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Book Review: *Power Struggles: Hydro Development and First Nations in Manitoba and Quebec* Edited by Thibault Martin and Steven M. Hoffman

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Finally, Klein is aware of the relevance of his work for understanding Oklahoma today, as when he writes:

Respectable people . . . publicly abstained from drinking and sought to restrict others’ access to alcohol; those who did not share this view were stained as less virtuous, less than righteous. Vestiges of this mentality remain in Oklahoma a century after the state banned liquor; the prohibition experience has left a deep imprint on social propriety in the state: a prominent outspoken population expresses disdain for the liquor culture whereas a less visible, less vocal population continues to consume alcohol as a beverage but does not attempt to justify its actions in the public forum.

Grappling with Demon Rum was among the finalists for the 2009 Oklahoma Book Award in nonfiction. Davis D. Joyce, Professor of History, Emeritus, East Central University, Ada, Oklahoma.


When First Nations try to protect their lands and waters it very often involves a struggle against some form of energy-related development. The greatest challenge facing those wishing to understand the long and complicated history between First Nations and hydro development in Canada is just that: it’s a very long and complex story. While this history begins over 50 years ago, the ensuing destruction of Indigenous lands and waters, cultures and ways of life, continues to this day.

Many have believed the time of building new big dams was over, especially since the Report of the World Commission on Dams (WCD) in 2000 highlighted the often environmentally and socially devastating, and in many cases unnecessary, damages inflicted by large dams on local peoples. The WCD concluded that large dams should not be supported unless they result in a “significant advance of human development on a basis that is economically viable, socially equitable, and environmentally sustainable.” Nine years later, however, pressing calls for clean energy sources have combined with extensive “green-washing” of hydro development’s destructive effects to resurrect plans for hydro development (of all sizes) across Canada. The question remains to be answered, though, whether these new dams will result in the “ends” necessary for sustainable improvement of human welfare in Indigenous communities.

The authors of Power Struggles recount the development approaches taken by governments and hydro utilities in Manitoba and Quebec in pursuing past hydro development, and compare them to the “partnership approach” now favored in the new generation of hydro-development projects. This book does what others in the field have not: it places hydro development not only within the contexts of broken treaty obligations, but also the assertion of Indigenous rights and governance as well as the twin economic drivers of omnipresent community poverty and globalization. The authors boldly link First Nations and hydro development to the real issues governing energy decision-making in Canada, such as provincial governments that depend upon revenue generated through hydro development to balance their budgets.

As the authors peel back the veneer on both the old “build first, compensate later” approach (the Northern Flood Agreement and the Great Whale Project) and the new “partnerships” approach (the Paix des Braves agreement and Wuskwatim Dam Project), they reveal that, despite some progress, there is still no consistent policy of fairness towards First Nations, or any other Indigenous nation, when it comes to hydro development in Canada. First Nations, as governments and rightful holders of rights regarding the lands and waters that will be forever changed after the dams have been built, continue to have to fight to be included in not only decisions involving these projects, but also the benefits that flow from them, though at a steep cost.

Power Struggles cuts through the green development rhetoric by exposing the details of environmental, social, and local economic destruction left in the wake of our last era of big dams. The result is a scholarly and balanced view exploring whether the treatment of Indigenous peoples has meaningfully improved over time, presented through timely, factual, and engrossing analyses. It should be required reading for anyone truly seeking to understand the struggles faced by those who live with the consequences of North America’s demand for energy. Merrell-Ann S. Phare, Executive Director/Legal Counsel, Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

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