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PARADISE BLUES – Travels Through American Environmental History

Sample Translation by Andrew Godfrey-Collins

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PROLOGUE

PARADISE BLUES

America is the object of countless dreams, desires, and longings. Millions of people from all over the world travel to the USA, often in search of both the superlatives of the cities and the vast expanses of the wild: the Niagara Falls and skyscrapers, the glitter of Las Vegas and the glaciers of Alaska, the blues in Memphis and the tropical wetlands in Florida; mammoth trees, canyons, and Mark Twain's Mississippi. Many view the road trip from coast to coast by camper van or car as a big adventure, a legendary pilgrimage through America's natural world.

As a historian, I have spent decades studying the USA. For fifteen years, I lived in Washington, D.C., from where I traveled all over the country. America is close to my heart, along with all its contradictions: a paradise of unlimited possibilities on the one hand, a society obsessed with political power and status on the other; the land of freedom and the land of slavery; a shining example and a cautionary tale. But it was only when I explored the North American continent, only when I studied its natural world, only when I looked for the deep marks its inhabitants had left on the landscape over long periods of time, that I discovered a completely new USA, beyond the clichés and well-known dichotomies.

If you want to understand America, you'd do well to focus not just on politics and economics, on the presidency and the almost constant wars since 1945, but rather on Americans' relationship to, and treatment of, their environment. At first glance, it may seem strange to try and understand a nation's spiritual and intellectual character by traveling to a few of its town and cities, but doing so can yield a wealth of surprising insights. That is the aim of *Paradise Blues*.

[p. 13, Prolog]

The chapters in this book can be read in isolation. But they do follow a deliberate arc, from the Brooks Range in Alaska in the first chapter to Portland, Oregon, in the concluding one. The book starts in a region largely untouched by humans and ends with a chapter about a city, the “greenest” in the USA, whose environmental policies and initiatives have made waves all over the world. As I traveled around America, one constant motivation was to find positives that I could set against the omnipresent narrative of the “end of nature.” As you will see in the following pages, I did sometimes, though not always, succeed in this aim. Exploring the history of America’s natural world brings to light both grand hopes and deep disappointments. Even paradise has its blues.

[p. 15 to p. 20 (Alaska)]

WISEMAN, ALASKA

"THE HAPPIEST CIVILIZATION"

Wiseman lies in the Arctic, a hundred kilometers north of the Arctic Circle. In summer, the sun never sets; in winter it's pitch-black for days at a time. According to the US Census, the former gold mining community had a population of just fourteen in 2010: seven men and seven women. In the American Northwest, where Wiseman is situated, wild animals have always greatly outnumbered humans. Caribou (North American relatives of reindeer) follow centuries-old routes through the nearby Gates of the Arctic National Park. Grizzlies and black bears roam free, as do Dall sheep and wolves. The name "Alaska," or "Alyeska" in the language of the indigenous Aleuts, means "great land." The volcanic and glacial origins of the landscape are plain to see. A few hundred kilometers away from Wiseman, glaciers shaped by the sun chart the movements of the Ice Age, like living fossils. There are black spruce forests and endless tundra with mosses, lichens, and ferns. When the snow melts, nature explodes. Plants shoot out of the ground, mosquitoes spread far and wide, and then the birds arrive, over a hundred different species, some of which (most notably the tern) travel halfway round the globe to incubate their eggs in Alaska. Nowhere else in the USA is nature as present as it is in Alaska. Nowhere else has humanity left so few marks on the landscape.

I decided to travel to Wiseman because the mountains and valleys in this region have barely been touched by the waves of European immigration; because it still has some intact historical cabins from the gold mining days; and because you can find a piece of North America there that's far removed from the beaten tourist tracks. As an environmental historian, I'm fascinated by the tension that manifests itself in the landscape around Wiseman. Wiseman itself owes its existence solely to the exploitation of a natural resource—gold. At the same time, it's nestled amidst the largest areas of wilderness anywhere on either American continent.

Another reason I specifically chose Wiseman as my destination was that I came across Robert Marshall's book *Arctic Village*. Marshall, a forester, plant pathologist, and son of a wealthy New York lawyer, flew to Wiseman for the first time in late 1929 in a sport plane. The twenty-eight-year old scientist was so impressed by the village and the extraordinary beauty of the Brooks Range and Koyukuk River that he decided to return in the summer of 1930. He stayed there for fifteen months, officially to investigate the growth of trees on the timberline. In reality, he was interested in the lives of the 127 Eskimos, Indians, and settlers of European descent living in Wiseman. He described the village as "the happiest civilization of which I have knowledge." I took his book with me on my journey, not least in order to understand how the USA's Arctic northwest has changed in the past hundred years. I know that these changes have been radical, as the vast oil resources discovered around half a century ago in Prudhoe Bay in the farthest north of the USA utterly transformed the face of the forty-ninth state: its economy and landscape, its nature and culture.

ALASKA—A VERY DIFFERENT AMERICA?

This wasn't my first trip to the USA's far north. In 1999, I visited Anchorage, Alaska's most populous city. At that time, I knew almost nothing about the state. Generally, the only thing that comes up in history books is that US Secretary of State William H. Seward bought Alaska from Russia in 1867 at a bargain price. Apart from that, the state is at best mentioned in connection with the Gold Rush at the turn of the twentieth century or in the context of the Cold War, since the Americans feared the possibility of an attack from the nearby Soviet Union. On US territorial and weather maps, Alaska is almost always positioned as a giant island in the Pacific, since the forty-ninth state only borders

Canada, not the rest of the USA. The image of an isolated, exceptional state has become deeply ingrained in the popular imagination. There are also common clichés claiming that most of Alaska's population are male, with barely any women, and that complete darkness reigns for six months of the year. Rather than the fast food restaurants and high-rises I found in Anchorage, Americans imagine Alaska as a place of polar bears and Eskimos, whose human inhabitants live out in the wild. In reality, almost three-quarters reside in cities. As of 2016, Alaska had a population of 740,000, with 300,000 living in Anchorage alone. Of the state's total area of 1,718,000 km^2, only a tiny portion is inhabited; over half of municipalities have a population below five hundred.

Alaska couldn't survive by itself. It's dependent on the federal state of Washington and its capital Seattle. Seattle, whose metropolitan area has a population in the millions, has had close business ties to Alaska ever since the Gold Rush. Almost all goods that are consumed in the north come to Alaska via Seattle's port or airport. Economically, there's no doubt Alaska is thoroughly integrated into the United States.

Despite all that, the northernmost US state has many distinctive features that set it fundamentally apart from all the others. Nature and culture have their own rhythms there: "Only in Alaska," wrote the author Roxanne Willis, "does daily life ebb and flow with the caribou migration, the midnight sun, the Iditarod [a legendary sled dog race], or the Inupiat [Eskimo] whaling season. Only in Alaska are bear maulings, bush plane crashes, and hypothermia such common threats to life and limb." Only in Alaska is there a ten-thousand-year-old indigenous population—Eskimos, Indians, Aleuts—who still live in their ancestral lands and have not been persecuted and displaced like indigenous people in the rest of the USA.

Alaska's geography is extreme, unmistakable, and unfathomably vast in scale. The state is four times bigger than California. At a total length of fifty-five thousand kilometers, the rocky, rugged coastline is far longer than the coasts of the forty-eight continental states combined. Its territory straddles the Arctic and subarctic regions, extending from the fifty-first to the seventy-second parallel north. At the most northerly point, 560 kilometers north of the Arctic Circle, the sun doesn't rise sixty-seven days of the year, and doesn't set on eighty-four. In northernmost Alaska, there is permafrost, where the earth has been frozen for thousands of years. All these things make Alaska unique; and for many people, they're also what makes it so fascinating.

THE FASCINATION OF THE WILD

I don't take the trip to the north by myself. My life partner, an American, thinks Alaska is too dangerous. "Alaska is a big wilderness. I want you to come back safe and sound." A friend, the Berlin painter Johannes Heisig, accompanies me. We meet in Fairbanks, Alaska's second-biggest city. Unlike in Marshall's time, Wiseman can now be reached by car. Before setting off, we wonder why most car rental companies prohibit travel on the Dalton Highway, and by extension travel to Wiseman. But as we head north, we quickly realize why the only company that does allow it is called Rent-A-Wreck and why its fleet is entirely made up of used cars with all-wheel drive. The 666-kilometer-long Dalton Highway, which runs from Fairbanks to Prudhoe Bay, is mostly gravel with deep potholes. Long, straight sections alternate with winding, often steep ones. The oncoming traffic sends stones flying at our car. "Take care a moose doesn't crash into your windshield," says the man from the car hire company as he hands us the key, only half in jest. There is definitely no harm in being cautious: The Alaska Department of Fish and Game estimates there are over seven hundred moose–vehicle collisions in the state each year.

On our registration plate is written “Alaska: The Last Frontier.” In Fairbanks, they chuckle about it. But outside Alaska, a reality TV show of the same name, which has been running for years and over a hundred and twenty episodes on the Discovery Channel, attracts high ratings. Why can the American public apparently not get enough of watching choreographed scenes of cold and hunger, coyote and wolf attacks, illnesses and floods, and everything else that a family living in Alaska’s Kenai Peninsula must contend with? To what can the success of Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man* be attributed, a documentary about a young man who spends many summers with grizzly bears in Alaska until eventually one of them kills him and his girlfriend?

What is it that people find so fascinating about the story of Christopher McCandless, a twenty-four-year-old Californian who traveled to Alaska seeking answers to the big questions of life but found only cold, mosquitoes, and a lonely death awaiting him there? With the outbreak of winter, McCandless starved to death in the abandoned Fairbanks City Transit System Bus 142; his body was only discovered by hunters months later. Each summer, hundreds of Americans follow in McCandless’s footsteps and go on a pilgrimage “into the wild” after reading Jon Krakauer’s biography of that name or watching Sean Penn’s movie adaptation. Some of them camp next to the bus and go without food like McCandless, whom they revere like a saint. One tourist drowned in a river near the bus, others have had to be rescued from dire predicaments. In the USA, the movie version of *Into the Wild* racked up millions at the box office and in home rentals, but in Alaska itself many regard McCandless as a “poacher” and “thief,” a “noble, suicidal narcissist,” or a “bum.” The Alaskan journalist Craig Medred sees him and his imitators as the epitome of “self-involved urban Americans, people more detached from nature than any society of humans in history.”

Perhaps, I think, as we head out from Fairbanks into the woods, the fascination of the wild expresses a longing for a world in which humans have not yet manipulated and tamed nature, not yet exploited and built over it, not yet dug it up and paved it over. Today, in the Anthropocene, a time when the tables have turned and nature appears to be entirely at the mercy of human whims and human goodwill, we long for it to regain its old power and at least sometimes strike forcefully back. Against the vastness of Alaska, human beings appear tiny. This is the most extreme of places, where men (for women almost never get a mention) can prove their strength and courage in the face of remorseless nature, as affirmed by the poems of Robert W. Service and famous works like Jack London’s *Call of the Wild*.

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PORTLAND, OREGON

EXPLORING AMERICA'S GREEN FUTURE

Portland, the most populous city in the northwest state of Oregon, is regarded as "America's greenest city," an eco-friendly place to live par excellence. The city is filled with parks; its bridges have nesting places for peregrine falcons; over half its energy comes from renewable sources. Planning is subordinated to sustainability in the city's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability. Carbon emissions have been steadily falling for decades despite the growing population. Portland was the first city in the USA to ban plastic; the first to convert a freeway into a park; the first to introduce a modern tram system. It's home to the longest car-free bridge in North America, the 520-meter-long Tilikum Crossing, a cable-stayed bridge over the Willamette River. The city has the highest per capita concentration of energy-efficient buildings, bike manufacturers, and microbreweries anywhere in the USA. Over a quarter of Portland residents cycle to work, use car pools, or travel by public transportation (the national average is less than one percent); and the city has topped quality-of-life rankings for years. The list could easily be extended. Yet Portland's history began with radical clearing of the Pacific coastal forests; and during World War Two, shipbuilding and the scrapping of warships made the waters of the Willamette River notoriously toxic and polluted. What brought about this fundamental change in Portland? What historical conditions, visionary planning approaches, and political factors contributed to the city's reinvention? And where did Portland get its image as an ecotopia, a cool, green city that points the way to the future?

BIKE CITY

I couldn't think of a more apt way to get around Portland than by bike. In part because the *New York Times* nicknamed Portland "Bike City, USA," in part because, as Hemingway once remarked, "it is by riding a bicycle that you learn the contours of a country best, since you have to sweat up the hills and can coast down them." In Portland, the hills aren't all that steep; and the cycle routes with the best views run along the Willamette.

If I'd known it was possible to reassemble your bike at Portland International Airport right after landing (next to arrivals is a covered bike assembly station with tools; there's also a signposted cycle path to downtown Portland and a light rail line on which you can take your bike for free), I might have brought my own bike. Instead, I rent one from Waterfront Bicycles, one of over seventy bike hire companies in Portland. While I wait, I study a board hanging on the brick wall. The company offers a wide range of accompanied cycle tours: a downtown tour (the cheapest variant costs 59 dollars), a brewery and marijuana tour, and gorge, coast, and vineyard tours (99 dollars). In a brochure, I read about just how crazy Portlanders are about cycling. In May, there's the Human Power Challenge, a racing event for all kinds of human-powered vehicles; in August, there's Bridge Pedal, a day-long celebration when over twenty thousand cyclists test the city's bridges to the limit; and there's both a Worst Day of the Year Ride (in February) and Hottest Day of the Year Ride (in August). While in other places the calendar is structured around religious festivals, in Portland that function is served by cycling events. At the eccentric Zoobomb events, begun in 2002, adult Portlanders ride old kids' bikes and homemade mini-bikes from the zoo to downtown.

The wait at Waterfront Bicycles, where there are over a hundred bikes to choose between, is worth it. The guy serving me is called Steve. He gives me a helmet, a lock, lights, a basket, and even a bottle of water: "So that you don't dry out." When I mention I'm writing about Portland, Steve takes a good forty-five minutes of his time and marks on a map all the places he says are "an absolute must for

eco-tourists" to check out. I'm not an "eco-tourist," I think to myself, but I do follow Steve's route right across Portland.

I cycle a few kilometers along the Willamette. There seem to be cycle paths everywhere, while on the roads wide cycle lanes are marked out by garish green stripes and white bicycle symbols. For almost two kilometers, my path takes me through a large, green park on the edge of Portland's business district. There are lots of different trees, including around a hundred flowering cherries, and hordes of cyclists, walkers, joggers, and skaters. A few young people are playing basketball, some older people are watching the ships on the river. Tom McCall Waterfront Park was opened in 1978 and then enlarged several times down the years. One of the expansions is a small memorial plaza on the edge of what was once Portland's Japantown (Nihonmachi). A thousand people of Japanese ancestry used to live there, until shortly after the outbreak of World War Two they were dubbed "enemy aliens" and forcibly evacuated, many of them to internment camps.

A little way up from the river, in a regenerated neighborhood on the southern end of downtown Portland, I stop off in Keller Fountain Park. I'd long wanted to see this legendary park and the monumental concrete fountain in person, as the Portland historian Carl Abbott once described it to me as one of the city's most emblematic places. In the 1960s, it marked the start of a revolution in city planning that was spearheaded by the landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, whose firm designed four parks with fountains in central Portland. For Halprin, modernism was about "more than just cubes in space." He sought to incorporate the "environment as a whole" into planning and "create living spaces for people." His fountains had almost nothing in common with American conventions and were more reminiscent of some of the exuberant Renaissance architecture to be found in Rome, like the Fontana di Trevi or Piazza Navona. I have to admit to being a little disappointed. It's late March and there's no running water in Halprin's fountain, as it's turned off for the winter. I try to imagine water collecting in the narrow channels at the top of the fountain, swilling around the gigantic concrete blocks, and cascading over the geometric stone walls at a rate of forty-nine thousand liters per minute.

On the fountain's opening day, young people, including many anti-Vietnam War protestors, jumped into the water and made the new aquatic playground their own. The Ira Keller Fountain became a democratic space par excellence: Businesspeople started eating their lunch there; families met up for picnics; hippies took a bath, smoked pot, and drove the park officials to distraction. Over the past fifty years, numerous weddings and christenings have been celebrated in Keller Fountain Park; it has hosted rock, pop, and jazz concerts; and every year the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art organizes a lively festival. The fountain's design was inspired by the spectacular waterfalls in the Columbia River Gorge, which are two-and-a-half hours away by bike. The fountain is intended to exhort people: Go out of the city! Go out and explore nature!

When talking to people in Portland, I notice how much importance they all attach to the presence of the nearby mountains, how proud they are of their hiking boots and waterproof sportwear. For many of them, the dramatic natural scenery was among the reasons they moved to the Pacific Northwest. The snowcapped Mount Hood, located just over eighty kilometers from the city center, looms over Portland. It's the highest point in Oregon, ascending to a height of over 3,400 meters, and also a dormant volcano. It hasn't erupted since 1865, but every schoolchild knows the period of calm can't last forever. Perhaps that's why Mount Hood exerts such fascination over the locals. Most of them see it as a paradise for leisure activities like walking and climbing. From the hills of the city, it looks like a white triangle, which sometimes comes into view and then disappears again; and the mountain has become an essential background actor in movies and on postcards.

THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST'S ORIGINAL INHABITANTS

Just like everywhere in North America, the Portland region also had a native population, which has been almost entirely forgotten. To this day, schoolbooks suggest that the American Northwest's transformation started with the white-skinned explorers who from the seventeenth century onward charted the coast and later the rivers: most notably the Spanish and British seafarers Bruno de Heceta, James Cook, and George Vancouver, and the members of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark's overland expedition in the early nineteenth century, which was commissioned by President Jefferson to map the American continent. US and Canadian maps are filled with places named after these explorers. Their written accounts became the basis for the version of US and world history found in schoolbooks. It completely escaped the White explorers' notice that the landscape of the Pacific Coast had been inhabited, cultivated, and permanently altered by indigenous people over the course of millennia. They lacked any understanding of ethnology or archaeology, and often even of natural history; they were, after all, there in the service of economic interests.

John Ledyard, a British adventurer who accompanied Captain Cook to the Pacific in the 1780s, was the first to praise the natural riches to be found in the continent's northwest a few hundred kilometers north of Portland. Many travelers, traders, and settlers would go on, like him, to describe the region between Oregon and Vancouver as a new world "in a state of nature." There were, Ledyard reported, "no plantations or any appearance that exhibited any knowledge of the cultivation of the earth." John Work, an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company, described the site of present-day Portland as a valley where there was "not a stone & scarcely a shrub to interrupt the progress of the plough which might be employed in many places with little more difficulty than in a stubble field." Countless contemporary reports, diaries, and letters mentioned the fires set by the Indians each year. George Emmons, a member of an official US expedition in 1841, observed that in the Willamette Valley, thirty kilometers south of Portland, the Indians would "burn the Prairies to dry & partially cook a sunflower seed" as food for the winter. Furthermore, he noted, the "forests are also frequently burnt to aid them in entrapping their game." Emmons's observations about ecology were relatively progressive, but even he failed to realize that it was these controlled fires that had ensured the rejuvenation of the savanna over the centuries. Instead, he saw the burnings as "the greatest obstacle the travelers encountered in this country"—"blocking up the way" and "destroying the food of the animals." In fact, the cultural landscape of the plains around present-day Portland provided the indigenous peoples with a varied diet. They hunted white and black-tailed deer, moose, birds, and waterfowl; and they supplemented the game with camas and wapato roots, sword ferns, nuts, grains, and berries. Meanwhile, the horses that had originally been imported by Spanish ships in the early eighteenth century grazed on the grass of the savanna and rapidly grew in number. Palynological studies on the history of settlement in the region show that the ancestors of the indigenous Kalapuya people created an ecologically stable cultural landscape in the Pacific Northwest over a period of at least six thousand and perhaps as many as ten thousand years using the slash-and-burn method. The newcomers from Europe and the USA, however, regarded the region, extending all the way up to southern Canada, as a paradise in a state of nature. Those who crossed the continent in Lewis and Clark's footsteps were effusive in their praise when they came to the confluence of the Willamette and Columbia rivers: that is, the place where Portland is situated today. In the central and western regions of the immense North American continent, they had found danger lurking in every corner, and water and wood were scarce. In contrast, the Pacific West seemed like a vast oasis, abundant in natural riches: a land of great promise and potential wealth, a green new world whose true destiny still lay ahead.

The newcomers saw the “Indians,” just like the forest burnings, as little more than an obstacle. They complained that the natives couldn’t be persuaded to hunt beavers and otters. These animals weren’t part of the indigenous diet and the fuss that the British made about beaver skins—for Captain Cook had learned that the Chinese in Canton paid handsome sums for pelts and furs—must have seemed deeply strange to the Native Americans. In the end, the newcomers’ “problem” with the natives solved itself, as invisible viruses came to their aid. First, around 1780, there was a creeping outbreak of smallpox, which had dire consequences for the native peoples due to their lack of genetic immunity. In August 1830, there then followed an outbreak of malaria, a parasite-borne disease that was carried to America by mosquitoes from west Africa. If the European Americans fell sick with malaria, they might eventually regain their strength after a heavy fever; but for the Native Americans, infection with smallpox or malaria almost always resulted in death. Within two generations, the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest, who had overwhelmingly welcomed the White newcomers with open arms, had been drastically reduced in numbers. Some villages lost half their population, others as much as ninety percent. One catastrophe followed another, and by 1900 almost all the Native Americans in the region of present-day Portland had disappeared forever from the world of their ancestors, having variously fallen victim to disease, been driven out, or been consigned to reservations.

The story of the “discovery” of the Pacific Northwest has many subplots in which indigenous people play a tragic role. At the start, many of the natives gave assistance to the newcomers. Without the young Sacagawea of the Shoshone tribe, for instance, who accompanied Lewis and Clark through the Pacific West, the expedition would not have made it to its destination; Sacajawea was familiar with roots and medicinal herbs, and protected the party from attacks by hostile groups. And without Watkuweis, an Indian woman who had previously lived among the Whites, Lewis and Clark would not have had a friendly reception from the Nez Perce Indians. In the end, however, the Native Americans were the clear losers in the clash between two wholly different views of the natural environment. The European Americans’ way of looking at things focused on material value, property, and profit, and they could not comprehend the Native Americans’ world. Explorers, traders, and settlers, whether Spanish, Russian, British, or American, saw beavers and otters as nothing but skins and pelts, trees simply as timber, mountains as ore and gold, grass as winter fodder. The White man’s dreams had a destructive edge to them. Few people expressed the one-dimensional view of the Pacific Northwest that dominated in the early nineteenth century, infused with belief in a divine mission, more succinctly than the ageing former president John Quincy Adams did in Washington D.C. in 1846, around the time of Portland’s founding, when he declared in biblical vein: “We claim that country—for what? To make the wilderness blossom as the rose, to establish laws, to increase, multiply, and subdue the earth, which we are commanded to do by the first behest of God Almighty.”

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THE SPIRIT OF UTOPIA AND THE CHARM OF PARODY—STORIES ABOUT PORTLAND

Portland's transformation is something unique. Within a short space of time, and with resounding success, politicians and citizens were able to overturn principles of planning that, in the decades since World War Two, had been considered inviolable in the USA. Instead of expanding into car-friendly suburbs, Portland invested in its downtown and a light rail system; instead of idolizing "the forces of the free market," it embraced municipal planning; instead of demolishing historic districts, it revitalized them; instead of extending the urban highway system, the city's planners helped to dismantle it; instead of centralization, Portland opted for regionalism and civic participation; instead of thinking solely in terms of cars, planners considered alternative modes of transport and the ecological function of natural corridors. The list of material changes in the urban landscape and organizational innovations is long. And yet nowadays, Portland differs in degree rather than kind from many US and European cities that have committed to sustainable environmental policies. So where does Portland's green image come from? In dozens of conversations, I noted how telling "green stories" about their city seems to be second nature to Portlanders and how many similarities there were between the stories they (re)told. Olmsted and McCall are mentioned; the demolition of the freeway, the importance of cycling (despite how much it rains), cannabis and coffee, the microbreweries, the recycling centers, Powell's (the USA's largest independent bookstore), free tool rentals, the MAX Light Rail system, the close proximity to the mountains, the neighborhood initiatives, the urban nature reserves, the bird conservation efforts, the heron as the city mascot. These stories about Portland are more than just summaries of facts: They convey values. And they constitute a myth—with heroes from the past and lessons for the future. The Portland myth bolsters the city residents' collective identity and offers subtle suggestions and guidance for anyone who is or wants to be part of the community.

The ecological exceptionalism at the base of this myth seems to echo the utopia envisioned by Ernest Callenbach in his bestselling 1975 novel *Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston*. Callenbach's notion of an "ecotopia" found its way into Portland's pop culture, and half a century after its publication the book reads like a prophecy, as if Callenbach had predicted Portland's eco-culture. The novel's plot, which is set a quarter-century into the future in 1999, can be quickly summarized. Investigative journalist William Weston is the first American to visit Ecotopia. He is reporting for a (fictional) US newspaper, the *Times-Post*. The country of Ecotopia, to which Oregon, Washington, and north California belong, split from the rest of the USA for ideological reasons. Through newspaper columns and private diary entries, the readers learn about how the people of Ecotopia live, and they see both how Will Weston presents the Ecotopians to the outside world and his own personal experiences with them. The society is organized as a grassroots democracy, with a president as head of state. It upholds ecological principles, uses solar energy rather than coal and bicycles and light rail rather than cars, builds sustainable housing, favors free love, and lives in communes rather than nuclear families. The people of Ecotopia embrace the principle of sustainability (though without using the term itself, which had not yet been popularized). This can be seen, for instance, in the way the country manages its waste, or in the Ecotopian timber industry: Anyone who buys wood must first spend time planting and tending to trees. Ownership is frowned upon. What counts isn't having but being. Everyone shares everything with each other, including partners. The Ecotopians enjoy life, protect the environment, grow food in cities, smoke pot, and give free rein to their emotions. They're creative and interested in culture. They live healthy, reflective lives and swear by alternative educational methods and healing practices, including sexual stimulation. Over the course of the novel, we see the protagonist's resentment and skepticism

fading as he falls in love with Marissa, an Ecotopian woman, and ultimately he decides to stay in Ecotopia, which offers a favorable alternative to the USA.

In the 1970s, Callenbach's novel read like a blueprint for a sustainable, ecologically harmonious future. In Portland, they attempted to make it a reality. To this day, the residents of "America's greenest city" identify more strongly with the vision of an ecological utopia than those of any other US city. The Portland myth contains in a nutshell the ideas and ideals, the concepts and values of Callenbach's Ecotopia. In Ecotopia, the future is not a non-place (u-topia) but an actually existing and experienced social utopia: a good-place (eu-topia). In Portland, especially in the stories that Portlanders tell about their city, this future has already begun.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, a series of literary utopias appeared in quick succession, including William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, Theodor Herzl's *The Old New Land*, and H. G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia*. These works promised various forms of progress and a rosy future that, however, ultimately prove to be unattainable. *Ecotopia* is very different. Callenbach's novel is set in the future but one not too far removed from the present. It is satirical rather than didactic, like Thomas Moore's philosophical fiction *Utopia* (though that is set not in the future but on a remote island). Neither in Moore's work nor in Callenbach's is everything to be taken seriously—and that goes doubly for the TV sketch comedy *Portlandia*, undoubtedly the most popular Portland utopia. *Portlandia* aired between 2011 and 2018 on the American cable channel IFC, running for a total of seventy-seven episodes. The series popularized the clichés and lifestyles of Portland's eco-warriors, hipsters, artists, and bohemians at a national level. Scenes shot in the studio alternate with ones filmed on location, firmly anchoring the individual episodes in Portland and opening up scope for caricature and gentle mockery. Realistic observations suddenly cross over into exaggeration and parody, like in the first episode when a couple dining at a restaurant want to know whether the chicken on the menu was actually raised locally. When they're informed that the chicken has a name (Colin) and comes from a farm near the restaurant, the couple decide to visit the farm to check whether the chicken is worth eating. They end up living on the farm but then choose not to order the chicken the next time they visit the restaurant. The episode is comical and absurd: Because there are many city-dwelling chickens in Portland, because Portlanders are extremely fussy about what they eat, and because they famously take their ecological principles to extremes.

In Portland itself, where you can go on *Portlandia* cycle tours, the TV satire is by no means reviled. Rather, Portlanders have creatively and self-deprecatingly adopted the *Portlandia* fiction. On my short tours, it sometimes feels like I'm cycling through a surreal world: not through Portland but through Portlandia, an eco-friendly, ultra-laid-back counterculture. The officials in the city hall wear sports clothes. On both private and public land, there are water butts, rain gardens, and "bioswales": vegetated channels designed to naturally filter rain and wastewater. Traffic-calmed roads are lined with wooden veg and herb boxes and herbaceous borders. Former wetlands, like the seventeen-hectare Westmoreland Park, have been restored to their natural condition: Where there was once a wetland, then later farmland, a golf course, and an airport, there are now nature-based play areas and streams and pools teeming with native fish species. In some neighborhoods, you'll find chickens clucking and goats grazing behind the houses. Accordingly, the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability has a hotline that explains things you need to be aware of if you want to raise peacocks or cows, donkeys or bees, llamas or little Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs. In the areas where the TV show *Portlandia* is set, there are wellness, yoga, and educational centers wherever you look; bakeries and cafes and art supply stores; vegan restaurants and cannabis shops. Christian Ettinger, owner of Portland's Hopworks Urban Brewery, cycles barrels of his beer round the city on a custom bike with a built-in stereo system. Uniformed riders from Portland Roasting Coffee Company chauffeur mobile

coffee shops through the city; and food carts with names like Buddha Bites, Thai Pasta, and Native Bowl sell fast food and gourmet snacks. Elsewhere, you can marvel at silver Airstream campers where people practice Zen meditation. In Portland, they fit right in. There are gyms where people generate electricity while they work out and hundreds of stores with curious, fanciful, and quirky names: I Am That, for instance, or Flying Cat Coffee, Barely Worn/Vintage Voodoo, the Freakybuttrue Peculiarium. Similarly imaginative names can be found among the brewpubs and microbreweries, of which there are seventy-four in Portland and over a hundred in the wider region—the highest per capita concentration of microbreweries in the USA. Portland's culture and nature come together in the history of its microbreweries. On the one hand, you have an urban industry that favors creative, artisanal businesses; on the other, you have hops from the agricultural paradise of the Pacific Northwest and soft water from the surrounding mountains.

During my conversations with Portlanders and my cycle tour through the city, I sometimes wonder whether I'm in the world of yesterday or tomorrow, whether Portland (like Ecotopia) has nostalgically detached itself from a global context or represents a model for the future. Urban sociologist Charles Heying, based at Portland State University, has spent years studying Portland's economic and cultural transformation. He says the answer is a mix of both. For him, Portland is both a "cultural anomaly," due to the high civic participation in politics and the minimal presence of big company headquarters, and a city of the future. Portlanders are "the Jetsons on bikes," simultaneously hip and homey. He sees Portland as a postindustrial "creative city" that manages to do localism without provincialism and whose organizational and economic approaches have proven sustainable due to their highly flexible, innovative nature. Deliberately rejecting the neoliberal model, these approaches take demands for humane working conditions seriously and are rooted in a completely new set of values that prefer and promote local, sustainable, DIY systems of production and consumption.

Needless to say, Portland isn't paradise. Even America's greenest city has a darker, dirtier side to its history. For some Portlanders, the utopia has become a dystopia. The more attractive the city has become, the higher the rents have climbed and the more that minorities have been excluded from the prosperity and driven out of the city center. The air is dirty, the water is still polluted, people in the rich neighborhoods have healthier lifestyles than those in the poorer ones, and once-respected heroes like Portland's mayor Neil Goldschmidt have fallen from grace.

But Portland has at least shown that a turnaround is possible: that even big industrial cities can reinvent themselves, not from one day to the next, but over time, not by legislation from above or the work of isolated individuals, but through a raft of initiatives; that a radical growth in GDP can go hand in hand with a marked fall in carbon emissions (in sharp contrast to the rest of the USA); that a livable future can draw inspiration from the past, from old, almost forgotten visions and plans like those of Olmsted and Mumford; that even in a rapidly growing city there can still be plenty of space (with more opening up all the time) for animals: for birds and fish, for bees and chickens and game; that a radically democratic metro government can strengthen a city's identity rather than eroding it; that civic initiatives and politicians can find common ground in environmental issues and the struggle against land consumption; and that where the urban myth reaches the limits of viability, it can have a ripple effect beyond Portland, as illustrated by the migration of people and ecotopias from the Pacific Northwest to the shrinking cities of the Rust Belt, in particular Detroit.

Portland's transformation can't be generalized. Unlike many of the world's cities, Portland benefits from its proximity to the ocean and mountains, which help make the region such an attractive place to live. Unlike cities where multinational corporations meddle in politics, Portland's small-scale economy has proven less susceptible to big crises. Rents may be rising steadily but they're rising

more slowly than in Los Angeles, San Francisco, or Seattle; the gulf between rich and poor may be constantly widening but not as rapidly as in many other major US cities.

What Portland's story shows above all is that it would be a mistake to indiscriminately label the USA as an environmental villain. Although many Republicans still want to "debate" climate change rather than treating it as a fact, cities like Portland have embraced sustainability with an impressive degree of dynamism. The combination of social mobilization, democratic transparency, and environmental initiatives is unparalleled among major cities worldwide. The success of Portland's urban testing ground shows that there are new ideas to be found in the USA outside Silicon Valley's (often self-obsessed and job-destroying) corporate innovation culture. Portland isn't trailblazing because it wants to remake the world as rapidly as possible with devices and gadgets, but because its planners and people have embraced a socio-ecological philosophy of conservation and utopia. Portland's ecotopia has ushered in an ironic, self-deprecating version of a green future. Where it will go from here, and how it will get there, remains to be seen.

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AFTERWORD

REDISCOVERING THE ENVIRONMENT

AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF THE USA

This book was originally intended to be a conventional history, focusing on the environment and society of the USA and arranged in chronological order from the European settlement of North America to the twenty-first century climate movement. But there are already lots of conventional histories of the USA that start their narratives on the east coast. At some point in this book's (far too) long genesis, I scrapped the original plan. And so the final result was a different book, one that begins in Alaska rather than New England and combines subjective observations, descriptions of nature, and historical reconstructions: an unorthodox travel guide that delves into the USA's nature, history, and culture. I've written myself into each chapter as the narrator—as a historian, a curious traveler, a contemplative walker. Some historians have complained in recent times that history books (outside the acknowledgements sections) are increasingly being written in a sterile, utterly dispassionate way. Unlike anthropologists and cultural theorists, historians have generally tried to keep themselves out of the stories they tell, which aspire to be objective. But Leopold Ranke's famous principle that the historian should recount the events of history "the way they actually happened" was discredited long ago. The chapters of this book therefore deliberately blend objectively verifiable facts with subjective elements: encounters and experiences, analyses and anecdotes, interpretations and impressions. In this respect, *Paradise Blues* is more than just an environmental and cultural history; it also follows in the Anglo-American tradition of nature writing, a genre that combines natural history, personal observation, and philosophical reflections on nature.

While writing, I envisioned a readership who only knew the USA from afar—from movies, newspapers, or vacations. So I deliberately wove people, places, objects, and cultural phenomena into the narrative that will be recognized throughout the world: Hollywood and Disney, cowboys and "Indians," gold miners and "Eskimos," Las Vegas and the Delta blues, to name just a few. As a result, although *Paradise Blues* is a work of scholarship, it doesn't feel like one. The (often unknown) history of America's environment is closely bound up with the America we're familiar with from the media. Viewed as a whole, the book takes the latest scholarly research on the USA's environment and history and attempts to make it accessible to readers.

In retrospect, it was probably a vacation I took to the American west long ago that was the catalyst for my writing about the USA differently than I had done before: looking not at the country as a whole but at individual towns and cities; looking not at American society and politics in recent history but at the relation between people and their environment over extended periods of time. On the last day of that memorable family vacation to Colorado, we discovered three towns quite by chance: Dinosaur, Rangely, and Meeker. These places couldn't have been more different. In the first of them, Dinosaur, we found a museum with dinosaur skeletons and street names like Brontosaurus Boulevard, Stegosaurus Freeway, Triceratops Terrace, Brachiosaurus Bypass, and Diplodocus Drive. In the neighboring town of Rangely, we discovered a desolate, barren, lunar landscape dotted with one oil well after another; this was the area where Chevron developed the largest oil fields in the American west. And near the third town, Meeker, we drove through large, dense forests. In Meeker itself, we stayed at a grand hotel decorated with stuffed forest animals and countless irregularly shaped antlers. The hotel looked as though nothing had changed there in over a century, and it felt like Teddy Roosevelt, the passionate hunter and founder of numerous national parks, might step out

of the grand suite any moment wearing a buckskin hunting suit and wielding a rifle. How come these three places had developed so differently, despite being so close together?

Clearly, natural phenomena and the way they were perceived and utilized by human beings played a decisive role. Long before humans populated the American continent, it was the forces of nature that washed up dinosaur skeletons in Colorado and then covered them in silt; a few kilometers away, the movements of the earth and the mixture of lipophilic materials created a reservoir in the porous sand, where huge quantities of oil formed close to the surface. The Native Americans who lived in Colorado were certainly aware of nature's particularities and peculiarities. But ultimately it was scientists, adventurers, and politicians of European ancestry who, with their colonial gaze, transformed the three towns' fates at a single stroke—incredibly, within the course of a single year. In 1900, a paleontologist from Pittsburgh discovered a large number of dinosaur bones in the area where Dinosaur is now located and recommended excavating the site. In 1901, prospectors discovered oil at the location of present-day Rangely and built the first oil well. And that same year, the newly inaugurated president Theodore Roosevelt came to Meeker. He stayed at the grand hotel and shot a few mountain lions and deer. Later, he had the area designated a National Forest. These events in northwest Colorado have attracted little interest among either politicians in Washington or scholars of history. But for me, my visit to these three little-known places raised a whole host of surprising questions. For instance: How many geological eras did it take for nature to produce the liquified fossils in Rangely? And what microscopic segment of time did human beings need to consume the oil that formed over millions of years? Was it the discovery of dinosaur bones and the founding of the museum that ultimately won the case against plans to build a reservoir and flood Dinosaur? What would have become of the woods if the hunting-mad president hadn't taken a liking to them? A look at the three towns demonstrates that both natural conditions—geology, flora, and fauna—and our perceptions and judgments of nature have been enormously influential over the course of history. The way the world we live in looks is linked to the natural phenomena that exist in a given place (oil, fossils, forests), what we know about our environment, and what value we attach to the things we find, in short: what we conserve and what we consume (and for what ends we consume it). The journey through Colorado brought stories to light that I'd never have come across in the library but that are highly pertinent to the relation between humans and nature in those places, while also being reflective of larger contexts. It showed that it's worth experiencing landscapes and their peculiar features at first hand and taking account even of small towns that normally slip through the net of national histories.

In *Paradise Blues*, my search for America's natural world isn't confined to spectacular natural monuments or popular tourist destinations. A few of the places I went to are so small that even American readers may barely have heard of them, never mind those from farther afield. Wiseman only had thirteen inhabitants at the time of my visit; St. Thomas is a ghost town, where only the ruins still remain; and Portland, the biggest city to have a chapter dedicated to it, has a population of less than a million in the city itself. Just as it wasn't any one of the towns I came across on my trip to Colorado that fascinated me but all of them collectively and the fact of their proximity to one another, so too although each chapter of *Paradise Blues* is focused on a single, eponymous location, it keeps panning out to a larger panorama in order to illuminate the many, often invisible connections between center and periphery. We tend to mark towns and cities on our maps as if they were strictly separated from their surroundings. But an excursion to the outskirts of any town or city reveals that there are no sharp lines between urban and rural, and that these places are always closely bound up with their surroundings through infrastructure and flows of people, goods, and resources. That's why, for instance, the chapter on Disney World in Florida doesn't just look at the theme park and the nearby planned town of Celebration, but at the whole southern tip of the

state—for, after all, the “river of grass,” the Everglades, begins very close to Walt Disney’s theme park. The chapter on Dodge City mentions the historical cattle drives from Mexico to Kansas and the wind energy that is produced in Kansas and supplied to distant regions. In the chapter on Malibu, I consider both the hinterland and the nearby megacity of Los Angeles. And the chapter about the desert concentrates not just on the ghost town of St. Thomas but also on Las Vegas, as I wanted to explore the links between the two places.

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STORIES THAT WE NEED

Today, more people are aware than ever before that we will need a new relationship with the environment in the future, both in the USA and around the world. But all too often, the scope of the slogans and political demands is limited to global warming. As well as climate change, which is sharply exacerbating many ecological problems, there exist an array of other challenges, often in our immediate area. Thus, to change our relationship to the environment, it's more important than ever to develop an interest in, and a deeper understanding of, our complex relationship to nature. This is where stories about the environment have an important role to play. Publishing facts and figures about carbon footprints and global warming may trigger a short-term feeling of disquiet, but will learning that every day 150 to 200 species are lost forever—a few hundred insects, birds, and mammals every twenty-four hours—really have any effect on our day-to-day behavior? Negative headlines are often paralyzing rather than motivating. Unlike abstract numbers or promises about future technology, stories reveal to us that there are endless discoveries to be made in the relationship between humans and nature—in idyllic landscapes where hidden dangers lurk in wait, and in visions and actions that transform worlds and environments. Above all, they demonstrate that where we came from and where we're going are intimately bound up with each other—and so that there's nothing inevitable about things staying the way they are.

Stories about the search for nature bring home to us that we can only preserve the idyllic beauty of our landscapes and the natural foundations of our existence over the long term if we remember that the future of people on earth is dependent on our maintaining the soil and water, the biotopes and ecological systems of which we are just a part—on our acting not like parasites that cause permanent harm to our host (our resources and the earth) but rather like commensals (literally, "beings eating together at the same table") that are sustained by the earth's resources without causing lasting harm to it. In this context, recognizing that the status quo is precarious and needs to be reformed is just as important as imagining a better world. *Paradise Blues* gives an insight into the vulnerability and beauty of nature. The individual stories show that vulnerabilities and pressures to behave a certain way are almost always politically constructed, and that it must therefore be possible to do away with them. The stories in *Paradise Blues* offer up many lessons about the threats and risks faced by our environment: for instance, that even the great Arctic wilderness isn't safe from destruction despite myriad efforts; that nature, with its wildfires, earthquakes, and hurricanes, is a powerful agent with which we need to find an accommodation; that there are regions whose long-term inhabitability we must seriously question; that toxic hazards can lurk in the shadow of spectacular natural monuments; that some things bearing the label of "sustainability" can widen the gulf between rich and poor; and that even in humid subtropical regions there's no absolute guarantee of an adequate supply of potable water unless we intervene. But they also offer a host of inspiring examples, showing that young activists are taking action for the environment and against racism; that committed citizens fighting against environmental injustice can bring powerful political forces to their knees; that we can (and should) renature ancient landscapes, flora, and fauna; and that a polluted city can become an eco-friendly role model—whether in the USA or beyond the borders of North America. If social and planetary burnout are the hallmarks of our age, then we need a more passive, slowed-down relationship with nature, rather than frenetic activity and radical technical interventions.

Little paradises and livable worlds can be found all over the earth. But we will lose them if we don't work to conserve them. Despite this recognition, *Paradise Blues* isn't a romantic *retour à la nature*, but a call to discover the beauty of the environment and the dangers it faces. Anyone who takes up

this call will find that nature and history offer an almost limitless supply of subversive observations, cultural discoveries, ecological insights, and subtle political messages. And so this book will ideally be an ongoing project to which we can all contribute, in one way or another, if we feel the desire to set out on our own journeys of exploration—in the places where we live, or in the new worlds to which this desire impels us.