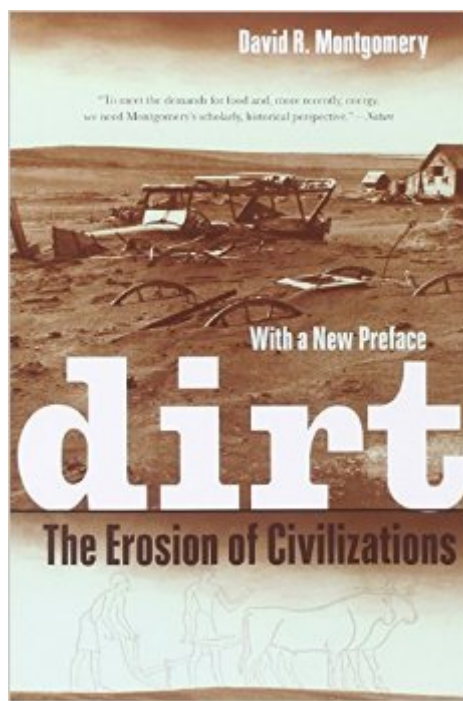


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# Dirt: The Erosion Of Civilizations



## Synopsis

Dirt, soil, call it what you want—it's everywhere we go. It is the root of our existence, supporting our feet, our farms, our cities. This fascinating yet disquieting book finds, however, that we are running out of dirt, and it's no laughing matter. An engaging natural and cultural history of soil that sweeps from ancient civilizations to modern times, *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations* explores the compelling idea that we are—and have long been—using up Earth's soil. Once bare of protective vegetation and exposed to wind and rain, cultivated soils erode bit by bit, slowly enough to be ignored in a single lifetime but fast enough over centuries to limit the lifespan of civilizations. A rich mix of history, archaeology and geology, *Dirt* traces the role of soil use and abuse in the history of Mesopotamia, Ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, China, European colonialism, Central America, and the American push westward. We see how soil has shaped us and we have shaped soil—as society after society has risen, prospered, and plowed through a natural endowment of fertile dirt. David R. Montgomery sees in the recent rise of organic and no-till farming the hope for a new agricultural revolution that might help us avoid the fate of previous civilizations.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is an excellent overview of soil formation and the cultural and ecological ramifications of its degradation and loss. One might say it is a cultural study of soil, rather than a scientific publication. Unlike other books about soil generation and degradation there are not the seemingly requisite pages of diagrams and chemical equations that would be found among publications by and for soil biologists. This is a very interesting and engaging book, with a really helpful survey of multiple

cultures through time and does not read like yet another 'cautionary tale' of how everything will be destroyed within the next five years so it is time to start living off the grid and await the Great Collapse. That being said, the author as a scientist makes real cogent arguments and draws upon history to show how those who ignored or abused their soil, often simply by being unaware or unable to perceive and change their cultivation practices, often fell into decline, obscurity or ultimately effective disappearance.

If this terrific tale of soil and civilization were a novel, it would be one of the most enthralling I've ever read. But it's not a novel --it's a multifaceted study of the soils that support and nourishes us -- what it is, how we use and abuse it, where civilizations that threw it away went, how the very landscape was changed by them. Montgomery makes the waves of civilization and soils, populations and soils, as vivid as a Hollywood extravaganza; makes vast landscapes and histories from beyond the edge of human time come alive. An hour with the book and I'm wobbly from surfing the waves of history and prehistory, rising and falling with soils and the civilizations that destroyed them. Nicely illustrated with drawings from the periods under discussion but I wish the publisher had been generous enough to allow the author to add photos, maps, graphs, timelines, to make the visions the story evokes more concrete and accurate. A good book to give a gardener, a plant ecologist (like me -- and I wish I'd had a course built around this book when I was in school!), a farmer, a cook, and I only wish that every lawmaker and ag-associated bureaucrat could be made to read it. Rhonda of the Mountain

I wish I could give David Montgomery's Dirt six stars. Without vilifying mankind, Montgomery traces our mistreatment of arable land from the beginning of agriculture in Neolithic times through great civilizations and some minor ones, taking us right up to modern times. He details how population pressures and other factors caused and continue to cause the depletion of topsoil. As well as being informative, Dirt contains some of the most effective writing I've read in years, and I say that as someone who teaches academic writing. While this book contains a good many unpleasant truths, Montgomery's highly readable prose encouraged me to turn pages. For example, Montgomery's use of vivid images removes the dry abstraction from statistical information. This is from page four: "Each year, America's farms shed enough soil to fill a pickup truck for every family in the country. . . . An estimated twenty-four billion tons of soil are lost annually around the world--several tons for each person on the planet." He also captures complex generalities in concise, direct language. Here, he's talking about the effect of a growing population on late

Medieval Europe: "An increasing demand for crops meant less pasture, little overwinter animal fodder, and not enough manure to sustain soil fertility" (93). Page after page, across time and continents, Montgomery documents mankind's devastating use and misuse of dirt. Even his plain, slightly vulgar title is beautifully chosen. He more than proves that dirt, far from being cheap, is more precious than gold. I'm tempted to say the same about Dirt.

A history of the rise and fall of civilizations through the gritty lens of how soil is treated....brilliant! A very insightful, thought-provoking new angle of historic analysis. But, it is a more comfortable and entertaining (read: 'less stuffy') than most academic/historical studies. Well-researched and deeply considered, yet written for a somewhat wider audience than the academic world, Montgomery's excellent study finds the sweet spot between an informative read and an entertaining read. Highly highly recommended.....to anyone with a curious mind.

Very well written with a vast amount of information regarding many past civilizations and peoples who slowly but surely destroyed the source of life for them and succeeding generations here on this earth --- the Soil. Most of this degradation was done unwittingly by the people responsible but because it was a slow process, it often was the next generation or two that suffered the consequences. The information in this book should be required teaching and reading in our schools and colleges. The future of man is directly dependent upon the wise and regenerative use of the earth's topsoil.

This is the dirt (the scoop) all right. It is a highly important book. Every policy maker in Washington and all the world's capitals should read it. This book gives a side of history that has been left out of the usual history books. And that is really too bad. This information needs to become widely known. There are a variety of eye-openers here, about numerous periods of history. This book not only teaches about agriculture and the misuse of land and soil, it also reveals a side of colonialism we usually do not think about. This colonialism has not yet completely disappeared. From another perspective: Never before have I appreciated the "humble" earthworm so much as I have since reading it. I never knew about rock weathering and the fact that earthworms literally create soil from rocks. We should bow down to earthworms. They make it possible for us to eat and live. The writing style is easily read. Yet emotionally, I find it hard to read more than one chapter at a time. I seem to need rest between them. They are very filling.

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