

'A Machine to Move Ocean and Earth' Review: How the Port of Los Angeles Was Born; Built atop mud and marshland, the seaport on California's San Pedro Bay is an engineering marvel and a gateway to the global economy.

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The estuary at the heart of James Tejani's history of the Port of Los Angeles—3,400 acres of mud and salt marsh on San Pedro Bay—no longer exists. It hasn't existed for more than a century, subsumed beneath what is now the busiest container port in the Western Hemisphere. In one recent year, Mr. Tejani writes in "A Machine to Move Ocean and Earth," some \$311 billion of cargo moved through the port—cars, refrigerators and the stuff of many Amazon purchases en route from Asian manufacturing plants to American consumers.

Mr. Tejani recounts the messy and contentious struggle during the 19th and early 20th centuries to build a port on those salt marshes—an area once teeming with natural life. Amid the mud, marsh, sand and water, native species such as topsmelt fish and slough anchovies helped support a rich ecosystem that also included savannah sparrows, owls and hawks, seals and sea lions, coyotes, pumas, bears—both black and grizzly—and whales migrating offshore.

"A Machine to Move Ocean and Earth" seeks to reveal the "buried secrets" of the nation's global gateway, an artificial port built against all odds. It tells how the region's business interests overpowered the recommendations of government scientists on where to locate a new West Coast port to rival San Francisco's, a protected natural harbor in contrast to what would become Los Angeles's man-made one. Mr. Tejani contends that the moral of his story is that "the world we make ultimately may not be the world we want."

The book doesn't focus on the wilderness that was swept away by industrialization. Instead, what drives Mr. Tejani's narrative is how and why this marshland became the biggest port on the West Coast. He introduces the many characters who fought over the estuary's future, weaving together the stories of scientists, railroad barons, real-estate speculators, Civil War veterans and "Californios," the Mexican-era landholders who lived in California before it was annexed by the U.S. in 1848.

Mr. Tejani, who grew up on San Pedro Bay and now teaches at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, packs his book with detailed, careful scholarship. The long middle section reads as if it may have been based on the author's doctoral dissertation, which also focused on the history of the port. The sections that open and close the book are more lyrical in tone. The most compelling moments are the rare personal ones, such as when Mr. Tejani describes the

scenes he would see while driving past the port: giant cranes, colorful containers, "refinery plumes and chemical tanks" that appeared endless. One longs to hear more about his personal connections to the bay.

Mr. Tejani relies on letters, maps, land patents, court records and newspaper accounts. But because the book hopscoches across the experiences of so many people, the individual characters tend to blur into one another. For example, Mr. Tejani's characterization of Phineas Banning, a colorful and important figure in developing the port, feels incomplete. And his accounts of the indigenous people who first lived on the bay are limited by scarce or nonexistent written records.

One exception is his portrait of the surveyor George Davidson, who was responsible for mapping the West Coast for the U.S. government in the 1850s. He initially dismissed San Pedro Bay as a possible place for a harbor, noting the bay's shallow waters and the difficulty of navigating ships through a tidal marshland. Davidson was widely respected and one of the country's leading geodesists (a scientist who measures and monitors the Earth to determine the exact coordinates of any point). But the area's boosters spurned his perspective on the suitability of San Pedro Bay, and Davidson came to moderate his original view. This far-ranging tale culminates in the dredging of tens of millions of cubic yards of mud and sand—an engineering marvel that, Mr. Tejani argues, should not have been possible yet cleared a path for what is now a "central engine of the U.S. and world economy."

Mr. Tejani details the surveying battles, the land grabs and the protracted litigation that laid the groundwork for the port. One recurrent thread is the Domínguez family of Rancho San Pedro. Originally granted 75,000 acres of land by Spain, the family saw its holdings shrink significantly by the time California became part of the U.S. With the boundaries of the remaining land in dispute, the family ultimately failed to hold onto its estuary claim in the face of intense development pressure. In 1897, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected the family's claims and held that the federal government had an interest in the bay for a future harbor.

The book ends in the early 20th century with the estuary's destruction: "the moment at which humans severed San Pedro Bay from its natural and indigenous past to make it serve the needs of modern mass society." I couldn't help wishing that Mr. Tejani had condensed his long descriptions of the twists and turns in that fight and instead included scenes from the dramatic culmination of his story—the destruction of the estuary through the digging of the artificial port, which was officially founded in 1907. After so much litigation, political maneuvering and dry facts, to skip this dramatic moment was frustrating.

The book succeeds in using the fight over the San Pedro Bay as a lens through which to view American expansionism. It links the fate of the once-wild estuary to developments in Washington, D.C., the Philippines, the Mississippi Delta and the shifting borderlands between Mexico and the U.S. It is a story of inexorable change—both destruction and

creation. Until the Covid-19 pandemic, when images of ships and containers stuck in the Port of Los Angeles proliferated, few people probably realized its importance to global trade. This history of how a pristine estuary became the mighty Port of Los Angeles is a relatively unknown chapter in the American experiment that Mr. Tejani has done well to scrutinize.

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Credit: By Julia Flynn Siler

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