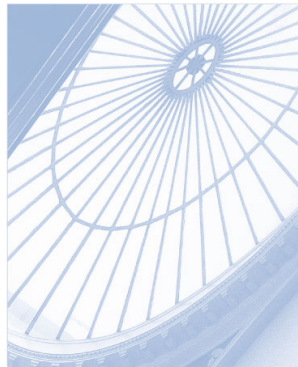


Zitierhinweis

Corsten-Neidigk, Anna: Rezension über: Corey Ross, Liquid Empire. Water and Power in the Colonial World, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024, in: German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol. XLVII (2025), 1, S. 96-100, <https://recensio-stag.lorax.syslab.com/r/2c50f6eb89654ffd8b30664f2e53e0ee>

GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE LONDON

Bulletin



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COREY ROSS, *Liquid Empire: Water and Power in the Colonial World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), 464 pp. ISBN 978 0 691 21144 2. £35.00

Water has increasingly become central to global crises, with two thirds of the world's population experiencing severe water shortages for at least one month annually. Recognized by the World Economic Forum as one of the most pressing challenges of the coming decades, this scarcity underscores the urgent need to understand the historical and socio-political dimensions of water. It also reflects the importance of interrogating colonial legacies in shaping contemporary vulnerabilities. Furthermore, 90 per cent of global fisheries are overexploited, threatening food security and biodiversity. Against this backdrop, Corey Ross' *Liquid Empire* offers a timely exploration of the multifaceted relationship between water and European colonial empires. Ross analyses water as a resource, a medium of power, and a site of socio-environmental contention, providing a rich perspective on imperial interactions with both people and environments.

The book sets out to reveal neglected aspects of Europe's imperial engagement with the colonial world. While earlier studies have often focused on large-scale hydraulic engineering or post-war mega-hydropower projects in Asia and Africa, *Liquid Empire* delves into broader, underexplored topics, such as attempts to enhance river navigability for trade and the significance of water as a transport medium and resource input. Ross' central thesis is that colonial states not only managed water but also governed through its manipulation. In this way, he uses water as a lens through which to examine the socio-ecological dynamics of imperial power.

Drawing on approximately 250 primary sources in English, French, German, and Dutch—including reports by engineers, state officials, and biologists—the book offers a comprehensive survey of imperial encounters with water. Its focus spans different colonial powers (Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium) and regions, with a particular emphasis on India, China, and Egypt.

The opening chapter examines the interplay between steamboat technology and colonial waterways, particularly in the Ganges and Brahmaputra basins. While rivers served as vital conduits of mobility,

their seasonality – marked by flooding or drought – often disrupted navigation. This highlights the agency of rivers, which defied human efforts to impose control. By contrast, the development of railways in colonial regions reconfigured imperial space. Water systems were subordinated to the expansion of rail, as the latter was seen as a more economically effective transportation system.

Focusing on irrigation systems, in chapter two Ross illustrates the uneven distribution of water as a central challenge. He discusses how irrigation projects symbolized European power, serving both as displays and instruments of dominance. Case studies, such as dam-building along India's Penner River from the 1850s, reveal the frequent underestimation of costs and environmental factors. Cyclones, monsoons, and floods repeatedly thwarted progress, while the neglect of indigenous knowledge exacerbated failures. Ross contrasts such projects with the Ganges canals, which integrated local expertise with colonial engineering. Famines and humanitarian crises often forced colonial governments to adapt water systems, exposing the political stakes of water management.

Chapter three explores efforts to 'conquer' wastelands in extreme climates, including river deltas in South-East Asia, the northern Sahara, and India's arid north-west. Engineers attempted to transform these 'hydraulic frontiers', with varying degrees of success. For instance, French plans in the 1870s to flood parts of the Sahara and create an inland sea were abandoned in the 1880s due to high costs and feasibility concerns. Such projects reflect colonial faith in technological mastery over nature, often overlooking the resilience of local ecologies.

Building on Ross' earlier work 'Constrained River',¹ chapter four focuses on attempts to mitigate flood risks. Colonial hydrological regimes aimed to keep water in place for economic development, but flood defences often introduced new vulnerabilities, particularly along India's north-eastern rivers. Human interventions, while addressing immediate challenges, frequently created long-term risks. Moreover, these efforts reinforced socio-economic inequalities, with

¹ Corey Ross, 'Constrained River, Constrained Choices: Seasonal Floods and Colonial Authority in the Red River Delta', *International Journal of Asian Studies: First View* (June 2023), 1–19, at [<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479591423000190>].

poorer populations disproportionately affected by flooding and the unintended consequences of water management.

Shifting the focus underwater, in chapter five Ross examines the colonial neglect of fisheries, despite their significance for food security in Asia and Africa. Indigenous fishing practices were often dismissed as primitive, and colonial policies—including restrictions on certain methods and leases—contributed to overfishing. European ideologies of industrial liberalism exacerbated these issues by introducing mechanized methods that many indigenous fishers could not afford, disrupting ecosystems and further widening socio-economic disparities.

Urbanization introduced significant challenges related to sanitation and water quality in Europe by the end of the nineteenth century. Colonial powers sought to implement sanitary infrastructure, mirroring European urban reforms, as chapter six shows. However, these projects often clashed with local customs and practices. For instance, the introduction of sewage systems frequently prioritized elite neighbourhoods, perpetuating infrastructural segregation. Conflicts over water cleanliness—such as the perceived loss of sacred qualities in Indian water bodies—further illustrate the cultural tensions inherent in these reforms.

The penultimate chapter explores the rise of hydropower as a marker of colonial modernity. Dams built after the First World War symbolized the civilizing mission of imperial powers. However, access to electricity was typically restricted to urban centres, excluding rural and indigenous populations. In some cases, broader socio-political contexts are missing from the numerous projects that Ross presents. For example, the brief discussion of hydropower networks in 1920s and 1930s Palestine fails to adequately contextualize their role in deepening inequalities between Jewish settlers and the local population.

The final chapter examines the enduring legacies of colonial water management. Decolonization often sparked resource conflicts, such as disputes over the Indus River between India and Pakistan, or tensions along the Mekong River in South-East Asia. The environmental and social consequences of colonial dam-building—including threats to agriculture and fisheries—persisted, intensifying vulnerabilities

and inequalities. Pollution and over-extraction further complicated post-colonial water governance.

Ross' *Liquid Empire* excels in demonstrating the multifaceted role of water in colonial power structures. The book's key strengths lie in its breadth of primary sources and its interdisciplinary approach, combining environmental history, political ecology, and postcolonial studies. By framing water as an active agent that often disrupted human designs, Ross challenges traditional narratives of imperial control. Recurring themes—such as the unruly nature of water and its role in reproducing inequalities—are woven effectively through each chapter. The book also underscores the tensions between indigenous and colonial knowledge systems, illustrating how local expertise was often marginalized but occasionally integrated with European methods. However, certain sections would benefit from greater depth. The discussion of hydropower in Palestine, for example, lacks the nuance required for such a complex subject. Similarly, while the inclusion of numerous case studies enriches the narrative, the sheer volume occasionally overwhelms the reader. A more selective approach could have allowed for deeper analysis of individual examples.

Liquid Empire is a significant contribution to the study of colonial history and environmental humanities. Ross, owing to his choice of sources and the foundational work he undertakes, primarily adopts a top-down approach, where colonial states and sometimes water itself are granted a central role. However, the indigenous population is afforded limited agency, with protests and resistance only peripherally addressed. Further studies should interrogate this agency and the means of dissent available to colonized peoples in order to better challenge the dichotomy of powerful empires and disempowered colonies. Ross' book demonstrates how water, as both a resource and a socio-political medium, shaped the trajectories of imperial expansion and its enduring legacies. By highlighting the environmental and human costs of colonial water management, Ross connects historical processes to contemporary global challenges. His work reminds us that many of today's water vulnerabilities are deeply entwined with the history of empire, making *Liquid Empire* essential reading for scholars and policymakers alike.

BOOK REVIEWS

ANNA CORSTEN is a Research Assistant at the Friedrich Schiller University Jena. She is currently working on a second book project on 'Water for All? How Water Inequality Became the Norm in the Anthropocene'. Between 2020 and 2022, she conducted research at the Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History in Munich on the question of how Nazi assets were dealt with after 1945. In 2020, she completed her doctoral thesis *Unbequeme Erinnerung: Emigrierte Historiker in der westdeutschen und US-amerikanischen NS- und Holocaust-Forschung, 1945–1998* at the University of Leipzig. She has been awarded fellowships by the Gerda Henkel Foundation, the German Historical Institute Washington, and the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute.