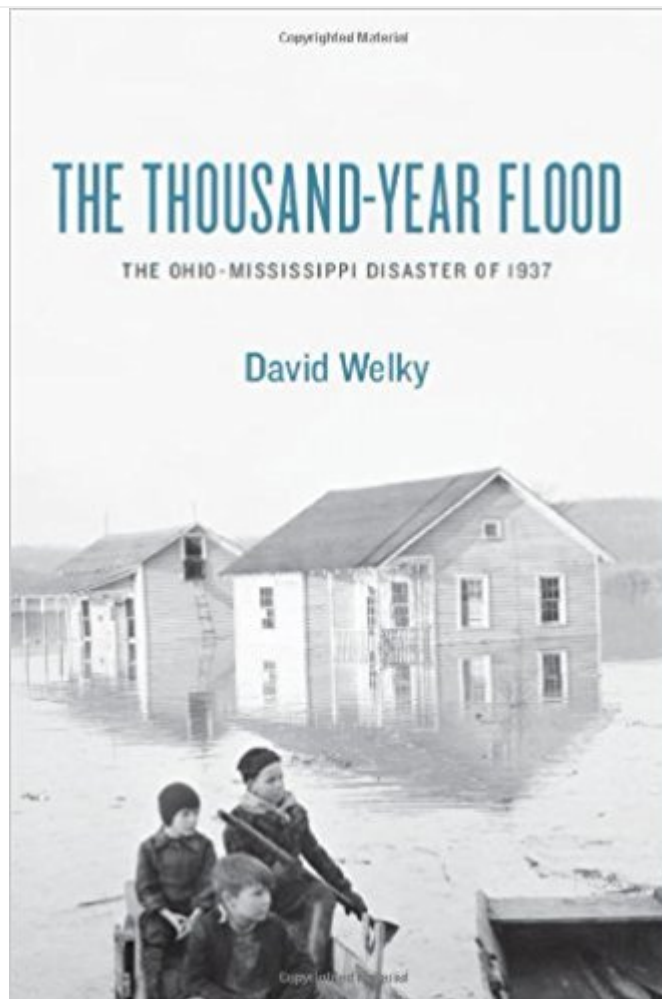


{essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia

The Thousand Year Flood: the Ohio-Mississippi Disaster of 1937



Volume 45 (2012)

Reviewed Work(s)

The Thousand Year Flood: the Ohio-Mississippi Disaster of 1937. By David Welky (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Pp. 355. Cloth, \$27.50.

David Welky's *The Thousand Year Flood* is not the first historical treatment of the 1937 flood of the Mississippi River and its tributaries, but it might be the best. Looking at the disaster from multiple perspectives, Welky stresses that the most remarkable aspect of the 1937 flood was not its enormous magnitude, but the response of the federal government. He argues that "previous administrations had put charities and local groups in charge of relief and rehabilitation matters [but] Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal placed federal authorities at the center of national affairs." Seeing the flood as an opportunity to demonstrate the utility of a centralized disaster response, Administration officials claimed new authorities and acted in unprecedented ways. Their success "solidified support for centralized power over environmental matters and emergency relief." In many people's minds, lack of planning had contributed to the calamity and only the strong federal response had prevented it from being worse. In that way, "the thousand year flood was very much a New Deal catastrophe" (8).

This argument is convincing, and the book's emphasis on the national politics of the flood is its biggest selling point. Whereas lesser historians often treat natural disasters as stories of communities either heroically pulling together or succumbing to every-man-for-his-self cynicism, Welky's account is more complete and less clichéd. Local events still have their place in the narrative. But, by grounding the story of the flood in the politics of the Depression and New Deal, Welky is able to use the deluge as a lens through which he can examine larger themes of New Deal environmentalism, such as Roosevelt's rivers policy.

Striking the right balance between local-level and national-level analysis can be difficult. Adding to this burden is the fact that the scope of the disaster – taking place over more than one thousand miles of river system, killing hundreds, pushing millions from their homes, employing

hundreds of thousands in relief efforts and costing half a billion dollars worth of damage – is epic and intimidating. Despite these potential difficulties, Welky weaves the story masterfully. Focusing on about six cities between Cairo, Illinois and Cincinnati, Ohio, Welky is able to illuminate the flood's impact on a representative set of communities, both big and small. The fact that the narrative never dwells in any one place for very long manages to reify the enormity of the disaster for the reader without creating confusion.

While it is a very good book overall, *The Thousand Year Flood* is not without problems. While the book includes two maps, it does not have one that shows the entire disaster area. Such a map would have been useful to readers hoping to assess the full extent of the crisis. More troublingly, the book fails to substantially engage with the emerging historiography that combines environmental history with issues of class and race. Welky raises those issues – the Southern Tenant Farmers Union is established as force early on, for example – but his interest in them quickly lapses. The book's analysis of the ways that class and race structured people's understanding of and experience with the flood thus remain shallow.

Ultimately, *The Thousand Year Flood* will be a welcome addition to the library of any twentieth century U.S. historian. The themes it uncovers are sure to keep future researchers busy for years.

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