

Michèle Dagenais. *Montreal, City of Water: An Environmental History*. xx + 231 pp., plus figs., bibl., index. Translated by Peter Feldstein. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017. \$29.95 (paperback). ISBN 9780774836234

Annmarie Adams

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Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

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Montreal, City of Water is a welcome translation by Peter Feldstein of Michèle Dagenais' earlier book *Montréal et l'eau* (Boréal, 2011). An innovative take on Montreal's complex history, the book is an environmental, rather than strictly urban history of Canada's second-largest city. Written for historians interested in a wide range of topics—Quebec, urbanism, architecture, public health, and municipal politics— *Montreal, City of Water* explores water as both a physical and social/cultural attribute. While engineers, doctors, and other experts, for example, struggled to assess and manage the city's water supply, H₂O simultaneously shaped the city's image and social relations. Notably, Dagenais sees the relation of city and water as mutually dynamic, avoiding any suggestion that water determined the morphology of Montreal: "Montreal's history is discussed with reference to water as a constitutive dimension of its development" (4).

Dagenais' argument for the significant role of water in the evolution of Montreal unfolds chronologically in a clear, almost linear structure. The book begins with a chapter reviewing the main publications on Montreal in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, outlining the ways water has been depicted. Especially important in these

early publications is an emphasis on Montreal's unique location, in the centre of the Hochelaga archipelago at the meeting of the St. Lawrence and Ottawa Rivers. In the subsequent six chapters, Dagenais presents a lineup of significant events and topics that shaped the island-city's water management into distinctive eras: the demolition of the city's walls in the early nineteenth century, the design of the harbor, the rise of the science of sanitation and water treatment, ecological concerns, the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway, and even last year's 375th anniversary of the city. An implicit argument of the book is that water has been a constant, rather than episodic concern to Montrealers for more than 200 years.

The book clearly satisfies the author's stated intention, articulated in the Introduction, "to reconstruct the ways in which water and its uses have intertwined with the City of Montreal throughout its history" and "to attempt a reconstruction of the dynamics governing the conception, definition, and lived experience of the collective relationship with water" (5). Additionally, the book is not a heroic tale of individuals who tamed the river and the city; this is truly a history of the shared/public ways Montreal water has been engineered, controlled, cleaned, moved, harnessed, exploited, enjoyed, and imagined. In the book's conclusion, Dagenais refers to this as "the process of co-construction of the city," a fascinating concept for architectural historians like me.

The strength of *Montreal, City of Water*

is that it links the history of a major city with larger scales of nature, weather, geography, and geology, as well as its comprehensive use of textual sources, from urban planning regulations to travel documents. Dagenais' use of visual sources is less convincing. While her analysis of maps is compelling, they are poorly reproduced and hard to read (and sideways). Photographs are included without critical commentary, as if they are objective evidence of real situations. Additionally, some visual material is incorrectly captioned (for example, in Figure 11, the photographer is Alexander Henderson, rather than Anderson).

Somewhat surprising to me as a historian of architecture is the absence of attention paid to Expo 67, a moment which focused the world's attention on two islands in the St. Lawrence River, including Île Notre-Dame, constructed from scratch in an enormous feat of engineering linking city and river. Historians of science and technology will likely be drawn to Chapter 5, which explores the Rivière des Prairies as the site of a massive hydro-electric dam, which cut the river in two and thus prevented shipping. In general, however, they may be somewhat

disappointed in Dagenais' portrayal of the history of the river as a series of technical "fixes" to water-based problems (172).

These are minor shortcomings. *Montreal, City of Water* is full of insights. One is that the image of the city morphed from being an island, to being a riverfront city (as the significance of Rivière des Prairies or "Back River" disappeared). Additionally, Dagenais shows how Montrealers went from seeing the St Lawrence as a natural amenity to a tool of urban infrastructure (91). Indeed, a major theme in the book is the tensions arising from our use of the St. Lawrence River as both a source of water and as a site to discharge wastewater. An unforgettable moment in the book is when Dagenais illustrates how identity politics, particularly related to sociolinguistic divides, were literally "channeled ... through the material fact of the water supply systems" (91). For this Montrealer, reading Dagenais' book means I will go from seeing Montreal as a place where water is invisible, to seeing it everywhere.

Annmarie Adams
McGill University