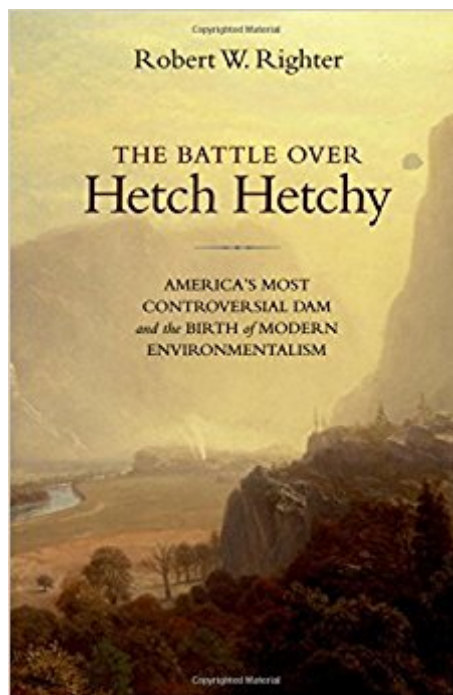


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The Battle Over Hetch Hetchy: America's Most Controversial Dam And The Birth Of Modern Environmentalism



Synopsis

In the wake of the devastating 1906 earthquake and fire, the city of San Francisco desperately needed reliable supplies of water and electricity. Its mayor, James Phelan, pressed for the damming of the Tuolumne River in the newly created Yosemite National Park, setting off a firestorm of protest. For the first time in American history, a significant national opposition arose to defend and preserve nature, led by John Muir and the Sierra Club, who sought to protect what they believed was the right of all Americans to experience natural beauty, particularly the magnificent mountains of the Yosemite region. Yet the defenders of the valley, while opposing the creation of a dam and reservoir, did not intend for it to be maintained as wilderness. Instead they advocated a different kind of development--the building of roads, hotels, and an infrastructure to support recreational tourism. Using articles, pamphlets, and broadsides, they successfully whipped up public opinion against the dam. Letters from individuals began to pour into Congress by the thousands, and major newspapers published editorials condemning the dam. The fight went to the floor of Congress, where politicians debated the value of scenery and the costs of western development. Ultimately, passage of the passage of the Raker Act in 1913 by Congress granted San Francisco the right to flood the Hetch Hetchy Valley. A decade later the O'Shaughnessy Dam, the second largest civil engineering project of its day after the Panama Canal, was completed. Yet conflict continued over the ownership of the watershed and the profits derived from hydroelectricity. To this day the reservoir provides San Francisco with a pure and reliable source of drinking water and an important source of power. Although the Sierra Club lost this battle, the controversy stirred the public into action on behalf of national parks. Future debates over dams and restoration clearly demonstrated the burgeoning strength of grassroots environmentalism. In a narrative peopled by politicians and business leaders, engineers and laborers, preservationists and ordinary citizens, Robert W. Righter tells the epic story of the first major environmental battle of the twentieth century, which reverberates to this day.

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Customer Reviews

This is the only book I have ever read on the Hetch Hetchy matter and I don't think I would have to read another one. Although the author reveals himself as more of an environmentalist in the sense that he would have like to have seen the valley preserved, I felt he was very, very fair in describing the motivations, merits and flaws of both sides and debunking the myth that this was solely environmentalism vs progress. His research led him to the conclusion that even John Muir was not looking to keep the valley in a pristine state. He and his followers thought that such beauty should be experienced and shared by everyone and they wanted to develop the valley for tourism, probably of the kind we see today in the Yosemite Valley. Other themes were public power vs. privately owned utilities and municipal water systems vs. private water companies that were supplying the city prior to the HH dam being built. All these debates were also taking place in the backdrop of Teddy Roosevelt's progressivism, the recent birth of the National Forest and National Park systems and the devastation of the 1906 SF earthquake and fire (for which there wasn't enough water to successfully fight). The author manages to tell his even story in a relatively short 244 pages, including interesting chapters on the legacy of the HH controversy and the talk of restoring the valley someday, a notion which I consider very far-fetched given the costs of replacing the dam's water as well as the hydroelectric power it produces. Pleasant as the sight of the valley would be, in today's world of fighting for every public dollar and the pressure to build more electric generation, I can't imagine we would agree to this. The author admits as much, but applauds the fact that it is at least talked about.

Note/question: Are a certain breed of modern environmentalists giving my review "unhelpful" ratings because of the "myth-free" comment (which is true), or what? The biggest myth, and one that I'll admit was in my head, was that John Muir and the early Sierra Club wanted to preserve Hetch Hetchy as wilderness, with all the ideas of wilderness that we have today, whether post-Aldo

Leopold or post-Wilderness Act. Not true. They envisioned development of the whole area, just somewhat less intensely than Yosemite Valley. In fact, a number of Sierrans openly favored building a road **up the Tuolumne Valley to the Meadows!** (Others favored building the Yosemite Valley road further up the Merced, then turning it left toward the Tuolumne Meadows as well.) In short, to some fair degree, the battle over whether or not to damn Hetch Hetchy was a split between the "conversationist" and "preservationist" wings of early 20th century environmentalists. A minority of Sierrans supported damming Hetch Hetchy, in fact. Meanwhile, the whole battle moved beyond environmental issues and definitions to pushing for public utilities, and San Francisco was served by both private water and private electricity at this time. One can see the makings of an epic conflict that crossed the desks of multiple Interior secretaries before being hammered out in Congress. And Robert Righter tells this story in detail, giving full play to San Francisco's side, including today, ever since Interior Secretary Donald Hodel first broached the idea of dam removal and brought Hetch Hetchy's history back to daylight.

Robert W. Righter has extended his reputation as a leading American environmental historian by this informative and well written account of the building of the Hetch Hetchy dam in Yosemite National Park in the early 1900's. He is candid and even handed in admitting that there were and are no easy answers in this complex history of building a dam in a national park. This book follows his earlier and acclaimed book (Crucible for Conservation, The Struggle for Grand Teton National Park) which contains the compelling story of the establishment of Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming in which the issue was whether the Park as a contiguous and viable entity would ever be established over the objections of local and regional political and other interests.

Who was Abe Ruef? What affect, indirectly or otherwise, did he have on Hetch Hetchy? Robert Righter's thoughtful history of the valley identifies Ruef among notable others and the roles they played in determining Yosemite's fate as part reservoir. Righter provides a rich story of a booming and brash San Francisco (which is reason enough to read the book), followed by an informative account of the building of O'Shaughnessy Dam, as well as the environmental legacy of Hetch Hetchy and the cause of restoration. Ultimately, Righter reveals myths surrounding the damming of John Muir's beloved valley and even myths surrounding Muir. The story is captivating and despite knowing the outcome, one cannot help but follow along with the hope that things would have turned out differently.

A very important book that should be widely read as the nation wakes up to the glorious possibility of restoring this majestic valley to its original pristine state for all mankind, for all time. It should be done, it can be done, it will be done. This book fully documents the past; it is up to us to write the future.

I have noticed that a lot of books written about the historical facts of Hetch Hetchy seldom include the original Indians of Hetch Hetchy. The early owners of Hetch Hetchy Valley were Paiutes. The leader of those Paiute Indians was Captain Jim, who was a sub-chief of the Mono Lake Paiutes. Why is that never written in the story of the Native Americans of Hetch Hetchy. There is proof out there and the Yosemite National Park Service is not mentioning this fact. When writers are doing books about Hetch Hetchy they should remember the Indians of Hetch Hetchy. The early Native American people who owned Hetch Hetchy before white settlers entered the Valley. The Mono Paiutes.

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