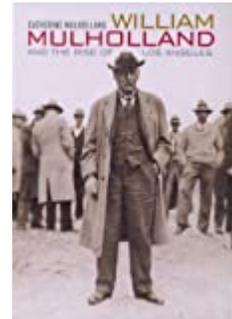


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Catherine Mulholland.** *William Mulholland and the Rise of Los Angeles.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. xxi + 411 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-21724-9.



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In *William Mulholland and the Rise of Los Angeles*, Catherine Mulholland has aimed to tell the story of Los Angeles's famed engineer, but also to vindicate this man, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power – the agency he dedicated so much of his life to – and, indeed, the city of Los Angeles itself. Her impressive research has yielded a rich, detailed biography of her grandfather from his early life to his death shortly after the Saint Francis Dam disaster; this is a biography of the professional, rather than the private, man.

The question of vindication comes in, of course, where C. Mulholland tells the story of Los Angeles's waterworks in the Owens Valley. She intends this work not just as a biography of William Mulholland, but also as a reexamination of the Owens Valley controversy. She particularly intends to challenge portrayals of the Los Angeles water development as “a tabloid yarn of water thievery and crooked land deals” (4). So, she adds tales of opposition and profiteering to a year-by-year account of the construction of the aqueduct, from initial planning to the final resolution of the lawsuits and land sales almost fifteen years after the project was completed.

C. Mulholland's desire to challenge Los Angeles's reputation as a bully and a water thief is appropriate and overdue. Taking water from the Owens Valley did not make Los Angeles unique. New York, Boston, San

Francisco, and Oakland all built distant reservoirs, sacrificing rural communities for urban growth in the process. (Although Boston took water from the Swift and Ware Rivers in Massachusetts, not New Hampshire's Lake Winnepesaukee, as C. Mulholland claims.) Compared to Los Angeles, the actions of Boston and New York seem particularly cold-blooded. Unable to find uninhabited valleys for their reservoirs, these eastern cities bought out and drowned whole communities. Indeed, urban “exploitation” of the countryside was never limited to waterworks, but has over the years included sewage and solid waste disposal, charity farms and, more recently, prisons. The unique element in the Owens Valley story is not the exploitation of the valley or the aggressiveness with which Los Angeles pursued its own interests, but the events of the 1920s - spurred, C. Mulholland argues, by profiteers eager to use public pressure on Los Angeles to secure more favorable prices for lands they hoped to sell to the city – that kept the Owens Valley story in the public eye so much longer than most.

C. Mulholland's year-by-year retelling of the story of Owens Valley, together with her descriptions of W. Mulholland's early career, creates an image of the man as dedicated, pragmatic, and at once distanced from and impatient with the political and financial maneuvering that accompanies huge public works. These attributes seem

to have made William Mulholland singularly effective in managing the city's waterworks and inspired great loyalty from his closest colleagues. These same characteristics, however, did at various times create conflict between W. Mulholland and the civil service board, labor unions, and some of Los Angeles's mayors and city councilors. These conflicts, in turn, prompted most of the accusations that the city was stealing water, ruining honest homeowners, or wasting public funds.

Early in the public water campaign in the 1890s, the *Los Angeles Times* published a letter from "a promoter and front man" for speculators who wanted to buy the water company before the city could. This letter played on class conflict, claiming that the water company overcharged the poor for water used by the rich to protect their homes from fire and to irrigate their estates, and insinuating that the city would not change this state of affairs (51). After the city bought the private waterworks, other speculators made a practice of buying inexpensive lands outside the city, and then conspiring "in a great plot to dupe the city into paying for a costly water system devised to render their land deals more profitable" (95). This practice followed Los Angeles's public enterprise to the Owens Valley. Many defenders of the Owens Valley were, in fact, "bankers and moneyed men" from Los Angeles, not longtime residents of the valley (300). It was they, C. Mulholland argues, who raised the hue and cry against the aqueduct that resulted in sabotage; she portrays the sabotage itself as a deliberate strategy to increase pressure on Los Angeles to buy out the remaining, disputed land holdings at inflated prices set by these "moneyed men." Indeed, the city did purchase some of these lands in 1925, over W. Mulholland's opposition. He felt additional expenditures violated his pledge to the taxpayers of Los Angeles "to deliver their water works at the amounts they agreed to pay for through their bond elections." (300) In telling the story of the Owens Valley in this fashion, C. Mulholland does shift responsibility for the violence in Owens Valley away from Los Angeles and William Mulholland and on to the shoulders of the individuals who sought to profit from the City's need for water. In other words, C. Mulholland blames Los Angeles's reputation for rapaciousness on the fury whipped up by speculators years after the Los Angeles Aqueduct

was complete. Thus, the real villain of the story is not W. Mulholland, but his former boss and friend Fred Eaton, W. W. Watterson, and others who had few qualms about profiting from public works.

C. Mulholland's vindication of Los Angeles would be more complete if she made the motives of the aqueduct's opponents clearer. While she makes a strong case for the speculators' self-interest in stirring up Owens Valley opposition in the 1920s, she does not offer a similarly plausible explanation for W. T. Spilman's now infamous accusation that William Mulholland or others in Los Angeles passed the water bonds by creating an artificial water crisis in Los Angeles (148-9). This accusation, and its repetition in Chinatown and historical works, is one of those that C. Mulholland is particularly interested in correcting; more information about Spilman would make her case stronger. The problem of unclear motives emerges again later in the book, when C. Mulholland turns her attention to the Socialists' opposition to the aqueduct project. It may be that the chronological organization of this work contributes to these problems. Some characters' accusations of graft or rapaciousness seem to stem from harm at the hands of Los Angeles suffered years or decades before they take the city to task for the Owens Valley project. This makes it hard for the reader to discern the roots of these later actions. On the other hand, the chronological organization works very well for a biography and for creating an impression of W. Mulholland as a driven, disciplined man.

Overall, this is a fine book, of great interest to those who want to know more about the slow process of building huge public projects and those who want something of an inside view of the politics surrounding those projects. It will leave the reader more critical of the received image of Los Angeles, even if C. Mulholland leaves the reader wondering why this image has been so consistent over the years. Of course, this will not be the last word on either William Mulholland or on Los Angeles's waterworks, but it is a fine addition to that literature.

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