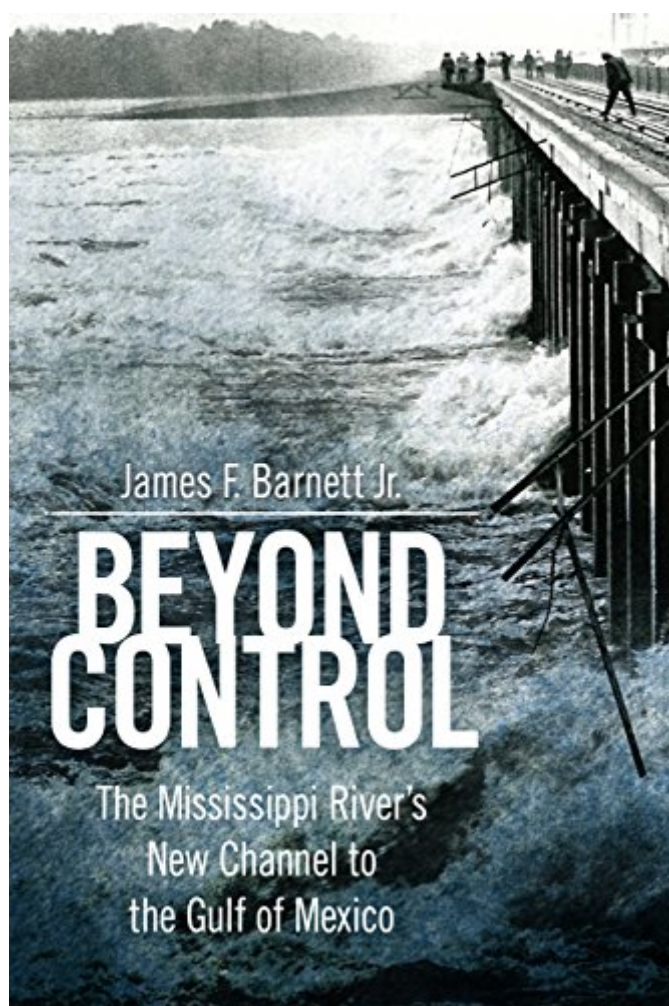


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Beyond Control: The Mississippi River's New Channel To The Gulf Of Mexico (America's Third Coast Series)



Synopsis

Beyond Control reveals the Mississippi as a waterway of change, unnaturally confined by ever-larger levees and control structures. During the great flood of 1973, the current scoured a hole beneath the main structure near Baton Rouge and enlarged a pre-existing football-field-size crater. That night the Mississippi River nearly changed its course for a shorter and steeper path to the sea. Such a map-changing reconfiguration of the country's largest river would bear national significance as well as disastrous consequences for New Orleans and towns like Morgan City, at the mouth of the Atchafalaya River. Since 1973, the US Army Corps of Engineers Control Complex at Old River has kept the Mississippi from jumping out of its historic channel and plunging through the Atchafalaya Basin to the Gulf of Mexico. Beyond Control traces the history of this phenomenon, beginning with a major channel shift around 3,000 years ago. By the time European colonists began to explore the Lower Mississippi Valley, a unique confluence of waterways had formed where the Red River joined the Mississippi, and the Atchafalaya River flowed out into the Atchafalaya Basin. A series of human alterations to this potentially volatile web of rivers, starting with a bend cutoff in 1831 by Captain Henry Miller Shreve, set the forces in motion for the Mississippi's move into the Atchafalaya Basin. Told against the backdrop of the Lower Mississippi River's impending diversion, the book's chapters chronicle historic floods, rising flood crests, a changing strategy for flood protection, and competing interests in the management of the Old River outlet. Beyond Control is both a history and a close look at an inexorable, living process happening now in the twenty-first century.

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Customer Reviews

Fascinating prognostication that fits the facts past, present and even future!

Third of 3 books by Barnett and all are very good

A number of years ago, I watched a documentary on television about the US Army Corps of Engineers, and their struggles to contain the Mississippi River. The Mississippi has changed course many times over its history, and right now it has its eye on a shortcut to the Gulf of Mexico. The Atchafalaya River begins just below Natchez, Mississippi, where it draws about 30% of the water in the Mississippi River and dumps it into the Gulf. The Atchafalaya is a shorter and steeper route to the Gulf than the current Mississippi, and it is probably just a matter of time until it captures the full flow of the Mississippi. The net result? Among other consequences, Baton Rouge loses its river, and New Orleans loses its fresh water supply when the lower Mississippi becomes a Gulf estuary. Armed with simulations, models, concrete, money and sheer determination, the Corps of Engineers is talked with stopping the change in the Mississippi. Given the nature of the river, it is probably a futile quest, and one that was made much more difficult by previous engineering projects on the river. This book is the history of those efforts, and a look at the current situation.=== The Good Stuff ===* It seems like it should be a simple job- build a dam, and keep the Mississippi in its present river bed and flowing through New Orleans. But as anyone who has ever played civil engineer with spring runoff in the driveway knows, water has a mind of its own. And to further complicate matters, the Mississippi brings with it an incredible load of silt and mud, all of which can modify the river bed in unpredictable ways. James F. Barnett Jr. does a great job of explaining the complexities and consequences behind even minor changes to the river.* The book begins with a history of previous projects on the river. Once you know what to look for, mankind's

tampering becomes evident, as the lower Mississippi is dotted with some very strange shaped lakes. What is not so obvious, and what Barnett explains very well, is how even a seemingly small change, such as straightening out an annoying bend in the river can drastically alter the silt flows, and cause major changes downstream. For example, the current pathway to the Atchafalaya from the Mississippi is mostly the result of a 19th century attempt to remove a particularly nasty bend in the river.* The management of the Mississippi is a fascinating topic. There are major stakeholders everywhere. The city of New Orleans would be in a world of hurt if the lower Mississippi became a saltwater estuary, so it has an interest in keeping the river flow at a high level. But it also wants flood control, so it wishes that unusually high water be diverted. The only feasible path for that diversion is to send that water through the Atchafalaya basin—hoping that you manage to send just enough to keep the Mississippi flowing, but not flooding. But sending water through the Atchafalaya means the Corps of Engineers exercising “flowage rights of way”—a nice way of saying they reroute a river through your living room.* Barnett does a masterful job of explaining how these issues are interconnected, the politics and interest groups behind them, and the actual mechanics and unknown risks of tampering with the river. The book can be a bit technical, but nothing too difficult to understand. And you certainly get a feel for the stakes and risks that the Corps of Engineers is playing for.=== The Not-So-Good Stuff ===* I was reading a draft galley, so this may have been corrected- but the book needs much better maps. The only ones included are hand-drawn sketches, and they were just insufficient for me to understand the subtleties of what was going on. Online maps were somewhat of a help, but sometimes a bit tough to line up historical names in the book with current names on map, and many features discussed in the book no longer exist.* Again, it was a draft, but the version I was reading had no pictures. It was worth it to go out to the internet and find pictures of some of the structures being described. For example, the book refers to a “spillway”, designed to control the river at high water. Without a photo or two, you would probably not realize the author is talking about a 500 foot long, 50 foot high structure.* The author writes in a somewhat understated tone. You have to work a bit to understand just how close the river came on one or two occasions to permanently switching course.=== Summary ===For some reason, this is a topic that has always interested me, and the book was a great way to better understand the problems and challenges. It is a very readable book, although it does take a little “homework”™ to really appreciate what is going on. It is certainly simplified enough that anyone with even a passing interest can understand the technical arguments and explanations. I would recommend it to anyone with an interest in the area, or even to anyone who likes to read of technical challenges and historical engineering projects—even if they

didn't know they were interested in them.=== Disclaimer ===I was able to read an advance copy through the courtesy of the publisher and NetGalley.

This is a layman's account of the attempts by engineers to fight against Mother Nature to control the Mississippi River, with emphasis on the attempts to keep the river from taking a new channel to the Gulf coast. Various people were contending with hydrodynamic principles they did not understand. There are basic empirical equations that relate flowrate, sediment load, channel slope, and channel dimensions of an alluvial river channel. Added to that is the natural meandering of a fluid stream (that is the snake shaped path that water takes if you run a stream of water down a slope). Attempts to "straighten the channel." cutting off meander loops, did not observe the hydrodynamic principles involved. Also, the delta area of wetlands at the river's mouth are unconsolidated sediment that require periodic flooding with new sediment to maintain the wetlands - confining the river resulted in the loss of wetlands and an unnatural extension of the deltaic lobe at the river's mouth. Much of the effort has been to maintain the channel past the Port of New Orleans, and to prevent flooding of the city which was improperly located on a natural flood plain, often at the expense of people in other areas/. There have been various technical glitches including the Corps of Engineers attempts to model the flow using crushed coal to model sediment load - that does not meet the modeling criteria for sediment bed load modeling. The book gives a good summary of the many problems. There is the future problem of a possible catastrophic channel shift that would be irreversible.

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