Ross, Corey *Liquid Empire: Water and Power in the Colonial World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024. 447. Hardbound, $39.95.

Corey Ross's *Liquid Empire: Water and Power in the Colonial World* is a "trans-imperial" (p. 14) exploration of how the water policies of European powers in African and Asia affected the continents' colonial and post-colonial realities. The book is organized by the varying relations we have with water, especially as expressed in the colonial era. It is also a work that reminds us of water's importance to the well-being of human society as well as the fate of the species with whom we share the planet.

Ross begins his work highlighting the importance of water for mobility. Colonial holdings were only as valuable as the treasure that could be extracted. Extraction in early colonial times was dependent upon water transportation. Harbors and rivers played important roles as "fluid 'pathways of empire'" (p.23). To increase their reliability as transportation paths, much energy was expended in plotting and taming rivers, including the removal of debris and the digging of channels. The demand for specific goods e.g., palm oil (p.35) and latex (p.50) speeded efforts to increase the reliability of rivers as transportation routes. The rise of railroads "(f)ar from displacing river transport, …multiplied it" (p.50). Natural harbors were calmed with breakwaters and where they did not exist, artificial harbors were created.

Colonial rulers also expended much effort and treasure in their attempts to protect their holdings from the threat posed by rainy seasons. Efforts at water control were seen to "legitimate (the) authority" of colonial rule (p.65). Control of rain and flood waters could increase "revenue generation (via irrigation and enhanced agricultural production), famine relief, …and improve "transport and security" (p.67). Colonial efforts mostly dismissed indigenous knowledge of water control and rather progressed in an experimental way leading to costly

failures, retrenchment, and further investment to remediate the shortfall of the initial interventive structures.

The harvesting of fish came late to the attention of colonial rulers as a means of food for its subjects and wealth for its treasuries. As was true of other colonial enterprises, the knowledge of "indigenous fisherfolk and their techniques were widely dismissed." (p.204). The redirection of rivers had already altered the natural habitat of many brown water fisheries before serious consideration was given to their "instrumental value." (p.213). As reservoirs were created, opportunities for the harvesting of lake dwelling fish multiplied and the temptation of "applied ecology", i.e., the use of scientific knowledge for "the rational management of the biophysical environment" grew as did resultant disastrous outcomes (p.235).

As water policies changed the structure of colonial societies, massive migration to urban centers took place throughout Africa and Asia. With the growth of urban populations came the challenge of providing potable water to and removing human waste from a swelling population. Public health became an increasingly salient concern of colonial rulers who tied the legitimacy of their rule (at least rhetorically) to their ability to improve the lives of their subjects. The challenge to providing potable water and sanitation differed from one country to the next given variations in their geography, weather, etc. Progress made on this front served "to reinforce and 'naturalize' the racial distinctions that underpinned colonial rule" (p.271).

A final frontier faced by colonial rulers' engagement with the hydrosphere was the transformation of water into electricity. While waterpower had long been used by Indigenous people for pulping fibers, working leather, and grinding grains, its use as a generator of electricity was completely a colonial endeavor. By demonstrating superiority and benevolence, the provision of electricity was another means of legitimating colonial rule. The

geographies/topologies of the colonial world were studied for their hydroelectric potential. Not surprisingly, most early investments were made to increase extraction of wealth from the colonies as it the case with the India's Cauvery Falls plant whose energy was used to facilitate the extraction of gold (p.288).

In the final chapter, Ross relates how the post-colonial world continues to be shaped by the legacies of colonial rule. The efforts of most postcolonial world leaders were devoted to the projects laid out for them by their colonial masters, e.g., building of dams designed but not executed by colonial powers (p.353). Many are bound by and still chafe under international agreements created by colonial powers and designed for their benefit, e.g., the dispensation of the waters of the Nile (p.343). The ecological harm done to their environs are legacies that may last millions of years (p.120). They live with the legacy of infrastructure that continues to dictate practice and policy of the post-colonial, independent states (p.361).

Liquid Empire is a very well-written book. The subject is well researched. The book is well organized. It is informative and easy to read. It is beautifully illustrated with photos drawn from numerous archives. The work is laced with terms that add to the precision of subject mastery, including "thalassology" (p.9),"hydraulic societies," (p.10) "hydrosphere," (p.15) "aeolian empires," (p.23) "blue" vs "brown water fleets,"(p.37) the "siltation hypothesis," (p.190) "pelagic fish," (p.220) and "white coal" (p.284). Ross provides a clear understanding of the reality of colonial rule and its legacy across a vast portion of the globe. Readers are left with a better understanding of many of the challenges faced by post-colonial states and the world today.

This book would be appropriate for graduate level classes addressing water policy, colonialism, and African and Asian history. It is also appropriate for upper-level ecology courses. It is a must-read for Africa and Asia scholars. I highly recommend it.

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