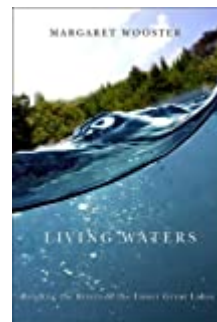


Margaret Wooster. *Living Waters: Reading the Rivers of the Lower Great Lakes.* Albany: Excelsior Editions/State University of New York Press, 2009. xii + 199 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-7703-8; \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7914-7704-5.



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Bringing Water to Life

As Matthew Evenden points out in a recent H-Net review,[1] the river basin or watershed is one of the favored geographical units for investigation by environmental historians and historical geographers. Given the hydrological integrity of river basins/watersheds, many environmental thinkers and activists also consider them as appropriate units for framing environmental issues and policies. In *Living Waters: Reading the Rivers of the Lower Great Lakes*, Margaret Wooster combines an interest in history with a lifelong commitment to environmental protection to produce an engrossing, and edifying, collection of river (hi)stories.

Wooster has devoted much of her working life to writing, organizing, and acting to protect the Great Lakes and the tributary watersheds of Lake Ontario, particularly those in northwestern New York state. In *Living Waters*, she avowedly "shifts focus" from water policy and environmental advocacy "to the experiences that made me care in the first place" (p. ix). The geographical range of the watersheds covered in her book reflects Wooster's personal experience growing up, living, and

working in upper New York state. There are separate chapters for every major basin from, and including, the Niagara to the St. Lawrence Rivers on the U.S. side of the border. Beyond this range, a chapter on the St. Lawrence ventures north of the international boundary to explore Québec's north shore, and there is a chapter on the Zoar Valley, whose river empties into the eastern end of Lake Erie above the Niagara River.

Despite her intention to shift attention from environmental advocacy, the book is infused with Wooster's environmental ethics and is full of opinions and suggestions for protecting the lakes, rivers, aquifers, and wetlands of the basins she describes. The opening chapter sets the tone, discussing problems of deteriorating water quality and declining aquatic ecosystem health on a global scale. Here, Wooster outlines a "water ethic" akin to Wisconsin conservationist Aldo Leopold's famous "land ethic." This water ethic, we learn, directs her research towards certain questions that the book is meant to address: "How did this river (lake, aquifer) work before it became a drain (industrial sewer, canal, power reservoir)? What life did

it support? How did precolonial residents live here and what can we learn from their knowledge and stories of this region?â (p. 11). The concluding chapter revisits the Leopoldian ethic and sets out specific principles and policy suggestions for protecting the regionâs waters.

Despite its frequently moralistic tone, this is a fun book to read. Part of the reason for its liveliness is in the mixed methods Wooster applies to âreadingâ these rivers and researching their stories. We follow the author as she and friends paddle a canoe around the mouth of the Buffalo River, drive along the north shore of the St. Lawrence River in Quebec, trace the course of a buried urban creek on foot, and hike the Adirondacks. These peregrinations are combined with secondary and archival research, personal memories, interviews, and an appreciation of aquatic science, to produce entertaining accounts that succeed in bringing these waters to literary life.

Figuring prominently in these accounts are the aboriginal inhabitants of the region—the people of the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois, Confederacy and their descendants. If a single theme emerges, it is the shift from aboriginal to European-industrial culture and the (invariably negative) impacts of modernity on the health of the waters, the flora, and the fauna of these basins. The declension narrative is relieved occasionally by evidence of recent improvements in environmental appreciation and quality, and well-reasoned anticipation of better things to come.

The book will be appreciated by a wide audience of readers interested in this region of the Great Lakes and

will be admired by many who seek the protection of these waterways as healthy ecosystems. *Living Waters* will perhaps be less satisfactory to those environmental historians, cultural geographers, and others for whom the naturalness of nature is less easily taken for granted. Much of the narrative is underlaid by a desire which, for example, seeks âto recover what is Niagara: the river in all its particularityâ (p. 31), if only the real Niagara could somehow be identified and realized as a historical fact. By cleaving to a traditional, dichotomized view of nature and human society, Wooster ignores an entire class of living waters produced through human agency. The Erie Canal, for example, which runs through almost all of the watersheds described in the book, is treated as a kind of aberration, one that serves mainly as a conduit for invasive aquatic species, and which in the authorâs view hardly deserves the public spending that it now receives as a recreational waterway.

To be sure, the waters described here are alive by virtue of the operation of the hydrologic cycle and the various biogeochemical processes that sustain their biological activity. But they are *animated* by the myths, the stories, the memories, and the writing by which they are integrated with human life. Woosterâs book serves as an excellent and entertaining example of this kind of integration.

Note

[1]. Matthew Evenden, Review of Dunwell, Frances F., *The*

Hudson: America's River, H-Environment, H-Net Reviews, April, 2009.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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