

Module 01: Can Humans Control the Natural World? Urban Landscapes and Perceptions of Nature

Introduction

After the visiting the English city of Manchester in 1835, the French social critic Alexis de Tocqueville wrote:

From this foul drain the greatest stream of human industry flows out to fertilize the whole world. From this filthy sewer pure gold flows. Here humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish, here civilization works its miracles and civilized man is turned almost into a savage.

This module explores the question embedded in Tocqueville's juxtaposition of "human industry" and "brutish humanity:" how did the forces of economic change, including industrialization and its accompanying process of urbanization, transform the relationship between humans and the natural world? By 1900, Europe had experienced unprecedented periods of population growth, economic expansion, and social transformation. Through an exploration of source materials illustrating changing perceptions of the urban landscapes of the late nineteenth century, this module asks the question, Can humans control the natural world?