

Water

“I am a prohibitionist. What I propose to prohibit is the reckless use of water.”

—BOB EDWARDS, PUBLISHER *THE EYE OPENER*, 17 MARCH 1904



This was a joke in 1904. Water was so widely available and taken so much for granted that there was no such thing as “reckless” use. It wasn’t until about 30 years ago when I read Robertson Davies’ *A Mixture of Frailties* that I realized one of our national characteristics is our cavalier attitude toward water: we Canadians leave the tap running while we brush our teeth. Davies’ plot hinges on this fact, as his Canadian heroine living in Europe “had been accustomed all her life to clean her teeth in running water.” So Giles discovers her. “Monica went to the bathroom to clean her teeth, a maiden; in slightly less than 15 minutes she returned to her room, her teeth clean, and a maiden no more.”

Bob Edwards’ quip was funny in 1904. It’s not such a laughing matter today. All over Africa women must walk a kilometre or two for questionable water. In Africa, the Middle East, India, China, Europe and southwest United States the water supply is in danger. Worldwide, over 1 billion people have no access to clean drinking water and 2.9 billion have no access to sanitation services. Every eight seconds a child dies from drinking contaminated water.

Water is a non-renewable, naturally recycling resource. Our earth has only the same amount of water now as it had in ancient times. But now, many times the number of people need that water.

Canada, by contrast, is water rich. We are second only to the United States in our per capita consumption of water—1,700 cubic metres per year, counting the water used to irrigate our food. Compare that to Israel’s 300 cubic metres per person per year, where no one now suffers from lack. But even in

water rich Canada all is not well. The Great Lakes are unsafe to swim in, disagreements with the US have arisen over the Columbia River and the building of dams has caused great grievance and social unrest.

In Alberta various interests compete for our rivers. Fishermen want the rivers for fish, environmentalists want to protect wetlands, industry wants a place to put wastes, farmers want water for irrigation, cities want clean drinking water and sewage disposal.

Ecologists warn us “we’re all downstream.”

Which public policies serve the best interest of all?

Water is precious. A proper value should be placed on water. In Marq de Villiers’ *Water*, Maurice Strong argues that the key to water is market economics. People should pay for the water they use—read: water meters in the city. Water should be priced at actual supply cost, if not market value. Water’s real cost includes the cost to the environment, to wild life, the cost of lost wetlands, the cost of remedying pollution, the cost of dams for irrigation, the cost of salinization damage to irrigated soil. Strong argues that if we paid what we should for water, we would use it more carefully.

In this issue we look at the condition of Alberta’s rivers and the efforts of some of our farmers to change the way they do things. Zero tillage, dryland crops, organic and mixed farming practices reflect a new determination to care for the land.

Without irony, what we propose to prohibit is the reckless use of water.

Jackie Flanagan