

Constructing Wildlife, Consuming Nature: Three Books in Canadian Environmental History

Game in the Garden: A Human History of Wildlife in Western Canada to 1940.

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Essay Review / Essai critique

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Science and the environment are both now acknowledged as distinctive and interesting areas of research in Canadian history. They might even be considered natural partners, if we view science as a chief instrument by which we understand, exploit, or protect our environment. But their relations are more accurately described as cousinly than conjugal: conversing on topics of mutual interest, but content to live in separate realms. While historians and historical geographers see fish, furs, water, timber, the land itself, as central to Canada's early history, these tend to drop out of the story just as, in the late nineteenth century, a scientific community is emerging. At the same time, historians of science usually emphasize scientists' intellectual and social relations, not their encounters with the world outside the laboratory. A work like Suzanne Zeller's *Inventing Canada*, in which she presented inventory science as central to Canadians' relation to their environment, and to their sense of who they were and might become, serves more as exception than example.¹

¹ Suzanne Zeller, *Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

But there have been several interesting experiments in closer relations between these areas. A previous issue of *Scientia Canadensis* examined the interaction between scientific knowledge and environmental attitudes and practices: nineteenth century entomologists who gave expert advice on controlling pests, thereby expanding the roles of government science; the formation of institutions for research into biological control of agricultural pests; the creation of a public health profession in response to concerns regarding pollution in the Great Lakes; and the contribution of scientists to the evolution of environmental management in Algonquin Park.² More recently, in the *Journal of Canadian Studies* several historians explored the significance of scientific studies of the environment across several issues: bison management in Wood Buffalo National Park, air pollution in Ontario, and logging and pesticide spraying in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.³ Together, these essays demonstrated how government activities came to be redefined in terms of scientific expertise; how scientific institutions proliferated in response to practical and theoretical motivations; and how scientists often provided both the rationale and the tools for transforming the Canadian environment. They also provided good examples of how the history of Canadian science can be combined with accounts of nature itself as a significant historical actor, shaping the choices available to humans: such a combination is the essence of environmental history.

The books reviewed here provide three interesting, and diverse, perspectives on the history of the Canadian environment. All can be read with profit by historians of Canadian science, perhaps encouraging further rapprochement between environmental history and the history of science. One book examines western Canadians' attitudes towards wildlife before and during settlement; another celebrates the history of the Canadian Wildlife Service; the third considers the history of national parks in Atlantic Canada.

²See *Scientia Canadensis* 22–23 (1998–1999): George M. Cook, “‘Spray, Spray, Spray!’: Insecticides and the Making of Applied Entomology in Canada, 1871–1914,”: 7–50; Stéphane Castonguay, “L’Institut de Belleville. Expansion et déclin de la recherche sur le contrôle biologique au Canada, 1909–1972,”: 51–101; Jennifer Read, “‘A sort of destiny’: The Multi-Jurisdictional Response to Sewage Pollution in the Great Lakes, 1900–1930,”: 103–29; Gerald Killan and George Warecki, “J. R. Dymond and Frank A. MacDougall: Science and Government Policy in Algonquin Provincial Park, 1931–1954,”: 131–56.

³See *Journal of Canadian Studies* 37, 2 (2002): John Sandlos, “Where the Scientists Roam: Ecology, Management and Bison in Northern Canada,”: 93–129; Don Munton, “Fumes, Forests, and Further Studies: Environmental Science and Policy Inaction in Ontario,”: 130–63; L. Anders Sandberg and Peter Clancy, “Politics, Science and the Spruce Budworm in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia,”: 164–91.

In *Game and the Garden*, George Colpitts surveys the material and symbolic significance of western wildlife. He begins in the fur trade era, when wildlife meant not just skins, but survival. Hudson's Bay Company officials may have assumed their employees were devoted to accumulating trade goods, but in fact they were often hungry, "fretted about food almost all the time" (p. 17), and even sometimes abandoned the fur trade to hunt, or to trade for meat with natives. This "meat exchange" became central to relations between natives and fur traders.

But after 1870, as western Canada began its transformation from fur trade frontier to agrarian society, settlers defined more complex, and sometimes contradictory relationships with nature. Wildlife became more valuable for sport than for food (although many settlers continued to hunt for the pot). This helped drive settler and native communities apart, as the meat exchange eroded away. At the same time, the presence of wildlife testified that the west was not yet quite civilized, but could still test and terrify, providing an alternative to the soft city life. Images of superabundant wildlife were also used to promote the region: stuffed elk, bison, and other species were marched into natural history exhibits from Saskatoon to London, to testify to the inherent richness of western Canada. These images provided a nice contrast with concerns about disappearing wildlife elsewhere: Americans may have depleted their natural heritage, but the northwest was still rich and fertile, and open for business.

But wildlife, especially the bison, were also disappearing in western Canada. This was seen as progress: exit bison, enter cattle. But it also provoked uneasiness: no wildlife could mean destitution for natives, and perhaps social instability, particularly at a time when immigration was causing rapid change. These concerns briefly encouraged interest in domesticating wildlife; by the 1890s, however, visions of bison ranches had faded, as settlers grew more confident in the capacity of the new farm economy to provide for all. Instead, an interest in protecting wildlife emerged, manifested in grassroots conservation efforts, with local game and fish associations insisting on regulations to control hunting and fishing. Contrary to Janet Foster's *Working for Wildlife*, in which she emphasized the importance of national agencies such as the Commission of Conservation and the national parks branch, Colpitts argues that conservation was very much a local phenomenon, growing out of local concerns and knowledge.⁴ And not just wildlife, but community values were conserved, with regulations often directed against people on

⁴ Janet Foster, *Working for Wildlife: The Beginning of Preservation in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978).

the margins, including natives and recent immigrants—groups often and conveniently suspected of the heaviest exploitation of wildlife.

Colpitts provides many insights into the practical and symbolic importance of wildlife to western Canada. His account, however, does have shortcomings. One is that in seeking to focus on the grassroots, and not bureaucrats, he almost denies that a national government even existed. For example, westerners must have developed various attitudes towards the creation and expansion of the Rocky Mountain national parks, and yet these parks receive only a few brief mentions.

A deeper problem, however, is that while Colpitts tells a story of contradictions—assumptions that there were endless wildlife, as well as fears that they would be depleted; visions of the west as a refuge from civilization, but also as the site of a new civilization—he doesn't seem to know what to do with this complexity. When presenting various symbolic and practical attitudes towards wildlife, he doesn't explain how they related to each other, or how local circumstances shaped them, or how they changed over time in response to natural or human events. Instead, western society is portrayed not in terms of individuals and communities working out their distinctive relations with wildlife in specific environments, but as a reservoir of examples useful in illustrating larger phenomena. Colpitts's emphasis on the grassroots is laudable, but the point is lost if the west is viewed as a uniform lawn, not a diverse meadow of species adapted to local conditions. The author's struggle with this complexity can be painful to watch, especially when it inspires obscure speculation, as in his last pages, or baffling observations, such as the "chilling thought" that "an animal that transcends its nature and is understood by a community as 'wildlife' does not, and really cannot, become truly extinct" (p. 12).

In several ways, J. Alexander Burnett takes up in his *A Passion for Wildlife* where Colpitts leaves off. His subject is the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS), which was created shortly after Colpitts's period of interest. The service epitomized the professionalization and bureaucratization of wildlife management—the antithesis of Colpitts's grassroots initiatives. The contrast is most evident in Burnett's first chapter: a brief but useful overview of official developments in wildlife conservation prior to 1940. While covering much the same period as Colpitts, the reader can easily believe that the authors are discussing different countries.

As Burnett explains, the CWS (initially, the Dominion Wildlife Service), focused on managing game—that is, species valued by hunters, including migratory birds, and wildlife in northern Canada or in national parks. But as he also makes clear, a chief theme of the history of the service has been its expansion into new areas of activity, often in

cooperation with other agencies, especially the provinces and environmental organizations. Emerging threats drove research in new directions, as it became clear that it was not hunting, but industrial society itself that posed the greatest danger to wildlife. This was well demonstrated by studies of environmental contaminants that began in the 1960s. Motivated both by information from outside Canada, including Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and by results obtained by Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) scientists themselves, these studies initially focused on pesticides, before expanding into other kinds of toxic substances, such as mercury, and into more contentious issues, such as the effects on birds of pesticides used in forestry, as well as the complex effects of contaminants in the Great Lakes.⁵ The service's work on endangered species exhibited an analogous expansion: initially focused on a few prominent birds such as the trumpeter swan, whooping crane, and peregrine falcon, it soon enlarged its view to include more species, their habitats, and projects with other agencies. This led to new kinds of institutions, created to facilitate cooperation, such as the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. Indeed, the need to cooperate with other agencies has become an imperative, both domestically, and in the agency's international activities, beginning with a circumpolar agreement on polar bear research in 1965, and continuing with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species in the 1970s, and the Biodiversity Convention of the 1990s.

Burnett attributes this expansion to several factors. The requirements of senior agencies have been important. After 1970, the service, now part of Environment Canada, began contributing to environmental impact assessments of projects under federal jurisdiction. The evolution of public concerns has also been significant: since the 1950s Canadians have increasingly viewed wildlife not in terms of hunting opportunities, but as emblematic of wilderness, worth appreciating alive. The CWS responded to these values, while encouraging them with projects like interpretative centres and those classic Hinterland Who's Who commercials. But the most important force in expanding the agency's activities, according to Burnett, has been research by CWS scientists themselves, by identifying new areas of concern.

During the last decade the CWS has experienced some of its toughest challenges: forced to respond to new demands, such as negotiating a waterfowl management agreement with the United States, while dealing with budget cuts, and a reorganization that virtually eliminated the service's institutional identity. Nevertheless, Burnett concludes, the agency's history exemplifies how Canadians have managed to achieve

⁵ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

excellence through institutions dedicated to public service, continuing the worthy tradition of the National Film Board and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. He also makes the more subtle point that this excellence has only been possible because the service has had the freedom to define its own tasks, with scientists able to pursue their own research interests.

The reader is often reminded that this is a commissioned history. Based in part on interviews, Burnett conveys a fine sense of what it was like to work there. The book is also frankly celebratory: a tribute, not a work of scholarly history. One problem with this is apparent from the outset: he makes no effort to explain why the service was created in the first place, beyond noting that it “was no great surprise”—merely a natural outcome of research and the formation of a national parks system. Nor is much subtlety employed in justifying service activities: wildlife were conserved, obviously, because they are essential to Canada’s natural environment. With a few exceptions—such as an account of the conflict between the Migratory Birds Convention Act and Newfoundlanders’ traditional appetite for murre and other protected species—any interpretation of the symbolic meanings of wildlife, like that provided by Colpitts, is lacking.

The people of the CWS, Burnett notes, are “numbered among our unsung Canadian heroes.” Their successes are many, and their failures uncommon—although with tighter budgets and increasing responsibilities one imagines that many important tasks must have been neglected. His account of the challenges and constraints of the last decade does not go much beyond arguing that service personnel did the best they could, struggling to balance scientific priorities against institutional constraints. The model is of the rational application of science to problems in wildlife conservation, and so debates regarding how these problems should be defined and solved—acknowledging, in other words, that these problems are not simply discovered, but constructed—tend to be obscured. Burnett’s account of managing diseased bison in Wood Buffalo National Park illustrates this. He describes how scientists studied the problem, identified what needed to be done, and then did it: the rational model in action. This account can be compared with Sandlos’s recent analysis of how the last “wild” herd of bison was subjected to decades of manipulation, treated almost as livestock: penned, vaccinated, slaughtered. This intensive approach was pursued most actively by the CWS itself, and it was only challenged once a community of wildlife scientists had developed in universities, that was independent of the service.

Nevertheless, within these limits, Burnett’s account is useful. His survey of the work of the CWS, including profiles of researchers and

other individuals, and sketches of some of the key trends of the last fifty years, such as the expansion of research beyond the federal government, provides a point of departure for historians of wildlife science, and of twentieth century Canadian science.

Of these books, *Natural Selections: National Parks in Atlantic Canada, 1935–1970*, by Alan MacEachern, is the most focused, in terms of both geography and time period. It is also the most ambitious, and is certainly written with the greatest wit. Indeed, it is a model of what environmental history can be: like the parks themselves, the book is a weaving of ideas about nature and culture.

MacEachern tells the story of four national parks: Cape Breton Highlands in Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Fundy in New Brunswick, and Terra Nova in Newfoundland. The existence of these parks is itself almost a mystery. For decades, ideas about what national parks were all about tended to emphasize mountains, glaciers and alpine lakes—in other words, the Rocky Mountains, and especially Banff, the first park. Nevertheless, these pieces of Atlantic Canada, while hardly sublime (but certainly pretty), were all, between 1930 and 1960, deemed worthy of commemoration. How and why this happened is a story that combines both local politics, and loftier ideas about culture and aesthetics. It began in the 1920s, with the Canadian government under pressure to expand the park system, to make it national in more than name. Financial objections to land purchases were soon eased, but the ideological challenge remained: how could the park system be extended into a region lacking any landscapes able to awe and inspire?

Part of the story of this extension, as I've noted, is local politics: trading off the interests of residents, landowners, and the provinces, buying land, improving roads, encouraging hopes for new jobs, as well as resentment towards disruptions imposed for the sake of visitors from away. The result was four pastiches of ecology and culture, each a little odd, somewhat arbitrary, but always interesting. At Cape Breton Highlands they cleared out the inhabitants, and installed a kind of "Scotch" symbolic character to the place; on Prince Edward Island local farmers were also removed, because they were inconsistent with the desired image of a seaside resort; in Newfoundland provincial support for Terra Nova was only gained by promising the timber for a pulp and paper mill. MacEachern combines effectively an understanding of official thinking within the parks branch, and the local histories of people forced to accommodate the new parks.

These parks also tell us a great deal about how ideas regarding parks evolved: shifting aesthetic preferences, different notions regarding what people should do in parks, changing views on how to balance

nature and culture. Most historians writing about parks have assumed that this balance, at least until recently, has been weighted towards culture, with parks viewed as economic development strategies. Banff, created to boost passenger numbers on the Canadian Pacific Railway, has always served as the type specimen. But MacEachern challenges this doctrine-of-usefulness thesis, finding instead a persistent interest in preserving parks, right back to Sir John Alexander MacDonald.

The same complexities regarding nature and culture have been evident in these four parks. The first two parks: Cape Breton Highlands and Prince Edward Island, included some concession to mass tourism, but emphasized high culture: golf courses, lodges, and other facilities for a wealthier and better class of tourist. In contrast, Fundy, created in 1947, exemplified the postwar ideal of recreational democracy: suburbia by the sea, accessible to one and all. Terra Nova, created in 1957, was something else again: a natural environment left untransformed, emphasizing direct experience of nature, as park officials began to realize that people didn't necessarily visit parks simply to experience each others' company. What is really interesting, as MacEachern explains, is that because the parks branch has been required to preserve the parks unchanged, each is a time capsule, still exemplifying ideas about parks that were influential at the time of its creation.

Ironies abound, not least in the fact that parks established to preserve the best of nature became exemplars of Canadians' evolving cultural values, fixing these in time, even as nature itself insisted on changing. Irony is similarly evident in every park: in the creation of symbols of Scottish heritage in Cape Breton Highlands, achieved by displacing those already living in the park area; or the restoration of Green Gables in Prince Edward Island, preserved because of its ties to a fictional story, even as so many real island homes were demolished to make way for the park.

After explaining how and why these parks were created, MacEachern turns to the challenges involved in managing them, during an era marked by ever-increasing interest in parks, as well as increasing impacts on them. Here he presents a central interpretative argument: that the dichotomy commonly drawn between preservation and use: that more of one requires less of the other, is a false one. In fact, in the postwar era the Parks Branch pursued both goals energetically. Even as the public demanded unspoiled nature, parks staff intervened intensively: manipulating wildlife, stocking game fish, spraying dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) against insects. Pressures from outside the parks were also becoming more significant. In the 1960s the Wreck Cove hydroelectric project, which consumed a chunk of Cape Breton Highlands, demonstrated that the Branch had only a tenuous control over the parks.

A cliché of park history is that after a period of relative quiescence the 1960s were the crucial decade, when increasing use coincided with environmental awareness, forcing parks to embrace preservation to avoid their own destruction. As is obvious from this account, MacEachern overturns this assumption, demonstrating how important were those “quiet” decades, when the park system confronted the implications of becoming something other than a jewel box of western mountains. And conversely, we might also, he argues, see the 1960s as less than revolutionary. His argument is subtle: while parks withdrew from wholesale manipulation of nature—predator control, fish stocking, DDT—this was not just a response to environmentalism, but a return to elitism. Just as the great park hotels had catered to a “better” class of visitors, so too now did rustic camp sites and back country trails—just the thing for visitors knowledgeable enough to appreciate nature on its own terms. And in a fascinating aside, MacEachern explains how staff “managed” park users, discouraging (in polite, oh so Canadian ways) Jews and blacks from visiting—including, in the 1950s, Martin Luther King and his wife.

Readers of *Scientia Canadensis* may find of special note MacEachern’s examination of the role of science in parks management. Management activities—often referred to as “experiments,” conducted in parks that were described as outdoor “laboratories”—were often justified in terms of science, even as evolving scientific ideas justified shifting from manipulating wildlife populations, to leaving them alone. MacEachern discusses this role of science as cultural authority, but he devotes less attention to what research was actually done in the parks; this is one of the few topics about which more details would have been welcome.

Together these books exemplify the advantages and shortcomings of diverse approaches: social history, institutional commemoration, and environmental history, to understanding Canadians’ relationship with their landscape. All can be read with profit, with MacEachern’s *Natural Selections* perhaps the finest effort yet to appear in the young field of Canadian environmental history.

Biographical Note: Dr. Stephen Bocking teaches in the Environmental and Resource Studies Program, Trent University. He is the editor of *Biodiversity in Canada: Ecology, Ideas, and Actions* (Peterborough: Broadview, 2000), and the author of *Ecologists and Environmental Politics: A History of Contemporary Ecology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), and of *Nature’s Experts: Science, Politics and the Environment* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004). Address: Environmental and Resource Studies Program, Trent University, Peterborough (Ontario) K9J 7B8, Canada. Email: <sbocking@trentu.ca>