

The AAG Review of Books

ISSN: (Print) 2325-548X (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrob20>

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Lisa M. Brady

To cite this article: Lisa M. Brady (2017) Losing Eden: An Environmental History of the American West, *The AAG Review of Books*, 5:4, 249-250, DOI: [10.1080/2325548X.2017.1366835](https://doi.org/10.1080/2325548X.2017.1366835)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2325548X.2017.1366835>



Published online: 16 Oct 2017.



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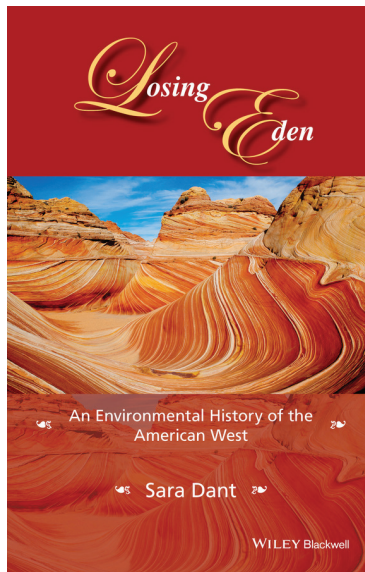
Losing Eden: An Environmental History of the American West

Sara Dant. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2017. xiii and 221 pp., maps, photos, illustrations, suggested readings, index. \$29.95 paper (ISBN 978-1-118-93429-6); \$84.95 cloth (ISBN 978-1-118-93428-8); \$23.99 E-book (ISBN 978-1-118-93431-9).

*Reviewed by Lisa M. Brady,
Department of History, Boise
State University, Boise, ID.*

Losing Eden is a concise history of the U.S. West that provides a narrative as sweeping as the region's scenery. In just over 200 pages, Sara Dant, Professor of History at Weber State University (Utah), traces the changing relationships Americans have cultivated with the area's diverse landscapes from its first residents through its more recent transplants. Dant's analysis begins with the place itself, defining its geographical characteristics, delineating its political boundaries, and establishing what the West is and is not. Critical to her argument is the concept of the West as Eden, a myth that ignored the long history of Native peoples and helped to displace them, one that colored over the harsh realities of the place with hopes and dreams, and one that we must contend with and, ultimately, reject if we are to do right by the planet and ourselves.

Dant's work is synthetic, drawing from a range of disciplines including anthropology, ecology, geography, and history. It follows a traditional chronology, beginning with two chapters on the West's Indigenous peoples. Subsequent chapters introduce the variety of groups who came to the region to find, create, or subdue Eden. In each of chapters 3 through 10, Dant highlights the experiences



of a representative group or individual to explore the chapter's main themes. Chapter 3, for example, tells the story of Brigham Young and his Latter Day Saints (Mormons) as they settled in Utah and established their unique water regime; chapter 9 follows the career of Idaho Senator Frank Church to relate the rise of environmentalist thinking and consensus building. Dant's coverage is wide-ranging, incorporating discussions of the West's corporate agriculture, its hydraulic society, the logging and mining industries, nuclear testing, National Parks and other public lands, suburbanization, and the Sagebrush Rebellion. The epilogue turns to issues of sustainability, climate change, and what Dant calls the "triumph of the commons." The West's

past has been riddled by overuse, misuse, and abuse, Dant avers, but it has also shown that collective action for the good of all—the triumph of the commons—is not only possible, but is the right way forward.

One of the book's major strengths is its contextualization of the West into broader national trends. Rather than depicting the West as a place apart, Dant clearly explains its complicated relationships with the nation as a whole, all while highlighting how the region's natural environment uniquely influenced the ways those interactions played out. Chapter 3 situates the West within the national drive to "claim and tame" through territorial expansion and legal mechanisms like the Public Land Survey, established by the Land Ordinance of 1785. Chapter 4 traces how sectional politics shifted in the middle of the nineteenth century away from a primarily North–South orientation to one dominated by East–West divides, based largely on an exploitative relationship where the West gave and the East took. Here we see the rapid expansion of mining and timber interests, spurred in part by the Civil War and,

later, by the nation's growing industrial and urban centers in the East and Midwest. Chapter 6 explores the consequences of unbridled commodification of the West's resources and the Progressive mandate to mitigate the problems through conservation and preservation. Although local activists like John Muir called for such measures, protection of the West's landscapes and oversight of its natural bounty became national priorities under the leadership of President Theodore Roosevelt. In each of these examples, Dant depicts the West in the familiar role of colonial subject, guided by the demands and whims of the dominant East.

Another strength is Dant's coverage and treatment of recent developments in the West. A particularly good chapter is the one chronicling the late-twentieth-century reaction by Westerners against the perceived overreach of the federal government. Chapter 10 tackles the rise of figures such as James Watt—who as Secretary of the Interior under Ronald Reagan intended to open public lands to increased resource extraction—and groups like the Blue Ribbon Coalition that ascribe to the tenets of the wise use movement and argue for limited government control and regulation of public lands. Central to this chapter is the Endangered Species Act and reactions against it in states where public lands and extractive industries are prominent. Rather than caricaturize opponents of the act as backward reactionaries, Dant acknowledges the real economic pressures they felt and treats them and their positions fairly. Nevertheless, she reveals the unsteady foundation on which they based their arguments, showing that species such as spotted owls and wolves were not to blame for financial woes and could, in fact (in the case of wolves at least) reinvigorate degraded ecosystems and form the basis for other economic pursuits such as tourism. Dant brings the public-private debate to the present, carefully narrating and analyzing events such as the 2015 takeover of Oregon's Malheur Wildlife Refuge by supporters of Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy, tying their calls for the privatization of public lands to the deep-rooted conflict over who should control the West's resources.

There are notable absences in Dant's history, however. The major actors in Dant's narrative regrettably remain

politically powerful, white, middle class, and male. There is no mention, for example, of Japanese internment, even though the West's geography and environment were critical both in the decision to remove people of Japanese descent from the coastal areas and to those same individuals' experiences in the remote detention centers. Also missing are analyses of women's contributions to the region's history and discussions of the experiences of Latinos and Latinas, despite their significance to the West's environmental development. Such omissions obscure the region's broad mix of perspectives and ways of understanding and interacting with its range of landscapes. Contrasting New Mexico's acequia-based irrigation with Utah's watershed version and California's corporate hydraulic society, for example, would have revealed the alternative paths Westerners took toward eking out livings and making profits from a limited land. All authors must make difficult choices in what to include and what to leave out; in a book as slim as this, such decisions are all the more challenging and yet that much more important. Dant's book is a natural for course adoption and some deviation from the familiar stories and names would have gone a long way to engage students who might find Dolores Huerta more accessible and relatable than John Muir.

Nevertheless, readers of Dant's book will discover a refreshing sense of purpose that will be especially appealing to students. Throughout every chapter is a strong sense of commitment to place and to informed, thoughtful action. Dant's tone is conversational, which makes the book a quick read and an easy choice for course adoption at the undergraduate level, especially if supplemental readings are used to flesh out and enrich the solid, if familiar, story presented here. The book could have used more rigorous editing to eliminate repetitive prose (the phrase "love affair" appears three times in quick succession on pages 122 and 123, referring to Americans' relationship to the automobile and its motive power, petroleum; "engineering marvel" and "make the desert bloom" are similarly used a number of times in that same chapter), but that is a small quibble that does not greatly undermine the overall quality of a book that should reach a wide audience.