

Serpent River Resurgence: Confronting Uranium Mining at Elliot Lake by Lianne C. Leddy

Lori Hallock

Volume 114, numéro 2, fall 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1092224ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1092224ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Hallock, L. (2022). *Serpent River Resurgence: Confronting Uranium Mining at Elliot Lake* by Lianne C. Leddy. *Ontario History*, 114(2), 263–265.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1092224ar>

space? Will they be satisfied with *how* they use it? Whatever a future flâneur might observe when walking downtown Yonge Street, Ross' claim will continue to ring true: "each new intervention is shaped by the accumulated weight of those that came

before—that is, by the street itself, actor in its own production." (15)

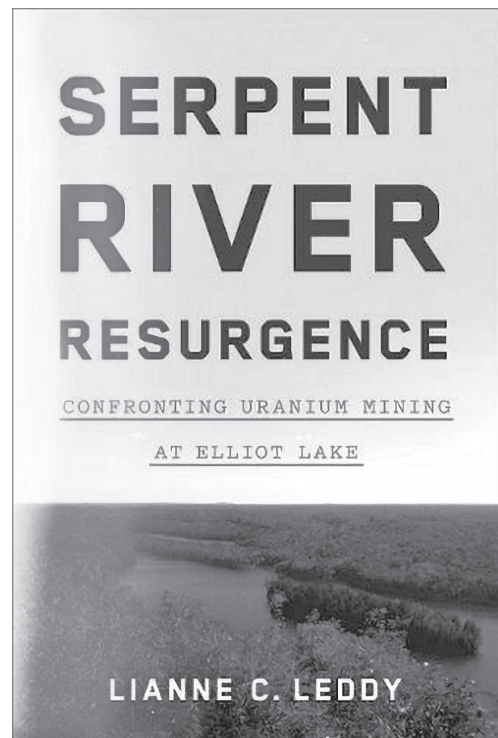
Ross Fair
Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University)

Serpent River Resurgence
Confronting Uranium Mining at Elliot Lake

By Lianne C. Leddy

Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2022. 233 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4426-1437-6 (<https://utorontopress.com/>)

In *Serpent River Resurgence*, Lianne C. Leddy examines the environmental history of uranium mining on Serpent River First Nation (SRFN). This historical overview uses storytelling as a methodology by blending the experiences of elders with archival records, newspaper articles, and other published materials. The book opens with an Anishinaabe story of a great serpent that carved the river of its namesake and laid eggs deep in the bedrock. The book continues by situating the history of settlers and uranium mining within this story as those that would come to take the serpent's eggs. Through this approach, Leddy traces the settler colonial history of resource exploitation in the region, culminating in the short-lived history of uranium mining at Elliot Lake in what Leddy terms "Cold War colonialism" (8), and the long-term environmental consequences for SRFN. The book primarily looks at two forms of environmental damage caused by uranium mining in the region: the pollution of the Serpent River from mining tailings located upriver near Elliot Lake and the effects of a sulphuric acid plant on reserve. The book finishes by showcasing how SRFN worked



tirelessly to raise awareness of the environmental impacts uranium mining caused in their community and to seek some form of recompense. Leddy's concluding advice to

readers connects back to the opening story of the great serpent whereby “responsible and accountable resource development depends upon the assertion of the Anishinaabe worldview that privileges Indigenous knowledge and stewardship responsibilities.” (140) In stark contrast, this book reveals how uranium mining in Elliot Lake, and the history of mining in general, has privileged short-term economic gain for a few over the health and well-being of communities and environments.

Leddy situates herself in the book as an Anishinaabekwe from SRFN who also grew up in Elliot Lake. As an identifying member of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, the impacts of uranium mining at Elliot Lake are personal. Leddy’s role in both communities reveals how mining activities often promise jobs and economic prosperity, but at an environmental cost. The boom-bust nature of mining industries, like uranium, means that communities are often left to deal with the environmental effects on their own. In the case of First Nations, the work of dealing with environmental issues is further complicated by the application of the *Indian Act* and the role that the federal government plays in overseeing the lives and affairs of First Nations on reserve. In chapters 1 and 2, Leddy explains how, historically, government control over decision-making furthered colonial ambitions to “civilize” or “modernize” First Nations. Chapter 2 examines how, in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the federal department charged with this decision-making power, then termed the Department of Indian Affairs, repeatedly controlled decisions about resources, land use, and finances at SRFN. In Chapter 3 Leddy describes the development, in the 1950s, of uranium mines and, subsequently, the townsite of Elliot Lake. She carries the thread from Chapter 2 into

Chapter 4 with a history of the construction and operation of the Cutler acid plant on reserve. This was undertaken by the federal government by offering up land to developers in exchange for community participation in the wage economy as a “means to escape the poverty imposed by the reserve system.” (66) Combining archival records and personal accounts, Leddy reveals an ugly history of institutional colonialism, decision-making, and the very real impacts this had on communities and individuals. Ultimately, the plant never amounted to any meaningful prosperity, closing less than ten years after being built. Meanwhile, the environmental and health impacts of on-reserve contamination caused by the acid plant lingered for decades.

In Chapters 5 and 6, Leddy showcases the harm uranium mining inflicted on SRFN and the laborious task that First Nation leadership undertook to have their environmental concerns heard by provincial and federal government officials. Sadly, the experience of SRFN is one that is all too familiar in Ontario. In fact, Leddy identifies historic parallels between the SRFN experience and those of Wabaseemoong and Grassy Narrows First Nations where mercury contaminated the English and Wabigoon River systems in northwestern Ontario. In both cases, this industrial pollution resulted in community alienations from the land that took years to be publicly acknowledged by the government, let alone redressed. That said, more could have been done to situate the experiences of SRFN with other mining areas in Ontario, including the extensive environmental impacts of mining in the Sudbury area and especially the Agnew Lake uranium mine located just east of SRFN. Leddy makes brief mention of the mining impacts in Sudbury in chapters 3 and 4. However, it would have been helpful to include more on growing aware-

ness of the environmental impacts of mining in the 1970s, and to contrast the massive regreening project in Sudbury with the lack of action in Serpent River.

Where the book excels is in highlighting how communities such as SRFN were forced to become actors of their own destiny, threatening or taking direct action to trigger any kind of meaningful government responses to their concerns. When tensions mount between Indigenous communities and developers or industries, the public may wonder why opportunities for jobs and financial benefits are sometimes met with fierce resistance. What is often missing in public discourse is the real work that communities must undertake for their voices to be heard, efforts that often come with significant financial and human costs.

In Chapter 6, Leddy strips away stereotypical assumptions that Indigenous communities are against economic development and aptly highlights the colonial mindset that remains pervasive in contemporary economic development planning and decision-making.

This book is a must read for anyone working with Indigenous communities in Ontario. It sheds important light on how Indigenous communities suffer even greater losses than non-Indigenous communities when promises of economic development opportunities fall flat. It also serves as a helpful reminder of the burden and distrust that communities like SRFN carry with them into future endeavours.

Lori Hallock

The Underground Railroad *Next Stop, Toronto!*

Edited by Adrienne Shadd, Afua Cooper, and Karolyn Smardz Frost

Toronto, Ontario. Dundurn Press, 2nd ed. 2022. 145 pages. \$19.99 Softcover. 8.99 e-pub. ISBN 978-1459748965. (<https://www.dundurn.com/>)

The Underground Railroad is a subject that has captured the hearts and minds of people since the nineteenth century. The particular story of enslaved people making their way north and settling in the province of Ontario remains an often-cited period in Canadian history. The new edition of *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop, Toronto!* (originally published in 2002), demonstrates how the Underground Railroad has retained its potency as a popular topic in Canadian history. However, discussions of the Underground Railroad in Canada have historically tended to focus on the journeys of enslaved people to freedom, with little exploration of the subsequent

realities of Black Canadian life in Ontario. While scholarship of Black Canadian experiences has broadened in scope over the last twenty years, the Underground Railroad as a subject still carries with it a focus on Canada as a destination rather than as a lived reality for Black settlers. Disrupting this narrative is why a new edition of *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop, Toronto!* is crucial to telling the story of Black Canadians.

In *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop, Toronto!* historians Adrienne Shadd, Afua Cooper, and Karolyn Smardz Frost explore the history of Black settlement in the city of Toronto. As the introduction