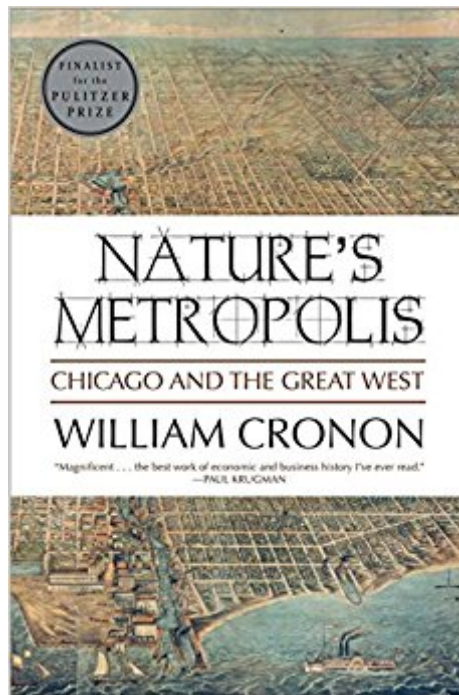




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# **Nature's Metropolis: Chicago And The Great West**



## Synopsis

A Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and Winner of the Bancroft Prize. "No one has written a better book about a city." —*Nature's Metropolis* is elegant testimony to the proposition that economic, urban, environmental, and business history can be as graceful, powerful, and fascinating as a novel." —*Kenneth T. Jackson*, *Boston Globe*

In this groundbreaking work, William Cronon gives us an environmental perspective on the history of nineteenth-century America. By exploring the ecological and economic changes that made Chicago America's most dynamic city and the Great West its hinterland, Mr. Cronon opens a new window onto our national past. This is the story of city and country becoming ever more tightly bound in a system so powerful that it reshaped the American landscape and transformed American culture. The world that emerged is our own.

Winner of the Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Cronon's history of 19th-century Chicago is in fact the history of the widespread effects of a single city on millions of square miles of ecological, cultural, and economic frontier. Cronon combines archival accuracy, ecological evaluation, and a sweeping understanding of the impact of railroads, stockyards, catalog companies, and patterns of property on the design of development of the entire inland United States to this date. Although focused on Chicago and the U.S., the general lessons it teaches are of global significance, and a rich source of metaphors for the ways in which colonization of physical space operates differently from, and similarly to, colonization of cyberspace. This is a

compelling, wise, thorough--and thoroughly accessible--masterpiece of history writ large. Very Highest Recommendation.

In a fresh approach that links urban and frontier history, Cronon ( *Changes in the Land* ) explores the relationship between Chicago, 1848-1893, and the entire West, tracing the path between an urban market and the natural systems that supply it. Examining commodity flows--meat, grain, lumber--and the revolution in transportation and distribution, the book chronicles changes in the landscape: cattle replace buffalo; corn and wheat supplant prairie grasses; entire forests fall to the ax. Thus Wyoming cattle, Iowa corn and Wisconsin white pine come together in Chicago. City and countryside develop in tandem. Cronon notes that gateway cities are a peculiar feature of North American frontier settlements and the chief colonizers of the Western landscape. He compares the world of rural merchants in the pre- and post-railroad eras, and cites the McCormack reaper works to illustrate the sale of manufactured goods to the hinterland. The culmination of this dynamic period is in the Columbian Exposition of 1893. Readers interested in the growth of capitalism will find this an engrossing study. Photos. Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A beautifully written book describing the rise of a great metropolis and its ability to exceed its boosters' wildest dreams. The intrinsic connection between city and country is one of the strongest themes of the book, granting credit to both country and city for the rise of Chicago. Additionally, the book surveys nature as found and man's alterations to nature (termed 'first nature' and 'second nature', respectively), and its impact on the city's economy. This is a must-read for any person who desires to shape cities and who subscribes to the theories of landscape urbanism. Though it does not conform to the idea that cities are to be solely shaped around nature, the book does in fact support that geography and the inherent value of landscape is what brought greatness to Chicago and the Midwestern region.

The city of Chicago inhabits a unique location straddling several natural divides: between the watersheds of Lake Michigan and the Mississippi River; between vast grasslands on the Great Plains and dense woodlands around the Great Lakes. Appropriately, William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis* tells the story of the city's remarkable nineteenth-century rise as one of connections, both geographical and thematic: between east and west, water and rail, ecology and economy. But like the low,

swampy ridge through which enterprising Chicagoans constructed the Illinois and Michigan Canal in the 1830s and 40s, Cronon's divisions are not so neat and tidy. Cronon begins with a delicate refutation of Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis, arguing that cities "grew in tandem with the countryside" (p. 47). Rather than developing in isolation as the product of discreet urban economic forces, Chicago rose to power only as its rural surroundings became a hinterland of natural and agricultural resource production. And as more efficient and reliable transportation networks sprung up to support trade between, for example, cattle ranchers in Kansas or lumbermen in Michigan and the concentration of fiscal and manufacturing capital in Chicago, ties strengthened further, leading some boosters and twentieth-century urban theorists to espouse a certain "gravitational" argument for the city's success. Throughout *Nature's Metropolis*—especially in the three parallel chapters on grain, lumber, and meat production—Cronon proves that economic and environmental histories can (and should) be reconciled. Furthermore, Cronon writes with the clarity and color that makes this a truly engaging book. Indeed, his explanation of futures markets is as lucid as that of seasonal grain production—which says a lot, considering the disdain with which environmental historians often regard the mechanisms of capitalism. Though the last three chapters can feel a bit tedious and redundant—especially considering the book's length—*Nature's Metropolis* is a remarkable achievement and a benchmark for urban environmental history.

There are going to be other reviewers who can provide more erudite reviews-- reviews better grounded in the study of cities or economic history. I am nothing more than an average reader who enjoys non-fiction. First of all, potential readers should be aware that this is an economic history. It follows flows of goods and capital rather than following the lives and careers of the men and women of Chicago. I knew what to expect, but for people looking for a more standard history of Chicago this may make *Nature's Metropolis* difficult to engage. I really enjoyed reading the book. It stretched my understanding of the economic growth of cities and raised issues that I had not considered about the role of the city \*in\* nature (not as opposed to nature). The examination of elements that made Chicago into both a city and The City was fascinating. The chapters tracing grain, lumber and meat as goods were clearly written and underscored the central theses. I guess it goes without saying that *Nature's Metropolis* is far from a light read, but that does not make it less rewarding. As someone who does not have a background in history, I only longingly wished that the bibliography had been

annotated to help support further reading.

I formerly had little interest in economics, much less economic history, but after reading Nature's Metropolis, any history I read that doesn't include the relevant economics seems incomplete. It would not be possible to write a book on Chicago's rise in the 19th century without writing a book that is almost equally about the prairies and forests beyond it, since the two were so fundamentally linked to each other; Nature's Metropolis is accordingly a history of both. It would be worth getting the book for Chapter 3 (on grain) alone: with railroads freeing farmers from having to build alongside watercourses, production exploded, necessitating the grain elevator, necessitating the comingling of grain, undermining the incentive to produce high-quality grain, necessitating a grading system to correct that, allowing (with the telegraph) the sale of grain to buyers 1000 miles away before giving them a sample, necessitating futures contracts, precipitating futures trading. That's an oversimplification, of course--there's a reason it's a chapter and not a sentence--but it hopefully conveys at least a glimpse of the work's radiance, and how relevant it is beyond its time and place. Given the current abundance of tendentious "non-fiction", it is worth noting that throughout the book, Cronon is (to the best of my senses) evenhanded about what was gained and lost, and the ways in which the market was both beneficial (reducing risk for farmers, for the most part) and perverse (market corners). In conjunction with the book's other virtues, this makes Nature's Metropolis, in my opinion, a work of rare quality.

Excellent! I grew up in the Chicagoland area and never fully appreciated the city's part in the development of the western United States. I read based on the recommendation of a friend and was skeptical to start, but was not disappointed.

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