



# Reading for Liberalism: The Overland Monthly and the Writing of the Modern American West

*Stephen J. Mexal*

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Founded in 1868, the *Overland Monthly* was a San Francisco–based literary magazine whose mix of humor, pathos, and romantic nostalgia for a lost frontier was an immediate sensation on the East Coast. Due in part to a regional desire to attract settlers and financial investment, the essays and short fiction published in the *Overland Monthly* often portrayed the American West as a civilized evolution of, and not a savage regression from, eastern bourgeois modernity and democracy.

Stories about the American West have for centuries been integral to the way we imagine freedom, the individual, and the possibility for alternate political realities. *Reading for Liberalism* examines the shifting literary and narrative construction of liberal selfhood in California in the late nineteenth century through case studies of a number of western American writers who wrote for the *Overland Monthly*, including Noah Brooks, Ina Coolbrith, Bret Harte, Jack London, John Muir, and Frank Norris, among others. *Reading for Liberalism* argues that Harte, the magazine's founding editor, and the other members of the *Overland* group critiqued and reimagined the often invisible fabric of American freedom. *Reading for Liberalism* uncovers and examines in the text of the *Overland Monthly* the relationship between wilderness, literature, race, and the production of individual freedom in late nineteenth-century California.

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