Kevin F. Kern

The University of Akron

E-mail: [kkern@uakron.edu](mailto:kkern@uakron.edu)

doi:10.1017/eso.2017.19

Published online June 9, 2017