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Review of *Turning on Water With a Shovel: The Career of Elwood Mead* by James R. Kluger

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Turning on Water With a Shovel: The Career of Elwood Mead. James R. Kluger. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992. ix+220pp. Photos and references. \$29.95 cloth (ISBN 0-8263-1382-5).

Elwood Mead, like Elwood P. Dowd, saw things other people didn't. Both preferred the world of their imagination. But the resemblance ends there. Mead labored zealously for over 50 years to make his imaginary world a reality. And to a significant degree he was successful.

James R. Kluger, essentially revising his doctoral dissertation for publication, has traced the broad outlines of Mead's career as America's foremost proponent of irrigation. This is not a biography in the strict sense of the word. Kluger gives us no insights into Mead's character, or his family life. The work is confined to recounting, on a chronological basis, the various steps in Mead's career, from serving as Wyoming's territorial engineer in the late 1880s to heading the Bureau of Reclamation from 1924 to 1936, culminating with the construction of Hoover Dam.

The portrait of Mead that emerges from the pages of this slender volume is not particularly flattering. In his conclusion, Kluger argues that Mead was not dogmatic, but virtually every incident cited in the book refutes that statement.

Mead was a zealot. Like most zealots, he was completely convinced of the validity of his views, and was quick to place the blame on others when any of his enterprises failed. But also like most zealots, he was possessed of vision and energy, and he labored mightily to bring water to the West.

Raised on a southern Indiana farm close by the Ohio River, Mead early on learned to appreciate the bounty water could bring to fertile soil. A firm believer in the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal of the sturdy yeoman farmer, he favored bringing water to small plots of land. If the fortunes of small farmers flourished, they would be more likely to demonstrate a sense of civic responsibility in order to maintain what they had. The philosophy shaped his entire career.

Dividing his time between academic pursuits and governmental service, Mead all the while engaged in private consulting work on the side. He taught at Colorado A & M and University of California-Berkeley, served as

the Wyoming territorial and state engineer, headed the Department of Agriculture's Office of Irrigation Investigations, headed state irrigation projects in Australia for eight years, and served as overseer for two planned agricultural communities in California before going to Washington to head the Bureau of Reclamation. Throughout his career, he preached the gospel that the Federal government should stay out of irrigation matters, and that the states should handle the distribution of water. The federal role, in his view, should be confined to building dams and reservoirs that regulated the flow of streams and provided flood control. Hoover Dam, the capstone of his efforts, certainly fit that mold.

From the time of his drafting of Wyoming's water code in 1890, which became the pattern for almost all Western water law, until the creation in 1936 of the huge impoundment behind Hoover Dam that bears his name, Mead single-mindedly attempted to bring order out of the chaos of differing irrigation codes, and to transform the arid area west of the 100th meridian into a garden of small agricultural plots. He was more successful in the first enterprise than the second. While falling short of creating a three-dimensional picture of this dedicated ideologue, Professor Kluger at least has sketched more than a silhouette. What Mead did is clearly set out. What he was is a bit more obscure, but the paucity of biographical background should not, and does not, detract from Mead's accomplishments. This work adds an interesting dimension to the most valuable resource of the American West. **James W. Hewitt**, *Attorney at Law, Lincoln, Nebraska*.