



BOOK REVIEWS

Isaac's Storm. Larson, Eric, 1999. New York: Crown Publishers, 323p., \$25.00 USD.

Isaac's Storm tells the story of the Galveston, Texas, Hurricane of Sept 8-9, 1900 as the central event in the life of Isaac Cline, the Galveston representative of the U.S. Weather Service (USWS). Though the book chronicles Cline's life, it is not his biography. Rather, it is an historical account of the consequences of the inability of a man (Cline) and a public agency (USWS) to understand or predict the what-would-become the worst natural disaster in United States history. The most gripping anecdotes describe survivors of the disaster, and though lacking in illustrations, these are positively riveting. I read most of this book during a trans-Atlantic flight, and could not put it down.

The book is divided into six chapters with many internal subdivisions. Within each chapter are a series of stories, woven in a grossly chronological order, leading up to the storm, and ending shortly thereafter. The principal story follows Cline's life and training in the Signal Corps, the predecessor of the Weather Service. Other parallel sections deal with evolving politics within the Signal Corps, the lives of Galvestonians destined to confront the storm, and the growth and development of the storm.

The main focus of the first and longest chapter is on the primitive state of forecasting weather at that time: "Even something as basic as predicting the temperature twenty-four hours in advance was considered so likely to result in failure and public ridicule that the bureau (USWS) forbade it" (p. 69). In later chapters the USWS's inability to forecast weather (they predicted "brisk . . . winds, fair weather" for the March 12, 1888 blizzard that dumped 21 inches of snow on New York and killed 200 people) was dangerously coupled with internal politics and an "obsession with control and reputation" (p. 104).

Fearing competition from Cuban observers, in August of 1900, the USWS head stopped the transmission of official weather reports from Cuba to the United States. This left Galveston blinded to approaching storms. This did not concern Cline because he theorized that Galveston was immune from hurricanes because the Coriolis Force would turn storms to the east and away from the Texas. In 1891 Cline wrote: "It would be impossible for any cyclone to create a storm wave which could materially injure the city" (p. 84). This prediction was tragically proven incorrect.

The climax of the book extends through several chapters as the storm destroys Galveston, and ranges from harrowing to gruesome. Cline's wife and child were lost as his house, which was filled with refugees, collapsed; ninety orphans were tied together with ten nuns and swept away, only to be later found (still tied) under a mountain of debris. People climbed trees and were killed by snakes doing the same. The waves were described as minimal because of attenuation by

the huge wall of debris, but the wind blew slate roofing tiles through houses and people; bricks from chimneys disappeared "like they were little feathers" (p. 196). The pathos of the soldiers at Fort San Jacinto firing their cannon through the night to attract rescuers is juxtaposed with the breathtaking story of the *Pensacola*, which departed Galveston directly into the storm. This book contains "disaster-prose" on a par with that in the "The Perfect Storm" (S. Junger, 1997, W.W. Norton and Co., NY).

The book is neither pure history nor science, and the author describes characters' feeling and intentions in ways that cannot be fully known. There are, however, more than 35 pages of notes substantiating the author's characterizations. Much of the book is also based on a written account by Cline himself, as well as descriptions by many survivors. The greatest failing of the book is a disappointing lack of illustrations; the book contains only a storm track map and a detailed location map of Galveston. More effort at obtaining photographs of the places described would have greatly enhanced the gripping prose.

There are other publications describing large storms, including: "Camille . . . She was No Lady" (Hurricane Camille, anonymous, Dev-Mac Publishing, Batesville, AK, 1969); "And Hugo was His Name" (Hurricane Hugo, C.F. Boone Publishers, Sun City West, AR, 1989); "The 1938 Hurricane" (W.E. Minsinger, Blue Hill Observatory, 1988), and "Last Island" (1856 Louisiana hurricane, J.M. Southern, Cheri Publications, Houma, LA, 1980). None of these is either as well written, or as well organized as Larson's work. There are also other accounts of the Galveston storm. Corie Roberts opens her book, "Against the Tide" (Columbia Press, 1999), by recounting the Galveston storm and the rebuilding of the city, and Stephen Fox, with many photographs, describes the event in a 1999 Smithsonian article (September, 1999). To these authors, Cline is something of a hero; he was given a raise and promoted after the storm for allegedly warning many people in the city. However, Larson does not portray Cline in such a favorable light, and his version of the events serves as an indictment of the USWS for failing to predict the storm and covering up their incompetence.

Isaac's Storm is a thoroughly engaging and entertaining "docu-drama" that will allow the reader to envision what it was like to live through a category 5 hurricane. It is more than simply an exciting story, however. In its portrayal of the ineptitude and deceitfulness of the USWS, the book appears to break new ground. The complacency and trust of the public and the press to the Weather Service is chillingly similar to that presently enjoyed by some other government agencies.

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