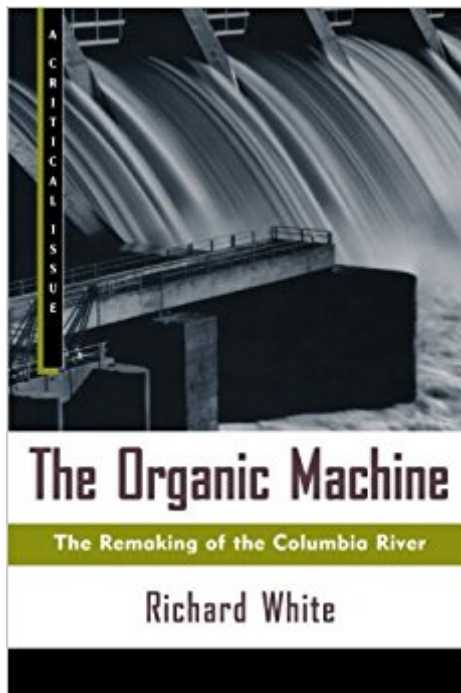




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# The Organic Machine: The Remaking Of The Columbia River (Hill And Wang Critical Issues)



## Synopsis

The Hill and Wang Critical Issues Series: concise, affordable works on pivotal topics in American history, society, and politics. In this pioneering study, White explores the relationship between the natural history of the Columbia River and the human history of the Pacific Northwest for both whites and Native Americans. He concentrates on what brings humans and the river together: not only the physical space of the region but also, and primarily, energy and work. For working with the river has been central to Pacific Northwesterners' competing ways of life. It is in this way that White comes to view the Columbia River as an organic machine--with conflicting human and natural claims--and to show that whatever separation exists between humans and nature exists to be crossed.

## Book Information

Series: Hill and Wang Critical Issues

Paperback: 144 pages

Publisher: Hill and Wang; Fifteenth Printing edition (January 31, 1996)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0809015838

ISBN-13: 978-0809015832

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 4.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 18 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #92,048 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #80 in [Books > Science & Math > Earth Sciences > Rivers](#) #84 in [Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Geography](#) #166 in [Books > Textbooks > Science & Mathematics > Environmental Studies](#)

## Customer Reviews

Award-winning author White (history, Univ. of Washington) offers a powerful and exploratory look into the relationship between people and nature in the Pacific Northwest. The result is an alarming vision of the history of life along the Columbia River. By examining both Indian and white interactions, the author molds a new environmentalism that incorporates pollution, inorganic naturalness, and environmental destruction, as well as a certain energy and mysticism. The relationship between the Columbia River and the people in its sweep can be symbolized by the "organic machine." According to White, this machine incorporates all living creatures in the environment, each with a "social claim to their part of the machine." White approaches the conflict between humanity and nature earlier noted by minds such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Lewis

Mumford with passion, optimism, emotion, and intelligence, connecting the reader on a variety of levels. Recommended for most libraries. Vicki L. Toy Smith, Univ. of Nevada, Reno Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Prizewinning University of Washington historian White's "organic machine" is the Columbia River and its tributaries: along this energy powerhouse, Native American fishermen and eastern adventurers, spawning salmon and man-made machines--from gill nets and fish wheels to hydroelectric dams and Hanford Engineer Works--came together to forge "a new energy regime, a new geography, and a new relationship between human labor and the energy of nature." Viewing human history and natural history as part of the same narrative, not as parallel stories, White argues "it is our work that ultimately links us, for better or worse, to nature." The Organic Machine focuses on that linkage to illuminate both the conflicting human claims and constructions that have "disassembled" the mighty river over the decades and the "larger organic cycles beyond [human] control" to which the river system remains tied. White urges that it is this mixture of organic and human-made that defines both the river's history and its current reality. Includes a bibliographical essay but no footnotes; an annotated version is in the University of Washington Library's Special Collections. Mary Carroll --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

It's an interesting book that looks at nature and man in a different way. The highlighting of salmon and the Columbia River illustrate the relationship of nature and man in a clear and concise way. Without these concrete elements the reader could get lost in the theory of an organic machine.

Excellent book. Richard White made a masterpiece here. His writing and framing of the subject is so beautifully done. I think the book gets better as you get more into it.....especially liked the second half. I am huge Richard White fan now.

Very decent reference for history of the river. A few more weeks of researching would have made it a 5 star.

great source for research papers for undergrad degree.

good quality!

White wants this book to represent a new approach to ecological history, one built not around humans or the environment, but about relationships - - between humans and the river, between salmon and the river, between humans and salmon, and so forth. To focus on relationships, he develops themes of energy and work. It's a good idea, but he doesn't pull it off. The first half of the book starts out promisingly enough, telling an ecological story in which humans appear but are not the only actors. White builds the narrative around the concepts of work and energy. The river can do work through mills and dams, humans work, salmon move energy from ocean upstream to bears and eagles, and so forth. Human relationships with the river's energy have changed from Native Americans to European settlers and then through industrialization. Unfortunately, White is too much a historian to be able to do this right. Telling a story about work would be very interesting, but that involves getting the data and making some calculations - - for example, how much energy do salmon move upstream, how much potential energy lies in the river downstream, how much of the energy do humans appropriate, and how much energy do humans apply? How has the human-river relationship transformed the energy system of the Columbia? White is simply not equipped to follow through on his own ideas, and remains too limited by standard historical methods and narrative structures. These limitations become particularly visible by the second half of the book. Beginning with the 1930s, White tells the same story as other historians, about the New Deal and dams, about World War II and nuclear power, about the death of salmon runs. He discusses political controversies, such as WPPSS scandal, even when they don't work in the narrative. All too quickly, then, White's narrative has become much more conventional. In short, White is too much the historian to be able to execute his own vision for this work. Historians read documents in archives, and clearly White has done a lot of this. In that sense, he knows his stuff. But to write a new kind of narrative really requires someone with the eye of a natural scientist, someone who can estimate the amount of energy the rivers does as it flows to the sea, the amount of energy the salmon bring up from the ocean, the amount of energy humans - - and bears, and eagles, and everyone else - - siphon off from the ocean. While White understands basic ecological relationships, he lacks an ecologist's deeper understanding of multiple relationships, feedback systems, and energy cycling. A coauthor would probably have served this project very well.

An interesting essay on the impact of our industrial civilization in the American west. White uses the history of the Columbia River basin as a paradigmatic example of large scale engineering of the natural world. White opens by pointing out that human interactions with the Columbia basin are ancient; Native Americans exploited the resources of the Columbia for millenia. The lower Columbia

valley was relatively densely populated due in large part to the enormous bounty of Salmonid migrations up the Columbia. While White is no starry-eyed romantic, the impression he leaves is that this traditional pre-industrial economy existed in a kind of equilibrium with the Columbia. The coming of Europeans and European descended Americans brought about great social and biologic changes. The enormous disease related mortality associated with European contact and the commodification of food supplies devastated Native American populations and societies. Into this partial vacuum came Americans who were increasingly involved in a global and commodity oriented economy. Industrial technology made possible the reorganization of the Columbia basin. White concisely shows the convergence of interests that drove this impressively large effort. Corporate interests, local boosterism, Progressive ideology-politics, and Depression era job creation all drove the amazing efforts of the Bonneville Power Administration and other agencies that remade the Columbia basin. This is very much the story of unintended consequences. Many advocates of these projects saw them as vehicles for political reform and social transformation - goals that were never really met. White connects these efforts to interesting and distinctly American figures such as Emerson and the 20th century social theorist Lewis Mumford. The ultimate result is what White terms The Organic Machine; the transformation of the Columbia Basin into a living analogue of a piece of machinery. This is not a moralistic book. White is primarily concerned with describing this phenomenon and understanding its genesis. While he primarily describes many of the unsatisfactory aspects of the outcome, he is also quite clear on some of the considerable benefits of this remarkable project. This is very much the story of human activity as a virtually geologic force; producing a powerfully concrete and very different analogue of the natural world. There is an unsatisfactory aspect to this book. It is really a fairly long essay and falls somewhat between 2 stools. Intended partially as a somewhat philosophical essay, it's a bit too long and White could have made the essential points in a shorter text. At the same time, White's historical perspective is quite interesting but it doesn't provide the breadth of historical detail you'd expect from a more strictly historical work.

I really can't add much to the other very positive reviews of the book. The Columbia River area -- especially the Gorge -- is one of my favorite places on the planet, and I really appreciate how Richard White gives a brief account of the development of the river without hyperbole and hysterics. He even touches on that in passing. As I read, it was so easy just to relive in my mind the trips I've made to and through the area. For anyone interested in the Pacific Northwest, the history of our interactions with the rest of nature, and/or the development of the West, this is a great book --

attention-keeping, fast-moving, and lots of interesting details without bogging down anywhere.

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