

Bort-les-Orgues, Les Mots sous le Lac: Récits et témoignages d'avant le barrage (Trans. Bort-les-Orgues, Words from beneath the lake: Narratives and testimonials from before the dam.)

By Armelle Faure, Editions Privat, Toulouse (France), 2012, 96pp, hardcover. 22.50€

Review written by Jamie Linton and submitted for publication in *The Canadian Geographer*.

Written by an the French anthropologist, Armelle Faure, this book is in the tradition of historical geography, using oral history to present a rich portrait of the effects of anthropomorphic environmental change on people and place. It documents the social impacts of Bort-les-Orgues, France's fourth-largest dam (by volume of the reservoir it creates) built on the Dordogne River between 1942 and 1952, catapulting a region that in many ways had changed little since the 19th century, into modernity. Faure has documented the social effects of dams in West Africa, Madagascar and southeast Asia, principally for the World Bank, and has authored and contributed to several books on this theme. In its respectful treatment of the experience of local residents following changes in the waterscape, the book is reminiscent of Joy Parr's *Sensing Changes* (2010) and Laura Cameron's *Openings* (1997). While there has been plenty of research and writing on the social effects of dams in developing countries and in relatively remote places like northern Quebec, this book contributes to the less-well-known but equally important story of the effects of large dams on the lives of people in industrialized, developed regions during the postwar period.

Immediately after the Second World War, France nationalized the production of hydroelectricity and launched an ambitious program of dam building. While people in some places (particularly at Tinges in the Savoie region) actively resisted the expropriations and forced relocation brought on by the dams, re-engineering the upper basin of the Dordogne was occasioned mainly by resignation and acceptance of sacrifice for the national interest. (p. 76) The full social impact of the dam at Bort-les-Orgues only became apparent later on, as residents and their descendants came to grips with the economic and emotional costs of relocation years, and sometimes decades afterwards.

The book is divided into four chapters, each providing the testimony of people uprooted from a particular section of the valley. A total of 140 families were expropriated and forced to leave their homes, their livelihoods and their land. Faure lets the 31 people she interviews for the book do most of the talking, narrating only what is necessary to give structure to the story. The text is complimented by historical photographs and by a series of photographs taken by Adelaïde Maisonabe, portraying survivors of the relocations and their descendants in the places to which they had moved, which was often as close as possible to their original homes. While the photographs deepen the human, affective dimension of the story, it is regretful that the book does not include a map of the region, especially for those readers who are unfamiliar with the Dordogne.

There is evidence in these testimonies of nostalgia for the excitement and opportunity that the dam—with its 1,200 workers during the construction phase - brought to the region. But this nostalgia is far outweighed by a sense of the sadness and pain that was occasioned by the upheaval, a sense that has been passed down through the generations. One of the most immediate effects of the dam was to terminate rail service to the region, which greatly accelerated the decline of many industries and services and produced a sense of isolation. But the most lasting affective impact of the dam is in the sense of uprootedness it produced. "The attachment to the land was something terrible in this region", as described by one witness of the relocations. (p. 41) The trauma occasioned by severing this attachment reaches down to the present. The

word “*déchirure*” (tearing apart) figures prominently in Faure’s account to describe the destruction of an association between people and place which, in this part of France, had been thousands of years in the making.

There is a great deal of interest in France today in maintaining and restoring what is described as “ecological continuity of rivers”. This concept, which forms a requirement of the European Water Framework Directive, comprises the biological connectivity of rivers as well as their capacity for lateral transportation of sediments. In the name of restoring ecological continuity, some dams in France are being decommissioned, while many others are undergoing structural changes so as to facilitate the migration of fish and the transportation of sediments. Faure’s book shows how dams can disrupt another kind of continuity: *cultural* continuity. In addition to the rupture of people and place, it describes the effects of the destruction of bridges that had linked one half of the valley with the other, the stranding of farms and villages by the rising waters of the reservoir, the abrupt disruption of traditional agricultural way of life caused by the flooding of the valley...

But while the book may be *about* the disruption of cultural continuity brought about by a dam, its *effect* is to help restore this continuity. Attention is given, for example, to the transfer of objects including houses, monuments and human remains, from the flooded valley to higher ground. Most importantly, the acts of remembering and relating stories from before the dam, of writing, and eventually, of reading (the book), serve to help restore the cultural continuity that is otherwise lost to the dam. In this process, the author plays a key role, relating the testimony of witnesses to the event, assembling before and after photographs, and providing a way for the people who experienced the moment of “*déchirure*” to restore a coherence between past and present. As declared by one of Faure’s subjects, who was 19 years old when the valley was flooded: “All the families of this region that I have spoken of left with great regret, and it is important that the names of these places and these families endure in the collective memory.” (p. 42) And another interviewee, who was 12 at the time of the relocations, describes her gratitude to the author: “What really warms my heart is to see that so many people today want to know [what the valley was like]. I want to thank you because I can die happily, knowing that people will continue to talk about my valley...” (p. 49)

Works cited :

Cameron, Laura. 1997. *Openings: A Meditation on History, Method, and Sumas Lake*. Montreal and Kingston, London, Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Parr, Joy. 2010. *Sensing Changes: Technologies, Environments, and the Everyday, 1953-2003*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

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