Book Review

Rural-Urban Symbiosis and the Making of Chicago

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The phenomenal growth of Chicago during the late nineteenth century has been a source of contention for both scholars and citizens, past and present. Precisely how and why Chicago grew as it did, coupled with how it managed to become America’s western metropolis, have been central concerns to how Chicago asserted its economic network over a vast area of the continent. The understanding gained from investigating such issues can help explain today’s Midwestern economic organization and, more generally, rural-urban dependencies around the world. William Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* explores this relationship and attempts explanation.

*Nature’s Metropolis* is not a comprehensive history of either Chicago or, as Cronon calls the land west of the Ohio River, the Great West. Cronon is not concerned with major political or social events or figures except how they affect the growing and changing dynamic and interdependence of Chicago and its hinterland. It is only the last chapter that gives anything more than a cursory emphasis to the social implications of the rural-urban exchange.

*Nature's Metropolis* deals partially with the historiography of city and country relations. As might be expected, Cronon discusses Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Thesis. To Turner, Cronon compares Johann Heinrich von Thünen's central place theory, which describes a state as having a central city surrounded by ever-larger rings of decreasing
economic intensity. Intensive agriculture, like dairy farming and orchards are in the rings closest to the city limits while ranching may be at the outer limits, followed only by, as would apply in America, a land inhabited exclusively by fur traders and hunters. For von Thünen, society radiated outward from the city. In contrast, Turner viewed the frontier as the birthplace of American civilization and the source of American identity.

Cronon analyzes both theories, shows how each can apply to the city of Chicago and its hinterlands, but then proceeds to attack them as oversimplifications of how urban and rural areas interact. Both theories fail, Cronon writes, to take into account a historical or geographic dynamic, such as the economic impact a navigable stream might have on von Thünen's concentric rings, or how Chicago’s overtaking of St. Louis as a regional center contradicts the premises of central place theory. To Turner, Chicago only wielded its influence as the frontier disappeared. For Cronon, Chicago was a crucial link in frontier advancement and development.

Cronon helps readers recognize their possible anti-urban sentiments and discard them for a new understanding of the rural-urban relationship. It is here that the book’s grander purpose might be perceived: to serve as a basis for understanding how our own actions and policies affect the rural-urban and human-nature dynamic. Cronon writes, “[N]o history book is finally worth writing unless it manages somehow to connect itself to the present world in which past and future meet and reshape one another.”

Some readers will see Cronon’s integrating of history and ecology as an important step in realizing a human relationship to nature. For such readers, Cronon may not address the environmental impact of the changing American economy enough. Discussion of what

2 Cronon, xxv.
economic events led to market sponsored deforestation, pollution of rivers and the vanishing of the buffalo herds is rich in detail, but the actual effect they had on the ecosystem or mankind as a whole is mentioned in passing, seemingly left for other studies. But Cronon’s personal biases are apparent. He makes no attempt to hide them as he states so plainly in the text: the “wealth of nature” is “stolen” and “few acknowledged their [the trees] deaths”.

A look at Cronon’s endnotes and bibliography indicate a very thorough and informed bank of modern and contemporary scholarship along with a near exhaustive collection of era-specific records, newspapers, journals and personal papers. Major repositories for these documents were found in various state historical societies, museums, universities and libraries in the greater Midwest, New York and Washington D.C. There are times where he seems to rely too heavily on only a few sources, as when discussing the habits of the lumber industry barons. But when this occurs, it is clear that this is not because of a poor effort in acquiring sources, but rather a result of a real scarcity of available materials. *Nature’s Metropolis* is well researched and Cronon utilizes his sometimes-limited sources to maximum effect.

Whatever one makes of Cronon's bias or tone, it is clear that *Nature's Metropolis* is an economic history of the landscape emphasizing environmental relations rather than a strictly environmental history of the landscape stressing economic interactions. Though he writes how the vast Chicago stockyards contributed to the pollution of the Chicago River, little is mentioned specifically of what this pollution meant to aquatic life or the spread of disease during the summer months. Economic exploitation of the natural environment is certainly not just a one-way street to improved living conditions. It results in gains for some, but results in a detriment to others. Cronon does not dwell on these consequences,

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3 Cronon, 206, 183.
despite their importance, preferring to maintain course with his strictly economic environmental perspective.

*Nature’s Metropolis* links economic needs of both city and country together using the story of Chicago and the Great West, and is perhaps the most noteworthy example of this association in American history. Using a variety of sources and the examples of the grain, lumber and meatpacking industries Cronon successfully demonstrates the rural-urban economic bond while unassumingly reminding readers of the consequences this relationship can have on our connection to nature. Some readers may view his inclusion of his personal memories and use of loaded language in regards to the environment as taking away from its scholarly use. Yet other readers will find his ecological references to be a necessary part of any book addressing the economy from the vantage point of the late twentieth-century. Whatever the case, Cronon’s work is an excellent case study of Chicago’s bond with the Great West and, secondarily, with humanity’s link to nature. *Nature’s Metropolis* should be on the reading list of both the lay and scholarly reader trying to understand these interactions.