Document généré le 25 avr. 2024 05:03

**Urban History Review**
**Revue d'histoire urbaine**

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# Harold Platt, *Sinking Chicago: Climate Change and the Remaking of a Flood-Prone Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018)

Daniel Macfarlane

Volume 46, numéro 1, fall 2017

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1059115ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1059115ar

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Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)
1918-5138 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Macfarlane, D. (2017). Compte rendu de [Michèle Dagenais, *Montreal, City of Water: An Environmental History* (translated by Peter Feldstein), (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017) / Harold Platt, *Sinking Chicago: Climate Change and the Remaking of a Flood-Prone Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, *46*(1), 73–74. https://doi.org/10.7202/1059115ar

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# *Book Reviews / Comptes rendus*

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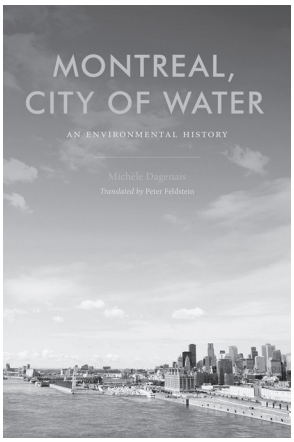


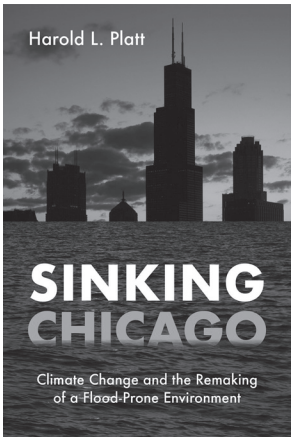


Michèle Dagenais's *Montreal, City of Water* and Harold Platt's *Sinking Chicago* are about big North American cities in the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence basin and their historical relationships to water. One is an American case study, the other is Canadian, making for a fascinating juxtaposition. Both are written by respected scholars who have been researching and writing about their respective urban areas for years. Both look at the co-construction and hybridization of the cities through an aquatic lens. Both posit water as a powerful historical actor while pointing to the importance of changing conceptions of water over time, but neither goes too far into a material determinist perspective or an extreme postmodernist approach where water is nothing but a social construct.

*Sinking Chicago* is, at base, a story of flooding and corruption. The book is split into two main periods: the first, from roughly 1885 to 1945, was a relatively "dry" period, followed by the second—and wetter—from the end of the Second World War until today. The Chicago area's long flood history was forgotten during the first era, leading to decisions and infrastructure that exacerbated the effects of the excessive precipitation in the latter period.

*Sinking Chicago* calls itself the first study of the effects of long-term climate change on an American city. More specifically, Platt examines how a changing climate taught or forced Chicago to adapt to a flood-prone environment, with varying success. Because of Chicago's low-lying and marshy position between Lake Michigan and a slight rise demarcating the Great Lakes basin from a watershed that eventually drains to the Mississippi, flooding has always been a problem. The drainage issues that exacerbated flooding also made water quality an issue: the waterways in what would become Chicago were notoriously sluggish and became conduits of diseases like typhoid and cholera.

The Sanitary District of Chicago's (SDC) late nineteenth-century reversal of the Chicago River and construction of a network of combined interceptor sewer lines to handle both wastewater and flooding, rather than the more expensive treatment options, "became the single-most-important decision in the city's history of its relationship with water and land" (17). This created important path dependencies, asserted a pattern of political expediency over technical expertise as well as incrementalism over coordinated planning, cemented the city's proclivity towards large-scale enviro-technical solutions, and ensconced the Chicago River as an open sewer and industrial conduit—a sacrifice zone—with Lake Michigan as the "ultimate sink."

The Windy City was all the while in the midst of rapid expansion. Chicago came to encompass what had been independent communities on the city's margins, turning them into suburbs and exurbs. The urban conglomeration's waterways expanded in a sense, too, as the Calumet region became the main harbour, since dreams of the Chicago River as a major water highway never materialized. Still, the tension remained as to whether the water bodies in central Chicago were best used for navigation and commerce, or sanitation and health. During the 1930s Chicago was forced to reduce the volume of the Chicago Diversion and start using water treatment technologies, and the Skokie Lagoons were developed as part of the New Deal. As the author puts it, "The political legacy of conservationism on Chicago's flood-prone environment during the interwar years was a mixture of significant gains and lost opportunities" (116).

Changing climate meant that the rain returned in the second half of the twentieth century, as did corruption scandals. In a case of shifting baseline syndrome, Chicagoans had forgotten how flood-prone their city was and made things worse by paving over and building on much of Chicagoland. Raw sewage continued to frequently overflow into the water bodies providing the public water supply. Between 1975 and 1985 the TARP, or Deep Tunnel, was built as a sort of massive holding tank for the extreme, yet common, rainfalls. The completion of this deep tunnel allowed the city to stop using chemical disinfectants for public water; but that approach quickly proved inadequate, and another expansion phase was embarked upon. Improving water quality was a double-edged sword, however. As Platt explains in

his penultimate chapter, cleaner water allowed invasive species to thrive, for example, but was part of a public movement to reclaim the river as a recreational pathway rather than an industrial corridor. In the conclusion the author covers more recent developments and isn't shy about applying historical lessons to current and future debates about the city's liquid trajectory.

*Sinking Chicago* is an engaging read, sophisticated but accessible to non-academics. The same is true of *Montreal, City of Water,* a slightly updated English-language translation of a book originally published in 2011 in French. This city in Quebec does not have the flood problems that its Illinois counterpart has historically dealt with, in large part because of the physical setting and topography. The book surveys the different urban aspects of water in Montreal, interspersed with selected case studies. Dagenais synthesizes differing approaches to the uses of water that are often separated: manipulation and levels; channelization and navigation; pollution and water quality; cultural and social meaning; and recreation. The author delves into the ways that hydrological "perceptions" change over time. Indeed, the way that water is perceived in Montreal helps determine chapter organization.

*Montreal, City of Water* is divided into two primary sections: the first, from the mid-nineteenth to the start of the twentieth, was marked by the construction of water supply and sewer systems as well as harbourfront development. The second period corresponds to the second half of the twentieth century when the waterways and their banks were urbanized with the increasing use of powerful technologies. Chapter 1 provides a historiographic survey of how Montreal's geography and water was perceived in pre-modern times. The next chapter is about the dual perception of water as both a menace and resource. After 1850 the "sanitary ideal" became widespread, with the concomitant result that water was commodified and brought under the aegis of municipal government. Chapter 4 continues the emphasis on sanitation in the nineteenth century. Problems arose when the same water that accepted pollution and waste became the source of the public water supply, especially with growing scientific awareness of disease. Montreal dealt with this problem in several ways. One was to convert water into infrastructure by transforming and covering waterways—that is, turn them into sewers. Regulation of water quality and quantity required the intrusion of local government into more aspects of daily life, particularly since government had the requisite expertise and technocrats. And surrounding communities and suburbs became linked to Montreal through the linking of water infrastructure: Montreal made its sewage the problem of surrounding communities.

Over time, Montreal's waterfront was transformed into a harbour and industrial zone. While many might think first of the St. Lawrence River and Mont Royal reservoirs when it comes to Montreal and water, Dagenais turns the reader's attention to other water bodies, such as the Rivière des Prairies on the north end of the island, There, the extension of Montreal's water networks beyond the historic city proper involved efforts such as hydroelectric dams.

Since the 1970s there has been a drive to reconnect with the city's water, especially the St. Lawrence. But this also leads to a mythologizing of past relationships to the river and the false notion that Montreal had become disconnected from its waterways. As Dagenais shows, the city had always been tightly connected to its waters, but the nature of those connections has changed over time, variously favouring industrial, economic, public health, and other interests. *Montreal, City of Water* demonstrates the reciprocal relationship between the city and its flows: how spreading urbanization transformed Montreal's hydrology, and how its waterways and modifications contributed to urban development.

Dagenais and Platt both prove that the historical development and current status of these cities cannot be fully understood without reference to their watery past. The two authors strikingly demonstrate the ways that water is politicized, and the ways that politics can hinge on water. Neither *Sinking Chicago* nor *Montreal, City of Water* is framed as declensionist stories, as the authors equally show that the urban aquatic health in Montreal and Chicago is better than it was a few decades ago—though not nearly as good as it needs to be, especially considering the unpredictability of climate change. *Montreal, City of Water* and *Sinking Chicago* will be of interest not only to students and denizens of these great cities, but to urban water, planning, and environmental historians in general, as well as recreation and public health scholars. Those interested in urban and municipal governance will have much to relish in these two books, which should be required reading for any planners, politicians, or bureaucrats responsible for the future of Montreal or Chicago.

Daniel Macfarlane
Western Michigan University

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**Donald Dennie. *Une histoire sociale du Grand Sudbury: le bois, le roc et le rail* (Sudbury, Prise de parole, 2017), 390 pages**

Wood, rock, and rails have, as Donald Dennie tells us, provided important settings for the human history of today's Greater Sudbury. Readers of this work, the first full-length history of the region written in French, learn something of each factor; but they will encounter more of the human factors that were at work. Dennie's interest in class conflict and entrepreneurial roles adds useful insights into the "Nickel Belt," revealing it as much more than a mining region. The interplay of forest, field, mine, and urban commerce offers much to readers unfamiliar with the region.

That said, *Une histoire sociale du Grand Sudbury* is often familiar for the minority who have followed regional historical