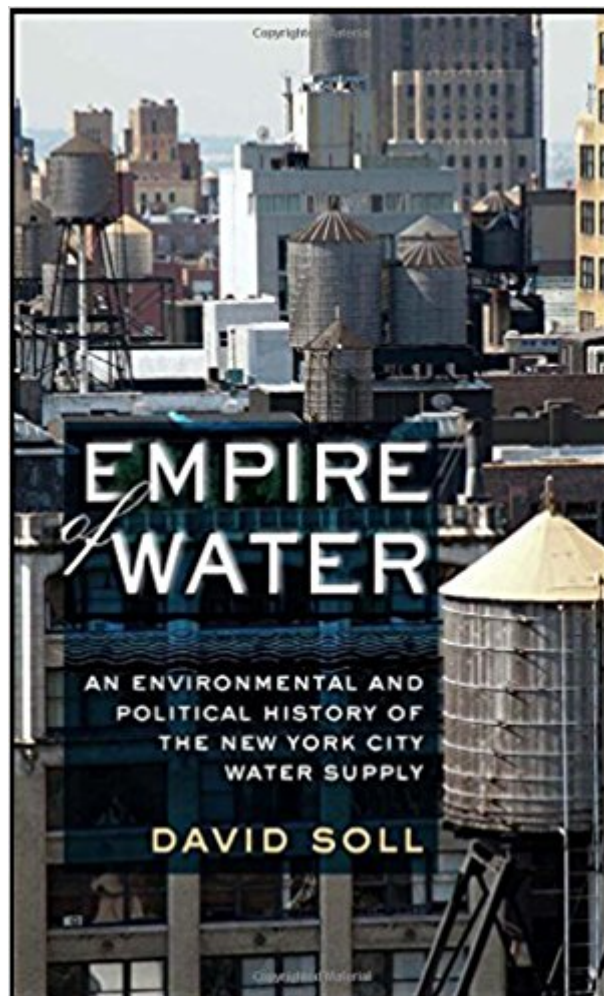




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Empire Of Water: An Environmental And Political History Of The New York City Water Supply



Synopsis

Supplying water to millions is not simply an engineering and logistical challenge. As David Soll shows in his finely observed history of the nation's largest municipal water system, the task of providing water to New Yorkers transformed the natural and built environment of the city, its suburbs, and distant rural watersheds. Almost as soon as New York City completed its first municipal water system in 1842, it began to expand the network, eventually reaching far into the Catskill Mountains, more than one hundred miles from the city. *Empire of Water* explores the history of New York City's water system from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century, focusing on the geographical, environmental, and political repercussions of the city's search for more water. Soll vividly recounts the profound environmental implications for both city and countryside. Some of the region's most prominent landmarks, such as the High Bridge across the Harlem River, Central Park's Great Lawn, and the Ashokan Reservoir in Ulster County, have their origins in the city's water system. By tracing the evolution of the city's water conservation efforts and watershed management regime, Soll reveals the tremendous shifts in environmental practices and consciousness that occurred during the twentieth century. Few episodes better capture the long-standing upstate-downstate divide in New York than the story of how mountain water came to flow from spigots in Brooklyn and Manhattan. Soll concludes by focusing on the landmark watershed protection agreement signed in 1997 between the city, watershed residents, environmental organizations, and the state and federal governments. After decades of rancor between the city and Catskill residents, the two sides set aside their differences to forge a new model of environmental stewardship. His account of this unlikely environmental success story offers a behind the scenes perspective on the nation's most ambitious and wide-ranging watershed protection program.

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Customer Reviews

"Empire of Water examines the development of the water supply system of New York City from the 19th century to the early 21st century through a political ecology lens. . . . The author's writing style would appeal to general readers who are curious about New York City's water supply system; the book could also serve as a text for university environmental history courses. Summing Up: Recommended. Upper-division undergraduates through researchers/faculty; general readers." •Choice (January 2014) "David Soll ably deepens our understanding of New York's water supply in two ways. First, he focuses on the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, more specifically the period beginning in 1905, when the nation's leading city began tapping the streams of the Catskills. In the 1960s it would reach to the headwaters of the Delaware River. Second, Soll offers what he accurately characterizes in his subtitle as a political and environmental, as opposed to technological, history." •Carl Smith, The American Historical Review (June 2014) "David Soll ably deepens our understanding of New York's water supply his story is a compelling and important one that he tells clearly and effectively." •Carl Smith, The American Historical Review (June 2014) "Empire of Water is an impressive work on an important topic. In clear and engaging prose, Soll explores the past management of New York City's water system and demonstrates that the story he tells has important implications for policy decisions today." •Michael Rawson, Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center, author of Eden on the Charles: The Making of Boston "This is first-rate environmental history. In Empire of Water, David Soll goes well beyond the existing literature on New York City and its water supply. He makes clear that we cannot understand the insatiable urban demand for water and the regional impact of that demand without examining the larger consequences." •Martin Melosi, Hugh Roy and Lillie Cranz Cullen University Professor and Director of the Center for Public History, University of Houston, author of The Sanitary City: Environmental Services in Urban America from Colonial Times to the Present "Empire of Water chronicles the fascinating story of New York City's water supply, which comes mostly from reservoirs in the Catskills and, remarkably, is unfiltered. That's because the city has spent billions of dollars and decades of effort working with residents, businesses, and governments in the Catskills to protect the reservoirs from pollution caused by runoff from roads, farms, and dairies. This

meticulously researched and persuasively reasoned history explores the change in New York City's attitude toward water, from indifference to profligate water waste and environmental pollution to stalwart champion of water conservation and protection. The best histories shed light on the past as they illuminate the present. *Empire of Water* is in this category. By protecting the ecosystem services provided by a pristine watershed in northern New York, the city avoided having to spend \$8 billion to build a treatment plant. As we confront water shortages in the United States and across the world, *Empire of Water* teaches that business as usual—looking for new oases and relying on massive engineering solutions—no longer makes sense. We must acknowledge nature's limits and work within them to secure a sustainable future for coming generations."—Robert Glennon, Regents' Professor and Morris K. Udall Professor of Law and Public Policy, University of Arizona, author of *Unquenchable: America's Water Crisis and What To Do About It*

David Soll is Assistant Professor in the Watershed Institute for Collaborative Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire.

David Soll has researched and entertainingly written about the labyrinthine history of a topic that for nearly all New Yorkers is out of sight (and mind), buried underground -- but in reality is vitally important to them every day: their water supply. He has taken what at first blush is an arcane topic, and by following its evolution, elevated it to its rightful status as a significant achievement.

Great book! Very detailed history of the NYC watershed and how they've treated the people of the Catskills over the years.

I bought this book for a long flight after I read about it in the Times. I read it from start to finish on the flight. It was fascinating. The author makes the topic so approachable. I frankly enjoyed learning as much about water supplies generally as I did about the NYC water supply. I look forward to Soll's next book.

As a New Yorker who has boasted for years about what wonderful water we have, and how much foresight the City's leaders have had to provide us with this great resource, I was disappointed that there was not more depth and detail to Mr. Soll's book. It could have been a story about the tensions between the builders and conservationists, the country folk who had their way of life

disrupted so that the City folk could have abundant, inexpensive water and waste. Instead of delving into these subjects, Mr. Soll has published a précis to the story that needs to be told. While a Robert Caro and his skill at telling the story of urban life comes along only once in many, many years, I had hoped to learn more about New York's wonderful water than I have from Mr. Soll.

There are some extremely serious problems with this book.¹ Soll's thoroughgoing animus against New York City can be grating, but he is at no pains to conceal it, so the reader can control for it. However, that bias leads him to an oversight that beggars credulity. He's really quite clear on the point that New York City should have been compelled to draw water from the Hudson River rather than to tap the Delaware. He does not mention, much less address, the compelling fact that General Electric, from two facilities north of Albany, dumped an horrendous amount of highly carcinogenic PCBs into the Hudson from 1947 to 1977 and that this mess hasn't been cleaned up even today. This is one of the longest running, best known environmental horror stories in American environmental history. It suggests conclusively that the New York City planners were absolutely correct to look to the Delaware watershed for water, because it was unattractive to that sort of heavy industry. Soll's purportedly cool eyed, even handed "analysis" of New York City's water supply alternatives is given the lie by this unavoidable bit of history.² Lack of an adequate literature review is also a problem with the book. A shaking hands acquaintance with McPhee's *The Pine Barrens*, with its account of New York City's pursuit of the water in New Jersey's Pine Barrens, undercuts Soll's repeated contention that New York City's pursuit of a pure, high quality, unfiltered supply was really just a bully boy city's effort to impose itself on defenseless Catskill farmers. Amazingly, he does cover New York City's investigation of one Connecticut source but he fails to mention how unlikely that possibility ever was based on Connecticut's own paucity of water supply sources. Had he looked even briefly at Bruce Ackerman's magisterial study of water policy along the Delaware River, *The Uncertain Search For Environmental Quality*, Soll might perhaps have thought better of covering the role of the Delaware River Basin Commission respecting the New York City water supply in more than three pages of his book, particularly since the Commission issues withdrawal permits for water supplies in areas of the Delaware watershed where water is scarce and as well since the Commission was the sole effective governmental voice raised against fracking that can and probably would negatively affect the New York City water supply. Finally, when an author writes a book such as this, his literature survey is a verification that he has mastered the literature in the field he purports to cover and also to provide the reader with access to those same works. Leaving out Ackerman and McPhee is an unforgivable oversight, but snubbing John Burroughs even less

explicable.³ His "summary" of fracking in the watershed - that it has somehow been effectively eliminated by the requirement of some sort of pre drilling, environmental impact analysis - is not merely flippant, but irresponsible and childishly callow. One wonders if this treatment was deemed necessary in order that the consultative negotiation process that led to the 1997 peace treaty among the various stakeholders (which Soll hails as a groundbreaking cure all for multiparty environmental disputes) failed abysmally in the area of fracking.⁴ Soll's intermittent swipes at the social policies of the Progressive era are irritating, misplaced and ill premised. For example, he charges that the eminent domain process created by the New York Assembly for Catskill condemnations needed to build the big Delaware reservoirs - which required payment of the assessed value of the property to the owner before it was taken - was somehow unfair and that this imagined unfairness was somehow a function of Progressive thinking of the time. This is pure ipse dixit; wishing doesn't make it so. It is also very bad historiography. I find it astonishing that the three jacket experts are able to offer such fulsome praise of the book given its detailed shortcomings. Likewise, I can only wonder at the quality of the Cornell University Press editing function. There is much in this book that is useful, helpful information, although most of the early history can be gleaned (in more gracefully written form) from McPhee and Ackerman. The remainder of the book, sadly, suffers profoundly from the deficiencies I have noted.

As someone who drinks NYC water, I very much enjoyed this book, which accomplishes what its full title indicates. The book has been making the rounds at my office's library. The book is thorough and informative on what is admittedly a topic broad in scope and demanding in details. At around 200 pages, it doesn't wear out its welcome, in fact, it could have been a bit longer. This may have addressed some of the concerns of the other reviewer. It didn't seem that discussions of drawing Hudson River water show bias against the City since the book documents efforts that the City went to use the Hudson. For some years, one has been able to affordably filter PCBs (or other contaminants); a fair number of cities and towns further up the river have been drawing on Hudson River for ages. In speaking with upstate residents, one still hears complaints about City DEP police giving out tickets as a revenue source. True or not, the suspicion between the sides seems to be a historic fact. The book concludes with an emphasis on an era of cooperation and collaboration, which is also a positive analysis of how to tackle complex issues. The tone of the book is perhaps a bit thesis-like, setting out each issue, followed by conclusions and supporting arguments, but this is no real impediment. It's not every topic where you have a Devil in the White City situation and can juxtapose how to a massive public project like the 1893 Columbian Expo with a serial killer. Worth

reading.

I got this book for my father (recently retired from US Army Corps of Engineers, PhD, PE) who reports: This is a well written exposition of the diversion of Delaware River Basin water to NY City and key consequences past and current. The book provides an objective and clear understanding through research and documentation not assembled elsewhere. From my own four decade involvement with the Delaware Basin water management affairs, the book is greatly valuable to appreciate present day consequences, constraints and risks. Planners, policy makers and water professionals should all gain considerable insight from the author's efforts.

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