

Introduction

During the summer of 1946, Bernard DeVoto toured the American West by automobile. He had grown up in the West; and after two decades of writing, he had established himself as an expert on the region. Having just completed two book-length manuscripts on the West, one a novel and the other an award-winning history of the mountain fur trade, DeVoto set out to see both the national parks and the northwest passage of Lewis and Clark in preparation for a book on that storied expedition.¹ He planned to support the more-than-thirteen-thousand-mile journey by writing articles on his venture for popular magazines, but by the end of the second month he had determined to enlist his writing against those westerners desirous of ruinously exploiting the region's extensive public lands. In the words of writer Wallace Stegner, his friend and a fellow westerner, "DeVoto went West in 1946 a historian and tourist. He came back an embattled conservationist."²

He began his crusade against western efforts to privatize the public domain with a pair of long essays in the December 1946 and January 1947 issues of *Harper's Magazine*. During the nine years until his death in November 1955, he published nearly three dozen essays advocating the importance of federal control over, as well as the conservation of, the nation's public lands. Most of these essays appeared in his monthly *Harper's* column, The Easy Chair; the others were longer articles in *Harper's* and in a variety of popular magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier's*. Together, they represented a sustained, impassioned, and complex argument for the conservation of public lands, which speaks eloquently today to the same issues that cause heated debates in Congress and around the West.

DeVoto began by describing the westerner's penchant for cooperating with nonwestern capitalists in liquidating the region's resources.

He then charged western stockmen, especially cattle ranchers, with overgrazing fragile river watersheds, much of them national forest lands, and thereby causing serious environmental degradation and flooding. He reported on the stockmen's and their Republican congressional allies' proposed legislation for "returning" the public lands to the people. With the election of Democrat Harry Truman as president in 1948, the challenge to the public lands temporarily subsided, and DeVoto turned his attention to the national parks and monuments, which were suffering the effects of a declining budget and threatened by development proposals of the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps of Engineers. However, in 1951 the pending return of a Republican administration advocating less government and greater local control stirred him to resume his defense of the public domain.

DeVoto's West collects twenty-two of DeVoto's essays on the American West and conservation issues. They offer a sampling of his western sensibilities and provide a coherent, lively, and timely argument for the conservation of the nation's public lands. The essays are grouped into five parts. The first part contains five essays, written between 1927 and 1952, in which DeVoto introduces the reader to his West and lays out his concern for exploitation of its resources. Part II presents five essays from 1947 and 1948, in which he exposes the western "land grab" and develops his argument for keeping the public lands under federal control. In the third part, comprising four essays written between 1947 and 1954, he explores the importance of water and watersheds for erosion and flooding in the West and critiques federal efforts to dam western rivers without proper evaluation of alternatives and consequences. In the four essays in part IV, DeVoto laments Congress's inadequate support of the national parks and the attempts to develop resources in these preserved areas. Part V contains four essays dating from 1951 to 1955, which decry the Eisenhower administration's collaboration with western interests to once again privatize and develop the public lands.



DeVoto earned his living as a professional writer. He worked as a novelist, short story writer, literary critic, historian, essayist, editor, and teacher. His novels did not sell well. His short stories and serialized novels earned him money, but they are not memorable. He gained some

recognition for literary criticism, especially a book-length study of Mark Twain.³ He also derived income from essays, editing, and, later, historical writing. As an essayist, DeVoto wrote with a vigorous, iconoclastic, and at times vituperative style. He commented on the American scene and the development of American civilization. Toward the end of his career, he energetically defended Americans' civil rights against McCarthyism and fought for the conservation of our national resources. While maintaining this career as an essayist, DeVoto turned to writing the history of American western exploration. He produced a successful trilogy on the topic and edited *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*.⁴ His historical work displays an astonishing breadth of reading, attention to fact, and a passion for his subject. He wrote history in a narrative style as a deliberate contrast to what he considered to be the boring, pedantic character of most academic history writing.

DeVoto's histories focus on the American West. Although he lived most of his adult life in the East, he considered himself a westerner. He was born in Ogden, Utah, in 1897. His mother was Mormon, his father a Catholic of Italian descent. Some of DeVoto's friends believed that his skepticism of conventional thought came from this parental combination. He wrote in 1940: "I came to conclude that absolutes were a mirage. And in my desert country, mirages are also commonplace."⁵ He enjoyed time spent on his maternal grandfather's nearby farm, hiking in the Wasatch Mountains, and shooting. These experiences remained important to him all of his life. At the same time, he never felt at home in the provincial, post-frontier Mormon society of Utah. Small in stature, brilliant, bookish, brash, and educated in a Catholic school, he felt free of Ogden's social and intellectual constraints only in the nearby mountains or on the farm. Stegner saw DeVoto's love of hiking and especially shooting as the outgrowth of a lonely childhood.⁶ DeVoto remained in Utah through his freshman year at the University of Utah, after which he transferred to Harvard University.

Arriving at Harvard in 1915, DeVoto exuberantly breathed in the air of what he took for intellectual freedom and sophistication. With the exception of brief stints in the army during World War I, back in Ogden after the war, as an English instructor at Northwestern University, and in New York City, he spent his adult years in and around Cambridge,

Massachusetts, making his way as a writer. In 1927, at the age of thirty, DeVoto decided once and for all to make his living with his pen. He aspired to be a novelist, and during the course of his long writing life he published six novels under his own name and four under the pen name of John August.⁷ While working on his novels, none of which received critical acclaim or financial success, he turned out magazine articles, short stories for popular magazines, essays of literary criticism, and book reviews. Although many of these short pieces of social criticism were serious efforts and helped him build a literary reputation, many others, like those for *Collier's* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, were mainly produced for income.⁸ Nonetheless, his sights were set higher than this hackwork. DeVoto enjoyed his first book publishing success in 1932 with *Mark Twain's America*, in which, through a combination of literary criticism, history, and biography, he challenged Van Wyck Brooks's explanation for the sorrowful state of American letters and art.⁹ DeVoto taught writing and literature courses at Harvard in the 1930s, but was eventually rebuffed in his bid for a permanent position. He eagerly taught many summers at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conferences in Vermont, where he jostled and drank with the likes of Wallace Stegner, Robert Frost, and Katherine Anne Porter. He worked in various editorial capacities as well, including editorship of the *Saturday Review of Literature*. In 1935 he accepted the offer to write the monthly column The Easy Chair for *Harper's Magazine*. The Easy Chair was the longest-running editorial feature in American journalism. Only five men occupied the chair before DeVoto, most notably George William Curtis from 1853 to 1892 and William Dean Howells from 1900 to 1920. As a commentator on the American scene, DeVoto had the opportunity in this column to reach a broad audience of American leaders, opinion-makers, and the reading public.¹⁰

Both as a student at Harvard and as a professional writer, DeVoto recognized the distinctiveness and utility of his western roots and sensibilities. In the East, as in Ogden, he was cast as an outsider, but he thrived on the East's intellectual climate and successfully aspired to be part of the intellectual community. Although he addressed a great variety of subjects in his essays, he frequently turned to western topics and themes. At first he scorned the West, and especially Mormon Utah. In an article published in H. L. Mencken's *American Mercury* in 1926

and written in an appropriately Menckonian style, he lambasted Utah for its anti-intellectualism and lack of distinction in letters and the arts.¹¹ Over the years he often charged the West with provincialism for being unable to accept criticism and for giving unqualified praise to anything produced by a westerner.¹² Despite this early alienation, DeVoto slowly developed serious and enduring interest in western history, the influence of the West on American life, and the condition of the contemporary West. He staked out a position as an authority on the West in some early book reviews, articles, and novels. His view of the West deepened, grew more complex, and eventually led to his best work, the historical trilogy published in the 1940s and early 1950s. From his vantage in the East, he could look with some detachment on the West, romanticize its bold landscapes, and yet analyze its failings as well.¹³

Reading John Wesley Powell and Walter Prescott Webb, as well as his childhood in Utah, led DeVoto to believe that the land and climate were the defining features of the region.¹⁴ In this view, the West began where total annual rainfall dipped below twenty inches. Aridity, therefore, was at the heart of his West. The wide-open vistas free of dense vegetation, the striking blue skies, and the ever-present mountain backdrops framed a beautiful landscape, which attracted DeVoto in a way that the environment of the East did not. He favored the high country most of all, that place where he sought personal renewal. At the same time, however, he recognized that the rugged topography and climatic extremes of the West created a harsh environment. "Western geography," he wrote, "is violent. . . . It is a country of blizzards, cloudbursts, northers, chinooks, every kind of sudden storm, of floods, landslides, mudflows, even earthquakes, and the U.S. volcano is Western. . . . You could love such a country but you were bound to hate it, too—and the splits in the Western soul begin here."¹⁵ This understanding of the environment, especially of the importance of aridity and the need for water, informed both his belief in conservation and his analysis of western economics, politics, and social relations.¹⁶

DeVoto grew up in the West as the frontier was passing.¹⁷ He described the period in a 1935 *Harper's* article, "Fossil Remnants of the Frontier," as a "pause between frontier society and industrialism. . . . We were really *fin de siècle*, we were the frontier's afterglow."¹⁸ From the vantage of that childhood experience and of being an expatriate, he

recognized the western myths that writers and westerners themselves believed about the frontier. Ever the skeptic and iconoclast, he set about demythologizing the West. He dismissed both the noble Indian image and the romance of violence as myths. At a time when academics, notably Frederick Jackson Turner, and popular writers celebrated American individualism as born and continually refurbished on the frontier, DeVoto scoffed at the notion, particularly for the arid West, where the hardships of the climate demanded cooperation for survival, let alone success. Frontiersmen were community builders, not rugged individualists, he noted more than once. "How indeed did the frontier community exist at all except by means of a close-knit cooperation? Especially, how did a frontier community in the desert exist?"¹⁹

His physical and intellectual distance from the West freed him to expose western contradictions in a 1934 *Harper's* essay. Like others before him, he described the West as a colony of eastern capital interests, which exercised absentee control and siphoned off large portions of the profits. Despite the heroic pioneering saga of western settlement, westerners became indebted to eastern corporations that exploited the region's great natural resources. Adopting Walter P. Webb's popular thesis, he argued that the markedly different western environment forced this last frontiersman to "ally himself with . . . the Industrial Revolution. . . . The West, then, was born of industrialism. When the age of machinery crossed the hundredth meridian the frontier . . . promptly came under the plow. But industrialism [also] has other products than machines. . . . [T]he pioneer found prepared and waiting there for him the worst of all, financial organization."²⁰ Absentee owners and outside speculators—such as mining companies, railroad corporations, and banks—enriched themselves, despoiled western lands, and left many westerners in debt. He went further, however, with this analysis than westerners liked and charged that regional timbermen, miners, and stockmen, by also favoring speculative development and the exploitation of natural resources, aligned themselves with eastern interests in the "liquidation" of the regional economy in a manner that benefitted a few, while most were hurt. Westerners did so even as they railed against absentee control.

This "split" personality carried over into western politics. Seeing the federal government as part of the eastern establishment and buying

into the frontier myth of western individualism, westerners implored “government to get out of business, to stop impeding initiative, to break the shackles of regulation . . . [while at the same time] demanding as Western right, as compensation for the West, and as assistance toward Western liberation, the expenditure of more federal funds. . . . It shakes down to a platform: get out and give us more money.” In 1946, DeVoto believed that the New Deal and the prosperity of World War II offered the opportunity for the West to achieve at last economic independence. But, he worried, will the West’s traditional habits cause it to sell out to the East? “The West [is] its own worst enemy.”²¹

While DeVoto was developing his critique of the West between 1926 and 1946, he also embarked on a project to write the history of the westward movement. He wanted to tell the story of exploring and settling the western frontier, using his literary skills but keeping close to the factual record. Academic history was too dry, analytical, and devoid of the common folk engaged in the process. Although his novels of the West failed as literature, writing them taught him literary strategies that he brought to his historical narrative. He wrote his history through the exploration of specific stories, often biographical ones, which stood for larger historical processes and themes, a technique called synecdoche.²² He used drama to great effect, and frequently followed several events and stories simultaneously. The trilogy that resulted from his project brought him acclaim and cemented his reputation as a western expert. When his first volume on the western movement, *The Year of Decision: 1846*, came out in 1943, it was selected by the Book of the Month Club and serialized by the *Atlantic*.²³ Many academic historians, however, did not appreciate this book. Even friends in academia such as historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr., whose son traveled west with DeVoto in 1940 for several months, objected that it was not history. On a kinder note, Frederick L. Paxson described DeVoto’s approach as “a brilliant job on the borderland common to the historian, the essayist, and the analyst.” Richard Hofstadter captured the distinction between DeVoto’s literary approach and that of the scholar, declaring: “Had he set out to prove it [the book’s thesis], he would have written analytical history of an epoch, not the narrative history of the year.”²⁴

DeVoto followed *The Year of Decision*, which described the Mexican War, the Oregon and Sante Fe trails, and the eviction of the Mormons,

among other events, with *Across the Wide Missouri* in 1947, winning both the Bancroft and the Pulitzer prizes. Generally viewed as the best of the trilogy, this second book focused on several decades before 1846 to recount the hardships and heroics of the fur trappers, known as mountain men, and to convey the drama and importance of the fur trade in exploring and opening up the West. It ends, appropriately, with the initial encounter of the mountain men with the first wagon train crossing the Oregon Trail in 1839. Five years after his triumph with *Across the Wide Missouri*, DeVoto published *The Course of Empire*, for which he received the National Book Award.²⁵ Intending originally to write a narrative about the Lewis and Clark expedition, he instead placed the epic American crossing of the continent between 1804 and 1806 within the larger story of European exploration of North America. These three histories, along with his writing in a variety of forms over the course of more than two decades, gained him election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, as well as an honorary degree from the University of Colorado—high recognition from a western institution at a time when many westerners still reviled this native son.²⁶

Despite the fact that he spent little time in the West until 1940, and then only to travel for extended periods a few times, he was able to bring the people and landscape of the frontier West to life in his historical writing.²⁷ Wallace Stegner believed that DeVoto was too judgmental to write good novels of the West. In fiction he had to speak through other people and create an imaginary world. Instead, Stegner declared, “He wanted to judge, he wanted to denounce, he wanted to express his own ideas and his own feelings. He wasn’t willing to suppress himself quite enough—or he didn’t know how.”²⁸ Stegner concluded, “when he wrote history, when he brought together the whole story of the West as frontier, as dream and discovery, exploration and confrontation, he would be magnificent.”²⁹ He could do this while living in the East because he devoured historical knowledge. “He was,” in Stegner’s words, “loaded, he was a learned man.”³⁰ He relied on the perceptions of the participants when the record permitted; and as his friend and fellow writer Catherine Drinker Bowen observed, “maps lined his study walls.”³¹ The West of his childhood remained with him forever; his friends believed that this experience gave him special in-

sight and passion for the region.³² DeVoto may have renounced his western roots early in his career and become an exile, but through his writing about the West he reconciled his differences and “came home.”³³

DeVoto’s ambiguous relationship with the West and his expatriation in the East may have been, as some friends believed, partially responsible for his adopting a national or continental perspective of the westward movement and of the West, instead of a regional or provincial one. In his foreword to Stegner’s book on John Wesley Powell, DeVoto argued that historians misunderstood “the meaning of the West in American history” because they persisted in seeing its history as “merely sectional,” outside the mainstream of national history. This is nonsense, he averred, for “the experience of the West is just as inseparable from the central energies of American history [as other regions’ experiences are].”³⁴ The grand theme of his trilogy was not simply the West, but instead “the development of the continental nation.”³⁵ Bowen quoted DeVoto as writing, “As a historian . . . I have interested myself in the growth among the American people of the feeling that they were properly a single nation between two oceans; in the development of what I have called the continental mind.”³⁶ It was this ability to see the West as part of the national whole, despite the region’s relatively recent settlement, its “colonial” economic and political status, its particularistic myths, and its distinctive environment, that allowed DeVoto to see the vast public lands of the West as a national resource, not simply a regional one. This insight, along with his passion for the landscape, lay at the root of his defense of the public lands in 1946.



Having completed by spring 1946 the manuscript for *Across the Wide Missouri* and also a novel set in the West, *Mountain Time*, DeVoto turned his attention to the long-anticipated journey around the West. Already planning a book on the Lewis and Clark expedition, he felt the need to see the explorers’ route—the topography, rivers, mountains, and forts—for himself. His last trip to the West in 1940 with Arthur Schlesinger Jr. had inspired him to return, but the war intervened, making such travel impossible. With the war over, he piled his family

into the car and set out on a three-month tour of the northern half of the West. In addition to the Lewis and Clark sites, DeVoto spent time meeting with friends and officials of the National Park Service and the National Forest Service. They informed him of the problems afflicting the public lands, ranging from neglected maintenance to overgrazing of mountainous watersheds, erosion, and flooding. He also learned of resolutions passed by the American Livestock Association and the National Woolgrowers Association to cede public lands to the states. Given the critique of the West he had been developing over the years, he understood the significance of this issue for the region's future, and inserted himself into the brewing controversy.³⁷

Federal management of the public lands held the best hope, in DeVoto's view, for wise use rather than rampant exploitation of the land's finite natural resources, as well as for protection of critical mountain watersheds, which would diminish erosion and ruinous downstream flooding. Because the public lands, although concentrated in western states, constituted a national resource, he believed it to be not only necessary, but also appropriate, for the lands to remain under the control of the federal government. Accordingly, he wished to bring the plot to remove the public lands from national control, the land grab as he called it, to the attention of the American public, so that political pressure would be put on Congress not to pass such legislation.

DeVoto opened his attack on the westerners' land grab with three essays in back-to-back issues of *Harper's*. In the first essay, "The Anxious West," he introduced westerners to his readers. He described their accent, dress, food preferences, and predilection for drinking and gambling. He sketched out some western myths, especially the romance of cattle ranching, and extolled the wide-open spaces and westerners' love of outdoor life. But as the essay progressed, a darker tone emerged. Intellectuals and the wealthy of the West, he wrote, are unhappy because of its economic and cultural colonialism, while at the same time westerners cooperate with eastern interests in exploiting the region's resources. This conclusion set the stage for the sequel in the next issue.³⁸

In "The West Against Itself," DeVoto reviewed the region's long history of natural resource exploitation.³⁹ He then reported how New Deal policies of forest restoration, land reclamation, rural electrification, and subsidies for industrial development had given the West

the opportunity to end resource liquidation and break the colonial cycle. However, he lamented, the West's tradition of ruinous exploitation threatened this chance for a more sustainable future. Using the popular western themes of individualism, local control, and the cattle ranching myth to rally political support, a small group of western stockmen, businessmen, and politicians was determined to open all unreserved public domain and the national forests to the cattle and sheep industries for grazing. In the same January 1947 *Harper's* issue, DeVoto focused his Easy Chair column on the destructive flooding caused by clear-cut logging and the overgrazing of cattle in fragile western watersheds.⁴⁰

These three essays began a series, published during 1947 and 1948, in which DeVoto exposed the goals and methods of the western land grab and warned of its dire consequences for the environment and the future of the West. He described the bills placed before Congress, named the senators and congressmen proposing the legislation, and attacked the sheep- and cattle-grazing associations and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which put their considerable political and financial muscle behind the proposals. He ridiculed the proponents' orchestrated and biased Congressional hearings on the issue and deemed the strategy of returning public lands to the states only a first step toward ultimate privatization. He particularly enjoyed his opponents' outrage at the essays and mocked their characterization of him and his fellow conservationists as communist New Dealers. Finally, in 1948 he became partisan, charging that Republicans were leading this assault on the public lands and ironically turning their back on the great Republican conservationist heritage of Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot. The *Harper's* publishers worried that DeVoto was becoming too controversial.

The western plan in the 1940s to divest the federal government of control over the public lands was only the latest in a series of such efforts over the years. DeVoto was well aware of this fact.⁴¹ Throughout the nineteenth century, federal policy was to dispose of the public domain as rapidly as possible in support of unrestricted settlement and development. In the second half of the century, however, a few people, such as George Perkins Marsh, John Muir, John Wesley Powell, and Carl Schurz, recognized the exhaustibility of our natural resources,

urged more responsible use of them, and even advocated the preservation of specific places. In the final three decades of the century, Congress erected the legislative foundation to set aside areas of the public domain for parks, dam sites, and forest reserves. By World War I, more than 150 million acres had been reserved as national forests, especially under the leadership of President Theodore Roosevelt and Chief of the Bureau of Forestry Gifford Pinchot. Moreover, the Supreme Court had decided in *U.S. v. Light* that “all public lands are held in trust for the people of the whole country.”⁴² From the outset, reservation of public lands under federal control engendered strong opposition from ranchers, land speculators, irrigation companies, timbermen, miners, and those sympathetic with states rights issues. The West’s traditional resentment of the East and the federal government and a growing sense of western regional identity exacerbated the strong feelings. Although they failed in their efforts to have forest reserves ceded to the states, western opponents did score some victories. But, the progressive era conservation philosophy—best captured in the phrase “the greatest good to the greatest number for the longest time”—prevailed.⁴³

Between the world wars, more utilitarian goals steered land policy. Although recreational uses of parks and forest lands increased and preservation of wilderness refuges gained some credence from the advocacy of Aldo Leopold and Robert Marshall, the building of large dams for irrigation and urban water supplies and the Army Corps of Engineers’ river projects for flood control, power generation, and improved navigation typified the period. The western graziers also pushed for the opening of unreserved public lands, and the subsequent struggle with conservationists culminated in the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934, which established federal control over grazing. The new Grazing Service’s efforts to set fees for use of these lands continued the long fight over public lands. Opponents of federal control gained a victory in 1946, when the Grazing Service was combined with the General Land Office to form a weak Bureau of Land Management. This success in weakening federal control over grazing emboldened the stockmen to push once again for the transfer of public lands to the states or even to private ownership. Senator E. V. Robertson of Wyoming proposed a bill giving unreserved lands to the states and appointing a commission

to evaluate all federal lands, thereby creating the potential for dismantling the national parks, forests, and wildlife areas.⁴⁴

DeVoto's crusade against the land grab came at a time when conservation groups were weak and elitist in approach. Using *The Easy Chair* as bully pulpit and developing a personal network of like-minded conservationists, he gleaned information from friends in Washington and around the West, urged colleagues like Wallace Stegner to write articles, and orchestrated the placing of articles in popular magazines.⁴⁵ The proposed legislation of Wyoming Congressman Frank Barrett and Senator Robertson failed, and the election of Democrat Harry S. Truman as president temporarily ended this phase of what recent writers have called the Sagebrush Rebellion.

DeVoto kept alive the issue of conservation of public lands. He favorably reviewed and publicized new conservation books and wrote several articles on the national forests, watershed protection, and the national parks for magazines other than *Harper's*. In January 1948, after receiving acclaim for *Across the Wide Missouri* and spearheading the attack on the land grab, he was appointed by Secretary of the Interior Julius Krug to the National Park System Advisory Board. This position expanded DeVoto's conservation network, provided inspection tours of the national parks, and aligned him with the National Park Service.⁴⁶

Aridity had been at the heart of DeVoto's conception of what shaped the West, and as he looked to the future he still saw water as the defining issue. In the late 1940s, he described the unusual floods and mudflows occurring as a result of timber clear-cutting and overgrazing in mountain watersheds. Restoration projects by the National Forest Service and the Soil Conservation Service underscored both the causes and the solution. By the 1950s, DeVoto drew his readers' attention to the increasing demand for water by continued agricultural and industrial development of the West. He worried that the Bureau of Reclamation was preparing dam projects of enormous expense and consequence without proper oversight, particularly as to interstate implications and national priorities. The public needed to be informed, DeVoto believed, about the bureau's plans, to understand the consequences of these plans, and to let Congress know its sentiments on the issue.⁴⁷

Even as he developed the themes of watershed protection and enormous dam projects, DeVoto returned to his earlier defense of federal control over public lands. In 1951 DeVoto launched a new series of essays in *Harper's* against what he saw as a renewed western Republican assault on public lands. Republican legislative policies, he wrote, constituted another land grab by the "boys in the backroom." Moreover, he charged that the western position was part of the traditional anti-governmental attitude of "get out and give us more money."⁴⁸ The federal government's control over public lands and hence its regulation of grazing, logging, mining, and oil drilling on these lands, as imperfect as such regulation was, provided the only protection of resources and watersheds. Local control and private ownership of the West's natural resources and the reduction of governmental interference, which Republican policy proposed, would, in DeVoto's opinion, not only reverse years of conservation but also destroy the West in the long run. Unlike his crusade of the 1940s, this campaign became more politically partisan as DeVoto urged Democrats to contest aggressively the Eisenhower administration. Conservation, he predicted, would be a winning issue. For the first time in his career, he even hitched his interests to electoral politics, first advising Adlai Stevenson in the 1952 presidential campaign and later, during the last few years of his life, maintaining a relationship with the Illinois senator over conservation issues.⁴⁹ He argued that water for western cities and recreation were becoming higher public priorities for the use of the public lands than traditional resource activities. Although written in the 1950s, this insight into the changing priorities of the West has largely come true and captures one of the key political divisions between the "old" and the "new" West today.⁵⁰

While DeVoto vigorously attacked Republican land policies in the 1950s, he also revealed the deteriorating conditions of the national parks and development threats to their protected status. In 1949 he outlined the National Park Service's budgetary dilemma. Inattention during the war, rising postwar attendance, and congressional demands for new parks overwhelmed the Park Service's already inadequate funding. Consequently, the Park Service could not properly address vandalism, deteriorating public facilities, and planned improvements.⁵¹ Four years later, DeVoto rehearsed similar concerns and added to them the de-

clining morale of park rangers living in shabby park housing, facing rent increases, and depending more and more on their wives' working for private businesses. He proposed closing the most popular national parks in order that the anticipated public outcry would pressure Congress for increased funding.⁵²

Perhaps a more serious threat to the parks was the pressure on Congress, often from within government, to legislate exceptions to the principle of no resource exploitation in the parks, which was established with the creation of the National Park Service in 1916. DeVoto first described the threat to the parks in a 1950 *Saturday Evening Post* article, and then returned to the issue in 1954 and 1955 in *The Easy Chair*, when the new secretary of the interior, Douglas McKay, recommended allowing dam projects in a national monument.⁵³ Whereas some western interests, supported by congressional allies, had often coveted the parks' mineral and timber resources, this time they joined forces with the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps of Engineers to develop the parks' water resources. DeVoto specifically denounced Bureau and Corps plans to construct dams and holding reservoirs or lakes in Dinosaur National Monument in Colorado's Green River valley. He also noted projects planned for other parks and monuments, including Glacier National Park and Kentucky's Mammoth Cave National Park. He believed that the estimated benefits of flood control, irrigation, and recreation not only could be produced by dam projects at alternative sites outside the parks, but also did not outweigh the principle of the inviolate protection of the national parks. If the public knew what legislators, governmental agencies, and a few western interests were plotting in smoke-filled backrooms, it would vociferously demand, DeVoto claimed, the parks' complete protection. He intended to let the public know. Once Congress breached the principle, he wrote in 1954, "the national park as we know it, as it was intended to be, will be open to destruction."⁵⁴ Although he recognized that the Colorado River's water would be necessary for western cities, he advocated a full and unbiased review of all developmental possibilities, especially those not in parks.

Many historians and environmentalists believe that the modern environmental movement emerged with the successful fight to stop the construction of the Echo Park Dam in Dinosaur National Monument.

What had been prior to World War II largely a conservation movement interested in the wise and efficient development of natural resources broadened in the two decades after the war into more of a middle-class movement concerned with the amenities and quality of life provided by the natural environment. While fundamental social changes in American society lay at the heart of this transformation, the Bureau of Reclamation's plan to erect a dam and submerge a scenic canyon of the Green River in northwest Colorado and northeast Utah as part of the Colorado River Storage Project (CRSP) politicized the Wilderness Society, led by Howard Zahniser, and the Sierra Club, under David Brower. They made the Echo Park Dam proposal a national issue through direct mail campaigns, a book edited by Wallace Stegner, articles in newspapers and magazines, and even a movie. The battle highlighted the conflict between development and wilderness amenity values; it not only challenged the prevailing ethos of development but also pitted national priorities against regional and local ones. These newly energized environmental organizations had found a means and constituency to pursue their preservationist objectives in the future.⁵⁵

DeVoto called the American public's attention to the threat posed by governmental development plans to the national parks in his 1950 *Saturday Evening Post* article, "Shall We Let Them Ruin the National Parks?" which the *Reader's Digest* reprinted for an even broader audience. The clamor following his 1953 proposal in *The Easy Chair* to close the parks is credited as a critical step in garnering public support for the parks in the face of congressional neglect and even direct threat to their integrity.⁵⁶ In his biography of DeVoto, Wallace Stegner underscored DeVoto's role not only in publicizing the fight against Echo Park Dam but also in building the new environmental movement.⁵⁷

DeVoto's defense of the public lands embraced both traditional and new environmental positions. In a conservationist manner, he advocated federal control of the public lands as the best means to protect and restore important western watersheds and timber resources. Moreover, since the public lands were national resources—not regional ones, as western opponents argued—he appealed to a national audience to express its opinion and pressure Congress. As DeVoto became more involved in public lands issues, he expressed the impor-

tance of preserving scenic places for public enjoyment and personal renewal.⁵⁸ DeVoto believed development was necessary and inevitable, but not at the expense of specifically reserved areas. The principle of preservation embodied in the 1916 act creating the national parks was sacrosanct.

DeVoto wrote feverishly for his conservation agenda once the Eisenhower administration was in place, but he did not live to see the successes (and failures) of his fight. He died on November 13, 1955, five months before Congress passed the CRSP bill without the Echo Park Dam component. He had been recognized as a champion of conservation before his death. People and organizations throughout the movement trusted and depended on him. The Sierra Club had made him an honorary member.⁵⁹ After his death more acclaim came his way. His friend Arthur Schlesinger Jr. observed in 1963: "He was the first conservationist in nearly half a century . . . to command a national audience. . . . No man did more to arouse public interest against this reversal [of conservation policy] than DeVoto."⁶⁰ In a similar assessment, Stegner wrote, "In the years before conservation and environmental concern became a mass movement and a shibboleth, *The Easy Chair* was its stoutest champion."⁶¹ Indeed, DeVoto was instrumental in building a conservation lobby. Senator Richard Neuberger of Oregon, an ally in the long fight, exclaimed that DeVoto was "the most illustrious conservationist who has lived in modern times."⁶² Stegner believed DeVoto should be ranked with conservationist heroes like George Perkins Marsh, George Wesley Powell, Karl Schurz, Gifford Pinchot, and Theodore Roosevelt.⁶³ Stegner had been prompted to enter the conservation foray in the mid-1940s by DeVoto, and many saw Stegner as carrying on his role. Stegner never believed he could do that with the style or energy of his friend. Stegner recalled, in reflecting on the aftermath of DeVoto's death, that "editorial writers and politicians and conservationists memorialized him and regretted his passing and wondered who would do his work. They were agreed it would take three men. They called him hardheaded and softhearted, the nation's environmental conscience and liberty's watchdog, the West's most comprehensive historian and most affectionate spokesman and most acid critic."⁶⁴ Forest Service friends and others scattered his ashes over a favorite spot of his near the Lochsa River in Idaho, dedicated a grove of

western red cedar to him in the surrounding Clearwater National Forest, and erected a plaque in his memory.⁶⁵



The passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964, which authorized the setting aside of large areas as wilderness free of commercial development, represented a victory for the Wilderness Society, the Sierra Club, and other preservationists, who had been fighting for the concept for more than a decade. It was the culmination of the forces unleashed in the Echo Park Dam controversy. But, the Wilderness Act and others that followed it also rekindled the anti-public lands movement that had struggled periodically against federal control since the 1880s. By 1980 a full-fledged, western sagebrush rebellion was once again underway, demanding the “return” of federal lands to the states, where local interests could manage the lands better than absentee eastern, governmental bureaucrats. Buoyed in 1980 by the vocal support of the newly elected, western president, Ronald Reagan, and his sympathetic and combative secretary of the interior, James Watt, as well as by the outspoken backing of key politicians such as Utah’s Senator Orrin Hatch, western “rebels” passed state legislation asserting state control of public lands and staged a conference in Salt Lake City akin to events in the 1940s, which had whipped up support for transferring the lands. Although this recent “land grab” seemed on the verge of success by 1982, it, like others before it, failed to effect the desired result. Law did not support the concept of “return.” Alarmed by threats to wilderness areas, preservationists rallied their national constituency behind federal control. High-profile political supporters of the “rebels” did not follow through in Washington, and Watt’s verbal excesses discredited the movement. Moreover, as DeVoto had understood in the 1950s, the West itself was changing so that rapidly growing western urban areas concerned with the public lands’ amenity values were gaining political clout at the expense of the traditional, rural resource interests. As it had in DeVoto’s time, the public lands issue raised national versus local concerns, the West against the East, urban versus rural views, and long-standing anti-federal government feelings. The rebellion did result in the establishment of a process of negotiated settlements about management policies for the public lands. But, DeVoto would have been

pleased by the continuation of public lands under federal control for the use of the nation as a whole.⁶⁶

Because the public lands issue involves contradictions in fundamental American values, it never is completely resolved after each period of debate. The Republican electoral victory of 1994, which resulted in that party's control of Congress for the first time since the middle of the century, unleashed again those westerners who wished to obtain private control of public lands. That impetus has carried on under George W. Bush's concern to increase energy production by tapping the resources of public lands. For example, Don Young, representative from Alaska, and the two senators from his state, Ted Stevens and Frank Murkowski, vigorously advocated widespread development of resources on public lands. They attacked the conservationists who wish to preserve Alaskan natural areas from private development under the protection of national parks and wilderness areas, tighter Forest Service regulations, and enforcement of the Endangered Species Act. Similarly, efforts in the 1990s by Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt to raise grazing fees on public lands encountered arguments by western stockmen and politicians resembling those propounded in the 1940s and 1950s. DeVoto would have found the issues and language familiar and exasperating. "They [environmentalists] are Communists," Congressman Young said in September 1998. "They believe in the communal ownership of all natural resources, including the land."⁶⁷ Headlines of newspaper and magazine articles are also familiar: "The Endangered West," "Open for Business," "Range Reform," "The Rancher Subsidy," or "The Wild West's Not-So-Natural Disasters." Except for the fact that he had been dead for forty years, DeVoto himself could have been suspected of writing the title of a 1995 *New York Times* editorial: "The Congressional Land Grab."⁶⁸

Bernard DeVoto is no longer a commonly recognized name of American letters. Yet, his western history trilogy still reads well today. Nor is he commonly recognized in the pantheon of conservation heroes. Yet, his essays on American conservation should be considered American land classics. Despite their being a half century old, DeVoto's essays have surprising currency today. Readers of his ten-year crusade to protect public lands will be struck by the similarity of goals, language, and issues with this latest reincarnation of the exploitation

versus conservation debate. Although in 1955 DeVoto republished five of the *Harper's* pieces in the collection of essays entitled *The Easy Chair*, they and the others of this new collection deserve, perhaps demand, republication a half century later when their style, passion, and insight “retain an astonishing vitality” and provide an important perspective on current land policy debates. Writing in 1985, Stegner doubted “that any body of like essays from the twenties, thirties, and forties would prove, on examination, to have dated so little.” Moreover, he concluded that DeVoto’s essays, including those on western lands and conservation, will be “found as near as such things come to being permanent, a part of the tradition, a part of the literature.”⁶⁹

NOTES

1. *Across the Wide Missouri* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), and *Mountain Time* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1947).
2. Wallace Stegner, *The Uneasy Chair: A Biography of Bernard DeVoto* (Salt Lake City, UT: Gibbs Smith, 1988), 297.
3. *Mark Twain's America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1932).
4. *The Journals of Lewis and Clark* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1953).
5. As quoted in Catherine Drinker Bowen, “The Historian,” in *Four Portraits and One Subject: Bernard DeVoto* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), 21.
6. Wallace Stegner, *The Sound of Mountain Water* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985; originally written in 1960), 259; and Stegner, “The Personality,” in *Four Portraits*, 91.
7. Stegner, *Sound of Mountain Water*, 267. Stegner noted that DeVoto wrote a seventh novel and part of an eighth, neither of which was published. The four novels published under a pen name, John August, were serialized for magazines.
8. Wallace Stegner and Richard W. Etulain, *Conversations with Wallace Stegner on Western History and Literature* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, rev. ed., 1990), 171.
9. Stegner, *Sound of Mountain Water*, 271; and Stegner, *Uneasy Chair*, 106–15.
10. Bernard DeVoto, *The Easy Chair* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1955), vii–ix.
11. “Utah,” *American Mercury* 7 (March 1926): 317–23.