

Turning on Water with a Shovel
The Career of Elwood Mead
By James R. Kluger

Would you recommend this book?

Yes, it is a very thorough examination of Elwood Mead's career and his impact on irrigation in the American West.

What did you get from this book?

Having a very limited knowledge of Elwood Mead's life and contributions to irrigation in the west (and across the world) it was great to learn more about the man and his life. From his work on the Wyoming water law to overseeing the construction of the Boulder Dam as Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation he had a very lasting impact during his career. Mead was a very skilled engineer who utilized his expertise across the globe in setting up successful irrigation and reclamation projects. Mead was also a lifelong educator with a diverse educational background in engineering, irrigation, and law that I think served him well in his career to combine his passions and vision with expertise.

I also found that Mead was a bit of a dichotomy himself with his political, professional, and personal beliefs. He seemed to favor much more local control and small government with matters such as land and water allocation yet spent much of his career working with the federal government in irrigation and reclamation. He had a passion for helping the small farmer prosper and disliked speculators who bought up these small farms. However, he himself made some successful private investments in irrigation companies and farms which seemed to go against his views on these speculators. Overall Mead's passion for irrigating the American West and supporting small farmers kept him working throughout his life.

Key Points

One of the biggest points that I learned as I took the journey through Elwood Mead's life is that none of the decisions or solutions that are implemented will ever operate in a vacuum. A good example is Mead's involvement throughout his career in the establishment of the close settlement centered around irrigated farmland. This was one of Mead's passions. Essentially the close settlement idea, or "scheme" as the book called it, is a planned settlement that is broken up into farms of certain sizes. The settlement would be self-sufficient with a focus on small farms and a city center with a co-op, town hall, and other services that were needed. The residents purchase their tracts of land, but are selected through an application process to ensure that they have the proper finances and farm experience.

Through a few trials of establishing these close settlements first in Australia and later in California with Durham and Delhi. These settlements all faced some good times but ultimately had difficulties. There were factors that were out of Mead or anyone else's control that affected the success of these settlements. Another example is the Australian droughts that caused difficulties for the irrigation systems Mead helped establish. His expertise in constructing these systems was great, but when droughts hit they had to react to the

challenges that they faced. I think this is a key for us as we look at our water issues and try to understand the best we can the scenarios that could occur as well as how our decisions may affect different stakeholders.

Another key point is that the policies and procedures for water allocation, irrigation and reclamation that have been utilized in the American West have shaped similar policies and procedures all around the world. Mead was very instrumental in establishing the Wyoming water policies before it became a state. He took some lessons he had learned in Colorado and used those to shape water policy in Wyoming. Much of what he did was later adopted in other areas of the west and the world. Australia specifically utilized these policies of allocation rather than the traditional riparian approach from England, largely through Mead's influence.

The final point that I think is key is that flexibility is vital in accomplishing change with water. Mead began his career very focused on the states having control of the land and water. However, I think it became apparent to him that he needed to be involved with the federal government to provide his expertise and have his ideas implemented in the development of irrigation in the west. As I read about Mead's life I could recognize that he changed and adapted his approach throughout his life as he followed his passion. Despite times where the policies were not implemented in the way that he wanted, Mead appeared to not get discouraged and continued to collaborate. A prime example is his return to the Bureau of Reclamation years after some of his policies were not adopted to help right the ship.