

# “Having Cleared and Embellished the Earth”: Agricultural Science and Poetic Tradition in Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Rising Village*

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## Article abstract

Critics have long noted a discrepancy between Canadian landscape and the imported European literary forms early Canadian writers used to describe a young country. Yet, in the early nineteenth century, some parts of the landscape were actively transformed in ways that would seemingly preclude the need for poets to transform their literary inheritance. This essay examines agricultural reform initiatives in Nova Scotia, which included deforestation in the interest of warming the temperature, as espoused in letters published in the *Acadian Recorder*. Focusing on Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Rising Village*, the essay locates a poetics at once beholden to English literary tradition and celebratory of indigenous flora and fauna’s “native exoticism,” both of which embrace a transformation of British North America into some place familiar to settler-colonials. Although the paradigmatic reading of early Canadian literature as struggling to fit English literary forms to a new landscape remains accurate, this reading of *The Rising Village* demonstrates how that paradigm struggled to gain acceptance.

# “Having Cleared and Embellished the Earth”: Agricultural Science and Poetic Tradition in Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Rising Village*

TRAVIS V. MASON

## Cultivating Cultivation in Early Canada

THE IMPULSE TO FRAME early Canadian poetry through a nationalist lens dominates literary critical studies and anthologies from the mid-twentieth century on. Concomitant with this impulse, environmental determinism emerged as an excuse for early poets’ derivative verse — a verse that, predominantly, remained tethered to a British literary tradition — and later as an explanation of how Canadian literature came into its own. Developing his argument that much of late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Canadian literature moved to New York, Nick Mount identifies this impulse as a “topocentric axiom of national canon formation” that privileges “a Canadian literature grounded in the Canadian soil” (“Expatriate Origins” 238; see also Mount, *When Canadian Literature Moved*). As Mount contends, “Canadian critics [have often] followed the canonical precedent that a national literature must reflect its physical environment” (238). If his thesis complicates a canonical notion of cultural nationalism looking back to post-Confederation writing by authors living and working in the United States, mine unsettles the “topocentric axiom,” not by looking at work produced elsewhere but by considering how pre-Confederation modifications of the land physically changed the ground on and about which a certain author wrote. Complicating the axiomatic relation between physical environment and literary history in early Canada, Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Rising Village* (1825) does not quite fit within a reading of early Canadian poetry as struggling to adapt a European form to describe a radically new geography. Rather, this poem relies on British literary tradition and form to support Goldsmith’s assumption, buoyed by the public writings of a Scottish

immigrant, that the land would be suitably modified in the coming years to resemble that which Goldsmith's literary forefathers had been describing for centuries.

In *The Picturesque and the Sublime: A Poetics of the Canadian Landscape* (1998), Susan Glickman argues that, since the eighteenth century, "Canadian poets have consistently transformed their English (and broadly European) literary inheritance to make it speak of their experience in this country — in particular their confrontation with the land" (vii). More recently, Don McKay has acknowledged the difficulties that early Canadian poets faced in their attempts to make "old forms work in the face of landscape and climate so radically other and so frequently hostile" (6). These observations occupy what has become a paradigmatic understanding of early Canadian writing. Accurate though the paradigm is in many ways, it suggests that the landscape itself has remained unchanged since the arrival of European settlers. In the early nineteenth century, some parts of the landscape — namely, those deemed fertile enough for agriculture — were actively transformed in ways that would seemingly preclude the need for Goldsmith to transform his literary inheritance. That is, while most poets struggled to match European (mostly British) literary forms to a new landscape, farmers were attempting to apply Old World farming methods that would transform a wilderness vastly different from most of Europe into a familiar and fertile landscape — one that would suit the tools and themes on which early poetic practitioners had been raised.

Ralph Gustafson's introduction to *The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse* (1958) represents a compelling way in to unsettling the paradigm. It has not, to my knowledge, been examined as much as, say, A.J.M. Smith's introduction to the *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* (1960), but it nevertheless occupies a similar mid-century critical trajectory that would be taken up in the following decades by the so-called thematic critics (D.G. Jones, Margaret Atwood, John Moss). In short, declarative sentences, Gustafson defends the perceived slow build of a distinctly Canadian poetry, acknowledging the inevitability that writers would draw on traditional verse and evoking a scant population focused primarily on surviving in "a wild and big place":

The poet cannot be asked to find his national identity before the factors that present it to him exist. Canadian poets identifiable as such, have had to wait for Canada. Canadian poetry came to

maturity slowly and with difficulty. Slowly, since the making of a Canadian existence was late and vast; with difficulty, since the population which could support a culture was meagre and because its urgent preoccupation with commerce and industry vitiated its values. The stifling of the creative arts stifled self-recognition. (21)

For Gustafson, the early Canadian population — including poets — comprised remarkably passive individuals. They were preoccupied with “commerce and industry,” yes, but as a whole they seem, in his analysis, to have been waiting for commerce and industry to act on them, just as poets themselves “had to wait for Canada,” for certain “factors” to emerge and reveal a national identity. This passivity is evident, too, in Gustafson’s baffling claim that “None of [the early Canadian poets] in this book is colonial-minded” (22), as if early Canadian poets were just waiting around for commerce and industry to happen so that they could go about self-identifying as Canadian. This perception, which has persisted in varying degrees to the present day, ignores the active role that early Canadians played in shaping their environment (and the extent to which that role was by definition colonial-minded, consciously or not). Moreover, far from “stifling the creative arts,” I suggest, Goldsmith’s *The Rising Village* was written in concert with contemporary “scientific” notions, supporting and incorporating calls for policy reform that would see the landscape irrevocably changed in ways that invigorated his art (no matter what later critics might think of its aesthetic or cultural value).

I focus in this essay on how *The Rising Village* incorporates ideas put forward by an agricultural reformist whose letters were printed regularly in the *Acadian Recorder*, a weekly newspaper printed in Halifax.<sup>1</sup> *The Rising Village* was initially published in Britain in 1825 before appearing, revised, in Saint John in 1834. The title deliberately evokes *The Deserted Village*, the 1770 poem written by Goldsmith’s great-uncle and namesake. Where the earlier (and much admired) poem laments in heroic couplets the movement from rural to urban spaces, the later poem, as its title indicates, borrows the heroic couplet to document a nascent colonial village. Despite the inverted subject matter, *The Rising Village* consciously echoes *The Deserted Village* in its evocation of a specific place. The speaker addresses his great-uncle, “dear companion of my early years” (l. 1), acknowledging an influence (about which he feels little anxiety):

And thou, dear spirit, whose harmonious lay  
 Didst lovely Auburn's piercing woes display,  
 Do thou to thy fond relative impart  
 Some portion of thy sweet poetic art;  
 Like thine, Oh! let my verse as gently flow,  
 While truth and virtue in my numbers glow:  
 And guide my pen with thy bewitching hand,  
 To paint the Rising Village of the land. (ll. 19-26)

This is not the mission statement of a poet intent on bending poetic tradition to suit an alien landscape. With the link — both genealogical and formal — announced, the speaker devotes 560 lines to this rising Acadian village. Historically, *The Rising Village's* success as a poem derives more from an assessment of Goldsmith's skill than from the degree to which the heroic couplet articulates the details of the village and its inhabitants. W.H. New argues that "Goldsmith opens *The Rising Village* with a deliberate invocation to the memory of [his great-uncle's *The Deserted Village*] in order to give the new work, and the subject it describes . . . , the orderly context of tradition. The heroic couplets may even be a conscious *archaism* in 1825, an implicit appeal (by means of formal imitation) to the orderly patterns of the civilization to which the poet aspires" (68). That is, the Canadian Goldsmith's *formal* choices seem to document a desire to recreate Britain culturally, and environmentally, in Nova Scotia. And one of the key strategies that Goldsmith documents is the scientific one popularized in the pages of the local newspaper.

To acknowledge the poem's archaic form alongside its interest in contemporary agricultural principles is to invite a historical reading that nevertheless resonates for current Canadian culture. Nearly two decades before Gustafson's dismissal of early Canadian poetry as "unexceptional" (23), E.K. Brown noted in "The Development of Poetry in Canada" that "scarcely any of the verse written in the Maritime Provinces up to Confederation has now more than historical interest" (29). Indeed, in the seventy years since Brown published *On Canadian Poetry* (1943), historical readings of *The Rising Village* have provided some of the more interesting reasons, if not predominated the critical scene, for returning to the text. Environmental historian/historian of science Suzanne Zeller and literary critic D.M.R. Bentley are the two most prominent scholars to have drawn on Goldsmith's long poem from a historical perspective. My aim in this essay is to maintain this historical interest and to con-

textualize it with a specific focus on the relation between deforestation and agriculture. The poem is an example of a text that does not support the paradigmatic reading of early Canadian poetry as awkwardly trying to fit the square peg of British form into the round hole of Canadian landscape. It also documents an important and desired side effect of deforestation — for the purpose of agriculture and otherwise — namely, climate change. Although the climate change that Goldsmith implicitly calls for in his poem is a far more localized version of what the globe is experiencing in the twenty-first century, metaphorically it anticipates a warmer climate while recapitulating post-Enlightenment theories regarding humanity's control of nature.

Such control has been recognized for its aesthetic as well as economic contributions or what Bentley identifies as “profitable beauty,” a phrase from John Galt’s novel *Bogle Corbet: Or, The Emigrants* (1831). The more likely a piece of land, having been cleared, could sustain agricultural industry, the more pleasing it was to settlers and poets. Moreover, “the primary requisite for a scene to correspond to many settlers’ notions of ‘profitable beauty’ in central and eastern North America was the absence of trees” (Bentley, “Tokens”). Aesthetics, economics, and climate were all bound up during the early part of the nineteenth century, yet an interest in climate and Europeans’ ability to control it continued to play a significant “role in contemporary environmental determinist ideology which legitimated supposed European superiority in the struggle for survival” in colonial outposts (Wesso 326). Focusing on a specific example of attempted climatic control in Nova Scotia, discussed in letters to the *Acadian Recorder* beginning in 1818, I show how *The Rising Village* participated in a colonial ideology that complicated the tendency to cultivate a poetic voice that did not fall in line with a dominant British tradition. As Bentley argues, “poems written in and about Canada during the era of European exploration and settlement . . . can illuminate the present, and, often in surprising and disturbing ways, they do reflect the three principles of land ownership that had — and have — immense consequences for Canada and all its peoples: (1) the right of first discovery; (2) the right of first possession; and (3) the right of annexation through labour” (“Tokens”). Ideas regarding the positive effects of deforestation on the climate of Acadia, too, have had lasting consequences during the ensuing centuries.

## Measuring the Climate of the Times

Readers of the *Acadian Recorder* in 1818 would have come across letters signed by “Agricola,” a fairly recent occupant of British North America. “The great defect,” they would have read in one such letter, “under which our Agriculture labours, is the want of general and scientific principles, among the practical farmers” (Young 22). Agricola was keen to reform the agricultural practices of his adopted land, keen to have the farmers of Nova Scotia adopt the successful strategies of their Scottish counterparts. That Agricola identified science as the best way to improve agriculture strikes me, nearly two hundred years later, as a curious detail, curious in no small part because Agricola’s letters influenced Goldsmith’s *The Rising Village*. Bentley has already demonstrated the connections between Goldsmith’s signal work and Agricola’s writings, asserting that “Goldsmith’s poem is in part a literary rendering of Agricola’s argument that agricultural progress alone would bring commercial prosperity and a host of other benefits . . . to Nova Scotia” (“Oliver Goldsmith”). Agricola was the pseudonym of John Young, a merchant who had emigrated from Scotland and saw commercial opportunities in pushing Nova Scotia from a “savage” state to an agricultural and commercial Eden. Given Goldsmith’s use of the term “science,” I am curious about the extent to which agricultural science has influenced what Fred Cogswell calls “the first volume of verse ever published in Canada by a native-born Canadian to receive serious attention at the hands of critics and literary historians” (133). If Goldsmith infused his poem with elements of Agricola’s agricultural doctrine, as Bentley demonstrates, then how far did Agricola’s scientific principles inform both *The Rising Village* and the nascent literary (and national) culture of the mid-nineteenth century?

In his study of imperialism’s ecological impact, Alfred Crosby identifies a pattern that explains the historical, environmental impact of settler colonialism, particularly as it played out in the “Neo-Europes” (those places with climate and soil similar to Europe’s). He explains that settlers tended not to embrace radically different places: “Europeans and their commensal and parasitic comrades were not good at adapting to truly alien lands and climates, but they were very good at constructing new versions of Europe out of suitable real estate” (102). Although the Acadian wilderness differed from its European counterpart, the climate was similar enough — precisely why colonists decided that settlement

was possible. “The Neo-Europes,” Crosby argues, “all lie primarily in temperate zones, but their native biotas are clearly different from one another and from that of northern Eurasia” (6). Despite the differences in indigenous flora and fauna, the Neo-Europes began producing and shipping “wheat, barley, rye, cattle, pigs, sheep, [and] goats” (7), species that were simply not present prior to colonization. Goldsmith’s implicit affinity with Young’s reform suggests that the earliest efforts to settle and to publish in the Atlantic region of North America were meant to transplant not just the idea or the culture of Britain but also the landscape itself — rock, stock, and soil. In other words, both literary and agricultural methods were imported into British North America in an attempt to remake the Old World in the New World; each medium thus provided a mode of “cultivation” that helped to determine what constituted a proper landscape. In addressing Goldsmith’s response in *The Rising Village* to Agricola’s argument in favour of agricultural reform, I argue that Goldsmith’s poem represents an early example of a poet not interested in changing literary conventions to suit the new landscape because the old conventions were part and parcel of colonialism writ large.

An ecocritical reading of *The Rising Village* cannot avoid linking the early-nineteenth-century focus on agricultural progress with what is currently known about deforestation’s effects on the global climate. At the time that Goldsmith was writing his poem, Canada was still very much a British colonial project, and this explains in part how *The Rising Village* simultaneously resists the paradigm exemplified by Glickman and McKay and demonstrates nascent efforts to embrace British North America as a place distinct from Britain (which I will examine in the second part of this essay). In *Ecology, Climate, and Empire: Colonialism and Global Environmental History, 1400-1940* (1997), Richard Grove claims that “Current preoccupations with a ‘global’ environmental crisis about pollution, climate change and resource over-use are now the problem of every man and every woman and of all states. But they were foreshadowed in the early days of empire by the dramatic globalisation of economic and natural transformations that was enabled during the colonial period” (1). My point about Goldsmith and Young in this ecocritical-postcolonial context is that the foreshadowing was neither incidental nor accidental to their efforts. Within a more straightforward postcolonial context, some commentaries on *The Rising Village* have



identified individual elements of the poem that contribute to my reading of it as proto-eco-management propaganda. In 1980, for example, David Jackel admitted the poem's "colonial re-creation of the Britain left behind" and Goldsmith's lack of "interest in its [the New World's] indigenous qualities," both human and otherwise. The poet's inability to see "that there are human and ecological costs involved" in such a project casts doubt, for Jackel, on the poem's value as documentary and as good literature. I am far more interested in how the ecological costs that Jackel referred to — but did not follow up on — are connected to the colonial re-creation of Britain. It should come as no surprise that Goldsmith invokes Britain's artistic and scientific achievements and its colonial reach as lead-ins for recounting settlers' efforts to clear the land and establish viable crops. Referring to Britain, he observes that "There men, in busy crowds, with men combine, / That arts may flourish, and fair science shine; / And thence, to distant climes their labours send, / As o'er the world their widening views extend" (ll. 39-42). These lines recount the colonial movement away from Britain. Arts and science both represent goals to be achieved in distant, yet not too different, climes (for which read climate and region). This movement is an example of what Crosby calls "ecological imperialism." If, as New suggests, the poem "argues against" a "wilderness of behaviour" by containing chaos/wilderness "within an imposed order" (69), then the actual (supposed) wilderness too must be contained — not with words but with agricultural science. Indeed, the following lines of Goldsmith's poem introduce the common story of settlers' struggles: "What dire distress awaits the hard bands, / that venture first on bleak and desert lands. / How great the pain, the danger, and the toil, / Which mark the first rude culture of the soil" (ll. 55-58). That the speaker depicts Nova Scotia at this time as "bleak and desert" suggests not only a misunderstanding of the region's native biota and ecology but also an unwillingness to adapt to new conditions. This unwillingness is reflected in Goldsmith's comfort with the heroic couplet: if "hard bands" of settlers are willing to endure "the pain, the danger, and the toil" of cultivating what they see as bleak and deserted land, then what impetus does Goldsmith have to develop a poetic style to embody that land?

The transfiguring of the landscape advocated by Young was fully in keeping with the development of the first modern agricultural system in mid-eighteenth-century Britain. Early in his series of letters, Young

claims that “Agriculture is not an *Art*, which may be acquired, like other mechanic trades, by patient drudgery and plodding dulness [sic] . . . *without* the direction of *scientific skill*” (18; emphasis added). He refers to the agricultural science employed in Scotland whereby the “land was [increasingly] adapted to suit the farming system rather than land use adapted to the nature of the land” (Shrubbs 1). But the adaptation taking place in Scotland and Britain required what Young calls “*scientific skill*.” “There is perhaps no other application of our active powers,” he writes, “which requires so much science as Agriculture, and there is none upon which, in this country, less has been bestowed” (18). If farmers were to learn the proper science, then they would be prepared to accomplish two things: produce enough food for the colony and, in the process, modify the landscape to resemble that of the Old World. Young’s efforts succeeded in convincing Lord Dalhousie to form a Central Board of Agriculture and influenced Goldsmith’s depiction of settler life. So, in a sense, science itself contributed both to agrarian life and to literary culture — at least for a short time.

Science during the later eighteenth century and early nineteenth century was not exactly what we consider science today. It consisted of observations, inventories, comparisons, and inferences. For example, a comparison of Europe and North America revealed two things to Georg Forster, a German naturalist on Cook’s voyage: (1) the east and west coasts of each continent exhibited extreme climatic differences, and (2) the west coasts of each demonstrated relatively mild temperatures. Gathered during Cook’s circumnavigation from 1772 to 1775, this evidence supported the common belief that the climate of British North America “improves ‘by westing,’” according to Suzanne Zeller, and “English immigrants who settled in eastern North America . . . accepted as self-evident that climate improved” in this manner (171). If you have spent time in Vancouver — or if you have had the good fortune to receive updates in February from friends who feel the need to tell you that the cherry blossoms are out — you can attest to a degree of truth to the theory of westing. But the exception in this case hardly proves the rule. That the theory of westing provided a foundation upon which to “assess the agricultural potential of North America” (Zeller 171) reminds us that “science” — however conceived — can influence human action in significant ways. As unscientific as westing might seem now, proponents of the theory based their belief upon the scientific

principles and processes of the time. A related theory, which similarly seems preposterous from a twenty-first-century vantage point, played a significant role in the time period and the texts that I am discussing here. The theory of climatic amelioration suggested that a country's climate could improve — by warming up — by the process of clearing and cultivating the land. The theory dates at least to 1544 — though speculation regarding climate change via human agency goes back to Aristotle's pupil Theophrastus — and it received authoritative support from the publication of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in 1776. So, when later Canadian settlers complained about trees, they did so not only because the removal of trees was necessary to begin building a home but also because each cleared tree was seen to contribute, however infinitesimally, to the amelioration and softening of the continent's harsh climate.<sup>2</sup> More trees meant more cold.

Goldsmith's depiction of deforestation in *The Rising Village*, while a subtle element of the long poem, anticipates the settler experience of Upper Canada, about which much has been written. The silence of the wilderness surrounding the settlers' homes pervades everywhere, "Save where the sturdy woodman's strokes resound, / That strew the fallen forest on the ground. / See! From their heights the lofty pines descend, / And crackling, down their pond'rous lengths extend" (ll. 65-68). If a tree falls in this forest, not only does it make a sound but it also joins the only sounds of any importance: those of human settlers applying their technological knowledge to tame or, more accurately I think, *shape* the forest to resemble a more familiar, more comfortable, and warmer landscape. Even though Goldsmith stops short of mentioning climatic amelioration in this passage, his association with Young's theories nevertheless implicates him in the attempt to warm the colony. Capturing the antagonistic relation between settlers and forest that would continue to mid-century,<sup>3</sup> Young espoused the theory of climatic amelioration in his letters to the *Acadian Recorder*. "[T]he more our forests are cut down," he confidently claims, "the more will the temperature of our atmosphere be meliorated" (21). Although Young appears to oversimplify a cause-effect relation, an element of truth resonates in his claim. Although it has taken longer than expected, deforestation has indeed contributed to global warming. Not *despite* what "we" have known all along, but

because of what we thought we knew. The cause has been occurring for centuries; the effects have been slowly accumulating.

Young, interestingly, states the cause and effect relationship with a simultaneous confidence in “Man’s” capacity to effect change and an awareness of the arrogance required to do so:

Man in his individual capacity is a weak and evanescent being. . . . Viewed in his collective capacity, his power swells into importance, and causes effects, which, while they astonish the imagination, gratify his vanity; and in nothing are they so apparent as in his *having cleared and embellished the earth*, that he might render it the source of his subsistence, the place of his residence, and the theatre of his glory. (50; emphasis added)

I find it intriguing, and slightly disturbing, that Young acknowledges, two hundred years ago, the role of human vanity in our damaging transformation of the earth. But as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin point out, such an attitude was not uncommon. “Settler societies like Canada’s,” they write in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2009), “have grown used to believing [in] the fiction of exclusive ownership, in which the acquisition of title to land has brought with it the conviction that it is then ours and we can do with it what we will” (121). Goldsmith affirms this belief with the lines “By patient firmness and industrial toil / [the settler] still retains possession of the soil” (ll. 103-04). Bentley connects this passage to Locke’s notion that “ownership of a thing such as land devolves to the man who ‘hath mixed his labour with [it], . . . joined it to something that is his own,’ and, thus, ‘remove[d] [it] out of the state that nature hath provided and left it in” (“Tokens”). This mindset is so effortlessly colonial that it followed Young to Acadia and enabled Goldsmith to transplant its lyric commensal to the region’s representative “rising village.” Although others writing around the same time in Upper Canada espoused similarly colonial notions of progress, Goldsmith’s connection to Young’s agricultural science more clearly explains his faith in the heroic couplet as the appropriate form. Nevertheless, as even his reference to the “bleak and desert lands” attests, *The Rising Village* does recognize certain elements of the land that are not — or not yet — British. While settlers’ industrial toil will serve to make the Acadian landscape profitable, other examples of Acadia’s indigenous flora and fauna sit less easily in my reading of Goldsmith’s poem as depicting a blank space waiting to be transformed.

### Further Complications: “Native Charm”

If the uncultivated land itself is deemed too rude to be of use, the Aboriginal inhabitants are figured as actively hostile and detrimental to the colonial project. Alongside Goldsmith’s characterization of Aboriginal peoples as “savage tribes” and “beasts of prey” that terrorize European settlers, the village’s “half-bred Doctor” threatens to undermine the settlement with his “doubtful skills,” by which “He cures, by chance, or ends each human ill” (ll. 217-19). As problematic as these depictions are, they are in keeping with the colonial mentality of the time. Less straightforward are Goldsmith’s depictions of the flora and fauna. A certain “native charm” emerges as a way to acknowledge Acadia’s natural beauty, to distinguish it from European landscapes. Unlike the “profitable beauty” cultivated via science and labour and industry, this native beauty at once marks Acadia/Nova Scotia as a charming region on its own (environmental) merits and establishes the extent to which more labour and toil are required to ensure that the colony maintains respectability in terms of the Four Stages theory expounded by Adam Smith (Britain) and A.R.J. Turgot (France). This theory suggested a chronological progression that societies could follow to achieve civilization: the savage/hunting stage, the barbaric/pastoral stage based upon herding, the agricultural stage based upon farming, and the commercial stage based upon trading.

By recognizing two species native to Nova Scotia — the Mayflower (*Epigaea repens*) — and to North America more generally — the whip-poor-will (*Caprimulgus vociferus*) — Goldsmith introduces notes of exoticism into his depiction of the rising village, which operate in opposition to much of his thesis regarding settlers’ capacity to transform Acadia into a familiar and profitable land. To be clear, I am interested precisely in how this “native charm” functions in his poem as exotic notes designed to embellish the Old World landscape aesthetic discussed in this essay’s first section. The native, then, is made exotic, while the new is rendered familiar.

Goldsmith identifies both of these species in footnotes. The Mayflower appears when the poet introduces the two young lovers, Albert and Flora. While Albert is fairly “bursting into manhood’s energy” (l. 314), “Flora was fair, and blooming as that flower / Which spreads its blossoms to the April shower” (ll. 315-16). Goldsmith’s note here

reads as follows: “The May-flower (*Epigaea repens*) is indigenous to the wilds of Acadia, and is in bloom from the middle of April to the end of May. Its leaves are white, faintly tinged with red, and it possesses a delightful fragrance” (l. 316n). In contrast to an earlier note that appears at the mention of a plant, this note celebrates a single flower’s ecological (geographical, aesthetic) characteristics. An earlier note glossing the line “The golden corn triumphant waves its head” (l. 72) elaborates more generally on the laborious task of clearing the land, which includes felling trees (natch) and burning the logs to ash. No biological, geographical, or taxonomical information about corn is provided. Corn’s role in making “the first rude culture of the soil” (l. 58) transcends both its status as an indigenous crop and its role as flora in an ecological sense; as food, and even more so as exemplar of settler culture, it requires no such scientific attention (beyond, that is, the science of agriculture expounded by Young). Goldsmith and his readers know corn as a staple — as part of an increasingly globalized system of colonial cultivation — and not necessarily as a biological entity. Corn and other grains, that is, participate in a global-local economy in ways that enable the final stages of civilization and thus negate the poet’s scientific impulse to describe.

To use a flower indigenous to Acadia as a metaphor for a character meant to represent “the youths that graced their native plain” (l. 309) complicates a colonial attempt to animate the new country using the language (the poetic form) and the arts (agriculture chief among them) of “Britannia.” While Albert’s seduction of Flora — I need not gloss the name at this point — literally resembles “a conquest made” (l. 324), she responds to his “unmanly arts” (l. 416), with which Albert deceives her and absconds before their wedding day, by going mad. This embedded narrative represents what New recognizes as “a wilderness of behaviour, which is what the poem ultimately argues against” (69). That is, Albert’s inexplicable decision to abandon Flora after “vows so oft repeated to [her] ear” (l. 367) constitutes a breach of conventional behaviour. As such, the tale serves as a warning against wilderness in all forms — Albert’s conflicting identity as conqueror-colonist and as instigator of unconventional behaviour suggests a precarity in Goldsmith’s understanding of the colonial project at the time. I would also suggest that Albert’s destruction of Flora — “Oh, shame of manhood! that could blast her joy, / and one so fair, so lovely, could destroy” (ll. 425-26)

— recapitulates the ongoing destruction of indigenous flora in British North America, though Goldsmith likely would not have meant it to. The implications of colonial violence metaphorically rendered as floral extirpation are given attention decades later. In her preface to *Canadian Wild Flowers* (1868), for which she provided “botanical descriptions,” Catharine Parr Traill articulates a desire — presumably shared by the book’s illustrator, Agnes Fitzgibbon — that readers cultivate “a love for the native plants of Canada and turn their attention to the floral beauty that is destined sooner or later to be swept away as the onward march of civilization clears away the primeval forest — reclaims the swamps and bogs, and turns the waste places into a fruitful field” (8). Here the “native charm” documented by Fitzgibbon and Traill acquires exoticism not only from the beauty of the flowers — which would be unfamiliar to British readers and Canadians focused more on clearing the land than on observing its inherent qualities — but also from their anticipated disappearance.

This attention to native flowers’ imminent demise cannot help but echo the late-nineteenth-century myth of the vanishing Indian, and I want to pause here for a moment to attend more to Goldsmith’s mistreatment of Aboriginal Canadians. Christoph Irmscher (101) locates in Traill’s memoir *Pearls and Pebbles: Or, Notes of an Old Naturalist* (1894) her awareness of the connection that Traill insinuates between her concern for Canada’s native plants and her concern for Canada’s Native peoples. “Types are they,” she writes, “of the native race, the Indian children of the land, fast passing away” (*Pearls* 131). These words, according to Irmscher, indicate her “regret [regarding] the disappearance of a whole way of life” (101), a disappearance that, though thankfully exaggerated, was — and in some ways remains — a plausible result of settler-colonial presence. For Goldsmith and Young, more than four decades before the publication of *Canadian Wild Flowers*, Nova Scotian Aboriginals fit into a colonial narrative shaped by the Four Stages theory. Neither made an effort to acknowledge either the humanity or the identity of those residing in Nova Scotia prior to European contact. Many Mi’kmaq around the time of Young’s and Goldsmith’s publications occupied reserves and, even though they had not succumbed wholly to the government’s genocidal efforts, represented less a nostalgic way of life — such as that evoked by Traill — and more a problem to be solved as the province continued to “improve.” In a

publication nearly contemporaneous with Young's selected letters and Goldsmith's poem, Walter Bromley documents his attempt to petition the House of Assembly "in behalf of the Indians of Nova Scotia" (5). Titled *An Account of the Aborigines of Nova Scotia Called the Micmac Indians* (1822), this document provides an account of Mi'kmaq families residing in Shubenacadie and Gold River and incorporating into their daily lives farming equipment and (European) agricultural knowledge provided by Bromley himself. His condescending language and tone<sup>4</sup> prevent a reading of his efforts as anything other than patronizing, yet, if his account is to be believed, the Mi'kmaq families whom he deals with appear to have been adapting as well as possible to a horrible situation. According to his petition, the twelve families living at Shubenacadie had, as of 1819, "cleared 50 3/4 acres of land, 23 of which contained excellent crops of potatoes, turnips, and every kind of grain peculiar to the country, all of which were enclosed by good fences" (5). They had also begun raising cattle for milk and poultry for (presumably) eggs and meat. While Bromley's "experiment" does nothing to downplay the contempt with which the Mi'kmaq were treated — they remained, even in his "benevolent" eyes, "forlorn brethren of the woods [yet] capable of being trained in some measure to the habits of civilized life" (5) — it goes to show the extent to which the May-flower and the whip-poor-will represent in Goldsmith, for whom the Mi'kmaq are "savage tribes" (l. 81) intent on ensuring "the *white man's* instant death" (l. 89), little more than ornamental accents that reinforce the project to create a Neo-Europe.

The whip-poor-will appears in *The Rising Village* shortly after the cautionary tale of Albert and Flora. Worry not about such heartbreaking events "[d]egrad[ing] the land" (l. 428), Goldsmith writes, for this "Village rises gently into day" (l. 442), and its future looks sweet and remarkably like that of any successful village or town in England. The end of Flora's tale marks the beginning of the end of Goldsmith's poem; Flora, having been "destroy[ed]" by Albert's lies, becomes the ashes that Goldsmith uses to fertilize the remaining 130 lines, effectively justifying the eradication of native plants in order to cultivate the land. Not surprisingly, agricultural success dominates these final lines, which praise both "Happy Britannia!" (l. 529) and "blest Acadia" (l. 537).



Here crops of grain in rich luxuriance rise,  
 And wave their golden riches to the skies;  
 There smiling orchards interrupt the scene,  
 Or gardens bounded by some fence of green;  
 The farmer's cottage, bosomed 'mong the trees . . . (ll. 455-59)

Here and there manifest in nothing but sweetness and light. The lucky trees that remain to “bosom” the farmer’s cottage have seemingly been spared because their “spreading branches [offer] shelter from the breeze” (l. 460).

Complicating the saccharine tone of these final lines, the whip-poor-will’s delightfully sorrowful notes intervene. The choice not only to mention the whip-poor-will but also to draw attention to its nativeness in a footnote — as Goldsmith does with the May-flower — serves to emphasize the paradoxically exotic “native charm” and the extent to which this Neo-Europe remains in need of civilizing efforts to counteract its latent sorrow. “The note of Whip-poor-Will how sweet to hear,” Goldsmith writes, “When sadly slow it breaks upon the ear” (ll. 477-78). The note that he provides affirms that *Caprimulgus vociferus*<sup>5</sup> “is a native of America”: — “On a summer’s evening the wild and mournful cadence of its note is heard at a great distance; and the traveller listens with delight to the repeated tale of its sorrows” (l. 477n). Something of the whip-poor-will’s “mournful tale” (l. 480) positions the bird as the nightingale of the north, a bird whose song evokes sorrowful contemplation in those who listen to it. That the bird remains at a distance reminds us of Acadia’s distance from Britannia while also implying, as Young does in his admonishment of “Man’s” arrogance, the villagers’ distance from what is native to America. Nevertheless, “such charms as these, / Sweet tranquil charms,” “cannot fail to please” (ll. 481-82) amid hopes for “Joy, peace, and comfort [for] each native heart” (l. 484). Despite unbreachable distance, “the peaceful arts of [agri]culture” “o’er Scotia’s fields their power extend” (ll. 513, 518), ensuring that the “sons” of Acadia will be “Heirs of [Britannia’s] splendour, science, power, and skill” (l. 551). The inheritance includes, as Goldsmith’s heroic couplets attest, a poetic style that need not be modified to suit the wild, unfamiliar landscape because that landscape was in the process of being modified to resemble Britannia.

## The Enterprising Village: A Conclusion

Although the paradigmatic reading of early Canadian literature as struggling to fit British literary forms to a new landscape remains accurate, I hope that my reading of *The Rising Village* demonstrates how that paradigm struggled to gain acceptance. Just as Goldsmith modelled his 1825 poem on *The Deserted Village*, so too immigrants such as John Young (Agricola) modelled their agriculture on what was working back home. Goldsmith's poem embodies both a literary and a scientific enterprise: the resourcefulness that Goldsmith recounts consists of settlers modifying Acadia to survive and to modify the land, rendering it familiar and thus receptive to established literary tradition. The agricultural science of the time, which supported massive deforestation and cultivation on the way to commerce and industry, occupied both the political imagination and the literary imagination. As a result, *The Rising Village* inhabits its literary traditions free of the nationalist anxieties attendant on later writers, resting confidently under the assumption that the environment would not determine its form or style; rather, the settlers and villagers whom it depicts would determine the look and function of the environment. That Goldsmith's poem includes references to indigenous flora and fauna, albeit as examples of "native charm" meant to exoticize Acadia as a project fit for colonialism, suggests that the paradigm did not shift in later decades so much as solidify. As much as settlers attempted to transform the New World into the Old World, their success was continually mitigated by the differences — exotically indigenous for Goldsmith — that persisted in this place that is not, ecologically or culturally, Britannia.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The first letter was printed on 25 July 1818, and the final one appeared in 1821. Thirty-eight of the sixty-four letters appeared in book form in 1822 (from which I take the quotations in this essay).

<sup>2</sup> Anna Brownell Jameson, for example, wrote in 1838 that "A Canadian settler hates a tree, regards it as his natural enemy, as something to be destroyed, eradicated, annihilated by all and any means" (64); Catharine Parr Traill implies that the climate "will be still more variable as the work of clearing the forest goes on from year to year" (*Backwoods* 251), insinuating a hopeful sense that clearing the forests might result in a more temperate climate. To be fair to Parr Traill, though, she does not exactly vilify Canada's weather: "You ask me if I like the climate of Upper Canada; to be candid I do not think it deserves

all that travellers have said of it" (251). Of course, her ambivalence stems in part from the "very oppressive" (251) heat experienced the previous summer. Still, her fervent support of clearing the land indicates the extent to which Canadian settlers intended to alter the landscape in particular ways and for particular reasons: "Some century hence how different will this spot appear! I can picture it to my imagination with fertile fields and groves of trees planted by the hand of taste; — all will be different; our present rude dwellings will have given place to others of a more elegant style of architecture, and comfort and grace will rule the scene which is now a forest wild" (250-51). Clearly, a Canadian settler hated trees growing wild in the forest; those planted (perhaps introduced from Europe), on the other hand, were just the thing.

<sup>3</sup> Jameson is particularly, and wondrously, blunt in her discussion of tree felling. Not content to euphemize by resorting to technical jargon, she informs her readers that "There are two principal methods of killing trees in this country, besides the quick, unflinching destruction of the axe; the first by setting fire to them . . . : the other method is slower, but even more effectual; a deep gash is cut through the bark into the stem, quite round the bole of the tree. This prevents the circulation of the vital juices, and by degrees the tree droops and dies" (64).

<sup>4</sup> He claims, for example, to "represent the unfortunate *Micmac Indians* in a favourable point of view" and to offer "benevolent exertions" in the hope of "improv[ing] the prospects of this people" (3).

<sup>5</sup> The Latin is derived from *capere*, *capri*, "goat," and *mulgere*, "to milk," which refers to Aristotle's claim that goatsuckers "attack[ed] the udders of goats for food" (Gruson 152), and *vox*, *vocis*, "voice," and *ferre*, "to bear," a reference to the bird's clamorous song (154).

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