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Bad Land

Jonathan Raban recaptures the unique ninety-year history of the Montana plains in a book that is part memoir and part history. The first settlers believed the pamphlets the railroads distributed to promote this arid land, and Raban re-creates the lives of people moving west, people who had read the propaganda and come to eastern Montana to live out their dream. However, after a few successful years, the normal weather—of inadequate rainfall and subzero winters—returned and drove the settlers west.

Some of the most intriguing parts of *BAD LAND: AN AMERICAN ROMANCE* take place in the 1990's. Raban traces the results of the failure of the American Dream not only when it dried up in the scorching sun of eastern Montana in the early decades of the twentieth century, but also later, when the Unabomber and the Montana Freemen made headlines in the latter part of the decade. Raban links the first homesteading failure with the anger and frustration of contemporary middle America.

Yet Raban also sees the beauty of this land and admires those early pioneers, as he admires many of the more recent immigrants. The story of eastern Montana is a story of courage, and Raban tells it in a series of poignant pictures: the scene of the early settlers tapping their fence wire to make crude telephones to talk to each other, for example, or the image of an original homesteader's mother "on her knees every day, crying and praying for rain."

Raban makes the story poetic in his own vivid style, and in the metaphors he uses to carry this history, like the story of Evelyn Cameron. Cameron was an early British settler whose photographs of eastern Montana are some of the best that remain, for she first caught "the treeless breadth and vacancy, more space than place, of the nearby plains."

Sources for Further Study

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