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## Review of *The River Returns: An Environmental History of the Bow*. By Christopher Armstrong, Matthew Evenden, and H.V. Nelles.

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**The River Returns: An Environmental History of the Bow.** By Christopher Armstrong, Matthew Evenden, and H.V. Nelles. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009. xi + 488 pp. Maps, graphs, illustrations, appendix. \$49.95 cloth, \$34.95 paper.

This book should be read more as a collection of essays on a wide variety of topics related to the Bow River than as a monograph. Each of its thirteen chapters examines an aspect of the history of human interactions with the river, ranging from ranching, forestry, hydroelectricity, and irrigation to urban sanitation, recreational fishing, flooding, and park building. The Bow River is amenable to a discussion of such diverse themes. Its headwaters are among the glaciers of the Rocky Mountains in Banff National Park, but it also flows through the ranching country of the foothills, the major urban center of Calgary, Alberta, and fertile but semiarid plains. Thus, the river has been subject to a wide range of anthropogenic modifications that, according to the authors, left it "altered by but not destroyed." Reflecting developments in environmental history, the authors argue that the Bow River is a "joint project of nature and human culture."

Most readers of *Great Plains Research* are likely to find the book's organization convenient. Any chapter can easily be read in isolation. But a book covering many aspects of the history of a river over such a long time

frame is bound to have lacunae. The role of the Canadian Commission of Conservation in early debates over hydroelectricity, for example, is neglected, and the authors do not explain the National Parks Branch's dramatic shift from supporting the construction of hydroelectric dams in Banff National Park in 1912 to opposing such projects during the 1920s. Incomplete citations in the chapter on hydroelectricity make it difficult to locate the archival sources referenced. Nevertheless, the volume offers a valuable addition to the scholarship on the topics of its chapters. Those on forestry and conservation, sanitation projects, and the emergence of "recovery narratives" in the 1970s and 1980s are particularly perceptive.

Environmental historians may be disappointed with the book. Only those interested in the Bow River specifically are likely to read it entirely. The authors, according to their preface, chose their title because they wanted "to stress the circular relationship between the inhabitants of the Bow valley and the river. What is carried downstream comes back. Acted upon, the river invariably returns the consequences of those actions in ways that cannot be avoided." However, they never really elaborate on this vague argument. It is possible to glean an implicit narrative, progressing from relatively passive uses of the river by Native peoples, fur traders, and early ranchers to conflicts between engineers and proponents of aesthetic parks, to the emergence in the mid to late 20th century of "a 'designer' view of nature that privileged . . . recreation," but also sought "a balance between use . . . and respect for natural processes." The authors endorse the benefits of this project for fishing and "green" power. Had the book been organized differently (perhaps chronologically), however, or had its authors written a longer and more interpretively original introduction, its potential impact on environmental history could have been much larger. Thus, the book should be welcomed as a valuable collection of essays on aspects of the history of the Bow River, but not as a model monographic environmental history of rivers. **Ted Binnema** and **David Vogt**, *Department of History, University of Northern British Columbia*.