
Los Angeles lives because of water. Its very existence depends on the rain and snowfall in the Sierra Nevada, 250 miles to the north. That pure snowmelt is captured and moved south via a system of canals, pipes and tunnels, some of which are approaching one hundred years of age. This remarkable engineering feat, that allowed a major metropolitan area along the arid California coast to flourish (and plunged another area into economic oblivion) has been the subject of numerous books and articles, film documentaries and a popular movie. Consider the titles of the various works that have been written on this subject: Vision or Villainy; Cadillac Desert; Man Made Disaster; Water and Power; The Great Thirst. By their very nature it would appear the authors take a pessimistic, negative, almost apocalyptic approach to their subject (although the careful reader will quickly find out that their content is much more balanced than the titles would imply). Into this welter of works on a difficult and contentious subject wades Catherine Mulholland, granddaughter of the self-taught engineer who had the strength and persistence to bring water to a parched people. She wants to tell the story of her grandfather, his life and accomplishments (as well as his failings) in as balanced and factual an approach as she can muster. Her affection for the man is apparent, and not diminished by the passage of time, or the unveiling of his shortcomings. If anything, her relationship with him only helps to personalize the man and bring him to life, a quality that is much welcomed in what would otherwise be a dry read.

The author takes us from Mulholland’s poor beginnings in Dublin, Ireland, to his arrival in a dusty backwater town located along the Los Angeles River. He was bright and hard working and he quickly got a job as a ditch tender for the private Los Angeles Water Company. He studied engineering in his spare time, and rose through the ranks of the organization, becoming superintendent of the waterworks at the age of 31. The boom of the 1880s caused the city’s population to explode, straining the infrastructure and the private water company’s ability to serve all of its new customers. Combined with the area’s periodic drought cycle, the lack of a reliable water source led the city fathers to look for new sources of water. They looked at several eastern cities, among them Boston and New York City, and witnessed how they had gone far afield to dam valleys and bring water to their thirsty citizens. Los Angeles mayor Fred Eaton investigated Owens Valley as a water source for his city, and quietly began to buy land (and the water rights) that he would later sell to Los Angeles. He enlisted the assistance of another young engineer, Joseph Lippincott, who worked for the fledgling United States Reclamation Service and who was planning a project for Owens Valley. True to their progressive natures, the decision was made to employ the waters pouring out of the mountains to the greatest good for the greatest number, which meant abandoning the farmers of Owens Valley in favor of the city inhabitants to the south.

From here Mrs. Mulholland details the financing and construction of the aqueduct year-by-year, during the seven-year period it took to build the system. Labor unrest, as well as the challenge of building an aqueduct system in a remote and harsh environment beset the project. She also details the beginnings of Los Angeles’ municipal power company (Department of Water and Power) that has proven to be a model of efficiency that the rest of the state may finally emulate.

The Chief brought the project in on time and within budget. It was considered on par with the building of the Panama Canal, completed at the same time. Mulholland continued to expand and improve upon the system, and championed the building of
Hoover Dam on the Colorado River as yet another source of water and power for the Southland.

The author shies away from the changes that water brought to Los Angeles, most notably the explosive growth and development that has produced a city both lauded and loathed. Beyond the mention of the men who physically built the system there is no indication of who they were as individuals, nor recognition of their collective accomplishment.

Mrs. Mulholland wends her way through the water wars of the 1920s and the collapse of the St. Francis Dam, which killed more than 400 people and forever tarnished Mulholland’s record. He has become the focal point for promoters and detractors alike, and no doubt the story of water and the west will continue to be discussed, debated, and dissertationed. Catherine Mulholland’s book joins the rank of works to be among the first consulted as a reliable and exhaustive source on the subject.

Robert Pavlik, Caltrans, San Luis Obispo