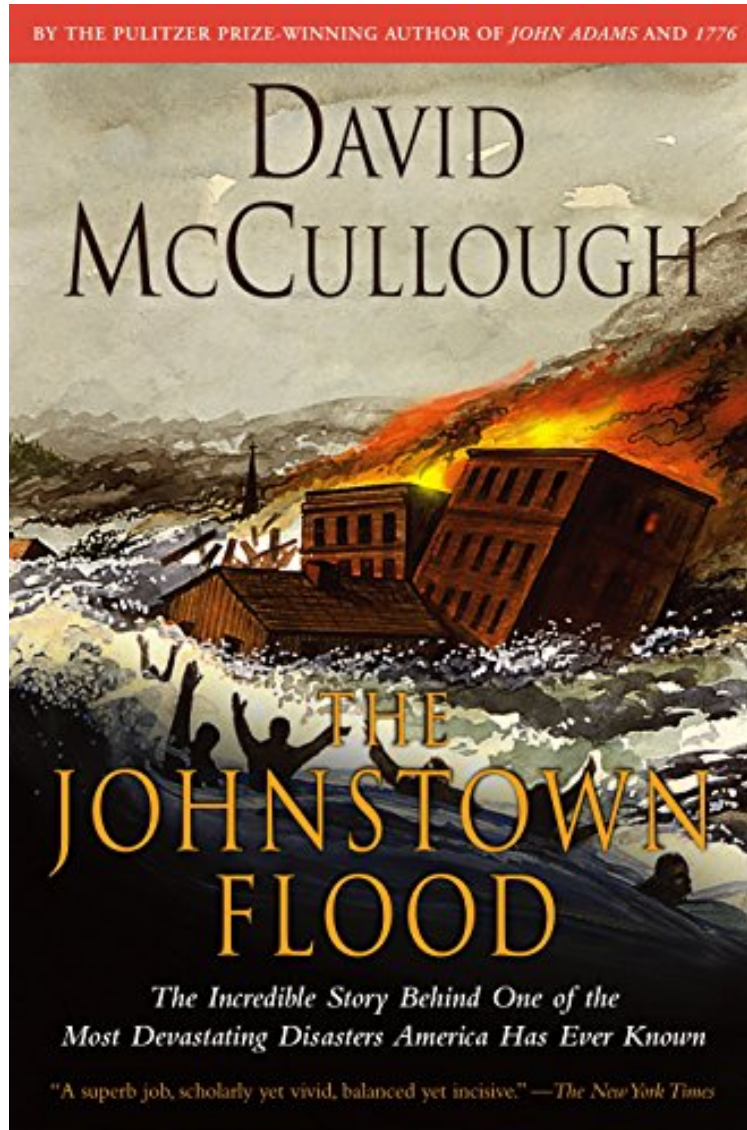


(Get free) The Johnstown Flood

## The Johnstown Flood

David McCullough

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**David McCullough : The Johnstown Flood** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Johnstown Flood:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Love the way David McCullough writes By Mary Jo Jurista Can't say I "like" reading about a devastating flood, but I love the way David McCullough wrote it. It opened my eyes about big industry at that time and how they allowed this flood to happen because of an elite club founded by rich industrial magnates. I live in PA since 1992, and never knew anything about this horrific flood. Now I'm more interested in the

history of this state.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Super book, this gave me much greater insight on ...By Ted O.Super book, this gave me much greater insight on a topic I hadn't known much about before. One's feet feel a bit damp after a chapter or two. I could hardly put this book down. Great writing about what took place in Johnstown about a century ago. One is awed by the terribly, disturbing, yet aptly descriptive McCullough language. The disaster truly comes alive for folks like me, who'd heard of the event but never really understood its terrible consequences. McCullough makes this story read like a novel except that the facts there. Until I'd read this book I never known that the wealthy REALLY took on none of the of the blame, it seems utterly monstrous that none of the blame fell upon "club members" who'd built the lake, and the spillway.5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. "We think we know what struck us, and it was not the hand of Providence. Our misery is the work of man."By wxnotesHuman societies have often anticipated major disasters. There have been prophets and omens, engineering stress studies, and just a gut feeling that things are about to go wrong. People have often had the propensity to fear the worst but hope for the best. Many pray to the almighty to protect them from danger. Others put their trust in professionals, experts, or elected officials. In the back of their minds, many think it could never happen to them. In the case of the 1889 Conemaugh dam burst and Johnstown Flood, the potential for disaster was a common unspoken fear for many years before the disaster, and the disaster itself was a dreadful manifestation of those nightmares. To tell the full story of the Johnstown flood--with not a single detail excluded--there is no better historian than David McCullough. McCullough brings all the drama of May 31, 1889 to life, focusing on a wide range of characters from the blue collar residents to the wealthy Pittsburgh steel barons to the railroad operators, reporters, and rescuers that stormed in afterwards. From these accounts comes a story of post-flood mania just as dramatic as the flood itself--perhaps the first media blitz in this history of the nation covering a scandal akin to the OJ Simpson trial. The wealth of information in the book may leave the novice history reader overwhelmed, but the patient are rewarded with a story of a flood disaster that has yet to be matched in American history.The pre-flood exposition sufficiently leads up to the disaster in about 60 pages before the narrative reaches the night before the flood. The point of view jumps quickly between different characters and scenes, from the people of Johnstown to the railroad to the building of the dam and consequential founding of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club. Many of the common themes of the late 19th Century are woven into the story and shown to have contributed to the disaster. The rapid change from canals to railroads forced the state of Pennsylvania to abandon its massive canal project and sell the dam, thus taking it away from the inspection of professional engineers. The growing divide between Gilded Age millionaires and their manufacturing employees existed--this was mostly a quiet resentment, but McCullough astutely notes the subtle signs of trouble. The almost annual spring floods brought paranoia to some in Johnstown, although with unqualified officials sent to inspect the dam. The reader will be most astonished to learn that the dam broke previously, in 1862, as part of a decades-long period of neglect and mismanagement.The actual description of the flood and the immediate aftermath consumes the majority of the book. McCullough uses an event-based point of view. The storyline is generally chronological, but because of the wealth of information and accounts, most accounts are examined in their entirety at once, including post-storm interviews and author commentary. Only the most detailed and significant stories are revisited at later times. Some readers may find that this method sacrifices some of the drama and human connection to the story, as the book does at times read a little like an official report. At the same time, the wealth of context and analysis is what makes The Johnstown Flood such a remarkable disaster book.There were numerous highlights from the flood itself, but the picture of the wall of water itself was most marvelously described. It is easy for accounts of the water to be distorted, as most eyewitnesses would have seen the water in a moment of sheer terror, while reporters would have been apt to exaggerate the size/magnitude of the flood. McCullough puts the whole event in perspective, detailing each turn the water took on its journey to Johnstown, the height and speed of the wall at varying times, and the black "death mist" that hovered in front of it. (McCullough, 146) The amount of debris behind the water was most amazing, as it clogged the path at times and brought the flood to a momentary standstill, before rushing forward with newfound momentum.A second highlight was the quick organization of the townspeople after the disaster. With the railroad washed out, people recognized that help would be slow to arrive, so they held town meetings, elected leaders, and started the recovery and cleanup immediately. The lack of looting, epidemics, or general lawlessness after the disaster is a credit to their leadership skills. Help did eventually arrive, along with newspaper reporters who literally walked on foot through the night to be the first on scene. The cleanup became a pivotal moment for Clara Barton's Red Cross, which gained legitimacy and later showed up in Galveston in 1900.The most remarkable aspect of this work is McCullough's ability to sort through a wealth of primary sources and tell a comprehensive story that leaves little to doubt. His long and detailed description of the media circus that followed the flood is as fascinating and compelling as the flood itself. The media was guilty of greatly exaggerating statistics such as the death toll, stereotyping Hungarians as thieves and rapists, and faking at least one photo. "The phrase `no pen can describe . . .` kept cropping up again and again, but the pens kept right on describing." (McCullough, 219). There were articles of all types--tragic stories on the line between fact and fiction, pure Victorian sentimentality toward the dead, and scathing damnations of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club. Many important themes of late 19th Century culture converge in these newspaper articles. Although the Progressive Movement had yet to arrive, its roots were already seeded at the time of the flood in

1889. Some readers may decide that McCullough strays too far away in Johnstown in the aftermath section. The media storm appears to be unprecedented both in scope and in negligence of facts. However, firsthand accounts of the flood were bound to be distorted and exaggerated as well. To its credit, the book is unequivocal about what actually happened and why, without descending too far into academic prose. The newspaper accounts do go on for too long compared to the rather abrupt ending with relatively few details on the legal proceedings or long-term rebuilding of the valley. McCullough is famous for his ability to immerse the reader in the tragedy, and the glut of second-hand newspaper accounts pulls away from the tragedy and into an outsider's perspective coming from the media. McCullough does not speculate on the meteorological causes of the disaster, except that rainfall was above normal throughout the spring, peaking heavily in the overnight hours before the disaster. As a meteorologist, I can confidently hypothesize that the disaster was almost certainly the work of a stationary front, with at least one mesoscale convective complex (MCC) forming in the Great Plains and tracking eastward along the front. An MCC is defined as a long-lived group of thunderstorms that propagates eastward as an organized system. MCCs are strongest in the overnight hours, fed by a nocturnal low-level jet which advects moisture northward from the Gulf of Mexico. The heavy rains the night before the dam break were from an MCC, with the front focusing additional precipitation in the region. The front likely lingered for several days after the flood, resulting in the continued cloudy conditions noted by McCullough. A similar setup caused severe flooding in Johnstown in 1977, which has been documented by several academic papers (e.g. Kirk, 2003). Most important to the theme of *The Johnstown Flood* is that the meteorological conditions were unusual but not especially anomalous. The book notes that the rivers topped their banks virtually every year and poured into the streets of Johnstown. The difference in 1889 was that civilization had detrimentally altered the natural ecology of the Conemaugh Valley. Deforestation of the valley hills and the narrowing of river channels helped to increase the severity of any heavy rainfall. McCullough mentions these issues early in the book and then revisits them with a harsh criticism of Johnstown leaders at the end. The citizens frequently witnessed spring floods, yet did nothing to prevent or even mitigate them. They were nervous about the dam but they trusted that the wealthy leadership had their best interests in mind. The flood was not an "act of God" like a mighty tempest. There was abnormally high rainfall, but without man's attempts to control nature, there would have been no disaster. This was a failure of human technology and human trust--an inability by all parties to understand that while technology had greatly advanced by the Gilded Age, it had not advanced to the point where it was immune to the workings of nature. This was McCullough's first book and it set the stage for a tremendous career. Its style is strikingly familiar to his later works--his prose flows almost flawlessly and leaves the reader longing for more at the end. Despite being a disaster book, the focus is generally on the positive side of humanity: the town's quick post-storm organization, the outpouring of charity from across the world, and the heroic acts and survival stories of individuals. I would have liked to see more on the legal aftermath and a few less tangents earlier in the book--there is a need to create cultural context but McCullough is unnecessarily showing off his research by adding lists of obscure names that only appear once or twice. However, the exhaustive detail does pay off, making this book an absolute must for anyone interested in natural disasters.[...]

The stunning story of one of America's great disasters, a preventable tragedy of Gilded Age America, brilliantly told by master historian David McCullough. At the end of the nineteenth century, Johnstown, Pennsylvania, was a booming coal-and-steel town filled with hardworking families striving for a piece of the nation's burgeoning industrial prosperity. In the mountains above Johnstown, an old earth dam had been hastily rebuilt to create a lake for an exclusive summer resort patronized by the tycoons of that same industrial prosperity, among them Andrew Carnegie, Henry Clay Frick, and Andrew Mellon. Despite repeated warnings of possible danger, nothing was done about the dam. Then came May 31, 1889, when the dam burst, sending a wall of water thundering down the mountain, smashing through Johnstown, and killing more than 2,000 people. It was a tragedy that became a national scandal. Graced by David McCullough's remarkable gift for writing richly textured, sympathetic social history, *The Johnstown Flood* is an absorbing, classic portrait of life in nineteenth-century America, of overweening confidence, of energy, and of tragedy. It also offers a powerful historical lesson for our century and all times: the danger of assuming that because people are in positions of responsibility they are necessarily behaving responsibly.

.com 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 *The New Yorker* A first rate example of the

documentary method....Mr. McCullough is a good writer and painstaking reporter and he has re-created that now almost mythic cataclysm...with the thoroughness the subject demands. Book World McCullough has resurrected the flood for a generation that may know it in name only. He proves the subject is still fresh and spectacular. John Leonard The New York Times We have no better social historian. About the Author David McCullough has twice received the Pulitzer Prize, for Truman and John Adams, and twice received the National Book Award, for *The Path Between the Seas* and *Mornings on Horseback*. His other acclaimed books include *The Johnstown Flood*, *The Great Bridge*, *Brave Companions, 1776*, *The Greater Journey*, and *The Wright Brothers*. He is the recipient of numerous honors and awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award. Visit [DavidMcCullough.com](http://DavidMcCullough.com).