

History as Experiment: Microhistory and Environmental History

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Like all history, microhistory is a dialogue about the interpretation of meaningful evidence left over from the past. Microhistory differs from other kinds of history in that it reduces the scale of observation; it is a very close reading of evidence documenting how people ordinarily (day to day) related to each other, and to their environment, in one place.¹ Microhistorians are drawn by their conviction that “[p]henomena previously considered to be sufficiently described and understood assume completely new meanings by altering the scale of observation.”² A study of a specific house, river, neighbourhood, family, or individual through history, or anything else that requires the reduction of scale and an intensive examination of evidence, could qualify as microhistory. But because the most commonly recognized kind of microhistory is the community-based study, and as its advantages to environmental history are both extensive and generally unacknowledged, this will be the focus of my discussion here.

Microhistorians are interested in the details of daily life in one place, and how they change over time. By focusing on the specific and the local, microhistorians’ detailed research has contributed to more nuanced general and even national histories. For example, microhistorical studies have provided evidence of the differences and variations within national or thematic patterns that historians have already documented, shedding light on such questions as, why is it that while most families in Canada were reducing their family size in the early 20th century, some did not? Did farms fail or did there seem to be more opportunities for a better life in the city? How exactly did dry land farming practices used by farmers in the early years of the 20th century contribute to the soil erosion that came to define the “dust bowl” of the Depression years? And microhistorians’ work can offer some particular insights into the ways in which general patterns or average behaviours were

experienced at the individual or local level. Bettina Bradbury's study of two Montreal neighbourhoods, for example, provides an in-depth look at the aspirations, practices, and financial considerations that engaged people coming to terms with industrialization.³ The reduced scale of microhistory can be particularly useful not only in documenting variations within general trends, and insights into the experience of the average, but also, as will be shown in more detail below, in bringing to the historian's view those activities, beliefs, and issues that are difficult to see, let alone understand, when the scope of enquiry is wider, more generalized, or depersonalized.

Unlike most other historians, microhistorians are not seeking to demonstrate the significance or meaning of their particular research in terms of, or in relation to, averages, patterns, or trends already established by other historians. Indeed, when microhistory emerged in the 1970s, it did so as part of a radical historiographical groundswell that challenged assumptions of homogeneity, uniformity, and "progress" posited by earlier generations of historians and embedded in the very notions of "general trends" or "average behaviours." Society cannot, microhistorians argued, be understood in terms of external forces that imposed massive change on everyone, or even on coherent social groups, all at the same time and in the same way; change cannot be understood as a "regular progression through a uniform and predictable series of stages" in which individuals respond to social and economic structures in a way that seems "given, natural and inevitable."⁴ By reducing the scale of observation, it becomes possible to document the ways that particular people work out their lives within a shifting set of patterns—beliefs, practices, relationships—in which they make sense of their own lives, adapting themselves to each other and to their environment, or by changing their environment to suit their society. It is in people's day-to-day practices that they make the "innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules."⁵ It is in these practices that microhistorians hope to see and sometimes explain variation and change in history. Microhistorians of the 1970s, in other words, were explicitly looking for ways of understanding difference and change that did not reduce culture, economy, and society to normative trends and generalized patterns; in the study of the local and the particular they found a new, and they believed, a much more complex way of understanding society and the individuals who comprised it through time.

But whether or not microhistorians actively espouse the radical purpose of their historiographic forebears, and whatever their contribution to debates about general trends, issues, and events, microhistorians' purpose, and the starting point of their research, is the local and the particular. This has some interesting consequences for the kind of history they write. They cannot be certain, at the beginning of their research, whether their findings will cast new light on old questions, support earlier generalizations, or generate new questions about issues or events whose significance has not yet come to the attention of historians. And because of the range of their topics, and their emphasis on diversity, difference, and the particulars of the person or place they are exploring, microhistorians as a group have no consensus on the theories, concepts, or ideological frameworks that will direct their interpretation of what they will find. Instead, they draw widely from anthropology, sociology, and history as seems appropriate to their particular study. Perhaps the only substantive generalization, therefore, that can be meaningfully made about microhistory,

aside from its alteration of scale, is that it is an essentially experimental genre of history. It is the kind of experiment that ventures something new and different; it is an experiment with no dependent variables.

I will be suggesting throughout this chapter that microhistorians' vision of history as experiment can offer focus, methods, and purposes that have some particular advantages to those doing and understanding environmental history. As Donald Worster argues, environmental history looks beyond the thematic, temporal, and geographic boundaries that define most historical subjects and practices.⁶ Instead of being located within these boundaries, environmental history situates human actions within an ecological context, where three kinds of relationships can be observed: the relationships among nonhuman phenomena (like microbes, algae, fish, and river beds); the ongoing, multiple, endless responses of human beings to their environment (adapting farming practices to a particular soil, or burning "buffalo chips" to heat a sod house on the Prairies); and the impact of human beings on that environment (the toxic waste from a chemical plant dumped into a lake that kills fish, or the creation by farmers of a perfect environment for weeds by cultivating the soil). A "fundamental premise" of environmental history, as William Cronon puts it, "is that human acts occur within a network of relationships, processes and systems that are as ecological as they are cultural. . . . [T]he natural world, its objective effects on people, and the concrete ways people affect it in turn are . . . the very heart of our intellectual project."⁷ Microhistory can assist environmental history by providing a focus through which to see the complex daily series of relationships involving humans and nature. It might be said that microhistory offers an "ecosystem approach" to understanding people in their environments.

A Case Study of Microhistorical Practice

Microhistory provides a close-up view of people and place over time. It also offers environmental history a methodology (a way of doing history) and epistemology (a way of knowing the subjects of history) for exploring the kinds of rigorous, detailed, empirical studies that are needed to explore the complex relations between people and their environment. As well as being defined by its attention to the relations within a particular place, microhistory is also rooted in a close examination of a wide variety and large volume of documentary evidence about that place. This section will discuss how the research of a microhistorian might unfold, and suggests, in the process, how this kind of history is particularly well suited to the study of environmental history.

Let's turn to the research process that I am the most familiar with: my own microhistorical study. In beginning work on what eventually became my book *Contesting Rural Space*, I chose Salt-spring Island, British Columbia, because it met the requirements set out above for a microhistorical study.⁸ It was a well-defined place, and there was a lot of historical evidence available that allowed me to answer questions that I wanted to ask about day-to-day life—most particularly, what was the relationship of these people to the rural land on which they lived? Before beginning my research, I understood from secondary readings that it had been one of the first areas identified as an agricultural hinterland for Victoria and the mining communities of Ladysmith and Nanaimo on Vancouver Island, providing them with fresh agricultural produce.

My first task as a researcher involved finding out as much as I could about the particular people who lived on the island, and about the particular pieces of land that they took up. I sought all of the documents that provided information about any person who lived on the island—from the time that the first non-native settlers arrived on the island in 1859, through the first generation of resettlement, to the date when the first detailed agricultural statistics were available for individuals on the island in 1891—and to find out about each piece of land inhabited in that time period. The population of the island was about 270 in 1881 and 450 in 1891, but most of my records documented the people of most interest to the colonial and early provincial bureaucrats and policy makers: landowners. Women were allowed to own land under some circumstances, but they were not generally allowed to obtain land under the pre-emption (or homesteading) system. As the vast majority of land on the island was obtained under that system, most of my records were about men. In the end, I had about 4,400 discrete pieces of information relating to this population in the years under examination, and about 80 percent of these described landholding men.

I spent many months finding and entering into a computerized database information gleaned from what historians term “routinely generated sources.” For the island, these included voters’ lists (listing the name of all eligible voters on the island); business directories (listing all property owners on the island); censuses for 1881, 1891, and 1901 (offering information about the age, sex, religion, place of origin, ethnicity, and relationship to the household head of everyone on the island on census day); and tax assessment rolls (providing information on land ownership, the value of land, the number of livestock, as well as information about the value of their taxable property in this age before income tax). I also looked for information about individuals in a variety of other sources: court records, inquests, school records, Public Accounts for the province of British Columbia (which listed the name of everyone who worked for the provincial government, for what wage, and for how many days), newspaper stories, diaries, and letters. Gravestones and parish records provided the best source of information about women and children outside the decennial census, though the latter, with its listing of the names, ages, and parentage of all residents, provided the best—though certainly still not always accurate—single source about all members of each household.

Land records provided my largest single source. The surveyor general’s office houses an important collection for the study of pioneer settlement. When land was (and is) originally purchased from the crown (i.e., from the province of British Columbia), the purchaser pays the government, and obtains a crown grant that gives him or her legal title to the land. This process generates a formal record, the registration of the land in the surveyor general’s office in Victoria. In the first years of resettlement, these records were handwritten in the land register, a huge book where every piece of land was listed by region (Saltspring Island had its own book, while Victoria and Nanaimo each had several volumes, for example) and then by individual section and range number, and included the name of the first person to purchase that particular piece of land and the date.

After a particular piece of land is “alienated from the crown,” documentation relating to any further sales of that land is dealt with in a different office, the land records office. It is an efficient system for following the purchase and sale of land from one individual to another, but it creates difficulties for anyone wanting to study the history of a community. First, the system used by the land records office does not allow the researcher to see the history of any particular piece of land

through time, because (unlike the surveyor general's records, which lists the history of each piece of property on a page or two), the land records office in British Columbia keeps track of only a number that links one sale in the province back to the last previous owner. As a result, it can take several hours to research a single piece of property through several purchases and sales. Second, the search is very expensive. The land records office will not allow researchers to do their own searching, and so are obliged to charge the researcher several dollars per land transaction. This makes tracing the history of land ownership in an entire community like Saltspring Island practically impossible—a factor that helps to explain why there are so few studies of land ownership in western Canada and the United States.⁹

Fortunately, given my research goals, most people on Saltspring Island in the years that I was looking at did not purchase their land outright; indeed, no one did before 1881. Instead, most people obtained their land by taking advantage of the pre-emption system. This was a homesteading system, developed in the 1860s across North America, that allowed people without a lot of money to register a claim on a piece of land for just a few dollars, and then to live on it for some years without paying for it. Once settlers had “improved” their land by clearing, fencing, and erecting a permanent building on it, they were entitled to purchase the property very cheaply from the government—\$1 per acre across much of the west in the 19th century. This was an excellent system for encouraging settlers to turn “wilderness” areas into farming communities. This system also generated the kinds of records historians need to follow the process of land settlement. The government recorded who was pre-empting and improving land in the same land register that listed the eventual alienation of each piece of land from the Crown when it was finally purchased. The land register, therefore, became central to my study of land use on the island, and I spent several months entering its contents into my computerized database. The only snag was that British Columbia started collecting its data in such an organized form only in 1871, when it became a province, while my study began in 1859. It took me several months of searching throughout the British Columbia Archives to find just over 100 pre-emptions from the earlier, colonial era.

Once I had all of this information about people and where and how they lived, I needed to organize and analyze it. What were the questions I wanted to ask? Did my data allow me to answer them? Foundational to my approach was a conviction that rural households were central to an understanding of rural economies and societies, and so I made the households on the island the centre of my study. The kinds of questions that I wanted to answer came, in their most general form, from the wider historical literature about rural societies and how they changed over time. From this literature, I identified a number of specific questions that I hoped would address bigger questions about rural society. What was the household composition? (Were families nuclear, or extended? How many children did people have? Was there intermarriage among the many different ethnic groups on the island?) How did people make a living on the island? (Did they grow crops or raise livestock? Did they sell or consume these products? Did they hunt and fish, and, if so, did they do so for money or for home consumption? Did men, women, and children do the same things, or different?) What kind of community was there on the island? (Was there a municipal government? Did people send their children to school regularly? Did they all go to the same church? How were conflicts settled?)

To answer these questions, I cross-linked the information gathered about land usage and ownership and every other piece of information I had about individuals to the census descriptions of households in the 1881 and 1891 censuses. The census, in other words, became a snapshot of each household that I related to all other information I had gathered about individuals over time. For all heads of household appearing on the census, for example, I was able to provide a first and last date that they appeared on any documentation indicating their presence on the island, a description of the amount of land they owned, and the number of children they had in the census year. These cross-linkages for 1881 and 1891 allowed me to answer questions such as, How old were people when they arrived on the island? Did they arrive by themselves, in couples, or with their families? How much land did people take up? How long did they live on each piece of land, and on the island? What percentage of those arriving on the island stayed for more than a year, or more than 20 years? Did people who arrived the earliest stay the longest?

Out of this information, gathered and analyzed over a period of four years, I gradually built up a description and analysis of the population of the island as it grew and changed between 1859 and 1891. My challenge was then to make inferences about people's motives, aspirations, and ideas about rural life from the fragmentary evidence documenting their behaviours. I concluded that the people of Saltspring Island worked out a particular compromise between their cultural expectations and the place in which they lived, a compromise that suited that rural population, but did not meet with the approval of bureaucrats or neighbouring "respectable" urban centres. As we will see in more detail below, it did not take Islanders long to figure out that they had more options open to them than selling either farm produce or their labour in order to make a living.

While my study noted the importance of the Gulf Islands' climate, geology, flora, and fauna to the people of the island, it did little to explore the particular impact of the population on that environment in any detail. In what ways can microhistorians add an examination of this crucial dynamic to the study of place? Louis-Raphael Pelletier's "Revolutionizing Landscapes: Hydroelectricity and the Heavy Industrialization of Society and Environment in the comté de Beauharnois, 1927–1948" is one of only a handful of detailed studies emphasizing the specific environmental impact that a community effected over time.¹⁰ Using the archival records of the Beauharnois Light, Heat and Power Company—records that included a wealth of photographs documenting the remarkable changes made to the environment by the installation of the dam the company needed to produce the electrical power it wanted to sell—and the "routinely generated sources" from the comté (county) de Beauharnois, in south-eastern Quebec, Pelletier documents the profound social, economic, and environmental changes that accompanied the development of heavy modern industry into an area previously characterized by small-scale farms. The majority of farmers were forced to sell their properties to BLH&P to make way for the massive canal and dam. Without land to farm, residents were obliged to work as waged labourers for the company. While wages rose, economic security was compromised, and the household forms of labour were disrupted with the new regime; the new workers no longer had control over their economic life. Even those farmers who retained their farm properties found their community, their economy, and their households transformed. Earlier patterns of transportation and communication were profoundly disrupted by the massive rearrangements of land to create the dam. The new dam cut the community in two, and no road was built to link the two sections, making

it extremely difficult for farmers to get their produce to markets, and for people to travel throughout the municipality to visit or shop. Whereas decisions about such key issues relating to landscape—where roads would be, where people would live—were previously made by municipal governments, with the installation of the new industry in the area, decisions were increasingly made by company owners concerned with maximizing the production of electricity. Even worse for the community, the company sold some of its lands to the federal government, which was not required to pay municipal taxes. Without a tax base, members of the municipality were unable to pay for the kinds of infrastructure—roads, sewers, lighting—that they needed. As Pelletier argues, the company had a profound impact on the land, on the particular landscape, and, as a result, on the society, economy, and culture of the people of comté de Beauharnois.

Microhistorical Practice and the Approach to “Topic”

It is worth elaborating here on just how different microhistorians’ focus is from that of many historians. Often the process of historical research begins with the historian making a number of decisions about the particular issue, event, or theme that he or she would like to research. A historian typically begins a research project by focusing on a topic related to a “big question” in his or her chosen field of history—why did industrialization occur, for example, or what factors explain the increase in consumerism? Then the historian must narrow his or her focus to find a particular project that, while addressing that question, is nevertheless small enough to research and write about. By contrast, microhistorians begin their research by choosing a particular place or, less commonly, a single entity or phenomenon. Microhistorians’ task is to find in the place they are examining the kinds of relationships out of which they can construct meaningful themes and issues—even if these had nothing to do with the historian’s original “hunches” about the place.

Here’s another example from my own experience studying Saltspring Island. Before beginning primary research, I had read a number of local and regional histories of the area. I knew that the island was one of the first areas resettled by non-Natives in the late 1850s, and it was widely described as one of the first agricultural communities in British Columbia. One of my initial research interests, then, was to explore a key theme in Canadian 19th-century history: the growth and development of farming from pioneer days through to the development of commercial agricultural production. I read widely in the field of agricultural history across Canada and elsewhere, and began to look for evidence of agricultural production and sales on the island. My preliminary research led me to a number of documents that described farming activity on the island, and confirmed that more than 80 percent of landholders on the island identified themselves as farmers. A close examination of evidence about individuals in a single year, the census year 1891, allowed me the opportunity to explore the economy and the meaning of “farming” in the community. Census takers collected information about individual farmers, including their absolute production of agricultural products, yields per acre, livestock, butter, eggs, and milk production; however, in Canada this information is available only in aggregate form, not for households, after 1871. Some time in the 1900s the government of Canada destroyed these records. In 1890/91, however, a number of factors coalesced that made it possible for me to obtain detailed information at the level of the household. The provincial Department of Agriculture asked Saltspring Island’s Anglican

minister, Reverend E. F. Wilson, to gather statistical information about agricultural production, yields, and land clearances from the major farmers on the island. His reports were published both in the *Department of Agriculture Report* for that year, and in a small promotional pamphlet about Saltspring Island written by Wilson and published by the government in the hope of improving immigration to the province. The year 1891 was the last that Saltspring Island was considered a separate region in the aggregate census data. With the information from those identified by Rev. Wilson as the 11 major farming families on the island, and with aggregate data published in the census report for 1891, I was able to calculate that the vast majority of farm produce sold by island farmers came from the “big 11” of the 100-odd farms on the island. Also comparing aggregate and individual data, I was able to calculate that the remaining 90 percent of “farmers” had cleared, on average, only about five acres during their stay on the island, about enough to support one household, in vegetables, meat, and eggs, but with no surpluses left over to sell.

If I had been researching the island as part of a larger study of a particular theme or issue—farm exports or crop production—my interest in the island would have ended at this point, or it would have been limited to those 11 farms that were doing what I had initially been interested in. As a microhistorian, however, my task remained the same: to examine the relationships among people on the island, and between islanders and their environment, in order to understand what people did on a daily basis to make a life and a living.

Although my task remained the same, one of my main research questions was now reframed, however: if most of the “farmers” on the island were not farming (clearing land or selling agricultural produce) how, then, were they making a living? In the end, my detailed examination of the behaviour of people on their land revealed that after a brief period of enthusiastic land clearing and crop growth in the early 1860s, most Saltspring Island residents realized that the government was not regularly enforcing the homestead regulations that required settlers to improve land before paying for it. The vast majority of those taking up land on the island “abandoned” their land without either improving or purchasing it, but some of those did so only after living on it for 5 or 10 years. Many of those who in the end did improve or purchase their lands took more than 10, and in some cases 20, years to do so.

Freed from the obligation to pay for the use of their land, islanders also realized that they did not need to farm it in order to live. Primarily through the specific, environmentally sensitive practices of their First Nations wives and in-laws—mixed-“race” marriages being very common in these years—they became aware they were living in one of the richest and most benign natural environments ever known to human beings. As the First Nations of the Pacific Northwest have known for millennia, the region’s mild climate and bountiful oceans and forests provide a rich living for those who live by hunting, fishing, and gathering. Early settlers on Saltspring Island were able to exploit both a generous land-granting system and a rich environment to create a way of life that was supported by a variety of work contributed by every member of the household. This is not to say that the islanders lived entirely off the land. When they needed cash for paying their taxes, or purchasing goods like flour, tea, and cloth, they worked in a seasonal and intermittent way in resource industries such as fishing, logging, and whaling. These industries relied heavily on the part-time and seasonal work provided by people whose lands were not quite sufficient to support them. But hunting, gathering, fishing, gardening, and preserving food was done by all

members of the family, except the very youngest, and these kinds of self-provisioning work were a key support to households. To reiterate, if my study had been of only commercial farming, or the fishing industry, or logging, then I might have missed the complex interplay between household, the local environment, and international capitalism that provided the framework for the complex and multifaceted economic life of island residents.

The advantages of a microhistorical approach to environmental history are obvious in my study. Saltspring Island was a Canadian settler community that bore a superficial resemblance to a typical agricultural community, but, as closer analysis revealed, it differed in some key ways from that norm. Without focusing on the day-to-day experiences of those settlers, and the decisions they made about land and their place on it, those differences were difficult to see, and even more difficult to understand. Like other microhistories, therefore, my study of microhistory was an experiment; I had to wait for a detailed analysis of the relations between people and place to grow out of my research before I could be sure of the themes, issues, and events that I needed to explore. This study revealed atypical relationships between people and land that can contribute to our understanding of the contours of daily life and therefore what comprised the society, culture, and economy of Canada. But more than this, it forces us to consider the idea that “typical” is not always a useful way of thinking about the “big picture” of history. Here, we see that 11 “typical” farmers were generating one kind of economy, while 90 percent of residents were living another—but this would be completely obscured if we were to look only at the aggregate farm production.

Choosing to Study a Place, and Choosing a Place to Study

When choosing the kind of place they want to look at—farm, city, marsh, island—microhistorians need to consider three questions as they refine their choice. First, how will this place be distinguished from others—can they articulate the boundaries between what is being looked at and what is outside the range of the microhistory? Second, is there enough usable documentation available to potentially address the kinds of questions they want to ask? And third, is the place small enough that the details of everyday life can be observed?

Choosing a place that meets these criteria can be more difficult than you might think. Microhistorians have used a variety of ways of defining place. Some have used political boundaries—a township, for example, or a city’s limits, or a county, or a national park. The great advantage of using political boundaries to define a place is that so many useful documents, and different *kinds* of documents, are created by government departments gathering information that locate people within a clearly defined place; political boundaries provide the organizing principle of gathering, storing, and analyzing a tremendous volume of information. It can be relatively easy for the historian to find out the population, average wheat yields, number of acres cleared, mortality and death rates of the population, and crime rates of any particular county, for example, because governments have already gathered that particular information about people in that particular place. But there are disadvantages too: political boundaries can change over time, making it difficult to compare evidence from one decade or century to another. And governments have not always gathered the kinds of information that historians, and particularly environmental historians, want to know about people and place: what were the changes in air-pollution levels in the late 19th century, for

example? How did the increase in settlement affect deer populations, and how did this affect both cougar and tree populations in the area? How did the relations between men and women change when men had to work in the woods to support a farm, being absent for many months at a time from farm work?

For the microhistorian wanting to do environmental history, political boundaries may not be the best way of defining a place, because they do not usually delineate a distinct environment, or bioregion. This is particularly true in Canada, where political boundaries were often put in place before European settlers arrived, and so these boundaries may have little or nothing to do with the way these settlers actually came to live off the land. For example, the surveying of the Canadian Prairies established a political set of boundaries, superimposing a rectangular grid onto the land regardless of terrain. The change from rocky Canadian Shield country to rich farmland might, therefore, occur right in the middle of a quarter-section of land. Microhistorians interested in how people's agricultural practices influenced and were influenced by a particular ecosystem, therefore, might reject political boundaries, preferring instead to use geological ones—such as the Georgian Bay area or Saltspring Island—or even ecological ones—the marshlands of the St. Lawrence or Palliser's Triangle.¹¹ Or they might choose a place where a particularly significant change has occurred—a valley flooded, a lake drained, a dam built (or not built).¹² They may simply choose a place defined as a significant region by different human populations over time, and then explore, as Daniel Clayton, Leslie Robertson, and Andrea Laforet have done in their respective studies, the competing narratives told about the place by Natives and non-Natives. Or, like William Turkel, they may decide to not only include the different stories told and retold by various human populations about one place, but also explore the stories that are etched in the region's material remains.¹³

The choice of place, therefore, reflects not only the historian's themes and issues of interest (which reflect issues of interest to historians more generally), but also the kinds of questions that the researcher wants to ask. This is an obvious point, but an important one. The choice of using a political boundary to define a place will tend to privilege questions about social organization, because there will almost certainly be a lot of information gathered about issues relating to political boundaries, but there may be little about any particular landform within the boundary. The choice of a river, for example, or a watershed, will tend to privilege questions that relate more directly to the relationship between people and that particular environmental formation, because the microhistorian would not be able to focus such research without first ascertaining that there are detailed records about how it changed over time.

The most important reason to narrow the scale of observation to one place, and to work very closely with lots of different kinds of evidence about the same people and place, is that this view allows us to see more relationships, more *kinds* of relationships, and in more detail than usually shows up in histories. To say that microhistory has a specific, close-up focus is not to say that the topics, themes, or conclusions of microhistorical investigation are narrow or of limited value, either in themselves or in understanding the larger issues, trends, and events that they may involve.

Doing microhistory is like using a compound microscope to allow quick switches among different degrees of magnification. With a historical lens trained on the specific, the local, and the everyday, the microhistorian can see the relationships that take place there, and then see their

effects on other places, in other times, or at other scales of experience. The microhistorian looking at one place in a 100-year period may also locate the study within a much longer time frame. As Lyle Dick argues in *Muskox Land*, his study of Ellesmere Island in the postcontact period also necessarily involves a discussion of the *longue durée*, for it is only the geological time scale that can explain the climate and geographic characteristics that had such an important impact on the people trying to eke out a living in this extreme northern environment. Land and climate were not the only factors in explaining the history of Ellesmere Island, but they played a significant role in the specifics of his study.¹⁴

There are two key points being made here. First, the microhistorical method allows one to see and explore connections among various scales of relationships. Even the simplest actions that we perform in our daily life—such as buying a loaf of bread—involve a number of different scales. A person exercising an individual preference for whole wheat becomes drawn into a complex system that incorporates local bakers, regional trucking companies, national farmers, and international trade regulators. Moving between these scales can reveal the intimate, urgent, and explanatory connections—between the specific and the general, between the personal and the political, between people and the environment—that are at the heart of the historical enterprise. In other words, what happens at one spatiotemporal scale has ramifications at another. The second key point is that significant historical change sometimes occurs on a scale that is visible only with a close-up view. To return to the microscope analogy, when an antibiotic agent is seen to inhibit the growth of a particular bacteria, the significance of what is under the lens is not limited to the particular cells being observed; what the scientist has done is to reduce the scale of observation to the extent that it is possible to see a tiny cause that has huge effects visible at a much larger scale.

In his book *Language, Schooling and Cultural Conflict*, Chad Gaffield looks at Prescott County, Ontario from 1850 to 1900, examining in considerable detail the households of the English and French Canadians who lived there. His study, though rooted in one Ontario county, draws on themes and issues that are of provincial, national, and even international scope. Did children of French Canadian descent have lower school attendance rates than their Ontario counterparts? If they did, at least before 1870, was that because, as some historians have claimed, French Canadian attitudes to education were characterized by “a fabric of delusion, superstition, and know-nothingness”?¹⁵ If so, then why (as his detailed study indicates) did French Canadian attendance rates then change after 1870, and why was there a famous controversy about the inadequacy of French-language instruction in Ontario at this particular time? Did most rural families decide for the first time in the 1870s to send their children to school because of some general fears and hopes about society and their place in it? Or were there particular family and household issues that prompted this change? Gaffield’s detailed analysis of household behaviours and the local economy sheds light on questions of both local and more general thematic and national import.

After closely analyzing detailed evidence about how families behaved, and how they supported themselves, Gaffield argues that differences in land settlement and economic strategies between French and English settlers in Prescott County created differences within family economies. These differences were reflected in many aspects of social, cultural, and economic life, including school attendance and the controversy over the language of instruction. His evidence indicates that while English settlers in Prescott county usually used land for commercial purposes, the later-settled

French Canadians “had not yet had sufficient time to establish commercial farms” by 1861.¹⁶ As a result, they worked in the logging industry in nearby forests, the wages from which provided an essential part of the family economy: “families were characteristically formed on the basis of agricultural ambitions, while the forest industry offered seasonal employment for certain family members, a market for agricultural product and some compensation for the onerous task of land clearing.”¹⁷

School attendance of Franco-Ontarien children was limited by the demands of this family economy. However, the “communal nature of existence in Prescott county”—resting on the informal economy, barter, lending, the help of kin and neighbours, and centred on agro-forestry—was undermined after the 1870s.¹⁸ As the forests were logged out by intensive commercial logging operations, the timber industry moved farther from Prescott County, removing both opportunities for waged work and the market for farm goods that had been tailored to meet the needs of the hundreds of men working in the lumber camps. The “inherently temporary” nature of the timber industry before the end of the 19th century—lumber companies having not yet realized that trees were functionally renewable resources, and the people of Canada not yet realizing that farm settlement on the Canadian Shield was not guaranteed by the removal of standing timber—worked against the long-term success of agro-forestry as a strategy for family survival.¹⁹

Gaffield argues that this loss of income forced many Franco-Ontariens off the land, reducing them to landless proletariat forced to work for wages to live. Under these circumstances, “schooling increasingly filled the space in children’s lives that had earlier been dominated by collective domestic industry” of the agro-foresting families.²⁰ As the proportion of Franco-Ontariens increased in the area, the language of instruction became both an increasingly important cultural factor in people’s lives and an increasingly important political issue. As the numbers of Franco-Ontarien children going to school increased due to these changing social and economic factors, so did the demand for French-language education and resistance to it, thus “the history of minority language education in nineteenth century Prescott County can be better explained by the changing interaction of land and family than by inherent intercultural attitudes.”²¹ Gaffield’s close study of the household economy, the logging industry, the timing of the move of families off the land, and the growth of education suggests that parents were, in effect, replacing the patrimony provided by land with the patrimony of education. Education, not land, was the hope for the future. Gaffield’s microhistorical study provides evidence that changes in communities like Prescott County, and in large institutions like the educational system, may indeed be the result of thousands of tiny personal or individualized relationships, interactions, and decisions taking place within a particular geographical and historical context. His study vindicates an underlying principle of microhistorical research already mentioned: “phenomena previously considered to be sufficiently described and understood assume completely new meanings by altering the scale of observation.”²² The “something new” here is not so much the generalization that “all people who own land in marginal areas where there is a forest industry and no government sponsored safety-net decide that education is going to replace the inheritance of land,” even though other microhistorical studies might eventually demonstrate the validity of this hypothesis. The key point is that a study of households in particular environments can reveal relationships that help to explain broader historical change.

Conclusion

Microhistory is defined by its scale and focus, and not by specific issues, themes, events, or theoretical frameworks. Instead of working from the premise that general truths and average patterns determine historical significance, microhistorians' purpose is to use the evidence available in one place to examine the relationships among people, and between people and the non-human environment as they are worked out, and made visible, in one place over time. Because microhistorians work so closely with so much evidence about such a small area, and because of the complexity and variability revealed by microscopic analysis of people and place, there can be no handbook of microhistorical research for each place and time. There is no official "school" of microhistorians that relies on particular, established theories or concepts about how, for example, human societies generally function as part of, or separate from, their environments, or how land resettlement generally occurred in rural Canada, or whether 19th-century farmers were market oriented or simply trying to feed their families and provide an inheritance for their children. Microhistory offers environmental history a focus and a process, just as environmental history offers microhistory the opportunity to pay more attention to the particularities of the physical world, augmenting our understanding of the relations among people and places.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There is an environmentalist slogan that we should "Think globally, act locally." How does that relate to the argument presented in this chapter?
2. Does microhistory have to be local? Why or why not?
3. What are the limitations and advantages of the microhistorical method?
4. The author makes a strong case for the advantages that microhistorical perspective can bring to the practice of environmental history. Do you think that microhistory can be similarly improved by using methods from environmental history? Think of some examples.
5. The author writes that microhistory forces us to consider that "'typical' is not always a useful way of thinking about the 'big picture' of history." Do you agree? Why or why not?
6. What are some examples of different spatiotemporal scales? Can you think of ways that they might be causally related?
7. Outline a research project that meets the criteria of an environmental microhistory, as described in this chapter.

NOTES

1. Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory," Peter Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992): p. 95.
2. Levi, "On Microhistory," p. 98.

3. Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993).
4. Levi, "On Microhistory," p. 94.
5. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): p. xiv.
6. Donald Worster, "Appendix: Doing Environmental History," Donald Worster, ed., *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988): pp. 289–90.
7. William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 78 no. 4 (1992): p. 1349.
8. R. W. Sandwell, *Contesting Rural Space: Land Policy and the Practices of Resettlement on Saltspring Island, British Columbia, 1859–1891* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).
9. The Torrens System of land registration characterized land registration in western Canada and the United States, but in central Canada land continued to be registered as it was in the B.C. Surveyor General's Office: organized by the piece of land, not by a numbered sale.
10. Louis-Raphael Pelletier, "Revolutionizing Landscapes: Hydroelectricity and the Heavy Industrialization of Society and Environment in the comté de Beauharnois, 1927–1948," PhD Thesis, Department of History, Carleton University, 2005. See also J. I. Little, *Crofters and Habitants: Settler Society, Economy, and Culture in a Quebec Township, 1848–1881* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991); Matthew G. Hatvany, *Marshlands: Four Centuries of Environmental Change of the Shores of the St. Lawrence* (Saint-Foy: Les presses de l'Université de Laval, 2003); Laura Cameron, *Openings: A Meditation on History, Method and Sumas Lake* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997).
11. See, for example, Claire Elizabeth Campbell, *Shaped by the West Wind: Nature and History in the Georgian Bay* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005); Barry Potyondi, *In Palliser's Triangle: Living in the Grasslands, 1850–1930* (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 1995); Hatvany, *Marshlands*; Sandwell, *Contesting Rural Space*.
12. See, for example, Pelletier, "Revolutionizing Landscapes;" Cameron, *Openings*; Matthew Evenden, *Fish versus Power: An Environmental History of the Fraser River* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
13. Daniel Clayton, *Islands of Truth: The Imperial Fashioning of Vancouver Island* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000); Andrea Laforet and Annie York, *Spuzzum: Fraser Canyon Histories, 1808–1939* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1998); Leslie A. Robertson, *Imagining Difference: Legend, Curse and Spectacle in a Canadian Mining Town* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005); William Turkel, *The Archive of Place* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007). These four studies all focus on British Columbia, which has, for reasons unexplored here, spawned an efflorescence of microhistories in recent years.
14. Lyle Dick, *Muskox Land* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2001).
15. Chad Gaffield, *Language, Schooling and Cultural Conflict: The Origins of the French Language Controversy in Ontario* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987): p. 21.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 118–19.

19. H. V. Nelles, *The Politics of Development: Forests, Mines and Hydro-electric Power in Ontario, 1849–1941* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974): p. 14–17.
20. Gaffield, *Language, Schooling and Cultural Conflict*, p. 122.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
22. Levi, “On Microhistory,” p. 98.

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