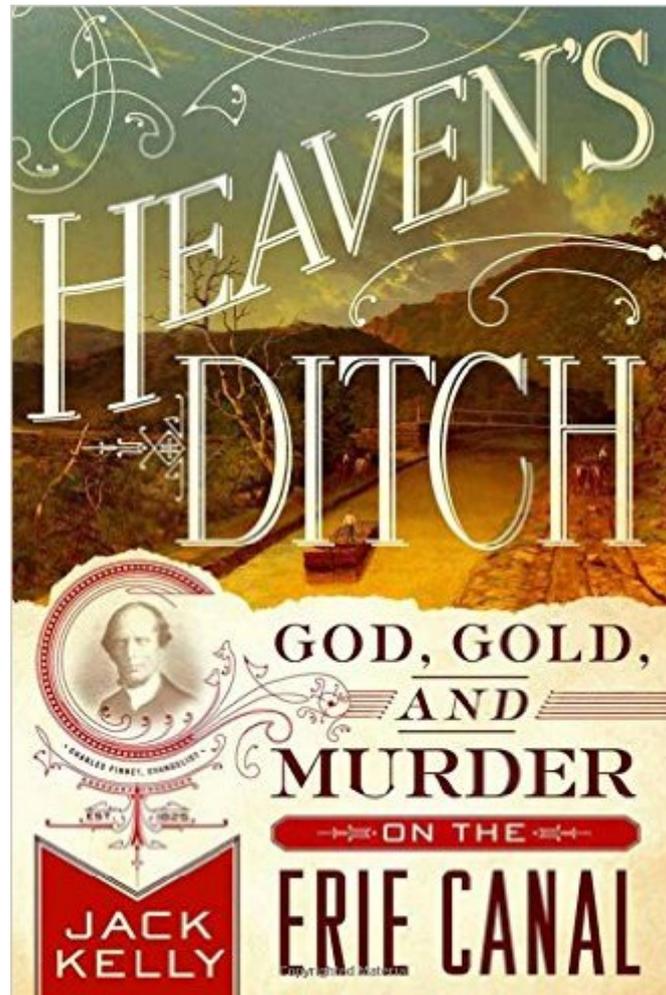


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Heaven's Ditch: God, Gold, And Murder On The Erie Canal



Synopsis

The technological marvel of its age, the Erie Canal grew out of a sudden fit of inspiration. Proponents didn't just dream; they built a 360-mile waterway entirely by hand and largely through wilderness. As excitement crackled down its length, the canal became the scene of the most striking outburst of imagination in American history. Zealots invented new religions and new modes of living. The Erie Canal made New York the financial capital of America and brought the modern world crashing into the frontier. Men and women saw God face to face, gained and lost fortunes, and reveled in a period of intense spiritual creativity. Heaven's Ditch by Jack Kelly illuminates the spiritual and political upheavals along this "psychic highway" from its opening in 1825 through 1844. "Wage slave" Sam Patch became America's first celebrity daredevil. William Miller envisioned the apocalypse. Farm boy Joseph Smith gave birth to Mormonism, a new and distinctly American religion. Along the way, the reader encounters America's very first "crime of the century," a treasure hunt, searing acts of violence, a visionary cross-dresser, and a panoply of fanatics, mystics, and hoaxers. A page-turning narrative, Heaven's Ditch offers an excitingly fresh look at a heady, foundational moment in American history.

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Customer Reviews

The Erie Canal is not the focus of this book narratively, just temporally. If you're hoping for a volume that really delves into the politics and mechanics of the canal, you will be disappointed. Instead, this is a book about just about everything else going on near the canal during the time it was envisioned and built. Religion, politics, social movements, agriculture and economics, etc. But mostly religion,

because western New York was a hotbed of revelation and revival back then, and if that's your thing then you'll find this fascinating. Alas, I'd been hoping for a little more ditch in the story. Really, it's just a temporal anchor, a background force that shifts people's lives in unexpected ways. I had some trouble with the organization of the book, which features a fairly broad cast of characters and leaps between them sometimes at random. For example, the first section of the book ranges from the guy who first published the suggestion of a canal across the state all the way to the victim of the titular murder, which happens years after the canal is finished. It jumps from the political quagmire of funding the canal, the complications of the war of 1812 thereon, the financial standings of various families that will be relevant to the story, the surveyors laying the path for the canal, and probably a few other factions I'm forgetting, plus a whole lot about religion, revivals, Calvinists and Presbyterians, conversions and epiphanies, and all the other related shenanigans. It all comes together eventually, but by the end of the first section you'd be forgiven for wondering if you're supposed to pay more attention to surveyors and their degree of error or men having religious experiences in wooded areas.

Low bridge, everybody down! A fascinating account of the history of western New York State in the early 19th century. This was the wild frontier before the canal: it could take a month to get from Albany to Buffalo by road. The Erie Canal opened up the area and gave rise to an astonishing collection of offbeat religious and social developments (this area was later called the "burned-over district" because of the repeated waves of evangelism that had swept through it). This was where Joseph Smith dug up the gold plates of the book of Mormon. It was where William Miller preached the coming end of the world in 1843. More traditional evangelists like Charles Finney also held sway. And the mysterious death of William Morgan gave rise to the Anti-Masonic political party, which actually carried one state in the 1832 election! The majority of the book deals with these developments, rather than with the engineering problems of building the Canal: I was a little disappointed by the fact that only about a quarter of the book is actually about the canal. As a history buff, I already knew a lot of the material covered here, but the book is clearly written and well-organized, and especially if this is new material to you, there's a lot of good reading here.

Interesting history. I live near the Erie Canal and enjoyed this book. Wish the author included descriptions of the canal photos shown in chapter headings. Excellent details of an amazing time for religious revival, new perspectives and a lot of faith nonsense in Upstate New York. Was surprised to read that some Christian pastor's passionately objected to smallpox inoculations because they

would thwart God's will to inflict suffering on those who deserved it. And, of course, Pastors defending or objecting to slavery as an institution with biblical quotes. Disappeared golden tablets. Dates calculated for the end of the world. No wonder so many people leave religion entirely. Too bad Jesus didn't tell a few of His followers to consult a doctor or scientist. Similar faith and science dialog going on today. Mark Twain was correct, "history doesn't repeat, but it rhymes." This book is an exploration of how faith and dogma evolved as the canal was built while also explaining how the greatest engineering feat of the day was accomplished.

The period following the War of 1812 but before the antebellum fractures leading to the Civil War often go unaddressed, despite being critical formative years in America's history. Fueled by the Industrial Revolution, revived nationalism and a perceived sense of opportunity, rapid expansion westward required linking the new frontiers with the established ports and industry on the coast, leading to ventures such as the Erie Canal. This environment brought out the best and worst of America, creating both entrepreneurial industriousness and opportunistic exploitation. "Heaven's Ditch" is a fascinating study on how construction of the Erie Canal and its effect on upstate and western New York exemplified this bipolar era, spawning nouveau riche and ruin, elevating some while exploiting others, and giving birth to new religions as America found its economic, political and philosophical way. Author Jack Kelly provides a well-sourced overview when any one of these subjects could warrant a book unto itself, exposing the reader to all aspects of the impact of the Canal and allowing them to delve into the sources referenced for more detail if desired. Modern Americans would never consider upstate New York the "wild west", but that's the colorful picture "Heaven's Ditch" paints for the twenty or so years the Erie Canal dominated its landscape.

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