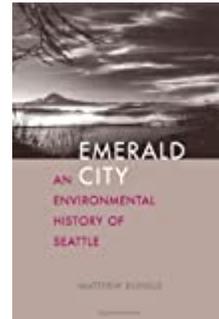




Matthew Klinge. *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. xix + 344 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11641-0.



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Seattle's Evolving Ethic of Place

In *Emerald City*, Matthew Klinge argues that “nature and culture are inseparable, and sometimes the best of intentions to split the two have produced the worst sort of evils,” resulting in steep environmental and social costs for Seattle (p. 280). He critiques the traditional approaches to both urban and environmental history that treat nature and culture as separate and “pure categories” (p. xii). *Emerald City* reveals how an unpredictable physical environment—typified by landslides and floods—magnified or thwarted human efforts at creating a new urban ecology in this western city. To tell this narrative, Klinge’s compelling environmental history illustrates the contentious evolution of an urban ethic of place. Drawing from legal scholar Charles Wilkinson, Klinge explains that “this ethic rests upon the recognition that humans rely on ‘the subtle, intangible, but soul-deep mix of landscape, smells, sounds, history ... that constitute a place, a homeland’” (p. 6). He convincingly demonstrates how a historical perspective, which includes both human and nonhuman components, helps us understand this ethic.

Before launching into the evolution of Seattle’s ur-

ban ethic of place, Klinge briefly explores the indigenous perspective of this concept, characterizing the pre-contact Puget Sound region as a mixed world where social subsistence and spiritual survival intertwined. As non-Natives began arriving in the region, indigenous peoples incorporated them into their mixed world, which, in turn, evolved into a hybrid ethic of American Indian and nonnative attitudes during the 1860s. This fluid and mixed culture came to an end as prospective real estate investors and homesteaders began to perceive the Indian presence as devaluing their property. Puget Sound Indians went from being family and neighbors to being strangers, trespassers, and enemies. While this transition is important for understanding the subsequent evolution of Seattle’s urban ethic of place, readers will want to refer to such works as Alexandra Harmon’s *Indians in the Making: Ethnic Relations and Indian Identities around Puget Sound* (1998) and Coll Thrush’s *Native Seattle: Histories from the Crossing-Over Place* (2007) to gain a more complete exploration of the complexities of indigenous Puget Sound.

The majority of Klinge’s study details the

multifaceted—and often conflicting—perspectives on the city’s evolving ethic of place. Chapter 2 establishes one of the key, recurring tensions: opposing views and codes of property, specifically property for public good versus property for private gain. For example, as wealthy and powerful railroad backers attempted to turn tidelands into private property in the 1880s, those with less power pushed back, arguing that these spaces needed to remain as public property because privatizing them would limit maritime commerce and fishing. Chapters 3 and 4 explore the perspectives of Progressive Era experts, like the city engineer R. H. Thompson and landscape architects like the Olmsted brothers, as they attempted to improve both the natural and social landscapes of the growing city. Believing in the “sanctifying power of reason and technology to redeem society,” Thompson set out to secure clean water, to build a complete sewer system, and to create solid and level land, services and qualities that he felt were necessary for the physical and social health of the city (p. 90). Adopting a different approach, the Olmsteds set out to improve Seattle through parks, which brought them into conflict with Thompson as Seattleites confronted the question of whether beauty would come at the cost of efficiency. Chapter 5 explains how urban advocates of outdoor leisure in the 1920s revised the Progressive experts’ ethic of place as they set out to change others’ behavior to restore and protect the physical environment within a new geography of recreation that connected the countryside to the city.

Kingle’s study importantly shows how these elite perspectives on Seattle’s ethic of place encountered significant resistance from the combined force of those with less power and the environment. As he argues, efforts to reshape and reengineer the landscape often created unstable and hazardous hybrid environments that amplified social tensions—“Improvement for some too often spelled despair, even ruin, for others” (p. 85). Nonelites and nature did not passively accept this ruin. For example, as developers attempted to create valuable private property from the public tidelands, immigrant squatters, resident Indians, and regular floods confounded their efforts and made it impossible for them to impose social order on their new properties. Similarly, Thompson’s infamous regrading of Seattle’s hills triggered both litigation from those living in regraded areas—often the poorest neighborhoods in the city—and spectacular mudslides that swept away homes and property. Wanting playgrounds instead of contemplative parks, poorer residents clashed with the Olmsted brothers and turned their parks into havens for the less fortunate, who saw the parks as

an urban version of the rural, hunting commons. Upper-class, urban “playseekers” worked to exclude those who did not fit their racial or political preferences and made it clear that the working poor were “not welcome in the city’s Arcadian playgrounds” both within and outside the city (p. 170).

Most important, Kingle demonstrates that the environment suffered where people also suffered. Conflicts over poor people and poor lands revealed the nascent and incomplete quality of Seattle’s ethic of place. The death of the Duwamish River best exemplifies this. As Seattleites and suburbanites cleaned up Lake Washington to supply themselves with comfortable and safe leisure and scenery, they sacrificed the Duwamish by dumping their pollutants into the river. Poor residents living on and along the Duwamish suffered as the salmon died along with the river. This example illustrates that “each effort to protect environmental amenities for some was a political act that endangered or abolished rights and privileges for others” (p. 228). Even when a broad coalition of concerned citizens, government officials, and businesses united behind the common cause of saving endangered salmon, they foundered on an incomplete ethic of place that failed to account for the poor and dispossessed of degraded landscapes.

The author concludes by arguing that Seattleites need a new ethic of place, one that is sustainable and relevant to the city and not in opposition to nature. This new ethic would allow residents to see the world in ecological terms and admit their collective responsibility to the nonhuman world and the hybrid landscapes that they have created. Most important, it should be rooted in civic environmentalism, which would account for imbalances in power and resources among citizens.

Kingle has written an epic narrative on the environmental history of Seattle. Due to its large scope, the book naturally has some gaps. Most notably, this volume does not adequately address the city’s regional transportation challenges, although it does mention some of these issues within the context of other municipal efforts. With its challenging combination of landscapes and waterscapes, Seattle has assembled a unique collection of transportation features, including floating bridges, ferries, extensive roads, an iconic monorail, and an inadequate mass transit system. People familiar with Seattle’s legendary traffic woes might expect Kingle to have explored how the city’s incomplete ethic of place has shaped these struggles that have become increasingly characterized by environmental and class tensions.

Emerald City is a groundbreaking achievement that charts a new course for both urban and environmental histories. Meticulously researched and documented, this book will appeal to a wide range of academics, including historians and geographers. Engagingly written in a way that brings clarity to complex and intertwined social and natural processes, it will appeal to anyone interested in Seattle, other western cities, environmental justice, or ecological restoration. *Emerald City* helps us begin to understand how our connection to place is a “deliberate and enduring dialogue between humans and their environment” (p. 270).

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