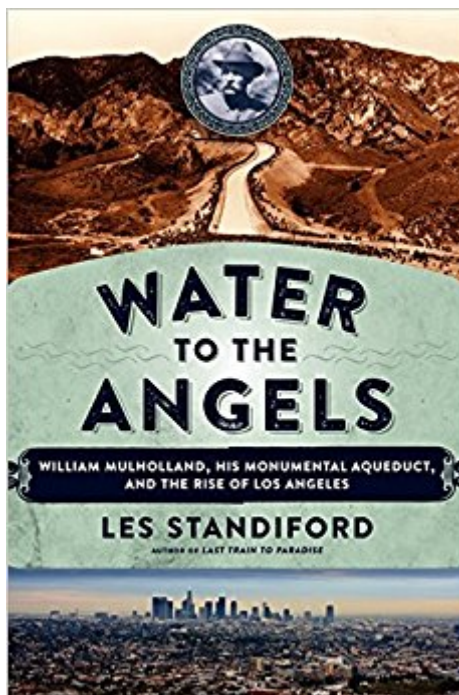




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# Water To The Angels: William Mulholland, His Monumental Aqueduct, And The Rise Of Los Angeles



## 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

In this incredibly timely book, Les Standiford chronicles William Mulholland's heroic drive to

bring water to Los Angeles and thus to create the city we know today. It's a powerful-and beautifully told-story of hubris, ingenuity, and, ultimately, deepest tragedy. • (Erik Larson)

The story of William Mulholland's Los Angeles aqueduct, the largest public water project ever created—a tale of gilded age ambition, hubris, greed, and one determined man whose vision shaped the future. In 1907, Irish immigrant William Mulholland designed and began to build one of the greatest civil engineering feats in history: the aqueduct that carried water 233 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 visionary 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. At a time when the importance of water is being recognized as never before, *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, shedding critical light on a past that offers insights for our future.

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. He had a prodigious memory who frequently overawed coworkers and politicians alike, and he proved to be endlessly innovative in finding new ways to get things done in a massive

construction project that ranked with the building of the Panama Canal in scope and challenge. He was also able, almost single-handedly, to persuade the city's voters to back the many bond issues that proved necessary to build the Aqueduct. *Water to the Angels* is not a dispassionate biography. For example, Standiford writes that it is "easy to argue that had William Mulholland not fought for and built the Los Angeles Aqueduct, Southern California as we now know it would not exist." He also insists that "what he overcame to achieve a position of influence rivals any Horatio Alger-style narrative." The author acknowledges the criticism of Mulholland by contemporaries and historians alike, but he dismisses most of it out of hand. Naturally, if you mention water and Los Angeles in the same sentence, you're likely to conjure up memories of the film *Chinatown*, which paints a picture of Mulholland's greatest creation as the product of unalloyed greed. In fact, Mulholland is quickly dismissed in the movie as a minor character named Hollis Mulwray, and the central device in the film "the discharge of millions of gallons of water into the Pacific to create a severe water shortage in the city" is pure fiction. Mulholland had, indeed, opened the pipes to drain water into the ocean, but only to avoid flooding the system. And the corruption ascribed to those who built the Aqueduct is equally fictitious: Mulholland was demonstrably incorruptible. However, the powers-that-were in Los Angeles did manage to emerge from the project richer by millions of dollars through their speculation in San Fernando Valley land. The story of William Mulholland and the Los Angeles Aqueduct can be viewed as a tragedy on a classical scale. Though the Aqueduct itself had to be viewed as an unqualified success, Mulholland made a catastrophic error a decade after the Aqueduct began delivering water to Los Angeles in 1915: he shrugged off signs that one of the big dams in the 233-mile-long system of waterworks was threatening to collapse. In fact, the dam did collapse, and the dam's failure took at least 450 lives [and destroyed thousands of homes], a disaster outdone in California history only by the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire. Most of *Water to the Angels* is reasonably well written. However, the first few chapters "before Standiford hits his stride" are rife with turgid syntax. For instance, the very first sentence in the book reads as follows: "Often a writer is queried as to the source of an idea." Not exactly an auspicious beginning! There are other flaws in this book: Standiford reports numbers in mind-numbing detail as he discusses the construction of the Aqueduct. And he devotes an ordinate amount of space to dissecting the movie *Chinatown*. Still, the book is worth reading as an account of what may have been the most consequential event in the history of the nation's second largest city.

Another non-fiction Home Run by Les Standiford. With the razor-edged skill of character development demonstrated in his famously successful "Deal" mysteries, Standiford brings to life the strengths and instincts of William Mulholland, whose vision and tenacity watered Los Angeles. Standiford's meticulous research and Mystery Writer's style make this history of the water umbilical to Los Angeles a true page turner. Paraphrasing from the final chapter of this book, History does indeed contain compelling drama. The drama integral to construction of the Los Angeles Aqueduct, its audacity, need, deprivations and tragedies, flows from this book with the power of the water it represents. If there were more stars to award, I would.

Very carefully researched account of how William Mulholland got water to Los Angeles. Though it starts out exciting much of it is tedious detail about meetings and water sources. Much of this detail could have been omitted, eg, the vote at the meetings and the time they started and who was there. The story is an important one. Mulholland's perseverance and ability to see what had to be done to make L.A. survive and thrive is fascinating, as is the opposition to his plans and the possibilities of corruption.

When you try to find books about the Los Angeles Aqueduct system, you can usually find books about the controversies surrounding the draining of Owens Lake or biographies of William Mulholland, but it is rare to find works that detail the construction of the aqueduct mixed with Mulholland's life during that time. While there certainly is controversy over the building of the aqueduct system, with court battles continuing to this day, what tends to get lost is the genius behind the construction of the system. That it uses gravity as a primary means to move water several hundred miles is an engineering wonder that certainly deserves to have its story told. This book contains a biography of Mulholland prior to and during the construction, a fairly detailed look at the construction, with a small amount of information on the controversies surrounding the aqueduct. It is well written, and contains a lot of information that surprised me and further fueled my interest in the subject. A fine read for anyone, it is a particularly informative read for those of us here in California that are still dealing with drought and the need to move water about the state.

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