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Book Review

VISION OR VILLAINY: ORIGINS OF THE OWENS VALLEY- LOS ANGELES WATER CONTROVERSY

By Abraham Hoffman. College Station, Texas:
Texas A&M University Press, 1981. Pp. 320. \$18.50.

Abraham Hoffman's *Visions or Villainy: Origin of the Owens Valley-Los Angeles Water Controversy* documents how one of the nation's largest cities acquired its water supply. While providing ample factual detail, the book's real attraction to the environmental attorney is the timeless familiarity of its cast of characters.

Fred Eaton, an engineer who had previously served as Mayor of Los Angeles, conceived the idea of bringing water to the city from Owens Valley—a distance of several hundred miles. He discussed the plan with William Mulholland, the self-educated chief engineer of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, and J.B. Lippincott, consulting engineer and part-time federal official with the newly formed U.S. Reclamation Service. The project was facilitated by open communication between the city and the Reclamation Service. The story is spiced with questionable land acquisition tactics, speculation about motives, charges of conflict of interest, and litigation. For instance, huge profits were earned by a land investment company partially owned by members of the city's Water Board. Lobbying went as far as the White House itself. The conflict between the City of Los Angeles and the residents of Owens Valley was actually resolved when President Theodore Roosevelt took up the city's cause. The fight against the project by Owens Valley was led and financed by its local bankers, the Wattersons, who were not averse to using any means of persuasion, including physical force.

The Wattersons' leadership, however, abruptly came to an end when their banks failed and they were jailed for embezzlement.

Any professional who has practiced in the environmental area will have no difficulty recognizing the engineer Mulholland as the epitome of a person who works up through the ranks to head a major governmental department in a rapidly expanding metropolitan area. He can tackle a complex, controversial problem and weather the local protest because of his roots in the community. Parallels between the federal official Lippincott and the bright young bureaucrats who manned the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the early 1970's are also easy to draw. These early EPA workers viewed their "purpose" as being that of the ultimate good and had difficulty working within a bureaucratic structure. When caught between their "purpose" and their "duty" they might be heard to justify every action in wonderfully obtuse examples of bureaucratic verbosity, a device Lippincott also used. Former Mayor Eaton, professional, political and ambitious, perceived the need for water and proposed a solution. At first he seems to have been overly interested in his own prospects for gain. However, he seemed to yield to the public need, retaining title to only one critical parcel of real estate. Ironically, his refusal to release his site to the city for a fair price ultimately forced him into bankruptcy when the Wattersons' bank failed.

High level bureaucrats in the Reclamation Service recognized the controversial situation as deserving their attention only after it developed to a point beyond their control. These individuals, like so many others around the turn of the century, achieved their positions by a mixture of ability, nepotism, and patronage. When they finally perceived the problems of the water project, they wrote all the right letters to all the right people, while authorizing investigations to "cover their own agencies." This kind of bureaucratic reaction is familiar to today's environmental practitioners.

Hoffman's book is a testament to the fact that, in almost one hundred years, the system has not changed very much,

despite enormous demographic, economic, and technological changes. Hoffman however, offers more historiographical argument than historical exposition. As a result, his presentation of the facts is cumbersome and confusing. He tends to use the same facts in several contexts, with sometimes conflicting emphasis. At times the reader is left in total confusion. It becomes necessary to read and re-read in order to be sure of the chronology of each episode. For example, the author seems preoccupied with the fact that Eaton originally wanted to hold an equity position in the project. He forgets that by the time the critical decision to proceed was made, Eaton had given up the idea. Certainly, by the time Eaton went into Owens Valley to acquire options on land for the project, he was acting on the city's behalf.

The book also contains some factual inconsistencies. One of the most controversial aspects of Eaton's trip into the Valley was his pursuit of information about Reclamation Service matters. In one telling, Hoffman says that Lippincott and the Reclamation Service were critically short of manpower and asked Eaton to look into a couple of power applications. Later, Hoffman says Eaton "was sent" to the Valley at Lippincott's direction. This venture and the circumstances surrounding it are mentioned again and again throughout the book, each time from a different perspective, requiring a continual sorting process by the reader and making Hoffman seem unable to handle the mass of data his research produced.

Nevertheless, all the elements of a great story are present in Hoffman's *Visions or Villainy*, and organizational defects are more than overcome by the multitude of fascinating facts. The book is certainly good reading for environmental practitioners interested in drawing historical analogies to present day practical problems.

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