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Book Review: The Future of the Southern Plains

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The Future of the Southern Plains. Edited by Sherry L. Smith. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003. xii + 275 pp. Photographs, maps, notes, bibliography, index. $29.95.

The Future of the Southern Plains is a collection of essays that evolved from a symposium at Southern Methodist University in 2001. The text's primary concern is how oil and water depletion in the Southern Plains affects the economy, autonomy, and aesthetics of the region.

Elliott West describes the historical exploitation of the region as a source of natural materials, including flint, bison, corn, human labor, oil, and cotton. As different resources are developed or depleted, the region's residents must adapt to preserve some quality of life and local pride. John Miller Morris discusses the past, present, and future of the region's family farm. He distinguishes the corporate farm as often a necessary progression as farm properties are managed across family generations, since larger, more diverse farm operations can be more insulated from economic and weather fluctuations than smaller single-family plots. Connie Woodhouse presents a paleoclimatic record of droughts that demonstrates the repetitive cycles of low and high precipitation. Droughts more severe than the 1950s event have occurred in the last few hundred years. John Opie compares and contrasts the leaders of two of the more influential groundwater conservation districts. One emphasized improving irrigation efficiency to delay depletion, while the other promoted the

zero-depletion concept to match withdrawals to recharge. Both approaches beg the question of the most beneficial use of the region's water.

Diana Davids Olien chronicles the changing roles of major and independent oil producers in the region. New technologies and volatile prices contribute to positive and negative uncertainties. Jeff Roche expounds on the regional meaning of conservative politics, and Yolanda Romero traces the settlement, adaptation, and community of Hispanics in the Llano Estacado. Finally, Dan Flores calls for preservation of the Plains grasslands and canyons of the Caprock escarpment. The Palo Duro Canyon missed its chance to become a national park, but present and future attitudes could lead to new public lands programs.

At a time when falling rural populations are seen by some as an indication of the general decline of the region, these essays struggle with the complexities of its people and resources. The authors point to positive indicators and alternatives that can encourage preservation of the Southern Plains' heritage and stability.

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