

Preface

This is a book about a particular place, but it is also about ideas that make and sustain all places. It is also a history with its own history. The ending did not turn out as I expected.

I stumbled upon my topic more than ten years ago. My inspiration came while driving across the Ship Canal Bridge. It was the rarest of occasions in Seattle: a blue-sky winter day. As my car reached the high point of the span, I saw the Space Needle to my right, Mount Rainier directly ahead, snowcapped peaks and open water in all other directions. It was a familiar view, but as a historian in training, I saw everything anew. Here, I thought, was a city that exemplified Americans' long desire to harmonize city and countryside. Having recently read William Cronon's pioneering study of Chicago, I began to think of Seattle in similar terms—not exactly as another nature's metropolis, perhaps, but instead as a city that was urban by nature.

Or so I thought. Having found my topic literally at my doorstep, I rushed to the archives. I began with the accounts of Seattle's builders and leaders who had reshaped the city's physical landscapes. Seeing Seattle through the eyes of engineers, landscape architects, and urban planners, all of whom literally moved water and earth and people, seemed to confirm my hunch that city and nature were reconciled. As I delved deeper, this reading soon proved too tidy. Behind every victorious account of a tamed river, a scenic park, or a flattened hill was another story of levees breached by muskrats, squatters catching fish and shooting birds, or landslides wiping out homes. The poor and minorities, like the Native peoples of Puget Sound, fought those who annihilated

their homes, fishing and hunting grounds, and workplaces. Wealthier residents rallied to stop the earthmoving, pollution, and highways that threatened their scenery or pastimes. Other sources of resistance were less familiar. Often, nature itself pushed back and imposed its own limits. Sometimes, combined energies of people and environment played out in predictable ways—poisoned rivers, vanishing wildlife, dispossessed peoples—but in other instances, nature did not disappear, and the seemingly powerless did sometimes prevail.

My findings corroborated what many historians were discovering: that transforming nature often meant controlling people as well. But this conclusion still seemed too neat because, for all of their differences, antagonistic Seattleites were fighting over the same things. All wanted to harness nature to sustain community, and all had fierce attachments to the places they had transformed. Stepping back, I began to ask what about my drive had originally stirred me. My answer took me to the common but neglected ground that unites our attachments to city and nature. The history of Seattle, like the history of America, was the evolution of an ethic of place.

The quest to find such an ethic is long-standing in both urban and environmental history. Urban historians have explored how the rise of the American city has been a dynamic process of inclusion and exclusion unfolding in union halls, residential neighborhoods, public parks, and shopping malls. But few historians consider the role that nature has played in forging the places urbanites call home, or how it has been an instrument to define and enforce the idea of community. For their part, environmental historians have expanded what counts as history, but the field remains trapped, at times, in an analytical device of its own making. By juxtaposing nature and culture as pure categories, environmental historians have demonstrated the independence of nature as well as the consequences of human actions. Yet this technique often yields stereotypical stories of decline, resulting in what some criticize as environmentalist history. This is a problem given the growing evidence of the unsavory, often hidden history underlying the conservation and environmental movements.

The historical scholarship on environmentalism's blinders is forcing us to reject the tendency to treat nature and culture so simplistically, and it may be fostering a more complex approach toward history. Unfortunately, this perspective is still wanting in environmental and urban policy, but thinking historically is different from finding a usable past. To think historically is to see the world as always contingent, as an impure and imperfect product of human actions and environmental processes through time. If historians are to con-

tribute toward the pursuit of a just and sustainable society, we need to show how and why history is relevant.

That is why we need histories that see humans and nature as tangled together, but we need something more. We need a new ethic of place, one that has room for salmon and skyscrapers, suburbs and wilderness, Mount Rainier and the Space Needle, one grounded in history. We alone are responsible for splitting nature from culture, and for injuring it and ourselves as a result. "One of the penalties of an ecological education," Aldo Leopold wrote, "is that one lives alone in a world of wounds." Perhaps, but one of the potential gifts of a historical education is knowing that some wounds heal in time or can be endured, and that we do not have to go it alone. History is no panacea, but thinking historically can help us live with the consequences of being imperfect creatures in an uncertain world.