

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and  
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

1-1-2009

## Book Review: *Hard Road West: History and Geology along the Gold Rush Trail* By Keith Heyer Meldahl.

Harmon D. Maher Jr.

University of Nebraska at Omaha

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Maher, Harmon D. Jr., "Book Review: *Hard Road West: History and Geology along the Gold Rush Trail* By Keith Heyer Meldahl." (2009). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. Paper 1012.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/1012>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

**Hard Road West: History and Geology along the Gold Rush Trail.** By Keith Heyer Meldahl. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. xxi + 329 pp. Maps, figures, notes, glossary, bibliography, index. \$25.00 cloth, \$17.00 paper.

The dust jacket of *Hard Road West* promises familiar pleasures to John McPhee lovers, and so I picked the book up with great anticipation. McPhee's works have greatly heightened the interest of writers and readers in the genre of creative nonfiction, and while for me, Keith Meldahl's work does not quite reach McPhee's stratospheric heights, for the right audience it is definitely a very good read.

The book is organized from east to west, forward in time, following in detail the wagon trail journey to the California gold fields. That human migration, driven by the search for geologic riches, provides the path for Meldahl's foray into the deep geologic history of the landscape traversed. Human and geologic threads are coarsely interwoven, alternating sections describing how the rocks and the landscape came to be with sections on the human travails, choices, failures, and successes as the travelers navigated a beautiful but often unforgiving landscape. Occasionally, differences between the human landscape of the gold rush times and the present are also commented on.

Meldahl gives special attention to what the migrants noted about the landscape and geology. From a modern perspective they had more questions than insights, but the juxtaposition of their thoughts against our modern understanding implicitly highlights the tremendous strides made by geologic science. Quotes from the travelers' logs and letters are well deployed to strengthen the connection between the geologic landscape and the travelers' experiences. Given the trying conditions of the trail, their thoughts about the landscape were not always positive. Water can be seen as a fundamental human issue for the West then as now. The human story is not glorified, but appears as the stark and bitter reality it must have been (carcasses galore). Relief is provided at points by travelers' positive reactions to spots of sublime beauty and to geologic oddities encountered on the way, such as at Soda Springs (in present-day Idaho).

Meldahl is a geologist, and it is fair to say geologic stories dominate here, such as the recent rebirth of the Rockies (the great exhumation), the plate tectonic-driven birth of the Cordillera, the crustal stretching of the Basin and Range, the Yellowstone hotspot, and the origin of the gold. The result is a fairly comprehensive and distinctive overview of the geology of the western half of the U.S., organized by the accidental way the artifacts of this geologic history happen to be encountered on

the trail west. Clearly, lucidly, and unpretentiously written, the book offers the geologically uninitiated a tremendous amount of geology and human history. Illustrations and analogies help to enlighten.

I would recommend *Hard Road West* to those who enjoy exploring the interplay between human and geologic landscapes and histories, and to those fascinated by western history written broadly. It would make a good companion on a land trip west.

**Harmon D. Maher Jr.**, *Department of Geography and Geology, University of Nebraska at Omaha.*