

NATURAL RESOURCES

Q: Whenever the topic of “water” comes up in a conversation, someone always refers to the 1974 movie “Chinatown” as the final word about Los Angeles’ early efforts to control the distribution of water and electricity. How accurate is that movie?

Although entertaining, the movie lacks a solid base in Los Angeles City history or in water policy. Many historians have provided more background on the actual history and policy.

For example, Dr. Steven Erie, in his book “Beyond Chinatown,” contrasts the movie depiction of unscrupulous developers partnering with conniving city water officials with the historical record that reflects extensive public debates leading to the creation of a vast and innovative publicly owned and operated power and water infrastructure.

Moreover, the movie tends to focus on what was to become the City of Los Angeles’ Department of Water and Power (DWP). In reality, the issues are far more regional than local. For example, the Los Angeles DWP is essentially a “retail” supplier of water to the City of Los Angeles. The movie omits the “wholesale” water provider to the region: the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California (MWD). The MWD was established by the State of California in 1928. Reflecting its vast charter, the governance of MWD is extremely diverse and complex (26 member agencies, 37 directors) and is the venue where the most serious challenges and conflicts, both internal and external, are adjudicated.

Finally, the movie did not offer a view of the future, suggesting that the unscrupulous conduct continues to this day. In contrast, Dr. Erie’s book addresses the real challenges of today: more people, more growth, more environmental degradation and new threats of terror attack. Each topic requires study, discussion and action.

Readers may wish to keep Dr. Erie’s text handy during any discussions about water and power in Southern California.

CITATION

Author:
Erie, Steven P.

Title:
Beyond Chinatown: the Metropolitan Water District, growth, and the environment in southern California

Year: 2006

Call #: 339.09794 E68

15.

