Introduction:
Mother McCloud

Nested between Dogwood Butte and Thimbleberry Ridge, the Northern California town of McCloud is a simple place: a population of thirteen hundred, no stoplights, one grocery store, and one roadside hotel. It’s also breathtakingly beautiful, surrounded by fir tree forests, some of the country’s best trout-fishing streams, and Mount Shasta looming above it all. For most of the past century, the town has had one and only one business: logging. For all intents, the McCloud River Lumber Company, or “Mother McCloud,” as it was affectionately called, was the town. The company owned the grocery store, the hotel, even the houses.

Mother McCloud was a doting parent. The mill supplied electricity for the town, and when a kitchen faucet was leaking or the lights didn’t work, it took no more than a phone call for a crew from Mother McCloud to arrive and set things right. Every Thanksgiving, workers’ families were given free turkeys. At the Christmas party, the curtain was raised at the local theater to reveal a huge mound of presents, one wrapped for each and every child. Life was good.

In the 1960s, the company’s fortunes started to turn, and with that began the town’s slow decline. Homes were sold. Local businesses folded. People moved away. The mill shut its doors in 2002, and former middle-class loggers had to make do with menial jobs and food stamps. The high school, which had once held one hun-
drew fifty students, now counted fewer than a dozen. The school had not been able to field a football team for years. The huge letters on the side of the gym spelling out “HOME OF THE LOGGERS” seemed a cruel joke. McCloud was dying.

Desperate for new sources of jobs, a few members of McCloud’s local government started looking beyond lumber. In what must have seemed a leap of faith, they placed their hope for the town’s future in another plentiful local resource: its water.

Much of the glacial melt from Mount Shasta flows underground and reemerges down the slope. These springs gurgle out clear, bracingly cold water that’s clean enough to drink. Locals have joked that their surprisingly young appearances are due to McCloud’s fountains of youth. New Age voyagers think something is special about the water, too. Some come from as far as Japan to meditate at what they consider a spiritual vortex.

Doris Dragseth ran the local auto parts shop with her husband before retiring. To her and the other members on McCloud’s district board, the idea of water replacing timber must have seemed an odd choice. Spring water had always been free for the taking. Locals just walked up and filled a gallon jug. But times were clearly changing. As soft drink vending machines and supermarket shelves made clear, the bottled water business around the country was booming. In 2011, Americans drank more than nine billion gallons of bottled water—roughly 312 single-serve bottles per man, woman, and child. And the numbers keep climbing. Bottled water is now poised to become the nation’s dominant beverage, surpassing even soft drinks.

To Dragseth, this was clearly a market they should be in. After all, McCloud’s spring water was as good as anything sold in bottles, probably better. The McCloud River Lumber Company was gone for good, but maybe a new Mother McCloud could be found to harvest the local waters. It seemed a long shot at the time, but so did the future of the town.

During the late 1990s, McCloud’s district board tried to woo water companies to build a bottling plant. They had no luck until Nestlé Waters North America, a subsidiary of the giant Swiss food
and beverage company, took an interest. Nestlé, the largest bottled water company in America, already controlled nearly one-third of the market with popular brands such as Perrier, Poland Spring, and San Pellegrino. Nestlé liked what it saw. Large sources of unpolluted spring water with few dissolved minerals—the flat, clean taste that American consumers prefer—have become increasingly hard to find. Some of California’s best groundwater, for example, around Lake Tahoe in the Sierra Nevada mountains, is contaminated with MTBE, an additive that makes gas burn cleaner but is also a human carcinogen.

McCloud’s district board was so broke it couldn’t afford a lawyer, so Nestlé paid for the legal fees, outside consultants, and permitting fees. The proposed deal was more than McCloud boosters could have hoped for: a one-million-square-foot bottling plant located on the old lumber mill site, big enough to enclose all the houses in town; a contract to bottle the town’s waters for fifty years with an option for fifty more; annual payments to the town; and the lure of steady jobs. To Dragseth, the choice was simple: “I couldn’t imagine why anyone in the world would be against this. We need the jobs, we need the money.”

On September 29, 2004, about one hundred McCloud residents showed up at a public meeting to hear about the proposal. Nestlé showed a corporate video and some PowerPoint presentations. The five district board members all voted to approve the proposal. No discussion. Deal done.

Richard McFarland, a local business owner, sat stunned in the audience. This was the first he had heard of the agreement. He’d expected to talk over the pros and cons, not mutely watch a vote. As he learned of the details over the next few days, he got angry. This was a big operation. Nestlé would withdraw up to 520 million gallons of water annually from local springs, pack it as Arrowhead brand water, and load up to six hundred semitrailers a day full of bottles.

From McFarland’s perspective, Nestlé was threatening to suck the aquifer dry, harm the ecology of the local streams, and clog McCloud with truck traffic, noise, and pollution. In exchange, it
was paying McCloud virtually nothing—just one penny for every seventeen gallons that Nestlé bottled and then sold retail for forty-five dollars or more. As McFarland saw it, “the contract read like nobody on the services district knew what they were doing. It read like Nestlé’s lawyers wrote it.”

Nor was McFarland alone. Local gallery owner Janet Connaughton despaired: “We feel mugged. This town shouldn’t sell its birthright for a few dollars.” Curtis Knight, manager for a fishery conservation group, worried about the environmental impacts of the water Nestlé would pump out of the aquifers. What if the river levels fell? “The McCloud River is sacred water,” he said. “It’s one of the most treasured and popular trout fishing streams in the country and has a reputation throughout the world.” With these supporters and others, the McCloud Watershed Council was formed, its sole mission to oppose the plant. It has fought Nestlé in court and in the media.

The well-meaning effort to save this close-knit town changed it, and for the worse, with residents taking sides in an increasingly bitter conflict. Many of the longtime locals resent opponents to the plan, mocking recent residents from other parts of California as “Flatlanders.” As former mill worker Ron Berryman complained, “These sorts of people did their level best to put the timber industry out of business. Now they’re asking us to reject a bottled water plant. How much cleaner can you get? Bottled air?”

Debra Anderson’s family goes back four generations in McCloud. A vocal opponent of the agreement, she has seen her car tires slashed. Things could get more violent. In a similar conflict in Michigan, four incendiary devices were found in a pumping station for a Nestlé bottling plant. The bombs didn’t go off, but the Earth Liberation Front claimed responsibility. Its members left a note with a clear warning: “We will no longer stand idly by while corporations profit at the expense of all others. To this end, we have taken action against one of the pumping stations that Perrier uses to steal water. . . . Clean water is one of the most fundamental necessities and no one can be allowed to privatize it, commodify it, and try and sell it back to us.”
Five years after the September 2004 public meeting, the plant still had not been built.

The story of McCloud is about water and a town down on its luck, bitterly divided over what type of future it wants. Over what type of future it needs. But it’s about far more than that. Similar stories could be told about conflicts in Fryeburg, Maine, or Mecosta County, Michigan, or Groveland, Florida; or about battles overseas in Cochabamba, Bolivia, or Kerala, India, or on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Fights over drinking water are on the rise around the country and around the globe, and not only at the community level.

These conflicts may be over a simple and abundant substance, but the nature of the conflicts is anything but simple. The history of drinking water is fraught with legend and strife, science and religion, ethics and business. It should come as no surprise that the story of McCloud reflects these themes, for it is drawn from the pages of a much larger, much older story.

For more than three thousand years, understanding and management of drinking water have dictated the growth and health of human settlements. The situation is no different today. Look to current debates ranging from globalization to community rights, conspicuous consumption to poverty, terrorism to public health, and environmental protection to economic growth. Concerns over drinking water figure large in them all. If you doubt this, consider some of the larger themes described below.

McCloud locals may joke about their fountain of youth, but there is no question that drinking water holds a special place deep within our collective consciousness. We surely need to drink water, and obviously want to ensure that quenching our thirst does not make us sick. But since time immemorial, long before Perrier’s chic green bottles, long before Ponce de León’s futile quest for the Fountain of Youth, long before tales of Jesus offering his followers “living water,” we have sought more from drinking water than simple hydration.
Drinking water is infused with symbolism and myth around the globe. There’s a reason that New Age voyagers are willing to flock to McCloud, that the McCloud River is said to flow with sacred water. Early Christian missionaries were entranced, as well. Soon after arriving in a new territory, they would rename the local pagan well after a Christian saint, often inventing a vivid story of a miracle to persuade doubters. What is it that leads people from vastly different cultures to view drinking water as special, with strikingly similar tales of water providing eternal youth, passages to the afterlife, miraculous cures, and mystical wisdom?

In all of these stories, the physical act of drinking these special waters creates a medium to the supernatural, a means of connecting the physical and the metaphysical. And the mythmaking continues today, implicit in the marketing campaigns of many large bottled water companies.

Of course, part of the attraction of bottled water is its perceived purity. Aquafina is the leading brand in the country. This Pepsi product is essentially municipal tap water that has been highly filtered, which may lead one to wonder why its label prominently features mountain peaks. The product’s slogan, spelled out in big letters, suggests why—“Pure Water. Perfect Taste.” A big part of the bottled water boom is due to concerns over health and the safety of tap water. But is bottled water really healthier than tap water? For that matter, how do we know that water, bottled or tap, is safe to drink in the first place?

This proves to be a surprisingly difficult question to answer. Part of ensuring safety lies in engineering—from the protection of source waters through to final consumption. Our technical fixes range from Roman aqueducts and the unlikely market success of Dixie Cups a century ago to fluoridation battles in the 1950s and efforts since the attacks of 9/11 to protect our water supplies from terrorists. The more difficult part of ensuring safety lies, ironically, in simply deciding what it means to be safe. There is no life without water. Indeed, we use its presence as an indicator for the possibility of life beyond the earth. But drinking water can kill, and always has.

The basic problem is that, apart from distilled water, no water
source can ever be completely risk-free, whether from the tap or bottle. The water we drink contains a lot more than just two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen. Microbes and minerals have always been in our water and always will be. So how do we decide what is “safe enough”? The answer is as much cultural as scientific, depending on whether the drinker is in America or Bangladesh, and raises some thorny ethical issues in the process.

In the world of 2030, the UN estimates that more than half the world’s population will live in water-scarce areas. This number could be even higher, depending on how climate change worsens droughts, reducing already scarce freshwater supplies. Today, where communal or free water sources are too far away or contaminated, the poor purchase their water from private providers—street vendors or tanker trucks. These prices are always higher than the price of water from municipal supply systems, often twelve times as much, with the tragic irony of the poorest in society paying the most for their water. Where safe water cannot be had at any price, it can kill. Unsafe drinking water is the single leading source of mortality in the developing world, exacting its greatest toll on children.

The scarcity of safe drinking water has subtler consequences, though equally dire. In many developing countries, women and girls spend a large part of their day collecting domestic water. This squeezes out their opportunities for employment or education, perpetuating gender inequality and poverty. It is no exaggeration to say that providing drinking water to poor communities can transform lives, with social benefits equal to or greater than the health benefits. But in these communities, as McCloud witnessed, the search for private capital to provide local water has unleashed furious globalization battles, where proponents of privatization clash against claims for a human right to water.

At a basic level, these debates concern the nature of drinking water, whether it should be managed as a commodity for sale or a public good. In 1776, the same year that the American colonies declared independence from Britain, Adam Smith, the father of economics sought to explain a paradox: Why are diamonds more
valuable than water? Water is essential for life while diamonds are a fashion bauble, yet diamonds demand a much higher market price. Shouldn’t the opposite be true?

In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith explained that the answer lay in supply and demand. Both diamonds and water are desired, but diamonds are scarce while drinking water is plentiful. Hence one commands high prices and the other is almost free for the taking. We have taken drinking water for granted. What held true in 1776, however, is no longer true in many parts of the world, and will certainly be wrong in the future. We have reached the tipping point where abundant, safe drinking water cannot be assumed. As a result, while some argue that there is a human right to water, many others contend that, if anything, water is far too cheap and should be even more of a market commodity. Whether we admit it or not, drinking water has become too valuable to take for granted.

There is serious money at stake. No surprise, then, that venture capitalists and entrepreneurs have already decided that “blue is the new green.” The Earth Liberation Front sees the matter far differently, and while its violent method is widely condemned, its opposition to bottled water companies is shared by many. Criticism of corporate ownership of water has become a mainstay of the antiglobalization movement. The popular mantra is that drinking water is a public good, not a bar-coded product. Human need should take precedence over corporate greed. Water is for life, not profit.

These make for great protest signs, but once one moves beyond facile slogans the issues become a good deal trickier. The real question is how society should best manage a scarce resource among conflicting demands. McCloud’s prior lifeblood, trees and timber, relied on the market. Wood is sold as a commodity, even when logged from national forests that belong to the public, and we seem to like it that way. Water is different, one might say, because it is necessary for survival. But it’s not so simple. People also need food to survive, but no one complains about farmers and companies charging for corn or beans. So what’s wrong with doing the same for water, even with a bar code?
Who really owns the water, anyway? Should McCloud's district board be able to sell the glacial melt filtered under Mount Shasta? Should Nestlé be able to buy it? These conflicts pit conservation and the duty not to harm your neighbor against the strong tradition of private property rights and the freedom to use the resources on and under your land as you see fit. The ethos of “Don't Tread on Me!” and the allure of local jobs are on a collision course with concerns over depleting local groundwater and harming the fish and plants that depend on those waters.

The ultimate privatization of water, of course, comes in the sale of disposable, personal containers of water. While we think of bottled water as a recent development, its sources run deep. The medieval market for holy waters provided the original template for the commercial branding of waters, satisfying the demands of the pilgrimage trade. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this developed into the practice of “taking the waters” at upscale spas such as Vichy in France, Baden-Baden in Germany, Bath in England, and Montecatini in Italy—towns that owed their economic existence to their spring waters. Thanks to developments in bottling technology in the late 1800s, people were able to take the waters from the spa, and the bottled water market took off.

The introduction of chlorination in municipal water in the early 1900s led to the near collapse of the bottled water industry in America. The nationwide bottled water market did not exist four decades ago. In the 1960s, the idea of selling bottled water in a convenience store would have sounded as ludicrous as the suggestion that we sell bottled air. Now, though, the assumption has reversed, with the expectation that you shouldn't get water for free. When was the last time you saw a public water fountain? Cafeterias and stadiums without free water are increasingly common. One gets the sense that drinking fountains are following the path of public phones, more a historic curiosity than a given.

Water is now widely viewed as much as a commodity as a public good. The highest-margin product in restaurants and convenience stores, twenty ounces of bottled water sells, at more that $8 per gallon, for far more than gasoline, yet it costs a fraction to produce.
No wonder Nestlé is so interested in McCloud. But how to explain the paradox that in the United States today, at a time when we are delivering more clean tap water to more people than ever before, sales of bottled water are gushing through the roof? In the face of this growth, environmentalists, church groups, and local governments have turned their sights on bottled water, denouncing the packaging waste and transport impacts.

The larger themes of McCloud, then, suggest much but leave even more unanswered. Where did bottled water come from and why has it become so popular? Why is the opposition so intense? Have natural waters always held such a powerful allure? Is our water safe to drink? What can be done for the billions of people who do not have access to safe drinking water? Will the combined threats of climate change and pollution soon make safe drinking water a scarce resource in America? And, as safe drinking water becomes increasingly scarce, who should own it? In answering these questions, the stories recounted in this book will feature different actors, different regions, and different eras, but all will be concerned with fundamentally the same issue: our relationship with drinking water.

“Relationship” may seem a strange word to use for a glass of water, but it is apt. This book argues that how we conceive of drinking water has always been fundamental to our relationship with the liquid. And the relationship is ever evolving. Drinking water has long been the source of both conflict and veneration, of healing and sickness, and it has always been central to our sense of well-being.

From ancient societies to the present, our conceptions of how this resource should be understood and managed—as sacred or market commodity, safe or unhealthy—have changed dramatically. In the chapters that follow, we will chart the course of that evolution.