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Villain and Visionary

Why we can't agree on William Mulholland

Just after Christmas 1924, William Mulholland was invited to dedicate the highway that bears his name, christening it with a bottle of water drawn from the Los Angeles Aqueduct. Engineered by a veteran of the aqueduct's construction, the road runs along the spine of the Hollywood Hills and was underwritten by a group of real estate developers who hoped to get rich selling off their land once the street was complete. Mulholland Highway, now called Mulholland Drive, divided the city from the San Fernando Valley—the terminus of the Los Angeles Aqueduct—and remains a prime spot from which to admire the whole LA Basin. Its name is a fitting tribute to the father of the aqueduct, a man with a deeply divisive legacy, derided as a pawn of powerful real estate interests, but without whose vision Los Angeles could never have become the sprawling and dense metropolis it is today.

The debate over Mulholland's character and legacy is nothing new; it has raged almost from the moment he first rose to local prominence. As chief of Los Angeles' water department, Mulholland's role was to provide ample safe and affordable water to the rapidly growing city. With others, he hatched a plan to tap the water of Owens Valley and engineered the Los Angeles Aqueduct to bring that water south to LA.

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LA from Mulholland Drive. PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW HALL.

He sold the plan to the public and won their support for a series of bond measures to finance the aqueduct's construction.

From there, opinions diverge. Did Mulholland, by bringing water to Los Angeles, make a great city possible, or did he swindle and destroy a small but vibrant agricultural community? Was he motivated by greed, played by rich men who hoped to be made richer by a secure water source in the San Fernando Valley, or was he merely a zealous public servant serving the greater good? Was he a visionary who won public support for his project with masterful public relations, or did he lie to scare the public into backing his pet project? His record as an engineer is also inconclusive—while the aqueduct was one of the great construction feats of its day, his Saint Francis Dam built to store aqueduct water was a failure and killed hundreds of people when it gave way in 1928.

Born in Belfast in 1855, William Mulholland arrived in Los Angeles—population 9,000—in 1877. As an old man, he claimed that Los Angeles was "so attractive to me that it at once became something about which my whole scheme of life was woven, I loved it so much." But not even his admiring granddaughter and biographer Catherine Mulholland believed that to be true. Instead, she wrote in *William Mulholland and the Rise of Los Angeles*, that he was already on his way out of town only a month after arriving when he was offered a job digging wells. And his life was changed. He taught himself engineering on the job, and he followed his new passion straight to the privately owned company that controlled LA's water supply, and then to the city-owned Department of Water and Power that succeeded it.

Whether or not his love for Los Angeles came at first sight, he was the city's ultimate booster and partisan. In Catherine Mulholland's telling—and Michael Hiltzik elaborates on this view in this issue of *Boom*—Mulholland's belief that Los Angeles would never reach its potential without water from Owens Valley drove his support of the project. If he exaggerated the present need or used overblown rhetoric ("If Los Angeles does not secure the Owens Valley water supply, she will never need it") to drum up voter support for the bonds to fund it, well, it was for the good of the city.

Although he may not have felt any particular responsibility to them, Mulholland maintained that Owens Valley landowners were fairly compensated for their land. His view was corroborated by natural resource economist Gary Libecap in a 2007 study, which hailed the land deals as successful transfers of resources. If Mulholland blocked meaningful restitution for residents who saw their livelihoods destroyed by LA's land-and-water grab, it was, as his granddaughter explained, because he was "schooled in an older, sterner system." He believed "he had pledged his word to the taxpayers of Los Angeles to deliver their water works at the amount they had agreed to pay for through their bond elections." Which he did—the eight-year $24.5 million project was, remarkably, finished on time and on budget.

Yet Mulholland had critics on both ends of the aqueduct. In LA, the newspapers that opposed his project called it unnecessary and a colossal waste of money. It was alleged that Mulholland and his backers lied about the immediate need for water, secretly dumped water to create an artificial drought, and passed an unnecessary ordinance prohibiting

William Mulholland.

COURTESY OF COUNTY OF INYO, EASTERN CALIFORNIA MUSEUM.

people from watering their lawns to frighten them into supporting the measure. From the start, there were rumors that the scheme was hatched by moneymen, including the owner of the *Los Angeles Times*, whose holdings in the San Fernando Valley were set to skyrocket in value when the aqueduct's water arrived. This argument was made memorably in the film *Chinatown*, a fictional account of the LA skirmishes in the water wars. (That one of the two characters in the film who stand in for Mulholland is an incestuous, Machiavellian rapist has done his reputation no favors.)

The critics did not stop once the water started flowing. Carey McWilliams argued in his 1946 history of Southern California that the aqueduct's water was always destined for the farms of the San Fernando Valley and that its arrival made the landowners a $100 million profit. In a twist on the argument that the aqueduct made Los Angeles, Marc Reisner wrote in *Cadillac Desert* that "the annexation of the San Fernando Valley, a direct result of the aqueduct, instantly made it the largest city in the world in geographic size. From that moment, it was doomed to become a huge, sprawling, one-story conurbation, hopelessly dependent on the automobile."

The present-day consequences of the Los Angeles Aqueduct for the city are explored in David Ulin's essay and for Owens Valley in excerpts from Kim Stringfellow's project *There It Is—Take It!* (both featured in this issue of *Boom*). For Owens Valley, the ill effects are myriad. Rivers and lakes have dried up, water available for local use has dramatically decreased, and, according to residents, private investment in the area has been discouraged by LA's Department of Water and Power, which is still a major landowner in the valley. But while Mulholland did not believe in spending Los Angeles taxpayers' money in Owens Valley, his old department's position has changed. Thanks to a number of long-running court battles, over $1.2 billion has been spent rewatering and managing dust at the once-dry Owens Lake, and an Owens River restoration project has seen some success.

What Mulholland achieved was remarkable, if difficult to characterize neatly. To his supporters, he was a man who believed in delivering the greatest good to the greatest number, and he devoted his career to doing just that. But in doing so, he rode roughshod over his many critics and a significant swath of Southern California. **B**