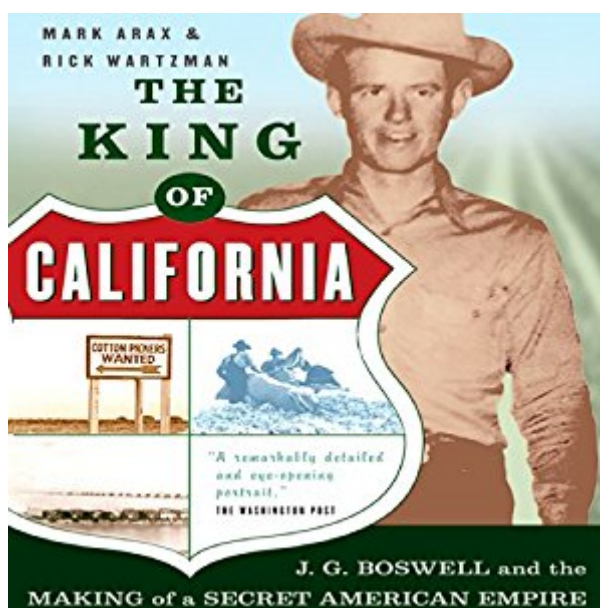


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The King Of California: J.G. Boswell And The Making Of A Secret American Empire



Synopsis

J. G. Boswell was the biggest farmer in America. He built a secret empire while thumbing his nose at nature, politicians, labor unions, and every journalist who ever tried to lift the veil on the ultimate "factory in the fields". The King of California is the previously untold account of how a Georgia slave-owning family migrated to California in the early 1920s, drained one of America's biggest lakes in an act of incredible hubris and carved out the richest cotton empire in the world. Indeed, the sophistication of Boswell's agricultural operation - from lab to field to gin - is unrivaled anywhere. Much more than a business story, this is a sweeping social history that details the saga of cotton growers who were chased from the South by the boll weevil and brought their black farmhands to California. It is a gripping read with cameos by a cast of famous characters, from Cecil B. DeMille to Cesar Chavez.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The King, J.G. Boswell II, died in April 2009 but the empire he and his fore bearers built still allowed his chroniclers to drive the distance from Washington DC to Philadelphia (over 135 miles) without leaving their property. The incredible reporting job done by these authors speaks to the highest traditions of that craft. Their detailed, balanced account of just how Boswell and his family acquired and maintained this vast empire of cotton and other agricultural products ranks with other California water sagas such as the classic "Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water" by Marc Reisner. That the Boswells and their competitors, who often joined in oligarchical goals, were clever, able, and rapacious is only part of a fascinating story. You must admire the effective

management they brought to their tasks and almost find yourself applauding their victories until you ponder the immensely adverse consequences. Now that the Pacific King Salmon season has been shut down on the entire California coast for the 2008 and 2009 seasons due to the almost total extinction of their number, citizens of California and the nation may want to ask about how the water allocation which made these barons so rich and politically powerful can be more justly shared with the entire environmental system. Most would agree I think that trading the magnificent salmon harvest for more Pima cotton shirts makes no sense. Surely one could give up some of the products now produced by this mega farmers to save such a precious resource as the King Salomon. This book serves as the ultimate cautionary guide to how we should not go about water allocations in this beautiful state.

This region is where most of the water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta goes to feed subsidized crops we don't need, making big ag rich on taxpayer welfare. Most don't know that the L.A. basin and MWD are second fiddle. This book tells you the personal history of how and why, covering the the largest landholder in the valley who fuctionally owns your State and Federal elected officials. This book is as important to understanding California water politics and history as Cadillac Desert. Most farmers never make this kind of \$. Farming is long hours of hard, dangerous work for low profit, unless you are one of the lucky few to get on the goverment dole of subsidized water growing subsidized crops. A biograpy of the antithesis of what people think of as the 'family farmer'.

All in all I feel the book brought out the good and bad man taming and controlling the Tulare Lake basin. The mixed basket of intended and unintended consequences strong willed individuals and politicians. In the end, poor public policy mixed with a driven group of individuals concentrated wealth and power in the hands of a few. A great history of California water and water policy.

After finally slogging through this giant book, I'm ready to recommend it to anybody who is interested in water and agriculture, and how the relationship between these two things has developed in the state of California. This book is not a light read, and sometimes a bit confusing to follow. However, the length and amount of information - it was much more like reading a Michener book like Hawaii than a regular boring history book. I feel like I "lived" it by reading the pages of this long history of the Boswell family and how it has shaped not only California, but much of the agricultural system in the United States. What's more interesting to me is that the book left me with a good perspective, both good and bad, of how these giants of agriculture came to be. Though there

are clearly many things that could make a person upset with the "evil big company", the incredible detail about the families, their lives, and the entire history gives some balance to the view. As an environmentalist, I hate to see what happened (with big ag). As a businessman, I can't help but be impressed. As a Californian, I'm extremely glad I know something important about our history. As an American, I have a much deeper appreciation of how our country was formed, with all its entrepreneurial spirit and warts combined. Is the book long? Yes. Too long? Probably. Worth reading? Definitely.

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