

The Golden Dream: A History of the St. Lawrence Seaway by Ronald Stagg

Ron N. Buliung

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*The Golden Dream:
A History of the St. Lawrence Seaway*

by Ronald Stagg

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010. 295 pages. \$35.00 hardcover.
ISBN 978-1-55002-887-4. www.dundurn.com

*(Note: This review was commissioned and edited by the journal's
past Book Review Editor, Thomas McIlwraith.)*

In the presence of a mixture of professional and personal interest, several questions emerged as I began to read *The Golden Dream*. As a lay reader, I was interested in understanding the connections between Ronald Stagg's subject and my family lineage, one that includes direct connections to Great Lakes shipping and to the Welland Canal. As a transport geographer, I recognized an opportunity to expand my knowledge of the historical geography of transport systems in the Canadian-American borderlands. Between 1929 and 1936 my grandfather worked as an oiler on various lakers, starting at the age of 19. How modern was his experience? How did the Welland Canal influence the locating of the steel and textile industries that employed members of my extended family? And what stories lay hidden beneath the waters of that route, a ruinous obsession for some and a political and engineering triumph for others?

Stagg details the development of one of the greatest joint Canadian-American engineering achievements with both the lay reader and scholar in mind. *The Golden Dream* is a study of navigation through the St. Lawrence River and Welland Canal sections of the Great Lakes—the official 'St. Lawrence Seaway' of 1959—and much more, covering some four centuries and reaching as far west as Lake Superior. Stagg argues that navigating the St. Lawrence-

Great Lakes system “began as a matter of necessity, developed into an international and interregional rivalry, and ended in international co-operation” (p. 17). In the first of five richly detailed chapters we read of Dollier de Casson, an early visionary, who tried without success to have a canal dug at the Lachine rapids near Montreal about 1700; it would have allowed canoes to bypass rapids and also have been a source of power for mills. Nineteenth-century innovators such as William Hamilton Merritt are celebrated for having built the earliest generation of canals, before 1848. Expansion and rebuilding in ‘the age of engineers’ carries the story through to 1932 (although the pre-1848 builders might feel slighted by not being called engineers too). Three further chapters focus on the modern Seaway: negotiations for building it, the actual construction through the 1950s, with the official opening by Queen Elizabeth II and US President Dwight Eisenhower in 1959, and its subsequent operation through to the present.

Stagg weaves a series of connected threads involving at least four countries, aboriginal populations on both sides of the modern international border, and a diverse array of political characters, private citizens, and, later, environmentalists. Several themes stand out: the challenge of landforms, power generation as a motive for building canals, and defense through periods of tension

between Great Britain and the United States. Rapid technological change is exemplified by vessel capacity growing faster than canal capacity. Much of Chapter 2, ‘The Age of Engineers,’ focuses on the relationship between government and the development of transport systems. Stagg concludes that an 1871 royal commission study of commodity flow marks the modern age of canal improvement. And so powerful was the fear of intermodal competition that in the 1930s railway management and labour joined forces to oppose a Canada-US treaty favouring collaborative Great Lakes development. It was a fleeting moment, which Stagg suggests offered “the best chance in over 30 years to build the seaway” (p. 137), and was missed.

Stagg includes historical maps of the canal systems, and a myriad of photographs showing personnel and equipment. *The Golden Dream* would have benefited from the inclusion of a list of illustrations, and an historical atlas recording dates of construction and enlargement of the canals and related structures would have been a helpful companion to the narrative. I was somewhat troubled by the printing of map plates across the inner joint of the book, rendering ineffective the communication of part of the mapped content.

Overall, *The Golden Dream* is an enjoyable work. I learned that my grandfather would have been working on relatively small, steam-driven ships travelling through

canals that seemed, from the viewpoint of politicians and operators, to be in a perpetual state of flux. Capital support for maintenance and upgrading was always an issue, challenging the ability of canal owners and ship owners, and their operators, to cope effectively with changes in fleet size and capacity. Many of the themes addressed in *The Golden Dream* remain true today. Politics and transport continue to be uncomfortable bedfellows and, in the current global era of container ships carrying up to 12,000 boxes (‘TEUs’ in the jargon), it is clear that canal systems may continue to suffer built-in obsolescence. In the

end, the reader is left to wonder how much the tireless efforts of unassailable lobbyists—people like Charles P. Craig, who would die relatively young and penniless due in part to his seaway obsession—contributed to political and engineering successes arguably unmatched on the economic front. As Stagg notes in the final chapter, Seaway traffic has been in decline for years. More work is needed to determine the most economically viable relationship for the St. Lawrence Seaway in an increasingly global economy. As to the hidden stories, there are simply too many to tell, and so I invite readers to spend time with *The Golden Dream*.

Ron N. Buliung,
University of Toronto
Mississauga

