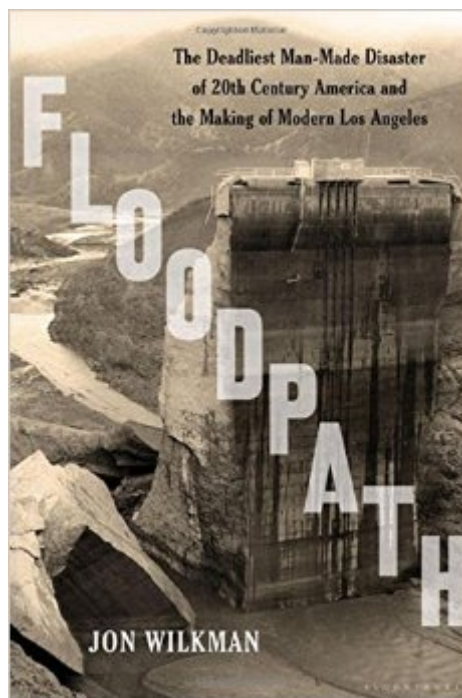


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Floodpath: The Deadliest Man-Made Disaster Of 20th-Century America And The Making Of Modern Los Angeles



Synopsis

Just before midnight on March 12, 1928, the St. Francis Dam, a twenty-story-high concrete structure just fifty miles north of Los Angeles, suddenly collapsed, releasing a devastating flood that roared fifty-four miles to the Pacific Ocean, destroying everything in its path. It was a horrific catastrophe, yet one which today is virtually forgotten. With research gathered over more than two decades, award-winning writer and filmmaker Jon Wilkman revisits the deluge that claimed nearly five hundred lives. A key figure is William Mulholland, the self-taught engineer who created an unprecedented water system, allowing Los Angeles to become America's second-largest city, and who was also responsible for the design and construction of the St. Francis Dam. Driven by eyewitness accounts and combining urban history with a life-and-death drama and a technological detective story, *Floodpath* grippingly reanimates the reality behind L.A. noir fictions such as the classic film *Chinatown*. In an era of climate change, increasing demand on water resources, and a neglected American infrastructure, the tragedy of the St. Francis Dam has never been more relevant.

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Customer Reviews

Jon Wilkman's *Floodpath* is history the way it should be told. Wilkman masterfully brings to life the now all-but-forgotten story of the St. Francis Dam, 50 miles north of Los Angeles, which suddenly collapsed one spring night in 1928, releasing more than 12 billion gallons of water that wrought death and destruction as it roared to the sea. More than 400 people died that night in what

has been called the worst civil engineering disaster in America in the 20th century. Wilkman began researching the story more than 20 years ago, at a time when some of the survivors and eyewitnesses were still alive, and he could interview them. More recently, he has also found new engineering data and theories that explain what caused the dam to collapse. As a result, this is the most complete and comprehensive account of the St. Francis Dam disaster that we are likely to see. If it were only that, the book would be an important contribution to California and engineering history. But it is much more. It is also the story of William Mulholland, the self-taught Irish immigrant who arrived in Los Angeles in 1877 and found work as a ditch digger in a city of 9,000 people. Mulholland rose to head the water department, and ultimately he designed and built the first of the aqueducts that brought water hundreds of miles to the semi-desert of Los Angeles, making possible the city of 4 million people that it is today. Mulholland brought the water, and the St. Francis Dam was part of the great plumbing project that he built to make that happen. The failure of the dam ended what had been a distinguished career, and Mulholland died a broken man in 1935. Wilkman tells Mulholland's story fairly and accurately, and he tells all of it "the St.

It is difficult for us to understand a large scale disaster, even a contemporary one. The scope and detail of what is unfolding, or what has recently happened, present a challenge to our comprehension, our imagination, and our empathy. In a desperate attempt to understand, we constantly make anxious shifts in our perspective. We look at the event from above---the panorama or birds-eye view---but we also seem to need the small stories---the eye-witness accounts and the personal recollections of individuals--- as we seek to fully realize what has happened. How much greater a challenge it is to bring a historical disaster of this scale to life for us. And yet Jon Wilkman has done that for us brilliantly, in a way that reminds us that history is an art. In *Floodpath* he has created a narrative of the tragic events of the St. Francis Dam failure that is economic yet feels comprehensive, a retelling that has power because it is circumspect and disciplined. Those virtues bring things down to a size that allows the disaster to have the illusion of immediacy for us. This is something he recreates most successfully in the chapters of the unfolding disaster, the ones which weave together personal interviews and first person accounts into a timeline that flows with the water, down the canyon and the Santa Clara River Valley to the sea. This must have been meticulous and painstaking work. These abilities may be part of the skill set of a documentary filmmaker, but they are skills that seem to work well, to be necessary, in attempting to write a satisfying narrative of a disaster like this. They are employed in presenting the context and subplots of the disaster.

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