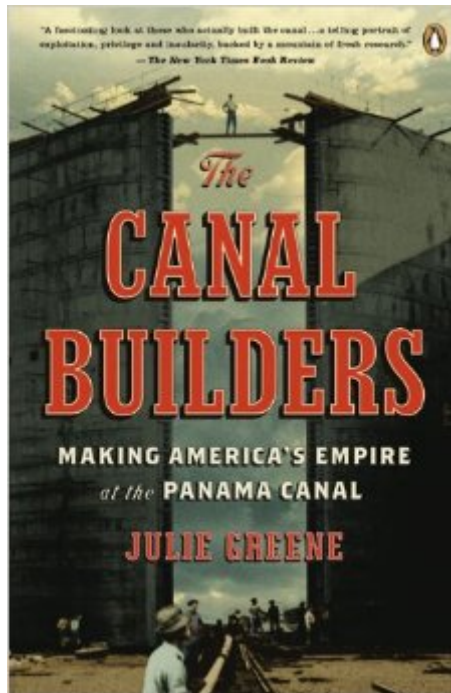


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# The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire At The Panama Canal (Penguin History Of American Life)



## Synopsis

A revelatory look at a momentous undertaking—from the workers' point of view The Panama Canal has long been celebrated as a triumph of American engineering and ingenuity. In *The Canal Builders*, Julie Greene reveals that this emphasis has obscured a far more remarkable element of the historic enterprise: the tens of thousands of workingmen and workingwomen who traveled from all around the world to build it. Greene looks past the mythology surrounding the canal to expose the difficult working conditions and discriminatory policies involved in its construction. Drawing extensively on letters, memoirs, and government documents, the book chronicles both the struggles and the triumphs of the workers and their families. Prodigiously researched and vividly told, *The Canal Builders* explores the human dimensions of one of the world's greatest labor mobilizations, and reveals how it launched America's twentieth-century empire.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Julie Greene has written a moving "labor" history chronicling the lives, labors, travails and enormous challenges faced by the thousands of laborers recruited by the United States to assist in construction of the Panama Canal. While most supervisory and executive positions were held by American white men, thousands workers were recruited from the Caribbean, southern Europe and even Asia. We learn about engineering challenges, backbreaking labor, courage and heroism. But, all was not well. Race, citizenship became tools for discrimination and abuse. People of color and different ethnic origins remained commodities to be used and when used up to be shed or sent home. The blatant racism and discrimination of 19th and 20th Century American society was

magnified in the Canal Zone as the officers of the Isthmian Canal Commission sought to recruit thousands of laborers and to provide them with housing, wages, food, health care, recreation and tried to keep order. Ms Greene illustrates her history with compelling stories and narrative about the lives of the "invisible people" on whose backs and lives the canal was built. Her writing is clear, interesting and not didactic. Many readers of history know about the roles of the French, Theodore Roosevelt, John Wallace, John Stevens, George Washington Goethals and William Gorgas in the extraordinary story of building the canal. Most, however, know little of the physical, social, medical and legal challenges faced by the common men and women, the manual laborers, who poured their bodies, and too often their lives, into one of the world's great feats of engineering and human endurance. This book is a must read for any person wishing to understand the human cost of building the Isthmian canal.

It isn't fair to dismiss this very interesting piece of history in favor of THE PATH BETWEEN THE SEAS, they compliment each other. One is the history of the Panama Canal and the other is the history of the people who built the canal, if you read both you really know about the Panama Canal. I can understand why "Zonians" would not like this book. It explains why they were the way they were and how they got to be that way. It is not a very pretty picture. I have lived in Panama most of my life. I am an American citizen but my life had nothing to do with the Zone. Every time we went from one side of the country to another we had to cross "foreign territory" and needed two licence plates on the car, one from Panama and one from the Zone. We also needed two driver's licences, one from Panama and one from the Zone. Even as American citizens we were excluded from the movie theaters, bowling allies, club houses, swimming pools, schools, hospitals and comisaries. Our exclusion was reenforced by security guards. Zonians always considered Panama a province of the United States and had terrible culture shock when they had to return to the States after retirement because they did not own their houses, Pan Canal did. They then found out that they had to pay for services like water, electriciy and that maids cost alot of money. Their lawns were not automatically taken care of and their trash was not picked up for free. Most of them spent all their lives in Panama (on the Zone) and never bothered to learn Spanish. It wasn't until almost the end that Spanish was taught in Balboa High School.

Julia Greene's book, *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal*, was both an unexpected pleasure to read as well as a tale that deeply altered my understanding of the geopolitical significance of the building of the Panama Canal. As fascinating as Greene's

descriptions of America's aspirations to empire at the opening of the 20th century are, other aspects of her historical explorations will linger far longer in my mind. Though I don't read much of it these days, I grew up a sci-fi buff, and the building of the canal may be the first significant example of deliberate terraforming (using technology to significantly alter a planet to fit human needs) in the history of Homo sapiens. Greene does give a sense of the enormity of the civil and mechanical engineering that splitting the North and South American land masses apart represented, but it is not her focus. What is her focus? Greene's focus is on the human story behind the gargantuan effort that it took to get the job done. The human panorama that she unfolds ranges from high altitude macroviews down to the granular and microscopic. Greene describes the role that the raging debate between socialism and capitalism in late 19th century America played in construction company policy decisions as the early 20th century Canal Project got off the ground. Also at macro level, Greene describes the American eagle spreading its wings over the concept of empire, with Teddy Roosevelt seeing the Canal as key to the vision of spreading American influence. Cruising down to the mid-altitude level, Greene displays the fascinating interplay between racial and nationalistic biases and the policies that governed the workers and residents of the Canal Zone. Workers were split into Gold and Silver designations.

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