

Who owns the land

Extracts from a speech by Chief Seattle of the Duwamish League.

The following speech was delivered by an American Red Indian, Chief Seattle in 1854 — one year before a great treaty-making council was held in the North-west of the United States between 14 Indian bands and the U.S. Government.

The Government proposed reservations, and although several tribes opposed this, treaties were signed allowing each of the 14 bands to select its favourite home valley as its reservation.

Three months later war broke out. Miners and settlers drawn by gold strikes, poured into treaty lands and several bands decided not to ratify the treaty.

The conflict lasted three years and broke Indian strength in the North-west. Ironically Chief Seattle was a strong American ally throughout. Little else is known of his life.

"The Great Chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. The Great Chief also sends us words of friendship and goodwill. This is kind of him since we know that he has little need of our friendship in return. But we will consider your offer. For we know that if we do not sell, the white man may come with guns and take our land.

How can you buy or sell the sky, 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?.

Sacred.

Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memories of the red man.

The white man's dead forget the country of their birth when they go to walk among the stars. Our dead never forget this beautiful earth, for it is the mother of the red man. We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters, the deer, the horse, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadows, the body heat of the pony and man — all belong to the same family.

This shining water that moves in the 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, 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 and memories in the life of my people. The water's murmur is the voice of my father's father.

Our ways are different from your ways. The sight of your cities pains the eyes of the red man. But perhaps it is because the red man is a savage and does not understand.



Weep for the land

Weep for the land,
Weep for its loneliness,
for faltering handshakes
and retreating friends.
The misconceptions, or the innocence
have found no favour with the enemy
they are so many ...
Weep when good intent
effects no victory,
or change of pattern
in the thickening tide
of dark intolerance.
Weep for the land, for what it was,
for what it is, for what it yet might be.
I can perceive the threat
I am afraid ...
The malcontent has claimed monopoly
and posturing, so futile in our time,
holds grave portent.
Weep for the closing doors
and bruised integrity,
for promises not kept.
Weep for the blinded eye
and doubtful destiny.
Weep for the land ...

Roma Henden

Same breath.

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.

So that they will respect the land, tell your children that the earth is rich with the lives of our kin. Teach your children what we have taught our children, that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth.

If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves. 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. All things are connected. 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.

Reservations.

But we will consider your offer to go to the reservation you have for my people. We will live apart and in peace. It matters little where we spend the rest of our days. They are not many. A few more hours, a few more winters and none of the children of the great tribes that once lived on this land or that roam now in small bands in the woods will be left to mourn the graves of a people once as powerful and hopeful as yours. But why should I mourn the passing of my people? Tribes are made of men, nothing more. Men come and go like the waves of the sea.

Even the white man, whose God walks and talks with him as friend to friend, cannot be exempt from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all, we shall see. One thing we know, which the white man may one day discover — our God is the same God, a God of man, and his compassion is equal for the red man and the white. The earth is precious to Him and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator.

Hold in your mind the memory of the land as it is when you take it. And with all your strength, with all your mind, with all your heart, preserve it for your children, and love it ... as God loves us all.