

[Bryan on Fisher, 'Urban Green: Nature, Recreation, and the Working Class in Industrial Chicago'](#)

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Colin Fisher. *Urban Green: Nature, Recreation, and the Working Class in Industrial Chicago*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. Illustrations, maps. 248 pp. \$32.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4696-1995-8.

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Commissioned by William S. Cossen

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Perhaps no image of Chicago has endured like Upton Sinclair's gritty 1906 depiction of the city and its exploited workers in *The Jungle*. When Sinclair describes impoverished slums surrounding the stockyards, leisure activities like outdoor recreation seem far removed from the realities of day-to-day life in this polluted industrial district for immigrant workers like Jurgis Rudkus. The city—even its parks—were places where nature seemed to disappear, where Rudkus claimed he had “never seen a tree!”[1]

Yet Colin Fisher's *Urban Green: Nature, Recreation, and the Working Class in Industrial Chicago* shows that nature actually played a critical role in the lives of Chicago's working classes. As immigrant laborers struggled to cope with a precarious life of industrial work, they used what little leisure they had to escape from “artificial urban neighborhoods” to green spaces where they could enjoy outdoor recreation (p. 42). Using the observations of urban naturalist Leonard Dubkin, a first-generation Ukrainian immigrant, Fisher takes readers on a vivid tour of the varied sites that workers visited during their Sunday leisure time. While some working-class people joined upper-class nature lovers who traveled to places outside the city like the Indiana Dunes and the Cook County Forest Preserve, workers more commonly sought out nature closer to home in vacant city lots; in cemeteries; in small neighborhood athletic parks; and in privately owned green spaces like amusement parks, youth camps, picnic groves, and beer gardens.

All classes saw nature as an “antidote” to the rigors of urban living, but Fisher shows that the working-class people who traveled to city green spaces enjoyed nature in far different ways than stodgy middle- and upper-class Chicagoans (p. 4). Rather than taking in park scenery through quiet carriage rides or contemplative walks, Chicago's workers played sports, listened to music, swam, gambled, and drank beer. Scholars have generally interpreted these activities as having little to do with nature itself, but Fisher argues that they were “vehicles through which immigrants enjoyed the outdoors” (p. 47).

Chicago's green spaces also served an important cultural purpose. German, Italian, Mexican, Irish, and Polish immigrants used these landscapes to “remember distant villages, regions, and nations,” helping them to forge strong ethnic, regional, or national pride and community identity far from home (p. 53). Building on the popularity of outdoor recreation in other countries, leaders of immigrant

communities in Chicago also devised outdoor athletic programs and camps for young people that promoted ethnic identification and language retention.

Chicago's politics of leisure were always contentious, however. Immigrants resisted efforts by urban reformers who tried to define how and where working-class people could enjoy the city's green spaces. Fisher argues that white immigrants ultimately prevailed in this "culture war and taught conservative Americans," who typically spent Sundays indoors, to get out and "appreciate the outdoors" (p. 51).

African Americans faced steeper barriers to enjoying Chicago's green spaces, especially after World War I, when white Chicagoans often resorted to violence to keep parks segregated. These efforts culminated in the city's 1919 race riot, an event that began with an altercation over beaches on Lake Michigan. Even after this event, Fisher shows, African Americans sought out green spaces where they could escape from the city, and they used natural landscapes to imagine and construct a transnational African identity.

Urban Green is a thoughtful book that contributes to several fields. For one, Fisher internationalizes the narrative of American outdoor recreation and nature appreciation. By revealing how immigrants drew on cultural understandings of nature that extended beyond the United States in their outdoor recreation in Chicago, Fisher's book challenges longstanding portrayals of the United States as an exceptional nation indelibly marked by its close relationship with nature. By connecting labor agitation with the politics of leisure, Fisher also shows that outdoor recreation and urban green space was critical to the formation of a distinct working class as well as to immigrant communities defined by ethnic, regional, and/or national lines.

Fisher's book is perhaps most valuable in showing that working-class people experienced nature through their leisure—not just their work—complicating top-down narratives of outdoor recreation that have long been standard fare in environmental history. Some scholars may question whether the recreational activities enjoyed by Chicago's immigrants were truly an expression of their desire for nature, or whether the working class was just making the most of their limited options. But *Urban Green* is an important reminder that people can express their love of nature in different ways, and it is a call to expand how we think about nature recreation.

Because of these contributions, *Urban Green* will be of interest to scholars working on topics in environmental history, labor history, and the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. The book is an enjoyable read, making it a natural for use in the classroom on the graduate and undergraduate levels. Fisher's book also speaks to recent issues. By showing that the enjoyment of nature is the product of historical circumstances—not something that is encoded in our genetic makeup—Fisher affirms the importance of environmental history and rejects recent claims about "biophilia" (p. 144). As institutions like the National Park Service work to open up opportunities for nature recreation to a more diverse crowd, Fisher's book should also point us to a greater acceptance of how people show their enjoyment of nature.

Note

[1]. Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (1906; repr., Pasadena, CA, 1920), 254.

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