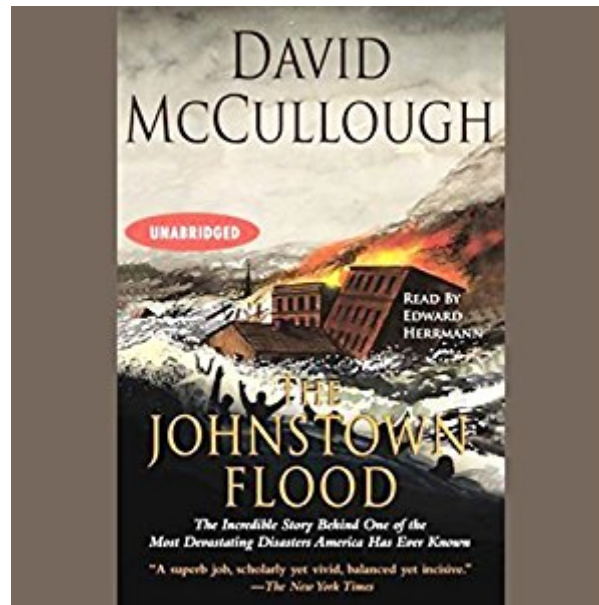


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# The Johnstown Flood



## Synopsis

At the end of the last 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 portrait of life in 19th-century America, of overweening confidence, of energy, and of tragedy. This is a powerful historical lesson for our century and all times: the danger of assuming that because people are in positions of responsibility they are behaving responsibly.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I was born in Johnstown and lived in Western PA until I graduated from college. I then moved to Washington, DC. About 4 years later, a coworker told me that he always wanted to visit Johnstown. At the time I couldn't understand why, so I asked. He went on to explain how he was reading "The Johnstown Flood" by David McCullough in Iowa in 1977 when he heard a radio announcement about the 1977 Johnstown Flood. I lived through the 1977 flood, and knew about the 1939

Johnstown Flood that my father lived through, but I knew little about the 1889 Flood. I bought this book the day after this friend recommended it and read it straight through cover to cover - I couldn't put it down. That weekend, I drove back to Johnstown and visited the Flood Memorial and the Flood Museum. I couldn't hold back the tears at these sites. This book completely changed my opinion of the Johnstown area and its history. I can't believe how many natives of Johnstown have never read this book. I have recommended this book to many people and not one has ever told me he or she didn't sink themselves into the book and become part of the story. I now work in Johnstown again. Every workday I drive by the stone bridge that was described so prominently in the book. In my mind I can picture the victims and the debris piled up against the structure. Sometimes I can even hear the water, the flames, and the cries for help. This book is that well written! If you're from Johnstown and you haven't read this book . . . Shame on you! If you're not from Johnstown, still read this book. Then . . . come to Johnstown and see for yourself what David McCullough brought to life through his writing! This is definitely a book you'll never forget. Don't stop here. Read David McCullough's other books. And, if you get a chance to hear him speak, don't pass it up. He spoke at my commencement 13 years ago and I recently heard him speak again. He's a fascinating man with a gift for making readers (and listeners) travel back through time to relive the past.

David McCullough firmly embeds his devastating account of the Johnstown Flood in the social history of late 19th century America. The pre-flood history of the small Pennsylvania mountain villages brought to mind a combination of "The Music Man" and the "dark, satanic mills" of the Industrial Revolution (steel, in this case). Throw in a mixture of class war and the prejudice of the 'native' Americans versus the recently arrived Eastern European immigrants, and the book tells a good story even without the advent of the flood. However, the Johnstown flood is the heart of McCullough's story and he does a very good job in building up to the book's compelling climax. When the dam above Johnstown finally gives way, you will already be on the edge of your reading chair. As usual, in a story about a disaster, there are incredibly brave people and also incredibly foolish ones. I wish McCullough had told us a bit more about the post-flood lives of some of his heroes and heroines, but that is the only real fault I can find with his story. A book like this always makes me wonder how I would have reacted in the midst of the chaos, flood, and fire that was Johnstown on May 31, 1889.

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 nation's history.

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