that renewable energies can replace fossil fuels remains a daunting one. Needham’s explanation of coal’s second life after the progressive conservation era promoting water power is a tragic consequence of often progressive intentions for the American West: economic independence for tribes, the growth of clean industry in postwar urban development, and environmental concerns about the water supply and health of the region’s rivers. The Southwest’s version of Carl Abbott’s metropolitan frontiers obscured the pollution and subterranean contamination of the landscapes that made the region appealing to twentieth-century residents in the first place.

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Reviewed by Stephen B. Adams

In the preface to the 1961 edition of Robert L. Ingram’s A Builder and His Family, Stephen D. Bechtel recalled “pleasant surprise” at the 1949 book, which had been commissioned by the Bechtel company. The Profiteers: Bechtel and the Men Who Built the World will be considered neither pleasant nor a surprise to Bechtel insiders. Investigative reporter Sally Denton has written an old-fashioned exposé, along the lines of Jack Anderson, for whom she once worked. She is not the first investigative journalist to plow this ground, but much has happened in the Bechtel world since Laton McCartney’s Friends in High Places: The Most Secret Corporation and How It Engineered the World appeared in 1988—from broadening of the firm’s scope to the availability of newly declassified documents.

At times, The Profiteers reads like fiction—a sort of Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Engineer. If not directly involved, the company and its associates were at least present, Zelig-like, for a host of clandestine activities. Denton spans the globe telling the story of Bechtel with stops for coups in Syria (1949), Iran (1953), Iraq (1963), Indonesia (1965), Libya (1969), and Chile (1973).
One might expect the story of a San Francisco–based firm of engineers who set out to build the world to fit the “man goes on a journey” genre. At first, it does. Warren “Dad” Bechtel was born on an Illinois farm in 1872 and moved to Oklahoma in 1898 to try the construction business. His company built roads, pipelines, railroads, and dams, and used the latest equipment, such as giant steam shovels, to do so. Bechtel was not just an innovator but also a leader, heading the Associated General Contractors of America (the pinnacle for many engineers) in the late 1920s. He mentored the up-and-coming entrepreneur Henry J. Kaiser and, just prior to Bechtel’s 1933 death in Russia, helped assemble the “Six Companies,” a consortium that built Hoover Dam, the supreme engineering feat of its day.

Then the story shifts to another genre: “stranger comes to town.” Denton emphasizes the role of onetime Bureau of Reclamation construction superintendent Frank Crowe in the bidding and construction of Boulder Dam. She overplays her hand, writing that Crowe’s presence with the Six Companies could “guarantee sizable profits to the partnership,” suggesting that the system was rigged (p. 32). If Crowe, who left the federal government in 1925, knew that the Six Companies bid of about $49 million in February 1931 would be “lowest among the three competing bids,” why did the Six Companies bid $5 million below the next lowest bid—forgoing massive profits (p. 32)? Denton doesn’t say.

In 1937, a year after the dam’s completion, Bechtel’s son Stephen met John A. McCone. Through McCone, the company found friends in high places, such as McCone’s golfing buddy Dwight Eisenhower, who became president of the United States. With the assistance of McCone (who became head of the Atomic Energy Commission in 1957), Bechtel became a player in both nuclear weapons and nuclear power by the early 1950s. In the early 1960s, the McCone-led CIA engineered a coup that helped Saddam Hussein’s rise to power in Iraq, a country where Bechtel found rich contracts.

More central to the book is the mid-1970s arrival at Bechtel of Nixon administration veterans George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger. Shultz became “principal executive” and Weinberger vice president. They stayed with the company until the Reagan administration beckoned, and both became enmeshed in the Iran Contra affair, in which money from secret arms sales to Iran funded insurgents in Nicaragua (sidestepping Congress). Denton tells of a simultaneous scheme involving Israel and Iraq, involving Donald Rumsfeld (who met with Saddam) and Bechtel executives, who promised a decade of cheap oil to the Israelis (and $70 million for Prime Minister Shimon Peres) in exchange for Israel’s promise to protect a new pipeline extending from Iraq’s oil fields to the Gulf of Aqaba. Saddam nixed the deal.
Denton shows how Bechtel benefitted from policies of the George W. Bush administration. As part of the “privatization of state building,” Bechtel received massive contracts (some on a noncompetitive basis) to rebuild Iraq after America’s 2003 invasion, and in 2005 as contractors to the Federal Emergency Management Agency to rebuild America’s Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina (p. 235). Bechtel also became part of other privatization initiatives. Denton notes that by 2007 the Department of Energy (which designed and built America’s nuclear weapons) had become “the most privatized federal department, with 94 percent of its budget going to contractors” (p. 260). Bechtel, which had diversified from building nuclear power plants to cleanup of radioactive sites, led a consortium of private-sector firms that would oversee America’s nuclear laboratories and plants.

_The Proﬁteers_ does well in using one firm to show how blurred the lines between America’s private sector and public sector can be. Yet Denton writes that one of the attractions of Bechtel was a “story of entrepreneurship, of American homegrown ingenuity and technological genius” (p. 317). Therein lies the book’s primary weakness. Denton alludes to ingenuity and technological genius but lingers on access and scandal. The book gives short shrift to Bechtel as an organization with something to sell: speed, quality of work, and means to those ends such as technology use or managerial skill. Denton is more interested in the company as insider, with power to shape the world in which it operates; her book is about know-who, not about the know-how required to become an insider.

What motivated the Bechtel family members and the government officials they hired and those with whom they had access? _The Proﬁteers_ provides no convincing explanation. The notion that government policy was driven by private-sector proﬁt seeking fails to acknowledge the role of ideology in the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, among others. What the reader does learn is that by 2014, Riley Bechtel, the fourth-generation family member to run the company, was among the ﬁfty wealthiest individuals in America. According to Denton, mission accomplished.