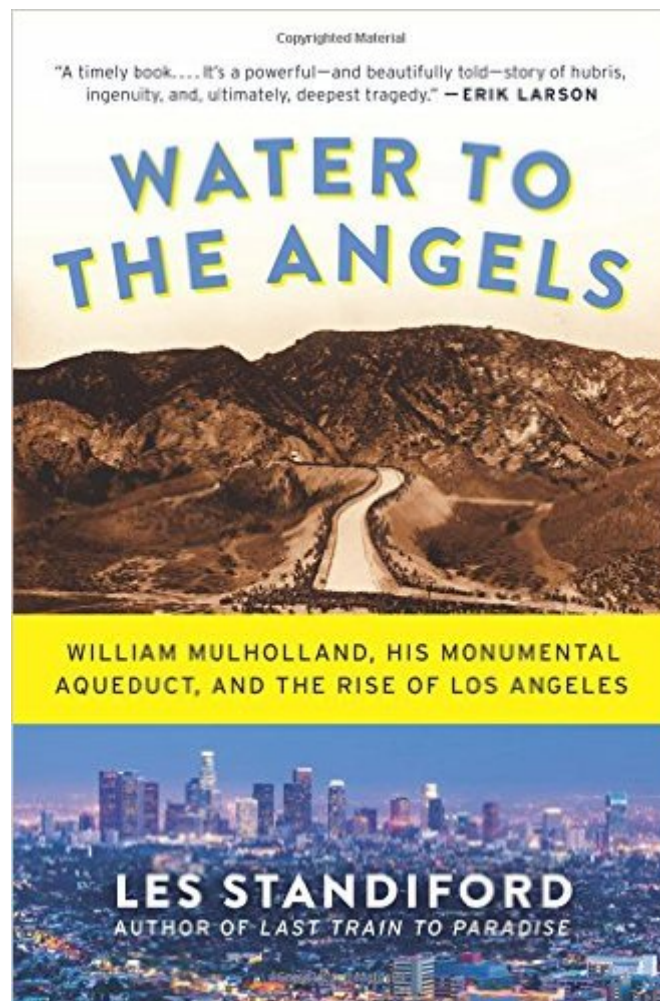


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# Water To The Angels: William Mulholland, His Monumental Aqueduct, And The Rise Of Los Angeles



## Synopsis

The author of *Last Train to Paradise* tells the story of the largest public water project ever created—William Mulholland's Los Angeles aqueduct—a story of Gilded Age ambition, hubris, greed, and one determined man whose vision shaped the future and continues to impact us today. In 1907, Irish immigrant William Mulholland conceived and built one of the greatest civil engineering feats in history: the aqueduct that carried water 223 miles from the Sierra Nevada mountains to Los Angeles—allowing this small, resource-challenged desert city to grow into a modern global metropolis. Drawing on new research, Les Standiford vividly captures the larger-than-life engineer and the breathtaking scope of his six-year, \$23 million project that would transform a region, a state, and a nation at the dawn of its greatest century. With energy and colorful detail, *Water to the Angels* brings to life the personalities, politics, and power—including bribery, deception, force, and bicoastal financial warfare—behind this dramatic event. At a time when the importance of water is being recognized as never before—considered by many experts to be the essential resource of the twenty-first century—*Water to the Angels* brings into focus the vigor of a fabled era, the might of a larger than life individual, and the scale of a priceless construction project, and sheds critical light on a past that offers insights for our future. *Water to the Angels* includes 8 pages of photographs.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

It's hard to imagine a more timely book than *Water to the Angels*, which appears in the midst of

a drought in California of historic proportions. Framed as a biography of William Mulholland, who built and managed the Los Angeles Aqueduct that supplied L.A. with most of its water for decades, *Water to the Angels* can equally be seen as a history of the Aqueduct itself — the more than two-hundred-mile-long series of pipes and tunnels that drained the Owens Valley to feed the thirst of generations of Angelenos. It also enabled the city to begin producing all the electric power it needed, setting L.A. on a course of energy self-sufficiency to the present day. Though he was reviled in the Owens Valley and by the men who owned and ran the private companies that had been supplying power to L.A., Mulholland was lionized for much of his career, gaining a worldwide reputation as an engineering wizard. He brought in the aqueduct — deemed an impossible feat — on time and for far less money than private companies would have charged. For decades, he was — the highest-paid public official in California — because his work played a fundamental role in making it possible for Los Angeles to grow from a population of 50,000 in 1890 to more than thirteen million today. Unquestionably, Mulholland figures in the history of the state as a major actor, and he was an extraordinary man. An ill-educated immigrant from Ireland who arrived at the age of nineteen, he was a self-taught civil engineer who rose to employ legions of professionals.

With California's drought in the news recently it's good to remember that Los Angeles was facing a similar problem 115 years ago. William Mulholland, superintendent of the Los Angeles Water Department at that time responded by designing a massive aqueduct plan to transport water over 200 miles from the Sierra Nevada mountain range to Los Angeles. The plan was constructed under his supervision and finished under budget in November 1913. Some of the technology developed under Mulholland's direction was used in the building of the Panama Canal. It's a fact that Los Angeles would have remained a small desert town if it weren't for Mulholland's initiative. It could be argued that the aqueduct would have been constructed by others if it weren't for Mulholland, but it's hard to imagine that anyone else could have completed the job in such an efficient manner free of graft and corruption. He was always on the lookout for the best interests of his employer, the City of Los Angeles. He was the model civil servant. There are some people who consider Mulholland to be an evil person. Their enmity is misdirected because really what they are saying is that Los Angeles is an evil city. Mulholland was simply doing his job. The fact that he did his job well is held against him by these people. This anger is based on the fact that the city took (i.e. stole) water from the Owens Valley which as a consequence became a ghost of its former self. The defenders of the project counter that it's a situation where a water resource was used for the greater good. This book's portrayal of Mulholland is that of an engineer/public servant extraordinaire who worked his

way up from ditch digger to being superintendent of the Water Department.

This is an excellently written biography of William Mulholland, whether you regard him as a hero or villain. Given the drought we currently face in SOCAL, this book serves up some lessons. Mulholland certainly is a heroic figure. He personified integrity and competence. Self-educated, he oversaw the construction of the the California aqueduct, a massive engineering accomplishment. He came in on time and within budget. He secured Los Angeles' future by securing it a water supply to enable its growth as America's second largest city. There is a dark side of course. To secure the water rights, the city secretly bought up Owen's Valley property that had water rights, using a dummy corporation, and using false pretenses. To be fair, revealing the true purpose of the purchases would have driven up the land acquisition costs. Completion of the project destroyed Owen's Lake, and dry gulched a mini-paradise of irrigated ranch land in the Eastern Sierra. I live in San Diego and have a second home in Mammoth Lakes, so I routinely drive up the route of the Aqueduct through the valley. There is no question that the Owen's Valley got a raw deal. Toxic dust from the dry Owen's Lake bed is still a problem. In context, however, Mulholland's loyalty was to his city that was running out of its primitive water supply centered on the Los Angeles River. The Owen's Valley offered the solution. There is no doubt that his foresight and inventiveness was a major factor in the growth of LA. Standiford does an excellent job of developing Mulholland's character, and the politics surrounding the project's adoption and completion. There is a tragic sidenote arising from the failure of the St Francis Dam, designed by Mulholland, that caused numerous deaths.

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