

Recent Books in Review

Losing Eden

An Environmental History of the American West

SARA DANT

(Malden, Mass.: Wiley Blackwell, Western History Series, 2017. xiii, 221 pp. Illustrations, maps, suggested readings, index. \$29.95)

As becomes immediately apparent in her introduction and then crystal clear in her first chapter, the “Eden” in the title of Sara Dant’s book should have scare quotes around it. The book is about ditching the myth of Eden in the American West, not about any Edenic fall from natural grace in the region. Or is it?

Losing Eden seems to be targeted directly at an undergraduate survey course on the environmental history of the American West. It is a short book, 234 pages in all, including front and back matter. And it does a good job of quickly covering the territory in 12 concise chapters. Dant is well versed in contemporary western historiography, and her book will give readers, especially students, an introduction to some of the most prominent voices and arguments in the field today. Dant calls on the three caballeros of the new western history—Richard White, William Cronon, and Donald Worster—so often that the reader half expects one of their famous showdowns to be featured, but that never occurs. They remain safely in their corners. And generous lists of suggested readings at the end of each chapter lead deeper into the field’s nuanced scholarship and

vigorous debates.

The chapters provide a fairly standard periodization of the environmental history of the American West, from the precolonial era through colonization and the Columbian Exchange; the westward expansion of the United States and the extractive frenzy of late 19th-century mining, timber, and transcontinental railroad booms, which the historian Vernon Parrington dubbed the Great Barbeque; the pivotal decade of the 1890s and the “closing of the frontier”; the rise of conservation and preservation movements in the Progressive Era; the 20th-century role of the federal government in building regional infrastructure, especially dams, and the post–World War II boom and atomic bomb testing; and the rise of the environmental movement and laws in the 1960s and ’70s, along with the backlash that followed in the Reagan era, including the Sagebrush Rebellion and the wise use movement. Along the way, readers are introduced to many of the usual suspects—George Perkins Marsh, John Wesley Powell, Frederick Jackson Turner, John Muir, Teddy Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, Aldo Leopold, Wallace Stegner, James Watt, and others. A whole chapter—on the rise of the environmental movement and laws—focuses on the Idaho senator Frank Church and building consensus. This is a useful departure from the narrative strategy in the rest of the book, because it gives readers a window into the politics of modern environmental policymaking. As the list of names above indicates, however, the heroes and villains of this history are mostly

men, and mostly white. For a more complex view of environmental politics, readers will need to dig into the suggested readings. Looking toward the future, Dant calls on Stegner’s 1960 “Wilderness Letter,” and his view of the western landscape as the geography of hope, to support her plea for environmental sustainability and the triumph of the commons over the tragedy of the commons that she argues has dominated western environmental history so far.

Losing Eden is structured like a textbook, and it could work well as one, but the book has a sharp, polemical argument and a sure, moral arc. It is as much an environmentalist history as an environmental history. “The West was never an undiscovered ‘Eden,’” Dant writes (p. 3). And “sustainability, not Edenic myth, must become the dream and reality of the West” (p. 5). In this, Dant rightly rejects any notion that a pure or pristine nature ever existed historically west of the 100th meridian. Nevertheless, her narrative succumbs to the traditional structure of an Edenic fall, and ends with the familiar call of environmental jeremiads: “Clearly, we are moving in the wrong direction.” “Yet,” she adds, “all is not lost” (p. 201).

Jon Christensen
UCLA Institute of the Environment
and Sustainability