

Jean L. Manore, *Cross-Currents: Hydroelectricity and the Engineering of Northern Ontario*, (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1999) 224 pp.

Stephen Bocking

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Book Reviews / Comptes rendus des livres

Jean L. Manore, *Cross-Currents: Hydroelectricity and the Engineering of Northern Ontario*, (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1999) 224 pp.

Canadians have often looked at rivers, and seen only kilowatts. The outcome has been predictable: masses of concrete, directing water into turbines, converting ecosystems to energy, epitomizing the transformation of landscapes through technology. But those who engineer rivers have also encountered much opposition: from environmentalists; and from communities that live near rivers and lakes, that depend on them for their livelihood, and that now seek to defend both themselves and their landscapes. Controversies today in China, India, and elsewhere; and recent events in Canada — regarding the Great Whale Project in Quebec, and the Kemano project on the Nechako River in British Columbia — demonstrate how dams bring together overlapping issues of political and bureaucratic power, economic change, and the relations between communities and environments. For readers of *Scientia Canadensis*, dams are of special interest because they exemplify the political, economic and environmental implications of the application of scientific and engineering expertise to the reshaping of landscapes.

These implications are also at the centre of Jean Manore's interesting exploration of the history of hydroelectric development in northeastern Ontario. Rivers, she explains, have been central to the region's history. After the hydropower potential of the Mattagami and Abitibi Rivers was surveyed shortly after 1900, the path to their development was opened through treaty negotiations that removed Aboriginal rights to the rivers. At the same time, technical innovations to deal with conditions such as log drives, ice accumulation, and seasonal changes in river flows made dams feasible in this northern environment. At first, development was the work of individual entrepreneurs and resource companies. Soon, large private companies, particularly the Nesbitt Thomson Corporation, entered the region, building a power system to meet the demands of local

mines and pulp and paper mills. After 1933, entry of the publically-owned Hydro Electric Power Commission of Ontario into the region led eventually to the exclusion of private developers, and, after World War II, to the integration of the region into the province-wide power system, as local demand for power began to exceed the supply available from within the region.

Recent works on hydroelectric development in Canada, such as James Waldram's *As Long as the Rivers Run* (1988), and Boyce Richardson's *Strangers Devour the Land* (1976, 1991) have tended to describe the history of this development as a story of the conquering of a landscape and its people by a developing industrial economy. Manore constructs an alternative account. While she acknowledges the significance of private and public investment, industry's demand for power, technological innovations, and policies that denied recognition of Aboriginal uses of the rivers; and while she describes the enormous impact of dams on the regional environment and the livelihoods of Aboriginal communities, Manore does not portray the north as merely a passive victim of southern imperatives. The Cree and Anishnabe continued to live according to their traditional ways, and sought compensation from officials for the loss of their lands as a result of flooding. While these concerns were long viewed as insignificant compared to the commercial wealth to be gained from trees, rocks and rivers, by 1990 the First Nations were, Manore argues, able to prevent further development of the Mattagami and Abitibi Rivers (although, as she could also have mentioned, cancellation of projects on these rivers in the 1990s may have had as much to do with diminished demand for power in Ontario).

The rivers themselves also played a continuing role in this history. Their course through the landscape, and the unpredictability of their flows, shaped the options available to those seeking to dam them, or, later, to integrate the dams into the provincial power system. As Manore concludes, in the history of the development of the region, neither its inhabitants, nor the landscape, have been merely passive recipients of pressures from outside. Instead, all actors within the region — businesspeople, politicians, engineers, Aboriginal peoples, and, not least, the rivers themselves — experienced conflict and also (the Aboriginals and the environment aside) cooperated with each other, intertwining and interacting, to use Manore's metaphor, like the cross-currents of a river.

Manore's account is both highly readable and historiographically sophisticated. Its significance transcends that of the region on

which she focuses. It will prove of value to anyone interested in environmental history, or in the economic and political dimensions of the history of technology in Canada.

Stephen Bocking, Trent University