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Sara Dant. *Losing Eden: An Environmental History of the American West.* Western History Series. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016. xiii + 221 pp. $29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-118-93429-6.

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Losing Eden is a brief political and economic history of the American West, a region the distinctiveness of which can be stated succinctly: it is quite unlike the eastern United States or the European countries whose excess populations, with or without a few generations of seasoning in the eastern states, arrived in the West with appetites for exploiting the land and its resources. In just over two hundred pages, Sara Dant's text captures essential historical scholarship as it has focused on the region. The book provides a useful, compact overview of the region's history, especially once a few corrections are added into the margins. To put the matter in the pithiest possible way: *Losing Eden* covers the major points of a boilerplate western environmental history as many have taught it over the past several decades. This is both a compliment and a criticism.

Compliment first. In compelling prose, neither purple nor dry, Dant walks the reader—in ten short chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue—from Beringia and the migrations of the late Pleistocene through the contested landscapes of the present-day United States, including the quite recent, indeed ongoing, disputes between the Bundy family in Nevada and the Bureau of Land Management. Brief as they are, Dant's chapters cover the ground fairly, if briskly, with clear expositions of such familiar topics as the European Exchange, Manifest Destiny, conservation and preservation, the boom and bust economies of natural resource exploitation, wartimes and the Cold War in the West, and environmentalism in conflict with established western livelihoods. *Losing Eden* provides a supplement to a study of the history of the United States writ large, or as a prolegomenon to or summation of western environmental history.

While it has that in its favor, the book also points to unresolved problems in western environmental history as a conjunction of regional US history and the subdiscipline of environmental history. These problems are several. First, the history or prehistory of the First Americans, as Dant sensitively names them, is woefully incomplete. Dant provides useful details of the migration through Beringia and the concerning lifeways in the Great Plains, including the extinctions of large animals for which they were in part responsible. What she does not discuss, because it is a lacuna in the literature from which she draws, are the changing glacial conditions of the western landscape over the period she discusses in an early chapter, from roughly 13,000 YBP to European contact. Vast areas of what are now western states, especially Utah, Nevada, and California, were covered by freshwater lakes interconnected by rivers and teeming with fish and other lacus-

trine life. While this has been known since G. K. Gilbert surveyed the relict shorelines of Lakes Bonneville and Lahontan in the nineteenth century, more recent research suggests that Native Americans had been adjusting to profound changes in environmental conditions over a period of perhaps ten millennia, and that the specific conditions of the "arid" West we know today only became so a geological moment before the Spanish began to explore and exploit the region and its peoples (and large freshwater lakes were still a feature of California west of the Sierra). There were similar changes in the glaciated regions, although these are in some ways more comparable to deglaciation in the northern states east of the Mississippi River. The absence of this scholarship is not Dant's fault, but until it is resolved, a very important component—vital for understanding the present as well as the past—of western environmental history and the ***longue durée*** history of Native Americans is missing.

The second of the problems is the way that Dant reduces "environmental" history to economic and political history. Again, this is a problem that is far broader than Dant's achievement; fine exemplars exist for this variety of reduction and Dant is steeped in this literature, which she uses to good effect. The difficulty is that the "environmental" component of work based on this historical schema is too often missing. How do the landscapes of the West differ not only from the eastern states and from western Europe but also from each other? (More interesting, perhaps, is how they differ from Japan or from China. How did Japanese and Chinese immigrants respond to this climate and landscape?) One of the outstanding features of the West is simply how differentiated it is. There are four deserts: Sonoran, Chihuahuan, Mojave, and Great Basin. How are they unlike the rest of the West, and also unlike each other? How are the igneous ranges of California differentiated from the sedimentary Rocky Mountains or the active volcanoes of the Cascades? Similarly, the West is the place where the life zones concept was fully developed. It is easy to see how habitats are shaped by altitude and by latitude, once one grasps this concept. Not all examples of environmental history need begin—or continue—with a grounding in the geomorphology, climatology, and biogeography of a region, but in the case of the American West, this is simply crucial.

A third difficulty is related to this second one. The West is not a coherent region, except as viewed through the lenses of political and economic history. Dant does a good job of inserting the Mormons into her narrative, and crystallizes some characteristics of that particular part of the overall story (which fits like fried beef tongue in a gazpacho) in my mind, but this still left me wondering: is there a coherent story to tell about this region? And even if there is, does it conceal more than it reveals? The West is in some ways better served by a graphical language, beginning with but not limited to maps, than by prose narrative and description. The maps in Donald W. Meinig's four-volume ***The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*** (1986) and William Cronon's maps in ***Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*** (1991) are helpful exemplars. Environmental historians should expand on these to show what they cannot—and therefore do not—tell. Dant includes a handful of maps in her text, but the ones she has chosen are not as good as her prose. She—and environmental history—need better maps, configured by historians and directed at the problems of history. In the same way, graphical representations could be used to clarify the complexity of the western landscape and the histories of land use in the region over time. Indeed, there is currently a renaissance in the use of visual representation, thanks to the works of Edward Tufte, such as ***Envisioning Information*** (1990); the technology of geographical information systems; and the explosion of interest in graphing "big data," due to digital technology. Environmental historians need to embrace these directions and shape them for

their own use, and these innovations should be apparent in works such as Dant's.

The forgoing criticisms are focused in the subdiscipline and this regional manifestation of it. ***Losing Eden*** merely instantiates them. There are other smaller problems in the text. The Great Basin Desert, for instance, is not "home to" the Sonoran Desert (p. 18). Lewis and Clark's list of new species found and described in the Great Plains is more problematic than "at least 20 new animal species and 22 new plant species" (pp. 49-50). Far more serious is this: Patricia Nelson Limerick's ***The Legacy of Conquest*** (1987) is acknowledged by a mere glancing reference in the text, even though that work clearly informs Dant's. (Worse, Limerick is renamed "Patrick" in the index.) John McPhee's works are also missing, but that is excusable. Eliding Limerick's rather large contribution to the literature (while properly demonstrating familiarity with Richard White's and citing it) is not.

The environmental history of the American West is essential for understanding the expansion of the United States and of its state capacities, from conservation to the prosecution of thermonuclear war. Accordingly, a compact edition of that history is a worthwhile project, and Dant has done a solid if conventional job of organizing this history in a way that I fully recognize, having taught a course titled Western Environmental History for several years. But it is high time that the body of literature from which Dant draws gets a substantial revision, and provides a more complete image of this history.