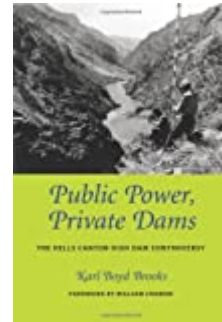


Karl Boyd Brooks. *Public Power, Private Dams: The Hells Canyon High Dam Controversy.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006. xxvii + 290 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-98597-8.



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Published on H-Energy (December, 2006)

The Biggest Dam That Never Was

“This is a hell of a tale about a hell of a place” (p. xv). The tale is the controversy over the world’s largest dam and the place is Hells Canyon on Idaho’s Snake River. It began with an argument over local water rights and hydroelectric power, and grew into a national referendum on New Deal natural resource policy and the expansion of public-power. University of Kansas professor Karl Brooks uses this episode, which he characterizes as a “fierce ideological and economic contest between public and corporate electricity,” to illustrate the end of the “New Deal credo of using cheap hydropower to exploit river basin’s maximum economic potential” (p. 5). Brooks contends that the controversy acts as a kind of guidepost to understanding postwar America and an emerging national environmental consciousness. Part of William Cronon’s Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books series, *Public Power, Private Dams* is a careful investigation of the economic and environmental history of the Pacific Northwest and the energy politics of postwar America.

Brooks’s narrative begins by showing how the geography of the land itself influenced human experience.

Linked by communal waters, the Pacific Northwest’s Snake River is the largest tributary to the voluminous Columbia River. Though in relatively close proximity, the peoples of the Snake River Basin and the Columbia River Basin developed different cultures based on each society’s particular relationship to their river. In the Snake River Basin irrigation farmers siphoned the waters from the river to make fruitful the high desert of southern Idaho. Irrigation agriculture dominated the politics of the area with interest groups dedicated to maintaining their water and energy needs. To the west lay the Columbia River Basin, the largest hydroelectric power-producing region of the country. There, cheap energy derived from the dammed river fueled industrial development, war manufacturing, and a booming but ever energy hungry economy.

The Columbia Basin Power System, a legacy of New Deal economic development administered the area’s public-power. The development planners and power brokers of the Columbia Power System—the Bonneville Power Administration, the Bureau of Reclamation, and the Army Corps of Engineers—looked to expand their

control over the Northwest's public-power by annexation of the Snake River Basin. In replicating their vision of a hydroelectric society in the Snake Basin, the Columbia River Power System saw the Hells Canyon High Dam as a key play in their up-river push. As Brooks ably explains, the dam would act as both an extension of their geographic control and as a cashbox to fund further economic development in the Northwest. Yet, despite the promise of cheap electricity and the boon of additional arable land, Idaho residents feared legal subjugation to their western neighbors and the federal government as well as the loss of their state's water rights at home.

With this complex context in place, Brooks turns to examine the debate's expansion to a national forum. To gain political capital in the Northwest, Harry S. Truman adopted the Hells Canyon project as his own. Piggybacking on the New Deal, Truman's Fair Deal advocated the construction of the dam for electrical power and as a safeguard against the flooding that ravaged Northwestern communities downstream in 1943. Truman portrayed Hells Canyon as a national asset best managed by the federal government. The Columbia Basin, with a long-standing tradition of local control, chafed at the President's concept of nationalized public power and its tenant requirements of bureaucratic reorganization and curtailment of local power. Administrators of the Columbia Basin Power System openly clashed with the Truman Administration on the floor of the Congress and in newspapers across America.

The spotlight shifted when the native corporate energy provider, Idaho Power Company, made its own proposal to the Federal Power Commission of two to three smaller, in-river hydroelectric dams. With Idaho Power's development plan, the dams would produce only a fraction of the electrical power but more than enough for local needs and would preserve the autonomy of the Snake River Basin and Idaho. Conversely, proponents of the Columbia Power System's plans for the Snake River Basin envisioned a more economically powerful and socially egalitarian Northwest suckled on the energy derived from its collective rivers, their greatest natural resource. Instead of a clear cost-benefit decision between the construction of a big dam versus small dams, larger and more compelling questions had immersed into a broader debate. "Where should the power to control nature reside and how should that power be used" (p. 118)? These questions galvanized both the supporters and opponents of the furtherance of New Deal natural resource policy and fueled the postwar public-power debate. In the face of federal High Dam advocates, Idaho Power

artfully aligned political support and exploited positive public sentiment for locally controlled private enterprise. The confrontation culminated when Idaho Power won the right to build their smaller dam system, a plan later ratified by the U.S. Supreme Court. The legal victory supported by the public's outcry against national control of the state resources amounted to a national referendum against New Deal environmental policy, effectively "unplugging" the New Deal from American energy policy-making.

In an effective companion to the political narrative, Brooks also investigates the environmental impact of Northwestern dams on salmon and other migratory fish. He demonstrates "the New Deal in the Columbia Basin conditioned federal hydroelectric planners to manage fish as portable, temporary obstructions" (p. 81). Clearly, dams eliminated the migratory salmon from their natural watersheds. While some attempts were made to relocate fish to rivers not employed for hydroelectric power or to construct a fish ladders to by-pass the dams, frequently these measures were poorly executed (if at all), resulting in a disastrous decrease in the salmon population in the Pacific Northwest. New Deal philosophy dictated a reactionary economic response to the long-term environmental problem: fund fish conservation programs elsewhere in the state with money made from dammed rivers emptied of their salmon population. In examining the environmental repercussions of New Deal economic policy, Brooks uncovers a kind of catch-22 relationship between politics and nature. This critical approach fills a gap between the political perspective of Donald Worster's *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (1985) and the environmental perspective of Richard White's *The Organic Machine* (1995).

Perhaps the most intriguing point is how unknown the Hells Canyon story remains. Occurring at nearly the same time, and with many of the same players, the Echo Park Dam controversy completely overshadows the Hells Canyon project. Environmental historians agree the heated battle over the proposed construction of Echo Park in Colorado's Dinosaur National Monument Park is a precursor to the modern environmental movement. The better-known showdown, involving David Brower of the Sierra Club, amounted to a turning point in American environmental history. Yet as Brooks makes clear, Hells Canyon was equally if not more significant in the development of a national environmental consciousness. Transcending that familiar debate over the preservation of the "wildness" of nature, Brooks's examination of this

remote Idaho location provides new insight into the origins of the modern environmental movement.

Brooks, a former attorney and Idaho state senator, utilizes an impressive array of sources including government documents, legal briefs, and ecological reports. He deftly unravels the conflict, tracing the acrimony between multiple government agencies and corporate interest groups that sought to gain a controlling position. His task is a large one. A numbing litany of agency documents and corporate memos threaten to obscure the relevant details of the story. Brooks, however, succeeds in employing his considerable political and legal acumen to negotiate effectively all elements of the argument while keeping the root dilemma of nationalized public power

firmly in the foreground. Another strength of Brooks's text lies in his ability to breathe life into the many large organizations involved in the debate over Hells Canyon during the 1950s. He deciphers the complex meanings and subtle mechanics of intra-agency rivalries and the effects of bureaucratic intrigue upon our political and business processes. Indeed, *Public Power, Private Dams* sits at an intersection of the histories of energy, politics and the environment, while illuminating a critical episode in America's postwar era. Simultaneously, understanding the Hells Canyon controversy and why the dam was never constructed, informs a discussion on America's current and future energy sector and its potential impacts on human beings and our environment.

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Citation: Gillian Little. Review of Brooks, Karl Boyd, *Public Power, Private Dams: The Hells Canyon High Dam Controversy*. H-Energy, H-Net Reviews. December, 2006.

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