

The Shannon Navigation by Ruth Delany

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Ruth's reputation as a waterways historian is solidly established, but this book takes her work to a new level. The structure of the book is broadly chronological, starting with works carried out before 1800 and then devoting two chapters to the achievements of the Directors General of Inland Navigation up to 1830.

But most of the infrastructure we know on the Shannon today came after that, based on a survey by Thomas Rhodes for the Shannon Commission and a report to the government in 1833. That led to the passing of the Shannon Navigation Act in 1834 and the appointment of five commissioners (including Rhodes) to carry out work on the Shannon. Between then and 1850, mill dams and eel weirs were removed and bridge arches were unblocked.

In the lower Shannon, the Black Bridge was built at Plassey and weirs were built at Worlds End (Castleconnell) and Corbally. At Killaloe the bridge was improved, a large L-shaped weir was constructed across the river and the canal retaining wall was built. On Lough Derg the navigation was opened to Scarriff, Mountshannon harbour was built and the Ballyshrule and Woodford rivers were dredged. Portumna bridge was replaced.

On the river sections, boulders removed in dredging were used as bases for navigation markers. At Meelick, Banagher, Shannonbridge, Athlone, Lanesborough, Tarmonbarry, Roosky and Jamestown, the navigation as we know it today was defined: locks and weirs were repositioned, old canals were abandoned and bridges were built or rebuilt. On Lough Ree the marking system was improved. The bridge and quay were built at Carnadoe and the shallows at Derrycarne Narrows were excavated. Drumsna bridge was strengthened while Carrick-on-Shannon bridge was replaced. Improvements were made in the river to Battlebridge and in the Lough Allen Canal, while on the Boyle Water bridges and a lock were built.

There were some small changes to the infrastructure in later years, and they are covered in this book; the most important was the building of Ardnacrusha and the abandonment of the old navigation between Limerick and Killaloe. But most of the Shannon as we know it today was defined during that twenty-year period in the middle of the nineteenth century, and Ruth Delany brings it to life: the surveys, the plans and the changes, the incidents during construction.

There are chapters on flooding, on the Shannon steamers and other trading vessels and on the changes reflecting new uses: recreational boating, fishing, hydroelectric works, the development of bogs, the hire industry and the need for water management. Even looking at the pictures of boats would provide hours of amusement.

The book is extremely well written: technicalities are well explained and the writing makes every sentence interesting. But there is more: this book is extremely well illustrated and produced. Sponsorship from Waterways Ireland enabled the publishers to use full colour throughout, with an extraordinary number and range of illustrations ranging from maps and charts, through drawings of the tools used in construction, to early black and white photographs and to contemporary colour photographs.

The result is a magnificent book, whose quality is a fitting tribute to the research Ruth Delany has put in to her subject over the years â€” and to the work she has done in campaigning successfully for Irish waterways.

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