

So Vast and Various: Interpreting Canada's Regions in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries Edited by John Warkentin

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Book Reviews

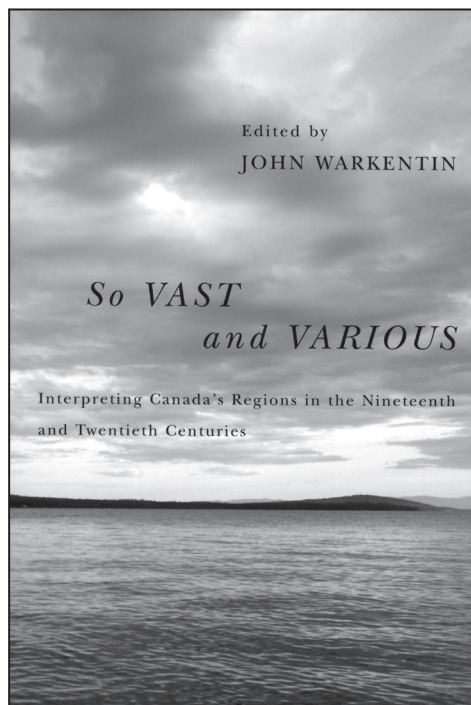
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So Vast and Various: Interpreting Canada's Regions in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Edited by John Warkentin. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010. xi + 508 pages. \$34.95 softcover. ISBN 978-0-7735-3738-5 <www.mqup.ca>

What happens when geographer *cum* editor engages with an immensely diverse terrain, trying to make sense of a classic literary landscape? In the case of the book under review, what a creditable combination, this particular editor and subject matter! Who better than John Warkentin to compile, set in context, and then comment on a body of geographical literature that explores and reveals the character and meaning of Canada's major regions? Warkentin is certainly Canada's pre-eminent literary geographer. Throughout a distinguished career he has written, edited, or masterminded a number of path-breaking studies about Canada's geography,



including *The Historical Atlas of Canada*, several well-received university texts, various scholarly interpretations of the historical cartography and geography of the Canadian

West, and of course, works on the geographical literature of Canada. For his own edification when researching Canada's regional geography, Warkentin has often made reference to the influential texts of authors from times past. For this volume, published in the Carleton Library Series by McGill-Queen's University Press, he has selected some of the best geographical writing on Canada from the early 1800s through to the 1970s. In a comprehensive and thoughtful introductory essay he emphasizes why we too should pay heed to this literary legacy. Through his guidance we are able to experience the interpretive power of authors who have written with passion about Canada's "so vast and various" regions.

There is a decided chronology, a progression in scholarly skill, to the history of writing about Canada's regional geography. Over time, compendiums of geographical facts eventually – and thankfully – gave way to more interpretative geographies where the region and its character was the focus of primary attention. For Warkentin, "a break-through in regional writing came with Joseph Bouchette's fine comprehensive geography of the 1830s, where he laid firm foundations for the major regions we know today." (p. 33) By mid-century, two kinds of books marked the geographical literature: "staid schoolbooks and geographical compendia" and "occasional scintillating, sometimes idiosyncratic, geographical interpretations of the different regions of the country." (p. 33) Warkentin cites Bouchette, George Parkin, J.D. Rodgers, Harold Innis, and Bruce Hutchison as particularly important authors, and has chosen excerpts from their seminal studies to illustrate how these authors both interpreted and added knowledge to our understanding of Canada's regional geography, particularly the evolving spatial pattern of east-west settlement and resource exploita-

tion across southern Canada. To flesh out essential geographical writing on Canada – that is, 'northern North America' – Warkentin turns to selections about the Canadian North written by R.C. Wallace and Thomas Berger. By the varied backgrounds besides geographer of these authors – land surveyor, educator, geologist, political economist, and lawyer – Warkentin alludes to the important fact that there is an essential interdisciplinary thrust to laying bare Canada's regional geography.

For readers of *Ontario History*, the undoubted expectation that Ontario will loom large in these seminal writings is fully realized. But in the truest and most meaningful sense of good regional analysis, the province as a regional entity is fairly compared to other Canadian regions and shown to be an integrating force in the country's spatial character. Warkentin illustrates well the historical context of geographical writing on Ontario, from the earliest descriptive writing of Bouchette on Canada West, through the stultifying school compendiums of provincial pride, and then onto more creative ventures, particularly Bruce Hutchison's manner of incorporating the lives of ordinary Ontarians within discussions of place and region. Moreover, before we dip into the actual observations penned by the chosen authors, Warkentin guides and informs us with gentle, well-placed authority as to the manner of expression and intent of selected passages. But as we venture forward on our own, reading original text as Warkentin wants us to, we quickly realize the value and importance of learning directly from Rodgers, Innis, Hutchison, and the other selected authors. For Ontario and Canada's other principal regions – the North, British Columbia, the Prairie West, Quebec, and Atlantic Canada – we are able to piece together physical, economic, cultural, and political landscapes into a regional whole. And

because the texts are drawn from a century-and-a-half of geographical writing, we are also able to discern transformative change in the regions.

The writing and analytical skill displayed in these classics of Canadian geography is palpable, and so is Warkentin's editorial skill in demonstrating the worth of these seminal studies for interpreting Canada's regional structure. The happy conjoining of skilled editor and fascinating

subject matter has yet again contributed to our understanding of Canada's major regions. In time, no doubt, John Warkentin's regional writing on Canada will itself be critically examined to further elucidate the on-going contribution of seminal studies to the interpretation of a country that is, for certain, "so vast and various."

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North of Superior: An Illustrated History of Northwestern Ontario

By Michel S. Beaulieu and Chris Southcott. Toronto: James Lorimer and Company Ltd., Publishers, 2010. 126 pages. \$34.95 softcover. ISBN 978-1-55277-469-4 <www.lorimer.ca>

Michel S. Beaulieu and Chris Southcott, scholars at Lakehead University, have produced a masterful rendition of northwestern Ontario's regional history. *North of Superior* is not only well situated within the larger provincial and national story but is readily accessible to non-academics and academics alike. Beaulieu, an historian, and Southcott, a sociologist, have combined their talents and knowledge of northwestern Ontario to produce a well-written and illustrated popular history. While many members of the university community dismiss popular history as suspect, it would be a mistake to pass over *North of Superior* on these narrow premises. It is a work of history that reaches out to all Ontarians as essential reading that will enable them to gain a better

understanding of the province's past.

North of Superior explores the history of northwestern Ontario chronologically from pre-contact to the present, each chapter centring upon events important within the region. Chapter one builds up to Saint-Lusson's ceremonial assertion of French title to the region in 1671; chapter two carries through to the merger of the Hudson's Bay Company and North West Company in 1821. This event deeply affected the Métis and First Nation populations' access to goods, employment, and credit, as well as reducing the presence of non-Natives in the region until the late nineteenth century. There follows "sixty-eight years [when] the region was transformed from a fur-trade hinterland into one of whose primary purpose was to serve the industrial

