

## A River Runs through it ...

**J.W.N. Tempelhoff (ed), *African Water Histories: Transdisciplinary Discourses***

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The editor of this book, consisting of fourteen chapters based on papers presented at a conference in December 2004, is to be congratulated on compiling this collection focusing on water and water-supply in Africa. As Tempelhoff rightly acknowledges, the work is “one of the first of its kind” (p vii). His is a bold vision to bring together different perspectives on water, including urban supply, water policy and law, as well as technical and scientific developments. Moreover, he has attempted to provide a continent-wide overview, a massive challenge when it comes to Africa with its diversity of ecosystems and issues around governance. Like many a bold or experimental project, however, success is somewhat uneven. Numerous collations of conference papers that become books are of course, patchy, even when the contributors share a discipline which in this case, they do not. The transdisciplinarity of the title is a warning that the content does indeed range across diverse disciplines that do not mesh together and the silo mentality of disciplinarity is very evident. For the historian, without doubt the highlight of the volume is the chapter by Heather Hoag. She actively engages theoretically with the rich literature on water history elsewhere in the world and situates her work – on river-basin planning – within it.

The theme of the original conference would appear to have been a loose one and in order to structure the book, Tempelhoff has arranged the contents in six sections, placing similar papers together in order that they speak to one another. Section 1 contains three chapters based on national narratives which cover Malawi, Zimbabwe and Cameroon. The authors of these chapters, Wapulumuka Mulwafu, Edmore Mufema and Ben Page, offer synopses of aspects of national water policy and supply in these countries. Of necessity given chapter length, the content is superficial, but the reader is provided with an outline which assists to direct further reading. In this regard, there is a useful “Select Bibliography” by Rabson Wuriga at the end of the book.

Section 2 is entitled “Local water histories”, although it might also have been called urban water histories (which could have included other

chapters too). Kalala Ngalamuleme investigates the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century water-supply to Saint Louis in Senegal and Kevin Wall a similar period for Cape Town. Doctor Wall is with the CSIR in Pretoria and it is a great pity that he did not consult the excellent University of Cape Town MA dissertation completed by Duncan Grant in 1991 on “The politics of water supply; The history of Cape Town’s water supply, 1840-1920”. Not surprisingly in view of the academic rigour required for a Master’s dissertation, Grant’s is the more sophisticated and nuanced argument. Engaging with it would have provided a perfect springboard for Wall to develop his argument, namely that megacities and larger units of regional government are vital in order to give economies of scale for urban services such as electricity and water-supply.

The section, called “Thematic approaches to water history”, is a real salmagundi. Ian van der Waag ranges across warfare in southern Africa in different periods and in different eco-regions, Deborah Lavin discusses the Smartt and Sundays River irrigation projects and Johan Tempelhoff lists some of the travellers’ and explorers’ observations on water and rainfall during the colonial period. Each of these themes has the potential to be extremely important and interesting in terms of the cultural history of water on the subcontinent, but they would all have benefited from deeper enquiry and more extensive theoretical underpinnings, perhaps drawing on similar themes in other parts of the world. The complexities between culture and water could have been expounded more productively. Van der Waag’s overview of the implications of rainfall patterns and topography for military engagements over the long period of South African human history, is very sketchy. Moreover, he has an idiosyncratic interpretation of “frontier” and uses anachronistic terminology (for example “Moshesh” and “invasions” of Bantu-speakers). Lavin’s discussion of the Smartt and Sundays River dams could have drawn profitably from Tim Clynick’s work on Hartbeespoort Dam and on the growing literature about ideas around progressive farming in the Cape Colony. Tempelhoff’s descriptions of some of the hunting and exploration literature is also suggestive, but again perhaps premature, for there is no argument along the lines of Tim Bonyhady’s *The Colonial Earth*, or Thomas Dunlap’s *Nature and the English Diaspora*, which would have furthered the debate about European environmental attitudes and understanding in South Africa at this time.

“Dams and hydropower”, the fourth section with two chapters, one by Heather Hoag, “The damming of Africa: the spread of river-basin planning in post-war Africa”, and May-Britt Öhman’s comparison

between two projects in Sweden and Tanzania, is more sophisticated. Both are part of larger projects on these subjects. These contributions interrogate the literature more closely and present ideas around communities and water impoundment projects to stimulate arguments that will be important in future work. The book is worth obtaining for these contributions alone.

Two legal chapters comprise Section 5. The first, by Owen McIntyre, argues for what is referred to as an “ecosystem” (bioregional?) approach to river management in parts of Africa. Gerrit Pienaar and Elmarie van der Schyff (both of the Faculty of Law at North-West University) give a straightforward and very useful legalistic summary of South Africa’s water law leading up to the innovative National Water Act (Act 36 of 1998).

The final section, “Research in progress”, reverts in one instance – David Nilson’s “The evolution of urban water and sanitation in East Africa from a public goods perspective” – to an urban theme taking a cue from economics theory, and the other returns to dam-building, this time by Joost Fontein. Fontein links his discussion around Lake Kyle/Mutirikwi in Zimbabwe to the ideas of Terence Ranger, JoAnn McGregor and others around imaginative landscapes, and cultural and religious affiliations with them. Through this literature he explores ideas that landscape appropriation is both non-physical and physical. His argument that even when covered by water, land remains “land”, with all that it entails, is a fascinating one.

There are many typographical errors. Among them are “Fireman”, instead of Feierman; “McGreggor”, instead of McGregor; “lilly” not lily; “Hartebeestpoort” instead of Hartbeespoort when referring to the dam and “millenium” instead of millennium.

While applauding the editor and contributors for their innovative idea and for stimulating interest in the past and present of Africa’s rivers and dams – as well as in the history of climate and other environmental themes – if this book indicates the state of the art at present, it may be some time before the field matures. *African Water Histories* however indeed is a step in the right direction.

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