

## BOOK REVIEWS

*B*eth Kephart. *Flow: The Life and Times of Philadelphia's Schuylkill River*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007. Pp. 116, illustrations, footnotes, acknowledgements, bibliography. Cloth, \$23.00.)

*Flow* is a clever but flawed attempt to tell the history of the lower part of the Schuylkill River through short historical impressions and vignettes of the past. In telling these tales Kephart assumes the persona of the river, so the stories read like an autobiography or a memoir. This method is certainly inventive but often leaves the reader wondering about the stream's knowledge (or lack thereof) and the origins of its various opinions. The writing is lyrical and conjures up vivid pictures in the mind but there are a few awkward phrases and poor choices of words, which are truly unfortunate. More troubling, however, is that the work contains notable historical gaps and errors in both human and natural history.

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Mistakes abound in Kephart's depictions of the flora and fauna of early Pennsylvania. "Hazel hens" are European game fowl (10). The birds were not here when Europeans arrived nor were they introduced by them but Pennsylvania's state bird, the ruffed grouse, roamed (and still roams) the woodlands. Beavers could not have been trained to hunt and retrieve fish (10). They don't eat fish. River otters, however, eat fish and have been trained to herd fish into nets. When bears emerge from hibernation in early to mid April they would not be able to smell "the beginnings of berries" (17). Berry blossoms don't begin to appear in Pennsylvania until May. In a footnote she dismisses as "fabulous hearsay" the notion that flocks of wild pigeons "often flew so low as to be knocked down with sticks" (22). People did hunt passenger pigeons with clubs and though one might have had difficulty in taking many (or any) while they were in flight, they were more often taken in this manner while they were molting, nesting, or roosting at night. Even more common was using sticks to plunder squabs from their nests. "Pompous pheasants" were not here to greet William Penn (22). Although now native, pheasants were originally imported from Asia and despite some famous failed attempts to introduce them to America in the mid-1700s, it was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that these birds began to thrive in the wild in the United States. Fish don't blink their eyes as suggested in "State In Schuylkill" (31). Their eyes are always open.

On the human side of the story, the author's unique blend of fact and fiction leads to folly. The Lenape did not wear black wampum as a badge of mourning as she hints in "Ganshowahanna" (18). The "East Indies Company" did not employ Arendt Corssen, the European discoverer of the Schuylkill, as she states in a footnote (21). He worked for the Dutch West India Company. The illustration identified as the "Market Street Railroad Bridge" and dated "1805" is incorrect (51). There were no railroads in America—or anywhere else for that matter—in 1805. Railroads first appeared in the United States in the late 1820s and gradually spread and gained greater acceptance in the 1830s. The image is originally from the September 3, 1853 edition of a once popular illustrated weekly newspaper, "Gleason's Pictorial."

As the stories are told from the river's point of view, it's surprising what the ancient Schuylkill knows and what it doesn't know. For example, it knows the names of prominent Philadelphians who have mansions nearby and some of the folks who frolic along, in, or on it, but many other people appearing

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in its yarns remain anonymous. It is acquainted with George Washington and professes its love for him (34, 43). Thus, it should be no surprise that the river is a patriot, yet it does not mention the Continental Army's winter encampment along its banks at Valley Forge. The Schuylkill takes umbrage that the British captured and occupied the Quaker city in 1777 yet it doesn't know the name of the leader of the enemy force-General Sir William Howe. Instead it refers him "the general who invaded Philadelphia" (36). It relates that along its course an exotic Chinese tallow tree grows and that someone in France sent Ben Franklin seeds or cuttings of this plant (41). And somehow it knows that after a year of suffering Franklin died (43). The river informs us that Meriwether Lewis came from the west to study botany with Benjamin Smith Barton (48). The old stream is aware of its "sister rivers" to the west but makes no mention of its own tributaries (48). It even knows the names of a coal barge man's mules and that of his paramour downstream but it doesn't know the man's name (64). It's aware of cinnamon bears in the Philadelphia zoo but strangely it has no idea where they came from even though they are from the American west (78). It seems odd that the river is puzzled by the use of the word "traffic" to describe the flow of automobiles whizzing along the Schuylkill expressway, as if it never heard the word before (97). But the river doesn't tell us everything about itself-like the time it caught on fire in 1892, or the 1902 flood, or its impressions when Penn students celebrating their team's football victories began a tradition of tossing the goalposts into its waters, or how it feels about invasive exotic species of fish swimming in it.

It seems that old river is just a mystery. It's lucid and it can recall some things very clearly yet other things remain shrouded; it can reveal some information yet it can still retain an infinite number of secrets. *Flow* is occasionally fascinating and informative but errors and voids make it more frequently frustrating. Sadly, it's very watered-down history. The book could have been-should have been-a lot better. Additional research and sharp editing would have helped.

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