

***Bond of Union: Building the Erie Canal and the American Empire.***

By Gerard Koepfel. (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009. Pp. 464. Paper, \$18.95.)

*Reviewed by John Lauritz Larson*

Heroic narratives attract leisure readers and therefore the writers of popular history. Centered on visionaries (or crackpots) who are beset with detractors, buffeted by winds of greed and intrigue, and guided by historical inevitability, such stories lend themselves to literary renderings so universal as to be accessible with little or no grounding in specialized academic conversations. The very best of these works—David McCullough’s *Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870–1914* (New York, 1978) comes to mind—manage to gratify the scholars on whom they depend while simultaneously delighting less pro-

fessional consumers. Gerard Koeppl's new book on the Erie Canal aims for this target with considerable success.

Anybody familiar with the story of the Erie Canal knows the literature is uneven and is dominated by works that use the New York example to advance larger arguments about politics, technology, transportation, economics, or the culture of progress. Koeppl deftly recycles the findings of these scholars and works back through the layers of historiography until he approaches the raw material on which it rests. Then he digs into the source material as well, testing earlier claims, filling in neglected details, and painting in color where the specialists contented themselves with black-and-white renderings. The result is a surprisingly new and thorough account of the political, technological, financial, and personal exploits that went into this famous and formative work of internal improvement. Throw Robert G. Albion, E. E. Morison, Nathan Miller, Craig and Mary Hanyan, Ronald Shaw, and Carol Sheriff in a blender, stir until smooth, and you might come up with something like this book.

One of the problems with the Erie story—as well as a source of its enduring interest—is the way it comprises so many distinct threads of action and innovation. New York politics in the era offers a bizarre and impenetrable tangle of personal, partisan, technical, and interest-based connections. Civil engineering (scarcely yet worthy of the term) advanced through fits of luck, daring, insight, patronage, and serious science. Financial officers likewise struck innovative poses that served New York fairly well but later plunged neighboring states into bankruptcy. Local interests in these very early days of the market revolution experienced great difficulty imagining the brave new integrated world that would result from the building of the Erie Canal, and some, accordingly, threw their weight in contrary directions. This complexity defies graceful analytical presentation; as a result, Koeppl's embrace of heroic narrative may be the best vehicle after all for trying to survey the whole ground.

Serious scholars may find fault with Koeppl's story because it does seem designed for the appetites of a leisure reader. Thesis and argument take a back seat to story (the ambitious subtitle notwithstanding), and the author indulges many tangential detours that will amuse the consumer with time to spare but frustrate the harried graduate student. The development of hydraulic cement (240–46), for example, is a matter of technical interest, but the digressive attention to who deserves credit for its invention contributes little real edification. Similarly, Koeppl launches odd detours in behalf of Gouverneur Morris's strange venereal

preoccupations (79–80, 152), apparently because the details are simply too good to leave out. Koepfel's history is driven more by larger-than-life individuals than many scholars would like to credit; on the other hand, as with McCullough's Panama Canal, key individuals taking action did make a difference in the progress of "Clinton's Ditch." Finally, the abbreviated notes and the Spartan approach to citations will irritate some readers: for them there is a helpful bibliography to lead them home.

Having written harshly in the past about journalists who poach in the historical literature while adding nothing more than their ready access to trade publishers, it is a pleasure to admit that this time we have a book of real value. Readers of this journal will do well to take note.

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