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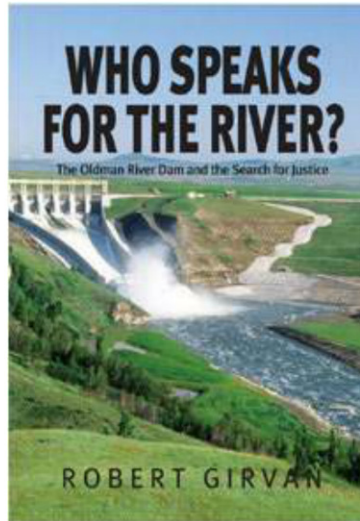


# Who Speaks For the River?

The Oldman River Dam and the Search for Justice

By Robert Girvan

Fifth house, \$24.95, 392 pages



*Who Speaks for the River?* is the riveting true story of the final, bitter battle between the pro-dam Alberta government and the anti-dam coalition of environmentalists and some Piikani First Nation individuals. This coalition really hated the concept of building a dam over the Oldman River and flooding a gorgeous green river valley...“full of birdsong, deer, and cottonwood forests” – an oasis in the hard, dry treeless prairie around it.

This is not only a true story, it is an amazingly prescient one. I was reading a particular section comparing the water-level flows of the Oldman River and the Bow River...“The Bow River has seven diversions and reservoirs...Without these diversions and reservoirs...Calgary as we know it, would not exist.” At that very moment, I heard on TV the voice of the mayor of Calgary declaring a state of emergency and warning of floods on the way.

The anti-dam coalition included “Friends of the Oldman,” a law-abiding group founded by the passionate activist Martha Kostuch and some not-so-law-abiding members of the Piikani First Nation, led by the charismatic Milton Born With A Tooth and his group – “The Lonefighters” – who mostly did whatever Milton told them to do.

Martha and her “Friends of Oldman” decided to use the law and environmental rallies to stop the dam construction. In 1990, Martha and the “Friends” started to prosecute the Alberta government for building a dam without federal consent. After losing their case in Alberta courts, they took the case to the Federal Court of Appeal which, “cancelled Alberta’s licence to build the Oldman Dam until the Canadian government did a full environmental assessment of the project.” They won!

As for the rallies. With the help of Ian Tyson and some anti-dam friends (Gordon Lightfoot, Murray McLauchlan), Martha turned Maycraft, a tiny recreation area on the banks of the Oldman, into a mini Canadian “Woodstock” (with a cause). The “Friends” had expected several hundred to attend but, by Sunday, there were several thousand. This provided a platform for the Blackfoot Piikani to explain the spiritual significance of the area for their people, who had lived and worshipped in the river valley for thousands of years. National media also attended and spread the word about the Oldman controversy.

The Alberta government ignored the successful rally at Maycraft and defied the decision of the Federal Court of Appeal. They either broke or dodged the law to continue construction of the Oldman Dam until it was completed – still unlicensed.

At this point, Milton and his Lonefighters decided to take a more direct approach. They set up camp on their reserve and started to protest by using a backhoe and bulldozer to change the course of the Oldman River. Eventually, nearly 100 police...heavily armed and accompanied by a helicopter...invaded the camp to stop the protest. Milton responded to this invasion by running toward the police with a single shotgun and firing a few warning shots. He was immediately put in jail for four months, before bail was granted. There

followed a blatantly unfair trial before an openly hostile, racist judge and an all-white jury. The outcome was, of course, appealed and in 1994, there was a second trial before a more reasonable judge, using the traditional Blackfoot pipe ceremony. Milton was sentenced to 16 additional months but by testifying, got a chance to display his power of words, “This government doesn’t understand what water is, it’s the blood bank of this earth.”

Author Robert Girvan has used his training as a lawyer to translate the actual transcripts of the trials (especially the first one) into page-turning, John Grisham-style courtroom scenes (complete with transcribed rude suggestions from the spectators in the gallery).

Lawyers are also trained to argue both side of an issue. Girvan does this so skilfully that I became temporarily pro-dam. He portrayed his picture of the farmers in the semi-desert of the Palliser Triangle desperate for water, trying to make a living in an area which had officially been designated as not fit for settlement. My visceral reaction was, “So? Build the damn dam!”

After years of research, Robert Girvan has organized his material in a unique manner to make a complex issue accessible. It is such a concise review of Canadian history and politics that it would be a good addition to school libraries. He writes in a warm, conversational manner – sharing his impression of the key players whom he interviewed. He also shares his love of the natural world in his description of the prairies and mountain roads of Alberta which he travelled to meet those players.

Milton Born With A Tooth once said, “When the right things are said in the right way, people have no choice but to feel it. This book *Who Speaks for the River?* does make you feel it. Enjoy!

