

# H-Net Reviews

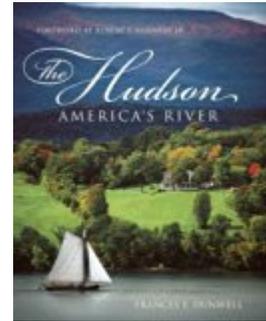
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frances F. Dunwell. *The Hudson: America's River*. Columbia University Press, 2008. 320. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-13641-9.

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## Celebrating America's River

Of all the units chosen for analysis by environmental historians, the river basin or watershed must be one of the most common. Some of the defining titles of the sub-discipline, from Donald Worster's *Rivers of Empire* (1985) to Richard White's *Organic Machine* (1995), focus principally on rivers and how people interact with them. These works have made important contributions to scholarship, pushing debates in new directions, and not only about rivers. If, to paraphrase Claude Levi-Strauss, rivers are good to think with, then this is because they touch on so many of the problems and concerns of environmental historians.

Environmental histories of rivers also command public attention in a way that thematic studies rarely do. Both Worster and White's books, for example, are read as widely outside the academy as within. This is partly because river histories offer audiences a subject that can, from the outset, be grasped. Rivers are understood as complex systems but also intimately known places.

Although environmental historians have contributed to public understandings of river issues, they write in a crowded field. Amongst proponents of landscape preservation, and environmental heritage, river history has an important place. Tim Palmer, one of the most effective popularizers of environmental history, writes almost exclusively about rivers.[1] Both Canada and the United States sponsor federal heritage river programs to preserve and deepen the connections between people and their surroundings.

Although these efforts bear contemporary origins, the ideas behind them may be found in a range of books across the twentieth century. The Rivers of America series, published by Farrar & Rinehart, and edited by Constance Lindsay Skinner, helped to create the genre.[2] Whereas Worster and White would later write about dammed and transformed rivers with the concerns of modern environmentalism hanging over them, the rivers at the center of Skinner's series were platforms for frontier tales of progress. Change, in these books, was inscribed with a sense of progress rather than loss. Where loss was noted, it was generally seen as inevitable.

Frances Dunwell's *The Hudson: America's River* bridges recent work in environmental history with this older tradition of river-writing. As the subtitle suggests, this is a book written with a broad and evocative brush and a message about the Hudson as a national symbol. The Hudson for Dunwell is a river that offers tales of progress, national self-realization, and environmental challenges faced and to some extent overcome. While many recent environmental histories of rivers read like laments, Dunwell's can be described as a celebration. The front cover captures well the upbeat mood to follow: an historic sloop tacks along the Hudson with an impressive home in the background on a slope cloaked with a sunny patch of grass. The earliest hints of fall touch the leaves of surrounding maples and the uplands retreat into the early signs of dusk. Nineteenth-century visitors would have called the view picturesque.

While academic environmental historians would hesitate strongly before describing any river as *America's* river, Dunwell's purpose is clear. She aims to situate the Hudson as a central artery of American national(ist) history, with a view to educating a wide readership in its significance for conservation. The book was sponsored in its early stages by Scenic Hudson, an organization that seeks to build links between local communities and *their* Hudson River. This democratic-conservationist impulse is further underlined in the foreword, written by Robert Kennedy, Jr., and by the notice that all royalties will be donated to river conservation. Dunwell's career spans several river organizations but she has come to historical writing on her own. The result then is an impassioned text, beautifully illustrated with photographs and art, with an episodic but usually entertaining approach to American history read through the prism of one river.

What can environmental historians learn from a book like this? The main contribution is not in terms of scholarship. Some of the points of emphasis and selection appear unusual or at least unjustified to this reader. How else to explain a whole chapter recounting the place of the Hudson in the American Revolution, while the period of British occupation and settlement in the preceding centuries is treated in a comparatively cursory manner? While I appreciated the attention to the Hudson Highlands in this book, I was surprised by the lack of focus on New York City. Where the book will hold greater value for environmental historians is as a body of contemporary evidence about environmentalism and the Hudson River. Dunwell's final chapter on the organization of Hudson River conservation since the early 1960s provides a lively and interesting perspective on changes in which the organization that sponsored her early re-

search participated and showed leadership. Her attempts to explain the links between environmental debates on the Hudson and national debates over the Clean Water Act are useful.

The more important contribution of this book for environmental historians is as a model of how to engage a public audience. Scholars may not wish to follow Dunwell all the way down the path she cuts, but they can learn from some of her choices. The large print format provides possibilities for an increased display of visual evidence and maps than is normally the case in academic texts. Dunwell has put a great deal of time into researching visual sources and integrating them into this volume and the result is impressive. Academics might cringe at the appearance of a coffee-table book but most readers will not. Dunwell is also very successful in creating stories. Although one can quibble with her subject choices and arguments, Dunwell tries hard to reach out and captivate readers and she tells her stories well, taking opportunities to wrap broader processes around biographical narratives. Finally, Dunwell has laid the groundwork for a readership. The book emerges out of an engagement with conservation groups, displays quotations from important river advocates including Pete Seeger, and tries to offer something to Hudson River communities by ploughing royalties back into river conservation.

#### Notes

[1]. See, for example, Tim Palmer, *American by Rivers* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1996)

[2]. Nicolaas Mink, "A Narrative for Nature's Nation: Constance Lindsay Skinner and the Making of *Rivers of America*," *EnvironmentalHistory* 11 (October 2006): 751-774.

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