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Finnish Water Services – Experiences in Global Perspective

London: IWA Publishing, 2017

ISBN 9781780408743 (E-book) £48.00. 288 pp.

Learning something new about a country or culture that is not one's own is always of interest to a Geographer. Let's start with the people of Helsinki, many of whom entered a draw to be chosen to celebrate the centenary of the city's sewer system by diving in them. Is this interest in underground exploration unique to the Finns I wonder? This book certainly lifts a drain cover or two for a detailed exposé of the watery thread of life running through 5.3 million Finnish people every day, and the structure of Finnish governance, through the water cycle. It is not until chapter eleven that you begin to realise exactly how the Finns have developed such an interest in water supplies – as the author indicates, the book is part of a genre of water history writing that is popularly used in Finland to increase communities' understanding of the value of clean water and the value to everyone in keeping it that way. This book therefore is partly about handing down knowledge to the next generation of Finns and creating a culture that appreciates and understands water services and their importance. However, it is no less useful in other cultures and provides a thorough and comprehensive description of the evolution of water services and their importance globally, which everyone ought to be cognisant with.

I should say that this book is not a page-turner. It can be frustratingly slow. My copy had to be relegated to the waiting-room-style pile I keep in my electric car, to read in small chunks whilst waiting for the battery to charge. I apologise to the author for this blunt observation but the slavish attention to every detail of the history of water management in Finland, and the myriad ways the precious resource is used, protected, polluted, pumped, sanitised, cleansed, bought and sold, meant that every chapter deserved to be read thoroughly, and carefully reconciled with one's own geographically-bound and personally centred view of the water commons and the flow of water through everyday life. This takes time – more than a long soak in the bath. At times it felt like a cross between an incredibly long field trip (indeed a lot of the photographs are those taken on field excursions) and an inspection of all 95,000km of water pipes and 45,000km sewers in the land of lakes and forests. Nevertheless, the book has already proven to be both inspirational and instructional and the number of markers and notes I have placed between the pages are testament to its value.

The fact that I have created my own scrap paper index for the book, highlights the main problem in that though the book is divided into four sections, the foreword by the advisory board provides details of the overall concept and direction of the book but few clues to the structure of its constituent parts. The author's attempt in chapter one is similarly lean. The headings aren't enough to guide one easily to sections of immediate use. Reading the book from cover to cover requires encounters with repeated information which do not help to alleviate the feeling of immense mental effort required to cross-reference each part to formulate a clear picture of all the actors on and within such a complex system. Of course, I can offer no alternative, and believe it is necessarily complicated.

The first part provides very clear overviews of the history of water services and water treatment, dipping into matters of efficiency, the appropriateness of different sources, industrial pollution and

policy evolution. Part two considers the structure of water management, ownership, and policy-making, costs, pricing and financing, and a spatial understanding of co-operative and municipal water systems. The sections that discuss the merits of dry toilets and water and sanitary provision in dispersed rural areas are particularly thought provoking. Indeed, why are dry toilets generally overlooked as a solution in remote properties and second/holiday homes? The information in chapter nine will be particularly relevant in popular rural holiday locations throughout Europe and beyond. The author usefully points out that *'even hard work does not feel unpleasant once it is voluntary'*, a reference I assume to the notion that dealing with a dry toilet might well be more acceptable when one has free time to spend in a beautiful location. This is no doubt the case in Finland where there are around half a million 'free-time' dwellings, three quarters of which we are told have Saunas and are situated next to water bodies. No wonder the Finns have developed such expertise in water management. Though plunging into cold water post-sauna may bring joy to the soul, it is much better if the water is clean. Parts three and four contain much that is transferrable to any global location, chapter thirteen is most interesting with regard to social efficacy and impact and these themes link well with the summing up in chapter seventeen.

Chapter eighteen alerts the reader to matters of pressing importance for the future. Ageing infrastructure is a problem. Most developed countries are in a similar position, needing to repair and renew on a scale that will be costly and resource-heavy. Has enough provision been made even in Finland to do this effectively and efficiently? Are there enough water engineers and people with specialist, technical knowledge and understanding, to deliver both in Finland and the rest of the world? The author points out that continuing education is needed to bring on the next generation of water services managers.

The book concludes with discussion relating to the export of Finnish expertise around the world. There have clearly been some extremely successful transnational partnerships that are reflected in a series of testimonies to collaborative success. There are some notable exceptions giving the reader some idea where the Finns and their partners may be needed in the future. Despite there being so much still to do at home, alongside wood products, Finnish water engineers and water engineering knowledge will undoubtedly remain one of the country's key exports.

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