

# LRC

LITERARY REVIEW OF CANADA

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MARK KINGWELL

## In praise of boredom

The modern life of a timeless condition



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ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

DYLAN REID  
Richard Florida's  
Frankenstein moment

ANNA A. BERMAN  
Love, war and the  
Tolstoys

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Christopher Ondaatje on the forgotten genius of Humboldt + Christopher Moore on fixing Parliament + Rosemary Westwood on feminist non-polemics + Kenneth Kidd on the sale of a Canlit icon + Heather Menzies on people vs. water + J.C. Sutcliffe on Pasha Malla + Andrew Forbes on Pierre-Luc Landry

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In Memoriam

**Ron Atkey**

February 15, 1942 – May 12, 2017

The LRC is deeply saddened by the loss of a long-standing advisory council member, and will miss his steadfast support.

In Memoriam

**Michael Bliss**

January 18, 1941 – May 18, 2017

The LRC is also deeply saddened by the loss of a frequent contributor, who will be missed.

Cover art and pictures throughout the issue, unless otherwise indicated, by **Natalie Very B.**

Natalie Very B. is a Polish-Canadian illustrator based in Toronto. She is a painter, digital artist and storyteller with focus on Polish folklore, female bodily existence and the secrets of the faraway galaxies. [www.natalieveryb.com](http://www.natalieveryb.com)  
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# The Line Aquatic

*Counternarratives of the much-mythologized waters at our border*

HEATHER MENZIES

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## **Border Flows: A Century of the Canadian-American Water Relationship**

*Lynne Heasley and Daniel Macfarlane, editors*

University of Calgary Press

336 pages, softcover

ISBN 9781552388952

## **The Death and Life of the Great Lakes**

*Dan Egan*

W.W. Norton & Company

364 pages, softcover

ISBN 9780393355550

## **Downstream: Reimagining Water**

*Dorothy Christian and Rita Wong, editors*

Wilfrid Laurier University Press

273 pages, softcover

ISBN 9781771122139

**T**HE DOMINANT NARRATIVE OF CANADA'S biggest waterway, the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River, has been that of empire building, nation building and, more recently, globalization. As historian Donald Creighton boldly asserted in his classic *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence*—quoted in the new anthology *Border Flows: A Century of the Canadian-American Water Relationship*—"the dream of the commercial empire of the St. Lawrence runs like an obsession through the whole of Canadian history."

First, there were the canals—the Lachine, Welland and Erie, followed by the mega-scale St. Lawrence Seaway, allowing a burgeoning array of products to move across this ever-expanding infrastructure. In 1957 CBS newscaster Walter Cronkite described the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway as "the greatest engineering feat of our time ... conquering nature on a scale and in a fashion never before attempted." Then there were the hydro projects, harnessing the kinetic power of Niagara Falls, generating electricity for export and domestic industry. The first of these power plants was the world's largest hydroelectric plant when it was completed, in the 1930s. Daniel Macfarlane, one of the co-editors of the worthy if uneven *Border Flows* anthology, describes this in his essay, "Dam the Consequences," as "hydraulic nationalism."

*Border Flows* focuses largely on the relationship between countries in the joint management of the

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*Heather Menzies is the author of ten books, most recently the award-winning Reclaiming the Commons for the Common Good (New Society, 2014).*



waters that form 40 percent of the Canada-U.S. border. It addresses the legacy of legally enabling big developments, and parenthetically defending the national interest and sovereignty in the Arctic. There is no inkling in that narrative of these waters being entities in their own right, living bodies with destinies of their own.

Water may be the ultimate shape shifter. Transmuting from solid to fluid to vaporous breath, it pulses in our blood and sustains all life on earth. It is much like language that way—and equally shape shifting as it sustains the earth's cultures. So it is fitting that *Border Flows*, along with two other recent books on water, specifically the water of the Great Lakes and Canada-U.S. borderlands, can be read on

two levels, not just for their alternately dire and inspiring content. *The Death and Life of the Great Lakes*, by Dan Egan, is a Milwaukee journalist's personal quest to know how the precious Great Lakes could have been brought so low by invasive species, and what hope there is that he can take his son fishing where he went as a boy himself. *Downstream*,

another anthology, carries on conversations started at a 2012 conference on ways of knowing and relating to water, and attended by artists and scientists, elders and environmentalists. All three are solid, commendable books. The bonus is in reading them through the lens of language, because it is here that established narratives can persist. Through the alchemy of other language, metaphors and stories, they can also be challenged and re woven into something more relevant and responsive to our times.

**There is no inkling in that narrative of these waters being entities in their own right, living bodies with destinies of their own.**

Happily, *Border Flows* and Egan's journalistic account largely focus on what might be called the counternarrative to the nature-conquering rendering of the progress myth. They address the shadow side of daring to take down the barriers

separating the Great Lakes from the seas of the world—through canal building, plus the cavalier breaching of the Continental and Laurentian Divides—to let in the world of commerce. The result has been a cascading succession of ecological disasters in an ongoing inundation of foreign species.

Both Egan and one of the *Border Flows* authors, Nancy Langston, chronicle the invasion of the sea lamprey and the resultant devastation of the Great Lakes trout fishery, although Langston argues that overfishing, pollution and habitat loss had already pushed the trout to the brink. Next came the stealth-entry species, carried Trojan Horse-style in the ballast tanks of global freighters: in 1965, a bottom-burrowing worm native to the Black Sea; then, in the 1970s, and also from the Black Sea, the zebra mussel that, with each one multiplying at a rate of a million eggs a year, quickly clogged intake pipes not just for city water systems but power plants as well. And now the threat is Asian carp, which can decimate local water life as they vacuum up the entire bottom end of the food chain. As Egan puts it: "They don't gobble up their competition. They starve it out by stripping away the plankton upon which every other fish species directly or indirectly depends." And throughout there has been pollution from heavy industry and now from run-off from farm fertilizers, causing not just algae blooms but also toxic blue-green algae blooms that poison water for drinking and swimming.

There have been valiant and often successful responses to these threats, channelled through some important Canada-U.S. treaties, and institutions such as the International Joint Commission, founded in 1909. Here, concerned scientists and policymakers have stickhandled political agendas toward responsible management of the shared waterways and, increasingly, preserving and even restoring their health. As Noah D. Hall and Peter Starr write in their pleasingly accessible chapter on the Canada-U.S. Great Lakes treaty in *Border Flows*, the 1972 signing of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement marked "a historic shift in the countries' water relations. Long gone were the days when access and navigation were primary concerns; water quality moved to the fore."

Subsequent revisions in 1978, 1987 and 2012 strengthened the agreement, mandating the restoration of the "chemical, physical and biological integrity of the waters of the Great Lakes Basin Ecosystem," prohibiting the discharge of toxic substances and increasing the scope of citizen engagement. In the absence of enforcement measures, this mandated participation has yielded "an informed and engaged citizenry on both sides of the border, which has led to improved transnational protection of the Great Lakes."

This is vital, given the historic moment. U.S. president Donald Trump has announced plans to defund the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, valued at some \$300 million a year, leaving the work to local and state governments. And the Great Lakes, which hold 20 percent of the world's remaining supply of surface freshwater, now faces a new threat to its integrity: corporate pressure to permit bulk water exports and diversions. The World Economic Forum has warned that the world faces water bankruptcy, with more than half the global population facing water shortages.

At the same time, the cadences of another narrative can be heard. It is in the voices of implicated citizens, allying themselves with these bodies of water as entities that deserve recognition and respect. It is also present in two recent court decisions—one in India and one in New Zealand, where rivers were recognized as sacred and having agency in their own right. In both cases, the

conferring of legal personhood on a river by a court (the Ganges and Yamuna in India, the Whangamui in New Zealand) means that harm inflicted on the body of water will be viewed legally on par with harm inflicted on a person. Although no Canadian court has yet made such a ruling, the so-called court of public opinion has been listening to the Great Lakes Water Walkers, a movement founded by two Anishinaabe grandmothers in 2003 to walk around each of the Great Lakes, speaking to and enacting the Anishinaabe truth that water is precious and sacred. This ethos is also evident in *Downstream: Reimagining Water*, which contains a chapter on the Water Walkers. It is a timely read that lends depth and resonance to some of the material and voices in the other two books.

Astrida Neimanis begins her chapter by quoting one of *Downstream's* co-editors, Rita Wong, who

## Trump has announced plans to defund the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, valued at \$300 million a year, leaving the work to local and state governments.

has come to believe that "water has a syntax I am still trying to learn." She then goes on to wonder, as she puts it, "if I think *with* water rather than *about* it, and if I invite water to be a collaborator in how I imagine or theorize the world, might I also treat water better." Similarly, in their dialogic chapter "Moving with Water," Alannah Young Leon and Denise Marie Nadeau begin by quoting aboriginal elder Ellen White: "The old people always knew what water was and what water said and how to connect with it." Encouraged thus to "work from body wisdoms," these authors go on to share some of the new thinking that drives their water advocacy work.

*Downstream* stakes out a bold and creative claim to collaborative and cross-cultural eco-spiritual-neo-traditional knowing and, with it, new approaches to policy and action. It ends with a kind of poetic summary by acclaimed writer and scholar Larissa Lai. Here, Lai highlights the essay by Violet Caibaosai, one of the founders of the Water Walkers advocacy movement:

As she step-stitches herself back together, she also step-stiches the fragmented living world back together ... The water walk heals because it is a moving relationship between the human body and water, mediated by Anishnawbe traditional understandings rather than any other cultural form.

The essay she refers to, which is a chapter in the book, is called "Water Walk Pedagogy." In it, Mary Anne Caibaosai writes about knowing through doing and about how, even as the presence and movement of these indigenous women gain public attention and attract allies with local people contributing food, money, shelter and a speaking platform along the way, she herself continues to learn. Depicting her experience of walking the roads, carrying a pail of water, around first one of the Great Lakes and then, next year, another, she recounts the journey as personal memory. "The gravel of the road's shoulders bears my tears as I remembered residential school days, girls running away from our school ... As I remember, Nibi

(Water) again is doing her healing work, washing away toxic memories."

Continuing to honour traditional aboriginal perspectives, Lai repeats award-winning author Lee Maracle's assertion that water is its own self, "it owns itself." To grasp this, and make it part of our consciousness involves, for her, a kind of translation of language to reclaim something of our original mother tongue. "To understand the body of the Earth as a living being, as part of a self that is larger than the self might be to begin to understand what Indigenous peoples mean when they talk about 'all my relations.'" "Downstream is a project about reconnecting to the Earth," she concludes. Moreover, it is at least partly attainable by identifying with water "as a response-ability we have always had."

Turning this owned and uttered interconnection into something that could make a difference is another matter. Still, there are hopeful hints of this "response-ability" in the other two books. For me, it is there in the drive of someone like Dan Egan taking time off his regular newspaper job to pursue his concern for the Great Lakes, and in the language he uses to complement the facts from his research. His

concern and alarm at what we have done to our water are palpable. "Contaminated ballast water is the worst kind of pollution because it cannot be fixed by plugging a pipe or capping a smokestack. It does not decay and it does not disperse. It breeds," he writes at one point.

*Border Flows* offers hope of a more progressive systemic response. Dave Dempsey, a policy advisor to the International Joint Commission, writes of the cracks appearing in the longstanding pre-eminence of national sovereignty, with the acceptance of the "indivisibility of shared waters" gaining a beachhead in policy circles, opening the path to a new governance model. Another essay describes the boundary-disrupting gatherings of West Coast Salish peoples where they talk about their shared waterways and all the things that touch on this. The 2002 gathering drew together 72 tribes and bands across 72,000 kilometres of land spanning the Canada-U.S. border. Besides fostering community reunification and cultural revival, the gatherings are serving to revive old practices of habitat care and conservation, and to stake a claim to the relevance of this "sub-state, decentralized, participatory arrangements for water governance," write authors Emma Norman, chair of native environmental science at a U.S. college, and Alice Cohen, a professor at Acadia University in Nova Scotia, cross-appointed between earth and environmental science and environmental and sustainability studies.

In his essay on "Border Ecologies in Boundary Waters," James Feldman writes hopefully about the new concept of "hybridity" in discussions of the environment, the new recognition that nature and culture are not separate, but intimately interconnected in the world we inhabit.

To honour and give voice to that hybridity requires precisely the kind of hybrid language and storytelling these books represent, combining the objectivity of modern science with the subjectivity of implicated, embodied voice. We need to know this Earth from the inside, not just from the outside looking down as if from a spaceship. There is a place for poetry alongside statistical data, for myth, traditional and scientific knowledge weaving old and modern narratives into something new. LRC