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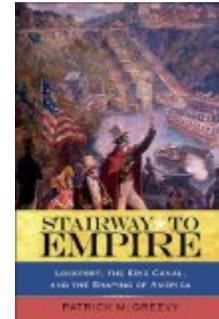
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Patrick McGreevy. *Stairway to Empire: Lockport, the Erie Canal, and the Shaping of America*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2009. Maps. xiv + 309 pp. \$27.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-2527-6.

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Deep Cutting the Layers of Lockport

When the Erie Canal opened in 1825, ceremonies featured the carriage of two barrels of water from Lake Erie through the canal to the New York City harbor, where Governor DeWitt Clinton poured the water into the Atlantic. Many referred to it as the “marriage of the waters”; there were explicit remarks about “nuptials”, and C. Y. Turner chose “The Marriage of the Waters” as the title of his famous 1905 mural (pp.124, 268n48).[1] The same boat took a keg of Atlantic water back to Lake Erie. A major highlight of both journeys was the passage through a remarkable set of locks in the town of Lockport, and through a deep and just as remarkable channel cut into the rocky ridge of the Niagara Escarpment immediately south of the locks.

This vignette is one of many that feature in Patrick McGreevy’s book about the birth and early development of Lockport, as well as many other aspects of the Erie Canal. The town was of great interest even before the canal was finished, because of its location at the northern end of the channel through the escarpment, about twenty miles east of Niagara Falls. That channel was the last piece to be built, and a difficult job it was. Lockport was the construction center for a project much larger than the locks alone, one lasting from 1821 to 1825. The town, the locks, the channel, and the workers and other people in McGreevy’s story—and the way he tells the story—are all interesting and deserve attention from specialists on the canal and the Lockport region as well as from more general readers interested in the middle third of the nineteenth century in the United States and social dynamics

of the period.

McGreevy, a geographer, grew up in Lockport and wrote an earlier book about Niagara Falls, *Imagining Niagara: The Meaning and Making of Niagara Falls* (1994). For *Stairway to Empire* he has drawn on a vast array of secondary literature, including many obscure items from the nineteenth century, and such primary sources as personal journals, government and church records, and newspaper accounts. He keeps his narrative moving, even though it is often extremely detailed; writes in a straightforward but engaging style; and enlivens his text with many quotations, especially from personal accounts. I was one of the generalist readers, and I was led to see the canal in a markedly different way.

The physical geography is essential to the story, and McGreevy gives us a thorough description of it. The Niagara Escarpment trends east-west and divides western New York into two parts. To the south of the ridge the elevation is roughly at the level of Lake Erie, but the plain north of the ridge is considerably lower. One section of the canal starts at Lake Erie and extends north and then east, south of the ridge; another section starts at Rochester and extends west, north of the ridge. The link between the two is a north-south channel cut through a part of the escarpment called the Mountain Ridge. The top of the Mountain Ridge is even higher than Lake Erie. To allow boats moving east from Lake Erie to negotiate the obstacle, the builders had to dig a deep trench—the “Deep Cut”—in the ridge down to a level slightly be-

low that of Lake Erie. They cut an average depth of twenty-five feet—as deep as thirty feet in one place—and one three-mile stretch was through hard dolomite. Parts of the surface were densely forested, to boot. They also had to build an elaborate column of five locks to lower boats down the steep northern face of the ridge (about sixty feet) to the level of the channel heading east toward Rochester. Of course, the same locks—actually, a second column of five immediately adjacent to the other—lifted westward-moving boats up to the channel in the Deep Cut, bringing them to the elevation of the stretch to Lake Erie: thus the “stairway” in McGreevy’s title.

Lockport sprang up in order to house and serve construction workers (perhaps as many as 1,500 at the peak) who dug the Deep Cut and built the masonry locks, and it grew rapidly after the canal was finished. Artistic representations of the double column of locks became some of the best-known images of the canal. For passengers from the east, entry into the locks was from a ravine with steep hundred-foot hills on both sides, and the locks and village loomed suddenly as their boats rounded a turn after sixty miles of flatness since Rochester. McGreevy analyzes images as well as written accounts of the locks, noting that while the Deep Cut was far more arduous work, over time images of the locks became far more popular.

The main part of the book comprises four chapters. “Locating Lockport” is on the general setting, including details of the geography and the choice of a route through the Mountain Ridge. It will be of value to physical geographers not already familiar with the canal. “Cutting Lockport” is about the construction activities in 1821-25, but is not limited to engineering matters; there is extensive analysis of the rapid growth of the town, the nature of the workforce, and tensions between workers and other residents. It probably will appeal more to social geographers. In the next chapter, “Writing Lockport,” the author starts with the hoopla around the canal’s opening, then describes and quotes extensively (and effectively) the observations of travelers, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Lyon Mackenzie, and Frances Trollope, to mention only a few (he says he looked at fifty different travelers’ accounts). The chapter ends with a discussion of pictorial images. I believe cultural geographers will find this chapter interesting, though McGreevy might have expanded his short discussion of the theory of travel writing.

The final chapter is “Losing Lockport: Afterlife of the Mountain Ridge Conquest.” Suddenly, McGreevy’s talent for chapter titles is no longer evident, for the word

“losing” is not helpful in interpreting the chapter: “Living Lockport” would have been a better title. It is a very selective history—I am tempted to call it a potpourri—with more attention to the three decades or so after 1825 than later. The main subjects are: social conflict between factory workers and other residents (which continued conflicts dating from the construction period); public disorder and violence; frequent religious revivals in this part of the “Burned-Over District” (a nice tidbit is that Lockport’s Baptists performed baptisms in the pool at the foot of the locks); early industrial development; and the history of the Gulf, a gorge to the west of town that became a site of heavy pollution. Many parts are interesting, many are not, especially for a reader interested mainly in the effects of the canal on Lockport, and except for the section on the Gulf there is too little on the period after the Civil War.

I must add, however, that for me one interesting part of the chapter is on the present-day writer Joyce Carol Oates, who was born in Lockport, spent much of her childhood near the town, and attended school there for some years. Her novel *You Must Remember This* (1987) is set in a fictitious city, Port Oriskany, that has features of both Lockport and Buffalo; the setting of her *Marya: A Life* (1986) is similar to Lockport; and *Wonderland* (1971) refers to Lockport by name, though Oates says the setting is fictional. I would have welcomed a deeper discussion of Oates and her literary characters and settings, replacing some other pieces of this chapter and the preceding one, which might also have broadened the book’s appeal.

McGreevy’s brief account of industrial development is useful for understanding the period up until about 1900. The locational factors that drew industrial investors to Lockport are interesting; McGreevy explains them briefly, and a fuller account, with more specific examples of growth and decline, would have increased the range of readers interested in the book. Two different kinds of stone were quarried and the blocks went into many prominent buildings from New York to Chicago. There were also flour mills; saw mills; and factories for textiles, boots and shoes, furniture, and carriages. Lockport was something of a “transshipment point,” because some waterborne traffic that was headed directly west (as opposed to going southwest to Buffalo) switched to land modes there, but it is not likely that feature was as important as in many other places on waterways. The town’s major advantages were an available labor force, some of it remaining from the construction period (when workers had skills in metalworking, machinery, and masonry), the water power provided by the big fall in water

level at the locks (Lake Erie was Lockport's "millpond" [p. 173]), some interesting entrepreneurs (one invented the pumps used in public water supply, the fire hydrant, and district heating systems), and of course the transport cost advantages of the canal itself (especially obvious, for example, in the wide geographical market for the heavy stone blocks). Later, there was cheap electricity from Niagara Falls. But of course those factors attracted different businesses in different ways and to varying degrees, and I wish there were more details on that.

McGreevy's history of the Erie Canal expanded my understanding of the canal and its historical significance. While I did not find all his generalizations completely convincing, I gained much from his thought-provoking way of presenting them. I urge geographers and historians to study at least some parts of his book. However, I have already signaled disappointment with the last chapter, "Losing Lockport." I had hoped for a concise but broad ranging account of an industrial city, up until near the present. I wanted what I think many other readers would want: descriptions of the routine traffic on the canal, the effects on Lockport of the displacement of canal traffic by railroads, the rise and fall of various industries, the Great Depression, the city's experiences of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, the different neighborhoods in the city, and the "deindustrialization" of recent decades. Given McGreevy's concern with class conflict, one is surprised not to find data on demographics, income, housing conditions, and so forth, for the major part of the city's history. I urge him to write another book, bringing the story up to date.

McGreevy has succeeded very well in his ambition to interrogate the common "progressive narrative about the canal" (p. 7). A fundamental theme is that that narrative "is built upon exclusions and elisions" (p. 7). It also overlooks the "remarkable contingency" of the canal and its effects in the way it implies a naturalness and inevitability of the achievement (p. 17). He says, however, that

"rather than directly fragmenting the progressive story ... I want to hold it together with what it excludes: the hidden, lost, and counterfactual stories of Lockport. My process is one of excavating beneath the layers of naturalness and inevitability, in an attempt to reveal the human agency, and the human responsibility" (p. 7). His strategy of "using Lockport as an example that mirrors broader transformations" is an excellent one, but these transformations continued through the twentieth century and Lockport mirrored them, too (p. 8). He has chosen great detail on limited topics rather than a broad, comprehensive account.

I have some suggestions on maps. It would have helped to have a full-page relief map of the region around Lockport, covering about 1,500 square miles and stretching from points west of Niagara Falls to some distance east of Lockport, showing clearly the topography of the Niagara Escarpment and important places in McGreevy's narrative like the falls, Buffalo, Black Rock, Eighteen-mile Creek and its branches, Tonawanta Creek, and the Welland Canal. Such a map would have made it much easier to grasp the description in the chapter "Locating Lockport." The book's only maps of the general region are small and very hard to read (it is a real challenge to find Black Rock, for example). Its digital elevation models of the north face of the Mountain Ridge, depicting two possible locations for locks, are helpful, although it would have helped if at least one of them were much larger. Readers would also appreciate a map of the built environment of all of Lockport, showing both the "upper town" and the "lower town" and many landmarks McGreevy mentions (like the famous "Big Bridge"). Instead we have small maps of a few small sections of the city, and they are also hard to read.

Note

[1]. On the "marriage of the waters," see also Roy G. Finch, *The Story of the New York State Canals* (Albany: State of New York, State Engineer and Surveyor, 1925), 7.

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