

SUNDAY TIMES OF LONDON

19 April 20

# Rivers of Power by Laurence C Smith review — the natural force that drove our history

A geographer's take on the significance of rivers, from ancient Egypt to today

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Some four billion years ago the first rains fell on our stony planet. “Water,” writes the American geographer Laurence C Smith, “pooled in lakes and seeped into the ground. Water flowed overland into rivulets, streams and rivers to the newly filling seas. Water evaporated into the poisonous air, condensed into clouds, and rained down again to complete the cycle.” Eventually, as it dribbled down from the high ground, the trickles became streams. Over time the streams became rivers. And so, over hundreds of millions of years, the great names with which we are all familiar — the Amazon, the Nile, the Tiber, the Thames — took shape.

Rivers, says Smith, are very important. Indeed, he believes that “rivers hold a grandly underappreciated importance to human civilisation as we know it. Our reliance on them — for natural capital, access, territory, wellbeing and power — has sustained us for millennia and grips us still.”

It is hard to believe that there are many readers for whom this will come as a great surprise. Still, Smith does a good job of reminding us how important rivers were in the birth of civilisation. The first societies originated along waterways such as the Nile, the Tigris and the Euphrates, where the soil was very fertile, but there was not a great deal of rain. River irrigation was crucial for survival, but that demanded planning and organisation. Villagers had to come together to build dykes and dams, and somebody had to be in charge.

Then, once the systems were up and running, producing more grain than people could consume, you needed somewhere to store and trade your surpluses, which meant warehouses and markets. You needed scribes and accountants to keep track of everything, but also rules to regulate the markets and guards to fight off raiders. And somebody had to pay for all of this, which meant taxes. So before you knew it you had built a state — but you wouldn't have had any of it without the river.

As Smith points out, our need for rivers has never abated. We rely on them not only for water, but also for power, with megaprojects such as China's Three Gorges Dam, which opened in 2003, having cost an estimated \$31bn and displaced more than a million people. As a result rivers are intensely political. They are often used as boundaries; for example, the Rio Grande between Mexico and the United States, formerly a gently meandering waterway, is now a “caged strip of concrete and steel”.

However, Smith argues persuasively that the real problems come when, by commanding the high ground from where a river flows, one country controls another's source of water. Turkey, for example, controls a critical water supply for Syria and Iraq, while Ethiopia controls a crucial

water supply for Egypt and Sudan. And in the future, as populations surge and the climate heats up, these flashpoints will become steadily more dangerous.

If Smith had confined himself to this issue, his book would have been much more coherent. But, like so many geographers who decide to write books explaining all human history, he ranges so widely and superficially that he ends up saying nothing very much about everything. One moment we are reading about the Nilometers used by the ancient Egyptians to measure river levels, the next we are on to the rise of Chinese communism. As a result, entire sections read like extracts from a child's encyclopaedia, explaining, say, the origins of the American Civil War or the first Opium War. The Dam Busters' raid happened on a river, so there are four pages on that. Then there are a couple of pages about Stalingrad that might have come from some dictionary of world battles. "Another example of how rivers influenced the strategies and battle tactics of the Second World War was Operation Market Garden," the next paragraph begins, ominously.

Few of these narratives lead anywhere, and sometimes you detect an almost tragic sense of desperation. At one point Smith says that the Second World War might have been averted had it not been for "an act of bravery by a young German boy named Johann Kuehberger". It turns out that in January 1894 Kuehberger saved a smaller boy from drowning in the River Inn, along the Austrian border. The local paper reported the story, but did not name the victim. However, the four-year-old Adolf Hitler lived locally, so it might have been him. Or, equally plausibly, it might not.

This book also contains what is undoubtedly my favourite sentence of the year so far. "It is unknown," Smith says earnestly, "whether Egypt's seductive and last independent ruler, Cleopatra VII, reflected upon the importance of the Nilometers as she lay dying from poison." Technically, I suppose that's true, just as it's unknown whether Julius Caesar reflected on the importance of the aqueduct as he lay dying from stab wounds, or whether John F Kennedy reflected on the importance of the Hoover Dam as he breathed his last in a Dallas hospital. I bet they didn't, though.

Rivers of Power: How a Natural Force Raised Kingdoms, Destroyed Civilizations, and Shapes Our World by Laurence C Smith

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