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LLANO ESTACADO: AN ISLAND IN THE SKY.

Edited by Stephen Bogener and William Tydeman.

“Island in the Sky” aptly describes the Llano Estacado, the southern extension of the Great Plains that rises some 800 feet above the surrounding terrain in northwestern Texas and northeastern New Mexico. It is this expansive landscape that William Tydeman and Stephen Bogener have placed in the forefront of an excellent collection of essays and photographs that explore the connections between the region’s geography and culture. The plateau’s flat terrain—“horizontal yellow,” as historian Dan Flores has described it—invariably defines the Llano, but Stephen Bogener reminds us also that “85 percent of what the human eye registers on the Llano Estacado is sky.” Its immensity dominates the landscape in many of the photographs included in the collection.

The other striking component of these photographs is the land itself—depicted as plowed furrows of brown earth, the soft green of crops sustained by center-pivot irrigation, or the featureless dull yellow of the shortgrass range. In some, an abandoned house, often only a shack, testifies to the lost hopes and dashed dreams of earlier residents. Like rural populations throughout much of the Great Plains, that of the Llano is declining—the results revealed poignantly in “Last Chance Restaurant” and “Railroad Shack House” by Peter Brown and in the photographs of abandoned homes and schools by Steve Fitch and Andrew John Liccardo. As Rick Bass notes, these pictures reveal “a land stretched very, very thin.” Two collections of black-and-white compositions—one by Miguel Gandert, the other by Tony Gleaton—portray the people living on the region’s ranches and farms and in its small towns.

The essayists were given no elaborate instructions and were encouraged to write about the Llano as they saw fit. Consequently, the style and content of the essays range widely from commentaries on the photographs to reminiscences and thoughtful interpretive pieces on the region’s culture and environment. The photographs and essays in Llano Estacado focus almost exclusively on the contemporary plateau and its people; only Stephen Bogener’s concluding essay develops a historical context and an environmental perspective on this unique bioregion. Overall, the book showcases some of the best photographers of the Llano Estacado and includes perceptive essays by the region’s leading scholars. It will appeal to residents of the Llano as well as to all students of the contemporary Southern Plains and Southwest.

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