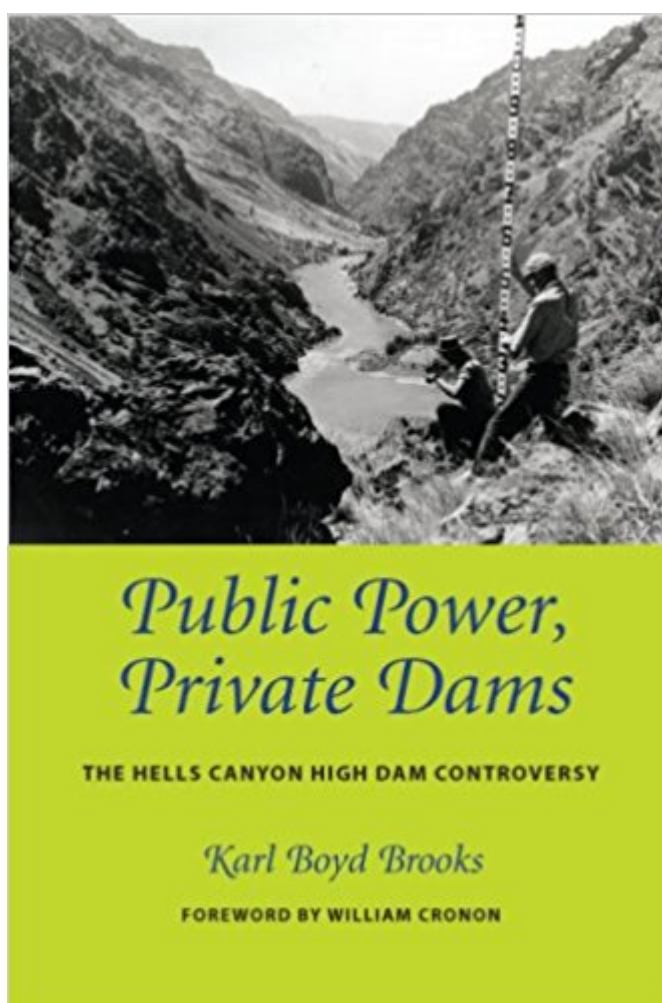


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# Public Power, Private Dams: The Hells Canyon High Dam Controversy (Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books)



## Synopsis

In the years following World War II, the world's biggest dam was almost built in Hells Canyon on the Snake River in Idaho. Karl Boyd Brooks tells the story of the dam controversy, which became a referendum not only on public-power expansion but also on the environmental implications of the New Deal's natural resources and economic policy. Private-power critics of the Hells Canyon High Dam posed difficult questions about the implications of damming rivers to create power and to grow crops. Activists, attorneys, and scientists pioneered legal tactics and political rhetoric that would help to define the environmental movement in the 1960s. The debate, however, was less about endangered salmon or threatened wild country and more about who would control land and water and whether state enterprise or private capital would oversee the supply of electricity. By thwarting the dam's construction, Snake Basin irrigators retained control over water as well as economic and political power in Idaho, putting the state on a postwar path that diverged markedly from that of bordering states. In the end, the opponents of the dam were responsible for preserving high deserts and mountain rivers from radical change. *With Public Power, Private Dams*, Karl Brooks makes an important contribution not only to the history of the Pacific Northwest and the region's anadromous fisheries but also to the environmental history of the United States in the period after World War II.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This is an outstanding book, meticulously researched, imaginatively argued, and engagingly written. Skeptics might wonder about the significance and inherent interest of a dam never built. Yet Karl Brooks narrates the story with considerable flair, and he makes a convincing case that the defeat of Hell's Canyon High Dam was a pivotal event in modern hydropower politics. Western historians should place this book at the top of their reading lists." [Western Historical Quarterly](#)"Nicely written, nuanced study contributes to hydroelectric, Pacific Northwest, and environmental history. Recommended." [Choice](#)"Brooks' brilliance in this book is in capturing a moment some 50 years ago when, in what is now perhaps the Reddest of states, private business made legitimate claims to represent the public good and helped make public policy more accountable to the public. But Brooks' empirical work suggests that what was important for democracy and environment was not the defeat of federal initiative per se, but rather that private challenge catalyzed political debate. Broader discussions forced needed restraint and a broadening of concerns as part of both public and private policy." [Review of Policy Research](#)"Brooks' work is a necessary addition to the Weyerhaeuser Book Series because it greatly advances our understanding of the conflict over resources, the consequences of development, and the legal battles between public-private ownership that continue to shape the region today." [H-Environment](#)"Karl Boyd Brooks has written a masterful book about the politics of hydropower." [Technology and Culture](#)"Transcending that familiar debate over the preservation of the 'wilderness' of nature, Brooks's examination of this remote Idaho location provides new insight into the origins of the modern environmental movement." [H-Net Reviews](#)"The author has done a great job as an environmental historian with sharp insights and a perceptive eye to the unknown. He offers valuable new insight into a question that still agitates the country, whether government or private corporations should be in charge of developing our natural resources." [Educational Book Review](#)"Brooks does a splendid job of showing how the Bonneville Power Administration assumed its roles of partner, planner, and promoter of public power in the Pacific Northwest. The author could tell this story as few others might. Public Power, Private Dams is a fine tale." [Oregon Historical Quarterly](#)

"Public Power, Private Dams provides a thorough discussion of the controversies surrounding the Hells Canyon High Dam, with a detailed examination of the regional and national forces that struggled over the dam, how their differing visions of the future were embodied in developmental alternatives, and how the region's salmon runs and tribes and fishers were the big

losers." — Dale Goble, University of Idaho

Karl Brooks reintroduces a 20th-century event to a 21st-century audience. Any American interested in water, power and the public policy that interacts with them should consider this book. In 1947, federal government agencies and their private-sector allies proposed a plan that would build the tallest dam in the world and flood a good part of Hell's Canyon, the deepest gorge in North America. Beyond a dam and a canyon, however, there was more to the plan--the entire restructuring of the Snake River plain through additional dams, reservoirs, tunnels and canals. If completed as designed the project would have changed the very face of the intermountain west. Brooks' book necessarily deals with politics and policy, but his writing style keeps the story moving. He summarizes information (sometimes a bit too much) to keep the reader engaged. It's clearly an academic piece but Brooks' affection for and familiarity with his home state (Idaho) help bring the story to life. Although many will be tempted to use this as a "good guy/bad guy" saga, Brooks highlights the weaknesses of all of the players. Anyone who lives in the American West should read this book.

Very informative about the history of water development in the west. But it is a dry read.

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