

# Historical Perspectives / Perspectives historiques

## The Landscape of Canadian Environmental History: Introduction



### The Text that Nature Renders?

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*Abstract: This Historical Perspectives surveys the state and prospect of the Canadian environmental history field, which studies the relations between people and nature through time. Four international scholars with deep knowledge of the Canadian literature and four homegrown practitioners discuss what has been distinct, best, and lacking in the work coming out of Canada so far this century. How have environmental historians engaged with broader literatures and how are they placed within them? What connections have been made – and missed? What contributions do the specific Canadian environmental and historical examples offer the broader field? And what does environmental history offer the broader Canadian history? The forum begins with three pairings that explore Canadian environmental history in relation to literatures with which it could expect to have an impact: Sverker Sörlin and Liza Piper consider Canada and the Circumpolar North, J.F.M. Clark and Graeme Wynn discuss Canada and the British Empire, and Nancy Langston and Sean Kheraj examine Canada and the United States. The Forum concludes with stand-alone perspectives by Stephen J. Pyne and Tina Loo on the place of, and for, Canadian environmental history in the world. As to be expected, the contributors vary widely in their diagnoses and prognoses: from claiming, for example, the evolution of a distinctive environmental politics in Canada to emphasizing sameness in Canadian and American treatment of the natural world. But, collectively, the essays suggest a vibrant field that implicitly critiques, and even rejects, many of the central tendencies of Canadian historical writing of the past generation.*

**Keywords:** environmental history, historiography, historical geography, Circumpolar North, northern history, British Empire, imperial history, the United States, American history, global history

Résumé : Ce *Perspectives historiques* porte sur l'état et les perspectives du champ de l'histoire environnementale au Canada, qui étudie les relations entre les humains et la nature au fil du temps. Quatre chercheurs internationaux ayant une connaissance approfondie de la littérature canadienne et quatre spécialistes d'ici discutent les particularités, les forces et les faiblesses des travaux réalisés au Canada depuis le début du siècle. Comment les historiens de l'environnement contribuent-ils à la littérature scientifique et quelle place y occupent-ils? Quels liens ont été établis – ou non – entre les deux? Sur le plan historico-environnemental, que nous montre l'exemple canadien? Et qu'apporte l'histoire environnementale à l'histoire générale du Canada? D'abord, trois équipes de chercheurs analysent les rapports entre l'histoire environnementale et différents domaines d'études sur lesquels elle risque d'avoir des répercussions : Sverker Sörlin et Liza Piper s'intéressent au Canada et à la région circumpolaire-Nord, J.F.M. Clark et Graeme Wynn au Canada et à l'Empire britannique, et Nancy Langston et Sean Kheraj au Canada et aux États-Unis. Ensuite, Stephen J. Pyne et Tina Loo expriment leurs points de vue respectifs sur la place de l'histoire environnementale canadienne dans le monde. Comme on pouvait s'y attendre, les diagnostics et les pronostics varient considérablement d'un participant à l'autre : par exemple, certains parlent du développement d'une politique environnementale spécifiquement canadienne, alors que d'autres insistent sur les grandes similitudes entre le Canada et les États-Unis en matière d'environnement. Dans l'ensemble, cependant, ces essais mettent en lumière un champ dynamique, qui critique implicitement (ou rejette carrément) plusieurs des grandes tendances récentes de l'historiographie canadienne.

**Mots clés :** histoire environnementale, historiographie, géographie historique, Nord circumpolaire, histoire nordique, Empire britannique, histoire impériale, les États-Unis, histoire américaine, histoire mondiale

In one of his best-known poems, Robert Service, channeling Jack London, asks readers whether they know “The Call of the Wild,” whether they have “heard the text that nature renders?”<sup>1</sup> A growing number of historical researchers in Canada are at least listening for such texts today, having taken to exploring the relations between people and nature through time: environmental history.

The term “environmental history” made its first *Canadian Historical Review* appearance in 1998,<sup>2</sup> remarkably late given the field’s prominence throughout the late twentieth century in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. And yet, this was a fair indication of the field’s

- 1 Robert W. Service, “The Call of the Wild,” *Songs of a Sourdough* (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1907), 21.
- 2 It is discussed in Neil S. Forkey, “Damning the Dam: Ecology and Community in Ops Township, Upper Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 79, no. 1 (March 1998): 70, but appears first in a footnote earlier in the same issue: Bill Parenteau, “‘Care, Control and Supervision’: Native People in the Canadian Atlantic Salmon Fishery, 1867–1900,” *Canadian Historical Review* 79, no. 1: 3.

slow start in Canada.<sup>3</sup> But, ever since early in the new century, Canadian environmental history has, by any number of standard scholarly metrics, experienced tremendous growth. There have been three new surveys,<sup>4</sup> numerous collections of published and original essays,<sup>5</sup> a textbook on methodology,<sup>6</sup> a thriving series of monographs and another of edited collections,<sup>7</sup> plus any number of special issues.<sup>8</sup> Works in the field have not only been plentiful; they have, in many cases, been highly-regarded. About a dozen have won Canadian Historical Association Clio Prizes, for example, and two have won the Sir John A.

- 3 Both Sverker Sörlin and J.F.M. Clark in this forum discuss Canadian environmental history's initial sluggishness. Sörlin notes that this has become the standard pushing-off point to historiographical discussion of the field, dubbing it "the trope of lagging behind." Historiographical essays include Alan MacEachern, "Voices Crying in the Wilderness: Recent Works in Canadian Environmental History," *Acadiensis* 31, no. 2 (2002): 215–26; Stéphane Castonguay, "Faire du Québec un objet de l'histoire environnementale," *Globe: Revue Internationale d'études Québécoises* 9, no. 1 (2006): 17–49; Anya Zilberstein, "Nature and Nation: Recent Books in Canadian Environmental History," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 42, no. 3 (2008): 193–207; and Liza Piper, "Knowing Nature Through History," *History Compass* 11, no. 12 (2013): 1139–49.
- 4 Graeme Wynn, *Canada and Arctic North America: An Environmental History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2007); Laurel Sefton MacDowell, *An Environmental History of Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012); and Neil Forkey, *Canadians and the Natural Environment to the 21st Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).
- 5 Examples include David Freeland Duke, ed. *Canadian Environmental History: Essential Readings* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2006); Claire Campbell and Robert Summerby-Murray, eds., *Land and Sea: Environmental History in Atlantic Canada* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 2013); and L. Anders Sandberg et al., eds. *Urban Explorations: Environmental Histories of the Toronto Region* (Hamilton, ON: L.R. Wilson Institute for Canadian History, 2013).
- 6 Alan MacEachern and William J. Turkel, eds., *Method and Meaning in Canadian Environmental History* (Toronto: Nelson, 2009).
- 7 The UBC Press Nature|History|Society series, [www.ubcpress.ca/books/series\\_nhs.html](http://www.ubcpress.ca/books/series_nhs.html); and the University of Calgary Press Canadian History and Environment series, <http://uofcpress.com/book-series/canadian-history>.
- 8 Examples include "Special Issue on Canada," Matthew Evenden and Alan MacEachern, eds., *Environmental History* 12, no. 4 (2007); "Penser l'histoire environnementale du Québec: Société, territoire et écologie," Stéphane Castonguay, ed., *Globe: Revue Internationale d'études Québécoises* 9, no. 1 (2006); "The Nature of Cities," Stephen Bocking, ed., *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine* 34, no. 1 (2005); and "Big Country, Big Issues: Canada's Environment, Culture, and History," Nadine Klopfer and Christof Mauch, eds. *Rachel Carson Center Perspectives 2011 / 4*, [http://www.environmentandsociety.org/sites/default/files/2011\\_4\\_big\\_country.pdf](http://www.environmentandsociety.org/sites/default/files/2011_4_big_country.pdf).

Macdonald Prize.<sup>9</sup> At one point, almost one-third of the Canada Research Chairs awarded to those doing historical research were granted for work intersecting nature and the past. Many of the field's young scholars have continued to find secure employment, even in a very difficult job market. And, coming full circle, in 2014 the *CHR*'s "Recent Publications" section introduced a new category: "Environmental History."

There may be any number of reasons for the field's sudden visibility. One is relevance / topicality: Canada has faced many environmental issues in recent years – from tar ponds to tar sands, water quality on First Nations reserves to air quality in Southern Ontario, the accumulating effects of climate change everywhere – and historians, as present-minded as anyone, have sought to discern such issues' historical contexts. But to accept this interpretation for the field's growth implies either that we face more environmental issues now or are better attuned to the environment than ever before – both at least questionable assertions. Another reason may be disciplinary migration: as historical geography, and cultural geography more generally, has declined within geography departments, practitioners such as Tom McIlwraith, Brian Osborne, and Graeme Wynn supported the upstart subdiscipline coming out of history, while ensuring that students of the field were aware of the nation's rich tradition in historical geography. And environmental historians have been receptive to geography's advances. No other historical field, for example, has so embraced geographical information systems (GIS), or has seemed so well-suited to the spatial turn.<sup>10</sup> This, however, does not in itself explain the newfound environmental interest among those who count themselves historians. Another reason – the converse to the previous – may be opportunity: notwithstanding historical geography's influence, historians of recent

9 In terms of *Clios*, I am thinking of books by Dean Bavington, Theodore Binnema, James Daschuk, Matthew Evenden, Sean Kheraj, Liza Piper, William J. Turkel, Anders Sandberg and Peter Clancy, John Sandlos, Shannon Stunden Bower, and Sharon Wall, as well as ones by scholars in other disciplines, such as Peter Pope, Julie Cruikshank, and Cole Harris, which also chronicle nature and the past. In terms of Macdonald Prizes, I am referencing Tina Loo, *States of Nature: Conserving Canada's Wildlife in the Twentieth Century* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006); and James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2013).

10 Jennifer Bonnell and Marcel Fortin, eds., *Historical GIS Research in Canada* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2014); and Barney Warf and Santa Arias, eds., *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

decades had so ignored the influence of the environment on Canadian life that there seemed self-evidently a wealth of neglected historical topics. Even the sheer *size* of Canada – the fact that the world’s thirty-seventh largest nation by population is the second largest by area – suggested the environment’s outsized significance in both national and international terms, and that there would be many environmental histories to tell. Or perhaps research council funding priorities accomplished their goal of encouraging more environmental study. “Environment” was a SSHRC priority throughout this period, and the council’s funding of NiCHE: Network in Canadian History & Environment / Nouvelle initiative canadienne en histoire de l’environnement (which I direct) to support the mobilization and dissemination of environmental history research can best be interpreted as both a cause and an effect of the field’s increased visibility.<sup>11</sup>

The Canadian environmental history field that has evolved since the beginning of the century has, as one would expect, developed specific emphases and strengths. In a 2009 article, Matthew Evenden and Graeme Wynn identified ten of them: Aboriginal life and colonialism; disease diffusion; resettlement and environmental change; science, technology, and environment; places and place-making; wilderness and wildlife politics; gender and environment; resources, conflict, and environmental change; environmental perception; and urban, class, and environmental justice.<sup>12</sup> This still reads as a solid categorization five years on. To someone outside the field, such a list might seem to encompass the full possibility of environmental history. But, just as an outsider might assume Canada in March would be entirely blanketed in white but a native would know to expect pockets of brown and green, Canadian environmental historians recognize the many gaps in coverage. There have been many studies of national parks, for example, although none on the entire park system or even on Banff. There are remarkably few historical works on such important, and obvious, topics as climate, energy, and mining. More is needed on urban environmental history, on ethnic minorities’ experience of Canadian nature, and on pre-Confederation Canada. A great deal of the output to date has been provincial or regional in scope – hence

11 See the NiCHE website at <http://niche-canada.org>.

12 Matthew Evenden and Graeme Wynn, “54, 40 or Fight: Writing Within and Across Borders in North American Environmental History,” in *Nature’s End: History and the Environment*, ed. Sverker Sörlin and Paule Warde (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 215–46; discussion of this list is on 227–30.

all those Clios – but there have been very few attempts at national synthesis (to the point that Stéphane Castonguay writes, “n’est-il pas paradoxal de parler d’histoire de l’environnement canadien alors que les travaux qui se fondent réellement sur une échelle nationale se distinguent par leur rareté?”<sup>13</sup>). Although the field has roots in the *Annales* school, there has been precious little written of *la longue durée*. There have only been very limited connections made between French- and English-Canada literatures.<sup>14</sup>

The 2013 gathering in Toronto of environmental historians from across the country and around the globe for the American Society for Environmental History (ASEH) conference provided an opportune moment to take stock of the Canadian field. NiCHE hosted a pre-conference workshop that called on eight leading scholars – four international figures with deep knowledge of the Canadian literature and four homegrown practitioners – to discuss what has been distinct, best, and lacking in the work coming out of Canada. How have we engaged with broader literatures and how are we placed within them? What connections have been made – and missed? What contributions do the specific Canadian environmental and historical examples offer the broader field? And what does environmental history offer the broader Canadian history? The event was to be an “intervention” of sorts, but of a decidedly two-sided nature: the national and international speakers together were to draw out shortcomings and suggest possibilities for development of both the Canadian and the broader field. The forum that follows is the product of that workshop – or, more accurately, the product of the excitement the workshop itself generated, as demonstrated by all eight scholars’ willingness to rework their presentations into essays.

The forum begins with three pairings, each a Venn diagram that explores, from external and internal perspectives, the landscape of Canadian environmental history in relation to a literature in which we can reasonably expect to have an impact. The first considers Canada and the Circumpolar North. Sverker Sörlin (Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm), an Arctic specialist who has authored,

13 Stéphane Castonguay, “La place de l’histoire de l’environnement canadien dans le champ international,” commissioned paper for NiCHE “EH+” workshop, April 2011. See [niche-canada.org/?event=eh-writing-the-next-chapter-of-canadian-environmental-history](http://niche-canada.org/?event=eh-writing-the-next-chapter-of-canadian-environmental-history).

14 Exceptions could be found to all of these statements, of course. Stéphane Castonguay and Michèle Dagenais, eds., *Metropolitan Natures: Environmental Histories of Montreal* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011) contradicts several of them at once.

co-authored, edited, or co-edited more than thirty books, traces Canada's international influence on scholarly writing on the North from Harold Innis forward. He concludes that our nation's northern environmental history shares many of the same unspoken questions as that of other northern nations: To what degree is northern history necessarily environmental? Is it bound to become more or less so when the environment is "tamed" by global warming? And, above all, what is northern history *for*: what overarching historical problem justifies our fascination with it? Liza Piper (University of Alberta), author of *The Industrial Transformation of Subarctic Canada*, sees a range of themes as unifying the environmental histories of the Circumpolar North. Like Sörlin, she sees northern history as having thrived in step with environmental history, but raises the concern that it has done so "in the absence of commensurate developments in social history," risking the silencing or underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Northern voices.

The second pairing involves Canada and the British Empire.<sup>15</sup> J.F.M. Clark, born in Canada and now director of the Institute for Environmental History (University of St Andrews), is well-suited to ask why Canadians have not contributed more than they have to the growing international literature on nature and British colonies. Clark looks back to Scottish geographer Marion Newbiggin's early twentieth-century work on Canada's colonial development as inspiration for what could be gained if more Canadianists looked back and forth across the ocean. The focus on Newbiggin is a reminder, if we need it, of the central role women such as Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, Laura Cameron, Michèle Dagenais, Caroline Desbiens, Claire Campbell, and Joy Parr have established in the writing of Canadian environmental history / historical geography today; Tina Loo and Liza Piper are almost certainly the two most-cited authors in this forum. Graeme Wynn (University of British Columbia), a South African by birth who has written extensively about New Zealand as well as Canada, notes that even when our nation's environmental historians have connected

15 The "British" may seem inappropriately and unnecessarily limiting – particularly when the first contributor cites American environmental historian Donald Hughes as recognizing that Canada's distinct perspective is thanks in no small part to "the unique presence of Francophone Quebec." But, there is not yet a strong environmental historiography of imperial France, let alone of New France. (Again, exceptions can obviously be found: see Denys Delâge, "Microbes, animaux et eau en Nouvelle-France," *Globe: Revue Internationale d'études Québécoises* 9, no. 1 (2006): 113–39.) More to the point, to drop "British" would be to obscure that this is the empire the two participants are discussing, and about which they possess expertise.

with the British Empire, they have done so with a firmly national orientation. He argues that engagement with literatures and debates related to imperial history and to other British settler colonies expands our view of the world, while expanding our work's reach.

The last pairing, Canada and the United States, is unlike the others, of course, in that the first element is not a subset of the second. But, in relating Canada's environmental history to that of other literatures, a comparison to the us is all but unavoidable, given the maturity and significance of the American field and, of course, the two nations' proximity. Adjacent states bear resemblance to our provinces – Maine to New Brunswick, Michigan and New York to Ontario, Washington to British Columbia – as much or more than the provinces resemble one another, so that it can seem we are looking at our skewed reflections in the water. Nancy Langston (Michigan Technological University) writes as a member of the Great Lakes Research Center, past president of the ASEH, and past editor of the journal *Environmental History*. With a clear enthusiasm for the Canadian literature, she explains how our border speaks to the importance of borders in environmental history generally, and the need to study things – microbes, fish, pollutants, people – that cross or get stuck at them. Borders need not be geographical, and Langston considers those between sexes and between species, too. Sean Kheraj (York University), the author of *Inventing Stanley Park: An Environmental History* and host of the ambitious *Nature's Past* podcast series, agrees wholeheartedly as to the value of studying borders generally, and the Canadian-American one in particular. But he stresses that, despite the difference paths the two nation-states have carved in their history, “Canadians and their American neighbours have suffered a largely common history with the natural world.”

Following these three pairings, the Forum concludes with two stand-alone thematic perspectives on the place of, and for, Canada environmental history in the world. It is perhaps no surprise that Stephen J. Pyne (Arizona State University) – MacArthur Fellow and author of two dozen books, including *Awful Splendour: A Fire History of Canada*, arguably the *only* original environmental history monograph yet written that covers all of Canada – found that assignment insufficiently challenging. His essay tells a compact history of Canada's place in the world, viewed through the portal of fire history. Even readers who disagree with Pyne's magisterial vision of Canada will find value in learning how a highly knowledgeable outsider reads our nation's history. The final contributor is Tina Loo (University of British Columbia), a Canada Research Chair in Environmental History and author



of the award-winning *States of Nature: Conserving Canada's Wildlife in the Twentieth Century*. Loo calls for more globalizing of Canadian environmental history: tracing, for example, the life of commodities as they travel around the world. Yet, she also argues that what is most Canadian about Canadian environmental history, and therefore likely our greatest contribution to the field, is the articulation of “how environment and environmental change shaped politics at its own national and local scales.”

Forums offer the pleasures and pitfalls of a potluck. There is opportunity to dabble: to experiment with a variety of unfamiliar dishes. But having so many cooks risks, if not spoiled broth, at least an unbalanced menu. Readers of this forum will notice some conspicuous, even glaring omissions. There is little explicit discussion of Quebec, or of urban Canada, or of ethnic minorities. These spaces suggest where either more scholarship or more integration of existing scholarship is needed.<sup>16</sup> And yet, I do not wish to imply that all imbalances are oversights, to be resolved with a well-placed pasta salad. Implicitly, and perhaps even unconsciously, these essays collectively amount to a critique and even rejection of many of the central tendencies of Canadian historical writing of the past generation. Nature is assumed to merit as primary a position as race, class, and gender. National histories are a stated goal. Secondary source citations drift back to the 1930s.<sup>17</sup> This forum evokes a vibrant Canadian environmental history field that is running alongside, rather than toward, the mainstream of Canadian history.<sup>18</sup>

16 Having designed this forum's structure and invited its participants (most of whom accepted), I am responsible for such omissions much more than individual contributors are.

17 I wish to thank one of the journal's anonymous reviewers for making this salient point.

18 Consider two books from 2013 that are, to my mind, two of the most successful works to date in exploring the relations between people and nature in the Canadian past: John L. Riley's *The Once and Future Great Lakes Country: An Ecological History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press) and James Daschuk's *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (Regina: University of Regina Press). Both are methodologically voracious, with Riley drawing on a career as a botanist and conservation professional to produce a sweeping history of the Great Lakes region, and Daschuk employing ethnohistory, epidemiology, historical climatology, and a host of other literatures to provide a masterful portrait of Prairie First Nations. Their regional titles notwithstanding, both books are national histories, and of a decidedly familiar, even classic type. Riley is by far the more radical in his traditionalism, eschewing historical work of the past fifty years to produce something that reads as the love child of Annie Proulx and Donald Creighton. But even Daschuk's book is as innovative as it is precisely because it upends our

No forum can offer a definitive vision of a field or a definitive path for one. Nor would we want it to. Similarly, Canadian historians – environmental or otherwise – need not fear that “the text that nature renders” will, once heard, make their own work obsolete. Nature does not really render texts, of course. Rather, it renders more complicated the texts we render. And that is of value: nature complicates the ways in which we understand Canadian history.

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understanding of the fur trade, the Confederation era, and Western settlement – all staples of the Canadian survey. Together, these two books suggest that Canadian environmental history benefits from an internal contradiction. On the one hand, it is receptive to a wide range of methodologies from the sciences, social sciences, and digital humanities. On the other hand, lacking a generation of environmental historians immediately preceding them, practitioners today feel free, and obliged, to respond to older historiographies and older narrative forms. There is no historiographical or careerist imperative, as yet, to differentiate one’s work as “the new environmental history.”

This forum arose from a workshop hosted by the Network in Canadian History & Environment / Nouvelle initiative canadienne en histoire de l’environnement at the 2013 American Society for Environmental History conference in Toronto. On behalf of the forum’s contributors, I wish to thank conference local arrangements chair Colin Coates, the journal editors, and three anonymous reviewers for encouraging and guiding the project to its present form. I also wish to gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided NiCHE through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada’s Strategic Knowledge Clusters program.