



Martin Melosi: Water in North American environmental history

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A book review for this journal does not have to emphasize the historical importance of water. Neither does this reviewer have to be convinced that water has been a major force in many developments and events of the past that historians better reckon with than ignore. And still, while browsing through the 281 pages, reading the 25 chapters and looking at the 36 illustrations in Martin Melosi's magnificent *Water in North American History*, the ubiquity, the significance, and the multi-faceted nature of water's ways are amazing. Water is stored behind gigantic dams, in swimming pools and drinking bottles. It flows through cities, bodies, landscapes and huge infrastructural devices. It can be contaminated, polluted, enriched and purified (again). Water is the source of life, power, fun, and sometimes death. It is endowed with material as well as aesthetic qualities. The water cycle connects (almost) every place of this earth and yet the distribution of water is highly uneven. It spills and leaks into places where it is not supposed to be and is being diverted to destinations it would never have reached on its own. It is difficult to ascertain what the bigger problem is: too much water or not enough of it.

Martin Melosi's book is part of the series "Themes in Environmental History" that mostly aims at undergraduate history and environmental studies students. It tackles the versatility of water in eight sections, each of which contains two to four "water episodes" (2) of approximately 10 pages each, understood by the author as "departure points for discussion and the basis for starting conversations" rather than "comprehensive learning vehicles." (2) This is true insofar as the individual episodes resemble scholarly articles more than textbook chapters (the one exception being the lack of references). However, it is also a bit of an understatement since Melosi's vignettes often highlight key events, developments, technologies and practices in the water history of North America (not so much individuals though). It is particularly the arrangement of and the interaction between the "water episodes" which lends the book an encyclopedic quality. The three articles in the first part of the book that speaks about Indigenous peoples before contact are a case in point. Here, Melosi deals with the Hohokam in the American Southwest, the Aztecs in Central Mexico and the Inuit in Canada's arctic region, and their respective encounters with water. This approach allows him not only to cover, exemplarily, the entire geographic region of North

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America but also to analyze different water regimes, emphasize the fluid and solid qualities of water and discuss concepts like Karl August Wittfogel's "hydraulic society" that describes the relationship between the challenges of constructing large water infrastructure works and the evolution of systems of central planning and control.

Melosi disarms potential criticism (and book reviewers) by anticipating that "some people will question why this topic or that was or was not included" (p.2). However, so broad is the range of topics and actors that the book covers that there is nothing much left to be desired. The reader finds a great variety of water bodies, from rivers such as the Rio Grande and the Mississippi, and human infrastructural artefacts like the Spanish colonial irrigation channels (acequias), the Houston Ship Channel and the Erie Canal, to underground sources like the depleting Ogallala aquifer. Some containers are surprising (at least in environmental terms) but convincing choices. For example, Melosi uses swimming pools to highlight the connections between water, structural racism and segregation in the United States and Canada. In general, the book benefits from the focus on (sometimes literally) concrete places where water and society interact, as for example in the chapter on the construction and extension of Toronto's waterfront (ch.11) to suit the city's increasing commercial and industrial demands. Niagara Falls (ch.12) seems to have followed a quite different trajectory, "a source of memories for those who viewed it, and a romantic subject of literature," as Melosi points out (p.128). At the same time, the famous waterfalls also manifest the harnessing of natural flows and their exploitation for the generation of hydropower.

There is no dearth of concepts, approaches and research fields in the book either. Melosi weaves together the analysis of environmental injustices, more-than-human issues, and envirotechnical systems such as the Philadelphia waterworks (ch.9) with case studies from the history of natural hazards and catastrophes such as the hegemony and failure of the "Levees-Only" policy of the United States Corps of Engineers (ch.14) or the surprising path of Hurricane Hazel in 1954 that reached all the way to Canada (ch.19). Melosi follows largely chronological lines and traditional turning points in (North) American history such as colonization, western expansion and the industrial revolution. However, while the book does give credit to the entire time span from pre-contact Indigenous history to the present, it clearly emphasizes, as does environmental history in general, the importance of environmental transformations in the industrial era. Already in chapter 6 (out of 25), Melosi leaves the preindustrial world behind and ushers in a period characterized by the massive use of fossil fuels, widespread extractivist practices, mass production and consumption and rapid urbanization—fittingly with a chapter on the transition from waterwheels to steam engines as the dominant energy-producing device. The environmental consequences of industrialization and urbanization were tremendous, of course. In fact, environmental history is so full of stories about pollution, the "sacrifice" of rivers and landscapes and the unsustainable use of resources that critics complained about the prevalence of a "declensionist narrative". Looking at Melosi's selection of case studies, there doesn't seem to be much room for more hopeful or upbeat stories.

The continental approach to water history Melosi has chosen is helpful in overcoming the limits and pitfalls of national units of analysis. Nature and nation, as many scholars have shown, often don't go well together. Yet while this approach certainly broadens and deepens our understanding of international and transnational entanglements and opens up new possibilities for analyses, it also obscures even larger connections like the often disastrous environmental impact of American companies in many parts of the world or intergovernmental cooperation to tackle global environmental problems. From a more pragmatic perspective, however, the continental framing of this book has contributed to a

more geographically, culturally, and environmentally diverse understanding of the history of water in North America and has made it an incredibly rich resource not only for those studying and teaching North American environmental history, but also for everyone interested in the many manifestations of water in the past. “Water is so integral to everything we do,” writes Melosi at the end of his introduction, “that we should not be amazed that our history is so intertwined with it.” (p.9).

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