

River of Dreams: The Saga of the Shubenacadie Canal. By
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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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***River of Dreams: The Saga of the Shubenacadie Canal.* By Donna Barnett.** (Halifax: Nimbus, 2002. 128 p. ISBN 1-22109-407-X \$22.95)

Throughout the modern period of Canada's history, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, transportation systems have been far more than just means of getting from one point to another; they have also been infused with emotion and controversy other societies reserve for religious issues. That one historian—with others nodding in silent agreement—

could equate construction of a railway with a “National Dream” is indicative of this state of affairs, and he is not alone. Canal building and operations in Canada is, therefore, a topic of no little interest, books and articles on the subject continuing to appear in large numbers over a century after the subject was first broached. *River of Dreams: The Saga of the Shubenacadie Canal*, by Donna Barnett, exemplifies the different approaches historians can take towards the topic, as well as the different levels of emotion canals can still evoke. A waterway is more than a ditch, and that such a system can be as much a symbol as an artefact is as true today as it was a century ago.

Barnett’s history of the Shubenacadie is a perfect example of the latter theme as the author begins by praising the efforts of the Shubenacadie Canal Commission, whose work began in 1984, but notes that: “What has been frustrating is that in spite of these accomplishments, the general public knows little about the canal” (p. xiii). Her book is thus an attempt at public education. In fact, the author’s relates her personal journey through the system to show that it can still be relevant for Nova Scotians and other Canadians living today.

It is no doubt for this reason that her story, though “ultimately one of failure on a grand scale” (p. 1), is told with no little sympathy. It is also richly illustrated with colour photographs and maps, so much so that the canal’s original promoters would have appreciated this beautiful production as excellent advertising. Photos and captions, in fact, tell their own rich tale, as do various sidebars throughout the book. *River of Dreams* is more than that, however, straightforward story-telling also taking the reader through much technical detail, well-explained.

As for the canal itself, we learn that prior to the arrival of Europeans aboriginal peoples had their own system of communications in the region. New settlers brought a different culture and priorities, eventually conceiving a canal to reduce the cost of transportation in the area and to provide more efficient communications for military operations, the War of 1812 having been but one example of how Nova Scotia was not isolated from some of the harsher realities of world affairs. Justified it may have been, but it was also a much-interrupted project, plagued by labour shortages, difficulties keeping construction to a schedule, and financial problems. Lobbying and begging for money, it turns out, was a large part of the story, workers often going unpaid.

Another aspect of its history was, of course, the work itself, as “various talents were required in the building of the canal. Common labourers were used to dig, while stonecutters and masons, considered to be among the most skilled workers on the canal, worked on fashioning the stones for the locks. Carpenters were also brought onto the payroll” (p. 32).

There were also navvies, who “laboured long hours for low wages, under less-than-ideal conditions. Serious injury and even death were often part of the daily routine” (p. 34).

As with other, similar projects—the Trent-Severn Waterway comes to mind—the Shubenacadie was built in fits and starts over a period of decades. First begun in 1826, work petered out after five years, beginning again in 1854, finally opening for operations in 1862, though with the Nova Scotia Railway as a main competitor. Its final operations were in the 1870s, though it should be noted here that by the latter part of the nineteenth century canals could serve purposes other than transportation. They could, for example, help power other economic endeavours. The Shubenacadie, in its latter days, served just such a purpose in providing water-power for local industries.

A central figure in operating the system was the lock keeper, three of them being hired in 1858. One of them (and perhaps the others as well), William King, was paid one pound per week. “At this rate, he and his wife Mary were obliged to augment their income by farming their Great Lake property and providing occasional overnight accommodation to travellers. In addition to operating the locks, these men were required to see to the general maintenance of their section. This would turn out to be an arduous task, taking up more of their time than actual lock-keeping duties” (p. 79). Still, as King could well see for himself, “the canal was not proving to be a booming enterprise, leaving him ample time for farming” (p. 86). *River of Dreams* is thus an informative story clearly told and richly illustrated, which has much to offer the expert and the general reader alike.

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