

Sean Kheraj

*Inventing Stanley Park*  
*An Environmental History*

Foreword by Graeme Wynn



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# *Foreword*

## *Between Art and Nature*

Graeme Wynn

One of my favourite episodes in the history of Vancouver is the visit (mentioned on p. 109 of this book) of English landscape architect Thomas H. Mawson to the city late in March 1912. The record of this fleeting moment is relatively thin, but it is nonetheless fascinating. Mawson was in Vancouver for but a few days (although he returned several times in 1912 and 1913, and his firm ran a Canadian office in the Rogers Building on Granville Street for some years).<sup>1</sup> Invited, as Kheraj notes, by civic officials anxious to have his advice about the development of their city, Mawson must have cut quite a figure in this fast-growing, still somewhat rough-and-ready frontier town of barely 110,000 people.<sup>2</sup> Generally pictured in a stylish three-piece suit, often wearing the high starched shirt collars fashionable in Edwardian England, and sporting a luxuriant moustache, Mawson was no shrinking violet.<sup>3</sup> Although his reputation “as perhaps the greatest living authority on city planning” preceded him, he made a point of telling members of the Canadian Club gathered to hear his thoughts on “Civic Art and Vancouver’s Opportunity” that he was “probably a greater student of this subject than any man living.” By his own account, he also set out shortly after his arrival in the city to take the measure of this “most marvelous creation of twenty-five years.” Seeking to discover what local residents thought “about Art and Nature,” he pursued his research in “every place – clubs, hotels and even churches.” On the basis of the conversations he had in these places, he quickly concluded that the people of Vancouver fell into two camps: those who loved Nature so unreservedly that “they can never imagine that Nature cannot always

be at her best” and a second group “interested only in commercial pursuits, with no idea or imagination that ever rises above that level.” Lacking the “reverent soul” and unable to hear “the music of the spheres,” members of this latter group “would do anything to destroy Nature.”<sup>4</sup>

Born in decidedly modest circumstances in Lancashire, England, in 1861, Mawson had left school at the age of twelve and worked in the building trades and a plant nursery before branching out into garden design in the 1880s.<sup>5</sup> In the following decade, he sharpened and refined his ideas through several estate commissions. Executing these, he effectively resolved the battle of horticultural styles – which pitted proponents of wild gardens against those who favoured formal spaces – by including formal elements normally associated with the house in the surrounding landscape and even more distant (and often artfully enhanced) woodland. As historian Edward Hyams described them, these fin de siècle years saw the reconciliation of picturesque, Italianate, and architectural principles with plantsmanship in the English garden, and Mawson was near the centre of these developments.<sup>6</sup> In 1900, he published *The Art and Craft of Garden Making*, signalling his indebtedness to the ideas of William Morris, John Ruskin, and the Arts and Crafts movement.<sup>7</sup> Links with the Scotsman Patrick Geddes led him in the first years of the twentieth century to the forefront of the emergent town-planning movement where he advocated what he termed *civic art*. Strongly influenced, initially, by ideas emanating from the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and, latterly, by the American City Beautiful movement, Mawson’s civic art was a mixture of town planning and park building that emphasized the aesthetic rather than the practical (e.g., sewage and water supply) elements of urban design.

A decade or so into the twentieth century, Mawson’s star was high; he had completed important commissions for Lord Leverhulme in England, been chosen to design the gardens of the Andrew Carnegie–funded Peace Palace in The Hague, and undertaken a lecture tour that encompassed several cities in the eastern United States and included visits to Harvard, Cornell, and Yale Universities, as well as to the governor general in Ottawa. Looking back on this 1910 trip, he reflected with typical immodesty: “I had now, metaphorically speaking, annexed America, and made this vast continent a part of my sphere of influence.”<sup>8</sup> A year later, he published *Civic Art: Studies in Town Planning, Parks, Boulevards, and Open Spaces*, and early in 1912 he was invited back to Canada to consult on a park at Niagara Falls and the replanning of Ottawa.<sup>9</sup> When these plans fell through, he arranged to give lectures on city planning in a dozen centres from Halifax to Victoria, including Vancouver. These contacts led to a virtual

reprise of this itinerary in the fall, a three-month trip that “constituted the biggest bustle of ... [his] life.”<sup>10</sup> In Vancouver a second time, Mawson was beset by newspapermen, people interested in town planning, and citizens concerned about social problems, but he insisted that his business in the city on this visit was “limited to the improvement of Coal Harbour and the famous Stanley Park.”<sup>11</sup> In a brief stay, he worked up a preliminary report for the Park Board and was instructed to develop alternative schemes for these purposes. These were further refined during a six-week visit to Canada in April-May 1913 and submitted in person on another visit in December of that year.<sup>12</sup>

Accepted but never implemented, these plans mapped an unbuilt landscape, part of a city that might have been.<sup>13</sup> Yet they warrant some attention, because they reflected well-established principles of Mawson’s design practice as well as the insights he derived from his quick assessment of the city and its inhabitants’ attitudes toward nature on his first visit in 1912. They are also an engaging starting point for thinking about the environmental history of Vancouver, the place of Stanley Park in the city, and the tensions between Art and Nature (or perhaps even God and Mammon) in the developing metropolis. They serve, in other words, as a convenient springboard from which to contemplate the arguments and achievements of *Inventing Stanley Park*.

In his address to the Canadian Club, Mawson left no room for doubt about the importance of Stanley Park to the city.<sup>14</sup> It was Vancouver’s greatest asset, known (he claimed) “to every schoolboy in the Old Country” and something akin to a great work of art in the possession of a collector, over which Vancouverites had custody on behalf of “the whole English-speaking race.” This valuable place HAD to be saved from those second-order denizens of the city’s clubs and hotels who “would do anything to destroy Nature.” Heed the powerful import of Ruskin’s rhetorical question, he implored his listeners: “What shall it profit you if you turn the whole world into a gasometer and lose your own souls?” But it was not sufficient to treasure Nature as it was. Nature sometimes dropped a word or missed a note in the composition of her poetic lyrics or the performance of her magnificent tune. Human intervention was necessary to realize Nature’s full potential. In a park or garden, the basic “features are supplied by Nature,” but they required an artist – “he who can combine and co-operate what Nature gives ... with the suggestions of Art clothing our needs.”

More than this, Mawson insisted, Vancouver was distinguished by the juxtaposition of the city, “a purely artificial creation,” and Stanley Park, “which is a work of Nature.” Art was inherent in neither, but it had the

capacity to unite the two and provide a “perfect orchestration.”<sup>15</sup> Here, he outlined the essence of the plans that he would submit to the Park Board in December 1913, with Georgia Street as the prime axis (the “Champs-Élysées of Vancouver”) of a design intended to make Coal Harbour “the great social centre” of the city. But he also embarked on a flight of fancy that – perhaps mercifully – substantially disappeared from his later designs. Between the artificial city (“where Art plays first fiddle and Nature a muted string”) and the natural park (where these roles were reversed), he insisted that there should be a progression allowing citizens to “pass by gradual degrees from that which is purely artificial to that where Nature has full sway.” This, he suggested, could be realized along Georgia Street by creating a purely architectural civic square in the centre of the city. “Belts of grass and a few trees” would be planted to adorn the architecture after the street left the plaza; a little farther along, the trees would be “clipped into the shapes of birds and beasts”; then they would be allowed to grow wilder and freer, until “in the far distance,” Nature would be left “to tell her own story.” Clearly, this distance was well beyond Coal Harbour, which was to be converted into a Vancouver version of Paris’s Grande Ronde Pond, surrounded by a promenade, carriageways, playgrounds, and an imposing neoclassical building to house a natural history museum. Here, “Art, Nature and Science ... [would] meet and arrange terms.” In Mawson’s analogical telling, the park beyond would be “the Tuileries, only not humanised” – but even this did not mean “free of human interference” because Mawson offered his listeners advice on the style of buildings to be erected there (“if you require a bandstand, let it be worthy of a Temple of Music”) and advocated banishing “absolutely every exotic, whether plant, tree or animal.”

Delivered with verve, these sometimes rather rambling remarks were received with great enthusiasm. In Vancouver, Mawson was, of course, something of an “exotic” himself, a *rara avis* with an international reputation who worked and walked and talked with members of the landed gentry, high government officials, business leaders, important public figures, and major philanthropists. This alone probably guaranteed him a rousing reception in frontier British Columbia. But Mawson’s clever incorporation of local “research” into his speech also won him favour. Although his half-formed plans for Coal Harbour and Stanley Park, with their roots in European and British debates about architecture and landscape design, may have been as grandiose as his address was grandiloquent, they also struck a chord, as Mawson’s biographer Janet Waymark has

noted, with those who “either admired or were intensely patriotic to Empire and its roots in the Crown.”<sup>16</sup> Perhaps most tellingly, however, his recommendations and remarks resonated with local convictions in their boosterish tone, and in their strong sense of people’s capacity and responsibility to alter and improve the world. In the end, Mawson’s call to unite art with nature in Stanley Park essentially echoed Mayor David Oppenheimer’s remarks at the opening of the park, although his arguments for this approach were both more elaborate and better undergirded, intellectually, than was the mayor’s 1888 call to improve the area through the combination of human artifice with natural scenery (see p. 92).

As Kheraj shows in the pages that follow, there were numerous efforts to improve upon Stanley Park nature in the decades before and after Mawson’s visits to Vancouver. In the quarter century after the establishment of the park, many of these initiatives drew their inspiration from the American school of park designers and landscape architects. Use of the word *school* in this context suggests a movement, and it is worth recalling that the creation of urban parks was something of a fad in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, park historian and geographer Terence Young has pointed out that no municipality in the United States had a developed public park in 1850 but that only one of the 157 American cities with more than thirty thousand residents was without one in 1908.<sup>17</sup> Many of these parks were designed by or followed ideas promulgated by Andrew Jackson Downing, Frederick Law Olmsted, and Calvert Vaux, whose approach historian Anne Whiston Spirn has termed *naturalistic constructivism*.<sup>18</sup> That is to say that these designers “sought to disguise anthropogenic interventions to make park spaces appear more natural” even as they made them more accessible (see p. 94). In effect, human artifice was employed to hide signs of human disturbance by the artful construction of curvilinear roads and pathways and the careful planting and management of vegetation. Similar strategies continued well into the twentieth century as park officials employed the techniques of facade management “to mask or minimize” the impact of such intrusions as roadways, water pipelines, reservoirs, and sewer lines (see p. 137).<sup>19</sup> Although often described and long cherished as a “wilderness” or ancient forest, Stanley Park was and is a profoundly humanized landscape.

To write of the “invention” of Stanley Park is to emphasize this disjunction, to argue that the park has been made not given, and to point to the complexities embedded in the process of creating and re-presenting such a space. Kheraj tackles these tasks in a handful of thematic chapters in

which he traces the pre-park history of the peninsula that became the park, the legal and social processes involved in making this a public space, the various efforts to remake park nature, the impacts of the city upon the park, and the ways in which efforts at environmental restoration after severe disturbances in the 1930s and the 1960s both reflected popular perceptions of nature and reinforced the view that the much-altered park was untouched.

Summarized thus, *Inventing Stanley Park* might be perceived either as simply another addition to the very substantial pile of books and articles treating North American parks or as a micro study adding details to the already reasonably well-known story of some four hundred hectares of land in the city of Vancouver. It is, after all, now widely accepted that the idea of wilderness is a social construction and that bounding spaces and conferring a particular status on them (by declaring them parks, for example) has shifting and ramifying consequences, depending on what the status entails (or what people take a park to be) at different points in time.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, those familiar with Vancouver's past might feel that several of the stories in this book have been adumbrated in earlier work. So they might point, for example, to Robert McDonald's discussion of competing perceptions of Stanley Park as a "holy retreat" or "practical breathing spot" as a reflection of class divisions in the city; or to Jean Barman's exploration of the displacement and dispossession of the indigenous inhabitants of the park peninsula; or to a couple of master's theses written in the 1970s that trace the history of Vancouver parks.<sup>21</sup> One of these, by planning student Diane Beverley Hinds, examines park design ideas in pre-First World War Vancouver and concludes (broadly congruently with *Inventing Stanley Park*) that they were largely influenced by the attitudes of Vancouver residents, by ideas and influences from other places, especially Britain and the American West Coast, and by "various civic associations and ratepayers groups who asserted themselves in the decision making process."

To stop at these observations would, though, do Kheraj's alluring and magnificently illustrated work a very considerable injustice. All scholarship is cumulative. The value of historical studies is measured in their details, in the acuity of their critical analysis, and in the veracity and pertinence of the stories they tell rather than in the sorts of "detachable conclusions" drawn from Hinds's extended essay. Looked at in this light, *Inventing Stanley Park* works, in often-understated ways, to make several contributions. In sum, it adds to and revises established interpretations of the processes of urban park creation in North America, offers fresh insight

into the development of Stanley Park, and brings a distinct perspective to understanding the park, the city that encompasses it, and the changing society that shaped it.

In his fine and important study of San Francisco's parks, Terence Young argues that American park advocates saw the creation of parks as a form of social reform intended to realize four virtues – public health, prosperity, democratic equality, and social coherence – but that “their understanding of *how* parks fostered the good society” changed with time.<sup>22</sup> In this telling, an earlier romantic view of parks that saw nature as God's handiwork and conceived of parks as places for visitors to contemplate “the beauty of the larger landscape scene,” gave way, as society grew more specialized (in the 1880s in San Francisco but earlier and later elsewhere), to a rationalistic vision that saw parks as settings for organized leisure activities. In essence, Young argues that a “Darwinian, mechanistic view of nature replaced a romantic teleological one,” and nature came to be seen as external to rather than inclusive of humanity even as he acknowledges that the rationalists' “new vision of the nature-society connection was both figuratively and literally built out, of, upon, and beside the existing, romantic one.” Kheraj draws upon Young's work, but to my mind his study suggests that conceptions of park design, in Vancouver at least, were both more complicated and more entangled than Young's dichotomized interpretation implies. Here, *Inventing Stanley Park* begs an implicit question about (and points, perhaps, to the need for further work exploring) the extent to which the trajectory of urban park development in Canada differed from that in the United States.

As a contribution to scholarship on British Columbia, Kheraj's study makes a particular mark by viewing the creation of Stanley Park from a perspective shaped by the venerable political-economy tradition in Canadian scholarship. So he describes the park as “founded on speculation and ambition.” So the eviction of indigenous people from the park had “more to do with private property rights and Aboriginal land claims” than any desire to make the space of the park appear “natural”; families were banished from long-occupied residential sites “because they challenged the very notion of a public park by possessing private homes within it” (p. 57 and 82). So the law is recognized as instrumental in producing Stanley Park as public space and reshaping Vancouverites' relations with nature within its bounds.

With sensitivities heightened by insights drawn from that important body of scholarship loosely known as subaltern studies, Kheraj adds to all of this an awareness of the importance of protest and resistance to the

story of Stanley Park's development. Parks may be for people, but recent scholarship has demonstrated that the notion of "the people" is far from inclusive and that generally some are more welcome, more able, or more entitled than others to use, and benefit from, parks, even when these places are ostensibly dedicated "to the use and enjoyment of peoples of all colours, creeds, and customs, for all time" (p. 63). In Vancouver, the legal regime that created the park allowed the displacement of its indigenous inhabitants, even though they did not go meekly into the good night. Settlers who had foraged in the peninsula and come to regard it as a commons were prohibited from continuing this practice once the land became a park. And although the story of this park is inevitably and substantially the story of what was done, and what was made, Kheraj marks the fact that the decisions that produced these outcomes were often contested. By noting several instances of resistance to the agenda for the park promulgated by city officials and others – by those who perceived extensions to the park road network as "the destruction of nature rather than an improvement," for example – he reminds us that things might have turned out differently, that history is contingent, and that (like that of true love) the course of development rarely runs smooth (quote from p. 102). To recognize as much is to begin to realize something of the contribution that good humanistic scholarship can make to understanding the human condition.

Finally, *Inventing Stanley Park* makes an explicit contribution to the fast-developing field of Canadian environmental history. This is where Kheraj finds the uniqueness of his book. He presents Stanley Park as "a hybrid produced by a confluence of natural and cultural forces" and argues that his environmental historical approach to its development enables us "to determine the relationship between humans and the rest of nature that is reflected in the landscape" of the park (p. 204). Here, the author's aim is to demonstrate the interdependence of nature and culture by acknowledging the power of nature's agency and recognizing the limits of human intention. So, for instance, he notes, "erosion, fire, insects, animals, drainage, and other natural features impeded improvement projects such as road construction and forest preservation ... [which] were often a struggle *against* the autonomy of nature" (p. 195). There is a good deal, then, in these pages about geology and hydrology, and because foresters, engineers, and entomologists were enrolled in one way or another in the task of managing the park – becoming in the process instruments of a landscape art designed to balance popular cultural expectations with the ecology of the peninsula – about the science they practised.



These discussions are given contemporary salience by Kheraj's examination of the efforts to restore Stanley Park nature after particularly destructive windstorms in 1934 and 1962, of the debates (running into the 1970s) over plans for new bridges and freeways that would have impinged on the park, and of a scheme to remake the park forest in the image of its purported 1888 condition – all of which play against the book's opening description of the powerful December storm of 2006 that felled ten thousand trees in the park and fuelled an outpouring of despair at the damage done to Vancouver's "Crown jewel." Time and again, public reactions to the devastation of 2006 revealed that they were grounded in what Kheraj's book shows to have been "an illusory vision of an unchanging forest" (p. 3). In the 125 years since its creation, the park had become "a temple of atonement for the environmental destruction that was necessary to build the city and the province" (p. 190). Even though a consequence of "the forces of nature," the dramatic alteration of even a small part (no more than 10 percent) of what was widely regarded as ancient unspoiled forest was considered a desecration. People had forgotten, or perhaps they never knew, what the park superintendent had admitted in an unguarded moment in the early 1950s: that "it takes a considerable amount of work to keep a forest area looking as though it were just as nature intended" and that – as he noted three years earlier – "a lack of such work allows the forest to get into a messy and untidy condition" (p. 180). In his somewhat idiosyncratic, Edwardian way, Thomas Mawson understood full well the myriad entanglements of art and nature, but it is Kheraj's achievement to remind us that decades of natural constructivism and facade management combined in Vancouver with the widespread disposition to set humans and nature asunder to produce what he calls "the fiction of Stanley Park" – that "no one worked there" (p. 180).

# Acknowledgments

I have always thought of historical scholarship as the product of a community. Historians work in conversation with other researchers, archivists, editors, and, of course, their subjects of study. This book is no exception. I owe a great debt of gratitude to many people. *Inventing Stanley Park* benefitted from the generous support of colleagues, friends, and family. All its flaws are my own, but where it shines it does so because of the thoughtful effort of others whom I must thank.

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# *Inventing Stanley Park*



# *Introduction*

## *Knowing Nature through History*

It struck the city overnight. A ferocious tempest tore through Vancouver and the surrounding area, shattering glass, downing telephone poles, and toppling power lines. In the early hours of 15 December 2006, the Point Atkinson weather station in West Vancouver recorded winds of 119 kilometres per hour. By daybreak, more than 250,000 households on Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland had lost power. In the light of dawn, as BC Hydro crews worked tirelessly to restore electricity to thousands of homes, Vancouverites awoke to discover that the city's treasured landmark had been transformed into a tangle of splintered, fallen, and uprooted trees.<sup>1</sup>

During that tumultuous winter, three separate windstorms ripped through Stanley Park. According to surveys by Vancouver Park Board staff, they felled more than ten thousand trees, approximately 5 to 10 percent of the forest. About thirty hectares of the four-hundred-hectare peninsula were severely affected, and another fifty experienced light to moderate damage. In addition, the storms destroyed large portions of the seawall between Prospect Point and Third Beach. Roadways and trails were closed for several weeks as foresters worked to clear the debris and repair damage to park infrastructure.<sup>2</sup>

In the following weeks, Vancouverites toured Stanley Park, like a procession of mourners at a funeral. The *Vancouver Sun* claimed that "our jewel, the gem in the heart of the city had been damaged and we felt it as deeply as the bite of a saw." People who had not even seen the damage claimed that the mere description of it caused them tremendous emotional pain.

This reaction was deeply rooted in memories of the park – personal histories. Long-time visitors struggled, according to one reporter, “to take in the drastic alteration to the happy memories and images of the park built over a lifetime.” Vancouver billionaire Jim Pattison was moved to pledge up to \$1 million of matching funds in a local drive to raise money for the park’s restoration. The popular sentiment in the wake of the storm was for immediate restoration, “to make the hurting stop.” All this anguish revealed not simply an attachment to the memory of a park but to a vision of a timeless and unchanging natural space – an elusive quest for a stable “balance of nature.” Yet nature rarely provides such stability.<sup>3</sup>

Stanley Park is synonymous with Vancouver, like Central Park to New York City or Golden Gate Park to San Francisco, and thus it holds great cultural value. According to local historian Richard M. Steele, this peninsula, adjacent to Vancouver’s downtown, is “the foremost symbol of Canada’s most beautiful city.”<sup>4</sup> Unquestionably among Canada’s best-known parks, it is one of the largest and oldest urban parks in North America. As has been stated repeatedly for more than a century to the point of cliché, Stanley Park is the “jewel” of Vancouver.<sup>5</sup> It holds such tremendous symbolic significance, and Vancouverites guard it so jealously, that it has become “a fetish of untouchability,” as one newspaper editorial remarked years ago. Despite the deep interdependence of nature and human culture in the history of this park, the public often recoils at the prospect of overt human interventions in it and laments natural disturbances such as windstorms. By the late twentieth century, this popular stance had come to shape the policies of the elected Park Board. For instance, in the late 1990s, the board became embroiled in a prolonged debate with the provincial government regarding widening the Stanley Park causeway connector, which cuts through the park and connects downtown Vancouver to Lions Gate Bridge. With substantial public support, the board resisted Victoria’s efforts to gain approval for the plan, expressing a preference for “the elimination of vehicular traffic through Stanley Park” and stipulating that “no trees be removed as a result of this project.” The bitter fight over the connector illustrates the power of Vancouver’s affection for the park.<sup>6</sup>

How do we account for such a strong attachment? Current tourist publications suggest two main explanations. First, Vancouverites perceive the park as a natural marvel made all the more miraculous by its proximity to a densely populated city. “So close to a large population,” the Vancouver Natural History Society’s 2006 guide *Wilderness on the Doorstep* reads, “it provides hundreds of hectares of BC coastal forest, many kilometres of accessible seashore, two very beautiful lakes and hectares of ornamental



gardens.” Second, according to the same book, “it is Stanley Park’s forest, especially its large old cedars and Douglas-firs, that gives the park its international reputation.” Nature in the park is precious because most visitors believe it to be old and unspoiled. Since the park opened to the public in 1888, its advocates have regularly described its forest as “impenetrable,” “unbroken,” “primeval,” “a jungle,” “virginal,” “untouched,” and “pristine.” For instance, a 1936 tourist brochure claimed that it “remains today as it was at the time the ‘white man’ came ... a virgin forest, and just a short walk from the shopping section of the city.” A 1980 guidebook to Vancouver asks, “Where in the world could 1,000 acres of ancient forest reside in the heart of a major city? Vancouver – naturally. Literally within minutes of downtown, the huge expanse of Stanley Park harks back to the hospitable virgin wood that once sheltered the coast’s native people.” A more recent publication, *The Stanley Park Companion*, notes that just minutes from the city, “you’re in the calm, green heart of an *ancient* forest,” a comment contradicted by its admission that “Stanley Park is no pristine example of first-growth forest.” Of course, the meaning of wilderness and nature has changed over time, as this book will explore, but the popular perception that Stanley Park is old and undamaged has come to influence contemporary park policy. Many Vancouverites value the park for its perceived sense of naturalness, its proximity to a highly urbanized environment, and its imagined connection to a pre-colonial past.<sup>7</sup>

The ubiquity of this view was most vividly demonstrated in the outpouring of grief following the windstorms of 2006 and 2007, as many Canadians expressed a profound sense of loss. The storms blew down thousands of trees, “ruining” the image of the unbroken forest. Eric Meagher, park supervisor of maintenance, admitted in a special issue of *British Columbia Magazine* that “it hurts, really hurts. There were some nights I went home and would just sort of sit in quiet reflection and just want to start crying because of what I’d seen.” Although his confession illustrates a remarkable emotional attachment to the park, it is grounded in an illusory vision of an unchanging forest.<sup>8</sup>

The most remarkable aspect of this perception is the disjuncture between public memory and the peninsula’s environmental history, which belies the popular narrative that Stanley Park is a preserved “ancient” wilderness. On a geological timescale, this landform has undergone a continuous series of dramatic changes by powerful natural forces. Responding to varying climatic conditions of the past thirteen thousand years, the vegetation has altered in numerous ways, and by the time it began to resemble a modern Northwest Coast coniferous forest, humans had already exploited

its resources and transformed the landscape. When the first European navigators charted the waters of Burrard Inlet during the late eighteenth century, they mistakenly believed they were in a virgin wilderness untouched by human hands. They extracted the wealth of nature from the resources of the region and eventually settled the land, further transforming what was already an anthropogenic (human altered) landscape. The creation of Stanley Park imposed a new set of ideas and values, but far from eliminating the human presence in the peninsula, it required a massive human effort. Regulations governed the use of the park and changed human relations with nature. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, advocates called for both protecting the park from human intervention and *improving* it via the same means. And despite the seemingly stark contrast between the park and the city, Stanley Park was woven into the infrastructure of Vancouver's urban environment. This is most obviously illustrated by the causeway connector – a three-lane highway that runs through the centre of the park. In addition to these human modifications, natural forces have continued to reshape the landscape. Fire, animals, insects, climate, rain, and windstorms have unceasingly altered the forest and ecology. Throughout this history, nature has constantly been an agent of change.

Stanley Park has become a symbol of an imagined past, a static portrait of a pre-colonial wilderness that never existed. Yet this myth is a relatively recent phenomenon, one common to many other large North American parks. As *Inventing Stanley Park* will show, humans have engaged with this peninsula in a number of different ways over time. By necessity, then, this book deals with the changing meanings of parks, nature, and wilderness as social and cultural constructs.<sup>9</sup> The region's first inhabitants occupied the peninsula as a living space; colonial entrepreneurs saw opportunities for natural resource exploitation; and the first park advocates of the late nineteenth century sought to improve the landscape through human intervention. The idea that the park is an inviolable wilderness did not materialize until the second half of the twentieth century. Not until the 1960s did Vancouverites begin vigorously to resist all types of disturbance in the park, including both human and non-human interventions. Although changing ideas about ecology and humanity's relationship to the environment played a role in this shift, popular memory and the sense that the park represented part of Vancouver's past proved to be more crucial factors in guiding park policy. The anti-disturbance approach was best symbolized by the completion of the seawall in 1971. Designed to protect the shoreline from erosion, the wall would, in effect, preserve the

landform from natural change. Symbolically, the encasement of the park in stone represented the public's desire to maintain what was considered a valuable historic landmark rather than a vulnerable ecosystem. This perception of the park as historically significant was formalized in 1988 when the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada recommended its commemoration as a national historic site. Why, then, contrary to historical evidence, do many Canadians believe that nature in Stanley Park is pristine and ancient?<sup>10</sup>

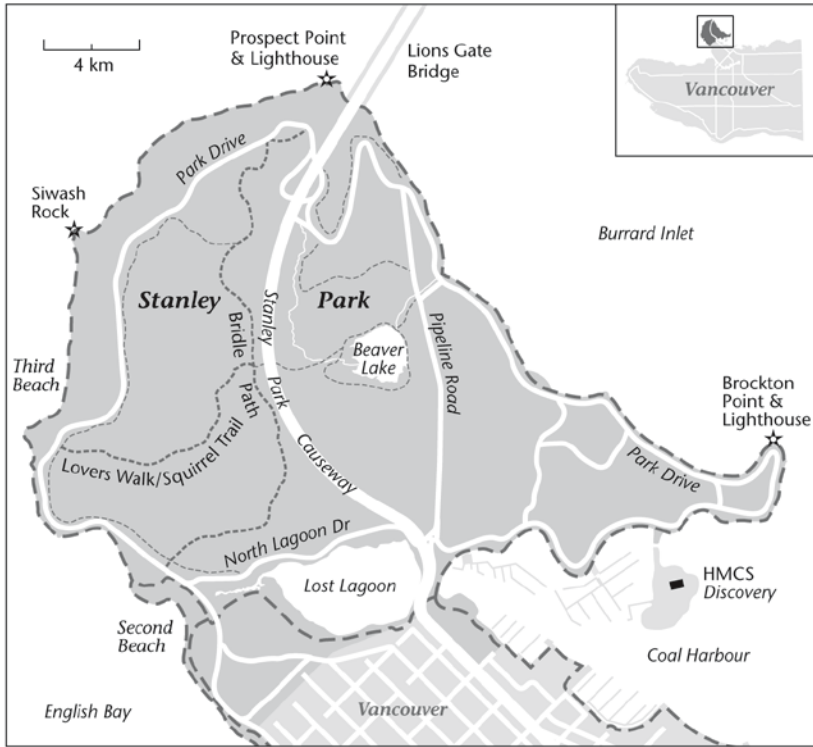
This book offers three main explanations. The first, which focuses on the role of people, argues that though humans have always interacted with nature on the peninsula, their role in reshaping its landscape and ecology was greatest *after* its designation as a park. A park is an idea imposed upon the land. Therefore, the creation of the park and the subsequent ecological changes were grounded in human intervention. The park encompasses an ever-varying environment that has never been free from human use and modification. From its use as a Coast Salish village prior to European colonization to its transformation into an urban park, its landscape and ecology have been hybrids of natural and cultural forces. This, of course, is true of all parks and all landscapes, according to Carl O. Sauer's foundation for understanding landscape as the product of the interrelationship between humans and the environment, "an area made up of a distinct association of forms, both physical and cultural." This history underlines the ways in which shifting human ideas about how to exploit the material space and the concept of the public park were significant agents of environmental change.<sup>11</sup>

The second argument examines the role of nature and the limits of human agency. Although a park is an idea, it is realized in relationship to the material world. The history of the urban parks movement in North America has focused largely on political and social influences on the production of landscape and ecological change. This perspective – most evident in Galen Cranz's influential work *The Politics of Park Design* – deals solely with human-induced change.<sup>12</sup> *Inventing Stanley Park* reinterprets this history and the politics of preservation by considering the agency of non-human actors. To fully appreciate the development of urban park design and understand the often politically contentious controversies over culturally significant landmarks such as Stanley Park, we must contemplate not only the ways in which human ideas and actions have influenced park policy but also the role of nature. Indeed, nature placed constraints on the design of the park: animals, insects, vegetation, and weather reshaped both its landscape and its ecology as well as human relations with the

peninsula. The social, political, and cultural influences on Park Board landscape policies cannot be understood outside of biophysical and ecological materiality.

The third argument focuses on the relationship between popular memory of nature in Stanley Park, Park Board landscape policies, and the volatile and unpredictable condition of complex ecosystems. This history shows that the contemporary shift in public thinking and policy in favour of strict preservation was produced through a relationship between popular concepts of the idealized wilderness, Park Board landscape policies, and tourist promotion in the twentieth century. This conjunction reinforced the image of the park as an ancient forest and shaped public memory of its past. The board's policies continuously interacted with powerful and capricious natural forces, characteristic of the peninsula's complicated ecology, that were the agents of change. For over a century, the board struggled to reconstruct the landscape, masking evidence of human and non-human disturbances in order to produce a more naturalistic appearance, a strategy commonly adopted in large North American parks throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>13</sup> The case of Stanley Park demonstrates that such landscape effects have the capacity to influence public memory and make the park seem like a timeless place.

In his work on the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918, Alfred Crosby found that "historians and people in general can overlook subjects of colossal importance," especially when they are thought to be inconsequential. Without proper consideration of such seemingly insignificant factors as insects, fire, vegetation, and wind, historians cannot fully explain the politics of park design and the changing popular perception of wilderness in parks. Because nature limits human actions, Donald Worster has called upon historians to reject "the conventional assumption that human experience has been exempt from natural constraints" and to critically rethink the notion of agency. Historians have traditionally relied too heavily on a Kantian sense of autonomy, which emphasizes intentionality and moral choice, an understanding of agency that overlooks the crucial role of unintentional consequences in history. Non-human forces, such as earthquakes and hurricanes, may lack a sense of moral choice or purpose, but their impact unquestionably has repercussions for human societies. As well, human actions always produce unintended results, especially in relation to competing autonomous forces. Consequently, the criterion of intentionality does not adequately define agency in this case. By considering the limits of human agency and the role of nature in Stanley Park, this book brings the interdependence of nature and culture into sharper focus.<sup>14</sup>



**Map 1** Official Park Board map, Stanley Park, 2007. Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation

### *Stanley Park in Park History*

Surrounded by the waters of Coal Harbour, Burrard Inlet, and English Bay, Stanley Park lies adjacent to Vancouver's downtown core (Map 1). Its use as a public park was granted to the City of Vancouver by the federal government in 1887. Prior to this, the peninsula was a government reserve, which had been set aside in 1859. And for centuries before the arrival of Europeans, it was the site of a large Coast Salish village called *Whoi Whoi* (located near the present-day Lumbermen's Arch).

Stanley Park emerged as part of a larger urban parks movement in the United States and Canada that began during the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> The movement's first notable example, New York City's Central Park, was established in the 1850s. Before its creation, the inhabitants of many large

American towns visited landscaped rural cemeteries in search of a scenic natural space for reprieve from the congested streets of the city. Burgeoning urban populations and their emergent desire for open spaces within the city placed pressure on public officials to create parks. Aware of this trend, and inspired by the urban parks and squares of Europe, Frederick Law Olmsted became a leading advocate for the creation of city parks in North America and the most influential landscape architect in the American parks movement. Olmsted designed parks in several American and Canadian towns, including New York City, Brooklyn, Boston, Buffalo, San Francisco, and Montreal. His collaboration with Calvert Vaux influenced the development of the profession of landscape architecture and informed the work of other park builders, including Horace W.S. Cleveland, Hammond Hall, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., John Olmsted, Thomas Mawson, James C. Sidney, and Frederick G. Todd.<sup>16</sup>

Park advocates in the nineteenth century believed that large urban parks were necessary for the growth and development of cities. They also believed that a natural retreat within the artificial confines of a city could cure many of the problems caused by the urban environment. These ideas were part of an influential social and intellectual movement, known today as anti-modernism, in which middle-class men and women sought refuge from the sterility and stifling effects of urban life. The anti-modern movement led to the creation of national, state, and provincial parks throughout North America, where city-dwellers could enjoy an authentic experience with wild nature, but it also inspired the creation of pockets of nature inside the city, the most ostentatious Canadian example being Stanley Park.<sup>17</sup>

Geographer Terence Young identifies four main benefits, or virtues, associated with the creation of parks, which American park advocates and reformers promoted in their campaigns. First, parks were a necessary measure in counteracting the negative health effects of urban areas. Cholera scares in the 1830s inspired many reformers to call for the creation of natural spaces in the city to cleanse the air of the “miasmas” that were thought to cause disease. On the grounds of public health, and in the belief that trees and other plant life purified water, authorities established Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park near the city waterworks and principal water supply, the Schuylkill River. Second, parks brought prosperity to cities by increasing real estate values and tourism. Following the creation of Central Park, nearby real estate quickly rose in price, leading other cities to emulate this kind of real estate boom. By the late nineteenth century, civic boosters argued that all notable cities in North America needed a

large park to draw tourists and potential investors. The third virtue associated with parks was the notion that they were social levellers, which promoted democratic equality. Unlike the royal gardens of Europe, American city parks were intended to be symbols of democratic ideals; they were the property of the people rather than the elite, and reformers hoped that they would uplift the lower classes. The final virtue was that the levelling effect of parks would lead to greater social cohesion.<sup>18</sup>

The leaders of the American urban parks movement, who subscribed to the four virtues mentioned above, tended to come from the wealthy class. In most North American cities, a small elite group of influential men controlled park commissions and determined the direction of park development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These men were also likely to profit from the real estate and tourism benefits of parks. They shaped the emergence of many large urban parks in North America and moulded their landscapes according to particular values and understandings of nature, which historians have associated with a romantic period in park development.<sup>19</sup>

Most historians divide the early urban parks movement into two distinct periods: a romantic phase lasting from the 1850s until 1900, and a reform, or rationalistic, era that began in the late nineteenth century and continued until the 1930s. During the romantic period, promoters saw parks as places for quiet contemplation and rejuvenation through passive interaction with nature. They viewed parks as the antithesis of the city and an antidote to stress and nervous exhaustion. Landscape architects such as Olmsted were influenced by this romantic ideal of nature and strove to construct parks along its lines. Olmsted's design for Central Park is a case in point: he orchestrated the complete transformation of the site from a swampy, treeless property to a manicured pastoral landscape. The romantic view of parks as naturalistic landscapes for passive leisure, separate but within the urban environment, dominated North America from 1850 to 1900.<sup>20</sup>

In the second phase, a new group of advocates challenged the elite view of nature in urban parks and called for more useable spaces for active leisure and recreation. This development is associated with the emergence of the American playground movement. New neighbourhood parks were established on small plots of land and scattered throughout town to provide useable recreation space for working-class people, who were often unable to access the larger urban parks, which were located at a great distance from the more populated areas of the city. These new parks included more space for sports, playgrounds, and other active leisure pursuits. Some historians

argue that the reform phase was associated with working-class views of leisure and recreation, whereas others suggest that urban reformers sought to uplift working-class children through supervised play in the new parks. During this phase, the large landscaped urban parks of the romantic period were modified to meet the demands of the reform park. However, most of the large parks were divided into distinct areas for active and passive leisure, and most retained their romantic qualities.<sup>21</sup>

Most of these American trends directly influenced the development of Stanley Park. The Vancouver Park Board was an active member of the International Association of Park Commissioners of the Pacific Coast, an organization of park commissioners and superintendents from Canada and the United States that met annually to discuss various matters relating to urban parks. On numerous occasions, Vancouver's park commissioners and superintendents consulted with their counterparts in various American and Canadian cities.

Vancouver was also affected by the transition from the romantic phase to the reform phase. Robert A.J. McDonald effectively demonstrates that, in Vancouver, class and class perceptions were aligned with these two approaches to park design, just as they were elsewhere in North America. He reveals that an elite group, which had been influential in the creation of Stanley Park, had lost its grip on the Park Board by 1913 and was no longer able to impose its romantic vision. At the same time, a reform-minded board was able to pursue some of the trends that Galen Cranz and others have noted in reform parks. W.C. McKee shows how the playground movement and other aspects of the rationalistic phase influenced the expansion of Vancouver's park system in the early twentieth century.<sup>22</sup>

Stanley Park must also be considered in relationship with the national park movements in Canada and the United States, which played a significant role in its genesis. Because it was so large and was perceived as a preserved wilderness, it was seen, in some respects, as an urban national park distinct from the manicured city landscapes like Central Park. Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) promoters in the mid-1880s envisioned the creation of Stanley Park as a logical complement to the construction of the transcontinental railway. Like Rocky Mountains Park (later renamed Banff National Park) – founded just two years earlier – it would draw people to Vancouver and increase tourist traffic on the CPR. In the United States, railway corporations helped create national parks for some of the same reasons, particularly in the case of Yellowstone Park in 1872.<sup>23</sup>



Of course, the profit incentive of railway executives does not adequately explain the emergence of national parks (or of Stanley Park for that matter). Historians who have scrutinized the complicated motives for the creation of North America's grand wilderness retreats struggle to reconcile the seemingly intractable paradox of national parks: the dual mandate of preservation and use. Environmental historian Alan MacEachern describes the dual mandate as the "unresolved problem at the heart of park history." It is indisputable that parks were created with the intention of deriving economic benefit from tourism and other activities, but there were aesthetic, cultural, and social motivations as well. The dual mandate of permitting human use and enjoyment while simultaneously preserving nature for future generations must not be seen as entirely contradictory; in some ways, the two strands are complementary. The Vancouver Park Board struggled with the tension between preservation and use in much the same way as authorities for national parks in North America.<sup>24</sup>

What follows, then, is a chronological account of the environmental history of Stanley Park, with a thematic focus for each chapter. Although hydrology, animals, insects, and geology are discussed, this book necessarily devotes much of its attention to changes in the park's forest, the most prominent feature of the landscape and the predominant component of its ecology. Beginning with an overview of geological history, Chapter 1 looks at the many ways in which humans used the forested peninsula that emerged after the final retreat of the glaciers. The first human inhabitants, ancestors of the modern Coast Salish, occupied the peninsula more than three thousand years ago. European colonization introduced new ideas along with new microbes, plants, and animals that transformed its ecology before its designation as a public park.

The next two chapters examine the process of park creation, or "emparkment," in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chapter 2 looks at the legal genesis of Stanley Park from the late 1880s until the 1930s. It explores the ways in which the park was invented as a legal entity according to a new environmental ethic, which sought to exclude consumptive uses of nature. In particular, the regulations that governed it were designed to eliminate practices that were common during the colonial period and to ensure that it remained within the public realm for non-consumptive use. Chapter 3 discusses a series of improvements launched during the same time period. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries, park creation required massive human interventions in nature, a fact that was not incongruent with public perceptions of wilderness in Stanley Park during this time. Indeed, the public sometimes endorsed the Park Board's highly intrusive activities. But wherever the board sought to improve nature, it hid its tracks, employing landscaping techniques designed to conceal the human footprint. In addition, nature itself played a prominent role as an uncooperative partner in this venture. Often, the improvements were acts of resistance against autonomous natural forces.

The fourth chapter focuses on the integration of Stanley Park into the urban environment of Vancouver during the 1930s and 1940s. Various government authorities used the park for a variety of infrastructure projects, including a water pipeline, reservoir, sewer, highway, and coastal defence gun emplacements. The social and economic conditions of Vancouver determined when the urban environment intruded into the park. Chapter 5 looks at the role of environmental restoration in the park, following the severe windstorms of 1934 and 1962. By the 1930s, the Park Board had moved beyond the simple management of nature via judicious improvements and turned toward active restoration of past landscapes through extensive reforestation. This effort was informed by popular perceptions of nature, which envisioned wilderness as a climax coniferous forest. The restoration policies reinforced the prevailing sense that the park was untouched, with the result that by 1962, when Typhoon Freda devastated the peninsula, the public had largely forgotten its very long history of change by natural forces. In the wake of Freda, the board and the public became more vigorous in their resistance to encroachments, particularly to proposals for a third crossing of Burrard Inlet in the late 1960s and early 1970s, an anti-disturbance approach that became entrenched.

The 2006 and 2007 storms revived the 1960s debates surrounding environmental restoration. To a considerable extent, the perception of Stanley Park as an untouched wilderness emerged because of policies that sought to fulfill this expectation. In erasing evidence of past disturbance by human and non-human agents, Park Board policy clouded the public memory of the park. Rather than reconciling dynamic, entropic non-human forces with the human role in nature, these policies have repeatedly reinvented an imagined portrait of the park's past.

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