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Dam projects, Teton disaster blasted in book

A new novel, "Cadillac Desert," takes shots at the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and its dam-building program, including ill-fated Teton Dam.

Twenty-seven pages of the 582-page hardback novel are devoted exclusively to the Teton Dam from the time it was authorized in 1971 until it collapsed June 5, 1976, causing some $400 million in damage and 12 deaths.

The book came off the press late last year. Its author is Marc Reisner, identified as a staff writer of the National Resources Defense newsletter from 1972 to 1978. The book was published by Viking Penguin, Inc., New York City.

In 1979, Reisner received an Alicia Patterson Journalism Fellowship to investigate water resources in the West. A 1976 graduate of Earlham College, he now lives in San Francisco.

The segment on Teton Dam mentions a number of eastern Idaho citizens who were involved with its construction and subsequent flooding. It generally derides those in favor of the dam and lauds those in opposition, particularly the environmentalists. This theme is carried out in lengthy accounts on various reclamation projects in the West.

Reisner did excellent research of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in narrating the promotion and construction of several dams in the West. He documents what he claims to be the first bitter rivalry between the reclamation bureau and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. He contends they "wasted billions of dollars on questionable dams, because one agency feared the other would build first."

Reisner concludes that despite the many new dams, the West's water shortage has only worsened. An obviously dedicated environmentalist, he contends the West faces a bleak future over the next 50 years because millions of acres of America's most productive farmlands will be abandoned due to exhaustion of groundwater reservoirs. He adds that within centuries, perhaps decades, hundreds of reservoirs will silt up, turning to mud and renewing the danger of flood. He says more and more soil and irrigated water are being contaminated by salt, which he said has destroyed previous civilizations.

He calls Teton Dam unnecessary, declaring the groundwater pumps and the huge Snake River Aquifer would have sufficed.

Of Gov. Cecil D. Andrus, Reisner said he "probably thought it was a bad project but didn't dare oppose it."

Andrus is frequently mentioned in the book because of his later position as Interior secretary to President Jimmy Carter. Reisner pictures Andrus as not overly keen on reclamation projects and Carter as strongly opposed. In fact, Carter killed a number of scheduled reclamation projects and since that time new reclamation construction has been at a virtual standstill.

Reisner also faults two former Idaho U.S. senators, Frank Church and Len B. Jordan, for their vigorous efforts on behalf of the $85 million Teton Dam.

Also coming in for sharp criticism is the late Willis Walker, prominent Rexburg farmer, then president of the Fremont-Madison Irrigation District, who he said managed "to organize all southwestern Idaho" on behalf of the dam. (He obviously meant southeastern Idaho.) The district sponsored the dam.

He also labeled this writer, who was then The Post-Register political and executive editor, as the dam's chief propagandist, which is flattering but hardly the case. He said The Post-Register was generous enough to publish occasional letters opposing the dam but that its news stories were slanted in the dam's favor, referring to those in opposition as "extreme environmentalists."

For their opposition to the dam, Reisner patted the backs of Ken Robison, then with the Idaho Statesman and now a Boise-based freelance writer; the Idaho Environmental Council, which he said included a number of scientists from the Department of Energy's nuclear reactor station; and two Idaho Falls environmental leaders, Russell Brown and Jerry Jayne, the latter then president of the Idaho Falls Environmental Council.

The volume, costing some $24, has been stocked in book stores, including Idaho Falls, and is also at the Idaho Falls Public Library. Some Idaho Falls book stores say they have sold out but can order the book.

(Ben Plastino is a Post-Register columnist.)