
Electric power is a ubiquitous feature of modern society, yet it represents a complex interaction of financial, legal, political, and social issues. Paul W. Hirt, Associate Professor of History at Arizona State University and Senior Sustainability Scholar at the Global Institute of Sustainability, examines this complex dynamic in a comprehensive historical study of electric power in the Pacific Northwest, including British Columbia.

The Wired Northwest traces the development of the electric power industry from its technological beginnings and first use in the Pacific Northwest through the growth of large capital-intensive power generators into regionally and then nationally integrated power networks. Beginning with a look at early electricity utilization, particularly by street cars and electrical appliances, Hirt moves on to describe the creation of an electric power infrastructure on the region’s major rivers, particularly the Columbia and Snake, construction of the large dams including Bonneville and Grand Coulee, and the financial pressures and opportunities they brought to both investment companies and urban areas. He places these developments within the establishment of a regulatory system intended to bring stability to the industry and benefits to consumers and investors. The book’s primary focus is on the time period of 1900-1945.

Electric power systems develop in relation to their geographic context, and this is particularly evident in the expansion of electric power in the Northwest. As Hirt clearly points out, “the region’s wet winters, abundant mountain ranges, and high-volume rivers made an ideal geography for hydropower” (357). Indeed, the vast majority of electric power generation in that region has been hydroelectric as opposed to coal or natural gas fired plants. As Hirt writes, “the story of electricity in the region cannot be separated from the story of the Northwest’s rivers, mountains, glaciers, and lakes” (132). Tracing the environmental impact of hydroelectric plants is only part of this story. Hirt also examines the business and regulatory issues that comprised the emerging public-private power debate of the 1920s and 1930s. “The excesses of the profit-seeking companies in this decade left the investor-owned utility sector vulnerable to criticism...” (210). Indeed, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) had launched a massive multi-year investigation of the public utility industry that led to dissolution of public utility holding companies and a new federal regulatory system in which the Federal Power Commission (FPC) exercised regulatory authority over interstate power sales. The FPC sought to impose both fiscal and competitive balance to the utility industry as well as electric power reliability and accessibility to consumers; the New Deal’s Rural Electrification Administration (REA) was a related federally inspired program motivated to this same end. Yet, the government’s attempt to promote public power during the 1930s led it to encourage “profligate consumption” (293) that inevitably created unnecessarily high demand for more dams and more power plants.
Hirt also addresses the impact of hydroelectric power on salmon fisheries. Although this is an issue unique to hydroelectric plants, Hirt argues that “Conflicts between hydropower and the salmon fishery in the Northwest parallel conflicts between coal-fired power plants and opponents of air pollution and acid rain in the Midwest” (4-5). Yet, recognizing the similarities of this dynamic does not minimize the dramatic effects of hydroelectric power on fisheries. It is estimated that the number of spawning salmon in the Columbia River and its tributaries prior to hydroelectric power was between 12-15 million; this number is now approximately 1 million. Hirt states that about eight percent of this decline is due to the effects of hydroelectric power production; he also describes the effects of that decline and protests against it by Native Americans.

By examining the electric power systems of both the United States and British Columbia, Hirt observes that “…over time, the ever expanding and increasingly integrated electric power system of the Pacific Northwest rendered political boundaries incrementally less significant. Electric power has become a regionally integrating force” (9). This nod toward technological determinism and rational system formation provides lessons for the future. Yet, the stakeholders in electric power have only increased, on both the supply and demand side. Hirt remains optimistic that the industry is headed in the right direction, as he concludes: “In this sense, complexity, stewardship, and shared governance represent progress. Let’s keep it going” (371). Hirt’s stance, therefore, is clear and clearly stated in the conclusion: “I hope I have provided a foundation for resurrecting an appropriately positive understanding of the necessary and beneficial role of public regulation” (369).

This is a readable book. It is well researched, based in large part on an excellent use of secondary sources and complements earlier work on electric power by Thomas P. Hughes (Networks of Power) and David Nye (Electrifying America), in particular. It should appeal to a wide audience including energy and water policy makers, environmental historians, and students of Pacific Northwest history. It provides readers with a comprehensive examination of the development of the Pacific Northwest’s electric power industry that should serve as both historical narrative and a valuable background study for this industry’s future growth.

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Open pits slowly filling with toxic water. Waste streams strewn across the countryside. Hillsides perforated with mineshafts and denuded of vegetation. In an increasingly post-industrial America, environmental degradation