

Making the Past Present: The Art and Practice of Writing the American West



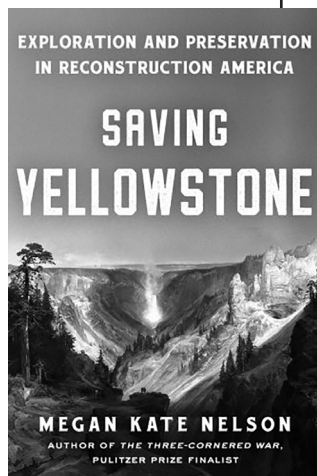
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The American West has long been an enigmatic region. Its history provides endless fodder for films, novels, art, and fashion, all of which blend myth and reality into compelling stories that provide iconic and sometimes wildly inaccurate portraits of its landscapes and people. But the West has also been deeply influential and rejuvenating for the nation and all who have called it home. The writer Wallace Stegner concedes that “If I had not been able periodically to renew myself in the mountains and deserts of western America I would be very nearly bughouse” – he called the wild places of the West the nation’s “geography of hope.”

*Historian and author Megan Kate Nelson was born and raised in Colorado and has found the region inspirational – indeed, the West itself acts like a central character in both of her recent books: *Saving Yellowstone: Exploration and Preservation in Reconstruction America* (2022) – winner of the 2023 *Spur Award for Historical Nonfiction*, and *The Three-Cornered War: The Union, the Confederacy, and Native Peoples in the Fight for the West* (2020) – a finalist for the*

A Conversation with Megan Kate Nelson



2021 Pulitzer Prize in History. Nelson's career trajectory seemed typically academic – a B.A. from Harvard, Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Iowa, tenure-track faculty appointments – until she made a major, personal pivot to full-time writing with obvious success.

In September of 2023, Nelson came to Weber State University to give the inaugural Sadler American West Lecture entitled "Saving Yellowstone: The Creation of a National Icon." Endowed by former history professor and dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Richard Sadler, and his wife, Claudia, Nelson's lecture examined Yellowstone's history as a crossroads of Indigenous trade and travel, its

exploration by American scientists, and the debates about its designation as the world's first national park. The story she tells is uniquely compelling because it is situated within the history of Reconstruction, and neither the Civil War nor this period tends to feature the West as an important theater. Yet as Nelson's talk and books demonstrate, this is a significant historical oversight.

Dr. Nelson is every bit as delightful and charming in person as her photograph conveys. I had the opportunity to spend time with her during her campus visit and to continue a correspondence over the ensuing months. Our conversation below captures both of these elements.

Thanks so much for talking with me about your career, your "process," and your most recent book, *Saving Yellowstone: Exploration and Preservation in Reconstruction America*. I'd like to start big-picture and have you tell us about your career trajectory and the major pivot points you've experienced. I'm particularly intrigued by the jump you made from academia to full-time writing. That's a frightening leap for some to contemplate. How did you make the decision, and what insights do you have to share with others who might be wondering if a similar move is advisable for them?

Ah, yes, the leap away from academia! It was definitely a leap of faith. One important thing to know is that I had been successful on the job market after earning my Ph.D. in 2002 and had been in two tenure-track positions, in Texas and California. And then, for family reasons (which is often the case in academia), I had to figure out how to get back to Boston, where

my husband was living. I took a research leave in 2008-2009 (for my second book, *Ruin Nation*), figuring that I could go on the market that year and find a position somewhere in New England. But in the fall of 2008, the banks imploded, and the market crashed, and all the academic job searches were canceled. So, I had a choice: stay in Boston and jump off the tenure-track for a year or two, or go back to California by myself and do the bicoastal long-distance family thing. I chose the former. I was able to teach at Harvard as an adjunct for the next few years, which was lovely. But what I did not anticipate was that publishing *Ruin Nation* in 2012 and going on the market as an adjunct with two books made me unhireable. I was too experienced for an assistant professor position, and no department would give me tenure off the adjunct track.

I had been thinking about the project that ultimately became *The Three-Cornered War* for a few years and thought it might be

a trade book. But honestly, I didn't really know. I discussed it with my husband, and we decided I should give two years to researching the Civil War in the Southwest, writing up the proposal, and trying to get an agent to sell the book. If that didn't work out, I would go find something else to do. Politics, probably. But much to my surprise, it did work out. (I should note that I could only do this because I live with a great deal of financial privilege; we were able to pay the bills while I researched and wrote. This is not a possibility for many people, and I am very aware of that.) I always advise graduate students to be thinking of *all* the possible jobs they might want, early on in grad school. Humanities programs train students to do a lot of useful things that are transferrable to other fields. Depending on what you find most fulfilling and enjoyable, you can write, edit, research, advise, or teach. And you can stand up in front of people and talk (and run meetings!), which are rare skills. Although academia often convinces us that there is only one viable future for people with Ph.D.s in the humanities (the professorial track), that is not true.

Let me, as a follow-up, ask, why did you decide to be a writer, and why history? For someone who might be new to you and your work, how would you describe your style? Who has influenced your writing, both topically and stylistically? Was there a particular author or book who/that rearranged the furniture in your head? Riffing on John Cusack in High Fidelity, what are your top five books of all time?

I had always been interested in writing, and when I surveyed my skills and asked myself what I liked most about the academic life, I realized that it was writing that I enjoyed the most. I also wanted to break free from the rather rigid expectations for academic writing. I thought that trade history would allow me to experiment more and write in a narrative mode, which I had never done

before. It is so fun, and I love it. My Ph.D. is in American Studies, which trained me in history, literature, art history, and landscape studies. Before I started writing my dissertation, I decided that cultural and environmental history would be my focus of study and writing. I have always been interested in places that most Americans have often seen as "strange," and that has driven my research interests: swamps, ruins, deserts, and geothermal fields.

I would describe my writing style as narrative history rooted in the lived experiences of nineteenth-century Americans. I like to put readers down on the ground with individuals so they can follow them through space and time. In this way I am also a biographer and an environmental writer. I am also really inspired by fiction writers and their experimentation with style. I wrote *The Three-Cornered War* as a multi-perspective narrative after reading many novels written in that particular

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style (including, weirdly, *Game of Thrones*). Reading Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns*, too, was a revelation for me. She wrote about three people who never met one another but who all participated in the Great Migration in different ways, and she situated them so beautifully in time and space—I was just in awe the entire time. The structure of that book is also really wild. She mixes biography and context in short chapters and in really fascinating ways. I wanted to see if I could do something similar in my current book project, but it didn't work. Maybe someday, with another type of narrative.

Oh, my top five! That's so hard. I am interested in so many different fields of study that it is difficult to compare and choose. But here goes: John McPhee, *Uncommon Carriers*; J.B. Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*; Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*; Patty Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*; Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps*.

I've never been a particular fan of the saying that those who fail to learn history are doomed to repeat it, but I firmly believe that the past provides invaluable insights into the present and possibilities for the future. In this maddeningly post-factual era in which we seem to find ourselves today, what would you say is the "value" of history? How is the past relevant in the modern world?

I absolutely agree that the past provides insights into the present. One of the values in knowing history is that it helps us to see how we got to this current moment. We cannot address the current climate crisis, for example, without understanding the successive waves of eighteenth— and nineteenth—century industrialization that changed the way Americans worked and lived—and polluted the air and the water. And we cannot understand the nation's amazing scientific achievements without knowing the history of education, the history

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*As an environmental historian myself, I find your incorporation of this field into your work particularly compelling. How would you explain this line of inquiry to someone who might be unfamiliar with it? Thinking about your two most recent books, *The Three-Cornered War* (2020) and *Saving Yellowstone* (2022), what unique insights did this approach provide that more traditional methodologies might have "missed" or left out?*

I think of myself as a "landscape historian" in that I am interested in peoples' relationship to the natural world and also to the built environment. As a humanist, I am interested in peoples' beliefs about different kinds of landscapes, as well as their material and

consequential interactions with their surroundings. These interests drove my first two books on swamps and ruins, and my more recent projects that focus on the Civil War and Reconstruction. The field of Civil War environmental history is still quite nascent—it is a tiny sub-field with just a handful of scholars with published works. Ditto with Reconstruction environmental history.

In Civil War environmental history, most of my colleagues are interested primarily in warfare and nature, rather than built environments. Given that wars were fought outside (obviously), there is abundant material in the records related to this. And there is a lot we still don't know about the impact of Civil War actions on particular landscapes and the ways that natural forces have shaped battle strategy/tactics and logistics. Traditional Civil War historians tend to acknowledge the role of nature in the conflict but then move on, or just ignore it all together. But to me, landscape studies is one of the topics that bridges military history and social history in Civil War studies—two fields that have often been at odds in the historiography.

We don't have a lot of Reconstruction environmental histories either. Most Reconstruction scholars focus solely on political history, and on the U.S. South. I would love to see more work on the literal reconstruction of the

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South, and the ways white and Black southerners rebuilt their lives and homes and created new landscapes in the wake of warfare. It was so interesting for me to think about the creation of Yellowstone National Park as a Reconstruction policy—it positioned the park in a history that never really gets mentioned in conservation stories. And it gives Reconstruction scholars a new way to think about the federal government's approach to the U.S. West during this period as well.

Focusing more specifically on Saving Yellowstone, what was it about this place in this particular historical "moment" that compelled you to write about it? I'm always fascinated by the connections authors find between one project and the next. Was there something in The Three-Cornered War or perhaps some earlier work that inspired Saving Yellowstone? And did these books lead you to a next project? If so, can we have a sneak-peek?

I always find my next book project when I am in the middle of writing my current book. There is a protagonist in *Three-Cornered* named John Clark. He was the surveyor-general of New Mexico Territory and a Lincoln political appointee. As I was researching the history of surveying, I ran across the Ferdinand Hayden expedition to Yellowstone in 1871. This was around 2018, so I realized that the 150th anniversary of his expedition and the Yellowstone Act that followed was coming up in 2022. And so, I thought a book published in conjunction with that anniversary would be a great idea. Of course, lots of conservation historians and historians of the U.S. West have written about Yellowstone, and so I needed to figure out why my approach to that story would be new. Given that I was already writing a book that was encouraging readers to see a well-known conflict like the Civil War from an unexpected place (the Southwest), I had that lightbulb moment: what if we see the

Reconstruction period from an unexpected place (Yellowstone)? How might that tell us something new, or something that historians have ignored, about the early 1870s?

I also like to think of *Saving Yellowstone* as a sequel to *Three-Cornered*, in a way. Hayden would not have made it to Yellowstone in 1871 and back again to lobby for the Yellowstone Act if the events that I detailed in *Three-Cornered* did not happen. The fact that U.S. troops retained control of the Southwest after their battles with both Confederates and Mescalero Apache, Chiricahua Apache, and Diné (Navajo) peoples was vital for the federal government's subsequent assertions of control in the region, including Hayden's survey and the Yellowstone Act itself.

I am currently writing a book called *The Westerners*, which is a history of the emergence of the "U.S. West" in the nineteenth century, as told through the lives of eight people—only one of whom is a white man from the East (a "pioneer"). The idea for that book did not come from *Saving Yellowstone* but from the conversations about the enduring pioneer myth that emerged with the publication of David McCullough's final book, *The Pioneers*, in 2019. As someone who grew up in the West (Colorado) but then moved to the East, I have always been interested in what Americans across the country define as "Western," and how understanding who these Westerners were and are can help us understand both regional identity and the history of the United States.

One of the compelling features of your writing is your literary use of character-driven narrative. Can you talk about each of the three primary protagonists who carry Saving Yellowstone and how you came to choose them? As a writer, do you ever develop an emotional connection to the people and events you write about? If so, how do you balance objectivity and empathy?

Ferdinand Hayden—as the leader of the 1871 expedition into Yellowstone, Hayden had to be a central protagonist (if not the central protagonist) in the book. He was also kind of fun to write about, given that he was polarizing. Some people really hated his ambition and his aggressiveness, while others loved his drive. He was also unusual in the context of mid-nineteenth century science: he grew up in poverty and had a hardscrabble life, unlike many of his fellow scientists, who came from elite families. He was trying to make a name for himself in Yellowstone, and this part of his story was, to me, really compelling. Jay Cooke—I was really fascinated by Cooke's role in the whole Yellowstone project, and in his disastrous decision to take on the financing of the Northern Pacific Railroad. He was a brilliant man who made a huge error in judgment that ended up launching the country into the panic and depression of 1873. When I found out about the connection between his Yellowstone aspirations and that catastrophic moment in Reconstruction history, I knew I had to write about him. Sitting Bull—some readers may find Sitting Bull's connection to Yellow-

We often think of those who lived in the past as a bit like their photographs: black and white, and two-dimensional. But when we think about them as actual living, breathing humans with complicated emotions of their own and motivations that are often problematic (for their own time as well as ours), I think we can come closer to understanding why past events happened in the way that they did.

stone a bit tenuous, but as one of the leaders of the Hunkpapa Lakota, Sitting Bull was invested in defending his peoples' territory from the Missouri River to the Apsaalooké lands north of Yellowstone. And he asserted Lakota sovereignty in multiple ways, including several fights against Jay Cooke's Northern Pacific Railroad surveyors. I found it interesting that he was emerging as a major leader not only of the Lakota but of a larger group that included Cheyenne and Arapaho allies during the early 1870s. The book argues that for Sitting Bull, conflicts over the Yellowstone River Valley led to the Battle of Greasy Grass (the Battle of the Little Bighorn) in 1876.

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Reading such a rich and obviously deeply-researched book like this one always inspires the question: what kind of sources did you utilize to build your narrative? And how did you decide what sources you needed, in the first place. I guess what I'm asking is, especially on behalf of other researchers and writers, what is your M.O.? Is there a source or an archive that more people really ought to know about? Anything that surprised you?

As an interdisciplinary scholar, I use everything and anything that will help me understand the past: manuscripts (journals and diaries, letters), government documents, newspapers, magazines, photographs, illustrations, material culture, the landscape itself. I wrote almost all of *Saving Yellowstone* during the pandemic, so I was not able to do as much material culture and landscape research as I had planned. But thank goodness for digital resources! I had access to all kinds of manuscript and print materials produced in 1871-72 that I used to track the Yellowstone Expedition, the debates over the Yellowstone Act, the press surrounding the Northern Pacific Railroad, and the rise of Sitting Bull as a Lakota leader. A Twitter friend who I had met while giving a talk a few years before gifted me access to the *U.S. Congressional Serial Set* for three weeks; that was an invaluable resource for understanding federal government officials' evolving views of Sitting Bull and Yellowstone. If you don't have a subscription to newspapers.com, go get one! I promise they don't pay me to promote them. Their digitization is crystal clear, and you can clip articles and convert them to PDFs that include the citation, including the page number. And they are word, location, and newspaper searchable. It's an amazing archive for newspapers across the nation. They don't have everything, but they have a tremendous amount of material for historians.

This period at the end of the Civil War in American history also marks the real emergence of corporate capitalism. During the postwar period, big business began to consolidate power and economic might in the hands of an oligarchic few, and nowhere was this more evident than with the railroads. As you reveal, the histories of the park and the roads are inextricably intertwined, particularly in establishing the commercial “value” of Yellowstone, so essential in its path to becoming a park. Can you explain the connections?

I was really surprised at the extent to which the railroads shaped the 1871 expedition. Hayden secured free passes for his team on the Union Pacific from Omaha to Ogden, Utah. The speed of the transcontinental line made his survey possible. Previously, any team coming from the east coast would not have been able to make it to Yellowstone for more than a week or two before the snows drove them out. So that railroad was vital to Hayden’s project in Yellowstone. And Jay Cooke, the man raising funding for the Northern Pacific Railroad—whose track would run through what is now Livingston, Montana—was very interested in Hayden’s discoveries in Yellowstone. He sent the painter Thomas Moran to join Hayden and received twelve watercolor images of the rivers, mountains, and geothermal features of Yellowstone in return. He was going to use these as promotional artworks for Northern Pacific advertisements and try to bring tourists out to Yellowstone once he had built the track. It was Jay Cooke’s PR man who wrote to Hayden about inserting a note about preserving Yellowstone as a national park in his report to Congress about his expedition. Hayden had not been thinking of this possibility at all. But when he read the letter, he immediately knew this was a great idea. And Cooke and his brother Henry helped Hayden lobby for the park legislation in November of 1871. As I’ve already

noted, Sitting Bull was not about to let the Northern Pacific move right on through Lakota territory, and his leadership in asserting Indigenous sovereignty in the region was an important element that shaped U.S.-Indian relations and policy during the 1870s.

Yellowstone National Park is such an iconic place in America – the nation’s first national park. Yet as you observe, this “best idea” required Indigenous dispossession.” In Yellowstone (and Three-Cornered War), you are admirably careful and direct in addressing the “at what cost” question of Yellowstone National Park – the good, the bad, and the ugly of seminal events leading to its historic protection in 1872. In the spirit of land acknowledgment and in recognition

It was important for me to remind readers that all national parks are Indigenous land, and that Indigenous peoples continue to live near (and in some cases, within) their boundaries. Tribal nations have always conceived of parks like Yellowstone as part of their historic and present homelands. Knowing and acknowledging this adds more historical complexity to our understanding of park history – Yellowstone’s as well as others. And it forces us to acknowledge that some achievements that Americans often take for granted have a much more complicated, and often a darker, history than we have been willing to admit.

of the diverse Native peoples who were the traditional stewards of this land and whose relationship endures to the present, could you talk about the Indigenous groups who occupied the Yellowstone region in the mid-nineteenth century and those who still call this land home? As a writer, how does telling the story in this way enrich and complicate the narrative? What made you want to return to this point in the epilogue?

There are twenty-seven tribal nations that have established relationships with Yellowstone National Park. All these peoples moved through the park on their way to and from the bison hunting grounds of the Great Plains. They hunted bison, elk, and other animals in the park itself. They quarried Obsidian Cliff to create spear and arrow points, along with other tools for their own communities and for trade. And they gathered plants and conducted ceremonies there. No one Indigenous group claimed Yellowstone as their singular territory; it was a shared landscape. Those Indigenous groups who lived in close proximity to Yellowstone used it the most: the Tukudika Shoshone, who lived and herded sheep in the western mountain ranges of the Basin; and the Shoshone-Bannock, Apsáalooké, Eastern Shoshone, Northern Cheyenne, and Northern Arapaho. Part of northeastern Yellowstone was included in the 1851 Apsáalooké reservation, but U.S. officials moved that boundary when they severely reduced the size of the reservation in 1868. It was important for me to remind readers that all national parks are Indigenous land, and that Indigenous peoples continue to live near (and in some cases, within) their boundaries. Tribal nations have always conceived of parks like Yellowstone as part of their historic and present homelands. Knowing and acknowledging this adds more historical complexity to our understanding of park history—Yellowstone’s as well as others. And it forces us to acknowledge that some achievements

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You’ve argued that the story of Yellowstone is a “metaphor for America.” Can you elaborate on this point? Has writing about the past, particularly the convulsive period of the Civil War and Reconstruction, affected the way you see the country today?

One of the major questions I had at the start of the project was, “Why Yellowstone?” Why not preserve Yosemite, which was already set aside and managed by the state of California? Why not Niagara Falls, which had long been acknowledged as one of America’s great natural wonders? I was thinking about this question while I was researching Reconstruction history, and the federal government’s campaign against the KKK, which occurred at the same time Hayden was exploring Yellowstone and fighting for its preservation. I was also writing about it around January 6, 2021, when protesters stormed the U.S. Capitol to halt the certification of the results of the presidential election of 2020. That was a shocking moment for a lot of Americans, and a lot of historians as well. And it made me think about how much hatred and violence had just been sitting beneath the surface of society until the election of Donald Trump in 2016 unleashed it. It was not a big leap, then, back to Yellowstone. Hayden and his survey team were constantly surprised and unsettled by the fact that the land beneath them was often hollow and that when they lay down to go to sleep, they could hear the water boiling beneath their heads. I argue in the book that this is one answer to the question, “Why Yellowstone?” Not only were its geothermal features unique in all the world, but Yellowstone—unlike Yosemite or Niagara Falls—seemed like an apt representation of the nation itself. It was amazing and wonderful and threatening and violent. It sustains all

these elements in tension. I see the United States of 1871-72 as doing just that; I also see those conflicts and tensions in play today.

Thank you so much for your time and these wonderful insights, Megan.

Thank you so much for this conversation! It has been wonderful.



Sara Dant is a Brady Presidential Distinguished Professor Emeritus and former chair of history at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah. Her work focuses on environmental politics in the United States with a particular emphasis on the creation and development of consensus and bipartisanship. Dr. Dant's latest book is *Losing Eden: An Environmental History of the American West*, published in June of 2023, with a foreword by former New Mexico Senator Tom Udall, son of Stewart Udall. She is also an advisor and interviewee for Ken Burns's *The American Buffalo* documentary film that premiered on PBS in October 2023; the author of several prize-winning articles on western environmental politics; the author of a precedent-setting Expert Witness Report and Testimony on Stream Navigability in Utah; and co-author of the two-volume *Encyclopedia of American National Parks*.