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The Fight Is On in Texas: A History of African American Churches of Christ in the Lone Star State, 1865-2000
(review)

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Storm over the Bay: The People of Corpus Christi and Their Port. By Mary Jo O'Rear. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009. Pp. 200. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 9781603440882, \$24.95 cloth.)

Influenced by the example of Houston obtaining federal aid in the early twentieth century to improve a ship channel, the leaders of Corpus Christi dreamed of the same improvement to their bay in order to construct a deep water port. However, political crosscurrents among local leaders Robert J. Kleberg, Walter Francis Timon, Roy Miller, Archie Parr, Walter Pope, and Gordon Boone complicated efforts. It took a devastating hurricane to bring them all together for the common good of the city.

Corpus Christians with a shield of barrier islands, bay, and high bluff thought themselves invulnerable to hurricane assault, but in 1919 a direct hit washed away the lower portions of the town and killed some 500 people. Faced with rebuilding the town, city and county leaders cooperated to obtain a local bond issue to construct a protective breakwater and to support a navigation district. They persuaded the United States Corps of Engineers to dredge a turning basin and a twenty-five-foot-deep ship channel through the bay to the Gulf of Mexico. It was a good example of collaboration between local and federal governments to provide regional economic infrastructure. The port opened in 1926 and at that point this account ends.

Mary Jo O'Rear, a former teacher in the Corpus Christi Independent School District and an adjunct professor at Del Mar College, tells the tale well. She writes with grace, drama, and humor. The politics are complicated, but she sorts out the various threads, and her description of the hurricane is the best that has been written. This is not a detailed urban biography. Early history is only sketched, and there is but partial information about changes in architecture, urban planning, professions, education, business, religion, tourism, and recreation in this short book. Her focus is upon politics and the effect of the storm. The hurricane and resultant construction of the breakwater and port, however, represent the pivotal events in the history of Corpus Christi. She thus adds to earlier academic contributions about Corpus Christi history by Dan E. Kilgore and Alan Lessoff. Obviously, there is much more to be explored about this city of the Coastal Bend; perhaps, O'Rear will continue her good work.

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The Fight Is On in Texas: A History of African American Churches of Christ in the Lone Star State, 1865–2000. By Edward J. Robinson. (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2008. Pp. 222. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 9780891125327, \$19.95 cloth.)

The Fight Is On in Texas marks the fifth book by Edward J. Robinson on the African-American Churches of Christ, and this latest is the first history of the denomination in the Lone Star State. Covering the end of slavery to dawn of the twenty-first century, this endeavor is remarkable since the African-American

Churches of Christ have never had a headquarters or archive at the national or state level, individual churches have kept few records, and a complete run of the denomination's paper, the *Christian Echo*, does not exist. Instead Robinson relies primarily upon existing Church of Christ newspapers, the writings of leading ministers, and individual church histories. The book is organized into four parts. The first section surveys the founding of the Black Church of Christ in Texas and the ministers who labored to establish its many churches across the state. The second and third sections examine the work and legacy of two key ministers, Marshall Keeble and G. P. Bowser, respectively. The final section looks at the rise of the denomination's educational institutions over the course of the twentieth century.

Robinson is at his best detailing the central importance of the dynamic ministers who successfully built the African-American Churches of Christ in Texas. Given the decentralized nature of the denomination it was up to clergymen like Keeble, Bowser, R. N. Hogan, and Jack Evans working at the local level to grow the membership, establish new churches, clarify doctrine, cultivate religious schools, and train new ministers. Particularly noteworthy is the long tradition of interracial cooperation between black and white members of the Church of Christ in Texas. Largesse from white Church of Christ members often provided the crucial support in building black churches and schools. Moreover, evangelization by African-American ministers proved so effective that it also aided local white Churches of Christ in increasing their rolls. Robinson emphatically notes, however, that this racial interaction followed the strict protocols of the Jim Crow system, and African-American ministers had to closely hew to Booker T. Washington's accommodationism up to the middle of the twentieth century.

There are many drawbacks to *The Fight Is On in Texas*, and to be fair, given the limited source material, many are beyond the redress of the author. Robinson does not explain how the rift within the Stone-Campbell movement that led to the creation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Churches of Christ played out for African Americans in Texas. Even though the black Christian Church figures prominently throughout the work, with a whole chapter devoted to its religious school, the Jarvis Christian Institute, and another devoted to a former member, G. P. Bowser, it is not clear how this kindred denomination figures into the story of the African-American Churches of Christ.

Furthermore the reader never gets a sense of the experience of what it meant to be a member of the African-American Church of Christ. This is significant since it would not only highlight what made denominational membership significant, but would also illuminate how the denomination interacted with the broader African-American community, contending with issues like Jim Crow racism and the civil rights movement and coexisting with black Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal churches.

The Fight Is On in Texas is a classical denominational history that opens a new historiographical vein. Robinson acknowledges that his work is not comprehensive but that he sought to open the subject to further study. To this end he has succeeded. This will be the beginning point for inquiry into the African-American Churches of Christ in Texas for a good while to come.