

Scientia Canadensis

Canadian Journal of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine
Revue canadienne d'histoire des sciences, des techniques et de la médecine

Scientia
Canadensis

The Intemperate Rainforest: Nature, Culture and Power on Canada's West Coast. By Bruce Braun. (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2002. xiii + 347 p., ill., notes, bibl., index. ISBN 0-8166-3400-9 US\$74.95)

Matthew Evenden

Volume 29, Number 1, 2006

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800505ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/800505ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (print)

1918-7750 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Evenden, M. (2006). Review of [*The Intemperate Rainforest: Nature, Culture and Power on Canada's West Coast.* By Bruce Braun. (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2002. xiii + 347 p., ill., notes, bibl., index. ISBN 0-8166-3400-9 US\$74.95)]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 29(1), 87–89. <https://doi.org/10.7202/800505ar>

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

General / Général

***The Intemperate Rainforest: Nature, Culture and Power on Canada's West Coast.* By Bruce Braun. (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2002. xiii + 347 p., ill., notes, bibl., index. ISBN 0-8166-3400-9 US\$74.95)**

The title of this book plays with the meaning of words. The forest under analysis lies in a temperate zone but is constructed in language, visual culture and practice by a politics that is rarely temperate or tempered. Different actors dispute not only sites and places when they contest British Columbia's coastal rainforest, Bruce Braun argues, but they also dispute the idea of the forest. Braun's aim, in part, is to analyze how the forest has been framed culturally and how contemporary discourses of environment and forest protection bear the traces of a colonial past and present. With this understanding, Braun hopes to shake some of the epistemological foundations of contemporary assumptions about nature and its meanings and to provide space for a postcolonial environmental politics in British Columbia and elsewhere.

The disputes over Clayoquot Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island which erupted in the early 1990s provide Braun with his point of entry into the problem, but the analysis ranges much more widely. This is no local history or regional geography. Readers imagining a close case study of forestry disputes in contemporary British Columbia will be surprised to discover substantial chapters treating such topics as contemporary eco-tourism operations, Emily Carr's paintings (read alongside those of the contemporary artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun), and George Dawson's writings and photographs of Haida Gwaii (the Queen Charlotte Islands). Moving backwards and forwards in time, juxtaposing historical artefacts and contemporary print ephemera, nineteenth century geological texts and twentieth century forestry maps, Braun offers a dazzling array of seemingly disconnected evidence and cases to illustrate one of his core arguments: that over time nature and culture have been constructed as separate categories and that this separation bears consequences on land, life, people and power. In one of the book's most forcefully argued and effective chapters, the visual representations of the so-called forestry crisis are laid bare. Corporate advertising, environmentalist posters of pristine groves and logged hillsides and ecosystem diagrams all come up for scrutiny. Embedded in these readings are close engagements with the work of cultural theorists

including Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, and Bruno Latour—to name only a few. Braun's study is as much an engagement in theoretical debate as it is an empirical examination of a place or an environmental imaginary.

The broad contours of Braun's argument are unassailable. Nature and culture were separated in cultural history; colonial ideas linger in present environmental and corporate discourse about the forest; First peoples have been both dispossessed and incorporated into orders of knowledge. At a finer scale, however, there is much to question and argue with in this book. Why did Braun choose the subjects he did to explore the evolution of forest ideas and politics in British Columbia? While he examines his case broadly and from different points of view, he ignores some obvious matters of local context, such as the creation of Pacific Rim National Park just south of Clayoquot Sound in 1970 that did much to produce a local geography of recreation and a national imagination of Westcoast nature. The cases and problems that Braun does choose to highlight emerge from a partial reading of the available evidence. His examination of Emily Carr, for example, rests on an examination of her visual art, on others' biographies, but not at all on Carr's letters (which are easily available in published form). Although Braun engages international theory, he devotes much less space to historiography and with less effect. Few historians of Canadian science, for example, will recognize Suzanne Zeller's *Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) in Braun's misleading encapsulation of its argument (p. 47). For a book that hopes to inform public debate, the language is needlessly abstruse. Here is Braun summarizing a discussion of travelling and tourism: "This is to suggest that the traveler is neither a bundle of instincts, a knowing, calculating subject, nor a dupe of ideology, but instead an agential subject that emerges at the place where material history and psychoanalysis meet" (p. 128). Finally, while the book argues effectively that we ignore the cultural framing of nature at our peril, it has little to say about how the material qualities of nature—assumed as a entity separate from humanity, or as a nature-culture hybrid—change over time. The materiality of the forest tends to slip through this analysis of the forest's meanings.

This book has attracted wide attention in environmental and cultural geography and deserves an audience among historians and historians of science as well. Although one might argue with some of Braun's approaches, choices and arguments, this is an important and ambitious book that draws some important environmental debates into dialogue with contemporary cultural theory. Braun also turns a welcome critical eye on the languages and meanings of nature in a province where claims

about the environment are too often grounded in unexamined assumptions with potent and regrettable effects.

MATTHEW EVENDEN
University of British Columbia