

Reviews of Books

Contested Waters: An Environmental History of the Colorado River. By April R. Summitt. (Boulder, Colo., University Press of Colorado, 2013. xvi + 286 pp. \$34.95 cloth)

Wide Rivers Crossed: The South Platte and Illinois of the American Prairie. By Ellen Wohl. (Boulder, Colo., University Press of Colorado, 2013. v + 344 pp. \$55 cloth)

A Story of Six Rivers: History, Culture and Ecology. By Peter Coates. (Chicago, Ill., University of Chicago Press, 2013. 350 pp. \$40 cloth)

Three authors and nine rivers made my head swim a bit. As I read these works, I could not shake a song playing in my mind at the same time: “Take me to the River,” an old Al Green number reworked by David Byrne and Talking Heads. Of course, this song is about more than a river, but the lyrics—“take me to the river, drop me in the water”—reminded me of what these three authors did to me as I read their works. April Summitt’s *Contested Waters* offers a two-pronged analysis of the Colorado River. Ellen Wohl’s *Wide Rivers Crossed* describes streams in two different grasslands settings: the short-grass High Plains, and the tall-grass prairies of Illinois. Peter Coates’s *A Story of Six Rivers* takes us on almost wanderlust tours of Europe and North America. Without a doubt, readers of these volumes will acquire a deeper understanding of how humans and rivers merge and reshape each other.

Summitt is a historian at Arizona State University, and *Contested Waters* is a sharp departure from her previous books on either Indian peoples or John F. Kennedy. The first half of her new book covers the history of the Colorado River while the second examines the contemporary scene. She breaks sharply with Donald Worster’s contention that water development in the American West created a “hydraulic empire.” In her words, “while prior appropriation law drove the over-allocation of the Colorado River, power relationships shifted over time from one group to another and have democratized what was once a river of empire” (p. xii). She contends that three issues need deeper analysis: the role of western water law in over-allocation, the complexity of power relationships surrounding the

use of the Colorado River, and the ways in which “sustainable” use has been defined and used throughout the valley.

The first half of Summitt’s book is an oft-told story of the Colorado River. If you have read Jack August Jr., Norris Hundley Jr., Helen Ingram, William Kahrl, Donald Pisani, Marc Reisner, Joseph Stevens, Daniel Tyler, or Donald Worster, to name just a few historians, then you will find much familiar here. Summitt summarizes the history of the Imperial Valley, the Colorado River Compact of 1922, the building of Hoover Dam, and the litigation among Indian nations, California, Arizona, the United States, and Mexico. Compounding the difficulties of water allocation among the users is the fact that the Colorado River Compact grossly overestimated the annual flows of the river, which means not everyone gets the water they want. Other issues include declining flow, endangered species such as the humpback chub, and efforts to reduce pollution buildup. As a result, there is a testy relationship among various water users and between users and those whose governmental roles are to clean up the river. Summitt understates the case when she suggests that “any real success . . . will require both widespread cooperation and an unflagging commitment to find solutions” (p. 104).

The second half of *Contested Waters* analyzes pressing current problems involving the Colorado River, beginning with the phenomenal growth of eight major metropolitan areas and their reliance on the river’s water for their very economic survival. Summitt follows with an analysis of the claims of Indian nations and of Mexico to the flows of the Colorado. The last chapter looks closely at the redistribution of water rights formerly attached to agriculture to cities through marketing rather than litigation.

Several conclusions emerge from Summitt’s study. To begin with, the Colorado River is first in the nation in terms of litigation and regulation. Resolving quantity issues will require redistribution and conservation. Second, pollution, species extinction, and climate change have forced people to cooperate if they want to retain their growing cities and sustain the agriculture along the river’s course. In a sense, Summitt argues that the river has the real power over humans and is guiding their need to cooperate in order to survive.

Ellen Wohl, an exceptionally accomplished geoscientist at Colorado State University, takes a less optimistic view of human interactions with rivers. Even though by training she is not an environmental historian, *Wide Rivers Crossed* blends natural resource science with elements of environmental history. Wohl takes readers on a trip down the South Platte and the Illinois. Her opening paragraph addresses how she views people and the land, including the

rivers that flow over it: “Only people of European descent squat heavily on this landscape, attempting to alter it to meet our expectations of trees, crops, and three-season greenery within cities, not to mention recreational lakes” (p. 1). Wohl, not surprisingly, pays great attention to the ecology and geography of both of these rivers. She begins her narrative of the South Platte with a discussion of snow pack in the Rockies and the climatological factors that affect it. In the Illinois tall-grass prairies she leads the reader to small streams surrounded by “velvet herbage” that once provided the resources for an “almost inconceivable abundance of wildlife” (p. 150). These streams merge to form the De Plaines and Kankakee Rivers, and their confluence forms the Illinois River.

What follows next is a bleak depiction of the fate of the Platte and the Illinois. On the Great Plains, over which the South Platte flows, Wohl tells us that “much of the landscape is overgrazed,” many animals have disappeared, and water has become ever scarcer over the last two hundred years. An equally despondent view emerges of the tall-grass prairie regions to the east of the Mississippi. Water shortages are not the issue here; indeed flood control and navigation enhancements are central. The destruction of aquatic wildlife and the introduction of carp show the deleterious results of economic rather than ecological river management. The replacement of wild grasslands with domesticated crop production and its detrimental effects on stream flow and quality also take on an important role in explaining the degradation of the Illinois River.

Wohl makes a strong case that humans are entering into a new geological epoch, the *Anthropocene*. By this term she means a period of time when the actions of humans have become the major transforming power shaping the ecosystems of the planet. Her narratives show how, through human effort, the Platte and Illinois were altered both to render both positive and negative results for the lives of people. In the end, she asserts that this transformation caused an unimaginable loss of environmental wealth, begging the question of whether or not humans have lost more ecologically (which also translates into economic losses) than they gained. In short, Wohl creates a declensionist narrative with a plea for policies leading to healthier river ecosystems and humans.

Peter Coates, an esteemed environmental historian, holds a position as the professor of American and environmental history at Bristol University in the United Kingdom. His work sharply departs from the other two books. As an environmental history, one would think that it would reflect the approach found in Summitt’s work. Yet rather than being a linear history of six rivers, Coates takes the reader on a *tour*; he

seeks the nature of the rivers through stories about them. It often feels as though Coates has written scripts for tour guides, ones hired to give visitors a sense of the nature of the rivers through the stories that they carry in their flows. He disagrees with Ellen Wohl's contention that many rivers have become "virtual" rivers—as she puts it, ones "that look natural (pristine even) but . . . have been heavily modified and which have been stripped of most of their equally diverse ecosystem functions" (p. 21). Rather, Coates embraces a view avowed by Richard White that a river should be understood as an "organic machine," one that retains its "unmade" attributes (p. 22). Coates, in short, looks to find embedded in his rivers their own agency distinct from whatever humans do to harness their flows.

He intends to drop the reader into the water as opposed to observing the rivers. For example, in the introduction, he includes three photographs by Andreas Müller-Pohle. These photographs were taken partially underwater with the top half showing the surface of the river. Coates uses narrative to accentuate the "real character and individuality" of his six rivers while he dips deep into the "liquidity of rivers . . . to convey a strong sense of fluvial place" (p. 10). His focus, as he frames it, is "on the river rather than the riverscape as a cultural construction" (p. 12).

The six rivers that Coates travels spans Europe and North America: the Danube, Spree, and Po on the European continent, the Mersey in England, and the Yukon and Los Angeles in the United States. He begins with how Europeans have made the Danube a river of international contention even as it retains its "primordial spirit." Despite nationalistic disputes simmering over the Danube's origin, mountain runoffs flow heedlessly together to form the river. The way in which Coates narrates the discrete aspects of the Danube underscores why he employs "stories" rather than history. He picks stories to highlight a theme, for example, a focus on the effort in the 1800s to tame the rapids in the Iron Gate, or later backing up in time in the same chapter with a portrayal of a bridging effort by the ancient Romans. The description of the "Disciplined Danube," however, is not a linear chronicle of human-rapid interactions. Rather, Coates presents the two stories to highlight the theme of a "disciplined river," the waters of which continue to flow as they always have: i.e., toward the sea.

One other river nicely illustrates Coates's approach. From all outward appearances, the Los Angeles River hardly qualifies as a river in any stretch of the imagination. A mere fifty-one miles long, most of its length is lined by concrete. The river received this ignoble treatment as a result of people protecting what they had built near it. Dana Webster Barlett, a Progressive Era city beautiful

proponent, framed the desire to clean the river and transform it into a “line of beauty.” By the end of the 1950s, all but the upper seventeen miles of the river were a straightened, concreted river bed that served as a model of urban flood control. However, by the end of the 1990s, the river returned as a flood threat with its rapid runoffs overflowing its hardened channel as a result of the impermeable urban hardscape built out miles surrounding it.

Now city authorities and conservationists alike are working toward “undoing some of the re-engineering works of the past 75 years” (p. 250). The goal, as Coates explains it, “is nothing less than the river’s restoration to its ancient role as the city’s heart and soul” (p. 251). Coates believes that this is possible because even in its concrete entombment, the essence of a living river still flows.

Given the sophistication and subtlety of Coates’s work, it might prove a difficult read for many audiences. A general reading public or graduate students just getting started might find his message difficult to grasp on first blush. And sometimes I was a bit puzzled by why some prominent works were left out of his research. For example, Jared Orsi’s study of the Los Angeles River is not consulted. Nonetheless, Coates’s research and first-hand experiences with these rivers gives his work a force not often encountered in environmental histories.

Coates, Summitt, and Wohl demonstrate the varied ways we can depict rivers. For anyone who has canoed, kayaked, swam, or waded in a river, these books will evoke both an intellectual and visceral response. For those whose experiences are more often confined to riverbanks, these authors will wet readers’ appetites for a deeper understanding of what flows by them. Regardless where one’s knowledge of rivers begins, these authors will take you to the river and drop you in the water.

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Bonanzas & Borrascas: Gold Lust and Silver Sharks, 1848–1884. By Richard E. Lingenfelter. (Norman, Okla., Arthur H. Clark Company, 2012. 461 pp. \$40 cloth)

Bonanzas & Borrascas: Copper Kings and Stock Frenzies, 1885–1918. By Richard E. Lingenfelter. (Norman, Okla., Arthur H. Clark Company, 2012. 586 pp. \$40 cloth)

The minerals industry of the U.S. West—or that of the nation as a whole—has received comparatively limited attention from