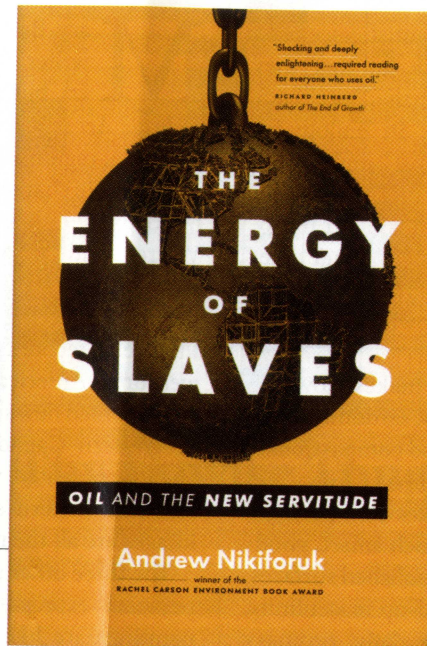


BOOKSHELF



The Energy of Slaves

by Andrew Nikiforuk
GREYSTONE BOOKS
\$29.95/265 PP.



Alberta journalist Andrew Nikiforuk's latest book is incredibly well-researched, cites and addresses a range of sources and offers surprising and interesting glimpses into a world history of slavery and oil use. It is also a reprimand, a demand on moral grounds, to seriously reconsider our everyday use of energy at every level of society. But, most importantly, it will not persuade anyone.

Nikiforuk argues that society has "replaced the ancient energy of human slaves with a new servitude, powered by fossil fuels." These domestic slaves include a cross-section of technologies, from cars to iPods. The idea of freeing both slaves and masters from a system that is not only on its last legs but is laying waste to the planet, he argues, is as foreign to people today as abolishing human slavery would have been to a 19th century plantation owner in the American South.

For those who gave up their cars years ago and are wary of society's reliance on oil, Nikiforuk's latest work is an invitation for some even deeper soul-searching. But for those who do not wholly believe individuals alone have the power to turn climate change around, or who simply do not believe that driving their kids to hockey practice is morally equivalent to enslaving another human being, Nikiforuk's argument is a tough sell. For years, the debate about non-renewable resources and climate change has been dominated by scientific and economic arguments—two completely different languages

spoken on either side of a closed door. Introducing the language of morality is perhaps an attempt to open the door and start a different conversation.

Surely neither author will appreciate this comparison, but to some extent *The Energy of Slaves* can be read as an environmental crusader's rebuttal to the 2010 book of another Alberta writer—Ezra Levant. Levant's *Ethical Oil: The Case for Canada's Oil Sands* is a call for continued bitumen production on the principle that Canada's human rights record outshines that of virtually any other country pumping oil into the global marketplace.

For those primed to support Alberta's oil sands economy, Levant's argument backs up all suspicions that Canada's oil industry owns some moral high-ground, independent of carbon emissions or

tailings ponds. For those urging a more sustainable approach to energy production and use, the "ethical oil" argument is far removed from scientific discussion and immediately dismissible.

But Levant's argument became part of the way Albertans talk about oil because, at the end of the day, he provided a stark "us versus them" paradigm in which "we" support the rights of women and democracy, and "they"—in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere—don't. Though bolstered by illuminating case studies and stone-cold scientific facts, Nikiforuk's moral argument is simply unpalatable, framing "us" as self-obsessed narcissists with little regard for the effects of laying waste to our natural environment, not unlike plantation owners who refused to abolish slavery. "They," in this scenario, are the enlightened few who have forecasted problems with humanity's over-reliance on fossil fuels, only to be dismissed as "cranks."

Where, then, can we go from here?

Nikiforuk's book closes by recounting how European monastic orders in the Middle Ages managed to live off the land and harness their fair share of energy without laying into non-renewable resources or enslaving others. It is hard to imagine that their example, however admirable, will motivate a change in how Albertans talk about oil.

—Trish Audette is a former Edmonton Journal environment reporter now pursuing a Ph.D. in communications at Concordia.