ÉTUDE CRITIQUE / REVIEW ESSAY

Water and the Expanding Subfield of Canadian Environmental History

Bouchier, Nancy B. and Ken Cruikshank – *The People and the Bay: A Social and Environmental History of Hamilton Harbour.* Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016. 344 p.

Bradley, Ben, Jay Young, and Colin M. Coates, eds. – *Moving Natures: Mobility and the Environment in Canadian History*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2016. 352 p.

Dagenais, Michèle – *Montreal, City of Water: An Environmental History.* Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017. 256 p.

MacDonald, Edward, Joshua MacFadyen, and Irené Novaczek, eds. – *Time and a Place: An Environmental History of Prince Edward Island.* Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016. 460 p.

The subfield of Canadian environmental history—the study of humans and nature in the past in the geographical space now known as Canada—has expanded significantly since the 1990s. Topics now associated with environmental history have long been part of Canadian historiography, but it has only been within the last 20 to 30 years or so that the contours of the subfield have become more well defined. But it is also a subfield in flux, young enough that it is still searching for definition. Within all of this, it is important to note the key role that has been played by the Network in Canadian History and Environment (NiCHE; http://niche-canada.org) in nurturing the expansion of the subfield since the organization's founding in 2004.

One of the themes within Canadian environmental history that helps illustrate the subfield's dynamic state is that of the human relationship with water. Recent contributions, all featuring major involvement from members of NiCHE, point to this dynamism: *Montreal, City of Water: An Environmental History* by Michèle Dagenais; *The People and the Bay: A Social and Environmental History of Hamilton Harbour* by Nancy B. Bouchier and Ken Cruikshank; *Time and a Place: An Environmental History of Prince Edward Island*, edited by Edward MacDonald, Joshua MacFadyen, and Irené Novaczek; and *Moving Natures: Mobility and the Environment in Canadian History*, edited by Ben Bradley, Jay Young, and Colin M. Coates. Each of these books relies on human-water relationships to some degree

to help expand the subfield's boundaries of historical inquiry. The two single-authored books, *Montreal, City of Water* and *The People and the Bay*, draw our attention to the role of water in the growth of two Canadian cities from the nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries. Meanwhile, one of the edited collections, *Time and a Place*, focuses on the environmental history of Canada's smallest but most densely populated province, Prince Edward Island (PEI), surrounded as it is on all sides by water. The other edited collection, *Moving Natures*, delves into the history of humans moving through Canadian environments, with many of the chapters incorporating water and water-based forms of transportation and sports. And yet, the degree to which the books revolve around water must not be overstated, and this is particularly true about the edited collections. Altogether, these four books suggest that the expanding subfield of Canadian environmental history will be producing many stimulating and innovative offerings for many years to come.

Of the four of them, Michèle Dagenais's *Montreal, City of Water* is the one in which water occupies the most central role within its conceptual foundation. The first French-language book translated for the Nature-History-Society Series with UBC Press, it is a study of how the industrialization and urbanization of Montréal, a city on an island in the St. Lawrence River, has been inextricably intertwined with water. As Dagenais explains:

> It is the aim of this book to show the centrality of water and water-related infrastructure in the production of new urban forms since the early nineteenth century. Montreal's history is discussed with reference to water as a constitutive dimension of its development. Such an approach calls for conceiving of this history as the outcome of close interaction with nature, and I will therefore elucidate the mutual transformations of the city and its hydrology over more than two centuries. More than a space of culture, Montreal is viewed here as a hybrid space growing out of both natural and social processes (p. 4).

Dagenais conceptualizes water as something more than just used by humans; it is also a force that can shape human experience over time. In many ways, water is the prime actor within the book, with individual humans more often than not mentioned in passing or lost within the descriptions of larger structural processes. Indeed, this is one of the criticisms I have of the book, that individual human stories are not featured a bit more prominently in certain sections.

Nonetheless, by focusing on the interconnectedness of Montréal and its water, Dagenais expands the boundaries of historical inquiry in a couple of key areas. With regard to Canadian environmental history, she adds an important study of Canada's largest city prior to the 1960s, and now the second largest, to the small but growing body of literature on urban centres. Cities are spaces that are not often associated with nature, so it is a delight to behold how Dagenais skillfully weaves water into the history of Montréal's development over the last two hundred years. The second key area relates to how past scholars have tended to represent Montréal's relationship with water. Dagenais points out that they "tended to look at the subject in a fragmentary fashion, focusing on infrastructure and human consumption, on hydrology, or on particular watercourses" (p. 4). Moving forward,

her work will serve as an excellent example of how to approach the subject in a more comprehensive manner.

Divided into seven chapters, *Montreal, City of Water* outlines how the city's industrialization and urbanization started out fairly limited, around the port area, and gradually spread to encompass the whole of the island and areas along the banks of the St. Lawrence River and other waterways. As the city and its population grew, so did the demand for water. Dagenais cleverly uses the building and extension of water-related infrastructure to reveal both the creeping authority of city officials and the evolution of the urban landscape. But this was not a one-way relationship, as water greatly shaped how the humans of Montréal designed their city, including the influence of the "sanitary ideal" and the flooding of the St. Lawrence River. By the early twentieth century, human impacts on local waterways, such as hydroelectric development and wastewater removal, were a cause for concern for many Montrealers, which Dagenais elucidates well with a case study of the lesser-known Rivière des Prairies. Citizen concerns could be pushed aside by city officials for some time, but economic expansion after the Second World War, including the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway, brought to the fore the potential downsides of urban and industrial growth. From the 1960s onwards, in conjunction with the rise of modern environmentalism, there were increasingly concerted efforts to lessen the city's impacts on surrounding waterways, and to create more "natural" spaces for recreational purposes.

The second of the four books reviewed in this essay, *The People and the Bay*, by Nancy B. Bouchier and Ken Cruikshank, another title from the Nature-History-Society Series, is also organized around the history of a Canadian city, but it is less water-centric than *Montreal, City of Water*. Whereas Dagenais's analysis revolves around the mutual relationship between Montréal and its water, Bouchier and Cruikshank tend to concentrate a bit more on the human side of things. This difference emerges from Dagenais adopting a systems-based approach, while Bouchier and Cruikshank examine Hamilton's development in relation to its bay and harbour, as a city using a major body of water as a resource, not so much intertwined with it. This is not to suggest that the authors do not take into account how water shaped the city over time, but they do not write about their subject matter as holistically as Dagenais. For example, there are really no points in *The People and the Bay* where it comes across that water is the prime actor. This is not meant as a criticism, simply an affirmation of differences in approaches.

Like Dagenais, Bouchier and Cruikshank have expanded the field of Canadian environmental history with the publication of *The People and the Bay*. They have also contributed to the small but growing body of literature on urban centres, yet their focus on a mid-sized city such as Hamilton, not one of the largest such as Montréal, could open up more potential for comparison. Bouchier and Cruikshank readily acknowledge as much: "Hamilton is not an exceptional metropolitan giant such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, or Manchester, but the work of several historians has presented it as a good example of perhaps a more common type of North American city" (p. 5). Intriguingly, Bouchier and Cruikshank also structure much of their analysis around questions of power, access, and use, well summed

up by the title of the introduction, "Whose Harbour?" While Dagenais touches on similar themes in her book, they are absolutely foundational for the conceptual framework of *The People and the Bay*. As a result, we have two books dealing with Canadian cities and water, but which offer quite different histories. Additionally, it should be mentioned that Bouchier and Cruikshank have produced as much a social history of Hamilton as they have an environmental history, so the text also contains a lot for those who are coming from that historiographical background.

Across eight chapters, Bouchier and Cruikshank explore the industrialization and urbanization of Hamilton since the early nineteenth century, all the while anchoring their historical account in the city's long-term relationship with its bay and harbour as a resource. The authors group the various chapters into three general sections, with each corresponding to a different period. The first and second chapters cover the initial period in the city's development, which spans most of the nineteenth century. It was during these early years that social and economic elites worked to transform the body of water adjacent to Hamilton into a thriving port, in part identifying a variety of natural processes that needed to be "civilized," such as fire and disease. Employing a detailed case study of the career of fishery inspector John Kerr, Bouchier and Cruikshank describe convincingly how elites attempted to steer working-class Hamiltonians toward what were believed to be acceptable water-related forms of recreations as part of this broader process of civilizing nature. The second period, chapters 3 to 5, is from the late nineteenth century to the early 1940s. This was when large industrial enterprises came to dominate the city and the port, with the scientific management and organization of nature being key to this happening. Bouchier and Cruikshank argue effectively that city officials and planners took into account what they considered to be the needs of immigrants and workers, but this often turned out to be a misguided use of public power. The sixth, seventh, and eighth chapters cover the final period. From the 1930s to the 1950s, city officials generally let the demands of industry dictate how the city and port were developed. The environmental consequences of this industrial growth were undeniable by the 1960s, and Hamiltonians started pushing for the "unchaining" and remediation of the bay and harbour. A major component of these efforts was ensuring that citizens had more say in how the bay and harbour would be managed, a goal realized in the 1980s with the implementation of remedial action plans.

One criticism I have of *The People and the Bay*, which also applies to *Montreal, City of Water*, is the lack of discussion of Indigenous peoples and issues. Perhaps it is not entirely surprising, seeing as how the subjects of study are urban centres, not necessarily immediately thought of as Indigenous spaces. And yet, these were still Indigenous spaces, with Kahnawake and Kanesatake near Montréal and Six Nations and Anishinaabe nations around Hamilton. There are nods to Indigenous peoples as original inhabitants peppered throughout the chapters, but nothing related to issues of water or urban planning. Even just some basic discussion would have added another level of meaning to two already first-rate texts.

Time and a Place: An Environmental History of Prince Edward Island, part of the Rural, Wildland, and Resource Studies Series with McGill-Queen's University Press, moves away from using water as a central organizing theme. Instead,

water occupies a prominent role by virtue of the geographical focus of the edited collection, an island. Due to the very nature of "islandness," residents of PEI have always had to grapple with the realities of what it meant to be surrounded by water on all sides at all times. The editors, Edward MacDonald, Joshua MacFadyen, and Irené Novaczek, do a fantastic job of addressing the relationship that the people of PEI have long had with the water around them:

> For much of its history as an island, the place we call Prince Edward Island was in most years virtually cut off from the mainland from December until April. Island society arguably bears the marks of that solitude. And yet, the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence was always also a road, albeit a treacherous one, and a road with different off-ramps from those of the fluvial and upper St. Lawrence River. The Mi'kmaq people travelled it seasonally by canoes. European sailing vessels fished its waters and frequented its harbours. As with the Hebrides in the Middle Ages, the sea connected the Island to the world more readily than pre-railroad trails and rivers could penetrate the great plains and mountain fastness of the North American interior. To Islanders, then, the sea was not an end but a beginning. Its saltwater walls defined and delimited, but the walls had wide doors to the ideas and technologies of the Atlantic World (p. 13).

Water is also dealt with in the book in a variety of ways other than as a barrier or connector. It comes up in relation to economic activities, either as an essential part of industries such as fishing or tourism, or as being on the receiving end of the destructive externalities of industries such as forestry or agriculture. However, with water not being the central organizing theme, the edited collection also contains analyses on an array of topics associated with island life, including chapters on wildlife and energy history.

As with the two books discussed above, *Time and a Place* has helped to expand the subfield of Canadian environmental history. It does so in a few admirable ways. First, the island is used as a sort of environmental history laboratory, to allow for an in-depth place-based examination of a well-defined area over time. But the contributors also make sure to connect what happened on PEI within broader contexts at the regional, national, and international levels so as to avoid the pitfalls of some other narrowly defined studies. In addition, the book is billed as Canada's first province-based environmental history. To be sure, it is not meant to be a comprehensive investigation, but rather a starting point, the beginning of a broader conversation about the long-term consequences of human-nature interactions on PEI and elsewhere. Finally, the fact that the contributors are from different backgrounds and disciplines means that the collection is just that much stronger for containing numerous scholarly viewpoints. It could have been difficult to maintain sufficient cohesion between the assorted chapters, but this is generally avoided in part by the decision to focus attention on a confined space like an island. The editors also provided coherence through the organization of an initial workshop, co-sponsored by NiCHE and the Institute of Island Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island, and by establishing a guiding set of principles, including "That time and place are inextricably bound when it comes to environmental history, and that larger

insights can come from examining environmental change in one well-defined place across the long sweep of time" (p. 9).

With eleven chapters and fifteen contributors, also counting the epilogue and an appendix, *Time and a Place* is a notable addition to Canadian environmental historiography. The tone for the collection is set with an engaging introduction by the editors that reads like a satisfying conceptual essay instead of a mandatory listing of chapter content. Then divided into three parts, the book begins with a section titled "Imagining Islands," with chapters by John R. Gillis and Graeme Wynn, that acts as the theoretical foundation for much of the rest of the book. The next section, "Shaping Abegweit," looks at broad interactions between humans and nature in the island's history. A couple of the standout chapters include Douglas Sobey's history of the forests of PEI from 1720 to 1900, a welcome boost to the understudied subject of early intensive forest exploitation in the Atlantic Region, and, with a specific nod to the theme of water, Irené Novaczek's exploration of how seaplants fit within the island's culture and economy. The third section, "Harvesting Land and Sea," is largely organized around economic activities on PEI from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. There are several novel and fascinating chapters in this part of the book, especially Joshua MacFadyen's on agricultural land use from 1861 to 1871, Edward MacDonald and Boyde Beck's on the fishing industry, and Alan MacEachern's on scenic images in PEI tourism literature.

Finally, *Moving Natures: Mobility and the Environment in Canadian History*, also contains a significant amount of content related to human-water relationships, but as with *Time and a Place* water is not entirely central to the overall conceptual foundation of the text. Edited by Ben Bradley, Jay Young, and Colin M. Coates and part of the Canadian History and Environment Series with the University of Calgary Press, *Moving Natures* "examines the complex intersections of mobility, the myriad environments of Canada, and the lives of its inhabitants" (p. 2). Another edited collection, several chapters incorporate water and water-based forms of transportation and sports. It very quickly becomes clear when reading the book the essential role that water, along with the railway and the automobile, played in shaping human mobility throughout Canadian history. From canoes to wooden ships to steamboats to container ships reliant on fossil fuels, the inhabitants of what is now called Canada have long used a myriad of vessels to travel along freshwater routes, or to venture across salt water to distant lands. They also used water for recreational purposes, from paddling on a calm stream, to steaming to a lakeside cottage, to avoiding a water trap on a golf course.

Like the other books, *Moving Natures* is an important contribution to the subfield of Canadian environmental history. This edited collection is the first real attempt to combine mobility studies with environmental history to shed new light on the study of Canada's past. There is much to be gained, as the editors note:

> Mobility studies can offer new insights in the field of environmental history. Key areas of concern for environmental historians include the touristic enjoyment of "wilderness" areas, practices of recreation in the outdoors, natural resource development, commodity trades, and infrastructure building. Parks and cottages

> are unlikely to become popular if transportation mechanisms fail to bring people to those areas, while at the same time the process of establishing such landscapes serves to exclude others from them. Many leisure activities, such as golf, canoeing, and horseback riding, bring adepts into areas that they consider to be "natural," no matter how designed they may be. Access to primary resources depends on transportation methods, and here the story may take on some distinctive Canadian—or at least northern—hues, given the necessity of dealing with snow- or ice-covered transportation corridors. Finally, the process of enabling mobility often requires dramatic reconstructions of the physical environment, through the construction of canals, subways, roads, and bridges (pp. 10–11).

While this is all true, relying on the combination of mobility studies and environmental history as the central organizing principle also means that this book has the least overall cohesion of the four addressed here. The editors wisely frame this characteristic of *Moving Natures* as one of its strengths, that the breadth of the case studies demonstrates the broad potential of the mixing of the fields within the study of Canada.

Consisting of twelve chapters by sixteen contributors, *Moving Natures* is another splendid addition to Canadian environmental historiography. The editors sensibly use the introduction to define mobility studies for the uninitiated, discuss how it can be joined with environmental history, and what impact that might have on the history of Canada. From there, the various chapters act as scholarly proving grounds for the approaches laid out by the editors. Divided into two parts, the first section of the book, "Productions, Pathways, and Supply," is focused on mobility for the purposes of production. All seven of the chapters in this section have their own strengths, but my interest was particularly piqued by Thomas Peace, Jim Clifford, and Judy Burns, who focus on the history of turning Nova Scotia forests into ships in the mid-nineteenth century; Andrew Watson's chapter on lakeside mobility in Muskoka, Ontario; Merle Massie's take on seasonality and mobility in northern Saskatchewan; and Daniel Mcfarlane's article on the creation of the St. Lawrence Seaway. The second section, "Consumption, Landscape, and Leisure," shifts to mobility for the purposes of pleasure. Chapters of note include Jessica Dunkin on the encampments and regattas of the American Canoe Association, Elizabeth L. Jewett on golf and the making of Canadian leisure landscapes, and Maude-Emmanuelle Lambert on automobile tourism in Quebec and Ontario.

All of the authors, editors, and contributors need to be commended for producing four outstanding texts. I have minor criticisms here and there, but nothing that really takes away from the overall effectiveness of any of the books. Connected through the theme of human-water relationships, it is important to note that all of these books are also so much more. Water plays a key role in all of the texts, but there are a number of other themes present, particularly in the edited collections, as noted in the relevant sections. *Montreal, City of Water, The People and the Bay*, *Time and a Place*, and *Moving Natures* collectively hint at an exciting future for the expanding subfield of Canadian environmental history. I look forward to what has yet to come.

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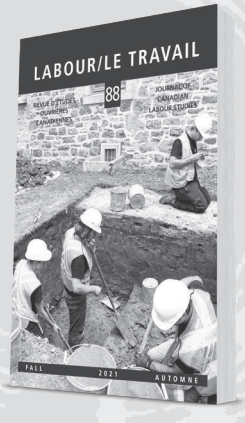

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