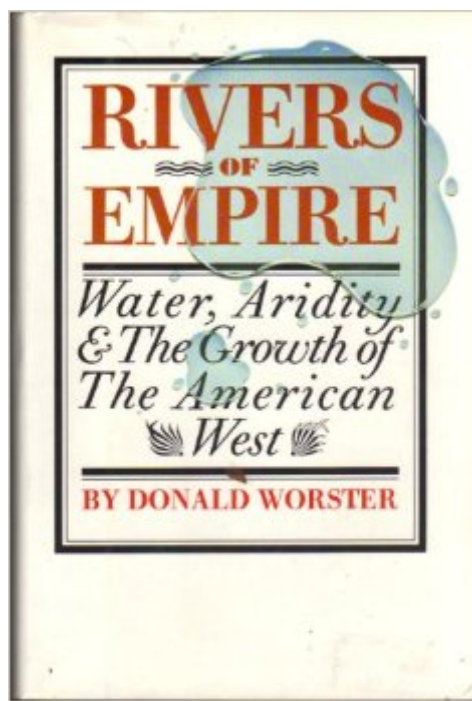


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RIVERS OF EMPIRE



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. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

I can count on two hands the number of truly pathbreaking works of history published since 1980. "Rivers of Empire" is one of them, and must reading for anyone who seeks to understand the history of this critical region of the United States. Donald Worster, Hall Distinguished Professor of American History at the University of Kansas, has been producing outstanding history of the American West and environmentalism for more than a quarter century. When the so-called "New Western History" was avant-garde in historian circles in the early 1980s he was dubbed one of the "Gang of Four" who transformed the field of study--the others being Patricia Nelson Limerick, William Cronen, and Richard White. Worster's work, as well as that of the other three historians, was indeed pathbreaking, and "Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West" is by far his most influential publication. It demonstrates well why Worster was one of the "Gang of Four." In "Rivers of Empire" Worster argues that the core reality of the American West is its aridity. To make it suitable for large-scale human habitation required the complete transformation of the region; Americans harnessed the rivers and brought water there, irrigating the land and creating great cities. As Worster writes, "The ecological and social transformation of the Great Valley is one of the most spectacular, and more revealing episodes of the American West" (p. 11). The organization and structure of every institution associated with the West reflected the need to control the environment. It brought profound changes to both the region and the people who lived there. This is the story that he tells in this superb book.

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