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In *The Foundations of Glen Canyon Dam*, historian Erika Marie Bsumek centers the story of the construction of an iconic dam not on engineers and workers, nor on conservationists and preservationists, but instead on Indigenous peoples and their interactions with various agents of settler colonization. Flipping the script on one of the epochal events of twentieth-century American environmental history (decentering David Brower and Floyd Dominy, for example) makes this book a significant contribution to environmental history. An auspicious trend in recent years has been the emergence of territorial land acknowledgments, frequently delivered at the beginning of conferences or invited talks. Bsumek begins the book with a preface that serves as such an acknowledgment, interweaving elements of her own family history with the layered histories of Utah, the Colorado River, Glen Canyon Dam, and the diverse peoples who have inhabited western North America. Upon learning more about her grandfather and other people involved in the construction of the dam, she found she “could not write another history of the dam without exploring the ways that the building of it was connected to the history of the Navajo Nation, Diné Bikéyah, other Indigenous peoples of the region, and to the longer history of the colonization and development of the West” (p. viii). Her personalized acknowledgment grabs the reader’s attention, paving the way for her to concisely introduce her methodological approach. She uses oral history interviews as well as archival manuscripts and published primary sources to expand our definition of infrastructure and to foreground Indigenous perspectives. In so doing, Bsumek makes a compelling case that “white settlers and immigrants like those in my family—and many, many others—both participated in and have benefitted from the infrastructures of dispossession that went into building the foundations of the modern American West” (p. xi). The mere fact that a Utahn (like her grandfather) did not participate in a massacre does not mean they did not benefit from such “infrastructures of dispossession” as the construction of a massive dam (or earlier events, such as homestead legislation or the creation of a national monument).

Bsumek, a professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin, previously wrote *Indian-Made: Navajo Culture in the Marketplace, 1848-1960* (2008), an acclaimed book on the marketing and sale of Navajo crafts by dealers and corporations. She went on to publish an evocative essay on Norman Rockwell’s painting, *Glen Canyon Dam* (1969), in *Environmental History*, which seems to have marked an early stage in the
process of researching and writing *The Foundations of Glen Canyon Dam*.[1] It is surprising that Bsumek does not include Rockwell in the narrative of the book, though his painting does grace the book's “gallery” of beautiful color images. Nevertheless, the book brings to full fruition an essential insight from her embryonic essay, namely, that we should regard the dam historically through Indigenous eyes. The full story embraces “dispossession” and cultural erasure as well as active participation and agency.

This book argues that “Glen Canyon Dam sits on more than its physical foundation; it rests on layers of social and political regional development that demand our attention” (p. 3). As well, “the dam’s construction rests on the foundation of Indigenous dispossession” (p. 4). But erasure and dispossession are not the entire story. She also identifies and contextualizes Indigenous voices, such as past Navajo Nation chairman Raymond Nakai, who supported the construction of the dam but was silenced (in what seems to have been a non-malicious way) at the 1966 dedicatory ceremony. The town that became Page, Arizona—where construction workers lived—had been built on land sold by the Navajo Nation in an important exchange chronicled later in the book. In addition, roughly a thousand Navajos worked on the dam. Her admonition that this history “should not be overlooked in discussions about the dam’s past, present, or future” makes this a strikingly relevant book, especially given recent reporting on decreasing water levels in the Colorado River (p. 5).

Overall, the book is organized chronologically by eras or generations defined by the sequential arrival of representative individuals to the Colorado Plateau. As a result, her “episodic approach” is somewhat reminiscent of Frederick Jackson Turner’s influential but outdated description of waves of different types of frontier settlers, absent Turner’s paean to democratization (p. 15). In her hands, it is a powerful tool to summarize the residual impact of one generation of human behavior and activities on the next, but it does leave gaps. Skipping over the long period of Spanish imperialism in the Southwest, Bsumek begins her book in the mid-nineteenth century with Latter-day Saint (LDS) exploration, migration, and settlement. She follows and expands on Diné scholar Angelo Baca’s pithy summary that “displaced people displace[d] people” (p. 9). While carefully distinguishing where the views of such leaders as Brigham Young diverted from the views of typical LDS settlers, she does identify common tendencies. For example, Native Americans occupied a unique position in LDS theology, which undergirded simultaneously dispossession of Indigenous lands and redemptive justifications for missionary activities well into the twentieth century. With the trenchant theme of water development coursing through the entire book, it is useful to identify places where the LDS—whose eye for identifying scarce water resources became legendary in the second half of the nineteenth century—learned from early contacts with the Utes, Paiutes, Diné, and others. The land was not empty, nor did LDS settlers learn all they needed to know about how to survive in the arid West from their own efforts and initiatives. The story of Rose Daniels, related through an earlier oral history project cited by Bsumek, poignantly captures intertwined themes of LDS social views and practices, the trade in Indigenous children, and Diné resilience and inventiveness.

Subsequent chapters detail the arrival of explorers, scientists, and engineers, continuing themes of water development and selective attribution of the sources of crucial geographical knowledge in the Colorado Plateau. In chapter 2, Bsumek places an iconic figure, John Wesley Powell (after whom the lake created by Glen Canyon Dam is named) alongside lesser-known scientists and explorers, such as William Douglass, Byron Cummings, and Herbert Gregory. More perhaps could have been written here on Powell, but he has his biographers. For Bsumek, Powell’s story is most useful in illustrating that personal curiosity
and sympathy—as well as facility in bringing new federal agencies, such as the Bureau of American Ethnology and the US Geological Survey, to bear on the Colorado Plateau—did not necessarily promote Indigenous interests. The new federal severalty policy, for example, constituted “cultural erasure” (akin to using the labor of Indigenous guides in mapping the West but not according them credit in the “discourse of discovery”) (pp. 62, 70). In the case of Gregory, Bsumek demonstrates that renaming places was another form of erasure and appropriation, though her interpretation of the origins of the term “Navajo Sandstone” is less convincing. More persuasive—and more impactful in later contexts—is Bsumek’s telling of the story of how Rainbow Bridge was “discovered” and set aside as a national monument, which “restricted Native peoples’ access to a sacred site they had visited for centuries” (p. 72). The next generational phase is characterized by engineers and ecologists who came to regard the eventual dam site at Glen Canyon as crucial to regional development plans. Angus Woodbury, a Utahn, supported the Colorado River Storage Project against the Sierra Club and other environmental organizations despite his status as a published ecologist. More information on the Colorado River Compact of 1922 and the construction of Hoover Dam would have been welcome in this chapter. Primary sources unpacking details from the largely forgotten Rainbow Bridge-Monument Valley Expedition are interesting, but this chapter does seem to race inexorably toward inclusion of Glen Canyon Dam in master plans for hydroelectric development of the Southwest. What matters in Bsumek’s analysis is that engineers and ecologists “unconsciously and knowingly erased Indigenous contributions to regional development” in their reports (p. 121).

The story of the construction and management of Glen Canyon Dam takes on less of the previous air of inevitability in chapter 4, which focuses on elected officials and the contingencies of politics. Bsumek highlights two influential LDS members, politicians, and dam supporters, George Dewey Clyde of Utah and Stewart Udall of Arizona. Clyde was a water engineer who ascended to state governor (1957-65), while Udall emerged as an influential environmentalist during and after his service as secretary of the interior in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations (1961-69). This reminds readers that the LDS remained present and impactful in preceding generations of exploration and engineering consultation in the Colorado Plateau. Referencing the inclusion of LDS elder Theodore Burton in the 1966 dedication ceremony for the dam further amplifies the point. In addition, she argues in chapter 4 that LDS politicians not only tended to support the construction of Glen Canyon Dam but were also “some of the key backers” of the policy of tribal termination at the federal level (p. 129). Bsumek includes some powerful anecdotes and quotations here, including Senator Arthur V. Watkins (Utah) insisting that Indigenous peoples “stand on their own feet and become a white and delightful people as the Book of Mormon prophecied” (p. 136). Watkins supported both the dam and tribal termination. Primary sources from LDS tourists visiting Rainbow Bridge and Hole-in-the-Rock add more weight to a powerful chapter (laying claim to LDS sacred ground while ignoring or erasing its Indigenous sacred past). Returning focus to the LDS also has the effect of bringing attention to the response of Diné politicians, such as Sam Ahkeah and Raymond Nakai, whose support for the dam was sought and (perhaps for some readers, surprisingly) obtained by state and federal politicians. Bsumek faithfully communicates Indigenous arguments in favor of the dam. Conservationist projections of recreational opportunities on beautiful Lake Powell were less important for the Diné than the tactic of conditionally supporting the dam to delay termination or of focusing on the value of irrigation water for Diné farmers and ranchers. More information on the federal stock reduction program in the 1930s would have added more context and weight to the post-World War II primary sources. Adding speeches or other
sources from additional midcentury politicians might have made the chapter more unwieldy, but previous discussions of the significance of names did lead me to consider the absence here of long-time senator Carl Hayden (Arizona), after whom the visitor center is named. However, her use of primary sources from the lobbying organization Aqualante adds evocative support to this chapter on the important and contingent interactions between LDS and Diné politicians.

The final chapter tracks the emergence of dissatisfaction of Indigenous peoples with the management of Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell in the late 1960s and 1970s. Diné politicians like Nakai retain center stage, but here they are joined by lawyers, judges, and environmentalists. For Indigenous people in the region, the economic benefits of the dam did not match expectations. More significantly, creation of the lake threatened Rainbow Bridge by bringing water—and many more white tourists—to its threshold. Bsumek unpacks the unfolding legal collaboration between the Diné and such environmentalists as David Brower, which culminated in the case of Badoni v. Higginson (1977). Judge Aldon J. Anderson, an LDS member and descendant of apostle Ezra Benson, ruled against Navajo First Amendment religious claims in this case. Bsumek uses the case as a springboard to revisit and expand on earlier debates about the practicability of a diversion dam to create more of a land buffer around Rainbow Bridge. Specifically, she again criticizes Interior Secretary Udall, whose reliance on Woodbury’s arguments and whose “failure to substantially consult with the tribe also illustrated just how effective and robust the region’s infrastructure of dispossession had become” (p. 183). LDS colonists and their descendants thus continued to exert tremendous influence on regional decision-making processes despite the new collaborations between Indigenous stakeholders and national environmentalists. As her epilogue makes clear, this is the only way to end a narrative that continues to unfold. Her poignant story about Paiute guide Jim Mike finally being paid in 1974 for his work supporting the Cummings-Douglass expedition of 1909 fits well with Bsumek’s counternarrative of Indigenous history and agency. Indigenous people still “protect and worship at the arch,” and the National Park Service (who paid Mike) does collaborate with Diné leaders on site management (p. 188). Her identification of “a more inclusive infrastructure” in the current generation ends with debates over decommissioning Glen Canyon Dam and the establishment of Bears Ears National Monument (p. 191).

In a book such as this, with its mixture of narrative and analysis, definitions of terms are crucial. “Infrastructure,” for example, is both “social” and “physical” (p. 5). Bsumek defines this and other terms (such as “dispossession” and “settler colonialism”) in the introduction, appropriately citing prior works by such scholars as Patrick Wolfe and Andrew Curley, whose allusion to “infrastructure” as “colonial beachheads, establishing the conditions for future dispossession,” is crucial to Bsumek’s argument (p. 6). This is a useful corrective to the conventional view of infrastructure as massive public works projects. Perhaps even more so than the dam itself, for example, the establishment of Rainbow Bridge National Monument during the Taft presidency serves as such a beachhead for Bsumek: discovery of a place deemed special enough to preserve as a monument was facilitated by Indigenous guides; its monumental status was enacted with no Indigenous political backing; and in later years, its status actually constricted Indigenous autonomy and constricted Diné spiritual practice. Telling the multiple stories and perspectives of Rainbow Bridge spans the entire book and helps highlight this book’s important contribution to American environmental history. Its potential audience includes residents and policymakers in the Colorado Plateau and in Washington, DC, as well as students in undergraduate and graduate courses on American environmental history. There are gaps in the narrative. One may wish for more information on uranium mining or,
in an earlier context, the Navajo Long Walk. As someone who studies the interrelationships between military campaigns and environmental change, I see the potential to integrate military officers and soldiers in the Civil War era more centrally into a framework of “infrastructures of dispossession” in the West. Bsumek’s conceptual framework is sturdy and capable of sparking similar scholarly investigations of other key historic sites. Most important, the humanity of her subjects shines through, and her territorial land acknowledgment for Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell is just and relevant.

Note


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