

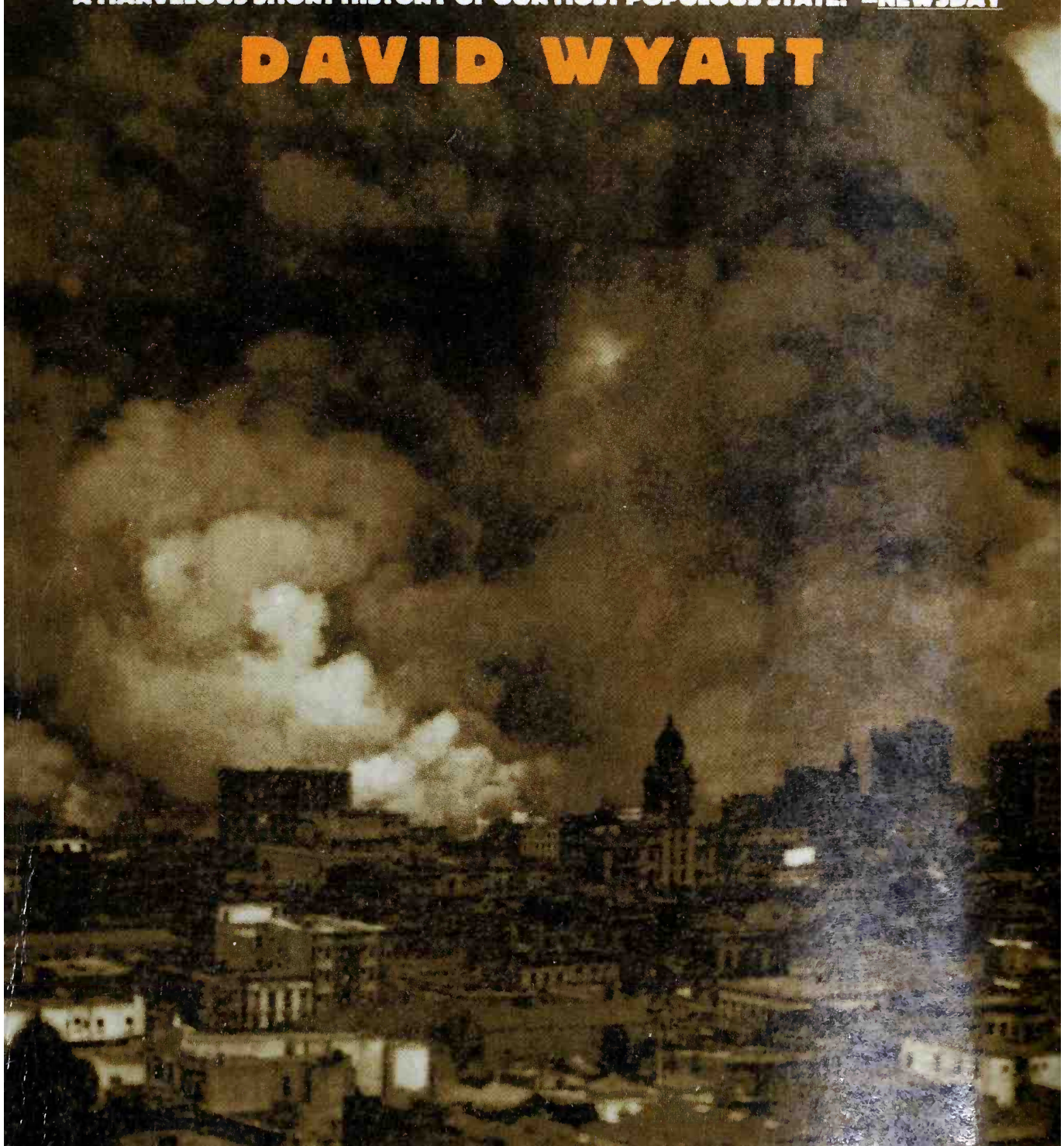
FIVE FIRES

RACE, CATASTROPHE,
AND THE SHAPING OF

CALIFORNIA

"A MARVELOUS SHORT HISTORY OF OUR MOST POPULOUS STATE."—NEWSDAY

DAVID WYATT



CHAPTER FIVE

THE POLITICS OF WATER

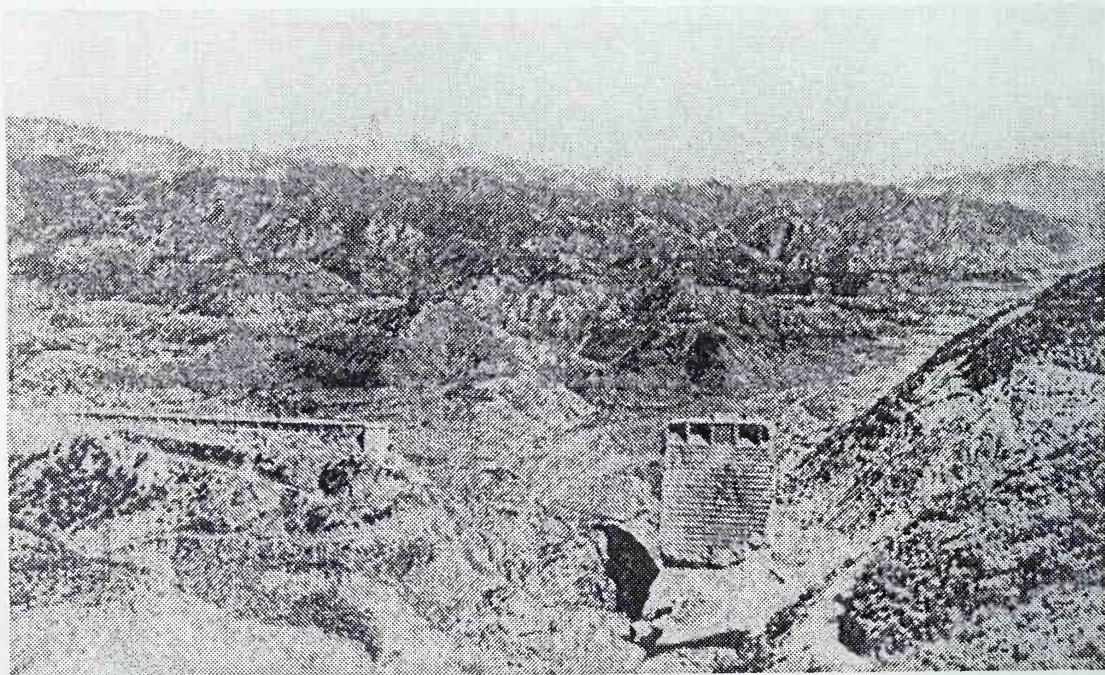
The Shift South

THE SAN FRANCISCO EARTHQUAKE and fire is an event whose meaning is largely self-enclosed. It presents something of a dead-end for historical analysis, a happening unproduced by human agency and therefore one in which responsibility gives way to response. What figures in the accounts of it is the feel or shape or look of the thing. The fire did break the city's continuity with its Gold Rush origins and "cleared the way," as Kevin Starr has it, for the building of the modern city of San Francisco. But during the rebirth of the city out of the flames, there also occurred a displacement of energy east and especially south. The Moore Shipbuilding Company moved from San Francisco to Oakland in 1906 and inaugurated the first boom in the modern East Bay economy. Los Angeles experienced even more significant growth after the fire. This southward shift was not a case of moving directly into some suddenly opened economic or cultural breach. Rather, all the forces that had been gathering to shift California's wealth and power southward came together in the next two decades. At the center of this story was not fire but water.

The water that brought life and expansion to Southern California also brought deep political hurt. Yet unlike the visitations of fire, the workings of water's power were often invisible. They took effect slowly, over decades, as a kind of occluded spectacle, one whose dimensions are still

being debated. The heroic building of the Los Angeles Aqueduct provided, of course, spectacle enough, even while diverting the public from the project's real human and economic costs. The enterprise of piping water across deserts and mountains for more than 250 miles delivered so many compelling images and moments of high drama that it may seem counterintuitive to claim that the truths of the event were largely hidden from the eye. The irony is that for all the pages of text that have attempted to bring this experience to light, one of the most sophisticated treatments of it took place in a medium devoted to the visible, in a film called *Chinatown*.

The story of the aqueduct still plays itself out—as recently as December 1993 *The Washington Post* ran an article entitled “Redirection of California Water Proposed,” quoting a resistant Governor Pete Wilson. But the epic can be seen as beginning in 1904, the year Los Angeles city officials first visited the Owens Valley in search of water, and as ending some twenty-five years later, with the collapse of the Saint Francis Dam. As far as catastrophes go, the Saint Francis Dam disaster killed as many people as had the San Francisco earthquake and fire. For those who died



The central core of the Saint Francis Dam on the morning of March 13, 1928. Designed and built by the chief engineer of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, William Mulholland, the dam collapsed near midnight and sent a wall of water some fifty miles to the sea. The dam had been built in 1926 as a reservoir to hold the waters of the Los Angeles Aqueduct. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

in the flood, it was perhaps more sudden and more terrifying, since a wall of water came sweeping down in the night. In *Water and Power* (1982), William Kahrl labels the event the “greatest unnatural disaster in California history.” The dam broke three minutes before midnight. Twelve billion gallons of water poured through Castaic Junction and over the towns of Piru, Fillmore, Bardsdale, and Santa Paula. A twenty-five-foot wave carrying huge pieces of concrete flattened schools and ripped away bridges. The water traveled over fifty miles before reaching the sea between Oxnard and Ventura. The human remains that would be discovered over the next fifty years brought the death toll to nearly five hundred.

The dam gave way in the spring of 1928, when my father was three and two years after his family had emigrated from Oklahoma to South Los Angeles. He spoke often of the quake of '33, when the roofs of the Compton schools collapsed and when he saw the palm trees cross and uncross in his Lynwood front yard. He talked more about earthquakes than about floods: what was a Southern Californian to do with the idea of *too much* water? The dam disaster did not lodge itself in his sense of place any more than it did in the popular consciousness of his region. The politics of water in California remain a manmade affair, and any catastrophe in which they figure cannot easily be transposed into a melodrama of the plucky human withstanding a nature “animated,” in James’s phrase, “by a will.”

The melodramas that do arise from competing human interests we call “political,” and while California endures its share of these, it shows little interest in memorializing them, especially those so directly related, as was the Saint Francis Dam disaster, to the costs of development. Located forty-five miles north of Los Angeles in the Santa Clara Valley, near what is now Magic Mountain, the Saint Francis Dam had been completed in 1926. The largest arch support dam in the world, it measured nearly two hundred feet high and some two hundred feet long. The dam had been designed and built by the superintendent of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, William Mulholland. Its purpose was to create a reservoir for the waters flowing southward from the Owens Valley and across the Mojave Desert through the Los Angeles Aqueduct. As a result of the water provided by the aqueduct—a structure completed in 1913 and also designed and built by Mulholland—Los Angeles County had become, by 1920, the major agricultural county in the nation and home to the largest city in California.

Yet these waters were by no means secure. They had been procured in the early years of the century through a carefully orchestrated city campaign. The aqueduct delivered considerably more water than the plan originally promised; not until the drought of the early 1920s and the rapidly increasing demands for irrigation in the San Fernando Valley, annexed by Los Angeles in 1915, did water in the Owens Valley begin to run short. The first dynamite attack on the aqueduct occurred in May 1924; that November, Owens Valley residents, led by bankers Sam and Wilfred Watterson, seized control of the Alabama Gates and temporarily halted the flow of water to Los Angeles. Hundreds gathered at the scene and began a four-day camp-out, complete with bonfires and a pig roast. Movie star Tom Mix, filming on location in nearby Bishop, rode over with a mariachi band and joined the party. The Wattersons were eventually jailed for embezzlement; the Owens Valley, once a rich farming and ranching region, dwindled into a high desert in which people made a living pumping gas. Feelings there ran so high against the city that when they drove up Route 395 on fishing trips to the High Sierra, in the 1930s, my father and his brothers taped over the identifying words "Los Angeles" on their license plate.

While Mulholland preferred to store water in underground aquifers rather than in surface reservoirs, the city leaders, in the wake of recurring sabotage against the aqueduct, insisted that he build a surface reservoir as a visible monument to the capacity for supply. Despite his awareness of geologic weaknesses at the Saint Francis Dam site, Mulholland proceeded. At the trial that followed the collapse, a University of Southern California geologist testified that the dam's underlying conglomerate formation had become saturated and had given way. "The failure was due to defective foundation material," he concluded. The stricken Mulholland responded that there had been "no more reason to believe there might be a catastrophe than a babe in arms."

THROUGH THE FIGURE of Hollis Mulwray, Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* deals with the consequences of Mulholland's career. It begins with the end of the story and proposes to have Mulwray build a second dam. He refuses. He will not make "the same mistake twice." He is murdered, by his ex-partner and city-builder Noah Cross, for his refusal. Detective Jake Gittes, tricked by Cross into smearing Mulwray, does not escape the

compulsion to repeat. As Gittes tries to “find out” what happened to Mulwray, he falls for Mulwray’s wife, Evelyn. He tells Evelyn about a woman he loved, in Chinatown. “I was trying to keep someone from being hurt,” he says. “I ended up making sure that she was hurt.” In attempting to keep Evelyn from being hurt, and in trying to “know” her, Jake ensures that she will be killed, as she is with a bullet through the eye in the movie’s last scene. He makes the same mistake twice.

Chinatown focuses on the fate of Mulholland, “the one universally acknowledged Founder of Los Angeles,” as Kevin Starr calls him. The written histories of water and the Southland center on three men: Mulholland, Fred Eaton, and J. R. Lippincott. Each was a man obsessed by the dream of bringing “the water,” as Noah Cross puts it, “to L.A.” Eaton, a former mayor of Los Angeles, introduced Lippincott and Mulholland to the Owens Valley in the early years of the century. His purchase of options on the key Long Valley site later thwarted the city’s plans for building reservoirs upstream and so led to the construction of the Saint Francis Dam. Lippincott worked for the U.S. Reclamation Service during the period when Los Angeles set about acquiring the Owens Valley



The Big Three in 1906: J. R. Lippincott, Reclamation Service engineer for California; Fred Eaton, ex-mayor of Los Angeles; and William Mulholland, chief engineer of the city's Department of Water and Power. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

lands. He supplied information to both Eaton and Mulholland and paved the way for the city acquisitions by encouraging suspension of federal claims to the waters of the valley.

One of the valley residents whose ire Lippincott managed to arouse was a man named Stafford Wallace Austin, register of the U.S. General Land Office in Independence. In 1905, upon learning that the city had quietly purchased all the potential land within the federal government's proposed reservoir site and riparian rights along the Owens River, Austin wrote President Roosevelt, charging fraud and conflict of interest. Two years earlier Austin's wife published the classic treatment of life in this "long brown land," *The Land of Little Rain*. In her autobiography, *Earth Horizon* (1932), Mary Austin provides a lucid if not disinterested survey of how things stood in the valley two years before work began on the aqueduct:

Strange things had happened in Inyo. In July, 1903, investigation was begun for the reclamation of arid lands there under the National Reclamation Bureau. All reports and estimates of costs demonstrated that the Owens Valley project promised greater results than any other for the cost. Individual owners made transfers of rights and privileges. And all this time the supervising officer of the Owens Valley project and Mulholland, chief engineer, had been working to secure a new water supply for Los Angeles. Suddenly it burst upon the people of Inyo that they were trying to secure the waters of Inyo. Everything had been done. The Reclamation Service had been won over. The field papers had changed hands. Transfers had been made. . . . There were lies and misrepresentations. There was nothing any of us could do about it, except my husband, who made a protest to the Reclamation Bureau.

Austin here draws Mulholland, Eaton, and Lippincott ("the supervising officer") into a web of "lies and misrepresentations." Subsequent histories have been more concerned to sort out blame, assigning core responsibility for the water project and what followed to one individual, or constructing a hierarchy of error. In doing so, these histories seek to manage, to varying degrees, an anxiety about the indeterminacy of the city's origins. The Owens Valley story is the origin-tale for modern Los Angeles—Kahrl begins *Water and Power* by asserting that "the history of California in the twentieth century is the history of a state inventing itself with water"—and the refusal of that history to yield up a master narra-

tive or even verifiable evidence about human acts and intentions raises questions about how much we can come to know about the past.

CHINATOWN BEGINS with a detective telling a spouse concerned about adultery, "You're better off not knowing," and it ends by repeating this advice: "Forget it, Jake, it's Chinatown." What do we *know* about Eaton, Lippincott, Mulholland, and the water? The question can be answered by consulting the many popular and academic histories about the bringing of water to Los Angeles. The best of these works use archival records to create a detailed chronology of the events. Yet this kind of "straight history," as Michael Herr calls it in *Dispatches* (1977), does not entirely satisfy. In "straight history," as Herr describes conventional attempts to comprehend the Vietnam War, "something wasn't answered, it wasn't even asked. We were backgrounded, deep, but when the background started sliding forward not a single life was saved by the information. The thing had transmitted too much energy, it heated up too hot, hiding low under the fact-figure crossfire there was a secret history, and not a lot of people felt like running in there to bring it out." But in the film Robert Towne and Roman Polanski made in and about Southern California, a secret history is brought out, and something does get answered.

We know that Mulholland arrived in Los Angeles in 1877 and worked as a *zanjero*, or ditch tender, for the city. He wrote about the discovery of Los Angeles in an autobiographical fragment: "The Los Angeles River was the greatest attraction. It was a beautiful, limpid little stream with willows on its banks. . . . It 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." We know that Fred Eaton worked for nine years as the Los Angeles City Water Company's superintending engineer, served as mayor, campaigned for the municipalization of the water system, and saw the city gain control of its domestic water supply in 1902. We know that Mulholland, who succeeded Eaton as head of the privately owned water company, fought the city's purchase of the company but then agreed to assume directorship of the public system. (The only map of that system existed in Mulholland's head.) We know that Lippincott took Eaton to the Owens Valley in 1904, and that Eaton took Mulholland on a visit there some months later. Lippincott, chief of operations in California for the Reclamation Service, had visited the

valley a year earlier and had recommended that more than 500,000 acres be withdrawn for possible development of a local public water project. We know that Lippincott and his superiors from the Reclamation Service met with Eaton, Mulholland, and the city attorney in November 1904 and asserted that Reclamation would step aside only if the proposed aqueduct was "public owned from one end to another." We know that city officials and even the publishers of Los Angeles's newspapers were sworn to secrecy about the city's plans so as to prevent a speculative run on Owens Valley land values. We know that in March 1905 Lippincott, while still working for the Reclamation Service, signed a private contract with the Los Angeles Water Commission to prepare a survey of "the possible sources the city could tap for additional water." And we know that in the same month Lippincott gave Eaton a letter directing him to prepare a personal report on rights-of-way in the valley. Eaton used the letter to buy up options on the Long Valley reservoir site, options over which he also retained some private control and which he would eventually offer to the city at a price it refused to pay.

Why did L.A. want the water? Even this brief summary of the jockeying that occurred before the aqueduct construction began suggests a profound mixture of motives. "Los Angeles is a desert community," former mayor Sam Bagby argues in the second scene in *Chinatown*: "Without water the dust will rise up and cover us as though we never existed." The film takes place during a period of drought—a drought engineered, it turns out, by the water department. In reality, Los Angeles voters supported a bond issue for Mulholland's aqueduct, in part, out of a chronic fear of water shortages—a fear manipulated by the water department. Mulholland campaigned for the bond issue by concocting drought conditions that did not, in fact, exist; 1905 was an especially wet year in Los Angeles. He imagined a system that would serve a population of 390,000 residents, a figure he estimated the city might reach in 1925. By 1925 the population of Los Angeles was three times that number.

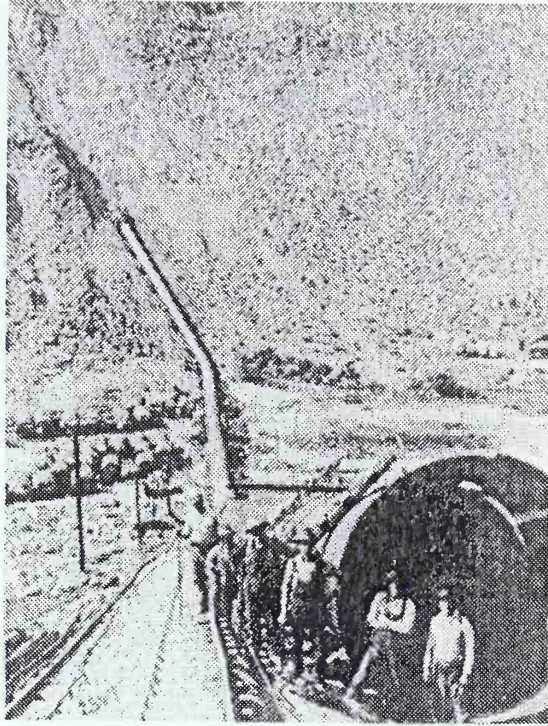
Water was and is brought to Los Angeles less to meet a necessary demand than to provide an infinite supply. William Kahrl establishes that from that time to this, the city has been able to secure far more water than its citizens have proven able to consume. In the early 1980s only seven percent of the water provided by the Colorado River was used by the city; the remainder went to the surrounding municipalities that had helped

fund the Hoover Dam project by joining with Los Angeles in 1928 to form the Metropolitan Water District.

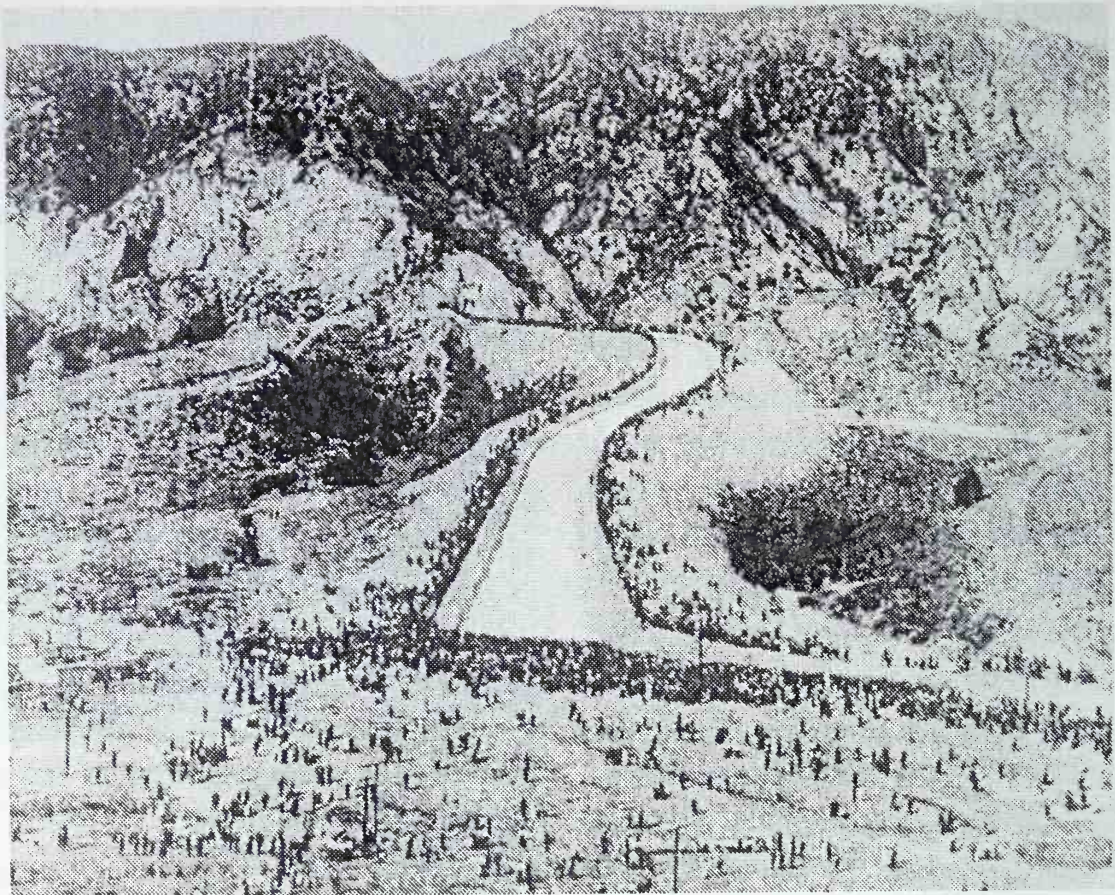
Despite the vagaries of demand, the building of the aqueduct was to prove so heroic an enterprise that its success tended to eclipse second thoughts. Work on the project began in the fall of 1907. The planned route was to carry 260 million gallons of water a day over a distance of nearly 250 miles. Arising near the back entrance to Yosemite National Park, the aqueduct was to divert the water of the Owens River into some sixty miles of open canals and concrete ditches. Gathered into the fifteen-square-mile Haiwee Reservoir, these waters would then flow or be pumped

through steel siphons and closed tunnels 125 miles across the Mojave to the Fairmont Reservoir, at the base of the Coast Range. The Elizabeth Tunnel was to carry the waters five miles through the six-thousand-foot-high Sierra Madre, after which they were to tumble through twenty-three miles of turbines and conduits to reservoirs above the San Fernando Valley.

By the time Mulholland stood at the Owensmouth Cascades in 1913 and declared to the gathered populace, "There it is—Take it!" he had built the longest aqueduct in the Western Hemisphere. To support the five years of construction, the Bureau of the Los Angeles Aqueduct had laid 120 miles of railroad tracks, graded five hundred miles of highways and trails, and erected its own cement-manufacturing plant to produce a special mixture made with Owens Valley tufa stone. Excavated in 1,239 days, the 26,800-foot Elizabeth Tunnel set a record for hard-rock tunneling. A potential labor shortage was averted when, in 1907, a financial panic led to the closing of mining operations throughout the West; four



Pipe for the Los Angeles Aqueduct as it passes over one of the mountain ranges on its 250-mile route from the Owens Valley to reservoirs above the San Fernando Valley. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.



The Owensmouth Cascades on the morning of November 5, 1913. "There it is—Take it!" William Mulholland said as he formally opened the aqueduct that allowed water to pass through its terminus at the Owensmouth Cascades. The cascades are located near the present site of Magic Mountain. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

thousand experienced tunnelers and diggers descended upon Mulholland's desert labor camps. A strike over food service in 1910 coincided with a cash shortage in construction funds. Mulholland weathered the crisis by dismissing eighty percent of his workforce and then hiring replacements once the city was able to float a new set of bonds.

Mulholland's labor troubles coincided with the trial of the union-organizing McNamara brothers, arrested in October 1910 on charges of dynamiting the offices of the *Los Angeles Times*. Largely through the efforts of *Times* publisher Harrison Gary Otis, Los Angeles had remained an open-shop town. It was a city as resistant to working-class solidarity as San Francisco was hospitable to it. The trial of the McNamara brothers thus became an allegory of the battle between capital and labor in Southern California, with a mayoral election hanging in the balance.

Throughout the country the progressive spirit had elected more than

five hundred socialists to various public offices in 1910 and 1911. In the Los Angeles mayoral campaign of 1911, Socialist candidate Job Harriman portrayed Mulholland's aqueduct as built for the benefit of the San Fernando Mission Land Company—a cartel, formed one week after Lippincott's secret 1905 meeting with city officials, that had managed to buy up, before the arrival of the water needed to develop it, most of the available land in the as-yet-unincorporated valley. The land includes the present-day towns of Van Nuys, Canoga Park, Reseda, Sherman Oaks, and Woodland Hills. Harriman portrayed the water project as carried out for the benefit of an owner class; the cartel included Otis, his son-in-law Harry Chandler, a former Los Angeles water commissioner, the vice president of the Title Insurance Company, and H. J. Whitney, the land developer who built Hollywood. "Perhaps more than any other city," Roger Lotchin writes in *Fortress California*, "Los Angeles was the product of a development conspiracy by its leadership." "They've been blowing these farmers out of here and buying their land for peanuts"—this is Jake Gittes's assessment of the syndicate's effectiveness after he is knocked out by the crippled farmer in a San Fernando orange grove.

Having tied himself to the labor cause, the success of Harriman's mayoral candidacy depended upon the acquittal of the McNamara brothers. Clarence Darrow agreed to handle the McNamaras' defense. He also concluded that his clients were guilty of bombing the *Times* offices. Using Lincoln Steffens as a go-between, Darrow brokered a deal in which the McNamaras agreed to plead guilty in exchange for reduced sentences. The result was a lost election for Harriman, the discrediting of the labor movement in Los Angeles, and the assurance to Mulholland that the aqueduct would be completed in relative peace.

The story of water and Los Angeles divides itself into countless subplots. Historians have sometimes managed the proliferating narrative by reducing it to a melodrama. A signal contribution to this process was made in 1931 by Andrae Nordskog in a pamphlet printed by the California State Printing Office. His *Communication* advanced a conspiracy history and accused "the Mulholland political crowd" of "gross mismanagement." Two years later Morrow Mayo relied on Nordskog's primary research in his chapter "The Rape of the Owens Valley," published in his book *Los Angeles. "The Federal Government of the United States held Owens Valley,"* he concluded, "while Los Angeles raped it." Here Morrow paraphrased the earliest contribution to the controversy,

W. A. Chalfant's *Story of Inyo* (1922, 1933). Publisher of the *Inyo Register*, Chalfant had maintained that "the government held Owens Valley while Los Angeles skinned it." Books like Remi Nadeau's *Water Seekers* (1950) and Vincent Ostrom's *Water and Politics* (1953) took a more positive view of the actions of the city, championing its developer-engineers and even describing them as "great creators." Abraham Hoffman's *Vision or Villainy* (1981) went so far as to attempt a rehabilitation of Lippincott, arguing that he was a "far more complex person than the caricatures have shown," the "unwitting victim of later historiographical distortions."

While it does not take sides, Kahrl's *Water and Power* does deign to judge. "Probably no character in this narrative has appeared so villainous as J. B. Lippincott," he writes in his conclusion. "He alone consistently broke faith with his public trust and then lied to cover his actions." Kahrl tempers this claim by allowing that Lippincott was correct about Los Angeles's water needs and "sincere in his belief that he was serving some higher public duty by encouraging the Reclamation Service to abandon the Owens Valley in favor of Los Angeles." His closing dismissal of Eaton as "comically ineffectual" pales next to his prior claim that Eaton "never conceived of the project as anything other than a private scheme that would work to his personal profit." The San Fernando land syndicate he describes as "somewhat less than corrupting." Mulholland's story devolves, for Kahrl, into a "tragedy." As Kahrl's subtitle suggests, he views the story as a "conflict." The drama he restages with thoroughness and balance serves as a model of the historian's truth.

In *Chinatown*, Polanski and Towne conduct an inquest into the power of cinematic truth. Director and screenwriter invoke many of the incidents and figures from the Owens Valley story. But they are finally concerned less with what we know than how we know. Film confers a certain kind of knowledge; watching it, we take in the world with our eyes. This amplified visual evidence has an immense authority—it capitalizes on the cliché that seeing is believing. What is seen on the screen fills the being before the mind can think; the assent we give to a movie is more sensual and visceral than critical or analytical. *Chinatown* chooses to expose rather than to exploit this process. While it holds up cinema as a legitimate vehicle for historical memory and critique, it also cautions the viewer that "truth," as Jake Gittes calls what he wants from Evelyn Mulwray, is always more than meets the eye.

Chinatown was by no means the first movie to appropriate the Owens

Valley story; in the 1935 *New Frontier* John Wayne and the Mesquiteers rode to the aid of ranchers in the New Hope Valley, beset by a water project for Metropole City. But *Chinatown* is the first movie to link the historical and narrative materials of the story with the formal limits and properties of film. Water serves as the vehicle for this process because its history and movements are transparent yet subterranean, ubiquitous while also hidden from view. Los Angeles works as the site for the inquiry not only because of Polanski's personal experience of the city—the 1969 Manson-Tate murders, in which his pregnant wife was brutally slain—but because of the plot-ridden character of the local politics. The intersections between film and history are many, despite Towner's claim that "I didn't base a single character in *Chinatown* on any person I read about in the Owens Valley episode." Script and camera focus on a heroic Mulholland-figure; they collapse into Noah Cross the shadier aspects of Eaton, Lippincott, and even Mulholland (he, like Cross, fought a custody battle with his daughter over a granddaughter); they play up the role of the land syndicate; they play down the city's labor problems; they start with the failed dam rather than the successful aqueduct; and they shift the entire action into the waning years of the Depression, ten years after the dam gave way and over thirty years after the "rape" of the Owens Valley first began.

TRICKED BY AN IMPOSTER into smearing Mulwray, Jake Gittes sets out to secure his revenge. While he does develop some feeling for Evelyn Mulwray as the movie proceeds, his prime motive in solving the presumed mystery is to get back at the people "who set me up." "I want the big boys who are making the payoffs," he says. *Chinatown* unfolds as a movie about pride, especially the pride of knowing.

As a private eye, its protagonist makes a living by selling information. The first shot in the movie is of a photograph, "grainy but unmistakably a man and a woman making love." We hear a voice moaning offscreen. What sounds like sex noises turns out to be the groans of an anguished husband, Curly. His lamentations provide the sound track as photographs are leafed through on the screen, and the viewer is taken in by the synchronization. The movie immediately establishes and exploits, as it will throughout, a gap between the heard and the seen. Within the confines of Curly's story, Jake succeeds in selling him adequate information about his wife's adultery. Curly confronts his wife, blackens her eye,

and sinks back into his routine. But in the world inhabited by Noah Cross, truth does not so easily yield to surveillance. Jake's investment in what things "look like" upholds him in the fatal belief that adequate knowledge can be gained from the world viewed.

"No script ever drove me nuttier," Towne was to say; he felt overwhelmed by the abundance of data on the politics of water in Los Angeles. "I tried one way and another casually to reveal mountains of information about dams, orange groves, incest, elevator operators." He was also influenced by another writer about a gone Los Angeles: "reading Chandler filled me with such a sense of loss that it was probably the main reason why I did the script." Polanski viewed the material as more personal, more existential. "I was in L.A.," he said, "where every street corner reminded me of tragedy." He insisted that Towne add a love scene between Jake and Evelyn, as well as an unhappy ending. "Evelyn had to die," he maintained. Towne, for his part, had imagined Evelyn in jail after shooting Noah Cross, with daughter Katherine escaping to Mexico. For Towne, the tragedy arose from the corruption of place. He smelled sage and eucalyptus and felt prompted to write about the despoliation of California land. The two visions happily converged; the incest between father and daughter became a compelling metaphor for our betrayal by those to whom we have given our private or public trust.

Directing their skepticism back at their own medium, Polanski and Towne also ask whether we can trust the truth delivered by an art so overwhelmingly visual. For Jake, who routinely misinterprets what he sees, experience proves an uninformative spectacle. Polanski surrounds him with aids and obstacles to sight: the binoculars and camera with which he spies on Mulwray; the photographs of Curly's wife and of Noah Cross and Mulwray; the various kinds of clear and broken "glass" or "grass," as the Japanese gardener calls it in another misheard aural cue; Mulwray's spectacles and Cross's bifocals; the eye of a fish and the "flaw" in Evelyn's iris. Eyes get shot out; lenses and taillights broken. So Jake continues to see but has no perspective on what is seen. As both Cross and Evelyn say to him, "You may think you know what you're dealing with, but believe me, you don't."

Jake begins as superior to the action and to his client. He doles out sympathy and information to Curly and agrees that Curly is right only in order to get rid of him. The viewer, coming in at the end of the investigation, is placed in the role of voyeur. We share with Jake a sense of

distanced knowing, even delectation. In the following scenes, we watch Jake watch Mulwray: at City Hall, in the bed of the Los Angeles River, and at the outfall at Point Fermin Park. The next day, back at the office, we are treated to a second set of photographs that show Mulwray outside a restaurant with an older man. Jake tosses them down in disgust, accusing his assistant Walsh of having wasted his time. These photographs refuse to yield information. Walsh mentions that the two men argued. "What about?" Jake asks. Walsh answers: "I only heard one word—apple core."

Jake cannot hear the clue in "apple core" ("albacore," the name of Cross's yacht club), and the viewer has as yet no idea what the words might mean. But the gap between the seen and the heard has been introduced a second time, and it suggests that what Jake needs to do is not to look but to listen. Throughout the film he proves remarkably deaf to the tones and inflections of speech. He cannot hear the falseness in Ida Sessions's impersonation of Mrs. Mulwray. Nor can he detect the obvious and sincere distress in Evelyn's voice as she gamely attempts to divert him from discovering the identity of her daughter.

Jake's futile attempt to catch up with the past is measured out by the movie's persistent ticking sounds, as in the scene just after he and Evelyn make love. Provocative little noises, like the sexy squeak of a car being polished or a name being scraped off an office door, frequently distract him. The telephone interrupts lovemaking and sleep. Jake's refusal to heed the messages carried by sound culminates in a silent movie of his own staging—the scene where he watches Evelyn and her daughter arguing through a bungalow window, and where, for the lack of a sound track, he draws all the wrong conclusions.

Late in the film, and long after we have begun to question Jake's skill as a detective, Polanski introduces another scene that enacts the persistent lag in Jake's response to sound versus sight. Jake has been called to Ida Sessions's apartment and walks through it, finding a wilted head of lettuce, spilled groceries, and then Ida dead on the floor. A hand-held camera shakily follows him. Jake turns toward a dark closet. At this moment Jerry Goldsmith's score produces a loud screech, one that we hear but that Jake does not. A light suddenly comes on in the closet, revealing the hidden police officers Loach and Escobar. While the scene is meant to scare us, it also contains a built-in warning device that blunts the shock. The sound track gives us the aural before the visual cue; it is as if

the thunder arrives before the lightning. By inverting the normal timing of cues, the scene not only points to an alternative method of gathering evidence but to the viewer's increasing distance from and even suspicion of the adequacy of the hero.

Until Faye Dunaway turns up as the real Mrs. Mulwray, the viewer accompanies Jake in gathering the data. Her appearance marks the beginning of our divergence from him. We first see her as she stands behind Gittes while he tells Walsh and Duffy the joke about the "China-man." As he finishes the joke, Jake laughs, turns, sees Mrs. Mulwray, and chokes. After this sequence, our relation to him shifts: We are no longer willing to look at the world through his eyes, and when we see him in the frame, he is increasingly shot from behind. Jake's back becomes part of the scenery; the camera situates him in the field he means to survey and master, while we look over his shoulder. Jake may continue to view himself as uninvolved, but we *see* him as part of the action, a man who continually gets ahead of himself and who gets in the way.

Yet although we learn not to trust Jake or his point of view, we are not granted any other angle of access. There are no scenes without him, and he increasingly becomes the moving force in bringing about the conclusion—the very one he means to prevent. His final summons to Noah Cross is not only gratuitous, based solely on Jake's desire to *know*, but will place Cross at the scene of his daughter's attempted escape. By subjecting Jake to this series of humiliations and uncertainties, Polanski withholds from his film an authoritative and knowing point of view. The director's mistrust—even renunciation—of authority culminates in the cutting of Jake's nose: Polanski casts himself as the "Man with Knife." By making the behavior of the character he plays so capricious and unattractive, he positions himself within the ugly confusions of his film rather than beyond them.

Anyone who drinks a glass from the tap in Los Angeles accepts Mulholland's gift. Water connects; even the Mexican boy on the horse who consults with Mulwray knows that, and he knows that to follow the appearings and disappearings of water is to acquire the deepest and most complex knowledge of his city. Yet it is not a knowledge that enables or empowers. The knowledge delivered by the movement of water implicates and entangles; it reveals experience as interrelation. Such knowledge does not afford a privileged perspective, and Jake's attempt to enjoy such a position is what kills.

Given its view of life as mutual entanglement, the movie rejects the metaphor of rape that governs so much of the discourse about Los Angeles and the Owens Valley. When Jake asks Evelyn, “Did he rape you?” she pauses, then quietly shakes her head back and forth. As an adult, Evelyn fights her father out of a desire to protect her daughter/sister, not out of a sense of prior victimage. She accepts her own implication in the events of her past. The original script even allowed for a kind of sympathy for Cross, in lines that were eventually cut from the movie:

EVELYN (*continuing*): he had a breakdown . . . the dam broke . . . my mother died . . . he became a little boy . . . I was fifteen . . . he'd ask me what to eat for breakfast, what clothes to wear! . . . it happened . . . then I ran away.

Towne's language here represents incest between father and daughter as a response to a need. It also attempts to imagine the misery of Mulholland's life after the collapse of the dam and to meet it with a strange kind of solace. The filmed version replaces these lines with Jake's question about rape. Evelyn does not nod yes to his question. The assumption of responsibility by a character who could so easily have been cast as a victim complicates any response to the film that looks to separate out innocence and guilt. Given the horrors of his personal losses—born in 1933 and raised in Poland, he saw his parents taken to a concentration camp in 1940—Polanski persists in viewing the world as a place in which people—and by this he means everyone—are “capable of anything.”

Polanski's, then, is finally not a political vision. While the actual history of governments may be complicated, politics depends on people making a distinction between better and worse, on acting and deciding. Towne had wanted a movie in which the good guys got away. But by including everyone in his landscape of despair, Polanski created an image of Los Angeles as a site of continuing holocaust. He used the unique history of water in California to make a general case about the ubiquity of collaboration and evil. “He has to swim in the same water we all do,” Jake says about Escobar. Not even the viewer of *Chinatown* escapes the implications of this claim.

While much is lost in this cinematic adaptation of California history—especially the informed anger that could make for political change—something is also gained. In *Chinatown* Polanski creates a powerful vision

of life in which relations stop nowhere and in so doing makes a direct challenge to the historicizing imagination. When we attempt to understand the film as a historical artifact, as pointing toward or influenced by some earlier historical occurrence, *Chinatown* in fact invokes an infinity of contexts. The most obvious is the Mulholland story—surely this is a movie about bringing the water to L.A. But why, then, is it set in the 1930s? Perhaps it is a movie about the promises and failures of public works in and since the New Deal. The film is, as Polanski writes, “about the thirties seen through the camera eye of the seventies.” Jake’s failed attempt to save the woman he loves—a mistake he makes twice—cannot be ignored: the futility and impotence and even the guilt Polanski may have felt after the murder of his pregnant wife provide the context here. But if any work of art necessarily expresses the received truths of its moment of production, then the context that comes to mind is the corruption and betrayal of Watergate. Nixon resigned less than a month after the film was released. The film’s message, however, is not that we must pursue corruption to its lair. Although the catastrophe here is the coverup, Jake only inflicts more damage by trying to uncover the “truth.” But why, then, is it called *Chinatown*? Yes, “Chinatown” becomes a metaphor for the unmanageable, a kind of universal and negative signifier. And if there ever was a situation in which the United States thought it knew what it was dealing with but didn’t, it was Vietnam. The final image of the Asian faces crowding onto the screen, as well as the salient yet marginal figures of the Chinese butler and the Japanese gardener—these may provoke some to consider the film’s context as not only the long history of the oppressed “Oriental” in California but the Asian war from which America had withdrawn in 1973 and which was to end with the fall of Saigon in 1975.

By so deftly invoking these and other contexts, Polanski opens up a free space. Not for action or emotion: these remain for the characters in the film, at least, a dead end. The space *Chinatown* opens onto is the space of interpretation itself, a space Polanski creates and protects for the viewer. *Chinatown* refuses to allow the onlooker to remain comfortable in the belief that a city or a life or even a movie can be fully understood by invoking its generating historical context. Yet the film also understands and accepts that such narratives and attempts at inter-connection are necessary fictions by way of which we control our anxiety about the

ambiguity of experience. This mordant negative capability reminds us that works of art that dramatize the past without apportioning blame, or even establishing firm lines of cause and effect, do as much as the histories to keep stories like the one shared by Los Angeles and the Owens Valley unforgotten and alive.