Johnstown Flood by David McCullough

Hair-Raising Disaster Embedded In Social History

The history of civil engineering may sound boring, but in David McCullough's hands it is, well, riveting. His award-winning histories of the Brooklyn Bridge and the Panama Canal were preceded by this account of the disastrous dam failure that drowned Johnstown, Pennsylvania, in 1889. Written while the last survivors of the flood were still alive, McCullough's narrative weaves the stories of the town, the wealthy men who owned the dam, and the forces of nature into a seamless whole. His account is unforgettable: The wave kept on coming straight toward him, heading for the very heart of the city. Stores, houses, trees, everything was going down in front of it, and the closer it came, the bigger it seemed to grow.... The height of the wall of water was at least thirty-six feet at the center.... The drowning and devastation of the city took just about ten minutes. A powerful, definitive book, and a tribute to the thousands who died in America's worst inland flood. --Mary Ellen Curtin

My Personal Review:
After recently reading In Sunlight, In a Beautiful Garden, a fictionalized account of the events leading up to the Johnstown flood, I decided to learn more about the flood. Not only did the novelist list McCullough's book as a source, but it was recommended to me by a friend who reads a lot of American history. This author does an outstanding job in writing the history of the worst flood in a non-coastal area of the U.S.--this book is a real page-turner!

McCullough relates the history of the South Fork property on which the dam and lake were located, including the purchase of this property by rich men from Pittsburgh, among them Carnegie, Frick, Mellon, and Horne. They formed the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, a mountain resort, and built a clubhouse for use by members. Sixteen members also built large cottages around the 350-acre lake that had been formed by the earthen dam which was first built between 1840 and 1850. When these men bought the property in 1879, the dam had been totally neglected so repairs were made. Unfortunately, no engineer had anything to do with these repairs, which consisted mostly of throwing junk, branches, rocks, and hay against the dam. During this time, the outlet pipes at the bottom of the dam were removed and sold as scrap. Other ingredients in this recipe for disaster were the pipes that were put in near the dam to prevent fish from leaving the lake. These would also, it was found later, allow debris to build up and cause water to spill over the dam more easily.
The inevitable occurred in 1889, on Memorial Day, when a huge storm caused the lake to rise above the dam. With no outlet pipes to lower the level of the water, the water poured over the top, at the center. The dam soon gave way, allowing the contents of the huge lake to rush 15 miles down the mountain, destroying everything in its path, including the town of Johnstown.

When McCullough describes this wall of water descending the mountain and the destruction that occurred, the picture he painted was beyond belief. The torrent of water brought with it livestock, houses, trains, tracks, machinery, barbed wire and everything else that was in its path.

In the face of such complete chaos and horror, level heads prevailed. The day after the flood, townspeople held a meeting at which it was decided that a dictator was needed. Arthur Moxham was subsequently chosen and he immediately set up several committees to take care of removing dead animals and wreckage, setting up morgues and temporary hospitals, deputizing a police force (which cut out tin stars from cans found in the debris), handling finances, and obtaining supplies.

At 4 PM this same day (Saturday), emergency supplies, 80 volunteers, and 30 police left Pittsburgh on a 20-car train after wagons had been sent out throughout the city to collect supplies for Johnstown. The next day, burials started. One out of three bodies was never identified—over 600 unknowns.

During this time, more trains arrived--one 11-car train from Pittsburgh contained nothing but coffins and 50 undertakers; another from the governor of Ohio was filled with tents. There were 27,000 people in the valley who had absolutely nothing, and providing for their physical needs was of paramount importance. Contributions, not including goods, eventually totaled $3.7 million, with only about $70,000 donated by the rich industrialists who owned the resort.

The National Guard was called in to try and keep order since thousands of people had come to help, and also to gawk. On Wednesday, Clara Barton arrived with her newly formed American Red Cross and 50 doctors and nurses. She was 67 and a bundle of energy and organization. Within days, she had organized hospital tents, hotels with hot and cold running water, and kitchens. She rarely slept and never left for five months!

Over 2200 people died in the Johnstown Flood and no responsibility was ever assumed by the members of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, and none of the lawsuits against the club was ever won in the courts. This was an incredible account of a horrific event in our nations history.

For More 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price:
Johnstown Flood by David McCullough - 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!