



The State of Canadian Environmental History

2011

## **Richard Anderson**

Department of Geography, York University

My interest is in urban environmental history in Canada, especially the atmospheric history and historical geography of Toronto. I teach courses where this material features. It seems that lots of people, scholars included, find urban political ecology fascinating. But it seems to me that this fascination is resting upon a very primitive understanding of urban environmental history. The topic has vast research scope, but so little has yet been done. We still lack basic works on urban energy and food consumption, on air pollution history, on waste disposal history, on the historical geographies of urban atmospheric heat, wind, dust, odors and noise. We lack histories of urban vegetation, wildfire, aquatic systems. I can see vast potential therefore for basic empirical studies which, in turn, will transform the ways in which we must interpret the political ecology of cities. It is fashionable, as we all know, to engage in great feats of interpretation, but without the basic data, it is elegant but empty guesswork.

I am an historical geographer, one of a small but dedicated band. I see enormous potential in spatial means of achieving interpretive synthesis, and in spatial forms of historical enquiry. Although environmental historians have done much, I sense that this spatial dimension is still fairly undeveloped in Canadian environmental history.

So the spatial and the empirical, perhaps especially in the urban context, would be my emphasis for the future.

## **Julia Hendry**

Head of Archives and Special Collections,  
Wilfrid Laurier University

The Wilfrid Laurier University Archives and Special Collections collects primary materials on the environment in Canada, with special emphases on water resources, Biosphere Reserves, and Canada's north. The archives aims to document aspects of environmental policy in Canada, particularly the role of nongovernmental agencies and academic researchers in influencing policy about environmental conservation. Some of our holdings include the records of the Canadian Arctic Resources Committee, the Canadian Environmental Law Association, and the Canadian Biosphere Reserve Association.

The Laurier Archives is one of the only archival repositories in the country with a primary focus on collecting non-governmental records about the environment. As a relatively new archives, our collecting work is just beginning. Being part of a discussion about the future of environmental history would help us create collecting priorities; that is, ensuring that we are collecting records that would be useful to researchers.

## Claire Campbell

Department of History, Dalhousie University

In the 2008 film *One Week*, Ben Tyler (Joshua Jackson) is diagnosed with an incurable illness and given a week to live. In a moment of rebellion with his Toronto life, he buys a motorbike, and when he rolls up the rim of his Tim Horton's coffee cup, he's confronted with a preternatural direction: "Go west." He leaves his bewildered fiancée to drive across the country, and a week later, on a beach at Tofino, German tourists tell him, "You live in one of the most beautiful countries in the world." Tyler squints into the sun, smiles, and says simply, "I know."

The movie appeals to me, in part because that's how I grew up learning what we call environmental history. My father taught high school history and geography, which meant he thought this stuff was important, but also, that he got the summers "off." For several years, beginning when I was eight, he packed the family into a Volkswagen camper and drove us around the continent.

Imagine my delight when I realized I could do this for living.

In recent years I have found myself alone in strange, sometimes beautiful, sometimes scary places. Amid knee-high grasses blown horizontal by wind in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains (beautiful). On a deserted gravel highway in the Labrador interior (scary). Lost in north Winnipeg (strange and scary). For me, this is the real joy of doing environmental history. I feel as though I can begin to understand what Arthur Lower once called the Canadian "heritage of space."

Such immersion produces a kind of sensual empathy, because it enables me to imagine what happened here. It makes me a better teacher, because I can tell a story that has to be told in three dimensions in order to make sense. Queenston Heights isn't just a pretty name.

The other gift of standing small against the land and sky is that it can nurture an interesting kind of humility. I don't feel like an expert on the places I write or teach about; I feel curious about them, affection towards them, and an ardent belief in their importance, but not confident expertise. Years of research about the Georgian Bay aren't actually a lot of help in the Georgian Bay. Destabilizing our feeling of authority toward the natural world is a good lesson, not just for the academic but for humanity in general.

Instead, I spend a lot of my time knitting together people from different places with different kinds of knowledge, for research projects and team-taught classes. Some days this means I feel more like a sociable hostess than a scholar, but generally I feel useful. The environmental historian can play the role of facilitator well, for a couple of reasons. Carrying that feeling of being small in the landscape has something to do with it: knowing you alone can't possibly have all the answers.

But we expect historians in particular to be disciplinarily multilingual and intellectually flexible – after all, our field ostensibly encompasses the whole of human experience (or even the whole of that experience in its environmental setting). And it's partly the historian's training to look for patterns and connections from where we sit, perched on the ledge of the present; so it's natural to try to make those connections between other scholarships. I also think my generation has tended to lean

away from specialized, pluralist social histories of Canada in favour of “big” stories that we hope have an element of national significance or public service. That’s a work in process, though.

The Nova Scotia Natural History Museum chose to call its new forest history exhibit Netukulimk, a Mi’kmaq word that translates roughly as connectedness, interdependency. It personalizes the concept of ecological relationships by asking visitors to “find your place in the forest,” and quite clearly advocates ecological responsibility (in a province, incidentally, openly divided on forest management priorities). So here’s my question for environmental historians: are we prepared to do the same? Do we study the environmental past because we want to better understand the past, or because we want to better understand the environment?

There’s been much handwringing among historians – including those involved in NiCHE – about communicating our work to a public audience. But this seems to be about raising historical awareness generally, rather than weighing in on issues such as climate change or resource extraction. Where is the humanities’ counterpart for David Schindler, the University of Alberta’s ecologist who has publically challenged the tar sands projects for their water contamination? We have allowed public discussions of environmental policy to become the domain of scientific research and scientific language, when environmental protection and sustainability – how humans are to exist on and with this planet – are fundamentally questions for the humanities.

This may be heretical, but I don’t “do” history for its own sake. I’m an historian because it’s the way I’m intellectually wired, the worldview or the toolkit that

comes most easily to me; it's not an end in itself. Rather, it's the places I write and teach about that matter. If you wonder what an historian could bring to education about the environment, I'd give you too long a list: the origins of industrial orchards in the Annapolis Valley; plantations and land ownership in the colonial New World; wildlife conservation in Canada's national parks; the role of watersheds in defining North American borders. If you ask what an historian was doing at COP 15 in 2009, I'd tell you she was answering questions about L'Anse aux Meadows and millennial climate changes, the past century of Canada's involvement in the Arctic, and why the provinces were busy disassociating themselves from Ottawa's energy policy.

I came of age as the environment entered the political mainstream; my students have known nothing else. As an environmental historian whose instinct is to take the long view, I understand their frustration with us, with our continued inability or unwillingness to act to protect what is also their "heritage of space."

## Mark J. McLaughlin

Department of History, University of New Brunswick

I believe Canadian environmental history's greatest strength as a field is its subject matter, the landscape and nature of this vast country. As the second largest country in the world, Canada has examples of most types of ecosystems, from the rainforests of British Columbia to the Arctic desert to the coral reefs off of the Atlantic coast. This multitude of environments provides Canadian environmental historians with a fairly unique opportunity to study humanity's changing relationship with nature over time across a wide variety of natural settings, all the while remaining in one politically-defined landscape. The numerous excellent studies that have already been produced by environmental historians in Canada demonstrate the possibilities of the field as it continues to mature. Coupled with the fact that just about any historical field or social or physical science can be utilized under the rubric of "environmental history," environmental historians are well positioned to effect positive change in the twenty-first century. However, those attributes that can be considered the field's strengths could also be its major weaknesses. The almost limitless number of topics upon which Canadian environmental historians could focus their research and the discipline's broad parameters could fracture environmental history to the point that it would have little cohesiveness left as a field. This scenario would make it extremely difficult for environmental historians to remain relevant and would fit in well with the oft-heard complaints that academic research is much too "ivory tower."

In order to avoid that outcome, I believe the discipline could assume an overarching, singular purpose. I propose that Canadian environmental historians position themselves to be key players in future policy debates about human-environmental interactions. Environmental history is an ideal analytical framework for societies seeking solutions to a variety of problems, including natural resource allocation, climate change, population growth, and increasing levels of pollution. Detailing how humanity's relationship with nature has changed over time can provide a "road map" of past mistakes and lessons learned or not learned. Canadian environmental historians could generally agree to focus their research on (dare I say it) "practical" concerns, while the multitude of environments present in Canada would almost certainly meet the individual's desire to study the topic of his/her choice. I also suggest that a four-pronged approach to greater public engagement could be adopted by environmental historians. I envision it as a sort of full-society environmental history teach-in, one that focuses on students, laypersons and civic groups, policymakers, and private industry. Starting at the primary and secondary levels, Canadian history classes could be revamped to include more on humanity's changing relationship with nature over time, rather than simply focusing on the creation of civic institutions and "Canadianness"; similar sorts of courses would continue at the post-secondary level. In addition, environmental historians should give more presentations to the general public and civic groups, especially when the presentations intersect with local environmental debates. We should also strive to include in our events and engage with as many government officials and policymakers as possible, so they can be exposed to

our methods and ways of thinking. This is particularly important for the types of policy changes that will be needed for the sort of societal change that environmental historians would be trying to achieve (for example, see the modifications in history courses in public schools mentioned above). Finally, environmental historians could engage private industry, perhaps to coordinate and fund local environmental seminars and initiatives. While this sort of full-society engagement would be incredibly complex and difficult to achieve, I believe it could be extremely fruitful. It also begs the question of the role of activism within environmental history. Such problems seem minor, though, when compared to the human-environmental problems facing Canada and all other societies in the world. I believe this sort of greater engagement would allow Canadian environmental history to remain relevant, give the field a general focus, and serve as an example for societies all around the globe.

## Jennifer Silver

Marine Laboratory, Duke University

Canada is frequently imagined – and therefore, governed – in terms of monolithic natures (e.g., temperate rainforest, boreal forest, arctic tundra, great lakes). Public discourse, and sometimes, scientific research on topics such as regional politics and economic development, territoriality, geopolitics and conservation, and even indigenous knowledge and sovereignty, often assume social and/or ecological heterogeneity over space and time. This is problematic as dominant understandings tend to ground policy, property rights and access, and cross-cultural relations.

Over the last one to two decades, however, scholars of Canadian environmental history and historical geography have drawn important attention to the contingent and power-laden social and economic processes through which nature is constructed or produced, and moreover, how nature is a significant actor in and of itself. This work has several important implications. First, it deepens the potential for individuals and communities to understand themselves and those who they co-inhabit places and regions with. Second, it brings much-needed historical context to contemporary debates and tensions over access to, and management of resources and the environment. Finally, it has the potential to build the spaces and dialogues necessary to imagine and enact alternative, more flexible and just, nature-society relations in the future.

Arguably, oceans and marine ecosystems that fall under Canadian jurisdiction have not received the same

degree of nuanced scholarly attention as their terrestrial counterparts. Yet, fisheries and aquaculture, offshore gas and oil, Arctic sovereignty, sea level rise, ocean acidification, and marine conservation are amongst the most prominent of the nation's current 'sustainability' concerns. Political, regulatory, and economic action on any of these issues must be informed by a solid understanding of the diversity inherent to the spaces and resources in question. For these reasons, exploring the social-ecological histories and politics of present seascapes, and thinking about how they might inform future use, has become a driving motivator of my emerging research program.

Currently, I am most interested in the history and expansion of industrial aquaculture in Canada. With my dissertation, I explored oyster and clam aquaculture on the West Coast of Vancouver Island. I am using my current work as a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow to document the history and conditions surrounding the introduction of new or novel species, such as a hybrid scallop. As a human geographer trained in political ecology, I would be keen to engage with, and learn from the diverse community of historians and geographers that participate in NiCHE.

## **Michèle Dagenais**

Département d'histoire, Université de  
Montréal

Je pense que la situation de l'histoire environnementale est plutôt positive pour un ensemble de raisons: la centralité des préoccupations pour l'environnement dans l'actualité; la quantité de programmes de financement de la recherche qui valorise les travaux dans ce domaine, l'intérêt des étudiants pour ce domaine, etc. L'HE a un rôle social important à jouer en ce qu'elle peut permettre d'historiciser la notion d'environnement et les rapports entre société et environnement, généralement considérés en termes normatifs. Il importerait que les historiens participent plus aux débats publics pour apporter un point de vue critique face aux discours alarmistes trop souvent les seuls considérés et qui ont pour effet de paralyser les individus. Il serait important de montrer que les rapports société-environnement résultent de choix et de processus historiques. Un autre défi consiste à montrer que les historiens de l'environnement ne sont pas des militants environnementalistes mais bien des chercheurs soucieux d'apporter des éclairages documentés sur les enjeux environnementaux actuels. Un peu comme l'histoire des femmes et du genre a réussi à le faire, il faut que l'HE soit en mesure de prendre sa place comme un domaine du savoir indépendant de la base militante.

## **Philip Van Huizen**

Department of History, University of British  
Columbia

To be honest, I'm not sure that there is such a thing as Canadian environmental history. Despite the fact that there has been a vast increase in environmental histories about Canada over the last decade, there is little that is unique about most of this work – no discernible “Canadian school” of environmental history. Rather, the Canadian version of the field is better described as an extension of U.S. environmental history northwards. The setting and the people involved are different, but the basic arguments behind the majority of new Canadian projects come from environmental histories south of the border. On top of this, Canada's main conference for environmental history is the annual American Society for Environmental History (ASEH) meeting, and the main outlet for Canadians publishing articles on environmental history remains the American journal *Environmental History*.

In many ways, the strong influence of the United States on Canadian environmental history makes sense. Environmental history originated out of the U.S. environmental movement, thus any expansion of the field into other parts of the world necessarily builds upon these foundational histories. In addition, as some environmental historians are increasingly arguing, nature does not adhere to national boundaries and hence its study shouldn't either, which, for Canada, means the U.S. will almost always play a role in its history. Finally, the social trends that have had such an enormous impact on nature in the United States – industrialization, capitalist development,

suburbanization, wilderness preservation, etc. – are not specific to that country, something that environmental historians around the world, including in Canada, have importantly proven.

But as much as nature has crossed international boundaries it has also been completely altered by them and it is important to understand how this nationalization of nature occurred. One way of doing so would be to directly confront the impact of the United States on Canada (as well as on Canadian environmental history). Becoming a nation in the shadow of one of the globe's most dominant powers has had a unique impact on the formation of Canadian environments, especially considering the fact that Canada has been the U.S.'s largest trading partner for decades. This has affected nearly every aspect of Canada's environment, including the settlement of its residents predominantly along the forty-ninth parallel and the increasing over-development of its natural resources. One consequence of this is that the Canadian environmental movement has developed differently than its American counterpart, gathering strength from anti-Americanism as well as from a concern for a degrading environment.

Furthermore, focusing on the effects of borders as much as on transnational themes would also contribute to the study of global environmental history. Decolonization and the subsequent creation of a tremendous number of new nation-states was one of the most important legacies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, something that has been sorely understudied in environmental history. The fact that Canada was at the forefront of this process means that studying the formation of Canada and the nationalization of its nature would contribute immensely

to an understanding of how the transnational phenomenon of decolonization played out so differently in each created country.

For Canadian environmental history to matter to more people than just Canadian environmental historians the field needs to have a broader appeal. Ironically, one of the ways this can happen is by investigating how different environments in Canada became Canadian (and just what, exactly this means), rather than how Canadian environmental history exemplifies trends in the United States. Such inquiries will create interest amongst other Canadian scholars and will push the larger field of environmental history in new directions.

## Mark Leeming

Department of History, Dalhousie University

The theme of natural agency is worn out. Outside of their field, environmental historians in Canada may well have to continue to make the case now and then for the capacity of environment to condition and restrain human action, but the best work of the future will have to concentrate on some other central theme. The two that hold the most promise are Aboriginal and regional histories.

Aboriginal history has been growing for years as a component of Canadian environmental history, and the field has come to a point where no one who proposes a place biography of any sort can contemplate ignoring the Native role. Undoubtedly, the result has been a better and more complete picture of the past, but this is also an area of history that can not escape the politics of the present, for it is a politics that makes ready use of history. (Indeed, it makes history, as William Turkel pointed out in *The Archive of Place*.) The myth of the Ecological Indian is pernicious and dehumanizing, yet it is promulgated by popular historians and defended by some scholars on grounds of political expedience in an era when Native land claims remain unresolved. The relationship and reciprocal influences between Native peoples and the environment, therefore, presents Canadian environmental historians not only with a subject rich in unstudied lacunae, but also with an obligation to inform one of the country's most important and contentious political debates.

While Aboriginal environmental history in Canada has developed over a period of years to the point where it may provide a major theme for the next decades, our

engagement with our internal regions and transborder environments is more tenuous. Canadian environmental history has tended too much to case studies and the local scale. Perhaps we worry that, while we want to join a global conversation, we will disappear behind our looming Southern neighbour should we take the stage with anything less than a history as big as Canada, and therefore we cling to the local. The solution for Canadian historians of all fields, but doubly so for environmental historians, is to give up any ambition to match other over-abstracted national syntheses. Regionalism is our national character, our area of greatest historiographical experience (and conflict), and can be our best passport. Without assuming *a priori* a national or local frame of reference for social environmental history, Canadian environmental historians can challenge a global scholarship on environmentalism and environmental justice that often does just that. And by extending our regional studies to larger trans-border bioregions (the Acadian forest or the cordillera, for example) we can explore environmental, political, economic, and cultural similarities and differences across local, provincial/state, and international borders. With such an approach we can join Pacific historiographies, or Atlantic, or Arctic, or Prairie. Far from the *entrée* to continentalism that Matthew Evenden and Graeme Wynn warned against in 2009, transborder bioregional studies are a perfect forum for Canadian environmental historians to take the global stage.

## Diogo de Carvalho Cabral

University of British Columbia

It is difficult to think of Canada, past or present without considering the forest. Yet Canadian scholarship accounts for only a small part of the large outpouring of writing on forests by historians and historical geographers in the last few decades. As a Brazilian student writing a dissertation on the Atlantic forests of colonial Brazil, I have immersed myself in this international literature and I am spending nine months at UBC, reading and discussing Canadian environmental and forest history with Graeme Wynn. I believe I can offer a unique perspective on the needs and challenges facing those who seek to write environmental histories of forests in Canada and elsewhere, as well as some thoughts for fruitful discussion about some of the ways ahead for environmental history more generally.

I begin by asking: How should an environmental history of the forest be written? My point here is that an environmental history of the forest is something different from an historical ecology of the forest. Although historical ecologies are "histories of the forest" in the sense that they deal with events and uniqueness, they provide a limited view of the past. Their concern is primarily with the way forests change, through interactions with climate, pests, fire, and other agents and natural processes. From an historical ecological perspective it doesn't matter whether these changes are related to human manipulation; after all, history is a mode of knowledge and not an ontological property. Any interest in "environmental impacts" goes in the same direction: it doesn't really matter why people thought and used the forest as they did, it is the "ecological

outcomes" of these concepts and uses that are important. Human action is considered external to the structures and processes examined, as if the action itself were not also a product of the transformations that it allegedly incited.

Environmental historians, by their turn, deal with internal processes of construction in which humans and nature form a whole in motion. This involves writing a history of the relationship itself, a history of socionature. Representations of and social attitudes toward forests are not "outside" the forests, but actually constitute it, they are also its constituent elements - as much as trunks, roots and vines. The felling of the forest is the forest, conflicts over forest resources are the forests, the names of trees are the forests, forestry authorities are the forests. Environmental historians are less interested in ecology's abstract forest, than in the forest as historical being. And all historical beings change each other as they change in a changing world,. Environmental history is - or at least should be - a radically relational form of interpretation. In this writing, nothing is categorically determined, outside of historical and geographical frames. The challenge is to "bring up" the forest from the narrative rather than build a narrative "around" a functional and physiographic category - The Forest. Forests emerge as historical beings as we narrate their relationships with other "things": cities, techniques, social conflicts, the lived world.

Such an approach, asserts the Brazilian environmental historian José Pádua, offers a way to overcome the stark divisions between nature and society, and points toward "an integrative and dynamic reading based on the observation of the world". To this end, the narrative needs to move seamlessly between the non-human and human, between the organic and the

organizational, material and representational, the local and global, but it also needs to be carried forward smoothly, between storytelling and analysis. Only then are we able to shift the focus from the external relations between pure and objectified realms to the networks through which Society and Nature mingle and take place as concrete events.

## **Richard Rajala**

Department of History, University of Victoria

The environment, conceptualized in different ways, has long figured prominently in the writing of Canadian history. Now, after a somewhat slow start, environmental history has indeed joined the mainstream. Having entered the field more or less by accident in the course of researching a PhD on a labour history topic, I remain enthusiastic about research that links class to the dynamics of environmental exploitation. What are the present strengths? That's easy to answer: the number of dedicated young scholars making their way through graduate programs and taking up teaching positions. The field, I think, should go in exactly the direction it seems to be going, which is reflected in rich diversity of approach, subject and method. In 2004 Graeme Wynn compared the Canadian field with American scholarship and called it "underdeveloped." Quite a lot of progress has been made since then, however, with veteran scholars turning to environmental topics and a younger generation turning out innovative work on the north, the urban setting, water, forests, the environmental movement - the list goes on. In the last five years I have supervised theses on the environmental consequences of CPR construction, reclamation, a Communist logger who became an environmentalist, land surveying, and the family camping trip in postwar B.C. Current students are studying the history of B.C.'s Adams River, and land-use planning processes. Together, these projects touch on the three main varieties of environmental history identified by J.R. McNeil: material; cultural/intellectual; and political. In

other words, based on this small sample, the field is developing quite nicely without any need to push things in any particular direction. I do wonder if we have reached the stage where a journal along the lines of *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, or the short-lived *Canadian Papers in Business History*, is in order. Younger scholars in particular might benefit from a forum devoted to publishing 6-8 articles annually, although it would be important for established scholars to contribute as well. Perhaps the conference could consider ways of making this idea a reality.

Having largely made the case for my own irrelevance at the EH+ conference, in that I lack a grand vision, I do believe the event to be a timely one. Connections are not easily forged in this vast country, although *Niche* serves wonderfully in this regard. Achieving greater policy relevance is certainly a worthy goal, as is reaching a wider audience. In fact, I am impressed with the extent to which natural resource managers want to hear what we have to say. And here, I believe that we are well positioned, for environmental narratives tend to be both important and accessible. Simply put, historians and geographers in this field tend to write well. Making that scholarship matter is the challenge, one the conference is wise to contemplate.

## Alan MacEachern

Department of History, University of Western  
Ontario

### *An environmental history of Confederation?*

Would exploring how the environment figured in episodes in the standard Canadian history narrative expand our understanding of such episodes, and introduce new methods, sources, etc. to a broader Canadian academic and public audience – or would it just reinforce existing notions of what’s important in Canadian history? It would be worth considering this question now; Confederation’s sesquicentennial approaches.

### *“Go big and go home”?*

I met one of Canada’s leading historians for the first time just moments after receiving an honourable mention for the Macdonald Prize. He asked me what my book was about. I told him: national parks in Atlantic Canada. He said: “Geez, it must be good.” I knew what he meant. In my historical research and writing so far, my inclination has been to try to say big things about small topics. I’m trying to move toward saying big things about bigger topics. Not just for the sake of relevance and in search of a larger readership, but to engage with more scholarship and force more scholars to engage with me. What would the Canadian environmental history / historical geography field look like in 10 years if a whole group of practitioners today pledged that their next book would be national in scope (it’s a start) and cover at least a century (it’s a start)? What if we researched and wrote more like we taught? What if we differentiated ourselves from other nations’

environmental history communities and other Canadian history subfields by putting ourselves in the position of dealing more with each other's work and so raising the bar on our own? What if we tried to bump up against one another, rather than tried to steer clear of one another? It would be a different kind of collaboration.

*And speaking of collaboration....*

NiCHE has promoted collaboration in our field, but the result has often been a sort of "parallel collaboration," where individual researchers network with other individual researchers and then, quite often, produce a compilation of individuals' research. There have been few examples of collaborative research teams or of using digital technologies to facilitate widespread collaboration (wikis? crowdsourcing?). Given that SSHRC is moving more to teams, partnerships, and programs that fund research as well as mobilization and dissemination, should NiCHE be encouraging more such collaboration in the next few years?

*And speaking of which....*

What's to become of NiCHE? In 2014, the SSHRC Cluster grant that since 2007 has given us not only the great majority of our funds but also an executive structure (one applicant, 7 co-applicants) will wind down. No one on the executive sees our structure, let alone what we do, as fixed. 2014 requires, and is an opportunity for, reinvention. I have always thought that the surest way to ensure NiCHE's long-term viability was to make it indispensable to the Canadian environmental history / historical geography community, so 2014 will be something of a test of which elements, if any, the community finds most useful and wishes to see continue in some fashion. What

should NiCHE look like in 2015, 2020? Should it foreground its associational character or be more project-oriented? Should it focus on virtual (e.g. niche-canada.org) or in-person (e.g. CHESS) networking? I'd like to devote a little time in EH+ to beginning that discussion.

## Jeffers Lennox

Department of History, University of British  
Columbia

Environmental history has boomed in Canada over the past decade in part because it can be all encompassing. This breadth is both a strength and a weakness: on the one hand, it helps Canadian historians approach old topics in new ways and encourages multi-disciplinary debate; on the other hand, any genre that explains everything explains nothing. In 2002, when Atlantic history was coming to dominate early modern and colonial studies, David Armitage declared “we are all Atlanticists now.” The same thing might be said for environmental historians. However, just as Atlantic history has been criticized for failing to address important facets of historical inquiry – most notably Aboriginals and Africans – so too must environmental history refine its scope and explain what can and cannot be included.

The present strength of Environmental history, especially for Canadian historians, is that it presents a useful entry into areas too often overlooked by Canadian historians. Pre-confederation history, especially the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, can be fruitfully examined through the lens of geographic knowledge and perceptions of land. American scholars are fascinated with this era, yet studies of Canada tend to begin around 1840 – Ian McKay’s “liberal order” framework is an excellent example. Environmental history, like Atlantic history, can help connect pre-national stories in promising ways. For example, investigations that move beyond historical geography (which is often limited to how land influences

development and interaction) can communicate with the international scholarship of critical geography (which examines how perceptions of land, constructed boundaries, and geographic competition shaped human relations and political action) to demonstrate the role played by northern North American in shaping early economies, imperial competition, and settlement.

Environmental history also opens up all regions of Canada to equally important research. Atlantic Canada, for so long on the losing end of binary comparisons in terms of development and economic strength in Confederation, can instead be examined in light of French, British, and Native competition and co-existence in a region shaped by each group's understanding of land value and land use. Furthermore, regions that feature so lightly in traditional narratives of Canadian history – the far north and the west, specifically – take on new meaning in international studies of settlement, exploration, and resource extraction in ways not possible within the rubric of a specifically national story.

As the field progresses, scholars should engage in more transnational studies to cement Canada's position in the broader context of environmental history. Regional studies will help elide national borders, reframe traditional arguments, and de-centre our understanding of Canadian history by forcing us to acknowledge the ultra-national influence on our geographic and environmental histories. Such a path will have the added bonus of featuring understudied eras (pre-Confederation), regions (the Atlantic), and peoples (Aboriginals), all of which tend to fall away in the face of dominant trends in Canadian history. Moreover, new projects of this type will rehabilitate regional studies, which have been criticized by some for

weakening national unity. These types of studies, and others, will serve two fundamental purposes: first, they will stimulate new ideas and debates within the international context of environment and geographic knowledge; and second, these projects will force us to re-evaluate our current interpretation of national stories and histories, which will no doubt remain a central element of historical education in Canada. Consequently, Canada will be not only internationalized as a subject of inquiry, but also revitalized in terms of understanding what separates this country from our immediate and distant neighbours.

## **Michael Del Vecchio**

Department of History, University of Western Ontario

The biggest obstacle facing the future of Environmental History is its dissemination, particularly at the undergraduate and high school level. As a first year PhD candidate, I am still very new to field. When I met with my supervisor during the summer of 2009 before beginning my MA, I will admit, I really wasn't sure what Environmental History was, or that it even existed. Four years of an undergraduate degree in History at UWO (NiCHE's physical home), an undergraduate thesis on the Hudson's Bay Company, and a year at Teachers College for History, and I had not been introduced to the field.

In retrospect, this seems quite bizarre and perplexing. Why had I not heard of Environmental History during my undergrad?...when researching for my undergraduate thesis?...when being taught how to teach history to the next generation of students? Why did it take me until grad school until I was exposed to the discipline? Why was Environmental History not present (or as present as it should/could be) in undergrad and high school classrooms?...or even in grad school classrooms? In the fall of 2010, I was enrolled in UWO's first ever Environmental History graduate seminar.

In the almost four years since I completed my undergrad, the amount of environmentally themed courses in all disciplines has greatly expanded and will likely continue to do so. UWO's collaborative research program in Environment and Sustainability, in which I am currently enrolled, and the addition of an EH seminar to

the history department's roster, attest to this. But is this expansion in teaching happening at a fast enough rate to keep up with the progress of the field? While the boundaries of Environmental History research are constantly being tested and pushed, can we say the same for how that research is disseminated to students? Some EH scholars have suggested the historian of the future will assess the twentieth century, not in terms of the World Wars or the Cold War, but in terms of environmental change. If this is the future of History, then it is imperative that we begin now to close the gap between researching and teaching the field.

## **Merle Massie**

School of Environment and Sustainability,  
University of Saskatchewan

*Accentuate the Positive: Attitude, Storytelling, and the Future of Environmental History*

April, 1934. Sargent McGowan of the East Weyburn district of Saskatchewan loaded his settlers's effects – farm implements, stock, and furniture, the entire contents of his moveable life – on a boxcar at a remote siding. Blinded by a black blizzard when the train pulled out, McGowan could not see the train's caboose although his settler car was directly in front of it. He and his family abandoned the arid plains and headed for the north country, to Paddockwood, Saskatchewan. When he arrived, there was still two feet of snow on the ground. The contrast of south and north, dry and wet, bust and boom were palpable to McGowan. Paddockwood was enjoying a relative boom due to new prairie refugee immigrants, the cordwood industry, and the newly-created Prince Albert National Park and corollary Lakeland region on Paddockwood's doorstep.

The first part of McGowan's story is familiar to most Canadians: the Dust Bowl, the Great Depression, and the massive out-migrations from the farms of the western interior. The second part, McGowan's decision to relocate at the forest edge, is less well known. Yet, in the face of ecological and environmental devastation – the story we're more familiar with – over forty-five thousand people in Saskatchewan (and a correspondingly sizable number in Manitoba and Alberta) moved to parkland and forest

environments during the Great Depression. In these regions, wood for fuel and building purposes, water, hay, the ability to grow a garden, the harvest potential of forest and aquatic resources (berries, fish, wild game), the cordwood industry and related off-farm occupations and the burgeoning northern recreational landscape became important pull factors in the decision-making process. Sometimes, in analyzing what refugees were fleeing from, it is imperative to evaluate that which they were fleeing to.

My purpose in telling this story is to suggest to current and future environmental historians (and historians in general) that by focusing exclusively (or even mostly) on the headline-creating, environmentally-devastating stories, historical analysis runs the real risk of missing or marginalizing important aspects. For Great Depression historians, the temptation to focus on the ‘big story’ of ecological devastation and reaction obscures the subtler story at play: a proactive choice to move to an environment that allowed humans to live within earth’s bounds, participate in foodsharing and exchange, engage social capital, and pursue a ‘back to the land’ idealism meant to mitigate the worst effects of the Depression.

Finding the positive serves a two-fold purpose for environmental historians. One, it will shape your narrative in new and interesting ways, perhaps revealing much more at play than at first could be perceived. Two – and perhaps even more importantly – accentuating the positive once in a while could help make your narratives more appealing to the general public. Worn down by a constant barrage of environmental news, calls for action and the ever-present spectre of global climate change, the public is (so pollsters reveal) tuning out. How do we, as environmental historians with an important connection to

public audiences, draw them back? Tell them a side of the story that they have not heard before, and perhaps they will tune back in.

## Matthew Evenden

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British Columbia

Something like a field of environmental history, drawing on the talents of historians and geographers, has sprung up in Canada in the last decade and a half, and we could document this with the usual metrics of a field's success: new positions, books and book series, organizations, courses and textbooks. There is a lot to be proud of and to celebrate and much to be thankful for besides. At the First World Congress of Environmental History in Copenhagen, Canadian scholars and scholarship were much in evidence. One of the organizers joked to me that there were more Canadians present than Danes. Environmental historians have asked new questions about Canadian history and put well-known problems in a new light. They have also provided perspective and context for a host of communities interested in contemporary environmental issues. At the international level, NiCHE and the NiCHE website attract a lot of attention. The field appears better organized in Canada than elsewhere, or so some international colleagues tell me. Canadian environmental historiography, on the other hand, attracts less attention than our institutions, by an order of magnitude.

And so some questions: Is the Canadian field simply derivative? What are the major historiographic debates? Is our collective approach to organization through NiCHE incidentally deflecting debate? Does the strong contribution of geographical scholarship in the Canadian field give our work a different cast, or not, and if not, why? And just who reads environmental history? Our

major scholars have not ventured as successfully into the popular realm as some of our American colleagues, or without as much notice. Speaking of Americans, do they read Canadian work, and if not, and beyond the platitudes, why? Do scientists consult our work? Do those working on contemporary environmental policy? We have reached other Canadian historical scholars (with more and less success), but shouldn't our ambitions extend beyond that?

Agenda-setting is a dangerous game, especially when academics continue to work as individuals with various allegiances to different scholarly communities, including departments, associations, fields, and subject specialties. There is no team to organize, no collective project to assign, unless of course we dream one up.

While it is difficult to predict the course of a field, I do think it is worth reflecting on how we position our studies in a loose, collective way, particularly as we are thinking of a field whose roots are both deep and shallow, and because we are considering a country which draws limited international attention and increasingly less domestic attention.

I'd like to talk further about taking Canadian environmental history out of the accustomed grooves in academic history departments with a view to improving the visibility and reach of our work in both popular, scientific and policy-oriented discussions, transcending and problematizing a national framework for our studies, and developing the means to be more bold and international in our choice of subjects and in our execution.

## Sean Atkins

Department of History and Classics,  
University of Alberta

'WHO ARE THESE ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORIANS  
AND WHY DO THEY KEEP FOLLOWING ME?' THE  
BUMPER STICKER SOLUTION TO MAKING  
ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY RELEVANT (AND HIP).

The above query, originally asking, "Who are the Grateful Dead and why are they following me?" was a bumper sticker commonplace enough on the road a couple decades ago yet also a pointed play on words setting it apart from other music-related road messages. There were different ways of encountering the question: An exclusively coded message to fellow 'Heads'; a matter of little relevance—whether one knew of them or not—because the experience was not shared; or an invitation—again whether one had heard of the group or not—to check out the scene if only fleetingly. The message also provides an opportunity to reflect on how people come to learn of, and from each other.

Environmental historians seem to have the first reading down to the finer points through (un)conferences, peer-reviewed articles, monographs, workshops, etc., but the second interpretation still prevails on those routes that circle but do not enter the Academy. So, it is in the third understanding—the interface between the committed and the uninitiated-- where environmental history has an opportunity to ensure the bumper sticker... sticks. Certainly one of the strengths of the environmental history field is its ability to draw great minds equaled only by the

passion in the field that underwrites the conceptualizing. This intertwining of the imaginative-exploring and argument-validation processes, a concept long discussed among and across the sciences and humanities, is more a reflection of the relative academic freedom that we enjoy in Canadian universities—and must continue to be ever-vigilant in passing along to the next generation. The affectations that come with researching and imparting this information to students on some of the most exceptional (and exceptionally challenging) places in Canada is a gift of geography—another strength, albeit one of contingency rather than any semblance of foresight.

Yet, threaded through these two related riches of academic freedom and geographical abundance are blind spots. Environmental history, as history, remains a study of human and environmental change (and continuity). But how do we define these two concepts, especially when they become a unified discipline? In other words, is it time to re-interpret how we view both parts before unifying them? Or is it time to consider a new name for the work that we do? To borrow a phrase taken from another contested and constantly changing area of the Canadian identity, environmental history is no longer a single-hyphen subject. Neither are its practitioners. We are also literary critics, philosophers, political scientists, artists, natural scientists and educators. The output of our work bears this out.

It goes without saying, then, that if the discipline is relevant it must also be hip-- or at least a little less grim. Submitting our work to smaller publishers like Anansi, Gaspereau and Coach House Presses would help broaden the appeal beyond the university audience. Returning to the art of literary non-fiction writing in publications like

The Walrus, Maisonneuve, Geist and Eighteen Bridges (all of which are also electronically accessible) would also allow writers to explore other kinds of writing. Bringing environmental history to the primary and secondary educational curriculums will certainly guarantee future prodigies. But perhaps most importantly, a little more humour and a dose of irony (what is history without irony?), a bit of the lighter touch that only character, charisma and some good old marketing can bring would be a much-needed makeover of the people behind the words. A few tie-died threads, organic veggie burritos and some extended jam band music wouldn't hurt either.

## Sean Kheraj

Department of Humanities, Mount Royal  
University

### *Environment as Analytical Lens*

Depending on whom you ask, environmental history, as a sub-discipline of Canadian history, is either very old or relatively new. When considered from a deeper historiographic perspective, Canadian history has a long tradition of concern with the interrelationship between the environment and national development. Much of the early work of Harold Innis, A.R.M. Lower, Donald Creighton, and J.M.S. Careless in political economy focused on the role of natural resources, geography, and transportation in the construction and development of the Canadian nation-state. This research was preoccupied with an environmentalist interpretation of history, but one that differs significantly from contemporary understandings of environmental history. Early twentieth-century historians, of course, understood and interpreted the relationship between people and environment in a fundamentally different manner. These early historical researchers operated within the context of the predominant environmentalist interpretation of the American past, Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. To some extent, Innis, Lower, Creighton and Careless sought a "made-in-Canada" counter-part to the frontier thesis, which seemed to so neatly explain the origins and development of US democracy and expansion. By 1954, Careless himself admitted that "we can hardly examine the current state of Canadian historiography, and perhaps project its lines of

growth, without giving heavy weight to the North American-Environmentalist view of our history which stemmed originally from Turner's frontier thesis and which still leaves a rich heritage on both sides of the Canadian-American boundary." The environment was the focal point of early narrative analyses of the Canadian nation. [1]

Historical researchers, however, turned away from both national histories and environmentalist views of Canadian history by the 1960s and 1970s, leading to what historical geographer, R. Cole Harris, recently characterized as "the widespread contemporary disinclination to write national histories." The older environmentalist approach to Canadian history was abandoned in the process and somewhat marred by critiques of environmental determinism, beginning with the work of Carl O. Sauer and the development of his concepts of landscape morphology and cultural history. Though more immediately influential in the field of historical geography, Sauer's work provided a foundation for understanding landscape as the product of the interrelationship between humans and the environment, "an area made up of a distinct association of forms, both physical and cultural." As Canadian historiography explored new avenues of biography, and further fragmented into various "limited identities" of social history along lines of ethnicity, class, and gender, the remaining historians and historical geographers of Canadian political economy reinterpreted the staples approach from a regional perspective, most prominently in H.V. Nelles's *The Politics of Development* and Graeme Wynn's *Timber Colony*. [2]

Environmental history, then, has deep roots in Canadian historiography, but as a deliberately defined sub-discipline, its roots in Canada are relatively shallow. Most Canadian historians would agree that the field of environmental history in Canada was specifically inspired by pioneering work from the US by scholars including Roderick Nash, Alfred Crosby, Donald Worster, John Opie and Carolyn Merchant. In 1970, six years prior to the founding of the American Society for Environmental History, Nash bravely attempted to define the proto-field with a somewhat premature “State of Environmental History” article, the first of many to appear over the course of the next couple decades. By the early 1990s, US environmental historians had more clearly defined the field, its theories and methodologies, focusing explicitly on the changing reciprocal relations between humans and non-human nature in US history.[3]

Because of the environmentalist traditions of historical research in Canadian political economy, environmental history seemed like a natural fit for Canadian historians. In an effort to catch up with their counterparts in the US, emerging environmental history researchers in Canada re-discovered books like *The Politics of Development* and other works in Canadian political economy because, according to Nelles, “the limitations on the land placed upon social, economic, and political development were among its main concerns.” This early wave of interest in environmental history, then, focused mainly on a revival of older works in political economy and a general recognition of environmental issues in the current literature. As Alan MacEachern put it in 2002, “there are more historians deciding that because their topic has an environmental angle – their battle

scarred Belgian landscape, their politician made his money in forestry, their striking coal miners mined coal when they were not striking – environmental history must be part of what they do.” Environmental history in Canada by the beginning of the twenty-first century was somewhat methodologically vague and in need of new original research. The first textbook reader in Canadian environmental history, *Consuming Canada*, reflected this early approach to the field, consisting of a loosely organized collection of reprinted articles and book chapters.[4]

Within the past few years, environmental history in Canada has experienced substantial growth. In 2004, the Network in Canadian History & Environment was awarded initial funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to coordinate the first scholarly organization for environmental history research in Canada. In terms of publications, there has been significant growth in both articles and original monographs in Canadian environmental history, led by the UBC Press *Nature/History/Society* series. A number of environmental history researchers have been appointed Canada Research Chairs and we are just beginning to see history departments seek tenure-track appointments for Canadian environmental history. The largest area of growth in environmental history research continues to be at the graduate level with numerous new M.A. and Ph.D. projects on a wide variety of topics. Finally, environmental history can be more regularly found in undergraduate course calendars and, within just the past two years, two excellent textbooks in Canadian environmental history have been published.[5]

The challenge, of course, for those attending the EH+ workshop will be to determine some future directions for the field. While environmental history research in Canada has grown substantially within the past decade, arguably becoming more mainstream in historical scholarship, it has yet to mature methodologically. Canadian researchers have yet to fully embrace the methodological frameworks for environmental history laid out by leading scholars like Carolyn Merchant, Donald Worster, and Alfred Crosby. Environmental history, according to these scholars, is more than simply a distinct set of topics in historical research concerned with some aspect of the natural world. It is more than just history with trees. "It becomes easy to forget," as Ted Steinberg argues, "that the earth's climate, geology, and ecology are not simply a backdrop, but an active, shaping force in the historical process." From her earliest work in the field, Merchant was clear that environmental history "asserts the idea of nature as a historical actor," or rejects, as Worster put it in 1988, "the conventional assumption that human experience has been exempt from natural constraints." Environmental history, as it was conceived by some of its earliest practitioners, is a revisionist methodological approach to studying the past from a biological perspective. Crosby was perhaps the most explicit in his argument that the field should not merely be understood as a sub-discipline of history but as an entirely new way of understanding the past. He believed that "[h]istorians were purblind in considering environmental matters," and that by not viewing humans as biological actors, "historians and people in general can overlook subjects of colossal importance." This historical "astigmatism" could, according to Crosby, be corrected by adopting an

environmental history approach, which he characterized as a kind of analytical lens, one that could alter traditional understandings of history. His own research on ecological imperialism still stands as one of the most significant reinterpretations of global imperialism that has had a lasting impact on historical scholarship outside the field of environmental history. Future environmental history research in Canada should strive for this kind of revisionist impact.[6]

Environmental history must integrate into and influence Canadian history research as an interpretive framework and analytical lens for studying the past. Just as gender, class, and ethnicity have reshaped our understanding of Canadian history within the last generation, so too should historians consider the material limits of the interrelationship between humans and the non-human world. When reconsidering the role of James Wolfe in the conquest of Quebec, historians might reasonably ask questions about how his decisions were informed by mid-eighteenth century understandings of masculinity or his status within British class hierarchy. So too should historians think about Wolfe's place in history as a biological actor, suffering from an unknown gastrointestinal disorder on the eve of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham. Historical studies of climate and epidemiology might clarify still unanswered questions about the influence of an agricultural crisis and cholera in Lower Canada prior to the outbreak of violent rebellion in the late 1830s. We are already seeing fine examples of this kind of revisionist work, including Esyllt Jones's study of the influence of the 1918 influenza epidemic on class relations in Winnipeg leading up to the 1919 general strike and Liza Piper's case study of the impact of the 1815

eruption of the Tambora volcano in Indonesia on agriculture in colonial New Brunswick. By using an environmental history approach to studying the past, these historians have begun to establish the field as not merely a sub-discipline of Canadian history but something far more pervasive. Rather than producing new monographs isolated from the broader discipline of Canadian history, environmental historians should strive to produce research that engages with a wide range of disciplinary fields of history and, perhaps, challenges older interpretations of Canada's past that were purblind to the biological and socio-economic interdependence of humans and the rest of nature. If taken in this direction, environmental history in Canada is likely see greater growth and influence within the broader discipline.[7]

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[1] Harold Adams Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930); A.R.M. Lower, *Settlement and the Forest Frontier in Eastern Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1936); Donald G. Creighton, *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence: 1760-1850* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1937); J.M.S. Carless, "Frontierism, Metropolitanism, and Canadian History" *Canadian Historical Review* 35 (1) 1954: 1.

[2] R. Cole Harris, *The Reluctant Land: Society, Space, and Environment in Canada before Confederation* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009); Carl O. Sauer, "The Morphology of Landscape" in *Land and Life: A Selection from the Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer*, ed. John Leighly (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) pg. 321 [Originally

published in University of California Publications in Geography 2 (2) 1925: 19-54.]; J.M.S. Careless, "Limited Identities in Canada" Canadian Historical Review 50 (1) 1969: 1-10; H.V. Nelles, *The Politics of Development: Forests, Mines & Hydro-Electric Power in Ontario, 1849-1941* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974); Graeme Wynn, *Timber Colony: A Historical Geography of Early Nineteenth-Century New Brunswick* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

[3] Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1973); Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); John Opie, *The Law of the Land: Two Hundred Years of American Farm Land Policy*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987); Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapter Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Roderick Nash, "The State of Environmental History" In *The State of American History*, edited by Herbert J. Bass, 249-60 (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970).

[4] H.V. Nelles, *The Politics of Development: Forests, Mines & Hydro-Electric Power in Ontario, 1849-1941* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005 [1974]) xxiii; Alan MacEachern, "Voices Crying in the Wilderness: Recent Works in Canadian Environmental History" *Acadiensis* 31 (2) 2002: 215; Chad Gaffield and Pam Gaffield *Consuming Canada: Readings in Environmental History* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1995).

[5] For an excellent review of recent literature in Canadian environmental history see Anya Zilberstein, "Nature and Nation: Recent Books in Canadian Environmental History" *Journal of Canadian Studies* 42 (3) 2008: 193-207.

[6] Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 4; Carolyn Merchant, "The Theoretical Structure of Ecological Revolutions" *Environmental Review* 11 (4) 1987: 267; Donald Worster, "Appendix: Doing Environmental History" in *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, ed., Donald Worster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 290; Alfred Crosby, "The Past and Present of Environmental History" *American Historical Review* 100 (1995): 1181; Marc Cioc and Char Miller, "Alfred Crosby" *Environmental History* 14 (3) 2009: 564; Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[7] I.L. Epstein and D. Ledin, "Battles and Bowel Disease: The Gastrointestinal Complaints of General James Wolfe" presented at Canadian Digestive Diseases Week 2008 [<http://www.pulsus.com/cddw2008/abs/340.htm>]; Fernand Ouellet argued this was in Le Bas-Canada, 1791-1840: *Changements Structuraux et Crise*, (Editions de l'Universite d'Ottawa), 1976; John B. Osborne "Preparing for the Pandemic: City Boards of Health and the Arrival of Cholera in Montreal, New York, and Philadelphia in 1832." *Urban History Review / Revue d'Histoire Urbaine* 36 (2) 2008: 29-42; Esyllt Jones, *Influenza 1918: Disease, Death, and Struggle in Winnipeg* (Toronto: University of Toronto

Press, 2007); Liza Piper, "Backward Seasons and Remarkable Cold: The Weather Over Long Reach, New Brunswick, 1812-1821" *Acadiensis* 34 (1) 2004: 31-55.

## Stephen Bocking

Environmental and Resource Studies, Trent University

Canadian environmental history is in fine shape. It has many strengths. Among these I would note creative and internationally significant work on: the environmental history of resource extraction and management; regional environmental history; urban environmental history; the environmental history of knowledge (scientific, indigenous, and otherwise); and spatial patterns in environmental history. If few Canadian works are considered among the first rank internationally (and I am not sure this is true), then that says more about the sociology of the environmental history community than it does about intrinsic quality.

Regarding the field's opportunities, there are many, but I would start with the following:

- 1) Development of stronger ties between environmental history and the history of science and other forms of knowledge. The history of knowledge of the Canadian landscape remains mostly unwritten: we have taken only core samples. This history would encompass, among other aspects: knowledge in its international contexts (including transnational scientific communities), the relations between knowledge and local places (which especially brings to the fore the relations between scientific and other forms of knowledge), and the political dimensions of expertise (particularly its roles in the assertion, exercise and contestation of power). Overall, a more sophisticated perspective on the social, political, and substantive

dimensions of knowledge (an area where environmental history, in Canada as elsewhere, does fall down a bit) is worth pursuing.

2) Development of transnational comparisons: between similar and dissimilar environments, forms of knowledge, societies, resource management regimes, and so on.

3) A stronger regional focus to research in environmental history. This could place special emphasis on the spatial patterns that shape human activities and environmental consequences, and the flows of materials, capital, knowledge and other resources into, out of, and within regions.

4) Related to #3, development of stronger ties between environmental historians and non-professionals. In particular, local historical/heritage societies (including those concerned with natural heritage) often have much interest, knowledge, and resources (sometimes moldering away in basement filing cabinets) that could be brought into closer contact with academic historians, for mutual benefit.

5) With respect to teaching: one opportunity is to develop better resources for teaching environmental history in the field. This could include, for example, guides to interpreting landscapes of various kinds.

## **H.V. Nelles**

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McMaster University

*Some scattered thoughts about Canadian Environmental History*

For some reason Canadian Environmental History, in sharp contrast with its US counterpart, emerged as a largely academic field with few connections to the contemporaneous environmental movement. Has this disassociation strengthened or weakened the field? Should efforts be made to build connections?

Many of the practitioners of Business History make their homes in business schools. Environmental History, as practiced in Canada, has relatively weak links to the many schools and faculties of Environmental Studies. Why? Should something be done to change that?

In dark moments it sometimes appears that we are writing our books and articles largely for ourselves. What we are learning is not being conveyed to wider audiences even though some of what we know has policy relevance and the ideas can be readily grasped. What do members of the field need to do to become more effective communicators?

Environmental Historians in Canada - and elsewhere too for that matter - have been more effective advancing social constructivist critiques of science than they have been in using a critical understanding of science as a foundation for analysis. Should we make a concerted effort to strengthen the science base of the field? Have Environmental Historians addressed the major public environmental issues directly? What would

historicizing major issues contribute to public understanding and debate?

Canadian Environmental Historians have written a lot in recent years. What broad generalization could be drawn from their work? Is Environmental History a predictive field?

Canadian Environmental History to this point has been largely geographically self contained, notwithstanding the inherent trans-nationalism of the subject. Should Canadian Environmentalists embrace a comparative turn, seeking out contrasts and similarities across space and time? If so where are our apt comparators?

Do we need to broaden the subject matter and temporal scope of the field? Have we clustered our research in some areas while neglecting other important subjects?

Have fundamental concepts - sustainability, environmental integrity - received a critical "free ride" from the field?

Our field has not been as obsessed with the holy trinity "race, class and gender" as other fields? Should we be more devout?

Is "energy" a concept capable of integrating and synthesizing our work?

## Daniel Macfarlane

Department of History, Carleton University

While environmental history in Canada, and in general, has traditionally incorporated the natural sciences, there is tremendous room for better engaging the social sciences, such as political science and anthropology (geography is an exception as it is already strongly linked to environment history in Canada). As a specific example, I am very interested in the relationship between the “state” and environmental change and environmental policy, and I therefore hope to see more research on that front. I think Canadian scholars already have a good track record of looking at the impact of the government at various levels, likely due to the archival records left by such institutions and the traditional reliance upon archival sources. I find the impact of governments and states on the environment so interesting because of their capacity to undertake organized large-scale environmental change and manipulation.

In looking at both individual and governmental impacts, the topic of historical conceptions of the environment is one of the most important contributions that I think future environmental historians can make. This contribution will be not only to environmental history, but the social and political disciplines, but can show how environmental attitudes, and indeed “science,” are culturally conditioned and shaped. Thus, to invoke Donald Worster’s oft-quoted three strands of environmental history, I see the discipline moving away from “nature itself” and focusing more on socio-economic and mental interactions with nature.

Environmental history has developed in Canada as its own discrete “niche” field, pardon the pun. On the other hand, I think that environmental history done well can become so prevalent and diffused that, in a way, it will be increasingly harder to label it as environmental history, but rather just good, wide-ranging, synthesizing history. By that I mean it can still be a group of historians interested in the environmental, but it can equally talk to and inform other fields to a greater extent than it has in the past. Thus environmental history topics can equally be political, diplomatic, labour, etc. histories at the same time that they are environmental histories. In this way, environmental history in Canada will gain a wider public audience within the country, but also more exposure internationally. It can also consciously use the past to inform the present, which is something at which the discipline has excelled.

Environmental history done this way can also serve to bridge the gap between “town and gown” that is often said to exist in Canadian history (i.e. the historian’s debate of the past decades). Canadian environmental history has roots in the grand nation-building narratives of Innis and Creighton, but contemporary Canadian environmental history scholarship tends to stem more directly more from American and European historiography that has roots in newer cultural and postmodern methods. I think we could benefit from a partial return to history by the likes of Morton, Innis, and Creighton, at least to the extent that the environment is a major factor in wider histories.

Despite my suggestion above that environmental history in Canada has often employed archival records, it has also been methodologically innovative, and I would suggest that Canadian environmental historians have been

at the forefront of using alternative forms of “evidence” such as reading landscapes or digital technologies, and can be at the forefront of the way history is researched in the Canadian content. It also tends to be interdisciplinary, and perhaps the future of environmental history lies in bringing together scholars from across the range of natural and social sciences with the humanities in order to provide a holistic picture of change over time as it pertains to the history of the environment. Moreover, any future historians covering the political or general history of the recent decades will necessarily need to discuss environmental topics since the environment has become inextricably intertwined with mainstream political topics.

## Jay Young

Department of History, York University

The field of environmental history in Canada has arguably never been stronger. A growing number of historians study relationships between humans and the natural environment, and the ways in which people have understood northern North American environments over time. In particular, historians of various methodological and thematic backgrounds now incorporate the environment in their works, and environmental scholars have established networks of national and local scope. Interest in environmental issues has provided historians with a useful position from which they can engage wider publics, while questions of national coherence and international significance still challenge scholars in the field. EH+ offers an exciting opportunity to build upon these successes and create possibilities for the future.

One accomplishment of Canadian environmental history is the growing realization that the environment is an essential factor in the study of the past, even for topics not traditionally considered “environmental.” I base this observation, in part, on my own personal experience. As a young scholar entering the first year of my PhD in 2006, I was eager to start my dissertation on the Toronto subway system, but had little awareness of environmental history as a field. I quickly realized that to study the history of even a human-built technology existing in an urban setting - without analyzing the ways in which the environment mattered - excluded an important part of the story. We must continue to convert other historians to the analytical benefits gained from a consideration of the environment,

which shows a maturity in the field. Work that examines the interactions between the environment and other fields – for example, social, cultural, or political history – offers one possible avenue to achieve this goal.

Another success of the field in Canada is the community of scholars that has developed over the past decade. NiCHE has certainly facilitated this strengthening of ties, with its exciting website, experiential summer school, and numerous projects. The recent Place and Placelessness virtual workshop, for example, used new media to bring together young scholars from across the globe to discuss their work. At a smaller scale, local research groups, such as the Toronto Environmental History Network, have also established stable foundations.

An interest in contemporary environmental issues held by Canadians offers an opportunity for historians to connect their work to a wider audience. We can draw on means that complement rather than compete with more traditional forms of knowledge dissemination like the university lecture hall or the scholarly monograph. The growing number of excellent environmental history blogs and podcasts illustrate these possibilities, as are upcoming public lecture series on environmental history that will take place in Ottawa and Toronto.

Within the academy, debate continues on the coherence of examining the environment within a country of various climatic and cultural regions, along with what Canada offers to the international field. These questions are somewhat ironic, considering an earlier generation of Canadian historians used the environment to explain settlement and state development in studies that ultimately influenced major works of environmental history, such as William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis*.

Hosting the 2013 American Society of Environmental Historians annual conference in Toronto offers an opportunity for us to reconsider not only what makes the field in Canada distinct, but also how our work can advance the field internationally.

## **Ruth Sandwell**

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The present strengths of Canadian environmental history can be found in the coverage of a few particular topic areas: fish, the generation of hydro-electricity, a few rivers, some aspects of the north, and some cultural histories of hunting, tourism and environmentalism. To the extent that environmental history has broadened the focus of historians beyond the cultural, and out to a close examination of the relationship between people and the environments in which they live, the field has provided some new theoretical contexts for the study of Canadian history. Overall, the field needs much more research and publication in the areas of detailed empirical local studies or microhistories, as well as works of a larger, more synthetic nature that could collectively appear as a coherent environmental history of Canada (to stand alongside Pyne's fire history of Canada). The field as a whole needs to establish much closer ties with the sciences, in a way pioneered by environmental historians in the United States. Perhaps the most important and under-researched topics are the environmental history of rural Canada (agriculture as well as resource extraction), and climate change and the related history of changing fuel use in Canada. In order for more environmental history to be researched, and if it is continue to gain in legitimacy and interest within the academic world and beyond, it would probably be beneficial to have it included as a component of survey courses in Canadian history, as well as being offered more frequently as an identifiable course or

courses at the undergraduate level in history and in a variety of science subject areas. In terms of taking the knowledge of environmental historians out of the academy, I would suggest that environmental historians could have a more public presence in engaging in topics of public interest, perhaps following the lead of the military historians in this.

## Jason Hall

University of New Brunswick

The other night I sat down to type a short and concise statement for this on-line application, but it turned out that nature had other plans. A few sentences into the draft, my basement rapidly flooded in a torrential mid-December rainstorm. After several hours of flood control I returned to my laptop just moments before the power went out. With my connection to NiCHE and other on-line resources severed, I was left with two candles, a pad of paper, wet socks, and a head full of ideas. The next day the warm rain continued and my time was consumed with digging two hundred feet of drainage channels to prevent the murky run-off from the neighbouring cattle farm from penetrating my family's well water. Although I was initially frustrated with having to deal with nature on such a physical level in the middle of a professional application process, the experience gave me much to think about in terms of Canadian environmental history and my own transition from rural farm boy to white collared (albeit with sweat stains) professional.

The mid-December rainstorm in Northern New Brunswick reminded me of the growing significance of climate change and the power failure reminded me of the important role that technology has played in the field's development. The experience of typing an application with two handfuls of blisters from a wet pick axe and shovel also reminded me that Richard White's discussion of the separation between environmentalists and those who work in nature needs to be further explored in a Canadian context. The following pages are a summary of my

thoughts upon the state of the field and the directions I believe it should consider following in forthcoming years.

The field of Canadian environmental history/historical geography has experienced a minor renaissance over the past decade. A host of innovative scholarship, new research networks and a growing number of conferences are indications that the field is currently healthy and vibrant. It is composed of a mix of established and new scholars who have fostered a collegial atmosphere that is attracting an increasing number of graduate students. Furthermore, the body of literature on Canadian environmental history has grown in both quality and quantity.

One major weakness of the field is that it is not yet considered a core component of Canadian history curriculum by many scholars and institutions. I have encountered history graduate students, professors and members of the general public who have the misconception that environmental history is an inferior subject of study compared to the traditional canon of historical fields. When one takes into account that my university's library does not even carry a subscription to *Environment and History*, it is easy to see how colleagues could develop the impression that Canadian environmental history is an inconsequential field.

I believe that introductory courses on Canadian history need to include a stronger component of environmental history if the field is to gain more recognition. A step towards achieving that goal would be to ensure that all new Canadian history textbooks have significant sections devoted to Canadian environmental history/historical geography and that graduate level courses in Canadian historiography include a module

focused upon environmental history. Not only will these initiatives aid the field's development, they will also help vitalize the discipline of Canadian history by cultivating new research questions, methodologies, and alliances.

The lack of a specific journal to serve as a nest to nurture the field also impedes its development. It is currently challenging for scholars of Canadian environmental history to find a consistent place in which to publish their research. The lack of a centralized journal also makes it arduous for new students and scholars from other disciplines to gain a greater appreciation of the field. In order to investigate a particular scholar or topic, a researcher often has to explore dozens of regional, national and international academic journals and edited collections. Although the field may not yet be in a position to launch its own journal, it should at least facilitate a serious discussion on this issue.

In some cases many of the core strengths of environmental history/historical geography, such as the field's interdisciplinary nature, and ability to produce unique and innovative ways of presenting history, can be a liability within traditional academic institutions that encourage disciplinary specialization and conventional types of historical inquiry. The field needs to continue to demonstrate the merits of interdisciplinary approaches by publishing high quality scholarship and work towards increasing the level of informal and structured collaboration between allied university departments. The University of British Columbia is a good role model for the success of this approach.

The University of British Columbia series Nature, History, Society which has published fourteen books and addressed a number of core themes of environmental

history, has played an important role in strengthening the field within Canada. The forthcoming NiCHE / University of Calgary Press series *Energy, Ecology, and the Environment* also promises to be an asset to the field's development. The fact that Canadian journals such as *B.C. Studies* and *Urban History Review* have published themed issues on environmental history is testimony that the field has begun to establish itself within Canadian historical scholarship. The forthcoming collection of articles, *Environmental Histories of Atlantic Canada* (Acadiensis Press 2011), is an indication that this trend will continue in coming years.

Now that the topsoil of the field has been broken and revealed to be fertile, scholars need to fill in the major gaps in existing scholarship and sow new intellectual seeds to ensure that Canadian environmental history continues to grow. This entails identifying which natural features, species, issues, and types of studies have not been adequately investigated. One suggestion towards meeting this goal is to construct a series of provincial environmental histories. I believe that such a series would appeal to an academic and popular audience and would also be useful as a curriculum resource for university courses on provincial histories. If environmental history is to continue to gain respect within the discipline of Canadian history, I believe that it must produce works that are tailored to fit into the political and university structure of Canada. (Many Canadian universities still center a large portion of their Canadian curriculum upon particular provinces and regions). On the other hand, I also believe that the field needs to carry on producing innovative works that stretch the historical and geographical imagination of Canada. On that note, it is perhaps time for

someone to write an environmental history of the Northwest Passage or a history of the various mountain ranges and air currents of Canada.

On the national/transnational scale, historical geographer, Graeme Wynn has recently penned an excellent environmental history of Canada and arctic North America that is focused upon society's technological and material relationships with the environment. This eloquently written and insightful study should be twinned in the near future with a book of similar scope that concentrates on the cultural and intellectual aspects of Canadian environmental history.

I also believe that the field needs to develop more comparative studies with other nations. Although Canada is frequently compared and contrasted with the United States by both Canadian and American environmental historians, comparisons with other nations have been relatively few. This is surprising given the fact Canada has a vast number of biomes, a multicultural heritage, and strong presence within historic and contemporary global economies. Writing more comparative studies will aid scholars' attempts to identify what is unique about Canadian environmental history and also help the field gain international recognition.

Canadian environmental historians and historical geographers need to produce more studies that appeal to the general public. This could happen in a variety of ways. The University of British Columbia series *Nature, History, Society* could be complemented with a series of documentary films aimed a public audience that would make Canadians more aware of environmental history. These documentaries would also provide educators with visual sources that are specific to Canada. Scholars within

the field should also consider structuring their efforts around topics that will engage a general audience. Two potential titles that spring to my mind are “From Birch Bark Canoes to Ice Road Truckers: an Environmental History of Canadian Transportation.” and “An Environmental History of the Hemp and Hops Industries of Canada.” Furthermore, students and scholars might want to consider writing environmental histories of particular species associated with Canada such as the beaver or moose. These animal histories would make an insightful academic study as well as a popular coffee table book for the animal lover. On a personal note, despite dire warnings of potentially sabotaging my academic integrity, I plan to adapt my dissertation research on the environmental history of the St. John River into a book intended for a popular audience after completing my program of study.

Paying more attention to environmental activism and contemporary policy debates may be another constructive way to make the field more appealing and relevant to people outside of academia. Climate history is one subfield of environmental history that is especially important to policy makers and the general public. The presence of vast expanses of glaciers makes Canada an important repository of historic climate data in the form of ice cores. I believe that more research needs to be conducted on climate history as it is becoming evident that climate change is one of the most serious dilemmas facing our nation and world. Policy developers, business leaders and the general public need to be able to make informed decisions if humanity is to successfully respond to local and global climate change. A million dollars committed to a research project that helps Canadians understand how

historic changes in climate impacted the natural world and how species adapted to it, may save our nation billions of dollars (and incalculable human and nonhuman suffering) in the near future as we struggle to adapt to the realities of a changing world. Furthermore, historic climate research may prove to be a useful means of demonstrating the value of environmental history and increasing support for the entire field within Canada and internationally.

Canadian environmental historians should also consider developing more historical studies of particular environmental activist campaigns and groups. I believe there should be, for example, a body of scholarship on the Atlantic seal hunt that is as diverse and engaging as the public debates which are stimulated by the topic. If credible environmental historians and historical geographers fail to address issues that are relevant to the general public, activists and policy makers, I fear that media sensationalism and biased scholarship will continue to foster the growth of uniformed policies and misguided activism. Furthermore, I think that environmental history needs to produce more works of national scope that investigate the history and nature of Canadian environmental activism and environmental politics. Renowned American historian Samuel P. Hay's research on the nature of conservation and environmental politics in the United States should be mirrored with Canadian studies.

Furthermore, I think that Canadian environmental history needs a stronger presence of heroes and villains. Producing more works with biographical content is one way to achieve this. Although there are certainly some Canadian environmental historians who have skillfully included biographical components to their work (Janet

Foster's *Working for Wildlife* and Tina Loo's *States of Nature* are two books which come to mind), I believe that the field suffers from a lack of personality. My home province of New Brunswick, for example, would benefit from environmentally focused biographies of notable figures such as: billionaire industrialist K.C. Irving; 19th century conservationist Moses Perley; and geographer and botanist, William F. Ganong.

Although there has been some excellent scholarship on First Nations and the environment, too little work has been done within the field on the topic of race/ethnicity. This is surprising considering that multiculturalism is a fundamental aspect of contemporary Canadian identity. The inclusion of a significant discussion of race and the environment in Tina Loo's *States of Nature* is a promising indication that this topic may finally be given the recognition that it deserves. I believe there is much important research that needs to be done on this theme.

A logical step towards addressing this gap in the field's literature would be to develop a series of case studies focused upon particular racial/ethnic minorities or critical events, in order to stimulate further academic debate and scholarship. These case studies could in turn lead to the development of a national history of race and the environment. Several topics that I believe should be addressed by environmental historians and historical geographers are: the marginalization of black Loyalists in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick; the creation and destruction of the community of Africville in Halifax; the experience of Chinese labourers in the Canadian West; and the land ethic of the Doukhobor settlers of the prairies. Furthermore, David Suzuki, one of the world's most well-

known environmentalists, admits in the “The David Suzuki Reader” that he gained an appreciation of the natural world partially as a result of his family’s relocation to a rural internment camp for Japanese Canadians during World War II. This is an indication that environmental historians and historical geographers should consider examining the forced relocation of ethnic groups in Canada from an environmental perspective.

I believe that the skillful use of technology for networking and conducting research has been one of the greatest strengths of Canadian environmental history/historical geography in recent years. When I explore the NiCHE website, for instance, I really do feel as if I am part of an innovative and collegial field. However, I also believe that scholars and students must remember that although technology is empowering many particular individuals and social groups to participate in the growth of the field, it may also be marginalizing others. Technology can separate as well as connect people to nature and the ways that the natural world has historically been understood and related to. These statements are intended as words of caution rather than as criticism - in part to temper my own overwhelming enthusiasm for the online initiatives that are currently connecting students and scholars. Technology, however, is not the only factor that has contributed to integration within the field. A host of field schools and conferences have also allowed students and scholars to connect with one another and gain an embodied appreciation of various landscapes and communities across Canada. These events are integral to forging the professional relationships and personal friendships that will be the basis of the field’s development in coming years.

## **Robert Summerby-Murray**

Dean of Arts and Social Sciences, Dalhousie University

*Environmental History and Historical Geography: parallel tracks or convergent themes?*

In his seminal 1994 article in the *Journal of Historical Geography*, Michael Williams argued that historical geography had relinquished its hold on the study of environmental change, unconsciously yielding its longstanding expertise in the analysis of regional environments to devotees of a new environmental history that was more thematically driven and coherent, more concerned with broader temporal and social issues than specific geographies. New journals emerging out of the United States in the previous decade, such as the *Journal of Environmental History*, drew on increased environmental consciousness of the wider population and tackled broader topics such as urban sanitation and forest policy. In Canada (and the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Scandinavia, Australia and New Zealand), historical geography had explored numerous aspects of environmental change and changing environments over the previous decades: for example, various generations of Andrew Clark's doctoral students explored regionally, culturally and environmentally-sensitive topics with a particular geographic focus in Canada (such as the seigneuries of New France or the historical geographies of the fur trade) while journals such as *The Canadian Geographer*, *Geographical Review*, *Urban History Review* and the *Journal of Historical Geography* contained

significant exploration of environmental themes from Canadian perspectives.

The more recent blurring of boundaries between the work of environmental historians and historical geographers suggests a fruitful ground for focusing on particular environmental issues and themes, drawing on the spatial analysis skills of the historical geographer and the strengths of environmental historians in archival methods and broad temporal themes. None of these methodological descriptors are the exclusive domain of either disciplinary field; indeed, the value of this discussion is to demonstrate the importance of shared methodologies and complementary perspectives in the interpretation of similar data sources (from archives to oral histories, from cartography to photography, from understanding of biophysical process to understanding of social and cultural process, and beyond). In suggesting a blurring of boundaries and a greater focus on 'problem-based' approaches (to climate change, resource depletion, natural resource management (including important contributions from and to the roles of First Nations), ecosystem degradation, human and community responses to environmental disaster or catastrophe), this presentation suggests that historical geographers and environmental historians are forging new connections and opportunities. There is much to be gained from this blurring of boundaries or greater collaboration, as Williams 1994 suggested. These gains include the situating of our understanding of changed biophysical environments within their social, political and economic contexts. As an example, my work on the intensification of marshland agriculture in the mid-nineteenth century (illustrated in the Marshlands website) is as much about the particular

spatial arrangements of marshes, the application of specific technologies and capital, as it is about the effect of social processes, sub-municipal political structures and long-term economic change. Similarly, the work of historical geographers exploring urban and industrial environmental topics engages city energy comparisons through time (Olsen, 2007), the effects of suburbanization on population health (Harris and Mercier, 2005) and more.

Key challenges here in terms of an environmental history/historical geography 'plus' relate to the disciplinary identity of the researcher. While it may not matter from a problem-based perspective where the author comes from as long as their research is sound, multidisciplinary and creative, appointments processes at most universities have tended to follow traditional designations. The question of whether research is environmental history or historical geography may indeed be relevant in these terms, although the ability of many scholars to transcend these boundaries is heartening and exciting, both practically for history and geography and for the invigoration of research. As an example, environmental geographers are increasingly exploring historical change and searching for long-term trends, often with sophisticated theoretical positions (Walters et al., 2008). Similarly, historical geographers continue to explore dimensions of environmental change in a wide range of areas (climate change, species depletion, the evolution of regulatory environments) while physical geographers engage *longue durée* processes in their study of geomorphologies, dendrochronologies and changing climates. Environmental historians engage new dimensions of policy effects on water resource management, First Nations issues, and natural disaster, as

well as considering the role of the natural environment in shaping significant components of Canadian regional and national identity. In short, modeling these forms of interdisciplinary inquiry in these topics and themes will become increasingly important for our research in the future. While there will remain individual canons of historical geography (including a strong component that focuses specifically on changing environments through time) and environmental history (with its stronger policy orientation), an “Environmental History +” in this country has a particularly strong future because of its ability to draw on these complementary traditions. Rather than forming barriers, uniting our approaches around themes affecting Canadian environments will be the way forward. Identifying these linking themes is an important challenge. This presentation will elaborate on these shared themes.

R. Harris and M. Mercier (2005) “How healthy were the suburbs?” *Journal of Urban History* 31(6), pp767-798

S. Olson (2007) “Downwind, downstream, downtown: the environmental legacy in Baltimore and Montreal” *Environmental History* 12(4), pp845-66

B. Walters, B. McCay, P. West and S. Lees (eds) *Against the Grain: the Vayda tradition in human ecology and ecological anthropology* (Rowman & Littlefield)

M. Williams (1994) “The relations of environmental history and historical geography” *Journal of Historical Geography* 20(1), pp3 21

## George Colpitts

Department of History, University of Calgary

### *States, Policy-Making and Economics in Environmental History*

Never has knowledge of economic policies and state initiatives in the past mattered more for understanding environmental dilemmas in the present.

Almost from its inception, e-history has attempted to better understand human-environmental relations beyond borders, and applied optics of transnational, transborder and bioregional history to great effect. However, the needed direction in the field is not necessarily outside the nation, but within it. States matter. They persist more than ever as power-broking entities and collect themselves in obdurate tectonic blocks in world politics. In international fora, they obtrude in multilateral and global questions ranging from sustainability, climate change and human rights within each other's national territories or abroad in ever more vulnerable "frontiers" of exploitation in the developing world.

In keeping with the EH+ look to the future of the field, a leading question for environmental history will necessarily be how economic regimes and the power that they have wielded inform relationships between the environment and the nation state; how politics and patronage, with wide-ranging sinews of power (to borrow John Brewer's characterization of modern British state institutions) in capital and transportation, have deflected directions in environmental history within borders and, by

establishing traditions and public expectations, informed environmental diplomacy beyond them.

J.R. McNeil underlined the importance of such research for global environmental history (*Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, Vol 19, 2010). Indeed, environmental historians have already turned their attention to the matter, as Paul Warde did in the case of the *Ecology, Economy and State Formation in Early Modern Germany* (2010), and John Richard masterfully accomplished in the *Unending Frontier of the Early Modern World* (2003). In many ways, the state is being rediscovered in local histories of significance and a number of recent environmental histories have emphasized the importance of state policy formation. All the same, Canadian e-historians tend to move across North America's northern latitudes without exploring distinctive national, state and provincial histories. In Canada, many histories do not mention the British North America Act and leave alone the issue of Canadian federalism in respect to the great Canadian past-time of government-encouraged resource overuse and exhaustion. Canadian e-history readers offer only a couple of articles that grapple with the state as an historical agent. As Anya Zilberstein recently pointed out in a comprehensive review of the literature in Canada, "Not unlike the environmental history of other countries, changes in Canadian climate, animal populations, or sea and landscapes are often more readily understood in a supranational context or in comparison to someplace else. ("Review", *Journal of Canadian Studies* 42, 2008). The resulting picture, however, lacks clarity. Apart from its appearance at the door, the nation state seems to be the missing dinner guest in many histories. Much world environmental history

indeed unfolds in an amorphous meta-narrative of inchoate elements that include an international corporate scramble for resources, demand economics driven by popular culture and consumerism, and ever-widening industrialization; the same histories make little if any mention of state formation, bordered economic and tariff regimes and competitive economic nationalism. These works make the assumption that, through different means, most nations have reached in capitalism, markets and industrialization the same generalized environmental ends, and messy at that.

The need for more comprehensive analysis is certainly needed in Canada. The evolving nature of federalism continues to impact our environmental history. Broadly conceived, but hardly consistently applied, crown lands and resource policies are still not well understood, and their complex history in the jurisdictional overlap between Federal and Provincial governments continues to raise fresh questions. Federal, provincial and municipal levels of government have, in turn, mediated traditions within our borders, shaped attitudes towards public policy and coloured a group think of Canadian expectations.

Furthermore, in most recent examinations, it is not “commons” areas where Hardin’s “tragedy” has unfolded, but within political spaces of blurry shared jurisdiction, in borderlands of power between levels of government in democratically elected (but patronage-wielding) institutions, and in state-directed, short-term economic initiatives. These have helped “annihilate” ecological entities having the misfortune to swim, bleat, warble or range inside artificially imagined but nevertheless significant government-managed killing zones, exclusive quota territories and, now, we can expect, newly mapped

“national” continental shelves. We still hardly understand the sinews of power that have extended through economic policies, national subsidies and initiatives, political patronage networks and civil works projects that, in our own staples heritage, have become major determinants of the environmental history of the modern Canadian state. It will form a research priority for the new generation of e-historians.

## **Teresa Devor**

University of New Brunswick

Canadian Environmental History/Historical Geography has the strengths of a mountain: it is bold, and cutting-edge, it reflects the light of issues as they rise and fall, it invites the intrepid down one trail and very quickly leads them to new meadows and refreshing waters, and reveals unique angles from which to view the scene, and some-wonderfully-how, all paths are connected... and could take a lifetime to explore.

I am delighted and scintillated by the diversity of questions and problems that have been explored by this creative and eclectic gang of academics and practitioners writing what can be classified as Canadian Environmental History.

Uber-Strengths Include:

\*NiCHE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

\* The diverse forums for communication and education – from virtual conferences, blogs, and podcasts to reading groups, discussion and speaker series, art and archival exhibits, and the phenomenal weeklong event that was “Time and a Place” ...

\* The depth of incorporation of ecology into Canadian historical studies, and the willingness of researchers who aren’t scientists to jump into the sciences and learn new languages and frames on concrete material environmental

history. The variety of sources with which practitioners engage, period.

\*The sheer ingenuity and diversity of the researchers involved with the field in Canada, and the painstaking research they (you!) have done that allows us to stand back and survey a fecund field.

\*Much interesting theoretical and concrete work has been done on human relationships with nature, ways of knowing and interpreting nature and our historic interactions, ways of recognizing the agency of more-than-human nature and of human beings, ways of blurring the boundaries between living and non living nature and between nature and culture or built environments, and on explorations of relevant boundaries – ecological, political, and temporal, to name a few.

\*Although I have focused here on the opportunity to vision about the future of the field, an enormous strength is that most of what I want to see more of is based on tantalizing tastes contained in the works of current and past practitioners of Canadian EH/HG/related fields.

Sverker Sorlin and Paul Warde, in “The Problem of the Problem of Environmental History: A Re-Reading of the Field”, suggest that the field of EH (our context lends itself to a discussion of EH/HG) in general faces a problem of too much diversity. I would argue that like an ecosystem, the field requires the creative dynamic prism that results when practitioners carve out brave and unique perspectives and challenge others to consider new viewpoints. As Liza Piper writes in *The Industrial Transformation of Subarctic Canada*,

“[d]istinctions between nature and culture, as well as living and non-living parts of nature, are constructed principally for the purposes of analysis. Nevertheless, these constructs have become reified because of the way they simplify and thus help us to grasp the enormous complexity of the natural world.”

I think that the task for Canadian EH/HG now is to articulate itself coherently enough to become a high school course, produce more textbooks that can be used for university classes, and become better known – better grasped, even - in Canada generally. Yet I would like to see this happen without the sacrifice of the immense dynamism and possibilities that result from such interdisciplinarity and openness. Liza Piper’s analyses recall the work of Fernand Braudel for several reasons. In this context, I shall confine myself to the following: her quote above rings with his articulation in, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World*, Braudel articulates that, “to draw a boundary around anything is to define, analyze, and reconstruct it, in this case select, indeed adopt, a philosophy of history.” Ultimately, while I have attempted to draw from the work and reflections of practitioners with a great deal more experience than myself, my analysis of where the field could and should go are rooted in my own research and philosophy, and arise from my very particular viewpoint.

Let us begin on the note of the philosophy behind our history:

Texts

-Working from the quotes above, I would like to see a potential compilation, certainly an article or published collaborative forum, on questions of how those writing EH/HG in Canada grapple with the meanings of “nature”, “environment”, “landscape”, and “culture”. How can and do we distinguish between them? There have been some fascinating explorations of these socially constructed concepts and their material consequences in such texts as Tina Loo’s *States of Nature*, and Piper’s *Industrial Transformation of Subarctic Canada*. Most authors discuss meanings of nature as context specific human constructions - I think it would be effective and provocative to produce some form of collected work on this topic. It could also be twinned with creative engagement (through essays/reflections/etc.) on the agency of nature as context for all human action/history/economics/politics/etc., as well as in the form of particular species, including ourselves.

-I would like to see more books that can be used as scholarly texts, and perhaps even *A Text* (as in a quarterly journal, printed on recycled paper, with website data appended to articles, and a virtual copy with more hyperlinking). The journal will be a physical manifestation of the NiCHE network’s goals of sharing and collaboration, a forum for writers focusing on EH, HG, urban and suburban studies, studies at the intersections of “culture and nature”, those scientists who are unearthing and building the understandings of the natural sciences (that are increasingly integrated into EH/HG) and reflecting historically thereon, and all other writers whose work could fall within the large and fruit-laden umbrella-tree of Canadian EH/HG.

-It is time for a University undergraduate textbook Canadian EH/HG that can be used in concert with Method and Meaning. So much change and development has occurred since the publication of Consuming Canada: Readings in Environmental History. Professors should not be required to use American textbooks to teach this subject North of the border. A proposal for this text would be to have an interdisciplinary team of contributors whose chapters, taken together, introduce main currents and debates in EH/HG in Canada. The idea would be for articles to be synthetic, contributing to textbook that would be perfect for survey courses.

-As mentioned above, I would like to see a course textbook in EH/HG for the high school level. I talk more about this in the section below on children and youth.

#### Our History/What's Been Done

-So many phenomenal people are involved in EH/HG in Canada. I appreciate NiCHE's directory, but I wonder if there could be another "master list" of people who have participated in NiCHE's activities, spoken in the Nature History Society series at UBC, presented at conferences, published in nature-related series through the University of British Columbia Press, University of Calgary Press, and Wilfrid Laurier University Press. A massive repository, it would list names, contact emails, and areas of interest and work. I often have to visit numerous websites to find and compile this data, and it would be a lot more efficient to just have everyone in one place.

-I would like to see a link from NiCHE's homepage to a site about the History of EH/HG in Canada. The site would

include articles such as Wynn and Evenden's "54, 40, or Fight?": Writing Within and Across Boundaries in Canadian Environmental History", MacEachern's introduction to Method and Meaning and Acadiensis article, "Voices Crying in the Wilderness: Recent Works in Canadian Environmental History", and could even be a space to archive responses to this application. As well, a link from this site would have a link to the bibliographies (proposed below), so as to give people a concrete understanding of the scope of what has been done in/on Canada. It could also include something akin to the Google Map field trip from "Place and Placelessness", whereby a geography of Canadian EH/HG would show which places have been studied, and what particular work has been done on them, and would also reveal visually the gaps in our scholarship.

-The bibliography from Wynn and Evenden's article – as just one pertinent example – is invaluable to anyone interested in taking stock of multiple diverse approaches to EH/HG in Canada, and I propose that it be made available, perhaps in the "Resources" section of the NiCHE website, along with a series of bibliographies. These would be organized by particular topics, and items would be cross-listed, depending on their content. This web page could include documentary films and other artistic expressions. As well, authors who were willing could authorize NiCHE to hyperlink from the Bibliography to the article/work itself. In order to keep the bibliographies current, a team of researchers from diverse disciplines would be responsible for keeping their ears to the ground for the year/6 months/or? and would submit articles in their specialty throughout that period. The site would also direct interested parties to A Scholar's Guide to

Geographical Writing on the American and Canadian Past,  
Michael P. Conzen, Thomas A. Rumney, and Graeme  
Wynn.

### Expanding Our Sources

-I think we should take up Sorin and Warde's suggestion that we attend to some of the relevant theoretical thought in the social sciences pertaining to the relationship between our species and the rest of nature, and ask whether or not our ties to the natural sciences are generating an overall lopsidedness in our interests and abilities. I am reminded here of the work of both William Marsden and Christopher Dummit. (Simulated hyperlink:

Marsden is the author of *Stupid to the Last Drop: How Alberta is Bringing Environmental Armageddon to Canada* (and doesn't seem to care) for which he won the National Business Book Award in 2008. He is an investigative reporter, and recently contributed a chapter to *Carbon Shift: How the Twin Crises of Oil Depletion and Climate Change Will Define the Future* (edited by Thomas Homer Dixon and Nick Garrison). I understand that H.V. Nelles sits on the editorial Board of the *Business History Review*, but I do not know how much similar overlap there is with the world of Business and economic history among those doing environmental history at this time.

Dummit was a co-editor and contributor to *Contesting the Contents of Clio's Craft: New Directions in Canadian History*. In his article, "After Inclusiveness: The Future of Canadian History", he reflects on a trend that he identifies as reflecting new forms of exclusion. In the attempt, within social history, to include the voices and experiences of

groups who were previously un/under-represented, he argues that decisions about who and what to focus on has created a bias as strong as that of the “old” Canadian history. To Dummit, this leads essentially to deception in historical writing, which needs to be recognized and remedied. What crucial angles, values, and aspects of society/the world are excluded from the work that we do?

#### Philosophy, Climate History and Policy

-I would like to see more assertions of our total embeddedness in the life of our planet and solar system. We are still made of and completely dependent on the Earth, despite the high degree of artificiality that appears to sustain us. Our ecological identities make the prospect of an “externality” completely impossible, in fact, so absurd as to be laughable, and we need to popularize that understanding. At the heart of our existence and our relationships of dependence is our need for energy from the sun, and we know about this in terms of our interaction with the current planetary warming. However, our role in setting the stage for climate change runs deeper than several hundred years of “industrial revolutions”, and not just because we have been contributing to methane production through rice paddies and animal husbandry for thousands of years.

Years of research suggest to me that a component of this current warming is a natural cycle, the ramifications of which, we are altering. Thus we are interacting with longue duree meteorological cycles that have affected our planet for hundreds of thousands of years. The impacts of this are enormous. Similar to the way that the geomorphology of the Earth’s continents has influenced

the ice age cycles, we are now acting as a force on the atmosphere, and on the ecosystems of the globe to such a degree that we may be influencing the future impacts of meteorological cycles for generations to come (or for longer, we really don't know – factors are complex beyond comprehension).

-I would like to see more involvement in the Early Canadian Environmental Data project, and more creative investigations into the impacts of past climates. When I told Dr. David Duke at Acadia that I was planning to write a history of the impacts of the end of the Little Ice Age on the Gulf of St. Lawrence Region, he replied that he had intended to do the same for the upcoming environmental history edition of *Acadiensis*. In beginning to delve into the topic, he realized that no one had yet synthesized any of the data that would be required in order for an article to be feasible. He is doing his part to amend this, contributing what promises to be an insightful case study on the Annapolis Valley. I have since decided to apply to do a PhD, which will allow me to undertake this groundwork and an initial synthesis.

-I would like to see a link on NiCHE's website to the World History network in historical climatology, <http://historicalclimatology.wordpress.com>. I invite interested Canadian historians and researchers to join the network and contribute to the site.

#### Policy in General

-I propose at least an article, and at most, a textbook, on environmental historians, historical geographers, and others doing related work, who have been involved with

policy at local, provincial, federal or larger/other levels. In part, this could be a bit like Method and Meaning in that the intent would be that those who are interested in influencing policy could learn successful ways to engage with government bodies or others. It could also potentially be thought of or directed to such bodies that may be interested in seeking policy advice, so that they can learn about what research is being done. Whatever the form that this work takes, I would like to see it posted on NiCHE's website, under the afore-proposed section on the History of EH/HG in Canada.

-The above idea emerged in part from my own participation in a one day forum in Moncton, New Brunswick, organized by the NB Social Policy Network. I have joined this group in large part because I want to connect with those who are studying all aspects of climate history and change in the region. Although I made some good contacts with people who promise to put me in touch with those researching climate change, the latter topic was not even on the radar for most participants. I was uncertain how to bring it up in large group discussions, in part because I felt like a voice in the wilderness. I would like to learn more about this process, and also more about how to frame arguments in ways that I can connect to the reasoning within people whose circle-of-thought may not initially seem to overlap much with mine.

#### Children and Youth – The Future of the Planet

-I would like to see a high school course in EH/HG. I believe that some foundation in the understandings of these subjects is essential, no matter what students choose to pursue once they leave high school. Is it premature to

start with a textbook? I imagine that there would be interested high school level teachers who would partner with those interested in creating a course and text. Is there such a course or text in existence in Canada? Is a pilot project in one province a good approach to making this a national reality?

-There are a myriad of youth environmental organizations in the country, addressing the conceptualization of, and dedication to, “nature” in Canada and worldwide. Is it appropriate for these upcoming environmental activists, economists, scientists, and yes, historians, to be involved with EH through focused groups/activities/online conferences? Climate Camp – learn about climate history, science, policy, and, like “Time and a Place”, invite policy makers and NGO folk, including representatives of the Canadian Youth Climate Coalition, etc.

-What about Green Teacher magazine as a forum for dialogues on EH/HG topics, questions, and pedagogy down through the levels of primary and secondary education? I have not seen EH historians featured in the Canadian Journal of Environmental Education – an excellent forum where we could focus energy in order to participate in pedagogical conversations, as well as to develop links between curricula and understandings, for example, of relationships to place, between culture and nature, between power dynamics in educational settings and analyses of power in “human-nature” relations... A closer relationship with this community (with this text as a medium through which to start or further the conversation), would help to bring the ideas and work of EH/HG into educational settings/public consciousness beyond universities.

-I would also like to see more work focused on children's relations with the environment, changing forms of play, relationships with and consciousness of "nature" through a diversity of experiences and opportunities, from institutional to informal (and changes, for example, the closure and sale of various outdoor education centers and boy and girl scout camps), the rise of allergies...

-Health Canada has recently published results of years of research into environmental pollutants. This work, and the exploration of related topics on an edition of CBC's Doc Zone (I believe it aired in 2008) highlight the salience of these findings for EH and the future ecology of Canada and the world. This research has generated important feedback about the ways that we as a species are "changing the nature of nature".

#### The Future

I would like to see more historians explicitly talking about the present and extending their work into the future in innovative and open ways. We do it already, from our choices of topics to the way courses are structured, to the temporal fact that our work plants seeds that will bloom in future, will be read, referenced, and acted upon, and will in fact take on myriad physical forms in the future. I am aware that there is a "great debate" about the extent to which historians have authority to speak about the future, but the history of the field of EH/HG, not to mention the sciences and other disciplines on which we rely, and the global context in which we find ourselves, lend themselves to confidence about our ability and need to do so.

#### Being "Canadian"

-We need more work tying self and national identity to land and waters, for example to presentations/representations/education/livelihood. For instance, what impact on the ecological, economic, etc. dynamics of the country resulted from the reality that particular segments of the population didn't and don't attend college or University, or go beyond grade 5-10 in school, and were/are instead on the land and sea? These questions build off of discussions of knowing nature through labour and the class dynamics therein, and take up questions of the contexts in which relationships with nature were and are cultivated, the genesis of forms of "resource development", regional differences and disparities in terms of culture and economics respectively... Such inquiries could clarify ways that particular ecological agents such as wheat and forests acted on the human communities that made their homes and eked out a living on the prairies or in the woods... How do these different contexts and relations relate to the historic dynamics between different regions of Canada? (I have to admit that I have not read Wynn's national environmental history, so I am not aware of his potential exploration of these questions at the scale of "nation". Piper addresses many in the context of the Northwest in her Industrial Transformation of Subarctic Canada.)

-How did particular Canadian regulatory structures, nation-building projects, economic networks affect the building of Canada's highways and the development of Canadian car culture?

-Canadian suburbia: what is the history of this phenomenon, the ironies of prime farmland being made into some of the first suburbs, the environmental impacts

as watersheds are re-engineered, the ingenuity/change over time as increasingly, ecological awareness has begun to influence planning, zoning, infrastructure, architecture, etc.

-To write Canadian EH/HG, talk to Canadians! I would like to see more oral (see for example Alan MacEachern and Ryan O'Connor, editors, "Talking Green: Oral History and the Environment", 2010) and community history projects (see for example, Steven High's article, "Sharing Authority in the Writing of Canadian History: The Case for Oral History", in *Contesting Clio's Craft: New Directions and Debates in Canadian History*, 2009. Julie Cruikshank's book, *Do Glaciers Listen?* is another good resource on oral EH.)

-Join the dialogues in "mainstream" Canadian history. I have already referred to discussions in *Contesting Clio's Craft*. As well, there was one article in Constant and Ducharme's, *Liberalism and Hegemony*, reflecting on the relevance of Ian McKay's liberal order thesis to the study of human-animal relations in Canada.

- I would like to see more activity from and on the Atlantic provinces as a whole. I am looking forward to becoming involved with the activities of HEAR, and am co-concocting a potential project to be launched in September, 2011. (More on that in the future!)

#### Other Animals

-I would like to see more on the historic relationships between humans and animals on the northern half of the continent. From Indigenous relationships with dogs and

other animals, to the introduction of European domesticates, to the taming of wild (or feral) horses, to the emergence(s) of the modern concept of the “pet”, to animals in cities (for example, opossums in Hamilton) to factory farm histories...

#### Communications, Outreach and MORE Networking

-Podcasts (I am thinking particularly of “Natures Pasts”, although Dr. Jan Oosthoek’s “EH Resources” podcasts are an important part of our web world too), and blogs are incredible and invaluable resources. I think we also need to challenge ourselves to speak more often and outwardly to “Canadian publics”, giving them ownership of our work and “nationalizing” our ideas through communicating on CBC, station of our large nation (programs such as “Quirks and Quarks”, “Ideas”, “The Current”), and also on local shows such as the Wednesday Science program with Richard Zarowski, out of Halifax.

-Compilations and magazines, such as the aforementioned, Carbon Shift, and Canadian Geographic, also provide venues for us to insert our work into “mainstream” consciousness. I have recently wondered if “mainstream” means, “go with the flow”, and if maybe “mainstream consciousness” could be equated with “go with flow, for thinkers”. If so, then speaking up in public in as many ways as we can begins to put our stream alongside the “main” one, even joins the two, instead of being divergent. (So we are not just ‘voices crying in the [Great Canadian] wilderness’, but are tight within the thicket of thinkers in this “country”.) This is crucial to making an active contribution to the ways of thinking and being that will

nourish health for and among the people, communities, ecosystems, and economies of this Place.

### Comparative Studies

-As Alan MacEachern and Matthew Evenden noted in the 2007 special Canadian edition of *Environmental History*, as well as by Wynn and Evenden in the aforementioned, “‘54, 40, or Fight?’”, that Canada presents a perfect opportunity for comparative studies. The Institute of Island Studies has collaborated on and published a number of such works, including, in 2007, *A World of Islands: An Island Studies Reader*. The recently published, *Historians and Nature: Comparative Approaches to Environmental History*, is one example of how to present both form and content from comparative research events. The essays therein emerged from a conference between German and American practitioners of EH.

-Wynn and Evenden have suggested that the global North provides contextual frames for identifying the uniqueness of Canadian EH/HG. We could organize a conference with participants from Scandinavian countries, and or others for whom the global North is home.

The possibilities are boundless. What is most important is that the field continue to build momentum and widen its bases of support, interest, and literacy.

Consent:

Space at the workshop is limited. If you are willing to have your statement posted to the NiCHE website even if you are not accepted, please check the box here.

additional statement, for Graduate Students / New

Scholars wishing to participate in Friday's writing workshop:

Climate history is one of the most exciting sub-fields within environmental history, due not only to its preeminent importance on the global ecological and diplomatic stages, but also to the fact that new archives are constantly being unearthed. Historians around the world are drawing on the vast material provided by the natural sciences to place current changes in historical context, and to develop a better understanding of the myriad of ways that climate matters at the interstices of the human and more than human worlds.

I propose to write a research paper situating the work that has been done on the climate history of Canada within the global scholarship. Further, the paper will examine Atlantic Canadian climate history as a burgeoning field within national and global climate history. I will peruse the current regional material, and suggest ways in which works at these other levels, as well as work in the natural sciences, government sector, and private sector, can inform future studies, methodology, etc. in and on eastern Canada.

My analysis of world climate histories will examine the roots of human understandings about the centrality or at least the influence of climate on human history. In the "West", these include Kant and Herder, Braudel and Ladurie, and I will search for these roots in scholarship pertaining to the other continents as well.

I will draw from the work of such established scholars as Liza Piper, George Colpitts, Alwynn Beaudoin,

and Stephan Castonguay. Studies by geographers and policy advisors and makers will also be consulted. For instance, I will incorporate new work on historic drought in the prairies by McLeman, Herold, Rejic, Sawada, and McKenney. As this sub-field is especially interdisciplinary, I will draw as well from research in the natural sciences, specifically from the work of Les Chouinard and Ian Spooner, who drill sediment cores in the region, and that of Colin Laroche, who works on dendrochronology at Mount Allison University, among others.

Despite policy actions to the contrary, the federal government has published useful and insightful historic analyses, such as “From Impacts to Adaptation: Canada in a Changing Climate, 2007” (online: [http://adaptation.nrcan.gc.ca/assess/2007/index\\_e.php](http://adaptation.nrcan.gc.ca/assess/2007/index_e.php)). I will also be searching for reports at the provincial and municipal levels.

In order to gain an understanding of the newest work that is being done, as well as to meet more of my peers, I will be networking with other graduate students working on related topics. I already know of the work of Sarah Chan (Memorial University) and Linnea Rowlett (University of Toronto), and I will seek others out as well.

While searching for sources of climate research in the Maritime region, I came across a site for the University of New Brunswick’s Environment & Sustainable Development Research Centre. While it appears that the Centre is now defunct, Dr. Shawn Dalton, the former director, now has a company called Thrive Consulting, and I will be investigating the possibility of useful

documents generated by it and by other private sector initiatives.

The goals of this paper render it relevant and important to both the work and the understanding of other scholars and the public because it pertains to the current ecological reality of the planet. I recognize that the media has at times been an extremely distorted lens through which to view current and historic climatic changes. I would like for a side-project of the larger paper to be written for a popular audience and published in either a magazine or newspaper. This research also fills an Atlantic niche in the Early Canadian Environmental Data project that has just begun to be filled. I look forward to contributing my bibliography to the site, as well as to developing other means through which to share the work/sources/perspectives revealed, through the NiCHE website.

When I received the e-mail about EH+, I had already been in discussion with Rusty Bittermann, who is supervising my Climate History reading course (to begin in January), about publication of this work in *Acadiensis*. Thus, I am very excited to have EH+ as a forum in which to workshop these ideas, and to strengthen my analysis, argumentation, understanding, and communication skills.

## Caitlin Charman

“If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly, we change our lives” ~Ben Okri

Numerous critics have argued that there is an important connection among our representation, experience and treatment of environment. As Lawrence Buell argues, “If, as environmental philosophers contend, western metaphysics and ethics need revision before we can address today’s environmental problems, then environmental crisis involves a crisis of imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity’s relation to it.” By bringing together such diverse fields as history, cultural geography, science, and policy, Canadian Environmental History has made a valiant effort to trace “humanity’s relation” to environment in this vast country of ours. Moreover, websites like NiCHE demonstrate the discipline’s laudable commitment to reaching a broader audience through non-traditional venues like blogs, podcasts and other social media.

And yet, to a large degree, other humanities disciplines have remained largely outside the purview of the field. Literary studies, once considered to have a natural affinity with historical studies, have mostly stood apart—like an estranged relation—from Canadian Environmental History. Moreover, many of Canadian Environmental History’s most important works have a landward focus. As the recent academic turn to Oceanic Studies has revealed, however, (and as phenomenologists like Edward Casey and Arnold Berleant have long argued) the stories we tell and the language we use to tell them

reveals a lot about “humanity’s relation to” and humanity’s experience of environment. Further examinations of the ocean’s representation in literature are crucial because—as Patricia Yaeger contends— the metaphors we use to describe the ocean have “real-world consequences.” For example, the myth of the ocean as “boundless” and limitless “encourage[s] humans to treat it as an inexhaustible storehouse of goods.” What is more, if Berleant is correct that our experience of nature is primarily an aesthetic one, then literary studies are uniquely situated to partner with environmental history: such a partnership will better enable us to understand how we imagine—and how we might re-imagine—our relationship with environment.

## Jennifer Bonnell

University of Guelph

Canadian environmental history has come a long way from the “voices crying out in the wilderness” that Alan MacEachern identified in his 2002 assessment of the field. The field can enumerate among its strengths a diversity of young and mid-career scholars working to open up new subjects and methods of analysis, a general openness to new approaches (particularly those that harness new technologies), and a necessary and productive interdisciplinarity. A strong degree of interconnectedness among emerging and established scholars within and across the country’s distinct regions is another strength we can build upon: many of us have had the opportunity to meet face-to-face, and to engage with each other’s work in meaningful ways.

Despite these considerable strengths, the field currently lacks a strong international presence distinct from the contributions of our American counterparts. Cronon, Worster, White—and to a lesser degree, Merchant—are still the bright lights of our reference lists. There is a need for greater leadership from senior Canadian scholars, and, connected to this, more landmark Canadian works that can claim international recognition. Joy Parr’s recent work on the phenomenology of massive infrastructure is an example of the kind of path-charting work that is needed to put Canada on the map as a contributor of distinct and methodologically exploratory environmental history. Ways to get there include advocating for more tenure-track positions in Canadian environmental history, mentorship from senior scholars (in

Canada and beyond) in producing book manuscripts with resonance outside our own borders, and efforts to clear access to new data sources. New and perhaps unlikely partnerships (with computer programmers, scientific research labs, citizens' groups) are another way to push our discipline forward.

In order to make distinct Canadian contributions that do more than echo developments in the U.S., we need to ask the question, what is Canadian research well-placed to do, that is different from other national jurisdictions? Rather than concentrating our efforts on the thin band of southern settlement that reflects the bulk of Canadian experience, we should place greater emphasis on those parts of the Canadian physical and cultural landscape that ground our uniqueness: the north, Québec, and the country's numerous First Nations' communities, to name a few. Continuing to build connections with other nordic countries who share aspects of our experience, particularly as global developments such as climate change create similar challenges across political jurisdictions, may yield productive and unexpected research encounters.

To take a specific example, and one that reflects my own research trajectory, Canadian environmental historians might profitably redirect attention to a languishing field in Canadian history: that of agricultural history. The distinctiveness of Canadian agricultural environments, both in terms of regulation and ecological constraints, position us well to take up Worster's 1990 challenge to adopt an "agro-ecological perspective" in the discipline, an approach that would seek to trace the ecological transformations brought about by changes in agricultural systems, and, in my reading, the human experience of these changes. As Colin Duncan has argued,

agriculture has historically held a central position in human awareness, monitoring, and regulation of ecological cycles. As such, the study of historical agricultural systems may yield insights—in ways that studies of industry cannot—that can guide us in building sustainable human communities.

## Joanna Dean

Department of History, Carleton University

*Needed: A Field Guide to the Canadian City*

Five years ago, when I taught environmental history to a Canadian Studies class in Germany, I asked them to describe “nature.” The students described mountains, bears, parks and forests; as they themselves observed, their ideal nature was the Canada of tourism literature. Our environmental history has, all too often, reflected this same Canada. We need an environmental history that reflects the lives of the 80% of Canadians who live in cities: a history speaks to gritty urban concerns, collaborates with urban activists and informs municipal policy.

Urban environmental history can be as uniquely Canadian as the histories of glaciers, wildlife, national parks, and northern lakes that we have been producing until now. Our cities are distinctive. It was, after all, Toronto that gave Jane Jacobs her platform, Vancouver that spawned Greenpeace, and Montreal that realized Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic dome at Expo 67. Our major cities took a distinctly Canadian form and have come undone in their own way, as Steven High observed in *Industrial Sunset*. We even have a made-in-Canada theory to apply, if we can reclaim J. M.S. Careless’ metropolitan thesis from William Cronon.

The existing literature is scattered; Canada has no equivalent of Mathew Klingle’s environmental history of Seattle, and Michele Dagenais and Stephane Castonguay’s *Metropolitan Natures: Environmental Histories of Montreal* (forthcoming 2011) is probably the first edited collection, unless we consider Stephen Bockings’ editing of

Urban History Review in 2005. But there is much emerging from the ranks of doctoral students and new scholars: Jay Young on the Toronto subway; Sean Kheraj on Stanley Park; Jennifer Bonnell on the Don River; Ryan O'Connor on Toronto's Pollution Probe and Arn Keeling on Vancouver.

The urban has already inserted a needed political perspective into environmental history. Race and class are central categories of analysis thanks to the environmental justice movement; gender and sexuality are appearing more slowly for some reason. The next step is the inclusion of animals. (Kheraj and Bonnell are already moving in this direction with research into urban animals and honeybees.) Animals, as Levi Strauss famously observed, are "good to think." Their proximity to the human in the city, both spatially and conceptually, muddies any easy distinctions. A horse that labours beside a man, under many of the same constraints, that feels, thinks, and senses in recognisable ways, cannot be understood to be entirely "other." The associative links also work in the other direction: once we see the horse as a sensing agential being, then we may think differently about the bedbug, the street tree, or, perhaps, even the rocks in the macadamized roadway.

We may also see the animal in the human. A forward looking urban environmental history will consider the material presence of the excreting, lactating, birthing, sweating human body in the modern city. It will consider the porosity of this body to the urban environment, where particulate matter enters lungs, toxins cross the placenta, and excreted pharmaceuticals enter the sewer system to play havoc with the genetics of frogs. It

will, following Joy Parr, also take account of the sensing body.

On a pragmatic level, urban environmental history has the potential to develop links between academy and community. Many of the most active environmental groups operate at the municipal level, grounded by a sense of belonging to place, and welcome historical research into the ecology of the local. My own work on city trees has been supported by urban foresters, municipal councilors and groups like Ecology Ottawa and Tree Canada. Jennifer Bonnell's Don River Historical Mapping Project was produced in collaboration with the Toronto Library, and citizen's groups such as Lost Rivers and the Task Force to Bring Back the Don.

(<http://maps.library.utoronto.ca/dvhmp/>) If NiCHE would like to foster an engaged and responsive environmental history, funding more of these kinds of collaborations would be an excellent first step.

In conclusion, a turn to the urban is not a narrowing of perspective. It is in the congested city that we should look for answers to the larger questions of climate change, energy conservation and sustainability. It is, arguably, in the urban soul that the very idea of wilderness, nature, and the great white north has developed.

## Joshua MacFayden

Department of History, University of Western Ontario

Environmental historians have a great deal to offer the scientific community as well as to policy makers and members of the general public. This will happen in many ways, but the contribution I would like to highlight is perhaps one of the areas environmental historians need to explore the most. One critical foundation of environmental science and environmental planning is the measurement of material and energy flows over time. The need for new and reliable estimates of our early social metabolic systems is only increasing. However, many scientists are limited to recent and regional datasets, and earlier and alternative accounts of the Canadian environment might be unknown to them. Others take information such as censuses and early government reports at face value without an awareness of their historical contexts, limitations, and errors. Historians specialize in understanding these historical data, their biases, and the worlds surrounding their creation and application. Historical geographers were proficient analysts of certain Canadian datasets, but new sources and systems are available for this work and Canadians need a revitalized knowledge of hydrological and land use change over the long run and for complete regions and ecosystems.

Many environmental historians are actively trying to establish better estimates of anthropogenic and natural changes in Canadian and other northern ecosystems. To name only a few, Geoff Cunfer and Kenneth Sylvester have demonstrated new cautions and considerations for

using censuses for environmental research on the Great Plains and Prairies, and Ruth Sandwell has argued for a new understanding of printed census data relating to human activity in the Canadian Shield. Dean Bavington and James Murton have called for an examination of subsistence relationships which fall largely outside of the scope of government records, and my own work calls into question the forest, estuarine, and land-use relationships captured by the traditional authority on these sources – the census of agriculture. The rapidly changing world of geographic information systems has introduced a new generation of scholars to geospatial analysis, and I argue that it provides another excellent way for historians to present well-worn sources and new historical data alike to a broad scholarly audience. New databases are now available to supplement and supplant the traditional accounts, ranging from weather station readings to remote sensing. For the most part the census only told us about the environment through the filter of human activity; new or generally unexplored documents – Canada’s extensive collection of aerial photographs, for instance – allow us to see humans through the lens of environmental change.

Querying this information and comparing it with other sources on a large scale would require nothing less than a complete network of trained historians and data architects in universities across the country. However, historians are involved in many similar projects, such as the recently celebrated Canadian Century Research Infrastructure project. Scholars who once presented what some might see as tired economic history to rather cloistered communities are now part of international teams informing the latest research in demography, genetics, and population medicine. It might be a surprise that historians

are reaching these audiences, but it shouldn't be. After all these historians built on a large historical knowledge base, new techniques such as digital linkage, and a well organized research community, not unlike the knowledge, methodologies, and associations created by the last generation of environmental historians.

In my opinion, an important next step for environmental historians would be the organization of a network for compiling historical environmental data for all species and sectors. It might resemble a hybrid of the Early Canadian Environmental Data Project and the *Historical Atlas of Canada*, and similar to the revised estimates of economic, demographic, and population data currently underway in Canadian universities, it would be a welcome contribution to a range of scientific and other new scholarship focussed on the problems facing Canada and the world at large. Our present environmental crisis demands that environmental historians have a strong voice and an integrated and collaborative research community. Our scholarship should help scientists understand our changing environment as well as help communities understand how humans have adapted to these changes in the past.

## Ken Cruikshank

Department of History, McMaster University

Canadian environmental historians live uncomfortably in the long shadow cast by Harold Innis. Like many other environmental historians, I suspect, I don't accept many of Innis' central contentions, including the organization of a society, even a colonial society, around a single product. Perhaps I just cannot quite bring myself to see in the destruction of the beaver, the birth of a nation.

We might as well welcome the shadow, and learn from it. Consider: his two leading "staples" books take seriously the biological characteristics of beaver and cod, and attend to changes in the social construction and commodification of nature. His work on biology is rather static, and nature is more acted upon than actor; that may be true of a good deal of more recent work in environmental history as well. Changes in how commodities are viewed and used in the market seem to me in many environmental histories to be treated as constant or somehow shaped by the product or producer itself. Innis invites us to take markets, consumption and consumers more seriously, and to better understand the connections between nature, producers and consumers.

Innis also connects, or at least considers, the interaction of biology and markets to the organization of business and the state. Environmental historians have attended to the role of the Canadian state, although we seem to have left the writing of some of the history of national and provincial environmental policy to political scientists. And we have done rather less well at considering the interaction of business enterprises and the

environment; ecological modernization does not appear to have any advocates in the Canadian context. Ultimately, Innis seems most interested in the process of adaptation and resilience at the regional and national level; he is intrigued by creation more than destruction.

I have chosen an unlikely focus for talking about Canadian environmental history. I would never recommend Innis as a stylist. I lecture my (often baffled) students on the problems with his arguments. I advocate through my teaching for more attention to cities and urban industrialization by Canadian environmental historians, and see the need to better connect the management of wildlife, parks and natural resources to urban processes. And Innis is almost silent on an issue that does concern me, who wins and who loses when nature is transformed, and how we go about figuring that out.

Maybe I am writing about Innis because I don't normally get to write about him. I think there is something more to it, however. There are dozens of directions that taking the environment seriously can and should lead historians and other scholars. Diversity in approaches is to be welcomed as a sign of the health of the field. Innis, however, reminds us that we should not lose sight of larger structures of trade, consumption and markets. And his long shadow reminds us that there is some value in taking calculated risks in our scholarship, to test larger conclusions from smaller studies.

## **Jim Daschuk**

University of Regina

I think that NiCHE and environmental historians in Canada and elsewhere are doing some of the most innovative and exiting work in the field, I agree with the statement in "Writing the next Chapter of Canadian Environmental History" that "our output is confined to academic texts, rarely penetrating the popular media or having a policy impact."

In my own small way, I have addressed the above in delivering an environmental history class at the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy here at the University of Regina this past term called "Case Studies in Environment, Health and Policy" to 18 or so Master of Public Administration Students. I've attached the syllabus. In contrast to most of the course content at JSGS, we spend most of 14 weeks examining policy failures on a number of environmental issues. Jessica, thank you again for helping out my students on the Asbestos file.

As a capstone to the course, I organized a two day visit by Andrew Nikiforuk and his friend Dr. John O'Connor, of Fort Chipewyan fame, on the environmental and health impact of tar sands development. They spoke to over two hundred people in person and throughout the province on CBC radio (twice) along with television coverage by CTV (twice), the indigenous broadcasting network -Missinnippi Broadcasting-and others. I had some help with the press release and, once work got out, there was sincere and widespread interest in the media. Dr. O'Connor was interviewed on our provincial CBC afternoon show hosted by a young indigenous woman

named Michelle Higli-Brass who brought her partner to the public event at the University that evening. (I've also attached the poster for the events).

I have been working with the Indigenous People's Health Research Centre here in Regina; they provided the financial support for the visit and acted as host for the events. If NiCHE members were to organize similar public events, funding would probably be relatively easy to secure. There are several similar research units across the country that would likely be happy to act as partners.

As an institution, I feel that NiCHE could both raise its profile and both student and public interest by engaging in research into the relationship between environmental issues and their impact on health. This might be done through the establishment of a working group made up of people interested in engaging these types of issues. Michael Egan, one of the organizers of the Hamilton event, comes to mind. I have been thinking about this for a while and was inspired by Andrew and John's visit, along with the indication from John that historical work into the emergence of current environmental health issues could only help in raising awareness among students, the public at large, and policy makers.

I know that active engagement in health issues may be too controversial for some but it would be great if we could we could set up a network of like-minded people across the country to share information and approaches. NiCHE would be an excellent vehicle for beginning this process.

## William Knight

Department of History, Carleton University

I balk at this task: to undertake a cogent summary of where Canadian environmental history has been, where it is going, and how it should get there and infuse it with creativity, provocativeness, and passion. I have my nose pressed too close to the screen of a doctoral research project to have that wide a view. And in the day-to-day routine of scholarly work the three aforementioned qualities are evanescent. They are like dark matter—suspected to exist, indeed necessary to sustain the universe, yet remain invisible. To switch metaphors, I do not think of the environmental historian as Toller Cranston, but rather as George Smiley: disarming, dogged, and determined to piece together the intelligence. And that is what Canadian environmental historians have been doing and doing well. It is arguable whether or not we have yet produced a work with immediate brand-name recognition like *Changes in the Land* or *Nature's Economy*—though *The Politics of Development* is definitely gaining momentum—but our work is adventurous. Liza Piper's recent monograph is a good case in point. An excellent piece of environmental history should tilt your horizon, and Piper's book immediately redrew my mental map of northern Canada; where I once saw a mass of land, she reversed my gestalt and I now see big lakes rather than big land, and view those water masses as a historical set of links in a new chain of 20th century industrial expansion and exploitation. This is the sort of work we need more of. What needs to be done? Environmental histories of defence in Canada, particularly

the DEW line, more about freshwater fisheries science, more art, more literature, more cross-fertilization—but these topics and approaches seem to take care of themselves as each wave of graduate students discover their own territories and orient themselves to their own peculiar bearings. In other words, we can let the Smileys of our discipline continue their work and give them support and encouragement. They set the agenda and we should trust them to continue their explorations.

## **Lyle Dick**

Parks Canada

Vice-President of Canadian Historical  
Association

*What are the present strengths of Environmental History in  
Canada?*

The strengths of the field of environmental history include its diversity of subject matter and research topics, the participation of practitioners of various fields, and its relevance to Canadians' on-going concerns regarding the status and future of our natural and cultural environments. Another strength is the sub-field's interdisciplinary base, including geography, vernacular architecture and landscape studies, ecology, and numerous sub-fields of history. Spatially, this sub-field and historical geography have generated some very good environmental histories of rivers, urban environments, rural communities, overview treatments of some large regions, national parks, and numerous other subjects. In terms of time scales, many good studies have been carried out over well-defined periods, especially in the medium-term register (Braudel's *moyen durée*), enabling historians to trace change over time within the periods selected for study. Studies in this field have added greatly to our understanding of the historical and current character of many of Canada's natural and cultural environments.

*What are its needs and challenges?*

In the interest of extending its reach and impact, it would be desirable for more environmental histories to seek to engage environmental issues of pressing social concern, posing both a challenge and an opportunity for the field. Some current areas of concern include such subjects as human rights and the environment and the impacts of major industrial developments on human populations and the natural environment although much more could be done in these areas. Less attention has been devoted to the impacts of the natural environment on people so it seems timely to encourage initiatives to redress this research gap, depending on the availability of historical sources.

In terms of the larger field of Canadian history, there are many potential topics that would potentially benefit greatly from the application of in-depth environmental history research to long-standing questions and conundrums. However, a major challenge is determining how to craft environmental history research topics that could facilitate their integration into larger synthesis studies of Canada, its regions, or cross-border studies. This points to the desirability of fostering greater collaboration between practitioners of different sub-fields in crafting research projects that can address different research questions and the needs of different constituencies.

As well, much current environmental history work does not yet fully engage the environment as a complex dynamic subject on a par with the human subjects who are usually the focus of study. Many environmental histories do not fully utilize the knowledge of other disciplines, such as ecology and climatology, in reconstructing changes in the natural environments of earlier eras in their full

complexity. The painstaking historical reconstruction of natural processes in a given area over time could enable a rebalancing of the field, i.e. a focus not only on the ways that humans have exerted an impact on the environment but also the myriad ways in which natural processes have influenced human societies in the past, right up to the present.

A further need is for more individual studies in environmental history to be carried out across a range of different time scales, such as the short, medium, and long-term scales identified by Braudel. Some good studies of *longue durée* environmental history have been carried out for the prairies and the Arctic, but that is not true of all major regions of Canada. If carried out along these lines, such studies might serve as building blocks for a larger environmental history of Canada (or North America).

There is also a need for more studies tracing historical change arising from the interplay of cultural or political factors and the environment. An example is the settlement history of Prairie Canada, where some studies suggest that it was the interplay of various factors, such as the provisions of the Dominion Lands Act, the settlers' time of arrival, the quality of soils and accessibility of available surveyed lands, which interacted in specific ways to contribute to cross-generational patterns of inequality evident across the region. However, much more microhistorical work of this nature is needed to establish the relative role of these and other factors in the making of the prairie provinces, its social, economic, and political structures. Presumably, analogous studies might be undertaken in other parts of Canada, albeit that the patterns of settlement, land policies, natural environments, and historical outcomes will be different in the various

regions. Further historical work also remains to be done on the climatic history of Canada's regions to connect more fully with the work of climatologists, including the intensive study of microclimates and the opportunities and constraints they posed historically to human populations interacting within these environments.

*Where should its research and teaching go in the future?*

As a practice, environmental history has much to contribute to current debates in Canadian society beyond the disciplinary concerns of history and other humanities and social sciences. For example, in the provinces and territories major engineering projects such as road construction or hydro-electric developments have built-in archaeological assessments as part of the required environmental review process, but a strong case could be made for promoting richer contextual historical research on associated environments and populations in tandem with archaeological impact analyses. Indeed, such research could be integral to documenting and understanding establishing the cumulative effects referenced in the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act. Such research might not be specifically required under CEAA, but funders of social sciences and humanities research might be encouraged to support complementary research projects. Oral histories with communities potentially affected by development could help document more holistically the true impacts of development, as indeed is required in such jurisdictions as the Territories of Nunavut and the Northwest Territories. Such studies would have an added benefit of bringing researchers into direct contact and dialogue with people with a direct stake in human-

induced environmental change. More research with people impacted by natural disasters, such as Graham Carr's recent oral research focussing on the testimony of survivors of Hurricane Katrina, would also be a welcome development. There is also a need for much more historical research on human rights and the environment.

Various historical studies of human-wildlife interactions have highlighted the importance of Indigenous and local knowledge. Few projects, however, have sought to collaborate or share authority in the production of knowledge with local hunters or others interacting with these environments. Environmental history would benefit from greater collaboration between professional historians and history students with grass-roots practitioners of Indigenous or local knowledge, such as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal hunters, fishermen or farmers. More general environmental history studies would also benefit from a greater engagement with the voices and perspectives of local environmental knowledge.

To address expressed concerns regarding a perceived lack of impact on public policies or the popular media, practitioners will need to consider what forms of media and messages can help them engage these important constituencies beyond the academy. Environmental historians might consider accessing partnership development grants awarded through the SSHRC's Connection Program, designed to support "specific activities and tools that facilitate the multidirectional flow of research knowledge." NiCHE already fulfills one of the partnership approaches promoted by SSHRC, i.e. networks for research and / or related activities, but perhaps further attention could be paid to the category "Cross-sector co-creation of

knowledge and understanding,” emphasizing partnerships between post-secondary institutions and non-academic senior partners. Potentially such partnerships might be pursued with such organizations such as the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society or other environmental groups.

*How should it get there?*

As the symposium outline makes clear, much more attention needs to be paid to disseminating the existence, findings, and value of environmental history research for Canadians. In this regard, it would be desirable for more research to be presented to general audiences, not merely specialists in university settings. It is important that environmental history be seen as contributing to current debates on the environment, and that implies finding new audiences and devising new ways to engage them. Partnerships with local environmental groups, for example Vancouver’s Green Club, the Stanley Park Ecology Society, municipal libraries and museums, could offer opportunities for practitioners to present their environmental history research findings to wider audiences. Perhaps also, beyond its current reporting to its granting agencies, and in the event of available funding, NiCHE might consider extending its informational reach to a broader network of constituencies engaged in environmental issues.

## Colin Coates

Glendon College, York University

### *For Agrarian History*

Reflecting the general focus of Canadian historiography, Environmental Historians in Canada have primarily engaged in twentieth-century studies. There have been important contributions to the study of earlier periods, of course, but the majority of historians deal with more recent subjects. This focus on the twentieth century has made it harder to see some of the longer and comparative trends in Environmental History that explicate the particularities of the Canadian experience. The relationship between the imputed costs of land and labour are, to my mind, among the key issues in Environmental History, and they reveal key differences between “Old World” tendencies and “New World” experiences. Historically, Canadian land – like land elsewhere in much of the Americas – has been less expensive than European land. This fact encouraged immigration from Europe to the New World through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and it allowed Canada to maintain a self-identification as a rural country later than many other Western nations.

Of course, the cost of land relates to the types of land, and most Canadian land has little value in agricultural terms. For many good reasons, much of Canadian Environmental History examines this non-agricultural land: the location for hunting, prospecting, hydro-electricity, park developments, conservation, and forestry. Historians have been comparatively less interested in looking at the agricultural ecumene, where

the vast majority of the Euro-Canadian population has been located. As a result, historians tend to replicate some of the problems of the staples approach to Canadian history, emphasising export-driven economies to the exclusion of internally- and subsistence-oriented agriculture, which involved a much greater proportion of the Canadian population well into the twentieth century.

In contrast to the relative cheapness of land, labour has been expensive, reflecting the underpopulated nature of the country and the ability through much of Canadian history to cross the border into the United States. As was the case to the south, the expense of labour necessitated choices in land use, encouraging more extensive than intensive forms of agriculture. These tendencies led to measurable environmental consequences, and historians have not had much interest in looking at these decisions. The rapid over-expansion of agriculture in central Canada in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and in western Canada in the twentieth century could be examined alongside an equally fast reduction in the amount of farmland in subsequent decades. Canadian historians have not paid enough attention to the place of livestock in mediating human relations with the “natural” world, or for that matter the relationship between livestock and indigenous predators. The cost of labour is a key component in the decision to embrace technological approaches to production. The relatively high wages also contributed to expectations that led to a development of new settlement areas, rather than the intensification of older settlement areas.

In short, I believe that Environmental History in Canada has not dedicated enough attention to the period before 1900 and to agrarian economies and landscapes.

## Matthew Hatvany

Department of Geography, Université Laval

Environmental history is robust from a disciplinary perspective. The quality and quantity of the scholarship are impressive and continue to grow. However, from an interdisciplinary social and natural sciences discipline like geography, environmental history's future appears precarious. This observation is made in reference to the growing role of government and natural sciences as mediators in eco-social relations. Those who hold power over eco-social relations are increasingly natural scientists deemed "environmental experts" (biologist, ecologists, hydrologists, geologists, physical geographers, resource managers, land managers, GIS experts, etc). It is ironic that despite the prevalent discourse of sustainability and the accompanying Venn diagrams illustrating eco-society-economy unity, any holistic approach is being eroded by research granting agencies tidily divided between the social and the natural sciences. This cleavage, reinforced by unequal funding, segregates research centres into natural and social sciences programs and draws off the best students toward the better-funded disciplines. The result is the vesting of eco-social relations in experts who, because of their disciplinary-specific training, treat the environment as an entity devoid of cultural content. While environmental geographers and historians are busily demonstrating to each other important historical nature-society processes, before our very eyes the future environment is being made placeless because our research is increasingly beyond the pale of the natural sciences. As environmental geographers and historians, we can and

should take pride in the positive evolution of our field, but we must take seriously the pressing challenge of rehistoricizing the natural sciences at the ultimate risk of our own irrelevancy.

## Jim Clifford

### Network in Canadian History & Environment

I come at this question from an odd position. I do not study Canadian environmental history, but I have been active NiCHE member since starting my PhD and I now work for the network. I do have a lot of experience in the challenges of building connections between history and the public in Canada, through my work with Active History. As a historian of Britain's environmental history I can confidently say Canadian environmental history is strong compared with the UK, where the field took some time to gain a place among the better established and overlapping fields of rural, landscape and medical history. Environmental history in Canada seems to have grown into one of the main sub-fields of research, and more slowly it is gaining ground in the undergraduate curriculum. Clearly NiCHE has played a big role in developing connections between environmental historians across Canada and we need to build on this success moving forward.

I agree with the stated goals of EH+ that we need to take environmental history to the next level by playing an active role in showing the public, policy makers and the media why environmental history matters. This is not an easy task, but the NiCHE website does provide an opportunity for us to start publishing more accessible environmental history (both in writing style and in cost) and I hope more NiCHE members will consider writing blogs and Op-Eds for the site in the years ahead. Beyond that, we need to continue our work to facilitate the teaching of environmental history in university survey

courses (hopefully the MacEachern and Turkel textbook is already helping) and in high school classrooms, as teaching is the single biggest way we can reach a wide audience.

Finally, I think we should take a leadership role in promoting the value of graduate history degrees in careers beyond academia. This is an uncomfortable conversation, as few of us want to discuss the apparent reality that many of the graduate students who attend CHESS each year will not secure tenure track jobs. It is particularly uncomfortable for myself, as I fully intend on spending the next few years pursuing an academic career. Nonetheless, I believe the field might benefit from imagining the contributions talented historians with advanced degrees could make in addressing current environment problems in careers in the government and NGO workforce. These contributions might be even greater if we work to keep the NiCHE network engaged with graduates working both within and beyond the universities. Environmental historians have a lot to offer in developing public policy. There are a number of ways academic historians can contribute to changing public policy (see <http://www.wildlandsandwoodlands.org/>), but helping students with MAs and PhDs in the field find government policy and management jobs, might be the most direct way for us to contribute an environmental history perspective.

## Colin Duncan

Department of History, Queen's University  
and McGill University

Watson (terrified): "Holmes, it's the footprint of one of those giant Canadians!"

What ABOUT Canada and its environment? Canada is mostly rocky and mostly cold with here and there lots of trees and lakes and swamps too, but also a lot of coast. So what?! That is what most Canadians say now, including historians of Canada. We don't care! But let us ask (again) the question Hippocrates would have asked first upon arriving here? Did Canada's peculiar environment determine the characteristics of its inhabitants? No, we say, it did not. In fact, we believe that nowhere on Earth in the last forty millenia has environment determined even cultural, let alone biological facts about humans. As Wallace, co-discoverer of the theory of evolution, early on knew perfectly clearly from direct experience, humans are basically identical, they just grow up different. So from the late 1800s to the middle of the 20th century wannabe scientific racists never had any positive evidence to support their pseudo-Darwinian attempted further development of environmental determinist ideas like those of Hippocrates which were actually based in mere correlations, but the mountain of evidence against the incoherent views of racists has got nothing to do one way or the other with the practice of environmental history, a point most non-environmental historians still do not get. When non-EH people think of us they think we do some kind of environmental determinism, which we don't. But

there is something a good deal closer to environmental determinism we should be doing and that is relating environment to the material practices that in fact underlay &/or underlie lives in Canada. Nobody lives long here without burning something, directly or indirectly. There are a lot of garments worn here. Much artificial lighting, etc. The suite of combustibles, wearables, etc. has changed a bit over space and time in Canada to be sure, but surely we would be enlightened by putting a bit more effort into systematic comparative history on what Canadians have HAD to do in their environment as well as on what they have CHOSEN TO ALSO DO. Ethnic differences are interesting enough in themselves, but arguably they pale in importance compared to environmentally enforced SIMILARITIES. At any rate, it has been a completely arbitrary procedure that has led Canadian historiography to focus so much on difference. So environmental history, if done systematically, could be an interesting way to start a new Canadian synthesis. It is to be expected that Canadians will fairly soon have to think hard about the way they deal with the material world. If they don't they risk being ridiculed, reviled, even attacked by others. The world as a notional whole presents as a strange quasi-spectrum of niches for life-forms (microbial, plant, animal, human, bird, etc.) but these niches vary both discontinuously and discontinuously. Since the 1960s we have figured out that the variability of Earth's environment is inevitable but also that most of the variability is very far from random. Thanks to climate science we now know the world is a real whole, not just a notional one. The differing rates at which air and water and land respectively absorb and dissipate heat coupled with asymmetries in the world (such as the happenstance

distribution of land versus ocean) turn periodic changes in the way the whole receives heat from the Sun into semi-periodic oscillations that we ignore at our peril. The environment as a whole does determine that different places present human wannabe occupants with different sets of characteristic problems that must be solved with various material practices. The sum of the consequences of these practices is now considerable. Analysis of Canada as an historical case study in nation building would be worthwhile. The fact that Canadians now barely believe in their nation as such cannot disguise the fact that in terms of material practices Canadians live more similarly now than at any point in their history. Who in Canada these days eats no fruit in winter? burns no gasoline? uses no electricity? etc. Let us soon tell the full story of how the environment has pushed us around. Then we can look and see what we have done to it thereby. Ignoring our giant footprints, past and present, is just too absurd.

Thomas McIlwraith  
Department of Geography, University of  
Toronto Mississauga

*Railroad history meets environmental history*

In my Emeritus years, following a career as historical geographer at University of Toronto Mississauga, I am reaching back to the 1960s, my early years of research addressing the refining and movement of wheat and flour through the Great Lakes region in the 19th century. It was corporate, statistical, and financial, and environmental only in a sort of intuitive, but rarely explicit, way. Were I doing it today, I would be keen to talk about soil depletion by the wheat monoculture of the pre-Confederation period, or where the Provincial Steam Dredge dumped the muck carried down the Credit River and scraped off the floor of Port Credit harbour.

Well, I am thinking about such matters today, in the context of the impact of railroads on society and land in Ontario from the earliest innovations in the 1830s to an undefined crescendo sometime about 1920. This is not corporate history, but a geography of landscape refinement, nimbyism and the optimism displayed in the positive responses of a population, increasingly urban, becoming mobile as never before. Railways discovered gravel as they cut through the glacial deposits of Ontario previously draped over by roads and barely scratched by farming. Railroads began wearing out from the day they were opened, introducing scrap metal to a stone and wooden world. Railroads created mountains of cinders as they converted from wood fuel to coal. Contractors cut

down forests to fence cattle and pedestrians from dangers previously unimagined along thousands of miles of edge between field and track. Railroads threw landfills across ravines to smooth their way, altering water flows. But railroads also, I believe, contributed significantly to the diversification from the wheat economy into the mixed farming economy following Confederation, which in turn offered the possibility for soil restoration hitherto lacking. Beyond the obvious visual and noise aspects of railways lie untold secondary effects on the human spirit as well as on the stewardship of the land.

It's all out there, evidence to be culled from newspapers, correspondence, public addresses, pamphlets, pictures, maps, and, most importantly, field work. Corporate records are poor sources, the environment (physical and cultural both) absent from the bottom line. My writing is primarily a social historical geography, and throughout it runs a strong undercurrent of environmental history, often turning up in unanticipated ways. My search for connections proceeds apace.

## **Lauren Wheeler**

Department of History & Classics, University  
of Alberta

### *Environmental history and the Public*

I came to environmental history in 2008 an atypical public history student; while the rest of my cohort were analyzing museums and films about the past, I was looking at pictures of early twentieth century winter recreation in Banff, Alberta to better understand how residents constructed identities from how they interacted with the mountain environment. Should have realized then environmental history was the place to be. Over the past three years of doctoral studies I have continually noticed that for all the inter-disciplinarily and all the cross-over with other theoretical approaches to history there is very little done by environmental historians which utilizes the practices and analytical framework of public history. This strikes me as strange because if ever there was a sub-discipline of history that could change society by leaving the ivory tower and engaging the public directly it is environmental history.

The moment when environmental history emerged as a distinct sub-discipline is the first indicator of its potential in the public sphere. The 1970s saw the emergence of modern environmentalism, as defined by an increased concern for the negative affects of human activities on the environment and increased actions by the public to mitigate the destructiveness of the modern western lifestyle. Environmental history was part of this movement just as the development of environmental

studies programs and increasing education on environmental change were. Yet, environmental studies and the sciences made educating and engaging with the public an important part of their project while much of the information environmental historians produced remained within the academic sphere. Contemporary issues inform the type of research conducted by environmental historians, but there is a hesitancy to share the stories and lessons of past environmental failures and successes with the public. Science has made itself relevant through actively seeking to engage with the public and over time has created a level of scientific literacy in the general population that is unprecedented. Environmental historians have the opportunity to do the same, to use science both as part of our work and as a tool for getting the public to understand the value of knowing about the past.

As the environment becomes a more pressing concern in political spheres and in society in general, finding a way to make environmental history public becomes increasingly important. The new scholars are leading the charge but without support from the establish scholars the success of getting the public to see the value of environmental history is uncertain. Blogs, community involvement, and publishing for a popular audience are a great beginning and by incorporating the media savvy shown by the sciences, environmental historians can make the past relevant in the present. The environment matters and environmental historians are in the unique position of being able to make it matter more by educating the public on how we came to be in the situation we are in today and what viable alternatives the past suggests are out there.