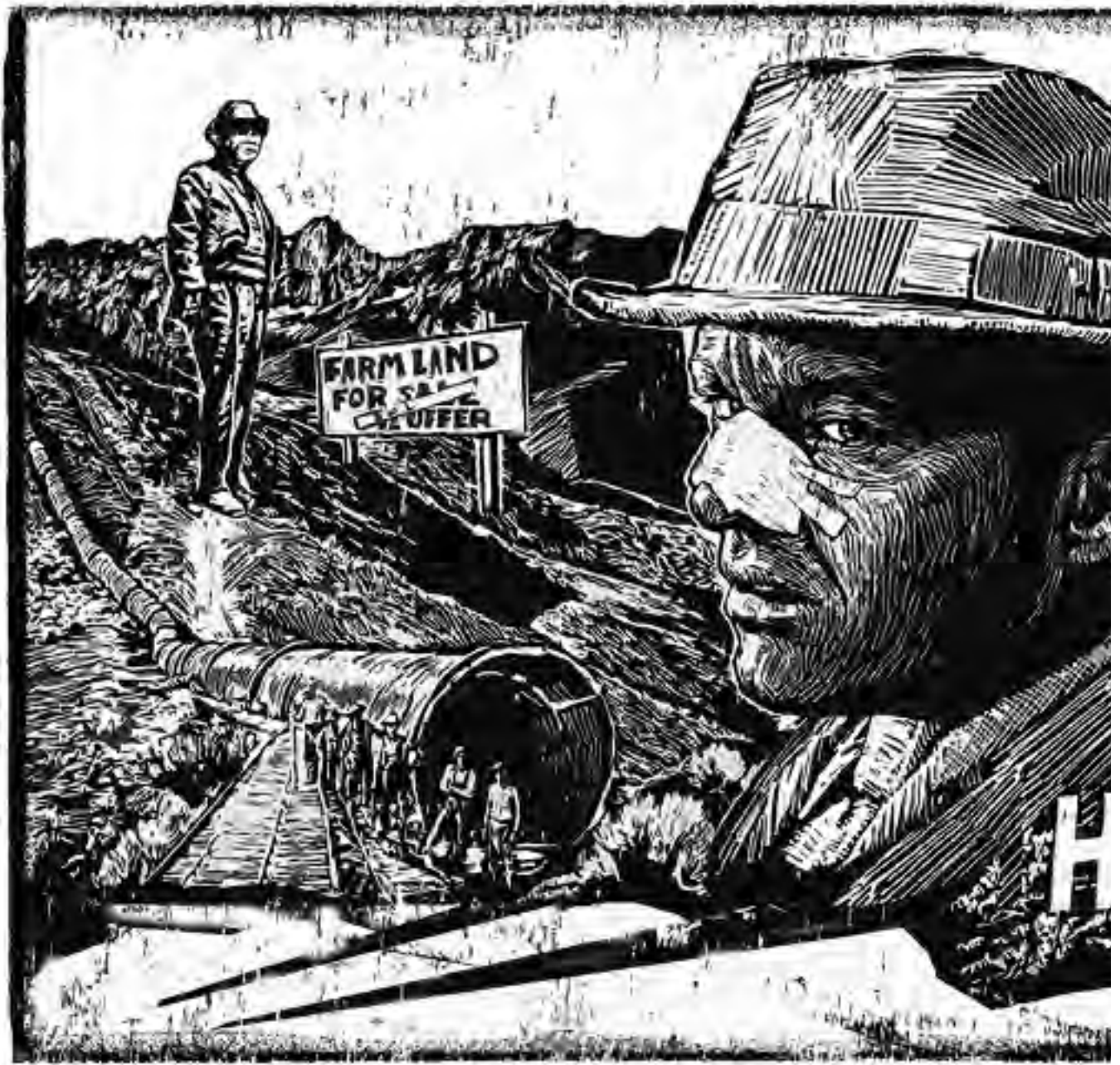


Film Mystery as Urban History: The Case of Chinatown
by John Walton



Introduction

Historians and students of film are familiar with movies based upon historical events and particularly with cinematic representations of those events, which are said to distort, reinterpret, or otherwise alter history in popular memory. Seldom, however, do we find instances of the effect of film and popular culture on history. The reason, perhaps, is that the latter side of this dialectic is rare or inconsequential in the unfolding course of history. This chapter will argue, on the contrary, that sometimes life imitates art, that renditions of the past in popular culture can have a forceful impact on the making of history. This proposition is examined in the context of Los Angeles's historical, and often controversial, efforts to acquire water for development the political movement to restrain the city's appropriation of natural resources mounted by citizens of the Owens Valley in the 1920s, the selective reinterpretation of these events in Roman Polanski's classic film *Chinatown* (1974), and the influence of the film on the subsequent and ongoing controversy over water rights and land development in the region since the mid-1970s.

These events began when the City of Los Angeles reached out 230 miles to the northeast along California's eastern Sierra Nevada Mountain chain and appropriated water from the Owens Valley in an aqueduct constructed from 1905 to 1913. Subsequently, drought and growing groundwater exploitation by the city in the 1920s resulted in the valley's steady desiccation.

Urged on by growing desperation and traditions of popular action, the valley rose in revolt in 1924, protesting politically and, when that failed, bombing the aqueduct. Although the community struggle of the 1920s ended in defeat, it left a growing residue of memory in accounts of the David-and-Goliath struggle produced in fiction, local history, and early films. Many of these distorted the facts of the conflict by attributing a conspiratorial design to the city's original effort to build the aqueduct and heroic motives to local resistance. In California parlance, these events came to be known histrionically as "the rape of the Owens Valley." *Chinatown* built on this myth and it too altered the facts of the case. The site of the conflict was moved 200 miles closer to the city, the events were advanced by thirty years to the depression-era LA of Raymond Chandler and the story was reconstructed as a murder mystery revolving around conspiratorial land speculation.

Meanwhile, the original controversy had evolved into a complicated legal struggle involving new environmental legislation, a strategic lawsuit mounted by Owens Valley officials, and a revitalized popular movement. By contrast to failed attempts in the 1920s, the local cause was now publicized widely, state political actors drawn into the process, and state courts persuaded that rural communities were entitled to some defense of their resources. In this new struggle of the 1980s and early 1990s, public opinion assumed that *Chinatown* represented the true history of the conflict—much to the advantage of a burgeoning environmental movement.[1]

In some respects, popular culture became political history and collective action proceeded from a new set of assumptions. Contemporary history unfolded with redressing results, some of which could be traced to the influence of film and popular culture.

The Story

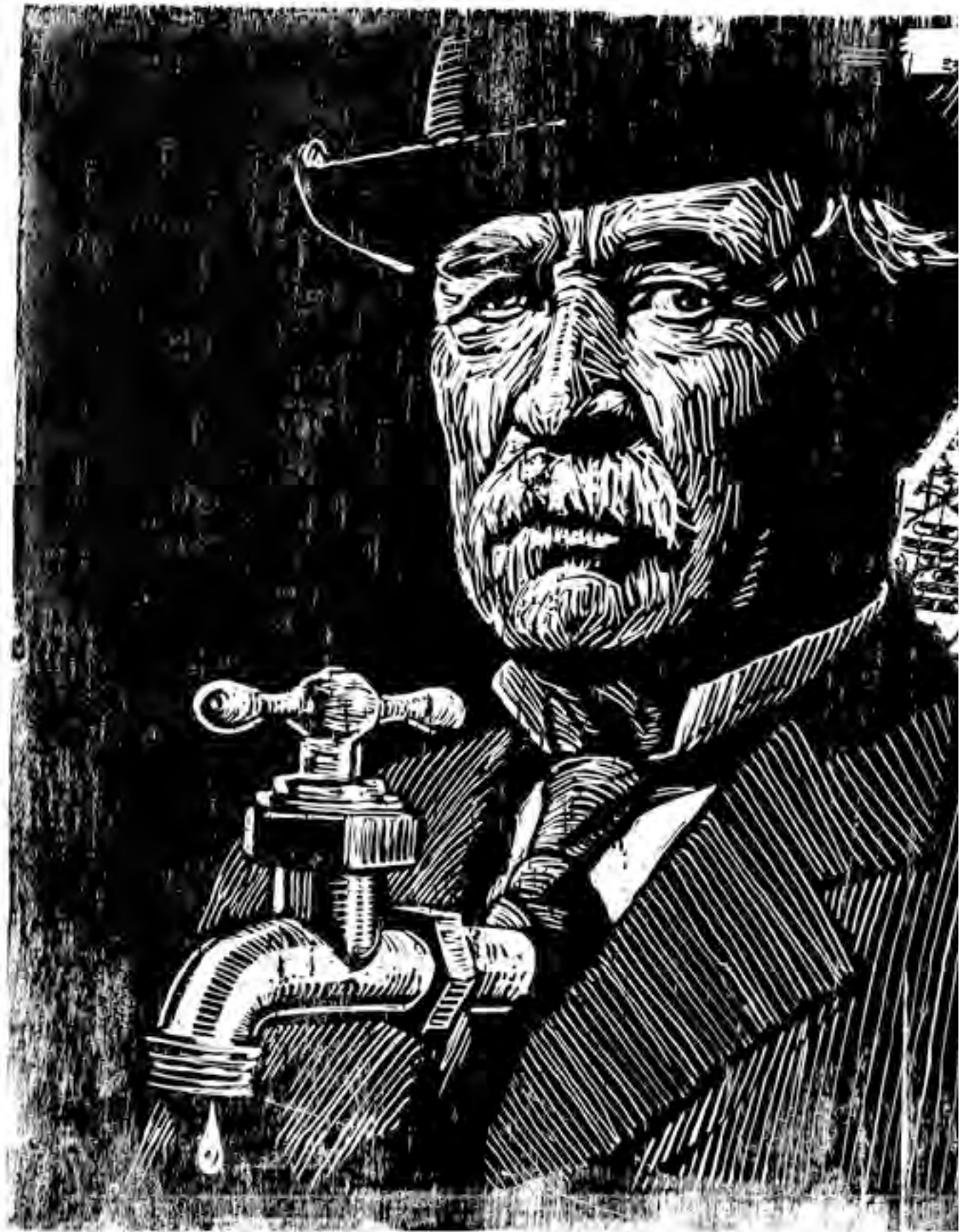
Early on the Sunday morning of November 16, 1924, seventy men from Bishop, California, drove south in a caravan of Model T Fords through the eastern Sierra's Owens Valley and took possession of the Los Angeles Aqueduct at the Alabama Gates spillway. Technicians in the insurgent crowd soon accomplished their mission by opening the spill-gates that held back the man-made river. By mid-morning an assembly of several hundred valley residents had gathered at the site five miles north of Lone Pine to watch most of the Los Angeles water supply flow out of its concrete channel on to the daybed of the Owens River. Within a day, a makeshift camp was created, neighbors brought picnic baskets, and Tom Mix's western movie crew joined the festivities, bringing their own Mariachi band. A rebellion was under way, a rebellion that would figure prominently in the unfolding history of California's political struggles, popular culture, and their reflexive connection.

The picnic at the Alabama Gates typified the struggle between rural communities and expanding cities. The 1924 aqueduct occupation came as the culmination of a local movement begun in 1905 as an effort to defend the small communities in the Owens Valley against the growing depredations of urbanization in Los Angeles. The city had extended its water-supply network to the eastern Sierra over local protest which flared and then cooled until the early 1920s, when a combination of drought and urbanization led to redoubled exploitation of the city's hinterland. On one front, the city exported increasing quantities of the valley's ground water, drying up local farms and communities, while on another front it bought up farms, town lots, and water rights in a master plan to depopulate the region and convert it into the city's own reservoir. Farmers and townspeople in four valley settlements (including, from north to south, Bishop, Big Pine, Independence, and Lone Pine) mobilized in the hope of ensuring that local development would rise on the tide of urban growth. Led by local business interests, the valley alliance attempted to negotiate with the city, guarantee local water supplies and continued irrigation, and establish the authority of a valley association to enter into agreements with the city. All this was denied by the city's highhanded methods of colonizing and exploiting its rustic neighbors. The rebellion in 1924 was a desperate move, a last resort by the valley to save its communities and way of life.

Although the aqueduct occupation succeeded as a *cause célèbre*, enjoying publicity around the country and even in Europe, it failed as a political action and brought about the end of the movement. The city ended the occupation by promising negotiations, but stood firm against any concessions to local interests. State authorities declined to intervene. Valley residents, still suffering the effects of drought and economic collapse, began to lose heart. Some sold out, others persevered (even selling and leasing back their own farm land from the city), and a few carried the struggle to the courts, winning small victories in the 1930s and 1940s.

With the collapse of rebellion, however, a legend began to grow, fed by depression-era sentiments centering on an underdog narrative in which the wholesome and ingenuous countryside bravely opposes the wicked and beguiling city. This narrative inevitably imposed gross simplifications on the historical record—local citizens were far from “rubies” and were never opposed to urbanization, only to their exclusion from its rewards. Yet the narrative did capture the plight of the Owens Valley in culturally accessible form, which later became and provided a symbolic resource in renewed political struggles over water and, now, the “environment.”

In the 1970s, the Owens Valley-Los Angeles controversy was revived as the result of a new local citizens' movement, which was enabled by federal and California environmental legislation. It was in this context that Polanski's remarkable film *Chinatown* appeared to an enthusiastic commercial and critical reception. For Los Angeles and national audiences who knew little of the historical background, *Chinatown* became the LA water story—the political intrigue that made urbanization possible. With its apt power-politics imagery, the film became urban history in the effective realm of popular culture, though its story was largely false. The ironic effect was that the critical narrative underpinning the screenplay was appropriated by environmental activists and a new citizens' alliance in the 1970s and 1980s. That struggle ultimately succeeded in recovering an important share of Owens Valley natural resources, community control, and local dignity.



Symbols and Politics

Chinatown's narrative of conspiracy and intrigue did not appear in a vacuum. Critical accounts began circulating in popular culture from the earliest days of the Owens Valley-Los Angeles controversy and flourished in the 1920s rebellion. Paradoxically, as the Owens Valley economy and society revived in the 1930s, the legend of local destruction grew even faster. The publicity that rebels in the 1920s had hoped would save their communities was reinterpreted and reproduced as California folklore and commercial fiction over the next half-century—too late for some purposes, but not for others.

As the legend grew, historical fact, in the sense of consensus among contemporaries and experts, inevitably suffered. Interpretations never entertained by the rebels themselves—such as conspiratorial intrigue behind city actions—were advanced in romantic and muckraking accounts. Dispassionate observers have properly exposed these “distortions,” but few have moved on to analyze the nature and uses of the legend. Historian Abraham Hoffman speaks for many, including Los Angeles partisans, when he laments that a popular film about water and corruption based on the Owens Valley experience takes liberties with the city’s legitimate development efforts: “*Chinatown*, its excellent story supported by a distorted version of history, assures new misunderstandings ... hopefully the cause of history may be spared yet another contrivance manipulating time and events.”[2]

Hope for some impartial factual resolution of a highly charged political conflict now in its eighth decade seems not only quixotic, but neglects the opportunity to analyze the cultural politics of the controversy—the manner in which symbols, indeed distortions, have become part of the political struggle. A distinctive aspect of this legend, moreover, is that in partisan accounts and popular culture, “the Owens Valley controversy came to be one instance in which the history of a conflict was not written by the victors.”[3] History became symbol, and symbolism played an essential part in California water politics from the 1930s onward.

The legend, elaborated over some sixty years, appears in two stages divided by the watershed years of the late 1920s. A critical shift occurs at that time when the folkloric master theme changes from rural romance to state intrigue.

Literary interpretations of Owens Valley society began appearing in the 1910s, using the struggle over water rights as a backdrop for Western morality plays. With the valley’s future still an open question, authors could write their own resolution and make their chosen protagonists responsible for the result. Peter Kyne’s 1914 novel *The Long Chance* is an engaging melodrama with overtones of Zane Grey’s *Riders of the Purple Sage* which appeared two years earlier. Kyne’s hero, Bob McGraw, an improbable combination of desert rat, clever lawyer, and social reformer, is committed to outmaneuvering corrupt officials in the state land office for the benefit of the toiling masses.

I’ve cast my fortune in the desert of Owens river valley. I’ve cut out for myself a job that will last me all my life, and win or lose, I’ll fight to a finish. I’m going to make thirty-two thousand acres of barren waste bloom and furnish clean unsullied wealth for a few thousand poor, crushed devils that have been slaughtered and maimed under the Juggernaut of our Christian civilization. I’m going to plant them on ten-acre farms up there under the shadow of Mt. Kearsarge, and convert them into Pagans. I’m going to create Eden out of an abandoned Hell. I’m going to lay out a town site and men will build me a town, so I can light it with my own electricity. It’s a big utopian dream. A few thousand of the poor and lowly and hopeless brought out of the cities and given land and a chance for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; to know that their toil will bring them some return, that they can have a home and a hope for the future.[4]

McGraw succeeds, of course, by detecting “powerful private interests at work in the state land office ... aided by corrupt minor officials” who were trying to grab land which they had “suddenly withdrawn from entry and thrown into a Forest Reserve.”[5] Kyne’s plot uses familiar events, but substitutes, on the one hand, private speculators and dishonest bureaucrats for the City of Los Angeles and Forest Service chief Gifford Pinchot, and, on the other hand, the intrepid McGraw leading thousands of crushed devils in place

of the historical citizens' movement. The conflict is presented in nineteenth-century cultural terms which juxtapose capitalist greed, public corruption, urban exploitation, and Christian hypocrisy against rural virtue, populist utopia, the return to honest toil, and philanthropy. Whatever distortions Kyne may commit, his drama resonates the cultural wellsprings of the 1905 protest movement. Rural probity, urban imperiousness, and all they entrain were the opposing symbols of the conflict and the meanings that fueled local action.

Mary Austin's more serious novel *The Ford* (1917) is similar to *The Long Chance* in important respects, despite a shift of moral responsibility to the settlers themselves and a more jaundiced opinion of pioneer character. The story involves divisions within the valley between the strong and scheming land baron Timothy Rickart (after Owens Valley rancher Thomas Rickey) and the doleful farmers who, like Mary's own ineffectual husband, dream of one day "getting into something." The geographically repositioned valley of Tierra Longa is coveted by unsavory oil interests and city agents from San Francisco who are taking options on land and water rights amidst local confusion over whether they are "government men representin' the Irrigation Bureau." Young Kenneth Brent uncovers Rickart's connivance in a land-grabbing plan to export water and endeavors to unite valley farmers in "common resentment [and] tribal solidarity," but fails. "The solitary, rural habit which admitted them to a community of beguilement could not lift them to a community of enterprise." Austin is clearly evaluating the farmers' failure in 1905, attributing it to "their invincible rurality ... how, by as much as they had given themselves to the soil, they were made defenseless against this attack on it." They lacked any vision of an alter-native to life on the land.

It isn't the Old Man's capital that the people of the valley are up against, so much as it is their idea of it, and their idea of the situation, or their lack of ideas... The greatest common factor of the Tierra Longans was their general inability to rise to the Old Man's stature; they were inferior stuff of the same pattern.[6]

Both novels cast the legend in terms of class struggle—the rich, urban, and powerful bent upon dispossessing the humble poor. Although Austin's moral is equally critical of rural parochialism, neither author moves beyond individual actors motivated by stereotypical vices. Institutional actors and state designs were not yet evocative cultural themes, but that would soon change.

A big step from sympathetic news coverage to legend-building occurred when the Watterson brothers, local bankers, began financing, from the reserves of their bank, the Los Angeles civic reformer and publicist Andrae Nordskog. A man of varied talents, Nordskog published the weekly newspaper *Gridiron* in Los Angeles. Looking for bigger stories than his usual exposés of excessive telephone rates and deficient city services, Nordskog traveled to the Owens Valley in June 1927 and immediately became an impassioned ally of the Watterson brothers. Before long the *Gridiron* was publishing denunciations of the city's water commissioners. Through his business connections, Nordskog carried the fight to a weekly radio broadcast and to civic groups—all of this subsidized by cash contributions from the Wattersons' bank, which Nordskog tried unsuccessfully to hide. When the Wattersons' bank failed and the brothers were tried for fraud, Nordskog only intensified his efforts to expose injustice. He traveled to Washington, DC to research Bureau of Reclamation records in connection with the events of 1905 and their parallels to the new Colorado River project that would bring additional water to Southern California. The results of his study were presented in a long and, by all accounts, chaotic manuscript which Nordskog tried to publish—hounding Mary Austin and Los Angeles attorney and writer Carey McWilliams to provide a foreword that would sway New York publishing houses. On the podium or in print, Nordskog's faults included prolixity, self-importance, histrionics, and a tendency to misrepresent his hard-won evidence by over-stating conspiratorial aspects of the case. McWilliams was impressed with the revelations in his work, but found him tedious and "as a man, rather naive. N [sic] writes like a bond salesman with a yen to be a poet." [7] The manuscript, "Boulder Dam in Light of the Owens Valley Fraud," was never published.

Through an odd set of circumstances, however, Nordskog's brief had a greater effect on subsequent events than anything written up to that time. As a result of his investigations, seeming expertise, and public visibility as a champion of water-management reform, in 1930 Nordskog was elected chairman of the Southwest Water League, an organization of forty-eight Southern California cities. With this organizational

base, “a new opportunity for Nordskog to alert the public to Los Angeles’s water aggressions came in early 1931 when the state senate adopted a resolution creating a special committee to investigate the city’s actions in the Owens Valley. Nordskog was asked to testify before the [Senate] committee.”[8] With the state legislature increasingly hostile towards Los Angeles, this investigation eventually led to laws protecting county water resources. In preparation for the hearings, Nordskog condensed the Boulder Dam tome into twenty-eight pages which the committee, in an unusual act of assent, ordered published in the *Assembly Journal*. Under the official state seal, 1,500 reprints of Nordskog’s *Communication to the California Legislature Relating to the Owens Valley Water Situation* were printed and mailed on request at public expense. According to Abraham Hoffman, “critics of the actions of Los Angeles had what appeared to be a state-sponsored document supporting the view that it had all been a giant conspiracy.”[9]

The following year, the popular book *Los Angeles*, published by journalist Morrow Mayo, converted Nordskog’s dense investigation into the stuff of popular legend. Mayo’s breezy chronicle is best remembered for its chapter on “The Rape of the Owens Valley.” Relying mainly on Nordskog and on Bishop newspaper sources, Mayo tells the story of “a rich agricultural valley” destroyed by the US government for Los Angeles developers. Mayo’s distinct contribution to the legend comes in the combination of an inflammatory narrative and a sense of institutional action—a formula unknown in earlier writing on this history but resonant in the years of the Depression and the emerging welfare state.

Los Angeles gets its water by reason of one of the costliest, crookedest, most unscrupulous deals ever perpetrated, plus one of the greatest pieces of engineering folly ever heard of. Owens Valley is there for anybody to see. The City of the Angels moved through this valley like a devastating plague. It was ruthless, stupid, cruel, and crooked. It deliberately ruined Owens Valley. It stole the waters of Owens River. It drove the people from Owens Valley from their home, a home which they had built from the desert. It turned a rich, reclaimed agricultural section of a thousand square miles back into primitive desert. For no sound reason, for no sane reason, it destroyed a helpless agricultural section and a dozen towns. It was an obscene enterprise from beginning to end.

Today there is a saying in California about this funeral ground which may well remain as its epitaph:

“The Federal Government of the United States held Owens Valley while Los Angeles raped it.” [10]

Mayo’s sexual symbolism had a sharp impact in the 1930s and, indeed, still carried force forty years later when a new citizens’ movement would rally to the slogan “the rape of the Owens Valley.” The countryside became re-metaphorized as feminine and nurturing, and the city as masculine and brutal. The federal government was recast as sadistic and complicit, a long way from 1905, when homesteaders had turned to Uncle Sam’s paternal justice on behalf of the common folk. In the emerging modern symbolism, violated citizens and rapacious institutions supplant wholesome pioneers building the West for the nation’s benefit. Indeed, the masculine metaphor of conquering pioneer communities, their victory over nature and savages, is replaced by an agriculturally fertile land and feminine hearth. This symbolic shift transfigures the moral grammar. Mistreated pioneers deserve recognition, compensation, and fair play—the full rights of political citizenship. But violated innocents and homemakers demand vindication, restoration of their honor. Symbolically, the modern struggle has moved beyond politics to virtue.

It was a short step from Mayo’s journalistic obloquy to novelistic social realism. *Los Angeles* supplied the plot for a series of books and films dealing with exploitation and the wages of avarice. Will Rogers helped advertise the Owens Valley story in his nationally syndicated column:

Ten years ago this was a wonderful valley with one quarter of a million acres of fruit and alfalfa. But Los Angeles needed more water for the Chamber of Commerce to drink more toasts to its growth, more water to dilute its orange juice, more water for its geraniums to delight the tourists, while the giant cottonwoods here died. So, now, this is a valley of desolation.[11]

Citing Mayo's inspiration, Cedric Belfrage published *Promised Land* in 1938, a novel about the downfall of a family divided between Hollywood demoralization and federal fraud in the Owens Valley. A John Wayne film of the following year entitled *New Frontier* (George Sherman, 1939) pits the homesteaders of New Hope Valley against the Irish construction engineer for Metropole City's water project. Not long after World War Two, which had temporarily "suppressed" the controversy, *Golden Valley: A Novel of California*, by Frances Gragg and George Palmer Putnam, appeared in 1950. Like the stories of Austin and Kyne, this one centers on the Owens Valley and its infiltration by facsimiles of agents working for the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP). When a fraudulently represented reclamation project is revealed as a screen for the Los Angeles Aqueduct, local citizens organize and threaten to dynamite the construction. Violence by land speculators matches bureaucratic speculation but, in the end, city and valley reach an accord, malefactors are purged, and settlers compensated for land lost to reservoir and canal sites. As the repetition in these fictional works suggests, by mid-century the legend was firmly entrenched in popular culture – the Owens Valley had become a symbol of urban aggrandizement and bureaucratic malice.

As adverse opinion mounted, Los Angeles followed the Wattersons' lead and recruited its own publicists. Beginning in 1924, the city had responded to newspaper accounts sympathetic to the rebels. In July of that year, the Municipal League of Los Angeles *Bulletin* explained that "The Owens Valley 'Revolt'" was prompted by "the Wattersons [and farmers] as land speculators" – an interpretation that continues in modern historical works, as we have seen.[12] In December, *Fire and Water Engineering* revealed "What Really Happened ... No Justification for the Mob's Action." [13] Over the following years, the LADWP hired Don J. Kinsley to write a series of exculpating tracts and published some of his work under such beguiling titles as "The Romance of Water and Power: A brief narrative revealing how the magic touch of water and hydro-electric power transformed a sleepy, semi-arid Western village into the metropolis of the Pacific" and "The Water Trail: The story of Owens Valley and the controversy surrounding the efforts of a great city to secure the water required to meet the needs of an ever-growing population." Despite these efforts, Los Angeles was losing the propaganda war, in part because it lacked the sympathy of an underdog and in part because its contradictory policy for managing the valley generated new disputes readily interpreted by critical opinion.

Unchastened by growing opposition, the city retaliated against the valley with an announcement that its policy of negotiating land sales with extant leaseholders would be superseded by sale to the highest bidder. Local protest of the action was met with a rent hike at Christmas 1944. Once again, the California legislature responded by approving a bill by Senator Charles Brown that required the city to give leaseholders first option on properties offered for sale. A new controversy erupted in the US Congress over previously approved bills that gave Los Angeles a right of way to extend the aqueduct northward into Mono County. Although the extension was built in 1940, Congress now refused to grant the city control of additional acreage for power plants as the original bills provided. The controversy ultimately centered on distrust of Los Angeles, a mood that had overtaken the interpenetrating realms of popular culture and practical politics.

Film and History

The water wars between Los Angeles and the Owens Valley have inspired novelists, muckrakers, and filmmakers since the early years of the twentieth century. History and drama have combined in a set of accounts which has created a popular culture surrounding these events, particularly a conspiratorial interpretation of the city's deeds. *Chinatown* is the most celebrated in the genre. Robert Towne's brilliant screenplay takes great liberty with historical fact, yet forcefully portrays the Los Angeles power brokers in a manner consistent with the transformed legend. The whole story is moved to 1937 and the protagonists become unscrupulous city developers bent on acquiring the land of farmers in the San Fernando Valley immediately adjacent to the city. Officials of the LADWP collude with speculators by secretly dumping city water during a drought in order to win public support for a bond issue on dam and aqueduct construction. Meanwhile, the farmers are cut off from irrigation water, forced into ruin, their land acquired by syndicate dummy buyers for a pittance. The aqueduct will serve the ill-gotten land of the speculators and make fortunes for the cabal. Incest is an important subplot, extending the sexual symbolism of rape to

the vile association of money and political power. Chinatown, the tarnished hero's police beat before he became a private eye, is a trope representing intrigue, deceptive appearances, and the futility of efforts to expose corruption. In one of the film's final lines a policeman comments, "You can't always tell what's going on in Chinatown." Attempts to reveal the scheme are discredited and one is left with the understanding that Los Angeles was built on exploitation in the face of a guileless public.

In fact, of course, the decisive events occurred around 1905 and involved no conspiracy or contrived water shortage. City voters overwhelmingly approved repeated bond measures for aqueduct construction without the inducement of panic. A land syndicate of prominent business interests did purchase San Fernando Valley real estate for subsequent profit, but that was well known and little regarded by a public that shared in the spirit of boosterism. With the exception of covert actions to subvert the original plan for a federal reclamation project in Owens Valley, and some unsuccessful speculation by a former city mayor, officials of the LADWP pursued the aggrandizement of their own agency.

The significance of *Chinatown*, however, is that, despite factual inconsistencies, it captured the deeper truth of the rebellion. Metropolitan interests appropriated the Owens Valley for their own expansionist purposes through the use of blunt political power. The film refueled popular interpretation and energized protest that returned to the valley in the 1970s. Indeed, it contributed to the success of a new county-LADWP agreement limiting groundwater pumping and restoring some of the habitat. To this day, Los Angeles authorities are livid on the subject of *Chinatown*, knowing that the perceived "rape of the Owens Valley" is an albatross hung around continuing work to ensure the city water supply.

If, as Oscar Wilde suggested, life imitates art, one explanation is that art can become a force with which life must contend. Events surrounding the impact of *Chinatown* illustrate the proposition. In 1983, ABC Television and Titus Productions of New York produced a film for television based on the prizewinning screenplay *Ghost Dancing* by freelance writer Phillip Penningroth. Set in Paiute Valley, the teleplay begins with the elderly heroine, Sarah Bowman, dynamiting a reservoir in an effort to get arrested and call attention to the valley's destruction by appropriation of its water. Sarah is outmaneuvered by the chief engineer of the unnamed city's water department. By persuading friendly local authorities not to make an arrest, the city avoids a public trial and the effective defense planned by Sarah's adopted Indian daughter who works for the district attorney's office. Although Los Angeles was never mentioned in the script (after changes made on legal advice), the reference was so transparent and the public relations effect so worrisome in the wake of *Chinatown* that the LADWP refused to grant permission for filming on its Owens Valley property. As Robert Towne explained about the filming of *Chinatown*, "we just told them we were doing a detective story set many years ago, so they had no idea what was going on." [14] Los Angeles did not intend to be burned again. *Ghost Dancing* was filmed in Utah with much of its impact neutralized by censorship.

But life had not finished its imitation. The *Ghost Dancing* controversy erupted in the midst of negotiations over a permanent agreement to settle disputed water rights, and it strengthened the hand of local activists. Following reports on Bishop radio and cable television, 600 residents signed a petition condemning Los Angeles for intimidating ABC. The County Board of Supervisors agreed and unsuccessfully urged the filmmakers to re-consider shooting on privately owned property in the valley. Literally, the term "ghost dancing" referred to a nineteenth-century Paiute Indian ritual which would cause the disappearance of whites and the restoration of native land. If the teleplay endeavored to adapt the symbol for modern political purposes, Los Angeles hoped to quell the legend. The LADWP acknowledged its fear of copycat aqueduct bombings that might be inspired by the film, but local observers saw more to the censorship. Inyo County Administrator John K. Smith observed, "Most of what they're doing now has nothing to do with getting water to Los Angeles. From here on in, it's all psychological damage to keep us down and make people forget what the valley used to look like." [15]

Yet the effects of the now-celebrated legend and each new controversy that recalled it worked in the opposite direction. The 1920s protest movement and subsequent urban domination became part of a living history. An oppositional culture developed around the controversy and helped mobilize subsequent

movements on behalf of community survival and environmental protection. Popular culture not only depicts nostalgically the lost world of local society, but re-creates potent symbols for modern use.

This essay was originally published in Mark Sheil and Tony Fitzmaurice's Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001. Reprinted through permission of the publisher. © 2001-2013 John Walton. All rights reserved.

Illustrations by [Neil Shigley](#).

[1] John Walton, *Western Times and Water Wars: State, Culture, and Rebellion in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

[2] Abraham Hoffman, "Fact and Fiction in the Owens Valley Water Controversy," *Los Angeles Westerner's Corral*, Brand Books (no. 15), pp. 179, 191.

[3] William L. Kahrl, *Water and Power: The Conflict Over Los Angeles's Water Supply in the Owens Valley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 319.

[4] Peter B. Kyne, *The Long Chance* (New York: H. K. Fly, 1914), p. 115.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Mary Austin, *The Ford* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917; Berkeley: University of California Press, California Fiction Edition, 1997), pp. 403–4.

[7] Letter from Carey McWilliams to Mary Austin, 27 January 1930; held at the Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

[8] Abraham Hoffman, *Vision or Villainry: Origins of the Owens Valley–Los Angeles Water Controversy* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press), p. 226.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 226–8.

[10] Morrow Mayo, *Los Angeles* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1932), pp. 245–6.

[11] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 241.

[12] "The Owens Valley Revolt," *Municipal League of Los Angeles Bulletin*, July 1924.

[13] "What Really Happened ... No Justification for the Mob's Action," *Fire and Water Engineering*, December 1924.

[14] Walton, *Western Times and Water Wars* p. 232.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 233

John Walton, PhD is a research professor at UC Davis. He is the author of *Western Times and Water Wars: State, Culture, and Rebellion in California* (1992), and *Storied Land: Community and Memory in Monterey* (2003).

Posted on [July 30, 2013](#) by [admin1963](#) Posted in [Fall 2013](#), [Perspectives](#)