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Martin Reuss

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BOOK REVIEW

CONGRESS IN ITS WISDOM: THE BUREAU OF RECLAMATION AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST

DORIS OSTRANDER DAWDY
Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press. 1989.
Pp. 236. \$27.95.

Doris Ostrander Dawdy is clearly outraged. Her book is a polemic against an agency that she accuses of subterfuge and administrative irresponsibility. According to Dawdy, the Bureau of Reclamation at one time or another has knowingly subsidized the irrigation of marginal farmlands, ignored warnings about major problems of selenium and salt pollution, procrastinated resolving problems even after acknowledging their existence and, in genera, abused the public trust. The author has a mission. She wants to reform the agency.

The Bureau has had its share of critics, and some undoubtedly share Dawdy's outrage. Certainly, there are dispassionate analysts who agree that the Bureau has historically seemed more interested in bureaucratic survival than in stewardship of western water. However, Dawdy's book adds disappointingly little to this debate. Despite the long bibliography, the author shows little inclination to present a balanced picture. She interprets Bureau documents in a light favoring her a priori biases, and, despite the title of the book, which promises a thoughtful analysis of the relationship between the Bureau and Congress, she reveals little sympathy for the political juggling that shapes policy in a democratic pluralist nation. The Bureau does not follow congressional mandate. Rather, it "succumbs" to political pressure and "has always been subject to Interior Department dictates" (p.84), and unsurprising fact considering the Bureau is located within the Department of the Interior.

There are also problems of fact. One aggravation is the footnotes. Although the author has certainly done much research in unpublished government documents, she does not bother noting where they are located. This discourages researchers from pursuing questions or checking on the author's interpretation. Then too, supposed factual statements that can be checked are occasionally inaccurate or misleading, partly the result of ignoring the historical context. For instance, Dawdy refers to a "Midwestern city" in which a conference was "quietly arranged" to

resolve Bureau and Corps of Engineers plans relation to Missouri River Basin development. Actually, the meeting was neither unpublicized nor held in some remote city. It was a meeting of the Water Conservations Conference, consisting of representatives from many Western states, and it was held in Chicago. In another case, Dawdy correctly notes that local interests listed flood control along with irrigation as a justification for the construction of Teton Dam and dismisses this as another case of exaggerating benefits. Actually, there was a more practical reason for exploiting the flood control benefit. At the time, the federal government constructed flood control dams usually at no cost to local interests except for providing lands, easements, and rights of way. It was not uncommon, then, for western interests to claim major flood control benefits for a planned water project even if the water was to be utilized primarily for irrigation.

Dawdy is especially distraught over the Bureau's handling of water quality problems. Focusing on California, and particularly on the Westlands Water District, Dawdy convincingly shows how local and state interests subverted the Reclamation Act's promise of providing water to encourage small-scale farming. Complicity extended to the Bureau, whose reluctance here and elsewhere to aggressively enforce acreage limitations undermined its major reason for existence. The ascendancy of agribusiness in Westlands helped lead to the catastrophe at Kesterson National Wildlife Refuge, where massive selenium-laden wastewater from the farms to the evaporation ponds, without considering long-range consequences (It should be pointed out that the Wildlife Refuge was an incidental by-product of the Bureau's water management plans). She accuses the Bureau's bureaucracy of disclaiming responsibility once the extent of the disaster was known in the mid-1980s, and for dragging its feet once responsibility could not be denied.

In the case of Kesterson, there are probably no water suppliers or users that are entirely blameless. Inadequate California water law, for instance, contributed to the situation. The reluctance of users to change their agricultural practices or to treat drainwater adequately was another major obstacle. And while it is true that scientists have known of the dangers of selenium and salt for years, and that, as Dawdy observes, "to read the history of irrigation is to read the story of salt" (p.135), the Bureau had no precedent to prepare it for the Kesterson disaster. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the Bureau should have paid more attention to the calls for action coming from subordinate Fish and Wildlife Service officials, but such calls had come before at other projects, and sometimes subsequent events showed the urgency was little justified.

It is a shame that the author did not apply her energy and skills to a better balanced history. If she had, she probably would have retained ample ammunition for her needs. The polemical style distracts readers

and undermines the author's credibility. Dawdy's writing also sorely needs editing. Sentences are convoluted and errors occur that a good copy editor should have caught, i.e. "conservationists" for "conservationists" (p. 53).

A good, comprehensive book on western water development is still needed. Marc Reisner, Donald Worster, Robert Gottlieb, and now Doris Ostrander Dawdy are suggestive and fill chinks in the history, but the entire story remains largely untold and undocumented.

MARTIN REUSS

Office of History
Headquarters,
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers