

**Review: Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in
the American West**

By Mark Fiege

Reviewed by [Cain Allen](#)

Oregon Historical Quarterly, Portland, USA

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Mark Fiege. *Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1999. 323 pp. ISBN: 0-295-97757-4 (softcover). US \$19.95. Recycled, acid-free paper.

Irrigated agriculture is not exactly the sexiest subject under the sun; in fact, sometimes it can be downright boring. But irrigation is an important part of the environmental history of the American West, and as such, it has not lacked attention from scholars. However, while much important research has been done on irrigated agriculture in California, very little has been written on irrigation in the Pacific Northwest, a region that, like the Golden State, has benefited immensely from private and public agricultural development of arid lands.

Mark Fiege, a professor of history at Colorado State University, has helped fill this historiographic gap with *Irrigated Eden*, an environmental history of irrigation in Idaho's Snake River Valley. He has taken what could be a deadly dull topic and turned it into a fascinating tale of the subtle and often unforeseen interactions between humans and the non-human world during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Written in a lively style with a strong narrative focus throughout, *Irrigated Eden* is certainly one of the finest histories of Northwest agriculture on the shelves.

Chapter one sets the stage for the later chapters, introducing readers to the Snake River Valley and to the culture and technology of irrigation. The author also introduces his primary argument here, an argument that he sums up quite nicely in the conclusion: "In attempting to change and control a dynamic environment, irrigators themselves changed. Culture and nature, social system and natural system, shaped each other: the result was a hybrid landscape and a hybrid social order" (p. 207). Fiege fleshes out this argument in the next five chapters, which cover the hybrid habitats created by irrigation; the hybrid social orders that farmers developed to deal with the contingencies of farming in an arid region; labor and irrigated landscapes; how both the environment and the market shaped the types of crops produced in the Snake River Valley; and the myths and metaphors associated with irrigation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Fiege makes many keen insights throughout the book, most centered on the reciprocal relationship between humans and the non-human world. His analysis of seepage, for example, is fascinating. He points out that not only did the infiltration of water from fields and canals into the water table undermine the concept of private property, it also required engineers and farmers to reclaim from water the land they "had first sought to reclaim from aridity" (p. 31). "Pest" species, both plant and animal, also challenged irrigators' attempts to impose their artificial boundaries on an uncooperative environment. "Much as seeping irrigation water helped to establish a hydrological commons," Fiege writes, "various mobile organisms helped to establish an ecological one" (p. 60).

Despite its many insights, however, the book is not without its problems. Fiege's strong focus comes from the use of a narrative device that sometimes leads to overstatements and baffling omissions. While there is no disputing that irrigation did indeed create a highly modified ecosystem with mixed natural and human elements, that is, a hybrid landscape, Fiege takes this insight too far, resulting in the occasional provocative overstatement.

He argues, for example, that "rather than turn the Snake into plumbing (a favorite metaphor of environmentalists and developers alike), dams instead became part of the river system itself" (p. 205). This is true only in a very simplistic, mechanical sense. If a river is nothing but a conglomeration of molecules subject to certain hydrologic laws, dams only modify the flow of energy and matter, they do not destroy it. A dammed river, despite human attempts at total control, is still subject to the same hydrologic laws as a free-flowing river. But if a river is viewed as a highly complex natural system characterized by a unique assemblage of native plants and animals, dams become agents of destruction that radically alter, and sometimes completely eradicate, native biota, whether or not humans achieve the degree of control they first set out to gain. In order to make his point that environmentalists tell simplistic stories about environmental destruction, Fiege refuses to acknowledge the unique and irreplaceable character of native ecosystems. He makes a point of arguing that while dams may destroy some native plants and animals, other plants and animals, both native and non-native, will take their place. Therefore, ecological change is neither good nor bad, only neutral.

Had he paid any attention to Indians, who disappointingly warrant only two or three passing references, I do not believe he could have viewed environmental change in such neutral terms. Environmental change is not neutral when salmon no longer swim up the river to feed your people, when the elk you depend on no longer have wintering habitat because dams and agricultural development have destroyed lowland riparian areas, or when

white men's dams flood tens of thousands of acres of your land, as happened with the Shoshone-Bannocks and other Indian nations in the Snake River Basin.

Fiege argues in his conclusion that while "it is true that Americans have often severely disrupted the environment . . . we need to acknowledge that the story of the ruined Eden is another of the many masks that prevent us from realistically viewing the world as it is" (p. 208). I would counter by saying that Fiege, in arguing that declensionist narratives obscure as much as they reveal and in substituting his own "the truth is in the middle" narrative, has succeeded only in telling another story. It is a fascinating story to be sure, and a well told one at that, but I do not believe it comes any closer to a "realistic" portrayal of the world than stories that emphasize the destruction of native ecosystems. Historians are above all else storytellers, and what kind of stories we tell is just a matter of emphasis and perspective.

That said, I highly recommend *Irrigated Agriculture*. It's a well-written, deeply researched, thoughtful book that will help set the tone for future studies not only of irrigated agriculture, but of the history of environmental change in general. That it is so provocative makes it all the more worth reading.

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