

APPROACHES
TO ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY :
THE CASE IN OF NEW ENGLAND
AND QUÉBEC¹

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In recent decades the field of environmental history has taken root in Canada. This approach – understanding history as a dynamic interaction between culture and nature – reflects a trend that began in the United States as early as the 1970s, but the recent

1. I wish to thank my colleague Scott See of the University of Maine for his helpful critical review of the manuscript.

development in Canada is more than simple imitation. Environmental history north of the border has precedents in several scholarly traditions that are far more vigorous than in the U.S.,² and as the threads of these established methodologies are woven into Canadian environmental history, the field will likely develop in distinctive ways. Still, this new Canadian research poses an interesting question: are the basic premises of environmental history, as they developed in the U.S., appropriate to the Canadian national experience?

In the U.S., environmental history was nurtured on three somewhat unique national obsessions: the settlement of the West, the romantic veneration of wilderness, and the American environmental movement. These three themes helped define environmental history by suggesting its topical concerns, providing its critical edge, and even shaping its

2. See Stéphane Castonguay's article, p.

basic methodologies. Because these themes are less resonant in Canada, practitioners there may find the basic topics, critiques, and methodologies of environmental history less appropriate to their own historical traditions.³ This article will explore the prospects for environmental history in Canada, beginning with some broad reflections on how the field took shape in America, then focusing on historical similarities and differences in a single cross-border region : eastern Canada and New England.

The most important influence on American environmental history was the historical scholarship on western expansion and settlement. Environmental history emerged in the U.S. in the early 1970s as a subset of western regional history, and it was this connection that gave the field its foundational narrative

3. Paul SUTTER, "Reflections : What Can U.S. Environmental Historians Learn from Non-U.S. Environmental Historiography?" *Environmental History* 8 (January 2003), pp. 109, 111.

involving the unsustainable exploitation of nature in newly settled lands. The havoc wreaked by logging, agricultural clearing, commercial hunting, and other forms of “frontier” livelihood inspired a counter-narrative to westward expansion, in which nature and society were separate worlds locked together in a dynamic exchange in which the latter gradually replaced the former. Thus the settlement frontier, as historian Dan Flores puts it, became the “ultimate proving ground of environmentalism’s doomsday predictions for the modern ... experiment in a massively altered landscape.”⁴

4. Dan FLORES, “Place : An Argument for Bioregional History,” *Environmental History Review* 18 (Winter 1994), p. 8. See Chad GAFFIELD and Pam GAFFIELD, *Consuming Canada : Readings in Environmental History* (Toronto : Copp Clark, Ltd., 1995) ; William CRONON, “The Uses of Environmental History,” *Environmental History Review* 17 (Fall 1993), p. 13 ; Richard WHITE, “Afterword : Environmental History : Watching a Historical Field Mature,” *Pacific Historical Review* 70 (February 2001), p. 976 ; Alfred W. CROSBY,

In large part the field developed as a critique of Frederick Jackson Turner's so-called frontier thesis, the argument that colonizing the western territories determined America's national character. Writing in 1893, Turner stressed the impact of the western frontier in American culture. Moving into the "vacant" lands beyond the settlements (Turner famously ignored Native occupation of these places), Americans continually reinvented themselves and reinforced the founding virtues of the Republic – democracy, individualism, and self-reliance. Turner's frontier thesis became one of the most powerful and persistent themes in American history, and the development of environmental history cannot be viewed apart from this debate over the role of the land in shaping American character.

In fact, both Canada and the U.S. produced western histories in which landscape

"The Past and Present of Environmental History," *American Historical review* 100 (October 1995), p. 1185.

was the crucible of nationhood: Walter Prescott Webb, Harold Innis, Ray Billington, Arthur Lower, Arthur Morton, Donald Worster, and John Herd Thompson, to name a few, shared a belief that the western biome helped shape national history. In both Wests, nature remains, as Alan MacEachern says, “the opening chapter in the national narrative.”⁵

5. Alan MACEachern, “Voice in the Wilderness : Recent Works in Canadian Environmental History,” *Acadiensis* 31 (Spring 2002), p. 215. See Fred A. SHANNON, *The Farmers’s Last Frontier : Agriculture, 1860-1897* (New York : Harper Torchbooks, 1968) ; Walter Prescott WEBB, *The Great Plains* (Boston : Ginn and Company, 1931) ; Ray Allen BILLINGTON, *The Far Western Frontier, 1830-1860* (New York : Harper, 1956) ; Harold INNIS, *Fur Trade in Canada : An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 1956) ; Arthur LOWER, *North American Assault on the Canadian Forest* (Toronto : Ryerson Press, 1938) ; Arthur MORTON, *History of the Canadian West* (London : Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1939) ; Don WORSTER, *Rivers of Empire : Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West* (New York : Pantheon Books, 1986) ; John Herd THOMPSON, *Forging the Prairie West* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1998) ; Robert Douglas FRANCIS, “Turner versus Innis : Bridging the Gap,” *American Review of Canadian Studies* 33

Still, there are some important differences. American historians see western expansion as a single, continuous sweep across the continent from the Appalachians to the Pacific Coast. The process, in Turner's thinking, was everywhere the same, making the frontier inseparable from the idea of America itself. In Canada, the west and east are separated by the Laurentian Plateau, and this discontinuity seems to have separated the Canadian frontier into many frontiers. While Americans define themselves as a frontier people, Canadian identity dissolves into questions of regional and ethnic particularism in which the frontier may or may not play a decisive role.

In fact, the term "frontier" has different meanings in Canada, denoting a political or cultural divide between Canada and the

(Winter 2003), p. 475 ; CROSBY, "Past and Present of Environmental History," p. 1179 ; Arthur S. LOWER in William H. KATERBERG, "A Northern Vision : Frontiers and the West in the Canadian and American Imagination," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 33 (Winter 2003), p. 548.

United States, or between French Canada and English Canada. This again emphasizes the difference between the way Americans and Canadians view space and culture. The American “frontier” suggests a unifying national process ; the Canadian “frontier” is a point of separation. This is true in the Canadian national expansion narrative as well. The western frontier is not so much a process of creating national character but a place, and often a distant place isolated from the font of Canadian history. Where Turner saw the West as fresh opportunity and a stimulus to cultural creativity, Arthur Morton underscored the harshness of the land – the mosquitoes, the great distances, the rocks and mud, and the scarcity of trees, water, and game – and emphasized the economic and cultural ties that bound the frontier to the metropolis.⁶

6. Arthur S. MORTON, *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71* (London : Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1939), pp. 138-39.

These differences have two important implications for how American environmental history translates into Canadian environmental history. First, Turner's western history celebrated the settler's triumph over nature, and it was this blithe vision of progress – or rather the argument against it – that gave environmental history much of its moral bearing. The field's overarching declensionist model is dialectically related to Turner's stages of frontier growth, which trace an inevitable upward progression from the homestead to agrarian republic. In the Canadian West, the settler's triumph over nature is more ambiguous; the prospect of outlying settlements hunkered down in "a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting," as historian Donald Worster puts it, does not challenge the environmental historian the way Turner's vision might. Second, the American frontier saga brings to mind an individualistic pioneer heroically confronting the forces of nature. Canadian historians,

partly because the environment seems so hostile, imagine the frontier as a web linking the hinterland to the city. The pioneer in this setting is simply an intermediary between eastern capital and western nature, making the declensionist narrative in the Canadian West much more diffuse.⁷ In short, the metropolitan thesis, in which urban capital shapes the development of the hinterland, provides a national narrative less likely to compel an environmentalist reaction.

7. Donald WORSTER, "Wild, Tame, and Free: Comparing Canadian and U.S. Views of Nature," in John M. FINDLAY and Ken S. COATES, *Parallel Destinies: Canadian-American Relations West of the Rockies* (Seattle and Montreal: University of Washington Press and McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), p. 4. See Gregory H. NOBLES, "Breaking into the Backcountry: New Approaches to the Early American Frontier, 1750-1800," *William and Mary Quarterly* 46 (October 1989), pp. 642, 644-45; R. FRANCIS, "Turner versus Innis," pp. 477-78; KATERBERG, "Northern Vision," pp. 545, 549-51; GAFFIELD and GAFFIELD, *Consuming Canada*, p. 2; Frances W. KAYE, "An Innis, Not a Turner," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 31 (Winter 2001), pp. 601-2.

Environmental history was nurtured in the U.S. by another powerful vision of the land that resonates differently in Canada. The campaigns for wilderness preservation in the 1950s and 1960s, culminating in the Wilderness Act of 1964, offered an ideal against which to judge all human intrusions in the natural world, and while recent historians have radically qualified our notion of pristine wilderness, the idea still casts a long shadow. Environmental politics *and* environmental history are not only biocentric in America, but also strangely anthropobic, a predisposition based on an almost inviolate separation between culture and “pure” nature. This predisposition does not always translate well in other parts of the world.⁸

8. Char MILLER, “An Open Field,” *Pacific Historical Review* 70 (February 2001), pp. 69-76; Mart STEWART, “Environmental History: Profile of a Developing Field,” *History Teacher* 31 (May 1998), p. 359; WORSTER, “Wild, Tame, and Free,” pp. 249-50; STEWART, “If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian: American Environmental History West

Here again, there are parallels. Canadians also romanticized their wilderness as uninhabited space, and the parks movement, begun shortly after Yellowstone's founding in 1871, was predicated on a similar wilderness ideology. But there is, as George Altmeyer puts it, an "immense complexity characteristic of the Canadian attitude towards Nature."⁹ The idea of wilderness has not been as closely studied in Canada, but it seems safe to say that where John Muir found spiritual renewal in his mountain sanctuary, Canadian writers dwell on the menacing aspects of these lonely places.

and South," *Environment and History* 2 (2005), p. 153 ; Lynda JESSUP, "The Group of Seven and the Tourist Landscape in Western Canada, or The More Things Change..." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 37 (Spring 2002), pp. 146-47.

9. George ALTMAYER, "Three Ideas of Nature in Canada, 1893-1914," in GAFFIELD and GAFFIELD, *Consuming Canada*, p. 98. See Patricia JASEN, "Native People and the Tourist Industry in Nineteenth-Century Ontario," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 28 (Winter 1993-1994), pp. 5, 8 ; JESSUP, "Group of Seven," pp. 146-47, 162 ; SUTTER, "Reflections," p. 1 ; ALTMAYER, "Three Ideas of Nature in the Canada," p. 97 ; WORSTER, "Wild, Tame, and Free," pp. 252-53.

Where Americans view the wilderness as vanishing, and hence romantic, Canadians understand the Shield as obdurate and anything but fragile. Also, Americans have been more successful in isolating the wilderness from their economic needs. As historian Lloyd Irland explains, the

*ability of the urban [world] ... to import its corn from Iowa, its lumber from Canada, its oil from Iraq, and its steel from Japan led its citizens to believe that they had been liberated from dependence on natural resources.*¹⁰

10. Lloyd C. IRLAND, *The Northeast's Changing Forest* (Petersham, Massachusetts : Harvard Forest, 1999), p. 130. See George COLPITTS, *Game in the Garden : A Human History of Wildlife in Western Canada to 1940* (Vancouver : UBC Press, 2002), pp. 5-6, 103-4 ; WORSTER, "Wild, Tame, and Free," pp. 256, 258 ; ALTMAYER, "Three Ideas of Nature in Canada," p. 96 ; KATERBERG, "Northern Vision," p. 547 ; Peter R. MULVIHILL, Douglas C. BAKER and William R. MORRISON, "A Conceptual Framework for Environmental History in Canada's North," *Environmental History* 6, October 2001, pp. 611-26.

This allowed Americans to idealize and romanticize their own natural hinterland. Canadians are more likely to view wilderness and the economy together. However much wilderness has influenced or inspired Canadian culture, the concept seems much different.

Finally, the politics of conservation and environmentalism left deep imprints on American environmental history, and again there are parallels and differences. In both countries, conservation reform began at the end of the nineteenth century as a reaction to forest depletion, and just as the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1908) marked the movement's peak in America, so the Commission of Conservation (1909-1921) marked its high point in Canada. In both cases, as H.V. Nelles and Samuel P. Hays demonstrated, conservation was orchestrated by a consort of government officials, expert planners, and industry representatives. But in the United States, rapid industrialization and urbaniza-

tion generated a powerful romantic backlash that gave the movement widespread popular standing. In Canada, the size of the forest resource dulled this sense of urgency, and more subtly, as Nelles points out, Canadians never developed a popular crusading spirit because their government already owned the nation's forests. Without the struggles over forest ownership that characterized the conservation crusades in western America, the movement, he says, failed to "penetrate deeply... into the conscience" of the Canadian.¹¹

Nor was environmentalism as compelling a context in Canada. American environmentalism was crisis-driven. Nuclear fallout, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the burning of

11. H.V. NELLES, *The Politics of Development: Forest, Mines and Hydro-Electric Power in Ontario, 1849-1941* (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada, 1974), pp. 49, 63, 186, 199, 200-201, 213-14; Samuel P. HAYS, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: the Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959).

the Cuyahoga River, the Santa Barbara oil spill, Three Mile Island, Love Canal – these and other environmental disasters dominated the news for two decades, and this crisis mood was exacerbated by the contemporaneous civil rights, free speech, and anti-war struggles. Environmental history was, to a significant degree, the product of popular protest politics, and this grounding gave the discipline a unique normative streak. Canadian historians stand somewhat apart from this intense protest tradition, and accordingly Alan MacEachern's advice to "avoid a slavish adherence to an American model" bears scrutiny.¹²

These different contexts explain in part the earlier development of environmental history in the United States. Conditioned by the

12. MACEACHERN, "Voice in the Wilderness," p. 216. See Richard JUDD and Christopher S. BEACH, *Natural States: The Environmental Imagination in Maine, Oregon, and the Nation* (Washington, DC: Resources for the Future Press, 2003); Vera NORWOOD, "Disturbed Landscape/Disturbing Processes: Environmental History for the Twenty-First Century," *Pacific Historical Review* 70 (February 2001), p. 80.

critical reaction to Turner's theory of westward expansion, American historians responded to the country's vibrant conservation and environmental traditions and the idea of wilderness and directed their research to understanding the nexus of human history and natural history, using concepts borrowed from ecology, geography, climatology, and other sciences to explore the latter. While the field remained wedded to this basic approach, it fragmented as it matured, borrowing new methodologies and themes from cultural, intellectual, economic, or literary history and becoming more diverse, if less unified. The founding and maturation of this new field preceded similar developments in Europe and Canada by about two decades. While America's unique national experience explains this pioneering role, it does not entirely explain why Europe and Canada lagged behind in developing the field.

One way to view this gap is to simply assume that Canadian historians have

neglected the nature-culture matrix but are now catching up. Some have suggested as much. Chad and Pam Gaffield wrote in 1995 that Canadian historians had not systematically studied the role of nature in history, and that the resources so important to the nation's history appeared simply as "static and passive" background images. Peter Mulvihill and others wrote in 2001 that "the formal environmental history of Canada's north is still very much in the developmental stage," and in 2002 Alan MacEachern wrote that environmental history had "finally arrived" in Canada. These comments suggest that Canadian environmental history will simply mimic the American model, and indeed in some cases Canadian historians have relied heavily on American classics like Alfred Runte's *National Parks: The American Experience* or Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*.¹³

13. GAFFIELD and GAFFIELD, *Consuming Canada*, p. 1; MULVIHILL, "Conceptual Framework for Environmental

A second way to view these differences between Canada and the United States is to assume that historians on both sides of the border write similarly about nature when working on similar topics, although their historiographical definitions may differ. What passes for environmental history in America may be something quite different in Canada, where historians operate according to different cultural, political, linguistic, or historiographical traditions, but the basic premise – that historians must recognize the role of nature in human history – is the same. This essential similarity in approach becomes evident if we narrow our focus to a single cross-border region – or “bioregion” in the parlance of the environmental historian. The area from the St. Lawrence Valley and Nova Scotia south to Massachusetts shares similar soil and forest

History in Canada’s North,” *Environmental History* 6 (October 2001), p. 611 ; MACEACHERN, “Voice in the Wilderness,” p. 215. See JASEN, “Native People and the Tourist Industry,” p. 7.

types, similar topographies and ecosystems, and in some respects a similar culture and history, and a cross-border comparison of approaches to the nature-culture nexus should reveal similarities and differences in the way Americans and Canadians study the interaction between culture and nature. Matt Hatvany, for instance, approached the history of the St. Lawrence salt marshes in essentially the same way Kim Sebold described those along the New England coast : both centered their history on the interaction between farmers and a unique ecosystem ; both showed how farmers adapted European technologies to New-World circumstances to manipulate this ecosystem ; both found that cultural and economic perceptions of the salt marsh changed markedly over time, and both stressed the human adaptation to this environment over multiple generations. Hatvany considers his work a historical geography ; Sebold, an environmental history. A comparison of topics like these shows that environ-

mental historians have much to share across the border.¹⁴

Beginning with William Cronon's *Changes in the Land* (1983), the southern half of this peninsula has been subject to a sequence of environmental histories, including those by Carolyn Merchant (1989), Theodore Steinberg (1991), Richard Judd (1997), John Cumbler (2001), and Brian Donahue (2004). Broadly speaking, these histories share a belief that nature is the material foundation for history, and they explore the way humans have

14. FLORES, "Place," p. 96 ; Matthew G. HATVANY, *Marshlands : Four Centuries of Environmental Change on the Shores of the St. Lawrence* (Sainte-Foy : Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2003). See FLORES, 1994, pp. 2-3 ; WHITE, "Afterword," pp. 976-77 ; David A. GAUTHIER and J. David HENRY, "Misunderstanding the Prairies," in GAFFIELD and GAFFIELD, *Consuming Canada*, pp. 257, 259 ; FRANCIS, "Turner versus Innis," p. 570 ; KAYE, "An Innis, Not a Turner," p. 598 ; STEWART, "If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian," pp. 139-40 ; Kimberly SEBOLD, "The Low Green Prairies of the Sea : Economic Usage and Cultural Construction fo the Gulf of Maine Salt Marshes," PhD Dissertation, University of Maine, 1998.

transformed this foundation into an economy. They display a certain fondness for environmental determinism, and they question the way New Englanders disrupted the natural relations necessary for their survival.¹⁵ By these terms the northern half of the Peninsula also has an environmental history, even though it falls under a different rubric and flows from a different set of interests and questions.

15. Carolyn MERCHANT, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Theodore STEINBERG, *Nature Incorporated: Industrialization and the Waters of New England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Richard W. JUDD, *Common Lands, Common People: The Origins of Conservation in Northern New England* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997); John T. CUMBLER, *Reasonable Use: The People, the Environment, and the State, New England, 1790-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Brian DONAHUE, *The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). See CRONON, "Uses of Environmental History," p. 4; STEWART, "Environmental History," p. 354.

Geography is an appropriate place to begin seeking out the hidden environmental history of eastern Canada. Andrew Hill Clark, who studied geography under environmental determinist Griffith Taylor and cultural determinist Carl Sauer, published a geography of Acadia in 1968 that emphasized the "closely interwoven story of man and land," on the assumption that the "rocks, the rain, the rivers, the winds, the tides, the trees, the fish" were all "integral parts of that story." Ramsay Cook appropriately saw this as a "model of environmental history," predating Cronon's *Changes in the Land* by a decade and a half.¹⁶ Likewise, Graeme Wynn's historical geography of New Brunswick traces the interactions between forest, settler, and merchant, and others have followed these examples, showing how

16. Andrew Hill CLARK, *Acadia: The Geography of Early Nova Scotia to 1760* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), p. x; Ramsay COOK, "1492 and All That: Making a Garden Out of Wilderness," in GAFFIELD and GAFFIELD, *Consuming Canada*, pp. 64-65, 69-71.

farming, staples production, and forms of occupational pluralism were all grounded in natural and geophysical conditions. "Taken as a whole," Wynn concludes, "this scholarship illustrates the close connections between landscapes and livelihoods." The weaknesses in Canadian environmental history, he suggests, perhaps "owe ... something to the relative strength of historical geography in Canada."¹⁷

Why Canadian geography assumed the ecological niche environmental history fills in America is a complicated question.¹⁸ There are obvious affinities between the disciplines. Both pay close attention to natural condi-

17. Graeme WYNN, *Timber Colony: A Historical Geography of Early New Brunswick* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981); WYNN, "Thinking About Mountains, Valleys and Solitudes: Historical Geography and the New Atlantic History," *Acadiensis* 31 (Autumn 2001), pp. 133, 135, 137, 145.

18. Susan SCHULTEN, *The Geographical Imagination in America, 1880-1950* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 3.

tions, both question the abuse of nature, both favor the long view of human occupancy, and both were steeped in environmental determinism. Geographer Ellsworth Huntington wrote sweeping studies of climate and human civilization, and Ellen Churchill Semple's 1903 *American History and Its Geographic Conditions* argued that "man is a product of the earth's surface." The earth, she continued,

*has mothered him, fed him, set him tasks, directed his thoughts, confronted him with difficulties that have strengthened his body and sharpened his wits, given him his problems of navigation or irrigation, and at the same time whispered hints for their solution.*¹⁹

Geographers have since adopted a more flexible doctrine of causation, of course, but in

19. SEMPLE in Geoffrey J. MARTIN and Preston E. JAMES, *All Possible Worlds: A History of Geographical Ideas* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1972 [1993]), pp. 329-30. See also pp. 325, 327-28.

Canada and the U.S. they abandoned this simple determinism in different ways. In the US, quantitative methods replaced descriptive studies in the mid-1950s. As academic departments expanded, geographers could specialize in narrower fields and focus on more precise measurement of spatial relations and functional systems. Computers, the Cold War, and the Space Race encouraged this move toward the sciences, as did the movement for urban and regional planning. For specific historical reasons, American geography moved in the direction of quantitative research and functional analysis, and away from the normative generalizations about environment and culture that marked the earlier period.²⁰

Canadian geographers were more closely wedded to the British and Continental focus on regional studies and historical perspective.

20. FLORES, "Place," pp. 90, 99; SPETH, "Historicism," p. 11; MARTIN and JAMES, *All Possible Worlds*, pp. 226-27, 330-31, 333, 335, 352, 368, 370-74, 455; CROSBY, "Past and Present of Environmental History," p. 1184.

Regionalism was already an important part of Canadian identity, and geographers concentrated on those features that gave each region its distinctive qualities, beginning with geology, climate, vegetation, and soils, and including a history of settlement and sequential occupation – emphases that highlighted the connection between nature and culture. Thus while Canadians contributed to quantitative studies, they chose a different set of primary interests in which the temporal and natural dimensions remained important.²¹

Canadian *historical* traditions have also encouraged a different approach to culture-nature relations. Historians of eastern Canada have taken a lead in applying class analysis to rural studies – the latter, of course, being the traditional venue for environmental history.

21. MARTIN and JAMES, *All Possible Worlds*, pp. 218-19, 221-25, 266-68 ; FRANCIS, "Turner versus Innis," pp. 570-71 ; Stephen HORNSBY, *Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton: A Historical Geography* (Montreal : McGill-Queens University Press, 1992).

This approach emerged out of the emphasis on staples theory, which points to a connection between natural resources like fish, furs, timber, and minerals and the direction and pace of overall economic development. Beginning with Harold Innis's work on the fur trade, a number of Canadian historians have explored the trade in natural resources and its relation to social and class development. This approach committed Canadian history to understanding the natural foundations for society – a standard theme in environmental history – but it also generated questions about how nature affected class formation and rural culture, a point most American environmental historians have ignored. Recent Atlantic Canada histories dwell less on staples than on the structures of external capital that transformed these staples into dependent economies, particularly in the lumber, pulp, and paper economies. These studies add to the emphasis on class and nature a sophisticated understanding of client-state behavior, ano-

ther element missing from U.S. environmental history. Historians like Peter Gillis, Anders Sanberg, and William Parenteau have shown that state-directed conservation politics are grounded in class struggle. Dependency theory appears in American rural history in the "plundered provinces" thesis, championed by western historians like Earl Pomeroy and William Robbins, but in general, American environmental historians have not elaborated these themes.²² William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis*, a study of Chicago's hinterland, barely touches on issues of class and dependency, and his work has had few spin-offs in

22. L. Anders SANBERG, "Introduction : Dependent Development and Client States : Forest Policy and Social Conflict in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick," in SANBERG, ed., *Trouble in the Woods : Forest Policy and Social Conflict in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick* (Fredericton, New Brunswick : Acadiensis Press and Gorsebrook Research Institute for Atlantic Canada Studies, 1992), p. 2 ; William G. ROBBINS, "The 'Plundered Province' Thesis and the Recent Historiography of the American West," *Pacific Historical Review* 55 (November 1986), pp. 578-79, 584 ; SUTTER, "Reflections," p. 110.

the U.S., despite his influence in the field. The lesson, in short, has not penetrated deeply in American environmental history, where human actors at the point of contact between nature and society – fishers, farmers, fur traders, lumberers, woodlot owners – still appear faceless and monolithic. Although staples theory has its challengers, Canadian environmental history will no doubt continue to include a class dimension, as Neil Forkey's work on Ontario's Trent River watershed has shown.²³

If staples and dependency theories add a class dimension to environmental history, Québec agrarian studies suggest new ways of understanding the relation between tradition and uses of nature. Québec rural historians like Serge Courville have refined the study of

23. William CRONON, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991); Neil FORKEY, *Shaping the Upper Canadian Frontier: Society, Environment, and Culture in the Trent Valley* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2002).

rural society, emphasizing the role of tradition in structuring agrarian life.²⁴ Profound cultural and linguistic differences define the study of French Canada not simply as regional history but as the history of a people, and accordingly comparisons to rural history in English Canada or New England must be made carefully. Still, the Québec historical tradition has an important environmental dimension that adds a great deal to our understanding of how societies and nature interact in eastern North America.

Fernand Ouelette wove nature and society into his sweeping account of the old regime, the seigneurial concessions, and the development of market relations, and historians since

24. Serge COURVILLE, "Tradition or Modernity? The Canadian Seigniorship in the Durham Era: Another Perspective," in Patricia GALLOWAY, ed., *Proceedings of the Seventeenth Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* (New York: University Press of America), pp. 44-66; COURVILLE and Normand SÉGUIN, *Rural Life in Nineteenth-Century Québec*, translated by Sinclair Robinson (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1989).

then have followed his lead. Ouelette's focus on traditional landscapes reflects the influence of *Annales* methods, with their multivariate analyses, their incorporation of physical geography, and their long perspective on history. According to French historian Fernand Braudel, theorist of the *Annales* school, humans are "prisoners" of a particular balance of natural and human forces which they "cannot escape without the risk of everything's being upset."²⁵ Braudel's understanding of balance and accommodation, applied to Québec's rural landscapes, promises another new dimension to environmental history.

25. BRAUDEL in CROSBY, "Past and Present of Environmental History," p. 1185. See Donald H. AKENSON, "Foreword," *Canadian Papers in Rural History* 4 (Gananoque, Ontario : Langdale Press, 1988), n.p. ; Serge GAGNON, *Québec and Its Historians : The Twentieth Century*, translated by Jane Brierley (Montreal : Harvest House, 1985), pp. 89-90 ; Robert P. SWIERENGA, "The Malin Thesis of Grassland Acculturation and the New Rural History," in Donald H. AKENSON, *Canadian Papers in Rural History* 5 (Gananoque, Ontario : Langdale Press, 1986), pp. 12-13.

Hatvany's historical geography, for instance, reconstructs human-nature interaction on the St. Lawrence salt marshes through several epochs, illustrating what he calls a "deep history" of this landscape in which farmers reached an accord with the land, even as they changed it.²⁶ American historians, with their fixation on frontiers, have not been as receptive to this *longue durée* and thus typically see the human and natural worlds as separate and antagonistic. Only recently have Americans accepted agrarian landscapes – a mixture of these two worlds – as a legitimate environmental history topic. This explains in part why the discipline has grown more slowly in long-settled regions like eastern North America.

26. HATVANY, *Marshlands*, pp. 3-4. See SWIERENGA, "Malin Thesis," p. 11 ; FLORES, "Place," p. 101 ; Karl JACOBY, *Crimes Against Nature : Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 2001), p. xvi ; White, "Afterword," p. 105 ; STEWART, "If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian," p. 140.

The distinguishing cultural feature of eastern North America is indeed the length and continuity of its Euroamerican settlement. "It is glaringly obvious that the American frontier moved far more rapidly than did that of the Acadians," Clark notes, "which, in a century and a half, had pushed only as far as the estuarine marshland areas of the ... Bay of Fundy."²⁷ Louise Dechêne points out that the farms of Montreal kept their essential characteristics for two centuries.²⁸ This long-term occupancy brings a different perspective to the study of society and the environment. Continuity on this scale is foreign to an environmental history paradigm that emphasizes new settlers, new lands, and dramatic transforma-

27. CLARK, *Acadia*, p. 389.

28. Louise DECHÊNE, *Habitants and Merchants in Seventeenth-Century Montreal*, translated by Liana Vardi (Montreal : McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), pp. 279-80. See Colin M. COATES, *The Metamorphoses of Landscape and Community in Early Québec* (Montreal : McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), p. 4.

tions, but it provides fertile ground for rethinking the foundational narrative of the discipline.

First, the “deep history” of these long-settled landscapes blurs the distinction between nature and culture. As we step back from the initial pioneering pulse that preoccupies most American environmental historians and take stock of nature in the long haul, ecology and society become much more integrated. Over several generations society reaches an equilibrium in which the boundaries between human history and natural history become less distinct. Viewed over the *longue durée*, soil, climate, forest, river, meadow, pasture, family, and parish become so intertwined as to form a single history. The oscillations from deforestation to reforestation, depletion to renewal, settlement to abandonment suggest a meeting of equals, rather than nature-as-victim. One era’s ecological disaster becomes the next era’s textured landscape. Viewed as shallow history, the environmental

past is a tale of decline and disruption ; viewed as deep history, it is not nearly so dismal.

Second, these long-settled landscapes force us to think about how traditions and folkways shaped the environment. Traditions differ across French and English Canada and New England, whether cropping patterns, forest uses, family structures, field allotments, or religious influences, but the persistence of these traditions is an important commonality. Environmental history, predicated on the western American experience, views land use as a kind of atomistic free-for-all driven solely by the pursuit of profit. Most environmental historians, following the lead of Cronon's *Changes in the Land*, assume that a capitalist orientation structured relations to nature even among the first Euroamerican arrivals. But this view was essentially derived from the western paradigm, where advanced capitalist impulses and Turnerian individualism were in full flood. Eastern rural history puts a different face on the motives behind land use.

“Upon initial occupance,” Clark found in Acadia, “the bonds of custom *were* noticeably strained, but certainly not broken.”²⁹ Dechêne and Cole Harris likewise noted the importance of European tradition in Canadian land use, and Hatvany shows how traditional dyking techniques helped overcome the natural limitations on Québec’s agricultural expansion.³⁰

The role of tradition in these long-settled landscapes offers a different perspective on those who stood at the point of contact between nature and society. Wilderness historian Roderick Nash insisted some time ago that

29. CLARK, *Acadia*, p. 384.

30. HATVANY, *Marshlands*, p. 9; DECHÊNE, *Habitants and Merchants*, pp. xvii-xiv, 282; COATES, *Metamorphoses of Landscape*, p. 10; Robert HAMILTON, “Feudal Society and Colonization: A Critique and Reinterpretation of the Historiography of New France,” in Donald H. AKENSON, *Canadian Papers in Rural History* 4 (Gananoque, Ontario: Langdale Press, 1988), pp. 18-19, 24, 44; John Warfield SIMPSON, *Visions of Paradise: Glimpses of Our Landscape’s Legacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 24.

farmers lived “too close to nature to appreciate it for other than its economic value as [a] raw material,” and Nelles considered farmers the villains of the Canadian conservation story.³¹ But as we plumb these deep-seated agrarian habits we find a more nuanced set of behavior and motives. Don Worster blamed the Dust Bowl of the 1930s on profit-maximizing Plains farmers who prided themselves on busting the sod and failed to accept the primacy of grass in a grasslands ecology. But their alienation from the land, he explains, was at least partly a product of their classic western orientation: they were “newcomers” on the last frontier of American agriculture and lacked a sense of place. If indeed mobility

31. Roderick NASH in JACOBY, *Crimes Against Nature*, pp. xv-xvi, 2-3; NELLES, *Politics of Development*, p. 192. See John OPIE, *Nature's Nation: An Environmental History of the United States* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998), p. 2; JACOBY, “Class and Environmental History: Lessons from ‘The War in the Adirondacks,’” *Environmental History* 2 (July 1997), p. 325; STEWART, “If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian,” p. 142.

explains in part their abuse of the land, what can we extrapolate about farmers who lived on the same land for several generations?³² As Hal Baron demonstrated some years ago, persistent eastern farmers nurtured a strong sense of place, and perhaps in these multi-generational links to the soil we can find a more meaningful land ethic.³³

In both Québec and New England, historians who studied the agricultural crises of the first half of the nineteenth century focused on the farmers' abuse of the soil. R.L. Jones in Québec and Harold Fisher in New

32. Donald WORSTER, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 6, 57.

33. Hal BARON, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), especially chapter 6. Baron does not discuss land use, but he demonstrates a growing cohesiveness in the community. For connections between sense of place and a land ethic, see Lura BEAM, *A Maine Hamlet* (New York: Wilfred Funk, 1957), and Margaret Lynn BROWN, *The Wild East: A Biography of the Great Smoky Mountains* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), p. 37.

England suggested that farmers neglected crop rotations, manured too sparingly, and exhausted their soils.³⁴ More recent historians downplay the importance of unsustainable practices and stress instead poor climate and soil, weak capital formation, poor market positioning, and overcrowding. In comparison with these economic factors, John McCallum says, "altogether too much importance has been attached to the alleged conservatism, backwardness, ignorance, and other unenterprising qualities of the unfortunate *habitant*."³⁵ While these recent studies downplay

34. Richard L. JONES, R.M. McINNIS, "A Reconsideration of the State of Agriculture in Lower Canada in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," in Donald H. AKENSON, ed., *Canadian Papers in Rural History* 3, (Gananoque, Ontario: Langdale Press, 1982), pp. 9-11. See Harold F. WILSON, *The Hill Country of Northern New England: Its Social and Economic History, 1790-1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936).

35. John McCALLUM, *Unequal Beginnings: Agriculture and Economic Development in Québec and Ontario Until 1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), pp. 4-5.

the environmental effects of agrarian conservatism, others point out that tradition may have made eastern land use more sustainable. In his study of colonial Concord, Brian Donahue demonstrated that early farmers successfully adapted English traditions of mixed husbandry to new environmental circumstances in order to create a walled, tilled, ditched, and pastured landscape reminiscent of the English countryside. The system, he shows, was sustainable over a surprisingly long time in this New World setting. Neither free marketeers nor blind traditionalists, they applied Old World ideas to New World conditions, weaving these habits into a cultural network of family, community, religion, and the land.³⁶ The record is not yet clear on how well French Canadian and Yankee farmers

36. DONAHUE, *Great Meadow*; JUDD, *Common Lands, Common People*, especially chapter 2; Steven HAHN, "Hunting, Fishing, and Foraging: Common Rights and Class Relations in the Postbellum South," *Radical History Review* 26, no. 18 (1982), pp. 38-39, 43.

treated the land, but their motives were clearly more complex than most conventional environmental histories imply.

Richard Judd's work on northern New England suggests these Old World traditions encouraged a careful husbanding of common resources like meadow hay, timber, game, and fish.³⁷ Generations of New Englanders used their forests as a sort of commons, a place to hunt, fish, pasture, cut firewood and timber, and gather herbs, berries, ginseng, and spruce gum. Here, too, continuous use over several generations suggests a deeper sense of belonging to these lands. Margaret Brown, who writes about the southern Appalachians, found that "in a way foreign to a modern reader, love for the land came from use."³⁸

37. JUDD, *Common Lands, Common People*. On Cronon's assumption of capitalist motives for colonialists, see *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

38. BROWN, *The Wild East*, pp. 12, 15, 22, 24, 29, 30, 39, 41-42.

As is often the case, these ethics are most evident in instances where they conflicted with those of other classes. Several recent histories describe the wars between ordinary rural folk and the urban-based conservationists who changed the rules of fish and game access in these eastern wild lands at the end of the nineteenth century. Carl Jacoby explores the impact of new conservation rules on the Indian, French Canadian, and Yankee farmers and loggers who used the Adirondack forest for subsistence and forage. They were, he suggests, defending their own alternative conservation codes based on mutual neighborly concerns and subsistence needs. William Parenteau and Richard Judd described a similar conflict over fish and game laws across the New England-Atlantic Canada border. Neither poachers nor conservationists were as one-dimensional as they might seem.³⁹

39. JACOBY, *Crimes Against Nature*, pp. xv-xvi, 1-3, 329. Judd and Parenteau, "More Buck for the Bang: Sporting and the Ideology of Fish and Game Management in Northern

Work by Sean Cadigan on the Canadian side suggests the same in regard to the fisheries. Challenged by intensive fishing technology, Cadigan's Newfoundlanders asserted their customary rights of access as a commons morality that was inherently more sustainable and more equitable than the codes proposed by the government. This is an observation anthropologist Jim Acheson made about Maine lobstering, and Richard Judd has found accurate in describing the New England inshore fisheries.⁴⁰ Although

New England and the Maritime Provinces, 1870-1900," *New England and Maritime Provinces: Connections and Comparisons*, Stephen J. HORNSBY and John G. REID, eds. (Toronto: McGill-Queens University Press/University of Maine Press, forthcoming); JACOBY, "Class and Environmental History," pp. 324-25.

40. Sean T. CADIGAN, "The Moral Economy of Retrenchment and Regeneration in the History of Rural Newfoundland," in Reginald BYRON, ed., *Retrenchment and Regeneration in Rural Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 15, 17; James M. ACHESON, *The Lobster Gangs of Maine* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1988); ACHESON, "Fisheries Management and

officials – and most historians – ignore these local common management regimes, they were active in fish conservation issues on both sides of the border. Whether Jacoby, Cadigan, Parenteau, or Judd are correct in speculating that these local regimes were more sustainable than the official policies that replaced them is still open to debate, but perhaps we should spend less time celebrating our national conservation heroes and more time learning about how farmers, *habitants*, loggers, trappers, and poachers viewed their own use of nature. These commoners probably lacked the spiritual sensibilities we associate with classic conservation, but they understood the

Social Context: The Case of the Maine Lobster Fishery," *Transactions of the American Fisheries Society* 104 (4), pp. 653-668 ; Richard W. JUDD, "Grass-Roots Conservation in Eastern Coastal Maine: Monopoly and the Moral Economy of Weir Fishing, 1893-1911," *Environmental Review* 12 (Summer 1988), pp. 80-103 ; JUDD, "Saving the Fishermen as Well as the Fish : Conservation and Commercial Rivalry in Maine's Lobster Industry, 1872-1933," *Business History Review* 62 (Winter 1988), pp. 596-625.

practical implications of fish, game, and forest depletion. Grassroots conservation is as complicated as it is fascinating, and eastern North America, with its long history of farming and petty resource extraction, provides an excellent venue for exploring its implications.⁴¹

So where does our comparison of environmental history in the U.S. and Canada leave us? As opposed to mainstream environmental history, the environmental history of this eastern bioregion involves many generations of farmers who worked and re-worked the land according to their own class and cultural traditions. Since class and tradition are not components of mainstream environmental history, Canada has a significant role to play in the ongoing development of this field. And the commonalities between Québec

41. CADIGAN, "The Moral Economy," pp. 18-19, 24-25; Brown, *Wild East*, p. 69; JUDD, *Common Lands, Common People*, ch. 3.

and New England history demonstrate the importance of tradition and long-term occupancy in shaping the nature-culture nexus. Nature and society cannot be viewed as separate, and understanding this where it is most apparent – on the eastern borders of the continent – helps us reconstruct environmental history in a way appropriate to modern societies. By defining the nature-culture nexus in more complex ways, we are better prepared to defend this modern landscape against all forms of unsustainable use. What applies in New England, Québec, and Atlantic Canada, in short, applies everywhere today.