

SECTION II

THE COMING OF
CIVILIZATION



The life of savages is so simple, and our societies are such complicated machines! The Tahitian is so close to the origin of the world, while the European is close to its old age. The contrast between them and us is greater than the difference between a newborn baby and a doddering old man. They understand absolutely nothing about our manners or our laws, and they are bound to see in them nothing but shackles disguised in a hundred different ways. Those shackles could only provoke the indignation and scorn of creatures in whom the most profound feeling is a love of liberty.

—Denis Diderot (1774)

Paul Z. Simons posits civilization as virtually complete from its inception, as if domestication occurred in a kind of qualitative quantum leap. Such a provocative thesis would surely make that moment all the more compelling an object of study: the most important turning point in our history as a species.

In the clash between precivilization and the ensemble of ways to control and harness life that has all but extinguished it, what was at stake? In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, the losing side can be seen in the exiled Duke's defense of wilderness, its "tongues in trees" and "sermons in stone and good in everything." Two-and-one-half centuries later, in a place more tangible than the Forest of Arden, Smohalla, elder of a Columbia Plateau tribe, issued a similar plaint:

"You ask me to plow the ground! Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's bosom? then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest.

You ask me to dig for stone! Shall I dig under her skin for her bones? then when I die I cannot enter her body to be born again. You ask me to cut grass and sell it, and be rich like white men! But how dare I cut off my mother's hair?"

The selections that follow provide some sense of the vast range of this struggle, and something of its many facets, its texture, and its fruits. Civilization's victory has had the most profound impact, both on the natural world and on our species—viscerally, culturally, and in every other way.

From Diderot in the eighteenth century, to George Marsh late in the nineteenth, up to the present in a mounting profusion and emphasis that reflects the growing crisis, we can see with increasing clarity what a truly monumental, cataclysmic watershed was the triumph of civilization. This small sampling can only suggest the scope and depth of that cataclysm.