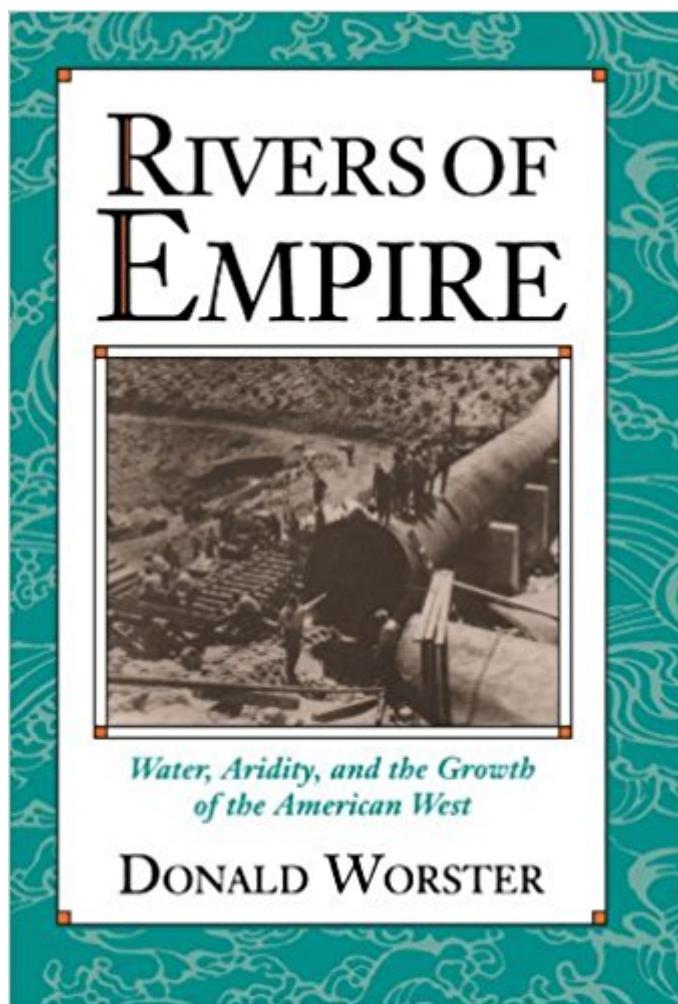


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# Rivers Of Empire: Water, Aridity, And The Growth Of The American West



## Synopsis

When Henry David Thoreau went for his daily walk, he would consult his instincts on which direction to follow. More often than not his inner compass pointed west or southwest. "The future lies that way to me," he explained, "and the earth seems more unexhausted and richer on that side." In his own imaginative way, Thoreau was imitating the countless young pioneers, prospectors, and entrepreneurs who were zealously following Horace Greeley's famous advice to "go west." Yet while the epic chapter in American history opened by these adventurous men and women is filled with stories of frontier hardship, we rarely think of one of their greatest problems--the lack of water resources. And the same difficulty that made life so troublesome for early settlers remains one of the most pressing concerns in the western states of the late-twentieth century. The American West, blessed with an abundance of earth and sky but cursed with a scarcity of life's most fundamental need, has long dreamed of harnessing all its rivers to produce unlimited wealth and power. In *Rivers of Empire*, award-winning historian Donald Worster tells the story of this dream and its outcome. He shows how, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Mormons were the first attempting to make that dream a reality, damming and diverting rivers to irrigate their land. He follows this intriguing history through the 1930s, when the federal government built hundreds of dams on every major western river, thereby laying the foundation for the cities and farms, money and power of today's West. Yet while these cities have become paradigms of modern American urban centers, and the farms successful high-tech enterprises, Worster reminds us that the costs have been extremely high. Along with the wealth has come massive ecological damage, a redistribution of power to bureaucratic and economic elites, and a class conflict still on the upswing. As a result, the future of this "hydraulic West" is increasingly uncertain, as water continues to be a scarce resource, inadequate to the demand, and declining in quality. *Rivers of Empire* represents a radically new vision of the American West and its historical significance. Showing how ecological change is inextricably intertwined with social evolution, and reevaluating the old mythic and celebratory approach to the development of the West, Worster offers the most probing, critical analysis of the region to date. He shows how the vast region encompassing our western states, while founded essentially as colonies, have since become the true seat of the American "Empire." How this imperial West rose out of desert, how it altered the course of nature there, and what it has meant for Thoreau's (and our own) mythic search for freedom and the American Dream, are the central themes of this eloquent and thought-provoking story--a story that begins and ends with water.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Classic."--New Internationalist"Extremely wonderful and well-written."--Thomas G. Alexander, Brigham Young University"Worster is an eloquent, often passionate historian....This important book, sure to be furiously debated, is a history of the West in terms of its most essential resource, water....It examines how manipulation of water has combined with frontier myths, expectations, and illusions, some of them carefully cultivated by interested parties, to create the ambiguous modern West."--Wallace Stegner"Worster is capable of making the most prosaic facts come alive through his mastery of the language, his imagery, and his ability to weave his ideas with events and personalities into a fascinating historical record."--The Los Angeles Times Book Review"Many readers will disagree with [Worster's] conclusions, but they are so forcefully presented that they cannot be dismissed, and will likely shape the discussions for years to come....A language of exceptional poetry and power....He takes his place in a tradition of awed affectionate writing about the West that includes John Muir and Edward Abbey, Bernard De Voto and Wallace Stegner. That is distinguished company indeed, and Donald Worster stands tall in it."--The New York Times Book Review"A brilliant book, clear in its argument, exceptional in its literary qualities."--The Los Angeles Times Book Review"Impassioned and lyrical."--The New York Times Book Review"An excellent choice for courses that include readings from the New Western History interpretations."--Thomas L. Charlton, Baylor University

Donald Worster, who won the Bancroft Prize for his book *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the*

1930s, is Hall Distinguished Professor of American History at the University of Kansas. He is also the author of *The Ends of the Earth*, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, and the forthcoming *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West*.

okay

I needed this book for a historiographical review...I found the author to be redundant and sanctimonious. The author could easily have gotten his point across in far fewer pages and a lot less time. And, his word usage is awkward at best.

quick shipper, item as advertised, Thanks!

good info on an important subject. not that it's anything like a vollmann book, but if you liked 'empire' you should check this out.

The central argument Worster tries to make in here is that the "hydraulic society" of the American West has somehow created an antidemocracy in which technocrats and plutocrats run everything. He asserts in his book that "everything begins and ends with water." If you accept this premise, his text has some interesting points, but the logical leaps required to accept the premise are difficult to make. As much as anything this book seems to be an attack on capitalism, but even that does not hold up because at different points in the text the author both highlights the need to get the power "into the hands of as many people as possible" and the problems people have in making self-regulated decisions. The general ecological message is still reasonably sound - learn to live with nature and don't fight it or dominate it to the point of damage - but the rest of the book is confusing and suffering from an overly narrow focus. Read it if you have to, but be aware of what you are getting in to.

Donald Worster's *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* provides an examination of the water irrigation system in the American West. Professor of history at the University of Kansas, Worster has created a work that blends environmental and social history rather seamlessly. *Rivers of Empire* examines both the environmental and economic impact of western irrigation. Worster does make some excellent points throughout his work, but his personal bias does bleed through quite a bit. Worster looks to Karl Wittfogel for inspiration and an

explanation of the role of water in societies. In Wittfogel's theory, those who control the water control the civilization. Wittfogel looks to ancient civilizations to prove his point, most notably the Egyptians and the Nile River. While Wittfogel's theory is quite logical and persuasive, Worster is not nearly as universally successful. The American West was essentially a useless wasteland before the implementation of a water system. The water system allowed for the region to be transformed and provided the necessary "life blood" to facilitate a massive increase in population. The irrigation system provided the foundation for urbanization in the West and made a small group of individuals very wealthy. This is an important time period in American history because it marks the point in time in which the American people harnessed the power of the river and completely transformed a region of their territory in order to make it livable. Worster makes a good argument regarding the importance of regulating and reevaluating the irrigation system in the American West, but he places a tremendous emphasis on the capitalistic aspects of the water system. While some of these characteristics do exist, it distracts from the environmental issues of irrigation and transforming the West. Worster seems almost surprised that something in the United States that could be exploited for profit was taken advantage of. This seems almost naive and certainly questionable for a historian. Yes, big business and big government greatly profited from "the watering of the west", but this should not be something that is surprising. The capitalist economy of the United States allows for, and even promotes, this type of corporate domination. Rivers of Empire looks at the environmental history of the American West through a Marxist lens. Worster is very passionate about his topic and he adamantly defends his position, while not shying away from condemning what he feels to be a wrong. He is idealistic and very optimistic about the future and the potential for a course correction before things become irreversible. Rivers of Empire is an interesting book because it is, in theory, concerned with the small farmer and the "little guy", but the majority of the book focuses on the "great men" of history. Worster spends more time on the men he views as the enemy than he does those he is advocating for. Although he spends a great deal of time on the "great men", he is highly critical of them. A closer examination of the "little guy" could have helped this book drive home its point. Worster's theory is a very readable book and it contains fantastic information and it raises some interesting questions and points. The attack on capitalism seems to be a personal agenda for Worster and while it does fit into the context of the book, it could have been toned down. With the personal agenda aside, the ecological message is

solid. Americans must recognize the problem that exists with its current methods for providing water in the West. If a course correction is not made soon it could be potentially disastrous. Humans must learn to live with nature and show the proper respect to the world they call home.

In this book, Worster extends Karl Wittfogel's theory of the hydraulic society to the United States -- a task that Wittfogel, despite having emigrated to the US, never attempted. Since Wittfogel emphasized the authoritarian consequences of large-scale irrigation system, so too does Worster, finding an authoritarian "empire" in the American West. Certainly there are authoritarian elements of western agriculture, especially in the treatment of farmworkers by large farms and corporations. Worster mentions this, but oddly enough does not give this issue as much attention as one would expect. Worster gives much more attention to the symbiotic relationship between landowners and the water engineers at the Bureau of Reclamation. Like most relationships between government and business, this represents a conspiracy against voters and consumers. That said, it doesn't seem any more hierarchical or autocratic than any other area of regulation, and Worster doesn't really make that case. Theory aside, the book tells its story well. Unfortunately for Worster, he's competing with a masterpiece, Mark Reisner's "Cadillac Desert", and he covers essentially the same ground. (Reisner's book was published a year later.) Without Reisner, I'd have given this book four stars and recommend for general readers interested in this particular corner of human experience. But Reisner tells the story so well that Worster's book has to stand or fall on the theoretical apparatus -- and this just isn't convincing. As a result, I think that "Rivers of Empire" will really only be interesting for specialists.

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