

INTRODUCTION

ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY IN ATLANTIC CANADA

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Denmark, Nova Scotia, is a quiet place in Colchester County, with a few houses surrounded by deep woodlots and overgrown fields of lupins in spring. Visitors pass it on the way to the Northumberland Shore or to see the Sutherland Sawmill, a provincial museum site. Today the mill is as quiet as the fields around, but in the late 19th century it was a vibrant, noisy place, busy turning lumber into gingerbread trim, window sashes, and carriage frames. Such products were much in demand from booming Nova Scotia communities also keen to furnish markets around the world. Using machinery from the heavy manufacturing towns of Amherst and New Glasgow, the Sutherland mill also relied on the branch line that connected with the Intercolonial Railway at Oxford and ran on to the coalfields of Cape Breton. Now, the siding is entirely overgrown, and the railway bed has been incorporated into the Trans-Canada Trail for cyclists and hikers.

Denmark looks like plenty of other communities along the Northumberland or nearby Fundy shores, or up the Great Northern Peninsula of Newfoundland, or in the interior of Prince Edward Island. Places founded on optimism and ambition, or maybe hubris, to make use of what the natural world had to offer. Places that have been occupied and abandoned, harvested and rearranged, recorded and represented. Woodlots and shorelines, farmers' fields and streetscapes that invite us now to explore their layers of geological, biological, and human pasts. Landscapes we walk every day show plainly the effect of several centuries of human-induced environmental change. They are historical artifacts, but also contemporary burdens, for it is the inheritance of past environments that poses substantial challenges to Atlantic Canada in the 21st century.

Environmental history explores these places to better understand our relationships with nature in the past, the consequences for the present day, and the range of options for the future. These may be material: the rise (and probable fall) of resource industries, the shape and effect of settlement, the development of new technologies for use and transportation. They may

also be imaginative: how maps, paintings, or scientific accounts helped us absorb the new and unknown into existing worldviews and political empires, and how communities constructed their defining stories and identities from their surroundings. In other words, environmental history includes what we have thought and felt about nature, as well as how we have used and changed it — and have been changed by it.

Environmental history brings together the strengths of history and geography, recognizing the role of chronological arc and spatial context in shaping the world in which we live. It emphasizes the fundamental importance of scale, and *different* scales, of space and time: from a single community to a transoceanic empire, from a momentary crisis such as a bad storm to the centuries of climate change recorded in cedar stands. It asks how human decisions and actions have been affected by the opportunities or constraints offered by particular places on the ground, but also how such decisions and actions raise wider questions about the purpose and character of the natural world. Scholars locate these questions at the “intersection of Nature and History,” a multidisciplinary discussion between historians and geographers focusing on problems of environmental change.¹ This shows the field’s connection to current environmentalist thinking, a complex relationship between research and activism that is, admittedly, unusual for academics. But as historian Edmund Burke III has argued, “The knowledge that human development has real, and increasingly ascertainable, limits, and that these are in large measure ecological, must inevitably shape the kinds of histories we write and the kinds of shared lives we imagine.”² The environmental histories of Atlantic Canada demonstrate that there can be significant consequences for misunderstanding environmental change; as Diana Davis puts it, “If the environmental history is misrepresented, not only people, but also the environment often suffers.”³

For some time, environmental historians have argued against writing history within the confines of national boundaries.⁴ The environment itself is transnational — rivers and mountains, birds and butterflies, all cross national boundaries, as, of course, do people. Nowhere is there a better example of this than Atlantic Canada, whose history has been shaped by movement between Brittany and Beaubassin, New York and Saint John, or Boston and St. John’s (and more recently, between Cavendish and Ontario, or Sydney and Fort McMurray). Environmental history queries, and thus implicitly questions, the origins, functions, and relevance of those political units we have “naturalized” as environmental authorities. As geographers

Graeme Wynn and Matthew Evenden observe, taking the long view, “Political boundaries are malleable and ephemeral by comparison with the age-old, seemingly immutable lineaments of continents and oceans.”⁵

Some scholars have suggested that we look not to nation-states but to bioregions, considering unified histories of drainage basins, for example, or ecological zones such as the Adirondack range or the Bay of Fundy that may very well cross (or unite) provincial or national borders.⁶ Conceiving environmental histories in this way situates environmental processes at a scale above political units while at the same time accommodating different political, economic, social, and regulatory regimes. This point is made well in, for example, James Feldman and Lynne Heasley’s agenda for an environmental history of the Great Lakes region, Matthew Hatvany’s detailed study of the saltmarshes along the St. Lawrence, and Graeme Wynn’s continentalist approach to a North American environmental history.⁷ At a global scale, studies of environmental processes in history may struggle to find their connection to political units that shape many of our daily realities — a theme visible in recent environmental histories of fire and salt.⁸

Atlantic Canada itself is a wonderful example of the artificial nature of political boundaries. Originally an invention of bureaucratic convenience, the region has rarely been anything approaching an organic alliance. As examples in this volume show, borders for the Beothuk, the French, and the English in 18th-century Newfoundland were defined by competition, occupation, and access to resources — and not by the numerous provincial or federal departments that today divide marine and terrestrial systems between them. Settlers fleeing the Miramichi fire in 1825 thought of themselves as citizens of a global British Empire, while their dire situation also reinvigorated connections with their American neighbours. But we cannot do away entirely with such boundaries. It would be naïve to ignore such fundamental historical features as the legal and managerial structures that have governed our use of natural resources, such as the colonial and provincial governments that patronized both the development of the natural sciences and the industries which applied these sciences, or the government agencies that saw in landscapes like Cavendish the makings of a prosperous tourism industry. And here, among the four provinces, there are many useful parallels.

The region is equally challenging in its ecological diversity, defying easy description and reflecting the fact that all of Canada’s formal regions are geopolitical conventions — deliberate oversimplifications that collapse

multiple ecosystems into more easily managed frameworks. According to Parks Canada, the four easternmost provinces have ten ecozones between them, with many more localized environments within these. We would be hard-pressed to find many ecological or social commonalities between the Tantramar marshlands and the boreal woods of Labrador. Environmental historians must be true to these particulars of place, the distinctive features of the local. The local, too, is where people are most often engaged with their environment, through function, familiarity, or affection. However, this may produce only disparate place-biographies of limited application and lacking context or comparison.

A regional environmental history therefore encourages us to make connections between these scales and landscapes, seeking shared historical patterns in exploration, settlement, and the use of natural resources. Observers such as Marc Lescarbot at the start of the 17th century saw, as we do, the complex shorelines and coastal focus shaping the productivity and culture of the region; we can recognize, likewise, Abraham Gesner's 19th-century assessment of mineral resources of the interior, complementing the already-exploited forests. These common sensibilities create a regional sense of place.

Environmental history at a regional level has a good vantage point: high enough to see patterns in the landscape, close enough to the ground to see the landmarks. From here we can familiarize ourselves with the silhouette of a single human actor, or study the effect of a particular historical event or a unique environmental feature. We can also draw back far enough to see experiences repeated across space and time, and to identify critical turning points. Our contributors here remind us that fishermen in Bay Bulls, Newfoundland in the 1860s and farmers on Prince Edward Island in the 1930s sought to protect their livelihoods from competitors, drawing on legal arguments and vernacular technologies. Titus Smith was tasked by early-19th-century colonial authorities to investigate and itemize Nova Scotia's geological and biological features for possible use; scientific research was again sanctioned during the 1920s by the state to promote better forest management in New Brunswick, allowing history to offer insights into issues of general significance to public audiences. In finding such patterns, we weave a more coherent story,

And with this, we are in a way returning to our roots. There is a long tradition of environmental (or environmentally aware) history in Atlantic Canada — perhaps one of the strongest such traditions in North America.

Several of Canada's most prominent historical geographers during the 20th century, William F. Ganong, Andrew Hill Clark, and Graeme Wynn, were fascinated by patterns of settlement in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island.⁹ Notable historians such as Harold Innis and Arthur Lower presented the region's core industries of fish and timber as the staples upon which a New World economy and a New World nation-state had been built.¹⁰ And by the late 20th century, scholars were preoccupied with questions of political economy that stemmed, in part, from an ongoing preoccupation among federal and provincial governments with the health of the region's natural resources, declining primary industries, and perceived underdevelopment. This became something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: the focus on resource economies — in relation to, or subject to, the national polity — may have helped perpetuate the very characterization of Atlantic Canada as a hinterland that so aggravated its critics.¹¹

Our relationship with our environment in this region, though, has been far more complex than simply one of industrial triumph or resource exhaustion. We do indeed have something to offer the national project, especially as the voice of experience, for the long histories of environmental change in the Atlantic region offer timely and urgent insights and guidance for policymakers. For one, this voice reminds us of the close connection of setting and community identity — the immense, multi-generational investment that survives in the places around us. This voice informs our sense of who we are as residents of this region, and helps shape our political will and our political priorities, for place attachment most often motivates environmental concern and action. As a result, scholars need to consider factors of “sentiment and symbolism,”¹² the contexts of ideology and culture, art and faith, in which policy decisions are made. After all, we are dreamers as well as doers.

At the same time, Atlantic Canada is — forgive the metaphor — a canary in the postindustrial coal mine, having modeled multiple phases of exploration, development, conflict, and adaptation. Human-induced environmental changes are well documented over several centuries, including the collapse of significant natural resources, notably in portions of the regional fishery but extending also to mineral depletion and agricultural change.¹³ There is a long and still-unresolved tension between settler societies and First Nations, particularly over access to fish stocks and forests. A drawn-out period of industrialization and deindustrialization

in cities and rural areas alike has brought long-term costs for human and environmental health, although also opportunities for brownfield site remediation (with continued policy implications for employment, migration, healthcare, education, and social services). During the 1950s, forestry management practices in New Brunswick inspired Rachel Carson and some of the earliest environmentalist critiques of industrial pesticide use. By the 1990s, the Sydney tar ponds ranked of national concern over the health effects of a century of depositing waste from the coke ovens at the steel plant (even as two generations of Cape Bretoners were at work on the new mining frontier of northern Alberta). And, as a coastal region, climate change is an increasingly urgent concern, with its effects on increased water temperatures, sea-level rise, increased severity of storm events, and shifting geographies of species and habitat. In assessing this dynamic and complex history, we are reminded of Wynn's point in the "Epilogue" to this volume that examining "the circumstances and consequences of previous actions" cautions us not to rush to judgment. Instead, we should bring the same considered analysis and sense of context to our current situation and decisions in order to provide an environmental history that is both theoretically informed and regionally sensitive.

This collection demonstrates how such a regional environmental history helps us find pattern and meaning — synthesis — in the past. The essays cluster easily around three themes: (1) understanding the natural world, (2) experiments in conservation and environmental management, and (3) historical sustainability with a particular focus on community resilience. How humans (especially settler society since the early 17th century) explored new places and sought to make sense of new kinds of environmental knowledge is a foundational part of our evolving relationship with the natural world in Atlantic Canada. This involved more than a simple assessment of available natural resources; instead, environmental historians suggest acknowledging the importance of philosophical conceptions of nature, the rise of formalized scientific inquiry (and its co-option by the state), and the prevalence of competing political motives in the interpretation and representation of the environment. Individuals, communities, and governments who experimented with managing these environments for production often changed them further in the process — one of the most valuable lessons the study of environmental history has to offer. An equally important lesson offered by Wynn is that our ancestors showed a capacity for sustainable choices as well as costly

exploitation; ours is a mixed lineage, and a present reality. The final theme of community resilience, particularly when facing unexpected ecological, economic, or climatic crisis, underscores the way in which understanding, adaptation, and resilience were and are fundamental and necessary steps in crafting new approaches to sustainable livelihoods. In drawing these connections, we see what tools we have reached for in the past to protect those livelihoods and resources, what has worked, what we have discarded, and what have been the consequences — intentional or otherwise — of our decisions. Perhaps most importantly, we see what we have in common; we are increasingly aware that solutions to environmental problems cannot be confined particularly to the provincial level, where so many environmental decisions are made. The solutions require both local commitment and wider coordination.

Atlantic Canada has much to offer a national, even global, discussion of environmental issues. Environmental history has blossomed in Canada in the past two decades as the fastest growing, most creative area of the discipline; the astonishing number and range of submissions we received for this volume testifies to that.¹⁴ But the field has sometimes struggled to find a way to bring its regional insights — the level at which it appears most authentic and faithful to detail — to a wider audience. While some have wondered if there is a distinct *Canadian* environmental history, Frank Uekotekker suggests that it is *transregional* environmental history — comparisons between regions with similar problems and issues — that will provide the most useful kind of “big” or global history.¹⁵ As we consider the relationship between past and future in Atlantic Canada, we might consider how our experiences may benefit other island or coastal zones, communities transitioning from heavy industry, or other places with histories as resource hinterlands. This echoes the 1980s slogan to “think globally, act locally,” but there is another, older precedent. In the 19th century, Maritimers believed confidently in their place in the global community, the importance of their towns and industries not just to British North America or the Dominion of Canada but to the rest of the world. As shipbuilder William D. Lawrence of Maitland said of Nova Scotia in 1867, “I desire to see her cities grow, her commerce extend, her ports crowded with shipping and manned with the sons of our own soil, many of whom I am proud to say are, at the moment, spreading canvas on every sea, from the cold north to the sunny south and conducting our ships to the ports of the most enlightened and commercial nations of the globe.”¹⁶ It is time to

re-establish these connections across the four Atlantic provinces (and with implications for our immediate neighbours in New England and the North Atlantic) and to share our lessons from the past so as to better understand and respond to the pressing environmental questions of our time.

ENDNOTES

Campbell and Summerby-Murray, Environmental History in Atlantic Canada

1. Derek Gregory, “Above the Dead Cities,” in *Envisioning Landscapes, Making Worlds: Geography and the Humanities*, ed. S. Daniels et al. (London: Routledge, 2011), 16; Michael Williams, “The Relations of Environmental History and Historical Geography,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 20, no. 1 (1994): 3–21.
2. Edmund Burke III, “Preface,” *The Environment and World History*, ed. Edmund Burke III and Kenneth Pomeranz (University of California Press, Berkley 2009), xiii.
3. Diana Davis, “Reading Landscapes and Telling Stories: Geography, the Humanities and Environmental History,” in *Envisioning Landscapes*, 171.
4. There are significant examples of such histories, including Fernand Braudel’s now-classic *Identity of France* with its entire volume *Environment and History* (vol. 1) (1988), and Eric Pawson and Thomas Brooking’s *Environmental Histories of New Zealand* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
5. Matthew Evenden and Graeme Wynn, “‘54:40 or Fight’: Writing Within and Across Boundaries in North American Environmental History,” in *Nature’s End: History and the Environment*, ed. Paul Warde and Sverker Sorlin (London: Palgrave, 2009), 215.
6. See, for example, Dan Flores, “Place: An Argument for Bioregional History,” *Environmental History Review* 18, no. 4 (1994): 1–18.
7. James Feldman and Lynne Heasley, “Recentering North American Environmental History: Pedagogy and Scholarship in the Great Lakes Region,” *Environmental History* 12, no. 4 (2007): 951–58; Matthew Hatvany, *Marshlands: Four Centuries of Environmental Change on the Shores of the St. Lawrence* (Aboiteaux of Kamouraska) (Sainte-Foy, QC: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2003); Graeme Wynn, *Canada and Arctic North America: An Environmental History* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC Clio, 2007). See also J. David Wood, *Places of last resort: The Expansion of the Farm Frontier into the Boreal Forest in Canada, c. 1910–1940* (Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2006) or Hugh C. Prince, *Wetlands of the American Midwest: A Historical Geography of Changing Attitudes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997). For a more localized watershed study, see Neil S. Forkey, *Shaping the Upper Canadian Frontier: Environment, Society, and Culture in the Trent Valley* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2003).

8. Stephen J. Pyne, *Fire: A Brief History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003); Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History* (New York: Walker and Co., 2002).
9. William F. Ganong published extensively on the natural and human history of New Brunswick, including *Notes on the Natural History and Physiography of New Brunswick* (Bulletin of the Natural History Society of New Brunswick, 1899) and *A Monograph of the Origins of Settlements in the Province of New Brunswick* (*Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 1904). See also A.H. Clark, *Three Centuries and the Island: A Historical Geography of Settlement and Agriculture in Prince Edward Island, Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959) and *Acadia: The Geography of Early Nova Scotia to 1760* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), as well as Graeme Wynn, *Timber Colony: A Historical Geography of Early Nineteenth-Century New Brunswick* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981) and Stephen Hornsby, *Nineteenth Century Cape Breton: A Historical Geography* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 1992).
10. As examples, see Harold A. Innis, *The Cod Fisheries: The History of an International Economy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press and Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1940) and A.R.M. Lower, *Settlement and the Forest Frontier in Eastern Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1936).
11. Bryant Fairley et al., eds., *Restructuring and Resistance: Perspectives from Atlantic Canada* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1990).
12. Graeme Wynn used this phrase with reference to New Brunswick in “‘Deplorably Dark and Demoralized Lumberers’?: Rhetoric and Reality in Early Nineteenth-Century New Brunswick,” *Journal of Forest History* 24, no. 4 (October 1980): 168–87; but the argument was made much earlier by Walter Firey in “Sentiment and Symbolism as Ecological Variables,” *American Sociological Review* 10, no. 2 (1945): 140–8.
13. Dean Bavington, *Managed Annihilation: An Unnatural History of the Newfoundland Cod Collapse* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010).
14. Much of the credit is due to the remarkable organizing force of the Network in Canadian History and Environment (NiCHE), which has been funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council cluster grant since 2007. See <http://www.niche-canada.org>.
15. Frank Uekoetter, “Globalizing Environmental History – Again,” *The Future of Environmental History: Needs and Opportunities*, ed. Kimberly Coulter and Christof Mauch (Munich: Rachel Carson Centre Perspectives Series, 2011), 25. Asking after a Canadian school are Evenden and Wynn, “‘54:40 or Fight’: Writing Within and Across Boundaries,” and Alan MacEachern, “Voices Crying in the Wilderness: Recent Works in Canadian Environmental History,” *Acadiensis* XXXI, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 215–26.
16. Speech on Nomination Day, 1867, in *William D. Lawrence: Nova Scotia Shipbuilder & Anti-Confederation Campaigner, The Complete Archived & Annotated Writings* (Kennetcook, NS: Heroes of Hants County Association, 2010), 229.