

The Hudson: A History. By Tom Lewis. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. 340 pp. Index, notes, illustrations, maps, photographs. Cloth, \$30.00. ISBN: 0-300-10424-3.

Reviewed by Evan Cornog

The history of the Hudson River is a noble topic for historians, just as its depiction on canvas was a noble subject for some of the great American painters of the nineteenth century. From its early exploitation by the Dutch as a passageway to the furs and other trade goods of the local natives to the present-day importance of the New York metropolitan area, the river has played a major role in shaping the United States.

In *The Hudson: A History*, Tom Lewis attempts to take on many aspects of the events that have unfolded along the river's banks—geological, military, artistic, political, social, economic, and so forth—from the earliest settlement to the present day. And he does all this in fewer than three hundred pages.

The result is a book that will entertain Hudsonian neophytes but will fail to satisfy more demanding readers. And for a river that has played such a large role in the economic history of the United States (and, indeed, of the world), Lewis's treatment of the business history of the Hudson is frustratingly brief and fragmentary.

The wider sweep of the river's story is nicely captured in Lewis's book—the early history of New Amsterdam, the change of control from the Netherlands to Britain, the Hudson's vital role in the Revolutionary War, and its place as muse to the first flowering of major artistic talent. Characters such as Peter Stuyvesant and Benedict Arnold (who tried to deliver the American fortress at West Point to the British during the war) make their expected and needed appearances.

Lewis, a professor of English at Skidmore College and the author of books on the radio and the interstate highway system, noticeably warms to the subject of the Hudson River School of painters. And he nicely juxtaposes his account of these artists with the story of the rape of the Hudson Valley's environment that was carried out by the tanning businesses that felled forests and poisoned rivers in order to turn hides into fortunes.

He pays close attention to the multitudinous Livingston clan, explaining their importance as local landlords and Robert R. Livingston's role as backer of Robert Fulton

and the birth of the steamboat trade along the river. And he pursues this story into the important legal case that arose from the steamboat monopoly, *Gibbons v. Ogden*, decided by the Supreme Court in 1824 in a manner that recognized extensive federal powers to regulate commerce.

But Lewis gives considerably less attention to the role of the Hudson Valley in the birth of the Erie Canal, the most important public-works project of the nineteenth century. The canal helped cement New York City's economic primacy in the nation, and the railways, which started being constructed soon after the canal's completion, followed the westward route of the canals. The historical transformation, wrought first by the canal network and then amplified by the railroads, was fundamental in creating a national market economy and linking American agriculture to world markets. This is a grand theme, little of which is sounded in the book.

A greater problem arises when we arrive at the twentieth century. The reader is treated to some anecdotes of Franklin Roosevelt, and a good deal of attention is paid to the plan of Con Edison to construct a vast hydroelectric plant at Storm King (a plot that was foiled by, and served as an unwilling midwife to, the modern environmental movement). Lewis also covers the pollution of the river by General Electric plants (and alleges, without support, that through its ownership of NBC General Electric "was able to ensure that few stories about the controversy were aired" [p. 272]—a claim that certainly ought to be backed by a footnote).

The entire twentieth century is disposed of in fewer than thirty pages. This neglect of the modern era is inexplicable. Surely the stories of the twentieth century—migration of southern blacks to the cities and towns of the valley, and the vitality and then the decline of the region's modern industrial base, to name just two—deserve greater attention.

New Yorkers have a tendency to overstate their city's importance in the nation—a tendency that the rest of the nation delights in pointing out. But the Hudson River truly is a vital part of the nation's history. It deserves a more comprehensive, and more serious, treatment.

*Evan Cornog is associate dean for academic affairs at the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University, where he also teaches U.S. history. He is the author of books and articles on American political history and on the history of the city and state of New York.*