



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West, 1848-1893* by William Cronon

Review by: Richard White

Source: *Environmental History Review*, Summer, 1992, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Summer, 1992), pp. 85-91

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of Forest History Society and American Society for Environmental History

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/3984930>

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Book Reviews

Hal Rothman, Editor

Review Essay

Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West, 1848-1893. By William Cronon. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991.) Cloth, \$22.95.

With *Nature's Metropolis*, William Cronon's extraordinary new book, environmental history crosses the divide that separates interesting subfields from the fields that are at the center of American history. *Nature's Metropolis* is a book so artfully written, so subtly and powerfully argued, and so conceptually bold and ambitious that it must be read by anyone seriously interested in the American past. But precisely because this is so important a book, and one that raises such difficult and complicated problems, it deserves special attention from environmental historians. One of Cronon's numerous triumphs is to bring to the surface issues that concern virtually all environmental historians, and it would be slighting this landmark volume not to begin a serious dialogue within the field on the important issues *Nature's Metropolis* raises.

Nature's Metropolis is best approached as a distant twin to Raymond William's classic *The Country and the City*. They are not identical twins, and their differences could provide the basis for a cultural history of the last quarter of the twentieth century, but parallels in approach and themes mark their kinship.

Williams was an English socialist and a literary critic whose study of the pastoral in English literature probed the cultural changes capitalism brought to English society; Cronon is an American and an environmental historian whose study of Chicago examines the economic and environmental changes capitalism brought to the "Great West." Williams wrote largely about what happened in people's heads; Cronon writes largely about what happens on the land itself. Williams used the social and economic history of English capitalism to contextualize and interpret English literature. Cronon uses nineteenth century American literature to provide a cultural context for the economic, social, and environmental transformation of the interior of a continent. Williams wrote, in the end, about human labor and how the pastoral obscured and disguised its division and alienation under capitalism; Cronon writes about capital and how it transformed, simplified, and obscured nature.

Such differences could be multiplied, but it is the parallels that first grab attention. Structurally, both books share personal anecdotal beginnings and endings. Thematically, both attack, in Cronon's words, the "deeply problematic assumption . . . that city and country are separate and opposing worlds." (p. 17) They both argue that the connections far outnumber the divisions. At the heart of each book is an exposure of the ability of capitalism simultaneously to transform and to obscure the natural world.

Cronon has constructed *Nature's Metropolis* as "a series of historical journeys between city and country in an effort to understand the city's place in nature." (p. 8) The particular journeys follow first human migrants and then wheat, lumber, and cattle and hogs into Chicago where all are transformed. There is a pervasive sense in the early chapters—most fully realized in the chapter on the slaughterhouses—of things being unmade rather than made, of things being disassembled rather than assembled. In chapter after chapter, Cronon reveals how the unique living elements of natural systems were turned into interchangeable, standardized units offered for sale on the market.

The journeys described were eventful and complicated, and as they proceeded, they created their destinations and shaped their places of departure. Within this movement and transformation, Chicago's hinterlands, as well as the city itself, were created as new capitalist landscapes. It is a tribute to Cronon's skill that so protean a process can emerge so clearly in these pages. This is a book in which the closer one looks at a thing, the more one realizes that it is already and always changing into something else.

Popular reviewers have tended to be at once dazzled and intimidated by the complicated quality of Cronon's subject and have sought to reduce the book to an urban or an economic history. These are two of the numerous vantage points Cronon takes in examining his subjects, but they are parts of a much larger whole. The book can be read as an urban history of Chicago. It can, in a similar sense, be read as an economic history. It discusses and criticizes central place theory. It offers a subtle and careful modification and defense of Frederick Jackson Turner and a critique of a purely regional interpretation of the American West. But primarily this is an environmental history, and even more precisely, a history of environmental relationships and transformations.

In an immensely more detailed, sophisticated, and complicated manner, *Nature's Metropolis* carries forward the central themes of Cronon's *Changes in the Land*: the environmental transformations brought by capitalism and the connections between environmental and social change. *Nature's Metropolis*, however, represents a major conceptual advance over *Changes in the Land* in two respects. The earlier book used capitalism so loosely that Cronon had "capitalism" completing the environmental transformation of New England, just as other scholars had the region only beginning to develop widespread capitalist relations. *Changes in the Land* also was criticized for neglecting meaning. Different peoples made different resource choices in the environment and created different landscapes, but there was a latent functionalism in his explanations of why they did so. There was little attention given to what "nature" meant to the people involved or how culture influenced their choices.

Neither objection applies to *Nature's Metropolis*. In it Cronon usually discusses capitalism in terms of praxis. This makes it seem less a dominant ideology than a historically contingent set of practices; it also makes it much clearer what capitalists do and why. The capitalists in Cronon's book think and act in terms of markets, commodities, profit margins, investments, debts, and efficiency. Cronon describes their actions, distills their logic, and shows the vast engine for change such economic actions represent.

Similarly, what Chicago and the countryside meant to the people who participated in their creation and alteration occupies the center of *Nature's Metropolis*. From the opening sections with the contemporary literary equation of Chicago and nature to the closing analysis of the White City and the country retreat, the meaning of this world to the people who lived in it remains crucial to the analysis.

Chicago—Nature’s Metropolis—is the physical and economic core of all this movement and transformation. The city is the place where “ecological and economic forces” had for a brief time come together to create “a single market, a single geography that spanned much of the interior of the continent.” (p.206) The city’s centrality resulted partially, as the city’s boosters claimed, from natural geographical advantages, but the geography that eventually mattered most was the geography of capital that came to dominate and shape the geography of nature. Primarily through the railroads, “the logic of capital had remade first nature and bound together far-flung places to produce a profound new integration of biological space and market time.” (p. 204) What Cronon’s demystification of this geography of capital reveals is the creation of a city filled with “temples of commerce that were also, less obviously, mausoleums of landscapes vanishing from the city’s hinterland.... Behind each urban structure were the ghost landscapes that had given it birth. In sinking its roots into the western soil, the city was remaking the countryside after its own image.” (p. 263)

The central tension in this book is between city and country, which merge into a single continuum, but just as critical, and more problematic, is the relationship Cronon creates between “capital” and “nature,” two of the most important and confusing words of the last two hundred years. Just as Cronon is not interested in writing a book about the city or the country but rather the relationship between them, so he is interested in writing a book about the relationship between capital and nature. And yet analyses of these two pairs are not, I think, equivalent enterprises. For capital and nature are ultimately and always abstractions while Chicago, and for example, the north woods, are not.

The fusing of these analyses of the concrete and the abstract, this insistent focus on relationships, makes *Nature’s Metropolis* a challenging and important book. It both participates in and transcends current intellectual trends. To the extent that this book is primarily concerned with relationships, it is a postmodern history. “The history of the Great West,” Cronon writes at one point, “is a long dialogue between the place we call city and the place we call country.” (p. 54) History as dialogue, the distancing of language and concrete reality—“the place we call...”—are conventional postmodern markers. The book is also a salutary movement beyond postmodernism. Cronon’s relationships are expressed in actions as well as language, and they are grounded in and include a tangible, physical world in which people, plants, and animals live and die. It is the quality of tangibility,

of concreteness that make the arguments about city and country so compelling. Which brings us back to capital and nature and their relationships and transformations.

Transformations are at the heart of this book. The book's central metaphor is the threshold, the boundary, the place where things are about to become something else; its governing trope is liminality. Threshold metaphors of meeting and transformation are everywhere in the book. Chicago is the "gateway city." It is "the place where eastern and western journeys meet." (p. 61) Chicago, introduced as the boundary of an actual watershed—where waters split to flow either to the Gulf of Mexico or the Atlantic becomes a metaphorical watershed "between two different systems of corporate competition." (p. 90) The railroads, which make Chicago, are themselves a threshold, "simply a go-between whose chief task was to cross the boundary between city and country" transforming both in the process. (p. 97) The mixing of wheat in elevators "happened on the boundary between first and second nature." (p. 135) And the grain elevators created new boundaries "between one grade [of wheat] and another, between public and private information, between legitimate and illegitimate business practices." (p. 137) The greatest problems in wheat trading occurred on "the boundaries where market fictions intersected with the real world." (p. 147) The stockyards were the ultimate meeting place, a place of "interpenetration of city and country," a place which forged connections that transformed both. (p. 212)

Transformations of tangible objects and abstract entities like capital and nature share common metaphors, but where transformations of physical objects are revealing, transformations of abstractions, when pushed too far, can seem simply clever, or confusing, or even appear to be a mystification. Trees become two by fours; nature becomes capital. This much is stunningly achieved. But Cronon's fascination with the linkage of capital and nature, while enormously suggestive, sometimes becomes problematic as capital and nature become more and more protean.

From the first, there is something forced about Cronon's discussion of nature. Following Hegel, he distinguishes between first nature, which is an original, prehuman nature, and a second nature, which is the artificial nature people erect on top of the first. His use of these paired categories is tactical, almost apologetic, but he uses them nonetheless because he wants to escape from the "central ambiguity" of the old dilemma regarding whether human beings are inside or outside of nature.

The terms are, however, not only uncharacteristically infelicitous, but they are conceptually confusing. In Cronon's formulation, first nature is initially simple physiography. (p. 56) It is what the glaciers left, and on this level the concept is clear and unproblematic. But Cronon inevitably slips into first nature as ecology, as tallgrass prairie, as bison, as forests, and here, of course, the idea of a first nature is far more debatable for clearly forests, and prairies, and by the mid-nineteenth century, bison, were all affected and shaped by human actions. And as Cronon's analysis proceeds into market agriculture, first and second nature become, Cronon says, "completely entangled." (p. 264)

Despite the inevitable imprecision of these categories, Cronon remains wedded to maintaining first nature because he needs a category of pure nature—a nature independent of human labor—to make a point about capital. *Nature's Metropolis* contains a critique of existing theories of economic value, particularly Marxian labor theory of value. Cronon does not deny that labor creates value, but he wants to insist that nature, too, creates value. "The abundance that fueled Chicago's hinterland economy thus consisted largely of stored sunshine: this was the wealth of nature, and no human labor could create the value it contained." (pp. 149-50) Without a first nature existing independent of human labor to provide such value, this kind of argument loses much of its clarity.

Value is a key term in *Nature's Metropolis*, and it can be a confusing one for Cronon uses it both in its economic sense and in a broader more colloquial sense. He wants to make nature a source of value in and of itself, and he wants to make nature an independent creator of economic value. Following an older Odumesque ecology, he conceives of nature as capturing energy, and storing the "surplus" as, for example, fiber or fat. This surplus is, in turn, available for human capture, and thus it becomes a form of capital. "Much of the capital that made the city was," Cronon writes, "nature's own." (p. 151) Taken separately, Cronon's uses of value are each illuminating, but when taken together, things can get a little confusing.

Cronon's immense skill as a writer enables him to make the transformation of nature into capital seem but another in his fascinating series of transformations. And he has so convincingly linked and changed so much that we are tempted to believe. He has shown us how grasslands have become wheat fields and how wheat has been abstracted to commodity futures; he has demonstrated how trees have become lumber and lumber becomes the interchangeable 2 x 4s of the market; he has shown how buffalo yield to cattle and how cattle

become barely distinguishable sides of beef. He has demonstrated how first nature has been rearranged as commodities within second nature of the market (pp. 265-66). But the boundaries between capital and nature seem too shifting, too blurred.

When and how an abstraction called nature can become an abstraction called capital is a difficult and important question, and in handling it Cronon becomes uncharacteristically obscure. Capital is "a world of money, credit, and merchandise," he says at one point. (p. 324) Capital thus seems a category of things. But no, capital, Cronon insists later, is neither things nor presumably a category of things. It is a relationship; its "geography was about connecting people to make new markets and to remake old landscapes." (p. 339) But nature, which he has also claimed can be a form of capital, seems to be neither money, credit, merchandise, nor a relationship between people and markets. Nature is not merchandise when it exists as trees in a forest or as uncultivated prairie, but it can still be, in Cronon's formulation, capital.

What Cronon is struggling with here is the very mystification at the heart of the concept of capital itself. At what point does a living being, a natural object, or an ecosystem become capital? Not satisfied with having tracked and demystified capital with such consummate skill, Cronon wants, in effect, to witness its birth in nature. But there is no birth. He rejects an easy postmodernist solution: capital is created by an act of perception, by seeing in a certain way. And he has already rejected a pure labor theory of value. What is left is a compromise. There is no magic moment at which nature becomes capital. There is, instead, a series of fine gradations during which nature as an independent value becomes transformed into economic value. Humans perceive fertile prairies and bountiful forests; they act on prairies and forests, and at some seemingly undefinable point, prairie land and trees become capital.

It is a mark of the fullness and complexity of this brilliant book that in what is already too long a review essay, I have only selectively touched on the issues and themes it raises. This is a book which will for the foreseeable future set the agenda for environmental history. It is the book that environmental historians will have skeptics read when they want to convince them of the importance and value of the field. It is an astonishing book whose success will help us all, and the highest praise we can give it is to take the issues that it raises as seriously as its author does.

Richard White
University of Washington