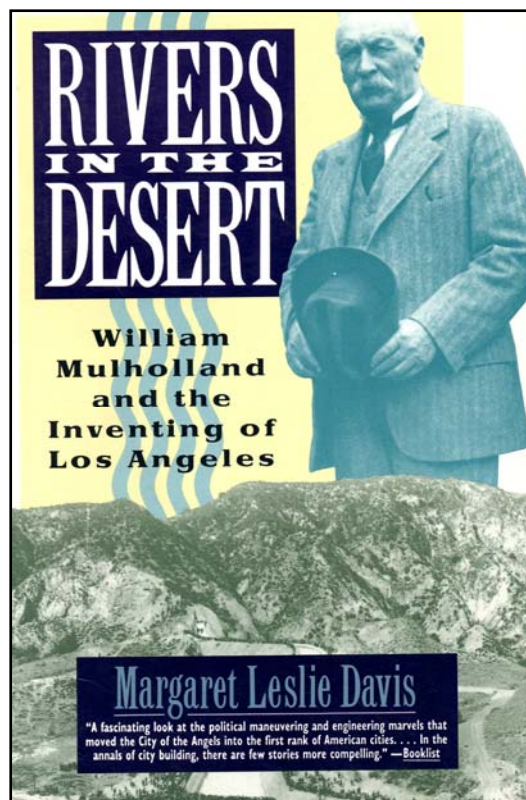


title **RIVERS IN THE DESERT:**
William Mulholland and the
Inventing of Los Angeles

author **Margaret Leslie Davis**
Staff writer for the legal publication *Los Angeles*
Daily Journal <http://www.dailyjournal.com/>

category History / Water Supply

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who should be interested in this book?

Anyone interested in the history of early twentieth century California, specifically the Los Angeles water supply problems and solutions. If you saw the 1974 movie *Chinatown* (Jack Nicholson) you saw a movie version of this water tale, the personalities somewhat “merged together” but the backbone of the story presented.

why read this book?

Set in a time when great developments occurred, with great impacts and losses to some players, at times this story almost seems like fiction. Did a city really dupe, swindle, or steal the water rights of a valley of farmers? and get away with it? or was it just the fate of a small group of farmers facing a large, growing city? Read this book as a “who done it & how” tale, as much as a true story of history.

review / outline by Lance Brown, vistadelsol@telus.net

There are detailed chapter notes and an extensive bibliography for further reading.

Overview

The story of how a large city grew out of a too-dry-for-a-city climate makes for a fascinating read. A comment expressed about the climate of this part of Southern California is that, given time, the ideally suited animal would have evolved into a “camel with gills”, such was the area used to long dry spells interspersed with heavy rain. To build a city in such a climate meant a problem with water supply, one that was met with a huge construction project, the kind that matched the development mindset of the early 1900’s in the US.

William Mulholland was chief engineer of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. From the Owens River, 250 miles from Los Angeles and about 4,000 feet above, some 400 cubic feet per second of water were there “for the taking” – and Mulholland led the charge. While the City had been “stagnating” for lack of water, that was soon to change.

About thirty pictures of personalities, sites, and structures, background the story very well; a team of fifty-two mules moving large steel pipe over the desert; first water flowing in an aqueduct in 1913; the St Francis Dam in construction, as finished, and in failure.

This is but one small part of the greater story that defines the water development of California, from city expansion to agricultural giant; all brought about by billions of dollars in water diversion systems. For more on this topic, see the review of “Cadillac Desert” by Marc Reisner, elsewhere on this web site.

[other review](#) **eBookMall**

Rivers in the Desert is the quintessential American story. It follows the remarkable career of William Mulholland, the visionary who engineered the rise of Los Angeles as the greatest American city west of the Mississippi. He sought to transform the sparse and barren desert into an inhabitable environment by designing the longest aqueduct in the Western Hemisphere, bringing water from the mountains to support a large city. Davis chronicles Mulholland's dramatic ascension to wealth and fame, followed by his tragic downfall after the sudden collapse of the dam he had constructed to safeguard the water supply. The disaster, which killed at least five hundred people, caused his repudiation by allies, friends, and a previously adoring community. Epic in scope, *Rivers in the Desert* chronicles the history of Los Angeles and examines the tragic fate of the man who rescued it.

[other review](#) **Publishers Weekly**

Davis (*Lovers, Doctors and the Law*) offers an arresting biography of William Mulholland, the visionary Los Angeles Water Department engineer who designed the Owens Valley Aqueduct. Completed in 1913, the aqueduct harnessed a river 250 miles north of L.A. and brought water to a city otherwise doomed to stagnation. Not since Roman times had such an immense water project been undertaken; Mulholland was the first American to make practical use of hydraulic sluicing, a technique that would later solve many of the Panama Canal's construction problems. Although it made Mulholland a hero, the aqueduct also devastated Owens Valley towns, farms and individuals, enriched speculators and fostered corruption. Mulholland's legacy is similarly ambiguous. In 1928, his auxiliary St. Francis Dam, supposedly the safest in the world, collapsed, bringing down its creator's lofty reputation as 12 billion gallons of water spewed across 65 miles to the sea. Mulholland's depression over the disaster persisted to his death in 1935 at the age of 79. These personal and public dramas make for gripping reading.

[other review](#) **Library Journal**, *Gary Williams, Southeastern Ohio Regional Lib., Caldwell*

A nationally prominent engineer and head of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, Mulholland was the man responsible for building the aqueduct that made possible the city's exponential growth in the early part of this century. Unfortunately, his reputation was tarnished when he was held responsible for the collapse of the St. Francis dam in 1928, a tragedy that killed hundreds. Not exactly a biography, this work begins when Mulholland was in his fifties and portrays him as one of the few noncorrupt figures involved in his own spectacular rise and fall. Davis, a Los Angeles lawyer who also appears on TV talk and news shows, tells a dramatic story, although she has a tendency to re-create what people and crowds were thinking without offering any documentation. Recommended for popular collections.