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Readings in Water History

San Diego, CA: Cognella, 2021

ISBN 978-1-5165-4399-1 (PB) \$124.95. 328pp.

Water history is a new and exciting field of inquiry of environmental history. It presents opportunities to study the relations between water and people linked to specific places, as well as raising useful questions about contemporary issues. *Readings in Water History* provides a helpful collection of readings in global water history from ancient to modern times. Nicholas B. Breyfogle and Mark Sokolsky have gathered together fourteen different articles and book chapters by several authors, organising them in five thematic sections and prefacing each section with an introduction and discussion questions. The aim of the book is to introduce readers to some of the essential topics in water history. Moreover, it seeks to offer ‘a survival guide for the future’ (p. V), showing what has succeeded and failed in the relationship between water and human societies in the past.

The first thematic section focuses on the ancient civilisations of Mesopotamia, Egypt and China, their close relationship to water and their efforts to control flooding and manage rivers for agricultural wealth. Water management in these regions exercised a profound influence on political life and human cultures – it has also created deep ecological changes with far-reaching implications. In his chapter, Edmund Burke III deals with a comparative history of the Fertile Crescent along environmental lines in a very long term (1500BC–2000AD) and highlights the ecological change over time, stressing that the consequences of human action and naturally-occurring events were not irreversible nor inevitable. River waters could be dangerous, but they were central for these ancient civilisations. For example, Jason Thompson shows how the relatively predictable Nile floods created an unusual agricultural cycle in Egypt (‘the gift of the Nile’, as Herodotus puts it), providing fertile soils and hydration to an arid region. Moreover, Philip Ball describes the management of water by the Chinese autocratic state, underlining the centrality of hydraulic engineering and its crucial role for flood prevention, irrigation and transport.

The management and manipulation of rivers have had a tremendous impact on the modern era. The second section explores the transformative structures and technologies and their relationship with politics. River management strategies produced many benefits, but also created ecological and social complications. As Mark Cioc explains in his study of the Rhine River (one of the great commercial waterways), the current biologically degraded situation is the direct consequence of the past political, economic and hydraulic ideologies and practices. Christopher J. Manganiello examines the role of water manipulation and energy generation as critical components of Southern modernisation after the Civil War, highlighting the deep connections between water and

power. On the other hand, Rohan D'Souza analyses the modern large dam in India, a project announced as a neutral technological artefact. He stresses that the water management was controlled by centralised bureaucracies and capitalists, which forcibly evacuated villages and uprooted indigenous traditions.

The book's third section focuses on drinking water and the difficulties faced by densely populated cities to ensure adequate clean water. This issue has impacted on urban layout and architecture, defined by water and sanitation systems. A major critical problem that emerges from these readings is the tension between water as a public good and as a private commodity. Leslie Tomory describes the 'new water' industry as it emerged in late sixteenth-century London. In this period, citizens and politicians were willing to foster a new way of organising the provision of water, and the City of London encouraged a for-profit commercial model and a new and larger network infrastructure. Two chapters by Peter Gleick investigate public water in modern times – especially tap water. In the first one, he emphasises how bottled water has grown from a niche mineral-water product to a global commodity, thanks to a war on tap water based on campaigns by the bottled water industry that play on consumer's fears. In the second one, Gleick deals with doubts and fears about the safety of tap water, connected with the history of water-related diseases and pollution.

Since the nineteenth century, water has also become a focus of recreational activities. In the fourth section, leisure history offers insights into historical views and aesthetic values of nature – which have implications for water environment – and into social divisions. John R. Gillis traces the history of the perception of the sea – from the sea as a navigable surface, associated with wilderness, to the sea as a place of recreation, physical and spiritual. This shift also led to environmental modifications, such as the creation of the modern-age beach. Calling attention to the social internal divisions in the United States, Jeff Wiltse illustrates how racial discrimination in the provision of and access to swimming pools in the past is largely responsible for the current Black/White swimming disparity and indirectly responsible for the drowning disparity.

In both connecting and separating, water has functioned as a site of cooperation, negotiation and conflict. The fifth and final section explores the interconnection between water, war and diplomacy. In wartime, water bodies have played a strategic role – in some cases, their destruction power has even been manipulated to achieve tactical objectives. Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley investigates how the Yellow River flood of 1938–1947, caused by China's Nationalist government in order to slow the Japanese Imperial Army's advance, impacted rural communities. Cooperation, diplomacy and water-related issues are at the core of the final chapters. Daniel Macfarlane and Noah D. Hall deal with the transboundary water management in the Great Lakes region, underlining how this site has induced a historic regime of cooperation across

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the border. On the other hand, Mark Dohrmann and Robert Hatem examine the historical relationship between Turkey, Syria and Iraq, stressing that the complications arising from the water-related Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) are not the principal factor governing the relations between these countries.

Overall, the fourteen chapters provide useful insights into a wide range of topics related to water history, while the introductions highlight connected themes and critical questions. This book draws attention to several issues and perspectives that are relevant not only to environmental history but also to present day problems. Nevertheless, since all of the chapters were already published in different books and journals, this volume would have benefited from an overall broad introduction that discusses the different approaches of the readings and their position within the emerging historiography. Moreover, certain omitted topics would have provided a more comprehensive perspective. For example, thermal and spa water would have offered insights into infrastructures, leisure, medical and religious aspects and cultural attitudes toward water in a global context, from ancient to modern times. In the final analysis, *Readings in Water History* provides a valuable reference text to the curious general reader and a good starting point to students, achieving its aim of offering a useful collection of readings for undergraduate environmental history courses.

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