

Heavy Ground: William Mulholland and the St. Francis Dam Disaster

Norris Hundley

Donald C. Jackson

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Norris Hundley and Donald C. Jackson's *Heavy Ground* focuses on the events surrounding the St. Francis Dam disaster.

On March 12th, 1928, the St. Francis Dam collapsed, and twelve billion gallons of silted water crashed through the California countryside. By the time the flood reached the coast and spilled into the Pacific, an estimated 400 people had lost their lives, making this one of the greatest disasters of its kind in US history.

In charge of building the St. Francis Dam was William Mulholland, a self-taught engineer who started his career digging ditches for the city of Los Angeles. Through tenacity and timing, Mulholland rose to become responsible for solving the city's freshwater problem. The result was the Los Angeles Aqueduct, without which Los Angeles would not have become the major city it is today. But Los Angeles kept growing, and soon it was clear that a dam was needed to provide the city with a year-round supply of fresh water. Mulholland set to work on what would become the St. Francis Dam.

This is a meticulous account of the circumstances surrounding the construction and collapse of the St. Francis Dam. Its abundance of photographs, maps, and sketches adds a visual element to the narrative. Interspersed in the text are extensive quotes from the inquest hearings, adding a human element to a disaster so great that it is difficult to fathom. The actions of Mulholland are given particular attention, providing a critical assessment of a man who, in spite of his personal responsibility for the disaster, came away from it with his reputation largely intact.

Heavy Ground is a detailed account of the St. Francis Dam disaster that takes engineering challenges and the human experience into account.

ERIKA HARLITZ KERN (November / December 2020)

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