

# H-Net Reviews

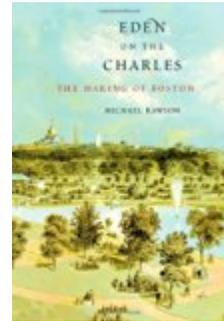
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Rawson. *Eden on the Charles: The Making of Boston*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. 384 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-04841-6.

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## Citizen Nature: Ecology and Society in the Birth of the Modern American Metropolis

Michael Rawson's *Eden on the Charles* explores the interplay between society and ecology in the development of Boston. Acknowledging the agency of both forces, Rawson makes an important contribution to a growing field of urban and social history that is increasingly erasing the line between natural and social history and replacing it with a synergistic unity. In this manner, *Eden on the Charles* joins earlier works, such as William Cronon's pathfinding history of Chicago (*Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* [1991]), and philosophies, such as actor-network theory, that accept the agency of nonhuman actors (see, for example, Michael Callon's "Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay," published in John Law's edited collection, *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge* [1986]).

Rawson uses the emergence of the fundamental building blocks of Boston to present this history. Across five central chapters, he covers the development of the city's first public park, public water system, suburbs, harbor, and forest reserves. By selecting Boston he provides the opportunity to examine the birth of these institutions as precedents (or near precedents) in the embryonic formation of what became the set form of the modern metropolis. As a result, *Eden on the Charles* provides not only an important contribution to the history of early Boston, but also insight into the schisms and trajectories that defined (and still define) the burgeoning urban revolution.

Chapter 1, "Enclosing the Common," grapples with the meaning and purpose of urban open space in a growing city. Rawson details the changing perceptions of nature and the resulting social conflicts that surrounded the transformation of the Boston Common from a working landscape, complete with grazing dairy cows and sand and gravel mining, to a reserve for gentile leisure and recreation.

Rawson continues in the second chapter, "Constructing Water," the themes of urban growth and social conflict to examine the establishment of Boston's municipal water system. As the chapter title suggests, this examination considers the growing power of the rising metropolis to bend ecology to fit its purposes as well as the social constructions of nature, class morality, and government authority that a change of urban infrastructure of this scale draws into its orbit.

The perceptions and manipulation of nature and social class and the role of governments to arbitrate and manifest the result are further dealt with in chapter 3, "Inventing the Suburbs." While Rawson's principal focus is on Boston, he rightly includes suburbanization as a fundamental component of urban development. Seizing on the two communities of Roxbury and Brookline, *Eden on the Charles* describes alternate trajectories that produced two very different communities. While secessionists from Roxbury sought to separate themselves from urbanization, their adherence to the market rather than investment in public services kept taxes low but resulted in

overdevelopment and subsequent demand that the town be (and was) annexed into Boston proper. Brookline took the highroad and through careful zoning and a commitment to municipal amenities created a town Fredrick Law Olmsted described as “civilized” and made his permanent home.

While the story of Roxbury and Brookline serve as an early echo of contemporary struggles over the appropriate roles of the market, public taxation, and the urban/suburban divide, Rawson’s fourth chapter, “Making the Harbor,” similarly explores the role of science in the definition and shaping of nature and the city. As a city initially centered on water-borne trade, Boston’s forces of commerce, engineering, erosion, and ecological preservation collide in the debate over the future regulation and construction of the city’s harbor facilities. Rawson acknowledges the similarities to present-day struggles over climate change as he describes the central, and in this case apparently erroneous, assumptions of science in defining the environmental problem and social solutions surrounding the sustainability of Boston’s harbor. Though mistaken in their science, the result was a tremendous expansion of the regulatory powers of government with impacts on land use, infrastructure investment, and development.

Moving again to the periphery of the city, *Eden on the Charles* looks at the beginnings of the movement for regional open space, land conservation, and the definitions of wilderness and local history. In describing the preservation of the large wooded tracts, Middlesex Fells and the Blue Hills near Boston, Rawson outlines not only an early battle in the struggle to maintain a connection between nature and the metropolis but also efforts to preserve specific historical hegemonies through the naming and narratives imposed on protected lands.

Presenting his case studies in this manner allows *Eden on the Charles* to offer a one-volume history of the city that is manageable yet covers significant underpinnings of the modern city. Rawson’s selection of Boston in the 1800s, the spiritual and intellectual capital of the nation in the same manner that Chicago was the nation’s workshop or New York City its financial hub, ensures a vibrancy of debate over issues that eventually would touch every other major metropolitan center. In addition, as many of these issues were rising for the first time on this scale, the debates have a further richness that can inform the frequently deterministic and market-dominated discussions of contemporary urban planning.

By presenting a narrative that unites social and eco-

logical history, Rawson has made an important contribution in two ways. First, as noted above, he has made a significant contribution to this new, unified direction in historical perspective. Secondly, by choosing to place this narrative within the context of Boston’s development, he has added to the urban component of this literature. This is especially important given the rapidly urbanizing global population and the need to dispel the myth that society, even in its modern urban form, is separated from nature.

While Rawson’s choice of Boston is strategic and well founded, he occasionally falls into a trap that waits for many biographers of both notable persons and notable cities—he grows too fond of his subject. While he is correct in framing Boston as an intellectual and spiritual leader in American affairs, he takes this description of the “city on a hill” a degree too far. While many Bostonians took the spiritual charge of their forbearers to heart, they did not hold a monopoly on the role of paragon. Rawson declares that “alone among America’s urbanizing populations, Bostonians believed they had a divinely-sanctioned destiny to create a model community, one that would provide an inspiring example to others” (p. 13), overlooking the similar mission underlying William Penn’s Philadelphia (City of Brotherly Love); Roger Williams’s Providence, Rhode Island, a city founded on religious freedoms unavailable in the “Eden” of Massachusetts; or the many other idealistically chartered cities throughout the United States (see *Backwoods Utopias: The Sectarian and Owenite Phases of Communitarian Socialism in America, 1663-1829* [1950] by Arthur Bestor).

Rawson similarly gives Boston a unique position in its reformers’ resistance to commercialism, stating that “its residents pushed back harder than in other cities” (p. 15). This emphasis unnecessarily delegates important social movements in such cities as Chicago and such efforts as Jane Addams’s Hull House to an undeserved secondary status. Rather than try to confirm an exclusive leading place for Boston, Rawson might have better served his subject by placing it in the general milieu of the United States, a nation of ubiquitous experiments in idealistic communities and fighting reformers.

Where the text excels is in its discussion of the emerging role of government to regulate community affairs in response to the social and ecological collateral damage of rising industrialization. The tensions of this struggle are best reflected in his chapters on the transformation of Boston Common from a working landscape to one of idealized pastoral leisure and on the creation of a municipi-

pal water supply and harbor authority for the city. Here, Rawson provides thorough, archival detail to the questions of how a society envisions nature and who profits when one vision prevails over another.

However, the victories of the public or elites are perhaps a bit overstated. Municipal institutions, such as public utilities, are under increasing privatization pressure and while cows no longer graze the Commons (or sheep, Central Park), America's urban parks are not quite the rarified recreational landscapes Rawson describes. They still are centers of commercial activity either by ancient and illegal custom or more recently as a result of the wave of privatization affecting America's public spaces.

The one weakness of *Eden on the Charles* is in its conclusion. While Rawson has provided an important, informative, readable, and engaging history of one of the nation's leading cities, it is his assessment of the urban future that falls short. In his final chapter, "The City Complete," Rawson writes that Bostonians have concluded "an important stage in their community's development by finishing the places and systems that would thereafter structure their environmental relationships" (p. 277). This assessment is ironic from an author who has joined ecological and social history to define a city, for the defining feature of both of these aspects is their incessant char-

acter of change. While the history that Rawson relates has indeed brought us to the cities we know today, the schisms within them, especially fractured along ecological and social rifts, are no doubt giving birth to yet another iteration of the city, one that will transcend and replace the contemporary modern metropolis. For example, the movement to replace traditional "grey" urban infrastructure, such as water treatment plants, with a new generation of "green" urban infrastructure, including urban forests, bio-swales, permeable pavement, and living buildings, may eventually transcend the sharp divides between open space, the built environment, and public water systems that Rawson has set in Boston's concrete.

Many of these rifts and the solutions that will be offered will have little resemblance to the physical features of modern Boston and the other cities that followed in its path. Yet this transcendence, it could be argued, will be centered in the essential things Boston has striven for: unity of society and spirit, public health and well being, and the realization of idealism in a community's physical form. In reaching beyond the "complete" city to one capable of mutual social and ecological evolution, we should, as Rawson charges, "aim our sights high, as nineteenth-century Bostonians did, and work to create new environmental relationships that are worthy of a city upon a hill" (p. 281).

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