

The King of California: J. G. Boswell and the Making of a Secret American Empire. By Mark Arax and Rick Wartzman. New York: Public Affairs, 2003. viii + 534 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, photographs. Cloth, \$30.00. ISBN 1-586-48028-6.

Reviewed by David Vaught

Rarely does a book reviewed in this or any other academic journal live up to its advance billing, exemplified here in phrases such as “thought provoking and groundbreaking,” “the nonfiction *Grapes of Wrath*,” “backyard history at its best.” For that matter, rarely does a book in this or any other academic journal even receive advance billing. *The King of California* is no ordinary book, however. Drawing from the literary tradition of Carey McWilliams, Paul Taylor, Michael Moore, and Mike Davis, newspapermen Mark Arax and Rick Wartzman seek to uncover the secrets of James Griffin (J. G.) Boswell (and, later, his son Jim), the biggest farmer in California, if not the United States and possibly the world. A slaveowning family from Greene County, Georgia, where Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, the Boswells migrated to California in the 1920s. En route, as Jim liked to tell it, they passed up the lush Mississippi, Colorado, and Imperial valleys for “a god-forsaken salt lake in a place called Corcoran” in the lower San Joaquin Valley (p. 99). This was Tulare Lake, one of America’s biggest, but with no outlet to the sea on the west (read dry) side of Kings County. Over time, and sparing no expense or hubris, J. G. drained it, planted field after field in Acala cotton, controlled flooding and irrigation by lobbying the federal government to build the controversial Pine Flat Dam on the Kings River, vertically integrated his firm, purchased more and more land, and battled labor unions, “the reclamation boys in Sacramento and Washington” (p. 426), and “enviros” from seemingly everywhere (p. 97). The end result was a “company” (they abhorred the word “plantation”) of 200,000 acres, give or take a few thousand, or, as the authors put it, “the equivalent of more than ten Manhattan Islands” (p. 17). Along the way, Arax and Wartzman manage to weave in a cast of characters from Father Serra to Cecil B. DeMille to Charles Manson—a veritable Who’s Who of California history.

As drama, *The King of California* is positively gripping. The narrative is tight, brilliantly conceived, fast paced, and, simply put, nearly impossible to put down. The

430 pages of text go by in a flash. Every last rhetorical device seems to work, from sprinkling in a few of the King's words here and there (no one had ever interviewed him before), to pointing out that growing a T-shirt takes 257 gallons of water, to quoting Winnie-the-Pooh on the issue of flooding. The real villain of the story, it turns out, was not so much Boswell himself but the government. Though not always firmly in his back pocket, the federal government was always there when he needed it the most—on the labor front, building dams, protecting his water rights from the 160-acre limit imposed by the Reclamation Act of 1902, and paying him millions upon millions of dollars in crop subsidies. The hero, in many ways, was the environment itself. Nature, for example, seemed to lure Boswell and other cotton farmers into a false sense of security, waiting for periods of fifteen to thirty years before unleashing a “flood of the century” to refill the lake and drown the crops. And no matter how much Boswell spent on fertilizers and pesticides (upwards of \$30 million a year), the cotton and the bugs in the field found all sorts of ways to defy him. So effective are Arax and Wartzman that, by the end, it becomes almost impossible to criticize the book without appearing to be a mouthpiece or an apologist for the King.

But because this is a scholarly journal, criticize we must. Grower–state relations, as portrayed in this book's account of Boswell's life, are highly oversimplified, if not sensationalized. Arax and Wartzman take their cue from Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (1985), and Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (1986). The Kings River was a “river of empire” (title of Chapter 10), they insist, and the scheme to dam it part of the larger “hydraulic society” (p. 426) of twentieth-century America. In this view, the federal government, and indeed all levels of government, acted as a monolithic bloc and, moreover, simply as an extension of the capitalist system. The workings of government and the political process, however, were often considerably more mundane. A number of histories, chief among them Donald J. Pisani's *To Reclaim a Divided West: Water, Law, and Public Policy, 1848–1902* (1992) and *Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902–1935* (2002), have demonstrated persuasively that the government was far less centralized and that water policy itself was actually constrained by competition among western states,

interagency rivalries, constant conflict between Congress and the executive agencies, and any number of other forces dating back well into the nineteenth century. Good history, the point being, does not always make good drama, and vice versa.

In the end, the King himself may have the last laugh. Americans, historians and nonhistorians alike, love to see the world in dichotomies—rural/urban, agricultural/industrial, agrarian/capitalist, frontier/factory. No one understood this better, or took better advantage of it, than Boswell. He wore blue jeans and boots, drove a pick-up truck, and described himself as a “boy from a Georgia cotton patch” (p. 218) while living in a mansion in San Marino and sitting on the boards of directors of Cal Tech and Safeway Stores. He could be whoever he wanted to be, whenever he wanted to be it. Arax and Wartzman, it seems to me, fall right into his trap. They rely on their readers’ desire to picture the farmer as continuing in the tradition and glory of Jeffersonian virtue in order to horrify with their crack investigative reporting. Bad growers. Bad government bureaucrats. The unintended effect is to make Boswell a sympathetic figure and to evoke admiration for his grit and persistence. “My grandson,” Jim said in his last interview, “will probably read this book and wonder, well, ‘Why didn’t that dumb bastard move out of the lake and go someplace better.’ There probably won’t be any cotton growing in California ten years from now. What the hell you doing growing cotton? I mean, let the Chinese grow cotton” (p. 429). Long live the King.

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