

# The Feather River Anthology

Kenneth Boulding

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## I

*Reflections on the State, Especially the State of California*

A curious creature is the State;  
It must persuade – but may dictate;  
It has an intermediate station  
Between the Country and the Nation,  
That is, a sort of middle level  
Between the Deep Sea and the Devil.  
It is its custom and its wont  
To do what other people don't.  
Its functions, therefore, though official,  
Are always somewhat interstitial.

## II

*On the General Absence of People-Centered Policies*

The Army Corps of Engineers  
Insists on building Dams and Weirs,  
The Reclamation men assume  
That *every* desert ought to bloom.  
The wildlife people often wish  
That all the world were game and fish.  
The conservationist's a whiz  
At keeping nature as she is.  
The Church is measured by its steeple –  
And no one gives a dam for people!

## III

*Ode, on the General Subject of Water*

Water is far from a simple commodity,  
Water's a sociological oddity,  
Water's a pasture for science to forage in,  
Water's a mark of our dubious origin,  
Water's a link with a distant futurity,  
Water's a symbol of ritual purity,  
Water is politics, water's religion,  
Water is just about anyone's pigeon.  
Water is frightening, water's endearing.  
Water's a lot more than mere engineering.  
Water is tragical, water is comical,  
Water is far from the Pure Economical,  
So studies of water, though free from aridity  
Are apt to produce a great deal of turbidity.

## IV

By Friday, in Los Angeles,  
A man's mind all a jangle is,  
So, to restore his sense of humor  
He spends a week end at Cachuma,  
Where, for a dollar (less a quarter)  
He plays on other people's water.  
This recreational ablution  
May save him from an Institution,  
And is a solid source of wealth  
That should be charged to Mental Health.

## V

All benefits that are dispersable  
Should be, perhaps, non-reimbursable  
But people should be made to pay  
For benefits that come their way –  
Unless we want to subsidize  
The good, the needy, or the wise.  
(It would be well to be quite sure  
Just who *are* the deserving poor,  
Or else the state-supported ditch  
May serve the Undeserving Rich.)

## VI

*(Chorus of Angelenos, testifying before  
Assemblyman Porter's Committee): Agitato*

Water, Water,  
Mr. Porter,  
Save Us, Save Us,  
Mrs. Davis,  
O Committee,  
O have pity,  
Legislator  
Do not wait or,  
We'll be Thirsty,  
Hot and Dirty.  
By Anno Domini (*Sotto Voce*)  
2030

Lay no hands on Nature's bounty  
In the Northern Mountain County!  
Every valiant Northern Daughter  
Fights to save her county's water.  
What though famine, fire and drought  
Overtake the crowded South,  
Water stays for fish to forage in  
In the county of its origin!  
(Chorus of Committeeman, Maestro)  
To sift the value from the fact  
Requires a monumental tact  
For values, everybody knows,  
Have easy-to-be-stepped-on toes,  
And facts so often take a notion  
To clothe themselves in wild emotion.

### VII

Around the mysteries of finance  
We must perform a ritual dance  
Because the long term interest rate  
Determines any project's fate:  
At two per cent the case is clear,  
At three, some seeking doubts appear,  
At four, it draws its final breath,  
While five per cent is certain death.

### VIII

The Unfortunate Administrator  
Is always holding a Hot Potater,  
And finds that as a general rule  
He cannot wait to let it cool.

The Social Scientist, however,  
Can wait around for truth forever,  
His problems, then, are self-created  
And thoroughly refrigerated.

The Administrators good digestion  
Rests on his answering a question,  
But Social Scientists who can, Sir,  
Insist on questioning the answer.

### IX

Remarked the Bureau to the Corps  
"Confine yourselves to flood and war."  
Said Engineers to Reclamation  
"You are obsessed by Irrigation."

This acrimonious debate  
Brings water to the thirsty State,  
For mutual recriminations  
Are soothed by large appropriations,  
And each Congressional Committee  
Is moved by pork, if not by pity.

The danger, it is plain to see,  
Comes when the Agencies agree,  
For what they might agree *about*  
Is apt to cause an Urban Drought,  
By so pre-empting nature's juices  
To strictly vegetable uses.

### X

Water is needed for use as detergent  
But washing is seldom exceedingly urgent  
Water for drinking is all very fine  
But Frenchman get by with the drinking of wine.  
Water is useful for flushing the toilet,  
But sewage is good if you filter and boil it  
Water has many industrial uses  
But most kinds of cooking can stew in its juices.  
Water is flexible, water is plastic  
And both its supply and demand are elastic.  
So what is the fuss about, what is the hurry?  
And why is this fluid the source of such worry?  
The answer, perhaps, will be found in the time it  
May take to ensure against the changes of climate  
For water in storage, stashed safely away  
Is a rainy day fund for the non-rainy day.

*Dr. Kenneth Boulding is with the Department of economics at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. This poetry was inspired by his attendance at several conferences on water.*