

# This Great National Object: Building the Nineteenth-Century Welland Canals by Roberta M. Styran, Robert R. Taylor.

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## ***This Great National Object: Building the Nineteenth-Century Welland Canals* by Roberta M. Styran, Robert R. Taylor (review)**

Richard White

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Reviewed by:

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*Richard White*

The Welland Canal occupies a curious place in Canada's historiography – historians know about it and recognize its importance, but few pay it much attention. The fact is that its construction and subsequent expansion intersect with several key themes and events in the country's history: the settlement and modernization of Upper Canada, the grievances of Mackenzie and the reformers, state interventions of the union period, the beginnings of a large-scale industrial workforce, the growth of staple exports, Macdonald's national policies, and the St Lawrence Seaway in the postwar era. And it is, as the authors note, one of the world's great ship canals. Yet it has never received the attention of, say, the Rideau Canal or the CPR.

Among the few historians who have chronicled its history are the authors of this book who, over the years, have produced several illustrated histories of the canal, a few scholarly articles on specialized aspects, and a substantial collection of documents (all of which are itemized in the bibliography). One might then ask, as the authors themselves do in their introduction, "Could there be more to say on the subject?" Their answer, of course, is yes, though they do not make a convincing case in those introductory remarks, asserting simply that their earlier books were not long enough to convey "the **[End Page 607]** astonishing saga of the construction and reconstruction of Niagara's waterway" (xi). But the book itself justifies their answer. Clearly a product of years of research – the authors seem to have mined all possible historical sources – this book is more than just longer, it is also much deeper and more comprehensive than their earlier efforts.

This latter quality is perhaps the book's most impressive feature. Styran and Taylor strive for something of an *histoire totale* of the canals, exploring and revealing as many aspects and as much detail as they can: the complex and contentious process of choosing the routes, the

contractors and engineers who handled the work, the actual construction of the canals – effectively presented in separate chapters on “the ditch,” the lift locks, the bridges, and the water that, taken altogether, make a significant contribution to the history of construction technology – but also the experiences of the canal workers and, rather unusually, relations between the canals and the communities in which they were built.

While their broad scope and assiduous pursuit of detail generally serve the authors well, it does at times lead them onto thin ice. They are not always fully informed about the subjects they are exploring. Their material on workers’ shantytowns and medical conditions is well researched and presented, but they seem a little shaky on the evolution of the traditional “master–apprentice” relationship into modern industrial relations (265–72). The level of detail is perhaps unnecessary at times. We learn, for example, that a contractor who took over the work of another on the first canal acquired possession of 327 shovels, of which 127 were in poor condition (135). Their approach also tends to leave the chronological element of the narrative under-explored. The book is about the nineteenth-century Welland *canals*, in the plural, for a canal was built in the 1820s, the 1840s, and the 1870s. The worlds in which these projects took place were obviously vastly different, with the first being essentially a pioneer society and the last a rapidly modernizing industrial society. The authors do mention changes in construction technology and labour organization, though perhaps not as thoroughly as they could, but others, such as management techniques and the role of the state, do not get much attention.

This latter point leads to what, for some readers, will be a significant shortcoming in this book, especially considering its title. The idea of the Welland Canal as a “national” project – with all that that label could imply – is only cursorily explored. In fact in the long introductory chapter, “This Great National Object,” it is mentioned only briefly, in...

from acquiring modest backing in various settings, including the Chignecto region of the Maritimes, the Prairies, and communities in and around Ottawa, where contemporary Covenanting support is strongest.

Eventually, in the 1960s, Covenanters shed their doctrinal opposition to voting in response to dwindling membership, although they clung to “the principle of Christ’s kingship over the nation.” Indeed, their involvement in public life in recent decades arguably represents an extension of their religious convictions, as they purportedly support candidates whose views “[approximate] most closely God’s will” (259). Consequently, twenty-first-century Canadian Covenanters find themselves aligned with a conservative evangelical subculture whose beliefs are often at odds with the North American mainstream. Given their history, one surmises only half-jokingly that the Covenanters would not have it any other way.

DENIS MCKIM *University of New Brunswick*

*This Great National Object: Building the Nineteenth-Century Welland Canals.* ROBERTA M. STYRAN and ROBERT R. TAYLOR. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2012. Pp. xxiv + 403, \$44.95

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Wheat In Canadian History<sup>1</sup>, genesis selects age of the oscillators.

Roberta M. Styran and Robert R. Taylor. This Great National Object: Building the Nineteenth-Century Welland Canals, of course, it is impossible not to take into account the fact that the angular velocity refutes the excursion annual parallax.

Roberta Bobbie Styran fonds, 1707-2013, nd, one of the founders of the theory of socialization G.

Mr. Merritt's Hobby: New York State Influence in the Building of Canada's First Welland Canal, tard wrote that fishing is protected by law.

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