

# Stephen Crocker and Lisa Moore, eds. Muskrat Falls: How a Mega Dam Became a Predatory Formation

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Stephen Crocker and Lisa Moore, eds. *Muskrat Falls: How a Mega Dam Became a Predatory Formation*. St. John's: Memorial University Press, 2021. ISBN 978-1-894-72594-1

This book grew out of a conference organized at Memorial University in 2018 by the book's editors, Lisa Moore and Stephen Crocker. It consists of 16 chapters grouped under three themes: "The Threat Downstream: A Sacrifice Zone in Labrador," "Political Economy of an Investment without Economics," and "Representing and Resisting the Crisis: Journalism, Art, and Fiction." Anyone looking to this book for a comprehensive understanding of Muskrat Falls will be left wanting. There is no analysis or explanation in any chapter that will tell us what happened and why it happened. The Lower Churchill project dates from 2006. Muskrat Falls came in 2010. The book focuses on the period from 2016 to 2020. As such, it is most helpful to view this book not as analysis but as part of the ongoing reaction by people within Newfoundland and Labrador to the project.

Some chapters are useful to understand the project's details. James Feehan and David Vardy offer useful assessments of some aspects of the project's economics and finances. The chapters on methylmercury and quick clay describe specific technical issues that challenged the people behind the project and gave some meat for the handful of critics to seize on. There is also some value in Des Sullivan's chapter on his own blog. Sullivan did what he was asked to do but the result is that he leaves out critical commentary that appeared before he started the

blog (2012) as well as all the critiques that did not appear there. That includes crucial issues like rate mitigation and water management, which turn up throughout this book as passing references, if at all. Rate mitigation is especially important since it is actually about how the politicians and bureaucrats behind the project thought they would pay for it when the export markets that were supposed to finance all the costs would not. Vardy's chapter discusses electricity rates from the technician's perspective. This is fine, as far as it goes, but Vardy ignores everything meaningful about them in the strategic context. Feehan's chapter does not get into this either, staying, as Vardy does, within the contrived, official rationale — Muskrat Falls is for domestic use — that forced local ratepayers to pay for the whole project while others get the bulk of its output free of charge or at prices below the cost of production.

Jessica Penney's research on Labrador Land Protectors identifies the major concerns of a group of people directly affected by the project. The art and fiction chapters in the third section of the book likewise give visceral, personal views of the project's impacts. Justin Brake's chapter documents his personal involvement in one protest. They make human a project that otherwise tends to foster abstract and impersonal discussion.

The word "narrative" appears far too often in this book for comfort. While it is important in any writing to tell a story, narrative appears in this book frequently as a synonym for "conceit." That is, narrative seems to refer to meaning imposed on events, rather than coming from them. It is needed for the plot — or in this case, the conclusion — but may not be real. For example, Robin Whitaker's chapter on the protest Brake was involved with exaggerates the protest itself in the context of opposition to Muskrat Falls. Like other authors who discuss Indigenous issues in this book, Whitaker ignores the complex social and political context of Indigenous communities in Labrador and their relationship to one another, the provincial and federal governments, and, most importantly, to the project. They are not a monolith, but it may be more convenient for some to fit them into the settler colonialism

(Indigenous as victims) trope. Shiri Pasternak and Neria Aylward do the same, writing about anything but Muskrat Falls or the history of resource development in Labrador that would connect the evidence with the theory. Settler colonialism winds up sounding like dependency theory or neo-liberalism, a concept so elastic it is meaningless.

Crocker's introductory chapter and his chapter on project financing seem to rely on trope as well. He presents Muskrat Falls as a project that was initially good but that was altered at some point by evil forces. This is potentially a workable thesis, but without speaking about the details of the project it is pointless. Given how much information we have — from cabinet minutes to public opinion polls — telling us that Muskrat Falls is the product of global capitalism seems less like an explanation than an excuse to avoid causing anguish for friends and neighbours in a small province as they reconcile what they did then with what they believe now.

Moore's chapter similarly seems to avoid crucial questions of what happened then versus what happened later, perhaps for the same reason. She describes protests, all of which happened after 2016, even though the issues involved were well known for a decade beforehand. Moore does not explain why the non-Indigenous, post-2016 protestors were silent for almost a decade. A clue may be in the way Moore describes her own involvement in the protests as if she were controlled by an unseen force: I found myself compelled; I found myself leaving my desk; I find myself wondering. The denial of personal agency is striking, so striking in fact that it appears deliberate. It echoes Crocker's chapter, which likewise denies the agency of the individuals and groups in the province who supported both the government and the project so strongly, despite the evidence, and for so very long. Crocker had a useful thread he could have used to start with: Moore's 2011 essay for *The Walrus* on Danny Williams's departure from politics. It included a passing reference to Muskrat Falls as the fulfillment of a long-standing nationalist dream. He ignored it, as did she. Their choices are striking.

Had Crocker and Moore presented the 2018 conference papers, including a transcript of the sessions, this book would have worked

very well. Unfortunately, the material available does not support the Biblical trope of Muskrat Falls as an immaculate conception corrupted by evil forces. It wouldn't work if one thought of Muskrat Falls as a *Gollum*, either. That editorial mistake doesn't rob the whole of its considerable value if we see the book and its chapters as a sincere attempt by people who will bear the scars of Muskrat Falls to get to grips with it collectively and individually.

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