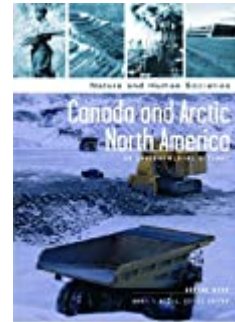


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Graeme Wynn. *Canada and Arctic North America: An Environmental History.* Nature and Human Societies Series. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2007. xiv + 503 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85109-437-0.



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Published on H-Canada (January, 2008)

Climate Change: A Timely Environmental History of Canada

The rising engagement with environmental issues outside of the academy in the last several years has given new impetus and attention to scholarly work on similar topics. A small but steadily increasing cadre of well-researched and thought-provoking monographs have illuminated various aspects of the historically changing relationships that Canadians have had with their home and native land.[1] Yet, and to the frustration of those teaching courses on Canadian environmental history, there has been no single book that considers the topic as a whole. Graeme Wynn's *Canada and Arctic North America* ably fills this void. Wynn aims not only to enhance the material available to students and practitioners of environmental history, but also to "offer a new perspective on the past of northern North America" (pp. xvii-xviii). His success ensures that this book will be of foremost interest to all who teach and practice Canadian history.

In the era of the local study and the microhistory, Wynn has accepted the daunting task of accounting for forty thousand years of human activity over more than ten million square kilometers of land. To do so in a format accessible to students necessitates some clear deci-

sions about the inclusion and exclusion of material. The author's most defining choice is to focus on the material transformation of the environment that came about through the means of trade and technology. In his view, this is the clearest way to "render intelligible ... the saga of the human occupation, settlement, development, and transformation of half a continent" (p. xiii). Hence, one finds little consideration of political or cultural ideals or movements. The book instead traces the development of the fundamental "staple trades" (pace Harold Innis in *The Fur Trade in Canada* [1930]) on which the Canadian economy was built from prehistoric times to the present day.

Wynn has divided the book into five sections and organized it chronologically, although he considers some time periods in more than one section. The first and shortest part, entitled "Deep Time," describes the processes of glacial retreat, climate change, and emergence of vegetation in what is now called Canada, as well as the first human incursions into this territory. Wynn guides the reader deftly through the masses of anthropological and archaeological literature on this topic. He contends that, although these early societies were skillful at adapt-

ing to their new environment, they were so few in number, with such limited technology, that they left barely a trace on the environment.

The second part, "Contact and Its Consequences," outlines the familiar story of European arrival on North American shores and the different relationships that arose between European and First Nations people. In addition to discussing well-known examples of interaction, such as the seventeenth-century Huronia trading network and the disappearance of the Beothuk, Wynn also considers the exchanges between Copper Inuit and Euro-Canadian whalers and explorers to interesting effect. Although the political and economic impacts of trade are given some space, Wynn's account of the ecological consequences of trade, including a dissection of the historical spread of disease, are most compelling.

The title of the third section, "Settlers in a Wooden World," underscores the prevalence and necessity of this natural resource to immigrant Europeans. Here, Wynn introduces Lewis Mumford's vocabulary of technic eras as a main organizing concept sustained throughout the rest of the book.^[2] According to Wynn and Mumford, early settlers in Upper and Lower Canada lived in an Eotechnic age: one of "wood, wind, and water," in which human, animal, and plant energy generated more than 80 percent of the mechanical energy used (p. 113). The narrative then unfurls to consider the effects of human activity on the cleared fields, forests, seas, and small townships of eastern Canada and the Maritimes. Wynn argues that "in seeking to change the face of the colonial earth to their purposes, settlers often, and often unknowingly, triggered cascading consequences that subverted their hopes and designs and had long-term, frequently deleterious, impacts upon environments and ecologies" (p. 114). He admits that farmers developed intimate knowledge of their land over time, but also claims that, scientifically speaking, they were unable to predict the impact of their actions. Although Wynn condemns mid-nineteenth-century societal practices as economically shortsighted and environmentally destructive, he contextualizes settlers' actions with reference to that era's faith in concepts like "progress" and "improvement." Few people, Wynn concedes, were able to resist the clarion call that "nations had to advance with the advancing and improve with the improving" (p. 163).

In "Nature Subdued," the fourth section, Wynn delineates the effects of two further Mumfordian eras, the Paleotechnic (coal, iron, and steam) and the Neotechnic (electrical and metal alloy). The introduction of new

energy sources permitted technological innovations that not only quickened the pace of environmental exploitation, but also restructured human relationships with the natural environment. People were able to apply less of their own energy to their work and also became increasingly distant from the land. This theme is expounded further in "Nature Transformed," the fifth section, in which Wynn analyzes the impact of the wartime and post-wartime economic boom on industry and the environment. He describes a climate of high modernism dating from the 1950s that fostered utter confidence in the ability of humans to alter their world and delineates the benefits of those alterations. Close collaboration of the state and capitalist entrepreneurs produced "brute-force technologies" that "ran roughshod over local practices, social differences, ecological diversity, mutuality, and informality as they turned upon the implementation of simplified, schematic, formal designs in the cause of social and environmental renovation" (p. 277). Although high modernism fell out of favor with the economic uncertainties of the 1970s and the government cutbacks of the 1980s and 1990s, Wynn believes that the effects of globalization, free trade, and waning government intervention have produced conditions that ensure continued corporate environmental exploitation. These last two sections are by far the lengthiest. Their constituent chapters richly detail historical developments in mining, hydroelectricity, forestry, fishing, and rural and urban land use. Some of these chapters could well be used to supplement standard Canadian history textbooks, which sometimes fall short in their consideration of more recent events. Wynn's integrated discussion of political, economic, and environmental issues—particularly in the last chapter, "Urban Mapping"—explains why the world around us today is as it is. Few students could resist the appeal of such a pertinent text; few histories attain this level of contemporaneity.

In his final section, "Reflections on the Remaking of Northern North America," Wynn closes with some general thoughts on environmental discourse in the twenty-first century. He decries authors who foment doomsday scenarios based on widespread human negligence of the Earth since the Industrial Revolution. Acknowledging the presence of current and "serious global-scale environmental concerns," Wynn nevertheless notes, dryly, that "it seems unlikely that the environmental changes made by people and societies on their way to achieving immense affluence and great material comfort will prove terminal" (pp. 388-389). In fact, a central tenet of his opening and closing arguments is that the natural world

remains dynamic and resilient despite humanity's best efforts, historically, to "conquer" it. Unfortunately, one finds it easy to forget this statement while reading the chapters in between. Perhaps acting on his thesis that most people today live apart from the natural environment, Wynn compensates by describing the effects of environmental intervention in graphic terms. One can feel the muscles of settlers aching as they fought the land or smell the poisonous chemicals rising fetidly from industrial endeavors. If anything, Wynn has done too fine a job of conveying these realities. One reads with a heavy heart and wonders if anything can be done to mitigate past mistakes.

Such gravity aside, this text will appeal to junior and senior scholars alike. Wynn, as a working and experienced historical geographer, is one of the best candidates to make such an elephantine topic comprehensible. He has read extensively; the bibliography contains over 650 titles. Yet he has a way of deftly cutting through the thick of scholarly accretion on a topic and illuminating, without diminishing, the complexity of the historical discourse. His discussion flows from the small scale to the large scale and back with ease; his narrative is one in which small actions lead to dramatic changes that materially impact individual lives over long periods of time. The illustrations are carefully and thoughtfully chosen to augment the text and provoke further discussion.

Some small features detract from the usefulness and usability of *Canada and Arctic North America*. The title somewhat obfuscates the book's content. This is an environmental history of Canada, with a small portion of content devoted to Alaska. Given that the book is part of an American-based series, the title may have been meant to align this volume with other offerings on North America in the series. It would be a shame if potential readers saw the word "arctic" in the title and assumed the book

was only of interest to northernists, as several have done with my copy already. Another minor criticism concerns the glossary of "important people, events, and concepts." Not only is the glossary not linked in any way to the main text, but it also contains references to things that do not, or hardly, appear in the text. Many of the terms are of cultural and political importance: in fact, precisely the sort of information that Wynn does not discuss in his main text.[3] It is understandable that some subjects must be excluded from a book of this scope. Using the glossary as a backdoor means of inclusion simply creates confusion for readers. However, these things do not detract from the overall excellence of this volume.

Canada and Arctic North America succeeds in presenting Canadian history from a novel perspective. It is a landmark in Canadian environmental history and an important new work generally. With its materialist focus, it will be of great interest and use to labor and business historians as well as their environmentally focused colleagues. But it is also recommended to all Canadian historians. It will serve as a lens to make that with which they are familiar look strange and new again, and so provoke them to question their assumptions on the subject once more.

Notes

[1]. See, especially, the books published by the University of British Columbia Press in the Nature/History/Society series, which Wynn coincidentally edits.

[2]. Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, 1934).

[3]. He has considered such themes elsewhere. See, for example, Graeme Wynn, *Remaking the Land God Gave to Cain: A Brief Environmental History of Canada* (London: Canadian High Commission, 1998).

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Citation: Christina Sawchuk. Review of Wynn, Graeme, *Canada and Arctic North America: An Environmental History*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. January, 2008.

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