

Book Review – alberta views, December 2015

*Who Speaks for the River?*  
by Robert Girvan  
Fifth House Publishers

*By Kevin Van Tighem*

I met Milton Born-with-a-Tooth in the late 1980's. He came across as a self-invented river Messiah with rather too large an ego, prepared to walk over anyone in his mission to stop the Oldman River dam. After that, I only saw him in the news, notably when he fired two warning shots to deter some RCMP officers and Alberta Environment officials he felt were trespassing on the Piikani Reserve near Brockett. Those gunshots marked a pivotal moment in a decade-long campaign by environmentalists and the Piikani people to stop the province from damming the Oldman.

The trials and conviction of Born-with-a-Tooth drew Girvan's attention to the Oldman Dam saga and lead to *Who Speaks for the River?* As a long-time Crown prosecutor in Ontario, Girvan relies on a lawyer's attention to detail and insights into the legal process to explore one of Alberta's – if not Canada's – defining environmental controversies. His writing style is less that of a lawyer than of a seasoned novelist, and for all his determined objectivity, the Oldman clearly captured his imagination.

I was deeply involved in the losing fight to protect the Oldman, Crowsnest, and Castle rivers. Like others whose stories Girvan tells – the late Martha Kostuch, ecologist Cliff Wallis, archeologist Brian Reeves, the Piikani activists – I saw legal victory after legal victory disintegrate before the sheer power of government intransigence. Widespread public opinion, expert advice, and court rulings against the dam – including by Canada's Supreme Court – were not enough to save the rivers.

The bitterness of the struggle renders the empathy and fairness Girvan shows to individuals on all sides even more impressive. He reviewed lengthy court transcripts, interviewed supporters and opponents, and was careful to present all views fully and fairly. His deep respect for the Piikani people in particular is compelling. These voices are rarely reported as clearly and honestly as Girvan strives to present them.

The resulting personal narrative of investigation and discovery leaves the reader with a sense of real connection. I think I understand Milton Born-with-a-Tooth better now and respect him more. I also see how my initial reaction to him arose from the same sense of privilege and entitlement that led the Albert Government and its irrigation lobbyists to be so blindly certain of their rightness that they could blithely violate environmental laws and defy court rulings. This important, compelling book should be mandatory reading in all Alberta high schools, as

inoculation against the environmental complacency and easy racism that built the Oldman Dam and continues to taint our province's culture.

*-Kevin Van Tighem is a Canmore-based biologist and naturalist.*