

Contrasting views of western water works

by Nicholas F. Benton

Hoover Dam: An American Adventure

by Joseph E. Stevens
University of Oklahoma Press, Norman and
London, 1988
326 pages, hardbound, no price listed.

Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water

by Marc Reisner
Viking Penguin Books, New York and London,
1986
582 pages, paperback, \$8.95.

One of the most distinctive memories of my childhood was the reaction I had when, driving along a hot, dusty road, we came around a bend and beheld the Hoover Dam. It was a breathtaking moment. In awe, we stopped the car ahead of the face of the dam, and examined the scale of its sheer mass.

It was not until years later that I learned how this dam, begun in the late 1920s and completed in the mid-1930s, made possible the seemingly unlimited bounty of southern California. A semi-arid desert was turned into one of the most densely populated regions of the U.S., a world center of high-technology aerospace industries, and some of the most productive agriculture in the world. It was achieved by men of vision who grasped the potential of capturing water running off mountain ranges to the north and east to transform a desert into a garden.

Joseph Stevens's book, *Hoover Dam: An American Adventure*, gives an account of how the project was conceived and completed. The book is short on the political intrigues surrounding the project, but long on how it was built: how engineering skill, financial finagling, problem solving, and hard work created this monument in the Black Canyon.

It is an important book for today's generation, because it

tells how men of broader vision and tougher resolve than those who pass for public officials now, were, 60 years ago, able to set their sights on a great project and see it through. It should stiffen the resolve of those who recognize the need for a revival of that approach today to build the great projects that could end poverty in Africa and Asia, bring peace to the Middle East, and, by tapping the enormous surplus of northern-flowing water in western Canada and Alaska, make green the western two-thirds of the North American continent.

It will also mute the nagging of those "nay sayers" like Marc Reisner, author of *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*. Reisner's book begs the question: Why would Viking Penguin publish a biased account of western water development written by a man whose only credential is employment as a staff writer for the anti-growth National Resources Defense Council?

The book is based on the premise that every civilization in the history of man that was dependent on water diversion failed, that water development for the West has been a mistake, and that the West should be allowed to revert to its arid, semi-arid state. (He had obviously overlooked Egypt, for starters.)

The book was apparently commissioned in the early 1980s. Following the California drought of 1977 and the failure to find a solution to the depletion of the Ogallala Aquifer that provides irrigation for agriculture in five states on the central plains, a new wave of interest began to arise in the North American Water and Power Alliance (NAWAPA) plan, as the water-from-Canada concept was called by the Ralph Parsons Company, which surveyed its feasibility in the early 1960s. Now, with California facing its third consecutive year of drought far more severe than that of 1977, interest in NAWAPA is growing again.

However, if Reisner's book was intended to block interest in water from Canada, it stands exposed because it is the drier southern California, which, by virtue of water diverted from the Hoover Dam and other sources, is able to offer relief to the northern part of the state.

Nonetheless, the battle lines are drawn as the West grows drier, between men of vision like those who built the Hoover Dam, and those who would halt progress at the expense of countless human lives. This is a basic moral question that hinges on the cultural paradigm shift that has occurred, in the past two decades especially.

A poem by Olivia Wheeler Whiteman entitled *Come Walk With Me*, (Daily Press, Craig, Colorado, 1973) expresses the different popular sentiment that existed when the Hoover Dam (called Boulder Dam at the time) was under construction. Entitled, "A Trip To Black Canyon Before Boulder Dam," the poem contains the lines: "It seems 'twas a part of God's plan,/To put here this possible dam site/For the future achievement of man./And He, in His infinite wisdom,/Has given a vision to some/That will be for the good of His people,/And will last through the ages to come."