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Carol Sheriff. *The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862.* New York: Hill & Wang, 1996. xvii + 251 pp. $19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-2753-8; $15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8090-1605-1.

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This slender volume of 177 pages of text covers the story of the Erie Canal during the antebellum period in a different manner than have prior works on the subject. Carol Sheriff, an historian at the College of William and Mary, differs in her treatment from standard accounts in that she is concerned primarily with the human dimensions of the development and evolution of this medium of transportation in upstate New York. In the words of Sheriff, her study "uses the Erie Canal region as a microcosm in which to explore the relationships between some of the antebellum era's important transformations: widespread geographic mobility; rapid environmental change; government intervention in economic development; market expansion; the reorganization of work; an d moral reform" (p. 5). These changes are discussed and evaluated in the context of what the middle classes of the 1817-1862 period would consider to be signs of "progress" or "improvement." The transformation of this region as a result of the Erie Canal is organized around six topics, each of which is covered by a chapter. They include the "visions of progress," the "triumph of art over nature," "reducing distance and time," the "politics of land and water," the "politics of business," and the "perils of progress." What does the author include under the forgoing headings?

The first details the visions of leading New Yorkers (most prominently Governor DeWitt Clinton) to get the project underway and thereby "represented a growing commitment in the North to the culture of improvement" (p. 25). These individuals were what Sheriff calls "adherents to the practical republicanism" who believed that "the nation's common good depended on prosperity, individual opportunity and an equal emphasis on rural and urban growth" (p. 24). A project of the size of the Erie Canal would further their visions of progress, according to Sheriff.

The second chapter details problems in the construction process of the Canal, a project of immense size and complexity for that era. According to the author, the Canal was "a tribute to republicanism" and a great "American achievement," especially for the middle classes.

In Chapter Three, the subject of "reducing distance and time" is discussed in terms of the various types of users of Canal services, whether they be tourists, immigrants, business persons, or settlers of the region. The Canal had set forth a commercial revolution, encouraged individuals to travel to new areas of the nation and provided a link to those left behind. The hardships of the Canal traveler are detailed. These often made travel an unpleasant experience. Eventually, these problems encouraged travelers and commerce to seek an alternative–the railroad.

Chapter Four, on the "Politics of Land and Water," is basically a discussion of the state of property rights as found in American society during the period. Professor Sheriff's example of the Erie Canal region offers insight into how ordinary citizens felt about property, particularly as expressed in their contacts with the Canal Board, the state agency set up to handle various matters relating to the Canal. The Board faced issues relating to compensation for land taken for the Canal route (and changes in the route over time), the use of water resources, and the placement of commercial structures near the Canal. At times the average citizen considered only the negative side of having a canal and neglected the benefits which accrued in having an expanded market. According to Sheriff, many citizens felt that the State had come to serve the special interests of the commercial elite.

The subsequent and related chapter, "The Politics of Business," also deals with the commercial side of life as relating to the Canal. Many citizens made their living because of the presence of the Canal which brought about issues and problems to be dealt with by the Canal Board. For example, the State was asked continually to expand the canal system to include connecting canals to the main route; towns had developed along the original route, but some lost out when improvements to the Canal necessitated a shifting of the route to a new location; the level of tolls charged on products and passengers had to be settled upon; and the need to raise enough revenues to pay interest and principal on the Canal debt were topics of concern. Not surprisingly, the business classes claimed to be contributing to the general welfare, whether that was the case or not. In the words of the author, "progress, in their view, did not mean an egalitarian society but rather one in which anyone would have the opportunity to improve in all senses" (p. 137).

The final chapter tells us whether the preceding statement was true. As explained in "Perils of Progress," there were "perils" in having the Canal, and this disturbed the middle classes of the region. Many of the Canal workers were children who were taken advantage of in every possible way. Wages were low and working and living conditions were poor. Some workers were considered to be a threat to civilized society. As correctly pointed out by Professor Sheriff, the expansion of internal improvements was one of the great changes occurring in the development of a more market-based economy. These changes brought about for many in the middle classes a revivalist fervor in the religious sense. They wished "to convert their sinning brothers and sisters" from undesirable behavior. These reformers sought to bring these workers into the mainstream religious community and some workers had "hopes of elevating their status in a fluid class system" (p. 158). Some reformers laid blame for the bad conditions on the business class itself. Thus, some reform groups "reminded the commercial classes that prosperity and progress had their costs," which needed to be paid (p. 170).

By the end of the period (1862, which was the date of the completion of the Erie Canal enlargement project), what Americans had considered to be progress had changed. The Civil War had begun, and the Erie Canal itself had become, in the words of the author, "second nature." I would agree with this assessment.

Overall, the book is well researched and well written with a light-hearted touch. There is little that I can quibble about. I especially enjoyed reading it as an economist. Nowadays, economists leave out many of the topics considered here in researching transportation history. As Peter Temin indicated recently in his presidential address to the Economic History Association, "historians are occupied today with various questions of culture. They are well suited to give us a thick description that can inform economic history. The trick for historians is to tie their investigations of culture into some economic activity" ("Is it Kosher to Talk about Culture?" *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 57, No. 2 [June 1997], p. 282). That has been accomplished here. The result is that this slender volume has provided us with a "thick" description and analysis of the culture in a regional setting which has contributed much to transportation history.

Of special note is the exhaustive, but valuable, section on Notes and Sources located at the end of the text material. Professor Sheriff has located and utilized the major available sources for this research effort. In particular, the newly available Canal Board Papers provide an invaluable source of insights into what New Yorkers of the antebellum years thought about their Canal. In addition, other manuscript collections at seventeen different locations in New York and New England were examined.

In short, I would highly recommend *The Artificial River* to students and scholars alike. Students in American economic history courses should gain by reading this volume; transportation scholars should gain by examining the cultural history of the period as shown in this regional study. Good writing and good research are always appreciated by this economist!

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