

Leona J. Skelton

Tyne after Tyne: An Environmental History of a River's Battle for Protection

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In this meticulously researched book, Leona Skelton provides a fresh approach to the environmental history of rivers – seeing them not as a passive backdrop to human activities, but as active agents within social, cultural, economic and political histories. Situated within the recent work which has brought attention to water and river history, the book aims to move the discussion of river history beyond the common preoccupation with the river Thames. In telling this history, the author structures the book broadly chronologically, with each chapter taking a period of the rivers chequered history.

The book's introductory chapter offers the conceptual framing of the book and provides an historiography of the River Tyne itself, exploring the recent scholarly work – within and beyond history – which has considered the river. In seeking to overcome the nature–culture dichotomy present in much historical work on rivers, Leona Skelton draws upon, or ‘stands on the shoulders of’ (p. 25), recent work from authors such as Richard White, Christian Schwagerl, Gregory Summers, Matthew Evenden, Mark Cioc and Sara Pritchard (to name just a few) who have sought to ‘complicate the artificial boundary that many people draw between the human and the natural’ (p. 25). The latter part of the chapter presents the methodological considerations central to the book – outlining the various archival sources utilised (recognising their respective strengths and limitations) and the use of oral histories. It is the latter which really bring this book alive. As recent work in this journal has noted, oral history is perhaps underutilised within environmental history and Leona Skelton presents, in the first chapter, a strong call to recognise its value and also presents practical reflections on the processes of oral history interviewing.

Chapters 1 and 2 consider the early modern period and through to 1855. A starting point is taken as 1529, when the English Crown assigned the mayor and alderman of Newcastle Corporation as ‘conservators’ of the River Tyne. Here, the aim of their role was to prevent the ‘choking up’ of the River and to create ‘a liquid highway’ (p. 35) to enable the transportation of goods and facilitate trade. What followed was the first form of management of the river – attempting to curb deposits into the river – lasting until the formation of a River Committee in 1835. The discussion presented in these two chapters has relevance beyond the specific case of the Tyne in noting, as Richard Grove has argued, that environmental concern (and management) predate 1800 and that the concerns voiced for the Tyne are similar to those seen in other parts of the world such as Venice. Moreover, the case poses the question of whether environmental change and damage can be categorised as negligible prior to

industrialisation and how the period saw a more democratic – albeit far from perfect – approach to managing the river.

Chapter 3 considers the work of the Tyne Improvement Commission (TIC) – which brought technical expertise into the discussion of the River's role and management. This account offers an insight into the importance of expert knowledge and how, during the period, the River's natural qualities were something to be overcome in the name of progress and 'improvement'. Their work, for example, focused on how disposal into the river might impede navigation and how technologies could be used to create and maintain, as the chapter's title suggests, 'a grand and deep river' to enable shipping traffic. The Tyne Salmon Conservancy (TSC) – the focus of chapter 4 – offered a voice in favour of trying to improve the environmental health of the river, but the author's discussion of their work illustrates the political power of industry in the period (up to the 1940s) in delaying concerted 'clean up action' until later in the twentieth century.

Chapters 6–8 consider the more recent history of the river. The 1950s and 1960s, the book shows, was the height of concern over the environmental quality of the river, with it being seen as an 'open sewer'. In sketching out this period, chapter 6 also relays the wider story of how local politics and governance often lie at the mercy of national concerns and priorities. The construction of a hydropower dam at Kielder in 1982 (chapter 7) served to create a new relationship between the river, its wider landscape and its people. This 'awesome and powerful and 'enviro-technical' spectacle' (p. 211) not only provided power, but also a new space of recreation. This latter theme is taken forward in chapter 8, which brings the story up to date, and considers the post-industrial uses of the Tyne – as environmental protection and use for recreation have dominated current discussion of the Tyne.

Tyne after Tyne is an excellent book which warrants a broad readership. The book will be of interest not only to river historians and those with a specific interest in Northeast England, but to historians, and especially environmental historians, more broadly. The broad time-sweep taken within the book is of value to those wishing to trace environmental concerns more generally, whilst the methodological insights and conceptual arguments offer a useful blueprint for future historical scholarship.

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