

## The Wired Northwest

The History of Electric Power,  
1870s-1970s

PAUL W. HIRT

(Lawrence: University Press of Kansas,  
2012. ix, 461 pp. Illustrations, notes,  
bibliography, index. \$49.95)

## Power for the People

A History of Seattle City Light

DAVID W. WILMA, WALT CROWLEY,  
AND THE HISTORYLINK  
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(Seattle: HistoryLink, in association  
with University of Washington Press,  
2010. 131 pp. Illustrations, notes, index.  
\$29.95)

It is a rare opportunity to review two texts whose theme and scope complement each other so well. Paul W. Hirt's *Wired Northwest* is an ambitious, comprehensive, and integrated history of regional power in Washington, Utah, Oregon, and British Columbia from the 1870s to the 1970s. David Wilma, Walt Crowley, and the HistoryLink staff's *Power for the People*, on the other hand, is a detailed microcosm of Hirt's larger narrative—a history of Seattle City Light, a municipal electric utility that in numerous ways lies at the heart of Hirt's story—during almost the same period. Together, the two books offer a compelling account of wringing energy from the landscape amid issues of ideology and regional identity.

*Power for the People* traces the stuttering emergence in Seattle of electricity, a new technology that promised to liberate the people in this quickly growing city from the darkness. The city was first electrified in 1886, when two dynamos went online, generating enough electricity for three hundred 16-candlepower lamps. The city soon turned its focus to harnessing the energy of the region's rivers, building its first hydroelectricity project on the Ce-

dar River in 1905. Though, as Hirt points out, electricity was initially unevenly adopted and used, questions about who would control the production, transmission, and consumption of the nascent resource immediately engendered debate between public utilities mandated with providing low-cost energy to as many as possible and private companies determined to provide electricity at the highest rate possible and only to those who could pay.

Hirt attributes the Pacific Northwest's early adoption of electricity to industry magnates who saw the importance of lighting not only private residences but also work sites such as mines and shipyards where artificial light promised to increase productivity and profits. Hirt covers subjects such as the amalgamation of small utilities into ever larger ones, the enthusiasm about the possibilities offered by this new technology (which was quickly tempered by unequal service and prices for residential and commercial customers), the apprehension of monopolies, the conflict between the utility companies and fishermen over use of the rivers, and the effect of the region's unique geography on energy history in the Northwest.

Hirt's narrative tends to focus more on private utilities and their machinations than on municipal utilities, yet given his goal to synthesize a hundred years of energy history this is not entirely his fault. Municipal utilities, as shown by Wilma and his coauthors, were, especially in the early years, volatile and small in number. Indeed, *Power for the People* provides a balance to Hirt's narrative of the ideological struggle that quickly developed between proponents of private power and proponents of public power by reminding us of the widespread desire all around the region for more reliable and lower-priced electricity.

Together, the two books demonstrate Pacific northwesterners' fear of outsid-

ers controlling their access to electricity, as they watched bankers, financiers, and capitalists from Chicago, Boston, and New York enter the local electric utility market via direct and indirect avenues of influence. Both books also agree that a 1915 victory of the National Electric Light Association, a law effectively prohibiting municipal electric utilities from selling power beyond city limits, was a serious blow to anti-corporate interests in the public-private war. This conflict would, over time, come to dominate the electric industry not just in the Northwest, but across the United States.

At the same time, each book brings independent subjects to bear. Hirt highlights the particularities of electric power in the United States and Canada, explaining that for Canadians growth remained generally slower, government regulation was less transformative (especially during the world wars), and the Great Depression was more inhibiting because of already-strained economies and cautious financiers. He also spends considerable time on the Bonneville Power Administration and the far-reaching effects that federally funded hydroelectric projects would have on the industry. Wilma and his coauthors, meanwhile, meticulously detail Seattle City Light's sometimes rocky transformation into the largest publicly owned utility in the region. A particularly interesting moment in Seattle City Light's history was when it implemented public tours in 1929 to keep the utility in the public eye during economic hardship. Picturesque train rides, guided tours of the monumental engineering project at Skagit River, and an overnight stay made the tours successful to the tune of 22,000 visitors per year by the start of World War Two. Also of interest to the reader will be the book's rendering of the life of a City Light employee, describing not only the daily work activities of the utility's linemen, salespeople, and troubleshooters, but also their personal lives in the often remote com-

pany towns where they learned, voted, commiserated, and celebrated together.

The two texts are not without their disagreements. For instance, Wilma and his coauthors argue that in the early years Seattle City Light charged residential customers eight cents per kilowatt-hour, with reduced rates as usage increased, while for commercial customers, rates were “generally higher” (p. 28). Hirt notes, however, that without fail commercial customers, who used far more electricity than the average residential customer, enjoyed significantly reduced rates. This trend, argues Hirt, provided continual ammunition for the multifarious interests debating the merits of public and private ownership.

Both narratives stop with the onset of the 1970s and the end of the utilities’ policy of pushing limitless consumption (which they did on the basis that production could always keep up with need). Economic realities, along with local and global politics, changed the landscape of public and private power, as did new environmental imperatives, as both the government and the public came to expect the utilities to be responsible environmental stewards of public resources.

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