

Geoists in History

Chief Seattle (1786-1866)

By Karl Williams

He became the very embodiment of indigenous nobility, with a deep connection to nature that was in fundamental conflict with any sort of personal ownership of natural resources. His moving tearjerker of a speech expressing respect for all creation and a deep spirit of sharing became an anthem for the both the conservation movement and New Age spirituality. For campaigners for indigenous rights, this speech is recognised as a powerful, bittersweet plea for respect of aboriginal rights. And yet the fairness and effectiveness of his code of living (or quasi-economic system) he proposed cannot compare to the profundity of a brilliant maverick economist who's now almost disappeared from history.



Chief Seattle, the leader of the Suquamish and the Duwamish tribes, rose to leadership for his flawless oratory skills and for his imperious, commanding presence among his people. A visionary who foresaw the inevitable destruction to be wrought by white civilisation, he actually worked closely with both cultures for their mutual benefit. That is, he sought that whites and natives should co-exist harmoniously. He strove for the safety of his tribal group from other warmongering neighbors and brought about peace and cohesion among his people. And in times of great change and conflict with white colonization surging, he ensured his people were given their rights and a relatively secure land reservation.

Sealth (his given name at birth) was born in what is today the northwestern state of Washington, with his father a noble from the main Suquamish tribe and his mother from the Duwamish tribe. As the line of descent traditionally ran through the mother, Seattle (to use his more famous name) was considered Duwamish.

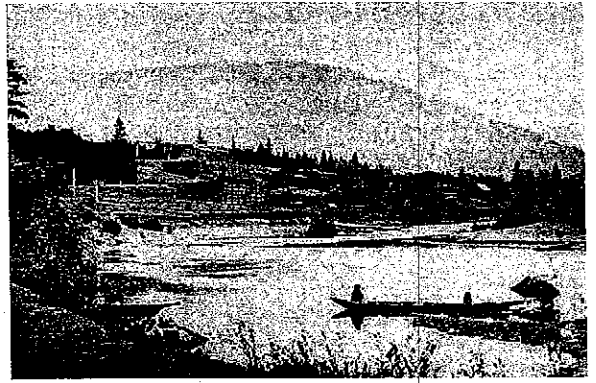
His birth occurred during an apocalyptic time in his peoples' history when epidemics inadvertently introduced by western traders decimated the native population, and the introduction of western trade goods and firearms added to the turmoil. Seattle was present when the British ship H.M.S. Discovery landed, captained by George Vancouver. His tribe's generous welcome led to lifelong happy memories of the explorer's visit and his appreciation of the power and abilities of Westerners.

From a very young age he earned the standing of an authoritative personality and was known for his great leadership qualities. Whether you wore a loincloth or a powdered wig, in those days leadership was basically about fighting your enemies, and Seattle fought back a number of invaders, which helped augment his reputation as a leader. He later went on the offensive and skillfully ambushed a number of marauding war parties and eventually gained control over six local tribes.

While traditional enemies were unavoidable, Seattle still showed a masterful ability to bring about a number of important tribal alliances that brought about lasting peace. Given the devastation meted upon native peoples by the white invaders, Seattle showed them remarkable respect and in turn became esteemed by whites as a man of honor.

If not for his spine-tingling speech, Seattle probably wouldn't have got this gig. Let's acknowledge at the outset that the accuracy of his original words is rightly questioned, but there's little doubt that the gist of what this tall, broad man with a penetrating voice proclaimed has been faithfully honoured.

Probably in the early spring of 1854, Seattle gave his speech at a large outdoor gathering in the settlement that later became the great city that bears his name. The meeting had been called by Governor Stevens to discuss the surrender or sale of native land to white settlers. After the governor explained his mission, Seattle then rose to speak, resting his hand upon the head of the much smaller Stevens, and declaimed with great dignity for an extended period. No one alive today knows what he said; he spoke in the Lushootseed language, his words were translated into the Chinook Native trade language, and a third person translated them into English. If you've never read the speech in its entirety, then it's Googled easily. But for now, open your heart to a few excerpts, Kleenex in hand.....



This we know. The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family.

Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove, has been hallowed by some sad or happy event in days long vanished. The President in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. But how can you buy or sell the sky or the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?

This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

This shining water that moves in streams and rivers is not just water but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you land, you must remember that it is sacred blood of our ancestors. If we sell you land, you must remember that it is sacred, and you must teach your children that it is sacred and that each ghostly reflection in the clear water of the lakes tells of events in the life of my people.

[A white man's] father's grave, and his children's birthright are forgotten. He treats his mother, the Earth, and his brother, the same, as things to be bought, plundered, sold like sheep or bright beads. His appetite will devour the Earth and leave behind only a desert.

And what is there to life if a man cannot hear the lonely cry of a whippoorwill or the arguments of the frogs around a pond at night. I am a red man and do not understand. The Indian prefers the soft sound of the wind darting over the face of the pond, and the smell of the wind itself, cleansed by a midday rain, or scented with the pinon pine.

The air is precious to the red man, for all things share the same breath - the beast, the tree, the man, they all share the same breath. The white man does not seem to notice

the air he breathes. Like a man dying for many days, he is numb to the stench. But if we sell you our land, you must remember that the air is precious to us, that the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports. The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also receives his last sigh. And if we sell you our land, you must keep it apart and sacred, as a place where even the white man can go to taste the wind that is sweetened by the meadow's flowers.

Seattle had seen the writing on the wall, and avoided the obliteration of his peoples by reluctantly moving to the reservation set aside for them. He continued to act as peacemaker within various tribes as well as between tribes and settlers. By the end of his life he had made deep bonds with many whites and continued to visit old friends in the city from time to time. But for the most part Seattle stayed home, dealing with the problems of overcrowding, disease, and traveling whisky sellers on the reservation.

Officially, Seattle died of a severe fever – unofficially, a broken heart. He was buried with Catholic and native rites in a reservation. Seattle's good friend George Meigs shut down his sawmill so that he and his Native American workers could attend. One of the Chief's last requests was that Meigs shake hands with him in his coffin as a farewell.



Thirteen years after Seattle died, Henry George wrote the definitive work on our relationship to land and natural resources. Seattle's romantic notions about roaming free in nature sounds great, but until a society lays down infrastructure (water, transport, power, public buildings etc.) then we're never going to escape the overwhelming preoccupation and insecurity of looking for food in the wild. Even if we wanted to live like hunter-gatherers, we'd be greatly limited by the vast amount of land upon which each person would basically depend.

While Seattle's peoples shared their tribal land in a more or less equal manner, George allowed modern peoples to share settled lands where land values varied greatly because of the inevitably uneven distribution of

infrastructure. George's system whereby the collection of the economic rent becomes a shared community resource and equalizes everyone's share of the value of land is unquestionably fair, indisputable when understood, elegant in its workings and ageless in its principles.

And how did Seattle ensure that natural resources were used sparingly given that they were free for the taking? While he and his peers might have held an intuitive connection to Nature such that they only took their bare necessities, it's only a matter of time before the connection is lost to a future generation and the proverbial tragedy of the commons ensues. George, however, would accord all natural resources a price (which is another way of saying "respect") such that the economic system would prevent needless consumption.

Yes, Seattle and his ilk expressed a profound sense of sharing but only within his allied tribes. The other tribes, it seems, can be obliterated for encroaching on "their" land! Geonomics enables the sharing of the earth so that all may live, and that sharing of the whole planet's resources is achieved with perfect equity.

Chief Seattle delivered a cracker of a speech when "Progress and Poverty" was only dimly taking shape in the mind of Henry George. You showed us how to respect and share Nature as a hunter-gatherer but, given half a chance, most of us would prefer access to modern infrastructure and services.



Next issue: the great American libertarian author, educational theorist and social critic, Albert Jay Nock.