

H-Net Reviews

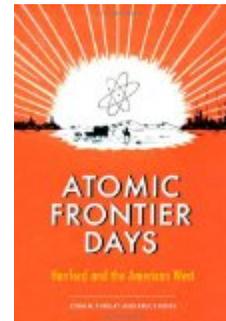
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John M. Findlay, Bruce Hevly. *Atomic Frontier Days: Hanford and the American West*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011. 384 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-99097-2.

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Like a series of nesting dolls, John M. Findlay and Bruce Hevly locate the history of the Hanford Plutonium Plant inside ever larger entities. They place the story of the plant within an account of the neighboring communities that supported it, the Tri-Cities of eastern Washington, which they in turn situate within a larger regional history of the Columbia Basin located as part of the chronicle of the Pacific Northwest, a region in step with larger currents of the American West. Findlay and Hevly do a marvelous job of mediating between local, regional, and national perspectives of Hanford's history. They arbitrate in other ways too—between earlier histories of heroic innovation and sacrifice of Manhattan Project scientists and later histories that told a darker story of secretive state officials in collusion with corporate managers quietly contaminating surrounding populations and environments. They point out that though science was important in the Manhattan Project, that history has been overplayed. Just as important was the production of weapons' implements which took factories of workers toiling away in sites not of research, but of production.

In titling their history *Atomic Frontier Days*, Findlay and Hevly point to a valuable insight. Rather than point to a local populace hoodwinked by scheming officials, they tell the story of people who embraced their pioneering role at the frontier of the arms race. Locals, Findlay and Hevly argue, supported their plutonium plant and especially its role in keeping the regional economy going and federally funded long after the desire for plutonium was sated. Local boosters did so not by looking to the great future of atomic energy, but by referencing a past on an underdeveloped western frontier historically plagued by cycles of boom and bust. Local boost-

ers saw themselves as “pioneers” in nuclear technologies (for in fact Findlay and Hevly point out Hanford's reactor technology was quickly obsolete) as well as in the fulfillment of longstanding “western ambitions for economic growth, urban expansion and cultural sophistication” (p. 267). In this way, Tri-City residents suffered few moral struggles or mortal fears in coming to terms with nuclear weapons production because they saw it in line with the development of the dams and irrigation networks of the vast Columbia Basin Project, which powered the march of farmland, interstate highways, and urbanized communities across the inland West. These vast, modernizing projects served both to fortify the nation and, more importantly for locals, to enrich and develop the interior West which had lagged behind so long.

Within this story is a narrative describing how the Tri-Cities came to depend on federal “welfare,” never breaking free from dependency on subsidies and Atomic Energy Commission/Department of Energy (AEC/DOE) funding despite decades of attempts to “diversify.” Findlay and Hevly describe how locals supported this democracy of special interests and earmarks, by rebelling in the fifties against higher rents, higher appraisals to buy their houses, and incorporation and self-governance in the federal city of Richland. At the same time, locals insisted that AEC officials open tracks of local land to the Columbia Basin Project despite AEC insistence that the land was within the path of accidental explosions. After 1964, when President Lyndon B. Johnson started the process of shutting down the Hanford plant, regional businessmen lobbied to keep the aging and leaking reactors going. They requested more reactors, a national radioactive waste repository, and the release to farming of more land in harm's way. Locals, in other words, promoted

their territory as a national sacrifice zone, applying what Findlay and Hevly call a “nuclear fatalism” in order to stay on the federal gravy train so that they would not go the way of other ghost towns.

Findlay and Hevly suggest a unique periodization of nuclear history. They argue that there was no great break in 1945 when Americans saw the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and began to fear the mutant, life-destroying qualities of the atom. Instead, they contend that the ominous qualities of nuclear weapons production became apparent only in the seventies with inroads from a growing environmental movement in which activists worried about not just nukes, but dams, pesticides, smoggy highways, and the whole clutching command of nature that westerners had celebrated for decades as talismans of development. By the late eighties, when locals realized the extent of environmental contamination, they actively participated in that process as “stake holders” in regional and state agencies to negotiate the terms of the cleanup. This was not as big a shift in mentality as one would imagine, for the cleanup had a great deal in common with the original arms buildup. It continued to pump federal dollars into the Columbia Basin—in fact more than ever before—propping up the regional economy.

I am writing a history of the first two cities in the world to produce plutonium, Richland being one of them. I have looked at many of the same sources as Findlay

and Hevly, and they kindly shared their manuscript with me before it came out for publication. I admire their calm prose and desire to find a middle ground between the often shrill charges and countercharges about public health that surrounded Hanford after the 1986 disclosure of nineteen thousand declassified Hanford documents. Findlay and Hevly state that they chose not to focus on public health, the most controversial questions surrounding Hanford, because other historians have done so and because they believe that contests over health effects “cannot be resolved by an appeal to the court of history” (p. 270). I personally believe historians can have greater power to influence contemporary debates than Findlay and Hevly allow. Certainly by compartmentalizing health and contamination out of their history, Findlay and Hevly cannot influence those debates at all. Their silence suggests that the two hundred million plus curies spilled from the Hanford plant had no impact other than to create the country’s largest Superfund site. I would have prized the evaluation of these two knowledgeable historians, one trained in the history of science, the other in urban history, as they judged the evidence on the public health effects caused by decades of Hanford contamination. My hope is that Findlay and Hevly will return to the topics of Hanford’s public health impact in their next work. Until then, *Atomic Frontier Days* is an excellent addition to the historiography of the modernizing American West, the politics of the Pacific Northwest, and the history of U.S. nuclear arms production.

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