

H-Net Reviews

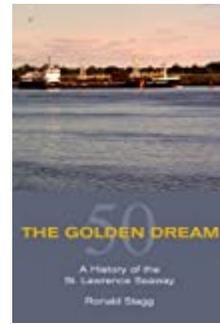
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jeff Alexander. *Pandora's Locks: The Opening of the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Seaway.* East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009. Illustrations. xxxiii + 431 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87013-857-7.

Claire Puccia Parham. *The St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project: An Oral History of the Greatest Construction Show on Earth.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009. Illustrations. xxxi + 353 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-0913-1.

Ronald Stagg. *The Golden Dream: A History of the St. Lawrence Seaway at Fifty.* Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2009. Illustrations. 256 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55002-887-4.



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Digging into the St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project

Hailed as one of the greatest engineering achievements of the twentieth century, the St. Lawrence development was the greatest construction show on earth as it is the largest transboundary project ever bilaterally constructed by two nations. The 1.2 billion dollar undertaking was completed cooperatively by Canada and the United States between 1954 and 1959. In addition to previously existing locks and power works, it featured the widening and dredging of channels and concomitant taming of rapids; the construction of seven locks and an international power dam; and the flooding of thousands of acres of land, which necessitated the reloca-

tion of thousands of people, numerous communities, and many miles of transportation networks. Moreover, the seaway was the culmination of a protracted and complicated political and diplomatic history: it was the longest-running issue in U.S. congressional history and—since the St. Lawrence forms the Canada-U.S. border for some of its course, any changes to the river basin require bilateral approval—is one of the most overlooked aspects of twentieth-century Canadian-American relations.

These three works are timely in that their publication, more or less, coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway and

Power Project in 2009. Although the shared focus is the St. Lawrence project, each provides a different approach and focus, which, taken collectively, advance our understanding of this megaproject. Ronald Stagg provides a survey history of development on the St. Lawrence, Claire Puccia Parham looks at the actual construction of the navigation and hydro works, and Jeff Alexander explores the environmental impact of the project since its opening.

In the introduction to *The Golden Dream*, Stagg notes that his contribution is an attempt to strike a balance between a general readership and serious students of the subject. In this sense, Stagg's work is a success, combining academic erudition with an accessible account. Calling the long history of developments on the St. Lawrence the "golden dream," stretching back to the first European explorers to sail down the great river, the book features five chapters. The first two cover modifications to the river up to the start of deep waterway discussions at the end of the nineteenth century, followed by chapters on the negotiations of the St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project up to 1954 and the construction period, and then a short chapter on the operation of the seaway since its opening in 1959. The inclusion of an epilogue outlining where remaining parts of old canals can be found is a nice touch. Stagg provides enough technical and engineering information to satisfy most tastes and not intrude on the narrative, rightly pointing out the role of defense, technology, power, and economics in the history of developments on the St. Lawrence. The author notes that there has generally been a heavier focus on the American aspect of the seaway story, and redresses this imbalance while also sufficiently discussing developments in the United States and providing a decent narrative of the role of Canadian provinces (i.e., Ontario and Quebec) in the St. Lawrence saga.

Stagg has previously published on Canada in the nineteenth century, and his discussion of St. Lawrence developments in this time period are very strong, while the chapter on the construction of the project nicely explains a complicated and multilayered process. The chapter on twentieth-century negotiations is a bit less satisfying than the others. Stagg relies heavily on secondary sources, yet does not seem to have consulted useful works on the subject, including the other books under review (which theoretically should have been available).^[1] Stagg does take seriously Canada's attempt to go it alone, which many previous commentators have failed to do, but as a result of underutilizing the archives of both federal governments, he misinterprets the roles of

important figures, including President Harry S. Truman, N. R. Danielian, and General Andrew McNaughton, and mischaracterizes important aspects of the discussions. However, this is in large part the result of writing a general history that covers several centuries and that relies to a large extent on older secondary works which generally underestimate the extent to which the Canadian government in the early 1950s was committed to an all-Canadian seaway, as well as the extent to which different forces in the United States conspired to block such a possibility.

Parham, who has previously published on the St. Lawrence region, looks at the experiences of some twenty-two thousand workers who toiled on the enormous endeavor, which was amazingly accomplished on schedule and on budget. Opening with an introductory chapter on the political events concerning the project, it misses some key points regarding the political and diplomatic lead-up to the construction, but this again appears to stem from relying on secondary sources. The bulk of the book consists of recollections by the various individuals—sometimes a few lines, sometimes several paragraphs or pages—arranged consecutively within thematic chapters that look at the design aspects of the project, the backgrounds of the interviewees, their daily work lives, the construction dilemmas, leisure time and families, the experience of the workers' wives, and a concluding chapter that presents memories of the seaway's opening and discusses why it has never gained national recognition.

The individuals interviewed represent a nice cross-section of society and different occupations, from manual laborers to middle-level foremen to engineers (Parham points out that most of the senior officials had passed on by the time of her research). Many women are interviewed, as well as both Canadians and Americans. The author does a good job of selecting and crafting the various interview responses into a well-flowing narrative, and intersperses helpful commentary and factual information throughout the interviews. A useful short biography of each interviewee is provided at the start.

The middle chapters chronicling the day-to-day experiences of those involved in the St. Lawrence project are the most interesting, from details about installing concrete forms to what workers did once their shift was finished. Equally intriguing are the mixed and varying experiences of the guest and permanent residents of the seaway area between 1954 and 1959. The interviews are vivid when speaking of the unforgettable im-

pressions the thousands of workers who came into the area to live and work for several years—while some even stayed permanently—had on the local inhabitants. Interestingly, although a number of those interviewed talk about mistakes, shortcuts, oversights, etc., the workers tend to speak generally of the project in very positive terms. At the same time, the book is very engaging when revealing that people have differences of opinion about similar and shared experiences. *The St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project* meets its stated objectives and is most useful for providing the different flavors and opinions about life on and around the project, rather than a chronological history.

Alexander's *Pandora's Locks* picks up where Parham leaves off, chronicling how the development "planted the seeds of a biological New World Order in the Great Lakes" (p. xvii). Alexander contends that it is not the economic disappointment that has been the most negative aspect of the seaway's legacy; rather, it is the environmental degradation unleashed by the opening up of the Great Lakes basin to ocean-going vessels. He effectively shows how seemingly small and harmless species have caused an ecological domino effect in the Great Lakes ecosystem, deftly weaving together an entertaining narrative with historical and scientific insights. He combines personal interviews, research, and science to put together a compelling account. The journalistic style makes the book highly readable, although aspects may not satisfy historians. That said, this is a book meant to educate the broader public, and its effort to do so is commendable.

The book is organized into four general chronological sections, and within each of these sections short chapters are organized along thematic lines. The first looks at the history of foreign species—such as lamprey, alewife, and salmon, which predated the seaway—while the second part tracks the introduction of invasive species via ballast water in the seaway's early years. The last two parts discuss the events of recent decades: the third section looks at invasive species and the fourth and final section concerns Great Lakes issues since about the turn of the millennium. The infamous zebra and quagga mussels are discussed at length, as are other topics, such as ruffe, gobies, alewife, lamprey, and blue-green algae.

The majority of this book therefore focuses on the post-1960s era. Alexander shows that the creators of the seaway were not aware of the trouble they were causing. Indeed, the seaway made possible the introduction of ocean "salties" that transported the foreign invaders in their ballast water. But Alexander wavers between blam-

ing the waterway itself and pointing out that, although it made the foreign invaders possible, their negative impact was not an inevitable result of the project. The author blames governments, regulatory agencies, and the shipping industry in 1980s and 1990s for the invasive species: "politics, scientific uncertainty, recalcitrant shipping interests, narrow-minded environmental activists, and dysfunctional government bureaucracies created a regulatory quagmire that produced much rhetoric but little meaningful action" (p. 255).

Pandora's Locks is particularly intriguing when examining the domino effects and unintended consequences that have resulted from attempts to biologically engineer or reverse ecological problems, such as introducing new species to combat the invasive species. He reveals the confusing and almost contradictory situations that can result when humans attempt to intervene to correct ecological imbalances (zebra mussels make the water clearer) and, in doing so, often create different, sometimes worse, problems. Alexander makes no bones about his passion and commitment to the Great Lakes, but is generally balanced, even if he sometimes equates what is good for sport fishing with what is good for the Great Lakes as a whole.

Alexander might be labeled as too condemnatory, for he ignores the fact that, with proper regulations in place, water transportation can be more environmentally friendly than its counterparts in terms of fossil fuels consumed and emissions. Conversely, some might criticize Parham and Stagg for being too celebratory about the impact of the seaway and hydroelectric development and the progress it represented, not adequately recognizing the long-term impact, such as the social and dislocation aspect of Lost Villages. Although the St. Lawrence topic naturally lends itself to environmental history, Parham and Stagg also do not delve into the approaches or concepts employed by environmental historians. The governmental and public attitudes toward the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes basin in particular, and the environment in general, are in need of further consideration. More nuanced discussion about mid-twentieth-century attitudes toward technology and progress would also have been welcome.

The St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project is strongest as a labor and social history, and also provides insights for cultural and gender historians. It will appeal to a popular audience, particularly those with a regional interest in the project or interest in megaprojects, and can also serve as a supplement to academic historians study-

ing the topic. The same can be said of *Pandora's Locks*, which will be especially useful for those with an interest in post-1959 environmental problems in the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence region. In providing an updated general history, *The Golden Dream* has filled a major hole and in a number of respects replaced the previous standards on the subject, most of which were published in the late 1950s or early 1960s.

Taken as a whole, these three works are therefore valuable contributions to the history of the St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project. All of the works reviewed employ a range of beneficial photographic and illustrated material. The three authors have individually and collectively made important strides and filled noticeable gaps in the historiography on an under-examined topic; yet, because so little academic attention has been directed toward the seaway in recent decades, there is still plenty of room—and need—for further detailed study of this important and overlooked topic.

Note

[1]. For example, see Lawrence Aronsen, *American National Security and Economic Relations with Canada, 1945-1954* (Westport: Praeger, 1997); Joy Parr, *Sensing Changes: Technologies, Environments, and the Everyday, 1953-2003* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009); Robert Passfield, "Construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway," in *Canal History and Technology Proceedings*, vol. 22, ed. Lance E. Metz (Easton: Canal History and Technology Press, 2003), 1-55; and Christopher Pattison, "The St. Lawrence Seaway Question, 1950-1954: A Canadian Perspective" (master's thesis, Carleton University, 1994). Although not available at the time of publication, several papers and panels discussed the twentieth-century history of the St. Lawrence project at the 2010 meetings of the American Society of Environmental Historians (<http://nichecanada.org/node/9133>), the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, and the Canadian Historical Association.

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