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**Gerard Koeppel**. *Bond of Union: Building the Erie Canal and the American Empire.* Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2010. 480 pp. $18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-306-81862-2.

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## Political Opera

In October 1825, New York State celebrated the completion of the greatest engineering project of the young Republic by lining the newly completed Erie Canal with cannon and firing off a "cannon telegraph" starting at Buffalo and continuing across the state until the explosive peal reached the Atlantic Ocean at Sandy Hook on New York City's harbor. It was an early sign of the maturing nation's growing optimism that the vast continent, despite its substantial environmental and human barriers, could be conquered with the application of applied engineering and an ineffable American spirit to transcend limits imposed by nature. Gerard Koeppel, who has contributed much to the scholarship of New York State, could not have picked a more complementary topic to follow up his popular history of New York City's water supply system, *Water for Gotham: A History* (2000), than *Bond of Union*.

Rivers have captured the American imagination because they organize the landscape and often define the boundaries of regional affiliation. Historians of the American West and the American environment have long advocated the centrality of water in human life. In his classic history, *The Great Plains*, Walter Prescott Webb argued that aridity represented a "determining factor" in the development of a particularly western culture, which established a commitment to examining the dialectic relationship between people and their surrounding environment within the historiography of the American West.[1] Likewise, historians Donald Worster and Richard White have organized histories around major western watersheds and told the stories of how human designs and natural forces have remade landscapes and, in turn, changed the path of history. Even popular presses have responded to the public demand for stories of their watersheds, most famously with the publication of the Rivers of America series by Farrar and Rinehart, which published sixty-five histories of American waterways over a course of nearly forty years.[2] So it is rather puzzling to find so much of Koeppel's history of an American scheme to link the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes taking place in the marbled halls of Washington DC, the New York State Legislature, and the parlors of New York City's elite rather than the course of the artificial waterway. Despite previous histories of the Erie Canal, such as Carol Sherrif's *The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862* (1997), which was grounded in the labor required to actually dig the canal and the impact it had on the lives of common people, Koeppel favors the perspective of the patrician. For a book about a flowing canal ditch, dug from the New York mud, the reader's shoes remain quite dry, and, as a result, Koeppel's history lacks a powerful anchor in the transformed land or lives of the people who built the canal with their own sweat.

In her review of Koeppel's popular *Water for Gotham*, historian Sarah S. Elkind wrote that although his narrative was "detailed and well written … this is not an academic book."[3] The same can be said of *Bond of Union*. Koeppel's thesis, that "without the Erie Canal, there would have been no penetration of the Appalachian range before interests inimical to the United States–French, English, Spanish, Russian, and native or discontented American–laid permanent claim to pieces of the continental interior," becomes an afterthought by the second chapter (p. 11). Instead, Koeppel focuses on the task of telling the story of the canal through the actions of eight men–all merchants, politicians, or engineers–which transforms his history into a chronicle of the itineraries of a single class.

Koeppel succeeds in exploring the failed experiments and historical cul-de-sacs that led to the creation of the Erie Canal. Every conceived path, project, and political plan for a canal to connect the seaboard to the interior receives careful attention and serves as a warn-

ing about narratives of inevitability. Although Koeppel is at his best when describing the contingencies of the Erie Canal's history–the failed Virginia Plan, the political struggle among different Lake Erie ports, and the internal disagreements over the canal's route–his narrative loses momentum when he breaks away on tangents to explore the personal idiosyncrasies of his elite cast. For instance, Koeppel dedicates an entire page to detailing the rumors surrounding the wife of Gouverneur Morris, who remained suspect in the eyes of many New York socialites following the "notorious but unproven killing of a newborn allegedly fathered by her sister's husband" (p. 80); yet, he dedicates but a single page to informing the reader about the Pleistocene glacial formation of the landscape that anchors the topic of his book (pp. 14-15). In recent years popular audiences have been willing to purchase historical biographies that are deep in detail but shallow in perspective and context. As a writer outside of the academy, Koeppel's two histories on New York seem to be an attempt to catch that commercial wave. This impulse is reflected in his research notes, which are almost exclusively the private papers of his primary cast and their associates.

Although historians can debate the merits of biography-driven history, Koeppel's approach fails because he disregards–at times refutes–his own thesis and fails to provide context to events. By failing to connect the Erie Canal's creation to larger trends in American history, Koeppel leaves his readers to figure out for themselves how his political opera informs our understanding of American history at large. In Koeppel's deliberate, detailed account of backroom political bargaining, we discover that federal support for the Erie Canal withered because of sectional differences, and that, once the populous states of New York and Pennsylvania were able to force a bill through, President James Madison vetoed the bill, leaving New York no other choice than to fund the canal on its own. Following his discussion of the completion of the canal, Koeppel presents the reader with a changing political landscape at odds with his thesis. Instead of a "bond of union" we read "the Erie Canal helped to marginalize the economy of the slave plantation South and radicalize its politics" and "the very notion of 'Southern' as a sectional identity arose shortly after the completion of the canal" (p. 394). Even the peripheral states of Ohio and Vermont, which would benefit from easy access to Atlantic markets, failed to lend support to eager canal boosters. As the completed canal ushered in the "Age of Acquisition" for rich merchants along its golden path, the nation descended into sectional politics that would result in the Civil War a generation later.

Finally, because Koeppel only introduces us to a single social class, readers fail to grasp the larger social and historical significance of the canal. When Koeppel briefly mentions Native Americans, interior farmers, or Irish laborers he does so in passing and without the careful attention to detail his primary cast (and their spouses) garner. Similarly, Koeppel fails to describe the importance of the canal to the creation of industrial America on the eastern seaboard and in the Midwest. Such cities as Cleveland, Buffalo, and Chicago used the canal as a stepping stone to the industrial era and many industrialists from these interior cities, including John D. Rockefeller, sharpened their logistical skills by connecting interior resources to eastern markets through the canal system. Instead, Koeppel appraises the success of the Erie Canal by the measures used by his principle subjects–the accumulation of material and political fortunes. Koeppel demonstrates how the Erie Canal created an "extraordinary profit of over $41 million" during its lifetime, became a defining legacy for such men as Dewitt Clinton and Jesse Hawley, and catapulted a small group of engineers into prominence (p. 395). Unfortunately, historians will only find his narrative and sources relevant to more provincial courses, such as a course on the history of New York State.

Notes

[1]. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1931), 16.

[2]. See Nicolaas Mink, "A Narrative for Nature's Nation: Constance Lindsay Skinner and the Making of *Rivers of America*," *Environmental History* 11, no. 4 (October 2006): 751-774.

[3]. Sarah S. Elkind, review of *Water for Gotham: A History*, by Gerard Koeppel, *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (June 2001): 194.

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