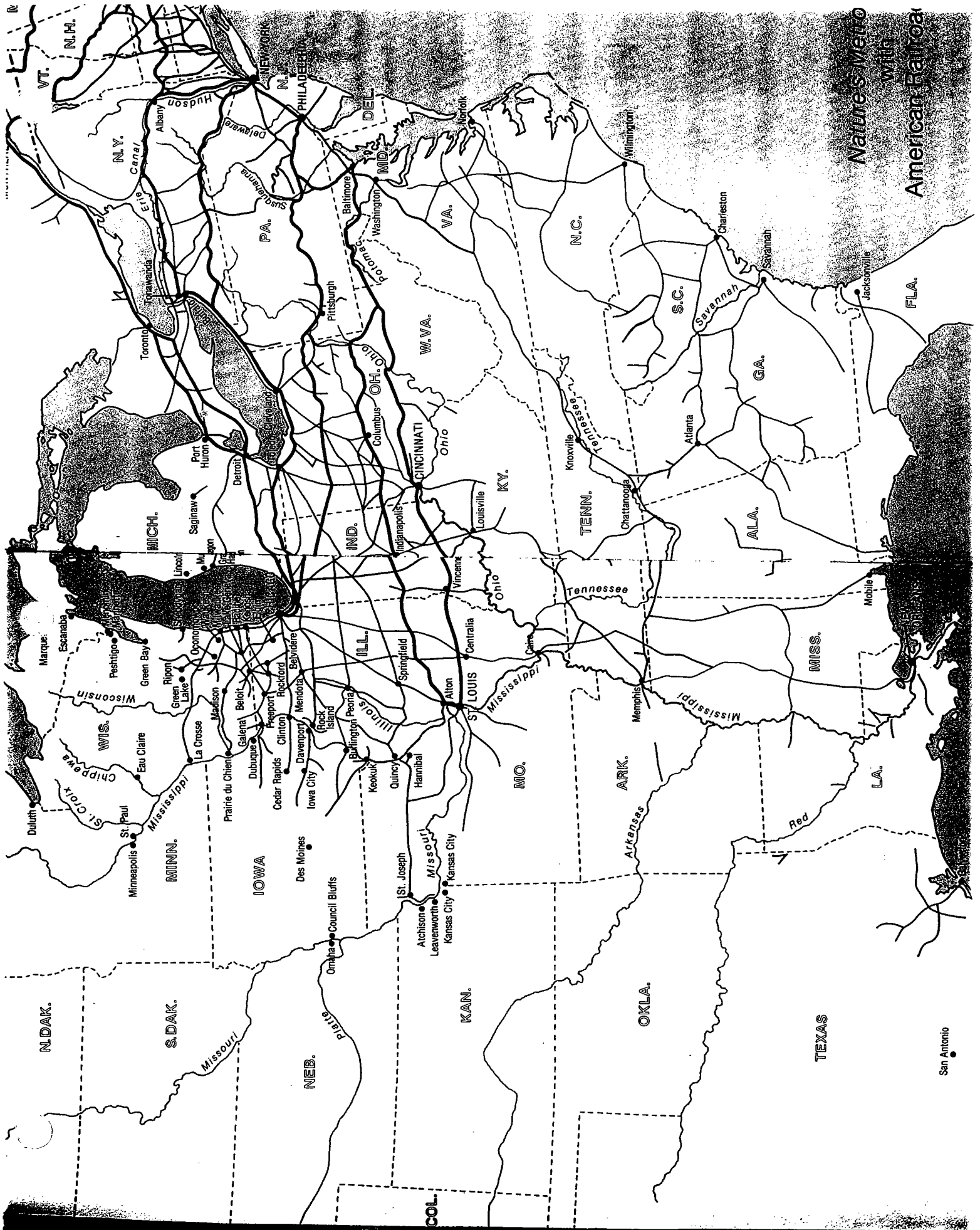


from William Cronon, Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West
(NY: Norton, 1991)

Preface

As someone who believes that truth in advertising should apply no less to books than to automobiles or toothpaste, I must warn the reader at the outset that *Nature's Metropolis* may appear to be something that it is not. Despite what its subtitle may seem to suggest, it is a comprehensive history neither of Chicago nor of the Great West. It is rather a history of the relationship between those places. My contention is that no city played a more important role in shaping the landscape and economy of the midcontinent during the second half of the nineteenth century than Chicago. Conversely, one cannot understand the growth of Chicago without understanding its special relationship to the vast region lying to its west. Although the persistent rural bias of western history has often prevented us from acknowledging this fact, the central story of the nineteenth-century West is that of an expanding metropolitan economy creating ever more elaborate and intimate linkages between city and country. To see the traditional American "frontier" from this metropolitan perspective, no place furnishes a more striking vantage point than Chicago.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the American landscape was transformed in ways that anticipated many of the environmental problems we face today: large-scale deforestation, threats of species extinction, unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, widespread destruction of habitat. It was during this period as well that much of the world we Americans now inhabit was created: the great cities that house so many of us, the remarkably fertile farmlands that feed us, the transpor-



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tation linkages that tie our nation together, the market institutions that help define our relationships to each other and to the natural world that is our larger home. The nineteenth century saw the creation of an integrated economy in the United States, an economy that bound city and country into a powerful national and international market that forever altered human relationships to the American land. Although this book takes Chicago and the Great West as its immediate focus, its broader ambition is to explore century-old economic and ecological transformations that have continued to affect all of North America and the rest of the world besides.

Few of us, I think, fully understand or appreciate how much our modern landscape is a creation of these nineteenth-century changes. For cultural reasons that date from this same historical period, Americans have long tended to see city and country as separate places, more isolated from each other than connected. We carefully partition our national landscape into urban places, rural places, and wilderness. Although we often cross the symbolic boundaries between them—seeking escape or excitement, recreation or renewal—we rarely reflect on how tightly bound together they really are. Even professional historians often fall into this trap. Urban historians rarely look beyond the outskirts of cities to the hinterlands beyond; western and frontier and even environmental historians usually concentrate far more attention on rural and wild places than on urban ones. As a result, there are few models for a book like this one, which tries to tell the city-country story as a unified narrative. Having struggled with this book for more than a decade, I can well understand why others have shied away from such an approach. The obstacles in its way are many, and I have by no means overcome all of them in trying to make sense of my own topic. Still, throughout it all I have held fast to one central belief: city and country have a common history, so their stories are best told together.

Since my own private passion is to understand environmental change in relation to the actions of human beings, blending as best I can the insights of ecology and economics, I have organized this book around a topic that many will initially find peculiar if not off-putting: commodity flows. In the pages that follow, I have much to say about grain, lumber, meat, and other trade goods as they moved back and forth between Chicago and its hinterland during the second half of the nineteenth century. Therein has been one of my greatest challenges as a writer. Economic history is unfortunately not much read these days, even by many historians, in part because it has come to be dominated by highly mathematical approaches that are far more dedicated to theoretical rigor than to ordinary communication or understanding. Trying to combine economic and

environmental history in a way that will excite rather than squelch the reader's curiosity has been my constant goal, especially since commodity markets have never been a subject that has attracted much public interest or enthusiasm. Most people find them deeply mysterious, and probably deeply boring as well.

These two reactions—mystification and boredom—are certainly understandable, but they nonetheless seem to me unfortunate. I urge you, reader, to resist them both, as I have resisted the urge to load my text with statistical analyses and tables. I write of commodity markets not from some perverse private fascination, but from the conviction that few economic institutions more powerfully affect human communities and natural ecosystems in the modern capitalist world. Even those of us who will never trade wheat or pork bellies on the Chicago futures markets depend on those markets for our very survival. Just as important, the commodities that feed, clothe, and shelter us are among our most basic connections to the natural world. If we wish to understand the ecological consequences of our own lives—if we wish to take political and moral responsibility for those consequences—we must reconstruct the linkages between the commodities of our economy and the resources of our ecosystem. This is what I have tried to do. *Nature's Metropolis* consists of a series of stories, each tracing the path between an urban market and the natural systems that supply it. I intend these stories as contributions to the history of nineteenth-century Chicago and the history of the West, but I intend them as parables for our own lives as well.

Because I spend so much time looking at commodities in this book, I devote little or no space to subjects that many readers and scholars might expect to find treated at some length. I have little to say about most of the classic topics of urban history: the growth of neighborhoods within the city, social conflicts among classes and ethnic groups, the actions of municipal authorities, even the environmental history of public services like sewage disposal or water supply. Readers turning to this book for an account of Chicago's architecture, its labor struggles, its political machines, its social reformers, its cultural institutions, and many other topics are likely to turn away disappointed. Indeed, I have little to say about individual men and women. The few who do show up in these pages are mainly merchants, who enter my narratives less because they are significant in their own right than because they exemplify so well the broader city-country connections I wish to trace. The book might have been better had I given more space to any number of other important subjects; it would certainly have been much longer. I can now understand why Bessie Louise Pierce was never able to finish her famous history of Chicago, even though it eventually encompassed three thick volumes. It is a big city with

a big history, and I have not even tried to do it full justice. Instead, I have kept my compass sights on the paths into and out of town, following the routes that linked the human community called Chicago to the natural world of which the city became so important a part.

I should perhaps define a few key terms that recur in this book and that may seem unfamiliar in the way that I use them. The most important are right in the book's title. By "the Great West," I mean a region that no longer exists on the mental maps of most Americans. According to nineteenth-century usage, it was the vast interior region of the nation that was neither the North (the region north of the Mason-Dixon line and east of the Appalachians or Great Lakes) nor the South (the region defined most simply as the losing side of the Civil War). The Great West began either at the Ohio River or at Lake Michigan, and extended all the way to the Pacific Ocean. By the second half of the nineteenth century, many Americans saw Chicago as the gateway to that expansive western territory.

"The Great West" is thus related to a much more controversial word, "frontier." Some western scholars have recently argued that American conceptions of frontier history are so ideologically loaded, so racist, sexist, and imperialist in their implications, that it would be better not to use the word at all. They offer instead a regional version of western history in which the West begins where it does today, at a not very well-defined line cutting across the Great Plains or the Rocky Mountains. Although I share these scholars' objections to the ideological distortions of traditional frontier historiography, I do not believe we can escape those distortions simply by changing vocabulary to redefine the historical experience that created them. In *Nature's Metropolis*, I describe one aspect of the frontier experience on a very macro scale: the expansion of a metropolitan economy into regions that had not previously been tightly bound to its markets, and the absorption of new peripheral areas into a capitalist orbit. Frontier areas lay on the periphery of the metropolitan economy, while cities like New York and London lay near its center. Chicago sat in between, on the boundary between East and West as those regions were defined in the nineteenth century. As such, its story is inextricably bound to American frontier expansion. Much as I may be uncomfortable with the shifting definitions that have plagued scholarly readings of frontier history since the days of Frederick Jackson Turner, I am convinced that regional redefinitions of the field are ultimately not much better, since I am quite confident that for much of the nineteenth century the West began in Chicago, not in Denver or San Francisco. To try to redefine the West to fit our modern vocabulary is to do violence to the way Americans in the past understood that term, since for them it was intimately tied to that other, now problematic word—"frontier." And so I have compro-

mised by self-consciously using an anachronistic phrase to label Chicago's nineteenth-century hinterland. The very fact that we no longer speak of the Great West suggests its origins in the frontier processes that created—and then dismantled—that region.

But “frontier” and “Great West” are not the most problematic terms I use in this book; that honor is surely reserved for “nature,” one of the richest, most complicated and contradictory words in the entire English language. Those who like their vocabulary precise and unambiguous will surely be frustrated by the different ways I use “nature” in this text. To them, I can only apologize: I do not believe the ambiguities can be suppressed, and I regard the word as indispensable to my purposes. The central ambiguity flows from the old dilemma about whether human beings are inside or outside of nature. At times, I use “nature” to refer to the nonhuman world, even though my deepest intellectual agenda in this book is to suggest that the boundary between human and nonhuman, natural and unnatural, is profoundly problematic. I do so because our language really has no good alternative for describing the nonhuman systems which humanity acts upon. I have tried to reduce confusion (but may only have heightened it) by resorting to the Hegelian and Marxist terms “first nature” (original, prehuman nature) and “second nature” (the artificial nature that people erect atop first nature). This distinction has its uses, but it too slips into ambiguity when we recognize that the nature we inhabit is never just first or second nature, but rather a complex mingling of the two. Moreover, the different meanings and connotations of “nature” have a rich cultural history of their own (traced most subtly in the work of Raymond Williams), and no simple definition can hope to control or capture them. Only careful, historically minded usage will do, especially when the thing one wants to convey about the human place in nature is precisely its ambiguity. My hope is that the attentive reader is already familiar with these conceptual problems of a word which is, after all, part of our everyday speech, and that my meaning in any given context will be reasonably clear.

I first conceived this book more than a dozen years ago, while working on a history of energy use in the English city of Coventry and realizing that an environmental history of a single city made little sense if written in isolation from the countryside around it. In the time since, I have incurred innumerable debts to so many people and organizations that I cannot possibly thank them all. Students and colleagues have been immensely generous with their insights and suggestions, giving me the intellectual and emotional support I needed to keep going on a project that often seemed too large and unmanageable ever to reach a satisfactory

