When the St. Francis Dam collapsed on March 12, 1928, news of the tragedy was reported throughout the nation and in many other countries. An estimated 450 people were killed (historians continue to debate the numbers), and debris from the flood waters scarred the Santa Clara Valley for years. The City of Los Angeles paid all claims, several commissions conducted investigations, and William Mulholland, chief engineer of the city’s Department of Water and Power, accepted blame for the tragedy and resigned his position.

In the years that followed, California historians took note of the disaster, but it was relegated to second place behind San Francisco’s 1906 earthquake and fire. Scholars gave it little attention; it took a journalist and a rancher to reawaken awareness of the St. Francis Dam failure as a major tragedy in the state’s history.

In 1950 journalist Remi Nadeau wrote *The Water Seekers*, republished in several subsequent and slightly revised editions. His study dealt with several episodes involving water in California. The first of these described the California Development Company’s ill-fated diversion of the Colorado River into the Imperial Valley and the creation of the Salton Sea. The second traced the history of the City Los Angeles’s quest for a reliably water supply to insure its future growth, finding it in the Owens River and the construction of the 233-mile Los Angeles Aqueduct. The city’s motivation and action launched a controversy over the alleged “theft” of Owens River water that has persisted to the present day.

A third episode in Nadeau’s book described the building and collapse of the St Francis Dam, constructed in 1926 by the City of Los Angeles [Department of Water and Power]. Nadeau was able to interview quite a number of people who had been involved, including city officials, Owens Valley residents, and employees on the aqueduct construction project. Unfortunately, Nadeau’s book lacked footnotes, only acknowledgements and a rather thin bibliography. Still, Nadeau was the first person to write a serious account of the St. Francis Dam tragedy.

It was left to a Santa Paula rancher, Charles F. Outland, to write a book that dealt entirely with the collapse of the St. Francis Dam. Born in Ventura County, Outland was quite familiar with the region where the dam was built, and he knew many of the survivors. Although not an academic historian, Outland proved to be a dedicated researcher who aspired to write as complete a narrative as possible on what happened to cause the failure of the dam.

The Arthur H. Clark Company published Outland’s *Man-Made Disaster: The Story of the St. Francis Dam, its place in Southern California’s water system*, its failure and the tragedy in the Santa Clara River Valley, March 12 and 13, 1928, in 1963. It quickly went out of print, but the publisher didn’t run subsequent printings. In 1977 a second edition was published, almost identical to the 1963 version, but again, in a limited edition. The tragedy was then essentially ignored by historians until the publication of Abraham Hoffman’s *Vision or Villainy: Origins of the Owens Valley-Los Angeles Water Controversy* in 1981 and William L. Kahrl’s *Water and Power: The Conflict over Los Angeles’ Water Supply in the Owens Valley*, published in 1982. These books included the St. Francis Dam failure as part of the history of the controversy; both relied on Outland’s book.

In 1995 the Historical Society of Southern California’s publication, *Southern California Quarterly*, published a special issue of articles about the St. Francis Dam. J. David Rogers, a geologist who examined the rock and soil formations at the site of the dam, wrote the main article, in which he concluded that the state of geological science in the 1920s had not the ability to evaluate the stability of the foundations on which the dam was built. He argued that while Mulholland was not blameless, he could not have known at the time of the problems that existed in constructing a dam in San Francisquito Canyon. The special issue also included articles by Catherine Mulholland on her grandfather’s involvement in the St. Francis Dam; a photographic essay by Charles Johnson, archivist at the Ventura County Museum of History and Art; and a profile of Outland’s life and work by Abraham Hoffman. The special issue was simultaneously published as a separate paperback book under the title *The St. Francis Dam Disaster Revisited*. Along with it, the Society reprinted Outland’s *Man-Made Disaster* as an inexpensive paperback book in a limited edition of 500 copies. Both books almost immediately sold out, indicating a public interest in the topic.

Catherine Mulholland had long undertaken the task of writing a biography about her grandfather, William. Years in the making, it was published by the University of California Press as *William Mulholland and the Making of Los Angeles*. This was no hagiography; Catherine held a Master’s degree in history from the University of California, Berkeley and had studied under Professor Herbert E. Bolton. Her book was a warts-and-all biography continued on page 9
that significantly raised the standard of scholarship well above Nadeau’s book. However, Outland’s study went much further than a chapter in the Mulholland biography could cover.

Around 2002 documentary filmmaker John Wilkman planned a film on the St. Francis Dam disaster. Wilkman wanted to tell the story with a number of interviews given by survivors of the tragedy, by this time senior citizens who recalled the events of seventy years earlier. He also wanted to make sure of the research and level of scholarship needed to demonstrate the film’s accuracy. Wilkman invited three historians—Donald C. Jackson, Norris Hundley jr., and myself—to serve as consultants. Almost immediately heated discussions broke out at the meetings regarding Mulholland’s culpability. Wilkman saw the film as an affirmation of survival over tragedy; Hundley wanted to move beyond Mulholland’s abstract confession of guilt to reveal his hubris and mistakes in designing a dam doomed to failure, and he disagreed with Rogers’ conclusions.

Hundley and Jackson wrote an article, “William Mulholland and the St. Francis Dam Disaster,” published in California History, the magazine of the California Historical Society, in 2004. The article outlined what the authors would argue in the book they were writing that would deal with the issue of Mulholland’s responsibility in the failure of the dam.

In 2003 Paul Rippens, who had a long-standing interest in the story of the St. Francis Dam, published a modest paperback, The St. Francis Dam: A Guide to the Los Angeles Aqueduct and the site of the ill-fated Saint Francis Dam. Rippens provided readers with a map and summary of the construction and destruction of the dam, including several dozen illustrations.

Eventually Wilkman put his research into print with Floodpath: The Deadliest Man-Made Disaster of 20th-Century America and the Making of Modern Los Angeles (Bloomsbury Press, 2016), and Hundley and Jackson wrote Heavy Ground: William Mulholland and the St. Francis Dam Disaster (University of California Press, 2015).

Approaching the topic from different viewpoints, these books offer outstanding scholarship with a compelling narrative that moves a neglected event into the mainstream of California history. Meanwhile, J. David Rogers is writing his book on the disaster, insuring that anyone interested in this event will find a wealth of opinions about this fascinating story of triumph and tragedy.

But wait, there’s more: Catherine Mulholland’s original manuscript for her book was much larger than the edited version that was published. The California State University Library, Northridge, has the manuscript in the Catherine Mulholland Collection, where it invites further research into this episode of southern California history. Mention should also be made of the work of Paul Soifer, serving as archivist for the Los Angeles Department of Water and power, who located the Los Angeles County Coroner’s report on the St. Francis Dam disaster—all 820 pages of it. Until its discovery only bits and pieces, culled from newspaper articles, were available to historians. Hundley and Jackson made extensive use of the report in their book.

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