Atomic Frontier Days: Hanford and the American West


On the banks of the Pacific Northwest’s greatest river lies the Hanford nuclear reservation, an industrial site that appears to be at odds with the surrounding vineyards and desert. The 586-square-mile compound on the Columbia River is known both for its origins as part of the Manhattan Project and for the monumental effort now under way to clean up forty-five years of waste from manufacturing plutonium for nuclear weapons. Hanford routinely makes the news, as scientists, litigants, administrators, and politicians argue over its past and its future.

It is easy to think about Hanford as an expression of federal power, a place apart from humanity and nature, but that view distorts its history. Atomic Frontier Days looks through a wider lens, telling a complex story of production, community building, politics, and environmental sensibilities. In brilliantly structured parallel stories, the authors bridge the divisions that accompany Hanford’s headlines and offer perspective on today’s controversies. Influenced as much by regional culture, economics, and politics as by war, diplomacy, and environmentalism, Hanford and the Tri-Cities of Richland, Pasco, and Kennewick illuminate the history of the modern American West.

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