

# Negotiating a River

Canada, the US,  
and the Creation of the  
St. Lawrence Seaway

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*Graeme Wynn*

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## INTRODUCTION

# River to Seaway

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The St. Lawrence “is more than a river, more even than a system of waters. It has made nations. It has been the moulder of the lives of millions.”<sup>1</sup> So wrote noted author Hugh MacLennan in 1961. Previously, in his quintessentially Canadian novel, *Two Solitudes*, published at the close of the Second World War, MacLennan had perceived hydroelectric development on the St. Lawrence River as either the key to the future or the death knell for the sleepy Quebec parish of Saint-Marc-des-Érables. These writings nicely bookend the period on which this book focuses and, in doing so, highlight the perceived centrality of the St. Lawrence to the history of Canada. Moreover, MacLennan’s portrayals of the river and hydroelectric development reflect the dominant perspective of the period, an attitude that saw the river as something to be controlled and harnessed through science and technology for the progress of the nation and humanity.

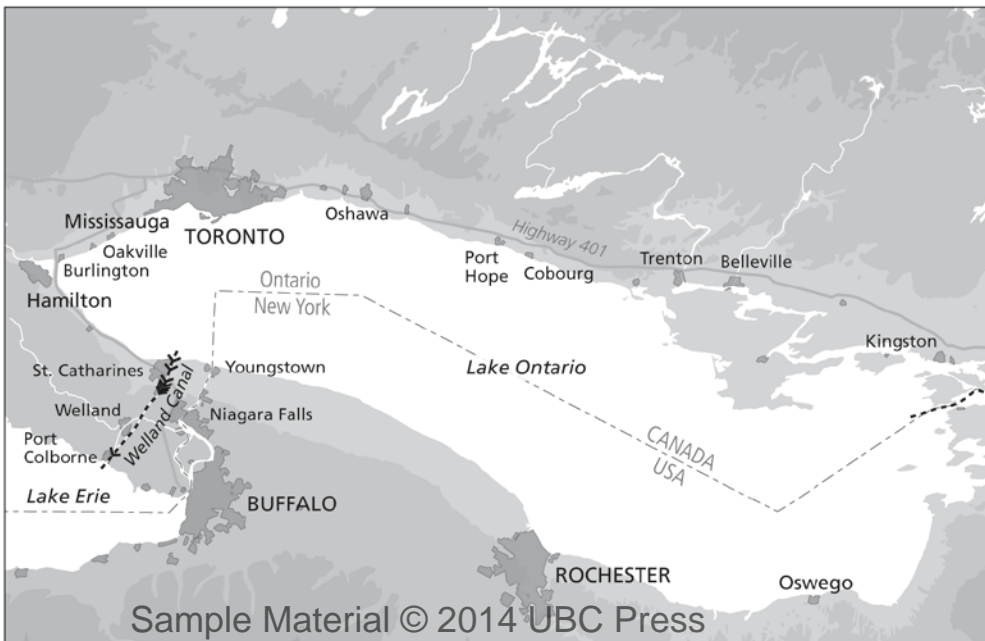
Prominent academics of the time, such as Donald Creighton and Harold Innis, were equally enraptured by the St. Lawrence. They found inspiration in the idea that the river determined Canada’s historical development – enough so that this notion became one of the great metatheories or narratives in the annals of Canadian history: the Laurentian thesis. Although this thesis is now dated, it cannot be denied that the St. Lawrence River has exerted a major influence on Canada, serving as the cradle and lifeblood of the country’s economy and development. From the First Nations groups sustained by its waters to the early European explorers and settlers – the habitants and Loyalists who populated its environs to the location of

many major communities and the majority of the country’s population, much of Canadian history has played out along the banks of the St. Lawrence.



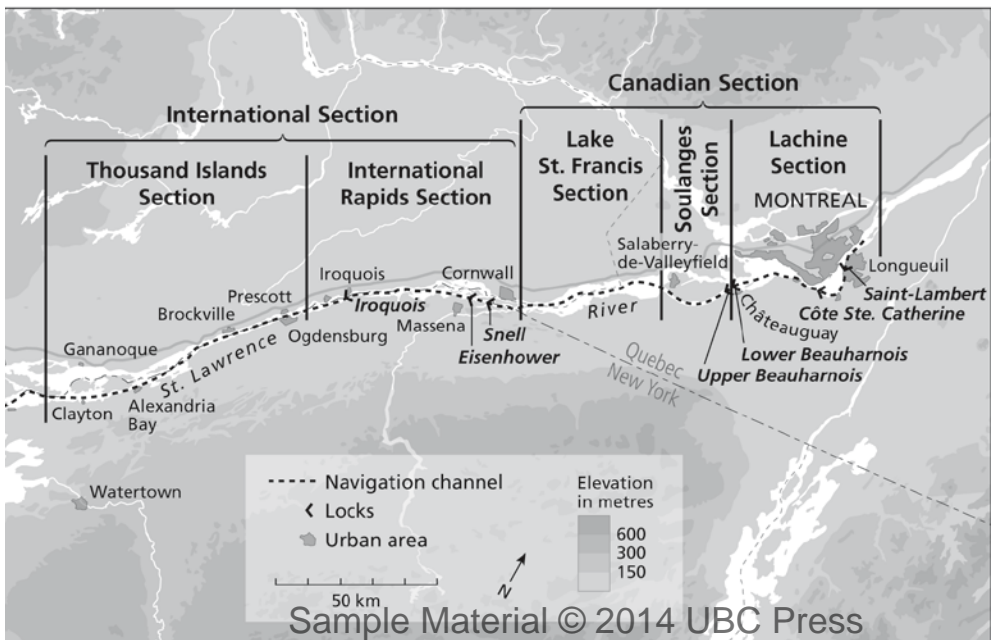
FIGURE O.1 Great Lakes–St. Lawrence waterway. Cartography by Eric Leinberger

FIGURE O.2 St. Lawrence Seaway. Cartography by Eric Leinberger



The St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project was built between 1954 and 1959 by Canada and the United States, after decades of cooperative efforts to create the combined navigation and hydroelectric project. Technically, the seaway is a series of navigation works (channels, dams, canals) that runs 181 miles (291 kilometres) from Montreal to Lake Erie. It includes the earlier-constructed Beauharnois and Welland Canals, and has a continual minimum depth of twenty-seven feet, four large dams (two of which generate hydroelectricity), and fifteen locks with a depth of thirty feet each. The larger Great Lakes–St. Lawrence water route system, which includes connecting links in the St. Marys River, the Straits of Mackinac, the St. Clair River, and the Detroit River, provides a network of deep canals, channels, and locks that stretches some 2,300 miles from the western end of Lake Superior, a little over 602 feet above sea level, to the Atlantic Ocean.

The St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project was superimposed on the majestic St. Lawrence River, which drains a vast basin of about 800,000 square miles, including the Great Lakes, the largest combined body of fresh water in the world. The third longest river in North America, the St. Lawrence proper has a length of about 745 miles and passes through a range of geographical features. The upper St. Lawrence is flanked by lowlands, though punctuated by the protruding rock of the Frontenac



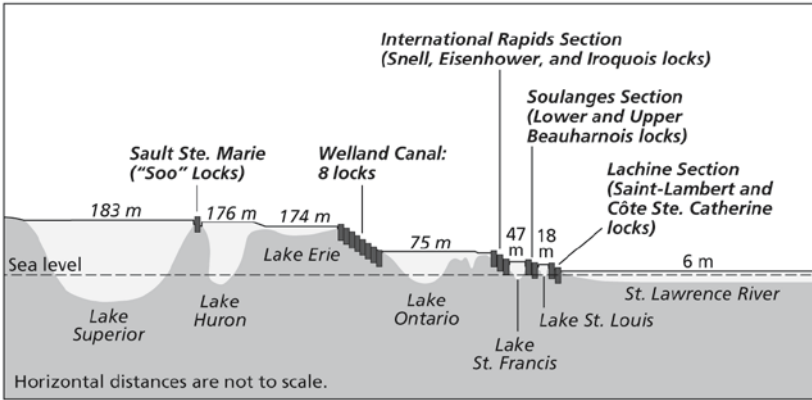


FIGURE 0.3 Profile of Great Lakes–St. Lawrence waterway. Cartography by Eric Leinberger



FIGURE 0.4 Welland Canal. Cartography by Eric Leinberger



Axis that create the vaunted Thousand Islands between Brockville and Kingston. There are higher banks near Quebec City, and further east an estuary zone where the river mixes into the Atlantic Ocean. Here the historic mean annual flow is 16,800 cubic metres per second, more than double the flow rate at the river's starting point, with the increase attributable to the many tributaries, the Ottawa River being the largest. Unlike many other rivers with high flow volumes, the St. Lawrence River is known for its regular flow levels (i.e., the amount of water does not fluctuate much during different seasons). Between Kingston and Montreal, where most of the St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project construction took place, the river was divided into five sections: Thousand Islands, International Rapids, Lake St. Francis, Soulanges, and Lachine.<sup>2</sup> The latter three down-river sections are solely in Canada or, more precisely, in Quebec. The upper two sections, the Thousand Islands and International Rapids, form the border between Canada and the United States (Ontario and New York) from the foot of Lake Ontario to the Ontario-Quebec border; any change to the river levels in these sections is thus a Canadian-American, as well as a federal-provincial and federal-state, issue.

The St. Lawrence undertaking was a megaproject. It involved construction of the massive Robert Moses–Robert H. Saunders Power Dam between Cornwall, Ontario, and Massena, New York. The two halves of the dam are bisected by the international border. Hydroelectrical production was a prime factor for building the entire project. The resulting Lake St. Lawrence flooded out much of the surrounding area, dramatically pushing back the shoreline into land that had formerly been farmers' fields. Numerous Canadian communities between Iroquois and Cornwall, including the nine submerged "Lost Villages," were affected by the raised water level, which flooded approximately 20,000 acres and 6,500 people in the Province of Ontario, and about 18,000 acres and 1,100 people in the sparsely populated riverine part of the State of New York. Another 1,500 permanent residents east of Cornwall, chiefly in Quebec, were moved because of the seaway. This was the largest rehabilitation project in Canadian history, with engineers and planners relishing the opportunity to employ modern planning principles to redesign the rehabilitated areas. The St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project would prove to be one of the great engineering achievements of the twentieth century, and with a generating capacity of 1,880 megawatts, the power project was at the time of its completion second only in North America to the Grand Coulee development on the Columbia River (1,954 megawatts).



FIGURE 0.5 Contemporary aerial view of the submerged remains of the town of Aultsville. © *Louis Helbig, sunkenvillages.ca*

Despite the remarkable rapidity with which construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project was completed, it took over half of the twentieth century – spanning two world wars, the Great Depression, and the formative years of the Cold War – and multiple failed negotiations and agreements for Canada and the United States to commence the seaway and power project. According to Canadian political scientist James Eayrs, writing in 1961, the St. Lawrence matter was one of the “most difficult and most momentous” Canadian foreign policy issues.<sup>3</sup> On the American side, it was the longest continually running issue in US congressional history. The authors of a study of Canadian-American relations assert that “nothing represents the bilateral [North American] relationship during the cold war better than that seaway.”<sup>4</sup> The completed waterway was, in the words of another historian, comparable to a gigantic “zipper” pulling together Canada and the United States and accelerating the economic, trade, and defence integration of the two North American countries.<sup>5</sup> The resulting hydroelectricity allowed for the industrial and economic expansion of central Canada, and deep-draught inland navigation

permitted the flow of foreign goods and the movement of iron ore to the Great Lakes region while simultaneously allowing for the increased export of the products of manufacturing, industry, and western agriculture.

This book is divided into two sections: negotiating and building. The first three chapters proceed chronologically and cover negotiations over the St. Lawrence project up to 1954; the next three chapters examine its construction and are organized along both chronological and thematic lines. This dual structure requires engaging a range of academic disciplines mostly from, but not limited to, different fields of history: international, political, environmental, nationalist, cultural, state building, water, transnational, borderlands, and technology. Many of these are prominent throughout; however, the first section out of necessity puts more emphasis on hydropolitics and thus on political history, nationalism, Canadian-American relations, and environmental diplomacy.<sup>6</sup> The construction of the joint project had a profound impact on St. Lawrence land- and waterscapes, and the second section therefore relies more heavily on environmental, technological, and borderlands approaches.

In the first section, I argue that in the late 1940s the Liberal government of Louis St. Laurent began to consider a unilateral Canadian waterway and a bilateral Canadian-American hydro development. The idea of “going it alone” struck a responsive nationalist chord in Canada. Between 1949 and 1951, both the St. Laurent government and the Canadian public progressively embraced the concept of an all-Canadian seaway, and it became the preferred policy. However, the US government, and specific American regional and economic interests, considered an all-Canadian route to be an economic and national security threat and used various means to stop the Canadian plan and secure American participation. Out of concern for the impact on the broader Canadian-American relationship, the St. Laurent government reluctantly acquiesced in a joint seaway project in 1954. Canada technically had the right under the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909 to construct a deep canal system entirely on its own side of the border if such a system would not change the water levels of the St. Lawrence. However, a hydroelectric power dam, which raises the level of the river and then uses the ensuing drop of water to spin turbines that generate electricity, was necessary to make a seaway feasible: the raised water levels of the head-pond made achieving deeper navigation channels much easier, and the cost involved in constructing a canal and lock system of sufficient depth to accommodate deep-draught shipping was seen as prohibitive without the dammed river. Many proponents of a St. Lawrence project had viewed

the waterway and power project in tandem since at least the First World War. But because a power dam would raise the water level in the international section of the St. Lawrence, it needed the concurrence of both the Canadian and American governments via the International Joint Commission, the bilateral body established to rectify Canadian-American border environmental issues. As a result, a unilateral Canadian waterway was indirectly subject to American assent to the power dam.

My reconceptualization of the diplomacy of the St. Lawrence project contributes to our understanding of Canadian-American relations in general, and the St. Laurent years in particular. I argue that there was a unique – terming it “special” would be going too far – Canadian-American relationship during the early Cold War.<sup>7</sup> The relationship was unique in the sense that Ottawa considered the United States to be its primary friend and ally and, accordingly, the main aim of Canadian foreign policy in this period was to ensure smooth relations with the United States. For its part, Washington was often willing to tolerate, accommodate, or humour Canadian policies and sensitivities. More specifically, the US Department of State, or at least the section responsible for relations with Canada, often accommodated Ottawa. This study seeks a middle ground between the continentalist and critical nationalist traditions in the Canadian historiography on the northern North American relationship, avoiding the excessive anti-Americanism and Canadian moral superiority characteristic of the latter while eschewing the tendency of the former to see Canada as inevitably benefiting from increased integration with the United States. I generally align my approach with the North American school of Canadian-American relations, which points to the importance of shared continental outlooks and tendencies, highlights cooperation – without obscuring conflict – between the two nations, and sees the bilateral relationship as constituted by everyday social, cultural, and economic interactions – which generally provided the relationship with an inbuilt momentum, balance, and continuity – as much as by negotiations at the elite and executive government levels.<sup>8</sup>

In the long history of the two nations oscillating between conflict and cooperation, the decade after 1945 was mostly characterized by the latter; the St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project, however, was a key exception.<sup>9</sup> As many recent borderlands, transnational, and regional studies have demonstrated, there is a strong upper North American interrelationship forged by many years and forms of regional, social, and personal trans-border contacts.<sup>10</sup> However, such perspectives can potentially obscure the

policy conflicts that did exist and exaggerate the impact of informal cross-border networks and shared cultural affinities on formal governmental policies, which generally played a more important role in determining the nature and tenor of the Canadian-American relationship. Each nation's political, economic, and security policies were predicated on self-interest, and cultural notions of Canadian-American kinship often went out the window when these national interests did not align.

In much the same way as recent works have identified the importance of culture and race in shaping Canadian foreign relations, I point to cultural conceptions of nature, water, and technology as important determinants of Canadian foreign policy.<sup>11</sup> Although this book could be accused of perpetuating the old idea of a North Atlantic triangle, linking Canada, Britain, and the United States, the fact remains that in the years after the Second World War these two countries were the main allies and key concerns of Canadian international policy. Indeed, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of the Ottawa-Washington relationship in the eyes of the St. Laurent government, as well as the desire to balance that relationship through an Atlanticist policy based on multilateral alliances and institutions. Some scholars claim that the Canada-US relationship in the 1950s avoided the use of "linkage" – a diplomatic approach in which one side attempts to put pressure on the other by tying together unrelated policy issues – but I contend that linkage attempts were prominent in the St. Lawrence dispute.<sup>12</sup> Realizing the diplomatic limitations inherent in aligning itself squarely with the United States, Canada sought to maximize its freedom of manoeuvre and protect its sovereignty to the fullest possible extent while simultaneously contributing to, and benefiting from, the spreading American economic empire and security umbrella. The United States hoped to bring Canada, and its resources, more tightly into the American orbit while at the same time protecting America's northern flank from Soviet encroachment and was willing to override Canadian sovereignty or desires when American security and important national interests were at stake. I believe that although the St. Laurent government certainly furthered Canadian-American integration, it did so with some reluctance and in order to advance what it perceived to be Canada's best interests.<sup>13</sup>

Most of the main political and diplomatic accounts of the St. Lawrence project – for example, those authored by Theo L. Hills, Lionel Chevrier, William Willoughby, and Carleton Mabee – date from the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>14</sup> The latter two are the strongest works, but they do not adequately explain the Canadian decision-making process or the nature



FIGURE 0.6 Iroquois Lock and Control Dam during construction (the old lock and canal can be seen to the left). © *Dumas Seaway Photograph Collection, Mss. coll. 124, Special Collections, St. Lawrence University Libraries*

of Canadian nationalism, nor the environmental and technological history. The publication of several articles on the topic over the last decade suggests there has been a growing interest in the seaway, and the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project in 2009 resulted in a spate of publications on the subject.<sup>15</sup> Considerable attention within the United States has been paid to elements of the political history of the St. Lawrence project, particularly the ability of special interests to block the project, its consideration in Congress over many decades, and what this process discloses about the American system of government and separation of powers.<sup>16</sup> However, this literature substantially neglects the Canadian perspective. The history of the seaway is meanwhile reduced to a minor side issue in broader works on Canadian-American relations and studies of modern Canadian politics, defence, and external affairs,

instead of being properly treated as one of the major joint disputes between Canada and the United States.<sup>17</sup>

The literature on Canadian decision makers involved in the development of the seaway – such as R.B. Bennett, William Lyon Mackenzie King, Louis St. Laurent, Lester Pearson, C.D. Howe, and A.G.L. McNaughton – has not added a great deal to our understanding of the genesis of the St. Lawrence project. Even when scholars have paid attention to Ottawa's attempt at an all-Canadian seaway, they have generally argued that the St. Laurent government wanted the Americans involved all along and was only trying to cajole the United States into a cooperative project. Some, such as the venerable John Holmes, assert that Canada outmanoeuvred the Americans by bluffing about an all-Canadian seaway in order to induce American participation.<sup>18</sup> Yet, Donald Creighton, for example, charged that American involvement in the seaway was “on the ungenerous terms of its own choosing” and contended that the manner in which this participation took place was as a serious blow to Canadian sovereignty and national identity.<sup>19</sup> On this particular occasion, Creighton was much closer to the mark.

The river – and, by extension, the seaway – offered the potential, as William Kilbourn phrased it, to “fulfill that age-old dream at the heart of Canadian history, the Empire of the St. Lawrence.”<sup>20</sup> The Laurentian thesis, most prominently forwarded by Creighton in his 1937 *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence, 1760-1850* (and rereleased in 1956 as *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*), holds that “Canadian economic and national development derived fundamentally from the gradual exploitation of key staple products – fur, timber, and wheat – by colonial merchants in the major metropolitan centres along the St. Lawrence River system,” which “provided the means by which both a transatlantic and a transcontinental market economy could be created.”<sup>21</sup> This east-west axis was further enhanced by the St. Lawrence's connection to the Great Lakes, and the “empire” extended west by railway after Confederation to the western interior and Pacific Ocean.<sup>22</sup> Although the grander aims of this empire may have failed, the extended attempts to bring it to fruition did serve to geographically and psychologically carve out the country of Canada, resist the pull of the United States, and forge the various colonies and English- and French-speaking peoples together. According to Creighton, “The impulse towards unity in the interests of strength and expansion is one of the oldest and most powerful tendencies in the history of the Empire of the St. Lawrence.”<sup>23</sup>

The St. Lawrence River holds an iconic place in the Canadian national imaginary. I am interested in how the manipulation of the St. Lawrence basin was shaped by culture, identity, region, and environment. This is in keeping with a global, even ancient, tradition of viewing rivers, and water control projects, as the bloodstream of nations on which nationalist obsessions were projected as reflections or repositories of cultural or national character.<sup>24</sup> The role of the St. Lawrence River (and of rivers in general) in the development of Canada is central, perhaps even unsurpassed, in the paradigm of national development. From the early explorers who travelled up the St. Lawrence and dreamed of bypassing its rapids to the settlers who populated the riverine basin in subsequent centuries, it served as the crucible of Canadian settlement and development. Canals were central to this evolution, and though they may have seemed in some ways an anachronistic technology by the mid-twentieth century, the seaway as a deep canal system (joined with hydroelectric development) could simultaneously link romantic nationalist associations and modern transportation and industrialization goals.

I argue that the link between identity and riverine environments has unique manifestations in the Canadian context. Given the importance of rivers and water to Canadian identity, it is no surprise that the St. Lawrence, the greatest of all of Canada's rivers, is the leading protagonist in historical writings that personify geographic factors in the nation's historical development, often acting as a synecdoche for Canada in general, and central Canada (Ontario and Quebec) in particular. Indeed, geographically determinist explanations of Canadian history animated many prominent historical texts of the day. These metahistorical and nationalist interpretations include the staples and metropolitan theses, which are part of – or contribute to, depending on one's perspective – the Laurentian thesis.<sup>25</sup> Creighton built on the work of Harold Innis, elevating Innis's exalted view of the St. Lawrence into "new poetic realms"<sup>26</sup> in which "the dream of the commercial empire of the St. Lawrence runs like an obsession through the whole of Canadian history ... The river was not only a great actuality; it was the central truth of a religion."<sup>27</sup> A range of prominent historians, although taking issue with unabashed Laurentianism and its geographically determinist and inherently anti-American stance, nonetheless accepted that the St. Lawrence had played a pivotal role in Canada's historical development.<sup>28</sup> Popular histories from the era forwarded similar narratives.<sup>29</sup>

Stéphane Castonguay and Darin Kinsey point out the tautological nature of the Laurentian thesis for its coincidence with the linked staples and



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