

***What is Water? The History of a Modern Abstraction.* By Jamie Linton. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010. xviii + 333 p., ill., maps. ISBN 9780774817028 \$34.95)**

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Reich's war effort at critical moments, including the spring of 1943. Wakelam's book will be of interest and benefit to students of air warfare and to students of the science and technology of the Second World War.

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***What is Water? The History of a Modern Abstraction.* By Jamie Linton.** (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010. xviii + 333 p., ill., maps. ISBN 9780774817028 \$34.95).

I leaped at the opportunity to review Jamie Linton's *What is Water?* Working in the earth sciences and surrounded by university colleagues studying various forms, attributes and meanings of water (hydrology, climatology, permafrost, wetlands, coastal erosion, sea-level rise, water transport, geopolitical conflict, and differing cultural concepts—just to name a few), it was difficult not to profit from the opportunity to enquire more deeply into such a hot topic. Given this multiplicity of interests and understandings, it is not surprising that, as Linton notes, water has an unlimited ability to convey metaphors. Despite the repetition *ad nauseam* of those metaphors in current media, Linton's confident critique of many of them results in an informative historical analysis that will leave most readers conscious of their previously limited understanding of one of earth's most important resources.

For most readers, that limited understanding stems not from any intellectual failing but rather from the nature of the water literature itself. Over the last sixty years, as Linton explains, most water research was written by hydrological engineers, natural scientists and resource managers who were concerned with water primarily as a quantifiable resource and as an economic commodity. Given that state of the literature, Linton is led to ask probing questions about how to expand the understanding of water—that is to say, how to find other ways of knowing water. Ultimately, he ponders how the recognition of water as a quantifiable object and economic good can be reconciled with its essential function of sustaining life. This contradiction, he argues, brings about a fundamental impasse in present society. The understanding of water, he believes, must be complexified. It must be viewed not solely as a quantifiable and commodifiable thing—for hydroelectric projects, farm irrigation, and drinking water—but also as a historical process wherein water becomes

what it is in relation to other things in space and time. This, then, is a book about the history of water as an abstraction and a critique of the kind of management thinking that flows from it.

While social scientists and humanists will certainly benefit from reading *What is Water?* for its insights into the broadly conceived interface between nature and society, the audience for this book ultimately lies outside of those fields. In a relational dialectic that Linton calls "hydrolectics," he attempts in this book to connect two disparate groups of readers through a process of engagement over the meaning of water. The first group is those in government agencies, private corporations, and water management experts (those who hold authority in hydrosocial relations). Inversely, the second group is those who, through the historical processes of modernity (quantification, regulation and management), have been disconnected from earlier hydrosocial relations by the first group. In both cases, Linton is trying to foster dialogue between these two unequal classes in order that both may find common ground through an increased understanding of the complex relations between the natural, social and economic meanings of water.

Despite the author's stated intentions, *What is Water?* is not a book that either group will find easy to digest without some background in nature-society philosophy. While it is written in a confident voice and peppered with intriguing philosophical insights, certain chapters demand to be reread several times in order to fully experience what the book has to offer. The first part (almost a fifth of the total work) is a philosophical tour de force not necessarily about water, but about the philosophical underpinnings (based upon much of the leading philosophical thought about modernity, nature and society) of Linton's attempt to complexify water. In the end, this section is a valuable exploration of the nature-culture binary that will be highly appealing to some readers while leaving others, without a taste for circular logic, feeling quite numb. What makes the other four-fifths of this book such a challenge is the repeated revisiting and restating of the philosophical concepts (relational dialectics, discourse, language, social relations, power, institutions, etc.) that make up that initial section. While this technique is quite useful in assisting readers less familiar with the philosophical literature, it will give more advanced readers a continual sense of *déjà vu*.

As a work emerging out of the fields of Canadian historical geography and environmental history, *What is Water?* makes an important argument for the need to escape the reductionism prevalent in the ways that modern science represents water (nature) as ahistorical and without changing cultural and political dimensions. To that end, Linton traces how modern water has incrementally become placeless over the last three hundred

years, as the links between society and water became abstract to the point that today all responsibility for maintaining relations with water is left to experts. Water, then, has become de-territorialized and de-materialized, while denying local specific human-environmental relations. Into this current impasse, the author brings the reader full circle at the end of the book, concluding with a chapter on “hydrolectics”. Hydrolectics is presented as a means of fostering society’s relations with water. Through the process of recognizing the complex natural and social nature of water, Linton argues, it may be possible to promote the reorienting of society’s response to water problems by increasing participation in decisions about water so that instead of striving to master the natural attributes of water, society strives to change water’s social nature.

A challenging read, *What is Water?* is well worth the investment in time in order to gain new insights into the natural and social meanings of water and to delve more deeply into the literature surrounding the nature-society binary. To that end, readers will find a perusal of the endnotes and bibliography of this book as instructive and rewarding as any chapter of the book itself.

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***Connecting the Dots: Social and Scientific Perspectives on Agriculture and Rural Life in Atlantic Canada.* Edited by Elizabeth Beaton. (Sydney, N.S.: Cape Breton University Press, 2009. 185 p., ill. ISBN: 978-1-8970-0939-0).**

This small volume presents the proceedings of a conference, “Sharing Knowledge on Agriculture and Rural Life in Atlantic Canada,” that was held in Mabou, Nova Scotia, in July 2006. Contributors include agronomists, cultural geographers, and sociologists from the region’s universities, as well as community organizers and environmental activists. Elizabeth Beaton, the editor and conference organizer, teaches in the Community Studies Department at Cape Breton University. The stirring keynote address (reprinted in the volume) was delivered by Dr. John Ikerd, Professor Emeritus in Agricultural Economics at the University of Missouri, who is a well-known commentator on contemporary issues in agriculture and society. Most of the essays deal with Cape Breton Island in northern Nova Scotia, but agriculture in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia is also addressed. The focus for all is the small farm and the family cultures that sustain them.

All the authors write in full awareness of the problems that face