H-Net Reviews
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Leona J. Skelton. *Tyne after Tyne: An Environmental History of a River's Battle for Protection, 1529-2015.* Winwick: White Horse Press, 2017. Illustrations, maps. 296 pp. $95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-874267-95-9.

Reviewed by Leslie Tomory (McGill University)

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Commissioned by Aditya Ramesh (University of Manchester)

The field of water and river history has flourished in recent years. One survey article published in 2017 provides a long list of scholarship on rivers in the Western world from the last twenty years alone.[1] British rivers have not, however, benefited from this growth of the field to the same degree, with the exception of the River Thames, which has long been the object of study. This is beginning to change with such books as Jim Clifford's *West Ham and the River Lea* (2017). Leona J. Skelton, a senior lecturer in environmental history at Northumbria University, has now added her own contribution with a history of the River Tyne told over a long time range from 1529 to the present. This lengthy range allows Skelton to chart quite distinct periods in the river's history, which she divides into three main parts. The first and longest part runs from 1529 to 1855, the second to 1972, and the last takes the story to the present.

Skelton argues that each of these three periods of her history was marked by different "socio-environmental entanglements" with distinct salient characteristics in how people using and living along the river interacted with it. Skelton relies especially on Richard White's historiographic model of the "organic machine" from his study of the Columbia River (*The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* [1995]) and to a lesser extent on Sara B. Pritchard's "enviro-technical landscape" from her history of the Rhône (*Confluence: The Nature of Technology and the Remaking of the Rhône* [2011]). These and other historians have emphasized the intrinsic connections between the natural environment, human society, and technology in river systems, and have tried to move away from nature/human dichotomies. Unlike White, however, the concept of energy is not prominent in this book. Skelton does not focus on a single common element throughout the chapters, choosing rather different themes to focus on such areas as river navigation and perceptions of cleanliness. However, she does give particular attention to what "conservation" or responsibility for the state of the river meant in these periods. Moving from the mandate to keep the river clear for navigation before 1855, conservation shifted to fostering industrial development, and then finally to environmental concerns.

The first two chapters deal with the earlier period from 1529 to the mid-nineteenth century. The history begins when the Crown named the mayor and aldermen of the Newcastle Corporation the conservators of the Tyne and its tributaries via a parliamentary act. The purpose was to preserve the freedom of navigation from encroachment and to prevent silt from blocking the

channel. From that time, the river's conservators considered applications from riparian landowners to do works that could alter the river's flow, such as the construction of docks. The corporation's activity in this role was only sporadic to 1613, when new bylaws were passed regulating various activities along the Tyne, such as waste disposal and the construction of wharves. From this point onward, the corporation every year appointed water bailiffs and river jurors to monitor and hear cases of contraventions. These institutions continued to exist until 1835 when municipal reform laws replaced them with a River Committee. Skelton argues that the activity of the Tyne river court can be seen as a form of environmental regulation that prevented the overdevelopment of the river. In doing so, she tries to seek similarities with the environmental regulations that would emerge in the twentieth century, while recognizing that the motivations were to preserve the river for economical motives. While she is correct to point out that modes of environmental preservation existed long before the late nineteenth century, the commonalities with twentieth-century movements, which she mentions in a number of places, seem overdrawn.

The next chapters describe the Tyne Improvement Commission (TIC) activities from 1850 to 1968. The commission was created by Parliament with a mandate to foster the river's economic utility. This commission's principal interest was above all on the trade that flowed down the river. As in the earlier period, this included keeping its central channel deep and free-flowing for ship traffic. It developed a degree of expertise by employing a well-paid engineer to report on proposed works along the river, as well as waste disposed into it. The TIC was concerned with waste discharged into the river but only because it could be a barrier to navigation. This narrow interest meant that almost all applications for docks, sewers, and other structures along the river were approved. Whatever interest there was in preserving nature, on an institutional basis at least, was found in the Tyne Salmon Conservancy (TSC). It was founded in 1866 in the wake of Royal Commissions on salmon conservancy and was given the mandate to protect the fish in the river. Skelton argues that the TSC and its successors built up knowledge of the state of the fish in the Tyne (and other rivers in the area) that, while not producing immediate results, nevertheless proved valuable for environmental protection in the long term, especially after the 1950s. For example, scientific studies from the 1920s and 1930s explored water quality and fish species. The TSC made a concerted effort in these years to motivate a cleanup of the river as it became ever more polluted with effluent. Efforts to get the funding necessary for this from the central government, however, failed so that by 1940s, the Tyne was in worse shape than ever before. The 1950s were little better in this regard. The slow recovery from the Second World War and its accompanying austerity offered little scope for spending on environmental protection, even as local campaigns tried to bring attention to the problem. Untreated sewage continued to flow into the river. Finally, in the 1960s the situation began to change. Two new bodies were created to conserve watercourses in the area and to build sewer systems to spare the rivers. The Tyneside Joint Sewerage Committee organized the funding for a new sewer system, with construction beginning in 1972.

The last part of the book deals with the era from 1975. A major hydropower dam was constructed on the North Tyne at Kielder, creating the United Kingdom's largest artificial lake in 1982. Local resistance to the scheme, motivated by a fear of aesthetic degradation it was thought to entail, was fierce. The project went ahead nevertheless. Although the dam has served as a major source of hydroelectric power, it has not produced all of the intended benefits. The reservoir proved to be as valuable to the local chemical industry as had been hoped, while the dam's effects on the fish and water temperature have been controversial. Indeed, the deindustrialization of the Tyne

that limited the chemical industry also afforded the opportunity to prioritize environmental issues above all else. Beyond the first efforts to cleaning up the river, boosting biodiversity eventually became a goal for the Environmental Agency.

Tyne after Tyne is an interesting and welcome addition to the field of river history. Although at times its longer historiographic discussions make it a heavy read, it offers a number of important contributions. Beyond providing a good history of the River Tyne, Skelton is to be particularly congratulated for her effective use of oral histories to explore how people experienced a very polluted river before 1950. This kind of research can offer a different perspective to that derived from the writings of commissions and campaigners. The long-term perspective on the changing idea of "conservator" is also interesting. The book deserves close attention from river historians.

Note

[1]. Paula Schönach, "River Histories: A Thematic Review," *Water History* 9 (2017): 233–257.