

On the History of Lumbering in Northeastern America, 1820-1960

Graeme Wynn

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**ON THE HISTORY OF LUMBERING IN NORTHEASTERN
AMERICA 1820-1960**

The forest has held a central place in the development of eastern North America. For centuries after the discovery of the continent, and from the St. Lawrence to the Savannah, visitors to the seaboard remarked upon the quality and extensiveness of the tree cover. Few areas were far from the forest edge. As late as the mid-nineteenth century when Henry David Thoreau visited Maine, he noted: "Each one's world is but a clearing in the forest, so much open and inclosed ground." Earlier, Lord Selkirk had mused upon the enormous change in attitude required of the British migrant on his arrival in densely forested Prince Edward Island. Indeed, George Grant, the Canadian philosopher, has suggested that the North American's attitude to his land and its resources may be understood in terms of the conquering relation to place established by the need to deal with the forest. Successful settlement was largely contingent upon clearing the land of its trees; and for centuries the abundant forest was widely exploited for construction materials and fuel.¹

Yet by comparison with the history of settlement and agriculture, the history of commercial forest exploitation in North America has been relatively neglected. At the turn of this century J.E. Defebaugh surveyed the *History of the Lumber Industry in America*; a large handful of monographs detail the heyday of lumbering in particular areas; a few business histories yield valuable information; and a number of often rather anecdotal reminiscences complement the picture.² Perhaps the powerful, persistent, post-Revolutionary vision of the United States as an agrarian society stimulated interest in the farmer. Perhaps the lure of Frederick Jackson Turner's westward moving frontier helped to focus attention on farming and the spread of settlement. However, even in British North America, where the timber trade was the most effective of the early staple enterprises in transforming the landscape, the quest for fish or fur appears to have captured the imagination of staple historians more readily than the exploitation of the forest.³

1 *The Journal of Henry Thoreau*, ed. B. Torrey and F.H. Allen (New York, 1962), I, p. 47; B.J. Greenhill and A. Giffard, *West Countrymen in Prince Edward's Isle* (Toronto, 1967), p. 8; George Grant, "In Defence of North America", in *Technology and Empire* (Toronto, 1969), pp. 1-26.

2 J.E. Defebaugh, *History of the Lumber Industry of America* (2 vols., Chicago, 1906); e.g. R.J. Fries, *Empire in Pine. The Story of Lumbering in Wisconsin, 1830-1900* (Madison, 1951); A.M. Larson, *History of the White Pine Industry in Minnesota* (Minneapolis, 1949); R.W. Hidy *et al.*, *Timber and Men: The Weyerhaeuser Story* (New York, 1964).

3 Perhaps this is attributable to H.A. Innis' focus on the former two staples. The writings of Arthur Lower, especially his *Settlement and the Forest Frontier in Eastern Canada* (Toronto, 1936), *The North American Assault on the Canadian Forest* (Toronto, 1938) and *Great Britain's Woodyard: British America and the Timber Trade, 1763-1867* (Montreal, 1973) and M.S. Cross, "The Dark Druidical Groves" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1968) stand as important exceptions to the general neglect of the Canadian forest industries.

Together, the two books recently made available by the University of Maine Press go some way towards remedying this situation.⁴ In providing a detailed account of lumbering in the Pine Tree State between 1820 and 1960, they offer perhaps the most complete account of forest exploitation in any area of eastern North America during this period, and one that is of particular relevance to historians of neighbouring New Brunswick where the little-studied forest industries played so large a part in the local economy.

Richard Wood's volume first appeared in 1935 in the Maine Studies series. It was well received by reviewers and has become something of a standard work in lumbering history, for it was a pioneering endeavour both in its subject and in its use of sources. However, by the standards of the 1970's the book has a number of shortcomings. Too little attention is given to the place of lumbering in the Maine economy; too little is said about the problem of trespass and the competing claims of Maine and New Brunswick to the upper St. John valley that in 1842 led to the Aroostook War. Occasionally, too much reliance is placed upon a few printed sources.

Paradoxically, that section which received the widest acclaim in the 1930's is now probably the least satisfactory. Wood's discussion of land policy and speculation was welcome in a period of considerable interest in the public lands, but today it appears cursory and fails to broach many vital questions. Similarly, although the study is avowedly "concerned with the pattern of the frontier in a particular region" (Wood attended F.J. Turner's last seminar in frontier history and prepared the book as a doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Frederick Merk), the distinctive characteristics and implications of the "lumbering frontier" are never made clear.⁵ Chapter II, on "The Advance of the Lumbering Frontier" briefly and rather sketchily summarizes the geographical patterns of lumbering in the United States and within Maine between 1820 and 1861, but thereafter the frontier concept — which might have provided a stimulating integrative theme — is all but abandoned in favour of local detail.

In fact, much of the present value of Wood's book lies in the sheer quantity of information on prices, wages, local conditions and annual lumber production that it contains. Newspapers, private manuscript collections and State Land Agents' Reports yielded a rich harvest of facts and figures to the industrious author for whom explication by illustration was a favourite ploy. The drive, rafting, scaling, booming, sawmilling and the life of the lumberer are all dealt with, but the descriptions vary considerably in quality. In general, Wood's consideration of lumbering practices depended too heavily on a

4 Richard G. Wood, *A History of Lumbering in Maine, 1820-1861* (Orono, Me., University of Maine Press, 1971); David C. Smith, *A History of Lumbering in Maine, 1861-1960* (Orono, Me., University of Maine Press, 1972).

5 See Cross, *op. cit.*, for detailed consideration of these questions in the Canadian context and the elaboration of the idea of a commercial frontier.

single source — J.S. Springer's useful and generally reliable *Forest Life and Forest Trees*⁶ — and it is on those aspects of the industry on which the mid-nineteenth century lumberman-author is weakest that Woods' contribution is most valuable.

Despite these failings, Wood's book cannot be ignored by historians of lumbering. Many have found the antecedents of mid-Western lumbering methods in its description of the Maine industry. Students of forest exploitation in the Maritime Provinces are certain to find both inspiration and useful comparisons in Wood's writing. How important were the basic differences between Maine and New Brunswick land policy in affecting the nature of forest exploitation in the two areas? Did Maine's position as a supplier of sawn lumber for United States and Caribbean markets have economic consequences similar to those produced by New Brunswick's reliance on trans-Atlantic timber markets?⁷ Why was co-operation on the drive so weakly developed in New Brunswick when it was widespread in Maine? As H.A. Davis has illustrated for the St. Croix Valley, techniques as well as lumbermen crossed the international boundary freely during the early nineteenth century.⁸ Although the large baulks of square-hewn timber for the British market that formed the backbone of the early New Brunswick timber trade were rarely if ever produced in southern Maine, many elements of the lumbering economy — from the construction of lumberers' camps to the practices of hauling and driving the cut — were similar over a wide area. Americans suffered loss alongside New Brunswickers in the Miramichi Fire of 1825; American and Provincial lumbering concerns competed for labour in the upper St. John valley; and absconding debtors, as well as a group of lumberers sought by the Crown after a fracas in the northeast of the province during the 1820's, were said to have taken refuge in Maine.

Much remains to be done on the inter-relationships between the New England and New Brunswick economies. Before 1850, exploitation of the New Brunswick forest was stimulated by British strategic considerations, sustained by British protective tariffs and dominated by the demands of the British metropolis, but American capital played an increasingly important role in the provincial economy after 1830. A period of reckless land speculation in Maine during the early 1830's prompted Americans to purchase large tracts of southwestern New Brunswick. The prices received for Crown land rose rapidly; indignant newspaper editors in St. Andrews spoke out against

6 J.S. Springer, *Forest Life and Forest Trees: Comprising Winter Camp Life among the Loggers . . . With descriptions of Lumbering Operations on the Various Rivers of Maine and New Brunswick* (New York, 1851).

7 For New Brunswick see A.R.M. Lower, *Great Britain's Woodyard*. See also J.M.S. Careless, "Metropolitan Reflections on Great Britain's Woodyard", *Acadiensis*, III (Autumn, 1973), pp. 103-109.

8 H.A. Davis, *International Community on the St. Croix, 1604-1930* (Orono, Me., 1950).

the rising tide of American investment that limited local access to the forest; and hasty changes were made in the land disposal system when it was rumoured that American interests planned to buy up all land and mill sites west of the St. John river.⁹

Only a few months later, many grandiose schemes for the development of sawmills in the province sought profit from the combination of American capital with New Brunswick's natural resources. Boston dollars lay behind plans for the development of tide mills on the Fundy coast, steam mills in Saint John and water mills in the interior. But the American financial crash of 1837 drained the risk capital and the spirit of optimism on which the schemes had been launched, and most foundered incomplete. Smaller, less spectacular American enterprises in the province received less publicity but were probably of considerable importance. Certainly the sawmill established on the Miramichi by a Maine emigrant expanded and formed the nucleus of a sizeable settlement to which the mill proprietor, Thomas Boies, gave his name. Data for the study of such economic interplay are scattered, and much careful and alert combing of the archives will be necessary before any definitive conclusions can be reached; the results could be rewarding to those interested in the antecedents of issues of current concern.

David Smith's study is as much a pioneering effort as was Wood's work of forty years ago. Many recent studies have focussed upon the Conservation movement; economic histories of the newsprint paper industry have been written; general works on recent logging practice have been published. But detailed regional histories of forest exploitation in eastern North America during the last hundred years of rapid change in the lumbering industry are scarce. In 1860 lumbering was much the same as it had been in 1820. Throughout the northeast, the axe remained the main tool of the lumberer, hard work by man and animal were still vital sources of energy, the rivers provided transportation and motive power. To be sure technological advances were changing the industry in both state and province. Steam mills, independent of water levels and suitable power generating sites, offered both reliability and flexibility. Railroads were being heralded, although not actually used, as alternatives to the difficult and dangerous spring drive of logs downriver. Briefly, lumbering technology was passing through the murky transition between those two stages defined, not altogether satisfactorily by Lewis Mumford, as the Eotechnic and Paleotechnic eras.¹⁰ As the age of wood, wind and water gradually give way to the age of coal, iron and steam, many of the changes seen to characterize the nineteenth century in Britain — the strengthening of the cash nexus, the emergence of a proletariat with the

9 For sources and some discussion of this material see Graeme Wynn, "The Assault on the New Brunswick Forest, 1780-1850" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1974).

10 Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York, 1934).

increasing differentiation of society into master and man — came to the northeastern woods and small scale individual ventures in the timber trade gradually gave way to a system dominated by capitalists and corporations. Again, however, the timing of this change is unclear. For example, during the third and fourth decades of the century, Joseph Cunard and Gilmour, Rankin and Co. extended their economic and social dominance of the timber industry in northeastern New Brunswick to an enormous extent. By acquiring licences to vast areas of the Crown forest they effectively brought hundreds of lumberers under their control; in a sense, then, they were the precursors of the large corporations that dominated Maine and New Brunswick lumbering by the beginning of this century.

But there is no doubt that change in lumbering quickened enormously after c.1860. To continue with Mumford's periodization, the industry moved from an essentially Eotechnic state into the Neotechnic phase — utilising the internal combustion engine and electricity to produce wood pulp — in less than a century.¹¹ The hand saw replaced the axe to be superseded in turn by the power saw. Mechanical means of hauling out the cut replaced the horse just as horses had replaced oxen. And the changes were not only technological. The lumber requirements of the new spoolwood and pulp mills fostered different patterns of exploitation; birch, poplar and spruce became the most sought after species. As even small trees were useful in these trades it is likely that the cutover area increased considerably. Working conditions in the woods changed drastically as the companies found it necessary to compete for labour with city industries and with lumbering in the Western States. Pork and beans, biscuits and molasses gave way to a more balanced and varied diet; rather than spending long months of isolation in the camps, lumberers began to return home at the weekends, and eventually woods villages were developed to allow the men a normal family life. By 1960 lumbering in the northeast bore few resemblances to the industry of three or four generations before.

Questions about this period abound. We know little of the social, economic and ecological consequences of mechanisation in the woods, or of the effects of increasing corporate dominance in the forest industries. To what extent did the principals of the large lumber firms dominate the political and economic life of the community? How rapidly and how effectively was the improvident exploitation characteristic of the early nineteenth century replaced by practices of sustained yield forestry and acceptance of the need for multiple use of resources? Potentially therefore, Smith's volume has a good deal to offer.

11 For an analysis of a similar case in the Adirondack Mountains see Evelyn M. Dinsdale, "Spatial Patterns of Technological Change: The Lumber Industry of Northern New York", *Economic Geography*, 41 (1965), pp. 252-74.

Unfortunately I find the book disappointing. An enormous amount of information has been crowded into its 430 pages of text, but too often local detail dominates at the expense of synthesis and interpretation. Problems in obtaining comparable data for all areas of the state undoubtedly make generalization difficult. But one soon feels that Smith's best estimates in this direction would be more useful than the recitation of scores of assiduously garnered facts about the cost of the annual log drive down the different rivers, or the date of arrival of logs in the Penobscot Boom between 1875 and 1900. At least, some of the quantitative information should have been presented graphically. Well drawn maps would give a far clearer picture than pages of statistics of the relative importance of lumbering in different parts of the state. Similarly, meaningful correlations between stocks of lumber on hand, prices, and exports might have been revealed by plotting even the incomplete data available. Smith's discussions of land policy and of the growth of conservationist thinking and forestry practice in Maine focus too exclusively on local detail. Were competing claims to water rights of Maine mill owners, hydro electricity developers and log drivers affected by changes in water rights made in the Western States? Did Maine's general policy of land alienation in fee simple make the implementation of forest conservation more difficult than in New Brunswick where vast areas of forest were still exploited under lease from the Crown? To what extent were markets for Maine lumber affected by the greater accessibility of the Great Lakes forest to the seaboard that came with the development of better communications to the interior? More perspective on the place of Maine forestry in the United States is needed; more should have been done to see developments in Maine in relation to parallel situations elsewhere. Overall, Smith's approach seems too cautious, favouring incontrovertible fact upon fact over more tentative interpretation — a luxury few pioneers can afford.

Nevertheless, this volume suggests many useful lines of inquiry, particularly for the sorely neglected study of social and economic history in Post-Confederation New Brunswick. The boundaries of the state do not entirely confine Smith's interests and references to conditions in the neighbouring province are scattered through the book.¹² However, Smith does appear to underestimate the continued importance of provincial lumbering. Perhaps beguiled by New Brunswick's opposition to Confederation,¹³ Smith suggests

12 It should be noted that in a number of cases Smith appears to interpret the New Brunswick evidence from too narrow a base. For example, the extent of lumbering on the upper St. John before 1859 is sorely underestimated. "Main John" Glazier was not the first to bring a drive over the Grand Falls — this was done before 1820 (pp. 53-55). The illustration titled "The Booms at Fredericton — (Early Print, around 1880)" appeared in the *Illustrated London News* of 1866 and probably shows the South Bay Boom near Saint John.

13 See the Saint John *True Humorist*, 22 June 1867: "Died — at her late residence in the City of Fredericton, on the 20th day of May last, from the effects of an accident which she received

that Maine lumber leaving Saint John, and jobs in the Maine woods for New Brunswickers, were the economic salvation of the province during the late nineteenth century. But the province's well-established trans-Atlantic deal trade continued beyond the end of the century, and although much of the lumber shipped from Saint John in the 1870's may have come from Maine lands above the Grand Falls, cargoes from the Bay of Fundy port normally made up only about half of the provincial total. Indeed, it may be that the later development of the pulp wood industry in New Brunswick than in Maine is attributable to the continued importance of the provincial deal trade. Similarly Smith seems to largely overlook the provincial output of box shooks for Caribbean markets and the importance of spoolwood production in northeastern New Brunswick.¹⁴

In the second as in the first half of the nineteenth century, the export based New Brunswick economy was heavily dependent upon overseas trade and tariff conditions. Economic boom and depression seemed to follow one another with monotonous regularity. Local newspapers spent much of their time reflecting gloomily upon the province's prospects and attributing the current recession to forces beyond the colonists' control.¹⁵ One can but speculate upon the effects of such experience on generations of New Brunswickers — might the cyclical economic fluctuations have engendered optimism ("time will serve to re-establish an upward swing") or stoical resignation ("enterprise is bound to be frustrated by external forces")? — but a detailed consideration of the nineteenth-century economic fluctuations would be of great value in furthering our understanding of the province. Did a decline in wood exports produce a broadening of the province's economic base by encouraging or forcing people into alternative occupations such as agriculture? Was emigration of the young and ambitious fostered by economic recession? To what extent did local complaints reflect the feeling that "progress" was too slow as the Maritime Provinces fell behind the St. Lawrence colonies in population numbers and prosperity? Were the recessions as drastic as local editors claimed? Certainly the depression years of the 1840's were prob-

in April, 1866, and which she bore with a patient resignation to the will of Providence, the Province of New Brunswick in the 83rd year of her age". Cited in Alfred G. Bailey, "Railroads and the Confederation Issue in New Brunswick 1863-1865", *C.H.R.*, XXI (1940), p. 383 and by Smith, p. 165.

14 The Provincial Archives of New Brunswick has recently accessioned and sorted the records of the Burchill firm of Northeastern New Brunswick. These promise a great deal of information on late nineteenth-century New Brunswick lumbering.

15 E.g. an item cited by Smith (p. 127) titled "An Unhappy City", which continued: "St. John N.B. going down hill at a rapid rate . . . A high protective tariff, a disastrous fire and iron steamships have almost knocked the life out of this once prosperous and still attractive city . . . The fire was an event of 1877, the tariff was made the law of the country about 1878, and iron steamships became a terror in the land about 1882 . . ."

ably as much the result of forecasts of doom creating economic uncertainty and panic as of the reduction of the British protective tariff on colonial wood.

Clearly we need to know a good deal more about forest exploitation in northeastern North America during the last 150 years. Can the pattern of forest exploitation be established in detail? What was the role of lumbering in the local economy; was it truly detrimental to agriculture or did it provide a useful source of cash income for a significant proportion of the population? How important were the other multiplier effects of the forest industries? The two volumes on Maine have provided a start. Much useful information has been assembled. Above all the way is open for broadly conceived studies that attempt to establish and explain the attitudes of the settlers of the area to their environment. By adopting such broader perspectives history can address itself to its essential task of helping us to understand ourselves, rather than becoming bogged down in the minutiae of innumerable individual facts.

GRAEME WYNN

TWO BOOKS BY JOSEPH HOWE

Joseph Howe's *Western and Eastern Rambles: Travel Sketches of Nova Scotia*, which originally appeared in the *Novascotian* newspaper in Halifax between 1828 and 1831, has been reprinted by the University of Toronto Press.¹ Despite a fine, readable format, interesting photographs, a very good introduction and excellent editing by M.G. Parks, this reprinting was, in my opinion, a mistaken tribute to one of Canada's earliest men of letters.

Paradoxically had Howe not belonged to a literary club and fancied himself so self-consciously as a man of letters *Western and Eastern Rambles* might have been a far better book. Its rivals, McCullough's *Stepsure Letters* and Haliburton's *The Clockmaker*, were shaped by religious, political, and social purposes so strong that the authors used all the human resources at their disposal to interest their readers in their work, which possesses an immediacy in language and a down-to-earth descriptive quality far removed from the manner of Howe's *Rambles*.

Howe had cut his teeth on the sententious moral essays of the eighteenth century (How he must have loved "The Visions of Mirzah"!) and he had digested the "picturesque" as put forward by the writers of gothic novels and travel books. He saw *Western and Eastern Rambles* as a kind of literary

1 Joseph Howe, *Western and Eastern Rambles*, Edited by M.G. Parks (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1973).