

*Bond of Union: Building the Erie Canal and the American Empire.* By Gerard Koepfel. (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2009. x, 454 pp. \$27.95, ISBN 978-0-306-81827-1.)

Gerard Koepfel's book is a richly detailed account of the events leading to the opening of the Erie Canal in New York State in 1825. Koepfel's narrative includes several legendary figures in the history of the early republic: DeWitt Clinton, Martin Van Buren, Gouverneur Morris, Robert Fulton, and a tremendous cast of lesser-known but influential engineers, surveyors, politicians, land speculators, and laborers who made the canal a reality. This biographical emphasis is the hallmark of Koepfel's analysis; he outlines the family history, character flaws, and personality quirks of even minor figures in the canal's construction. Using this approach, Koepfel weaves together an impressive array of primary materials into a cohesive narrative documenting one of antebellum America's most transformative events.

Creating a ditch four feet deep that allowed boats to travel at four miles per hour and make the voyage from Albany to Buffalo, New York, in sixteen days seems unremarkable to readers who could cover the same route in a few hours with modern superhighways. But Koepfel's book underscores how the canal revolutionized commerce and stimulated a host of scientific achievements: hydraulic cement, improved blasting powder, towering staircases of locks, and the nation's largest bridges. Koepfel also dedicates significant attention to the political debates surrounding the canal's location and financing, and he describes the pomp and ceremony that accompanied each phase of construction.

Focusing on these issues, however, limits Koepfel's coverage of other dimensions of upstate New York's history. The Erie Canal stimulated not only a surge of technological improvement and political maneuvering but a wellspring of cultural and artistic in-

novation and a myriad of religious and spiritual movements. At times, Koepfel's book is reminiscent of Erik Larson's *The Devil in the White City* (2003)—both works present vivid descriptions of nineteenth-century American technology and their influential creators. But *Bond of Union* would be best read alongside two significant works by Paul Johnson: *A Shopkeeper's Millennium* (1978) and *The Kingdom of Mathias* (written with Sean Wilentz in 1994), which demonstrate the religious enthusiasm that ignited the Second Great Awakening and other religious movements along the canal's towpaths.

Koepfel is primarily concerned with documenting the details of planning, constructing, and building, and his book essentially comes to a close with the canal's completion in 1825. This chronological focus gives Koepfel the opportunity to present a detailed account of the geography, landscape, and personalities of upstate New York, but it also forces him to relegate most discussion of the canal's later social and cultural influence to a brief final chapter. Likewise, this is not a book concerned with historiography; instead, Koepfel presents a lively and often poignant account that is accessible to general readers and undergraduate students, while providing sufficient detail to engage historians. While the Erie Canal is an iconic symbol of the early republic, Koepfel reinvigorates this familiar story, deepening readers' understanding of this crucial event in nineteenth-century America.

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