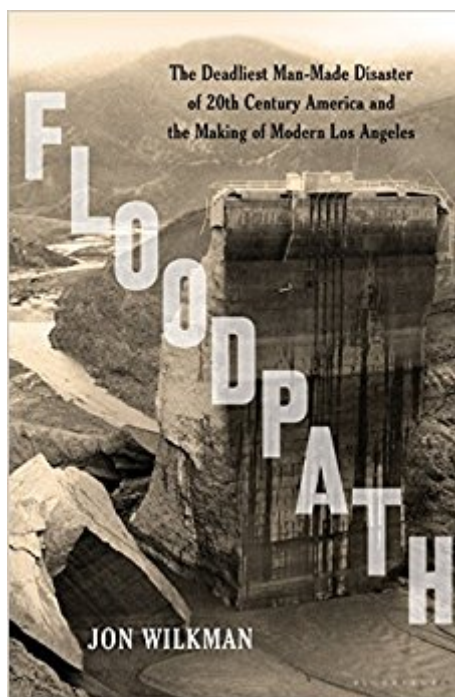




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Floodpath: The Deadliest Man-Made Disaster Of 20th-Century America And The Making Of Modern Los Angeles



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. Francis Dam and Mulholland—against the backdrop of the overarching story: Water in the West. In California, the water is in the north, but the people are in the south, and the water wars have been raging for more than a hundred years. In recounting the story of the St. Francis Dam and its failure, Wilkman splendidly puts all of the strands together and makes the dam disaster of long ago relevant to today.

Excellent narrative study of Southern California's St. Francis Dam disaster, that while scholarly, the book is definitely approachable for both people with an engineering background and the average reader. I can remember my father taking the family on a drive from the San Fernando Valley to see the ruins of the dam. This would have been in the early 1950s, when I was no more than four or five. It must have made quite an impression on me, as I still can remember some of what he showed us. My father had worked on the All American Canal and other major projects, and was fascinated by

what happened to the St. Francis Dam. I forgot about that trip, and despite going to school in the area, the St. Francis Dam disaster was never mentioned. While visiting a cemetery I came across some grave markers that mentioned the family died in the flood. My memory of visiting the site returned and I began reading what I could find about this important event, that happened where I lived and worked my entire life, yet was never mentioned in history classes or news stories. Floodpath is meticulously researched and doesn't leave out any of the who, why, where or when of this disaster and similar dam failures and potential failures in the United States and the rest of the world. The author doesn't cast blame, but rather lays out the known facts and trusts the reader to draw their own conclusions. The facts are supplemented by photos and charts that enhance the reading experience. It is a tragic event that deserves the respect the author has shown for what happened and what effect it had on the victims and the future of Los Angeles and California, including the current drought situation. Floodpath is a very readable and interesting look at how Los Angeles grew from its roots as a sleepy village to the major city it is today.

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