

## EDEN ON THE CHARLES: THE MAKING OF BOSTON

Michael Rawson

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*Eden on the Charles: the Making of Boston* explores the transformation of Boston from country town to urban metropolis during the nineteenth century. While urbanization has often been characterized as a process of separation from nature, author Michael Rawson argues that urbanization is better described as simply another kind of relationship with nature. Bostonians transformed their physical environment; altering the landscape and natural systems, constructing infrastructure. Rawson shows that in the process, they also changed how they thought about their environment and how they related to nature and to each other.

The book focuses on the nineteenth century, a period of rapid physical and social change. Rawson argues that it was during this period that Boston made its most significant break with the past, inventing new ways of relating to the natural world and helping to define what it meant to be urban in America. Older ideas about interactions between people and nature — nature as common property, a place of physical labor, a set of resilient resources, and a symbol of future possibilities — gave way to new ideas of nature as private property, a place of recreation, a resource requiring careful management, and a symbol of the nostalgic past. New relationships with nature were increasingly mediated by technology, science, and government. These changes established the physical and social foundation for much of the modern metropolis that we recognize today.

The book is organized around five case studies: the changing use of Boston Common, the campaign for Boston's first public water system, the development of Boston's first suburbs, the evolution in thought and management of Boston Harbor, and establishment of the nation's first metropolitan public park system. In each case, Rawson explains why Bostonians made the choices they did by looking at the environmental opportunities and constraints, the social motivations of the actors involved, and their ideas about nature. In Chapter 1, we learn how Boston Common went from being a place of work to a place of passive leisure. Since its purchase in 1634, Bostonians had dramatically changed the topography of the Common to suit their needs, but the most dramatic transformation occurred in the 1830s when Boston's elite led a concerted campaign to ban customary work, such as the grazing of cows, from the Common. What they sought was a recreational relationship to nature — a pastoral ideal.

The pastoral ideal is a common thread throughout the nineteenth century, and Rawson shows how it influenced the larger physical and political landscape. The pastoral ideal was not just about nature, but also about society. Chapter 3 relates the story of Boston's first suburbs —

romantic residential communities situated within pastoral settings — that were first developed in the 1840s to attract affluent urbanites. According to Rawson, these communities created new “middle landscapes” — country settings with urban amenities. In order to endure, however, they had to defend their borders, fending off both urbanization and annexation. Indeed, these early suburbs were defined as much by what they rejected as what they embraced. As Rawson shows in the case of Upper Roxbury, the pastoral ideal rejected not only industry and dense development, but also the presence of the poor and growing number of Irish immigrants associated with the industrial city. Political battles over the municipal boundaries of these new suburban communities came to define the physical and political organization of Boston’s neighborhoods and neighboring municipalities. In Chapter 5, Rawson shows how similar social tensions played out in the creation of a municipal park system. In the late nineteenth century, Bostonians worked to preserve remaining fragments of undeveloped forest in the greater metropolitan region — places like Middlesex Fells and the Blue Hills — as historic representations of a Puritan past. Preserving or reconstructing the Puritan landscape was an important priority for Yankee elites in the face of the growing immigrant presence. This new regional park system, which crossed the borders of dozens of municipalities, required new forms of governmental coordination and played a powerful role in shaping the landscape.

*Eden on the Charles* is an excellent contribution to the field of environmental history. Rawson’s work contributes to a growing literature in environmental history that has continued to break down the traditional separation of urban from natural, opting instead for a relational understanding reminiscent of William Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis* and that book’s groundbreaking exploration of the inseparable relationship between Chicago and its rural hinterland. Rawson very successfully integrates his theoretical framework of relationships transformed into a straightforward historical narrative. He shows convincingly how changing ideas about nature were integral to the material changes wrought on the physical landscape. At the same time, he manages to bring out the contested nature of these ideas and he clearly identifies how these ideas broke along distinct social fault lines of political economic interests, class, and ethnicity. After reading this book, one cannot help but see the Boston metropolitan region’s physical landscape as a cultural landscape, as a geography of negotiated meanings.

*Eden on the Charles* is also an important example of historical geography and it is supported with a fascinating variety of historic maps and illustrations — twelve maps and fifteen images dating from 1722 to 1902 — that bring to life the evolution of the Boston metropolitan landscape. They are well placed within the chapters, invariably juxtaposed with the relevant text. Indeed, it is clear that these figures, especially the maps, are meant to be consulted closely as one reads. It is baffling then that the book lacks a list of these figures in the front matter, or that these figures are not numbered, or that Rawson does not explicitly cite these figures in the text. It is not apparent that the book even contains these items until one begins to read, and it is frustrating to have to repeatedly hunt for them. These items are invaluable documents in themselves and it is a shame that the author and editors did not take the time to better organize them. However, as faults go, this is a relatively minor annoyance.

Rawson’s book makes a fascinating and enjoyable addition to the abundant scholarship on the history of Boston’s development. His theoretical perspective, emphasizing changing relation-

ships between humans and nature, and his integration of both material and cultural nature, advances the scholarship of environmental history and historical geography.