

## Compte rendu

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***Hydro: The Decline and Fall of Ontario's Electric Empire.* By Jamie Swift and Keith Stewart. (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2004. x + 240 p., chronology, notes, index. ISBN 1-896357-88-1 \$24.95)**

The institutions of Canadian science and technology which may be said to have a well-developed historiography are few and far between. The Canadian Pacific Railway is an obvious example, but little of the writing on it deals with matters technological. The National Research Council is another, thanks in no small part to historians associated with this journal and its parent society. A third is the Hydro Electric Power Commission of Ontario, once the largest power utility in the world, for a brief moment overseer of the largest civil engineering project in the world, and a frequently cited example of the possibilities of "public power." Born

amidst controversy and living in the ambiguity of a public enterprise within a capitalist political economy, the utility has provided historians with ample material to discuss broadly important issues in the setting of the Ontario provincial state. The authors of this study, Jamie Swift, a writer and journalist, and Keith Stewart, an environmental analyst and activist, chronicle the last twenty-five years of Hydro through and beyond its April Fool's Day 1999 break-up into several successor entities. Properly and commendably they recognize that the demise of Hydro is incomprehensible except in a longer historical context, a context to which they frequently appeal.

Although the end came on a Tory government's watch, the beginning of the end can be traced to the ubiquitous Maurice Strong, head of Hydro during the one-term New Democratic Party government of Bob Rae. While the break-up of Hydro succeeded—if such a description can be allowed—full privatization was beaten back, leaving Ontario with an ill-coordinated hodgepodge of public enterprise, growing private sector involvement, regulation, and open markets. Add blackouts real and threatened, a prolonged strike, sundry botched decommissionings and recommissionings of coal-fired and nuclear plants and voodoo energy pricing policies, and it is difficult not to describe the province's current energy sector as more a shambles than a system. This book is the story, told more in anger than sadness, of how this came to be. At one level the authors' argument is straightforward: a blinkered commitment to hard energy paths in general, and the nuclear option in particular, plus a dose of hubris by Hydro's engineers and managers intersected with Reaganomics, privatization fetishism, and a broad political consensus over the superiority of market solutions to doom Hydro. The authors portray Hydro managers' view that power usage, demand and supply would continue to increase without obvious limits as bizarre; if so then the history of energy usage in over a number of centuries has made that view widespread. The authors' main point is really that energy is too important to be left to the free market. Of course that is what Ontario Hydro was all about in the first place. It does however leave the authors with a difficult story to tell in which the public utility is both villain and victim. They come closest to realizing their problem when they note the lack of public support for Hydro during its demise. Partly its own actions and partly the relentless attacks of its critics left this once genuinely popular institution with few friends allowing exactly those private-sector free-market agents so despised by the authors to be in a position to kill it off in their own interests.

There is a bit of a retro feel to this argument, reminding this reviewer of the mid-1970s when Amory Lovins' "soft-energy paths" was a new

idea, and the Last Whole Earth Catalogue still important. But expecting cooperative windmill farms to replace the nuclear plants in Darlington and the Bruce is simply naïve. We are also left in no doubt about who wears the white hats (windmillers and anti-nuclear activists) and who wears the black hats. Energy Probe is guilty of apostasy in embracing market solutions. Ontario's Premier Bob Rae, in a delightful oxymoron, is an "extreme moderate" (p. 51). The president of CUPE 1000 also known as the Power Workers' Union is a "management stooge" (p. 166). Nefarious pro-privatization forces are characterized as "users," "droolers," and "con men" (p. 128). In a serious work this is not a level of rhetoric likely to increase credibility. Indeed it is indicative of a work which is more advocacy than analysis and more high-end journalism than academic-level scholarship. The research too tends more to the journalistic, relying on newspaper reports, secondary sources and interviews.

A major strength of this book is its use of comparative material, looking at privatization in Chile and the United Kingdom and the comparative United States cases of Vermont and California, the latter including an ineffective if not quite gratuitous discussion of Enron. The authors chose their examples to make their points well, however the more challenging instances of Quebec and France are elided or ignored. As well a useful chronology ending with the August 2003 black-out supplements an approach that while generally chronological has so many asides that it is not always easy to follow the course of events. Unfortunately the book also contains some errors which truly shake the reader's confidence. Few places in the history of electrical technology are more famous than Pearl Street, home of Thomas Alva Edison's first central station; this book instead locates it on Wall Street (p. 33). Most studies find electricity demand to be relatively price-inelastic; but the assertion that the "demand for electricity has little to do with price" (p. 134) is worse than simplistic. Nuclear power plant workers are described as wearing "thermoluminescent decimetres" (p. 185); this makes no sense at all, for a "decimetre" is a unit of metric measurement. The device which measures exposure to radiation (or dosage and thus the name) is a "dosimeter." This is not just a spelling mistake, but rather an error raising questions about how well the authors understand what they are talking about.

Where will this book fit in the historiography of Hydro? Certainly it draws together important information and is a lively if at times overly tendentious read. It is not in the same category with the fine analytical studies of H. V. Nelles, *The Politics of Development: Forest, Mines and Hydro-Electric Power in Ontario, 1849-1941* (Toronto, 1974) or Neil

Freeman, *The Politics of Power: Ontario Hydro and Its Government, 1906-1995* (Toronto, 1996). Rather it is, consciously, part of the ongoing debate over energy policy and strikingly exemplifies the passions which public power has, does and doubtless will arouse.

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