

As Long as the Rivers Run: Hydroelectric Development and Native Communities in Western Canada, by James B. Waldram. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1988.

Although Native Studies began in the late 1970s largely as a focussed area, the field is quickly growing substantively to challenge many notions and assumptions in the wider culture. This book, one in a series addressing related Native themes published by the University of Manitoba, contributes positively to this trend.

This book is about three Native communities which were sacrificed for hydroelectric power. The first, Cumberland House in northeastern Saskatchewan, has only recently received compensation from the Saskatchewan Power Corporation for the detrimental effects of the Squaw Rapids dam constructed in the early 1960s. The second community, Chemawawin, no longer exists as it was flooded by the Grand Rapids Dam constructed upstream from Lake Winnipeg in northern Manitoba in the mid-1960s. In the 1980s the people relocated by this hydroelectric project were still struggling to resolve their grievances. The third community, on South Indian Lake, was also forced to relocate because of the diversion of the Churchill River and the rising of the lake in the mid-1970s.

Though the book is built upon these three important northwestern case studies, it is carefully contextualized in terms of both Canadian energy policy and colonial history. The first chapter discusses the onslaught of hydroelectric projects occurring across Canada at the time. Though less well known on a national front than the dispute over the James Bay hydroelectric project in northern Québec, these western studies show how pervasive has been the hydroelectric impact across the Canadian north. The second chapter provides background about the treaties and scrip so essential to understand what Waldram calls "the alienation of Native lands" in the west. The historical, political and economic questions raised in these two chapters surround the case studies, compelling the reader to see that "Native Studies" is also a mirror by which to study the dominant society.

Throughout the book Waldram attempts to answer his own question: "By what mechanisms have these Native peoples been forced to surrender their lands, their rivers, and their rights?" (p. 171) The main argument developed through the book is that the agreements about hydroelectricity parallel the manoeuvrings and manipulations involved in the treaties. Waldram says that "the hydroelectric era seems to represent both the symbolic termination of these agreements and the re-emergence of the treaty and scrip processes which once again have allowed governments to exploit native resources for the 'common good'."

The exquisite reconstruction of the strategies and conflicts involved in these three megaprojects suggest non-Native southerners, not just Native northerners,

could justifiably be skeptical of traditional party politics. From the stance of the people who inhabit and depend upon the northern ecology, similarities between the provincial and federal governments in power, and their hydroelectric utilities — whatever their party stripes — were overriding. No party — NDP, Conservative or Liberal — comes out of this analysis unscathed. The Saskatchewan NDP under Premier W.S. Lloyd — which was in power when the Squaw Rapids Dam was opened in 1963 — was as mesmerized as any of the other parties by economic growth and the conquest of nature.

The underlying communality of political parties *vis-à-vis* the exploitation of the north is vividly shown by the actions of various Manitoba governments through the fifteen-year struggle over the Churchill diversion and the flooding of South Indian Lake. In the wake of the controversy over the relocation of Native people to Easterville after the Grand Rapids damming of Cedar Lake, which runs into Lake Winnipeg, one might have expected more from the politicians. However, without any environmental or social impact studies, Conservative Premier Duff Roblin indicated approval in 1966 of this diversion plan further to the north. When such studies were conducted by the University of Manitoba, they opposed the hydroelectric scheme and the proposed relocation of the people living on South Indian Lake. The government, however, preferred to follow a consultant's report which, according to Waldram, described the Native people as without any future and "anachronisms in the present age of technology." (This appeal to "technology" to justify a corporate view of northern development is akin to that used in the Cluff Lake Board of Inquiry in Saskatchewan in 1978.)

Northern and southern opposition to the hydroelectric project continued to mount. All but one who spoke at Manitoba Hydro's hearings in Winnipeg in 1969 were against the project. Lawyers for South Indian Lake even challenged the authority of the hearings in court. The NDP opposition spoke against the project, and vehemently attacked Bill 15, which was introduced to give the government authority to grant Hydro its licence without hearings.

The controversy over this hydroelectric project was so intense that the Conservative government finally dissolved the legislature and went to the polls in 1969. Widespread opposition was clearly a major factor in the election as premier of Ed Schreyer. Schreyer was quick to announce his government's plan to cancel the high-level diversion of the Churchill River. However, the NDP government did not scrap "low level diversion" of the river, and in 1972 announced the plan which would still require relocation of the people on South Indian Lake.

Opposition again mounted. Rather than introduce the issue to the legislature, as had the previous government, the NDP amended the Water Power Act so a licence could be issued without hearings or passage by the legislature. Though

an appeal was made by the Native people of South Indian Lake to then Minister of Indian Affairs Jean Chretien, he engaged in semantic legalities which reduced aboriginal rights to protecting reserves. Though most of the Native people to be affected were Status Indians, they had no reserve. This left the Native people to be treated solely as though they were Manitoba citizens.

The NDP was reelected in 1973 and Schreyer aggressively proceeded with the hydroelectric project. Waldram shows how the NDP government was never willing to bargain in good faith over Treaty 5 rights, either with the South Indian Lake people or the Northern Flood Committee that formed across the north. Rather, it continually appealed for its authority and legitimacy to the Federal-Provincial Agreement passed in 1966 by the previous Conservative government. Substantive issues of principle raised while in opposition had turned into formal legalities once in power.

In 1977 a draft Northern Flood Agreement was approved after a federal proposal to mediate. This agreement provided the right to compensation and future consultation about hydroelectric projects. The NDP, however, defeated in the election of that year, was not happy with the plan. Ironically it was Conservative Premier Sterling Lyon who signed a revised version of the agreement.

Revelations that vindicated the opponents of the project continued to come out in the late 1970s. It became clear that all provincial governments had advocated for Hydro — which it turned out did not have the right to flood Indian lands with the 1966 agreement — rather than to work with the federal government to defend aboriginal rights. Compensation proceeded as the carrot to get the project completed. Negotiations were conducted on an individual basis. And the stick was always present. With the lake already rising and destroying trap lines and fishing grounds, and the threat that compensation would terminate in 1982, many signed. By 1985 a deal was struck with the Trappers Association for \$1 million in compensation. Though the South Indian Lake community tried to oppose one of the many requests by Hydro to surpass past water flows, it became known, as Waldram put it, that “the fishermen and trappers signed compensation agreements based on their experiences and losses with one water regime, only to discover that the agreements actually covered an altered water regime.” A further irony: out of politics, Jean Chretien ended up acting for the Northern Flood Committee which believes the Northern Flood Agreement has not been properly implemented.

It is rare for a book based on solid community case studies to also offer theoretical insight. Waldram, however, attempts to postulate some theoretical explanations, though they tend to be about the “mechanisms” forcing the surrender of indigenous lands and not about the underlying reasons why such colonial mechanisms have persisted. Waldram in particular discusses the use of

the appeal to "public interest" or "common good" to justify the construction of these hydroelectric megaprojects to the detriment of northern Native people and the northern environment. At one place in his conclusion, Waldram quotes Mel Watkins, who wrote in 1976 about Manitoba hydroelectric development: "The rhetoric of the developers must be exposed for the propaganda that it is, for it prevents us from seeing the fundamental issues which it manages to obfuscate . . ." The book can be critiqued in its failure to directly explore these more fundamental issues. If there is one systemic weakness about the book it is its tendency to see the destruction of Native communities mainly in political terms, with little attention to the underlying political economy which greatly drives politics. At the same time, in its painstaking documentation, the whole book can be seen as an exposé of the propaganda used to justify hydroelectric development.

One of the fundamental issues requiring further examination has to do with the notion that perpetual economic growth is required to raise the general standard of living. There is growing evidence that this view is neither economically nor ecologically justified. Economic growth has not only tended to further concentrate wealth and power, but it has steadily undermined the planet's ecosystems on which all quality of living depends. Yet all governments and parties involved in these hydroelectric dams and diversion proselytized this view. Waldram notes, for example, that in opening the Squaw Rapids Dam in 1963, NDP Premier Woodrow Lloyd stated that "the use of power is one of the measures of economic growth and of growth in our standard of living."

This book certainly sets the stage for some fundamental reexamination of Canadian politics both in terms of the pressing need to protect aboriginal rights and the related need to redirect government energy and other policies in a way which is truly sustainable.

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