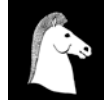




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Book Review

A History of Water in Modern England and Wales

John Hassan

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998

ISBN 0-7190-4308-5 (HB) £45.00. x + 214 pp.

This is a very welcome book because, considering the importance of the subject, the history of water in Britain has received relatively little systematic attention. During the present decade the privatised water industry has assumed an unprecedentedly high public profile despite the observation of one commentator in 1986 that for the rest of the century the water industry might be spared 'further public debate about general issues' (G Speight cited p.129). The public debate which *has* taken place during the 1990s concerning such water issues as privatisation, regulation, consumer costs and environmental standards characteristically lacks the informed historical background that the author seeks to provide.

Hassan comes to the subject from an economic history perspective and although he is anxious to engage with environmental history a selective approach has of necessity been taken and there is little detail provided on the science and technology of water and only passing reference to its social or cultural significance. The central theme of the book is the development and the changing orientations of water policy.

Much of the twentieth century history of water makes gloomy reading for those with an environmental interest. The inter-war and immediate post-war years were, according to Hassan, characterised by the 'paralysis of special interests' while the period of the regional water authorities (1973-89) is held to be noteworthy for the 'irresponsibility of government' towards the water industry.

The author repeatedly emphasises the degree to which water supply and sewage treatment – which is described as 'a Cinderella sector within a Cinderella industry' – has been starved of essential investment, subject to severe financial constraints, and has suffered from the macroeconomic objectives of governments which largely preferred to invest in projects with a higher public profile than water has – until the present decade – enjoyed. However, the book concludes on a more optimistic note with Hassan maintaining (p. 192) that 'the long-term decline in the quality of English and Welsh waters was decisively reversed from the late 1980s'.

The text of this book is not entirely free from errors – Michael Hestletine became interested in the Mersey in the early 1980s rather than the 1970s (p. 192) and Trent anglers are surely more interested in fishing for *roach* rather than *loach* (p. 184) for example – but apart from such minor quibbles the particular value of this work is in providing a guide through the complicated changes to the

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institutional framework of water over the last few decades. However, much of this book is essentially a distillation of published work and for an historical study the treatment of the formative Victorian and Edwardian periods is surprisingly brief. It is here that so much research remains to be undertaken.

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