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'Eden' traces the roads that led to Boston

By [Michael Patrick Brady](#)

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Bostonians of the 19th century believed they could transform their small town into a thriving, harmonious metropolis, and fought bitterly over how best to do it.

EDEN ON THE CHARLES: The Making of Boston

By [Michael Rawson](#)

Harvard University, illustrated, 367 pp., \$29.95

In "Eden on the Charles: The Making of Boston," Michael Rawson examines how the city's relationship with its natural surroundings informed its early growth and development. His compelling, well-

researched narrative touches on several milestones on Boston's road to modernity, including the Common's conversion from a place of labor to a place of leisure, the emergence of pastoral suburbs as a respite from an increasingly urbanized landscape, and the long fight over a proposed municipal water system to bring fresh water to those who needed it most. The people of Boston, argues Rawson, helped define the concept of urban living, and the choices they made in the struggle to harness their environment served as a model to others.

Underlying Rawson's anecdotes about Boston's interactions with nature is the debate between advocates for the common good, who believed government could be used to cure society's ills, and defenders of individual liberty, who favored private enterprise and feared an increased tax burden. It's a philosophical divide that had profound implications for the future of the city, and came to a head in the heated battle over Boston's water woes.

"By the 1820s," writes Rawson, "Boston's patchwork system of private wells and cisterns and a single water company was failing." Wealthy Bostonians could afford to have clean water piped directly to their homes, but the average citizen had to settle for well water contaminated by minerals and

pollutants from nearby factories. Poor and working-class families hardly ever saw a drop. A major public health crisis loomed, and there was no question that access to clean water needed to be expanded. There was, however, intense disagreement over whether it should be accomplished through public or private means.

Opponents of the municipal system argued that a for-profit private company would find the most efficient and least expensive solution. They circulated pamphlets under pseudonyms like “Selfish Taxpayer” and “Anti-Humbug,” warning that public water was the first step down a slippery slope that would undermine American capitalism.

Supporters believed that people had a right to clean water, and that the benefits of universal access would be worth the cost. “Water advocates believed that a plentiful supply of pure water could better the health and morals of the urban population,” writes Rawson. In the words of reformer Dr. Walter Channing, “Whatever a society judged to be essential to the health and happiness of its people must never be the responsibility of a profit-driven entity. It does not entrust the care of the public health to private companies, which may grow rich upon disease.”

Throughout “Eden on the Charles,” Rawson effectively conveys both the hard facts and deeply felt emotions involved in these contentious matters, showing how the aspects of urban living we take for granted were not inevitable, but rather won through fierce political and intellectual sparring. In Boston’s efforts to harness nature for the good of its people, he identifies not only the beginnings of American social reform and political activism, but also the first stirrings of conservationism, in efforts to preserve the beauty and utility of Boston Harbor, the Blue Hills, and the Middlesex Fells.

Perhaps the book’s most important lesson comes from a frustrated mariner who, upset over the maltreatment of the harbor, laments that “the past seems to be forgotten, the present only is regarded as of importance, and a veil is drawn over the future.” “Eden on the Charles” is a valiant effort to combat such shortsightedness, reminding us that the key to building a successful community lies in respecting the natural resources that provide for it and in understanding our responsibility to our fellow citizens.

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