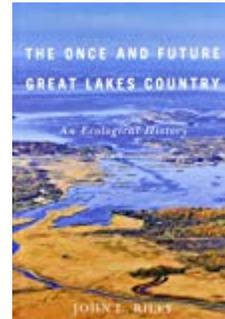


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John L. Riley. *The Once and Future Great Lakes Country: An Ecological History.* McGill-Queen's Rural, Wildland, and Resources Studies Series. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013. 516 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-4177-1; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7735-4388-1.



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Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

No one disputes the importance and beauty of the Great Lakes. They are the largest surface freshwater system on the globe (and 84 percent of North America's surface freshwater), big enough to warrant the label of a fourth seacoast. Some thirty million people live in the transborder basin, and *les mers douces* (the sweet seas, as early European arrivals called the lakes) are a dominant element of the physical, cultural, and industrial heritage of both Canada and the United States. Yet the Great Lakes system as a whole has received precious little attention from environmental historians, relative to its magnitude. This lacuna is at least partially compensated for by John L. Riley's fascinating *The Once and Future Great Lakes Country: An Ecological History*.

A word of warning: this book is about almost everything *except* the lakes themselves. That is to say, the waters of the Great Lakes are surprisingly absent. Granted, the author uses the phrase "Great Lakes country" in his title, with the "country" defined as *le pays d'en haut* (the upper country) of New France (which roughly included western Quebec, most of Ontario and the American states bordering the Great Lakes, and the area west of the Mississippi River into the prairies), and its various arrival coasts and corridors. This allows Riley to include territory beyond the Great Lakes basin proper, and de-

notes the volume's focus on terrestrial ecology; but it can also make it difficult to figure out his intended domain, which, it becomes apparent, is primarily Ontario.

Riley is the chief science advisor for the Nature Conservancy of Canada, and has worked as a botanist, geologist, ecologist, and conservation professional with the Royal Ontario Museum, the Ontario Geological Survey, and Ontario Nature. A synthetic work informed by the personal experiences of a restoration ecologist, *The Once and Future Great Lakes Country* is an engaging, graceful, and reflexive narrative; indeed, this could be considered a quasi-memoir. It is consciously framed as ecological history, and is the product of decades of formal scientific study and on-the-ground, dirty hands kind of knowledge. Virtually every page exudes a passion for the place, and much of this is decidedly place-based history, blending the local with the large scale, weaving in and out of personal anecdotes and grand summaries. As a result, it will find a general readership outside of academia.

The book is divided into three sections. They are arranged chronologically, though within each section the chapter organization tends toward the thematic. Like the borders of the Great Lakes country, these themes and chronologies are somewhat porous. While it is at

times selective and idiosyncratic, the extra attention paid to certain topics that the author knows intimately also makes for some of the finest portions of the book. The first section intersperses the geologic and glacier history of the region with First Nations (pre- and post-contact) land uses. The second section delves into the initial centuries of European arrival and revisits the trauma that occurred as the result of our assumption of the region's lands and waters, fish and wildlife, and forest and prairies (p. xxii). The third section focuses mainly on the industrial twentieth century, emphasizing invasive species, cities and urban areas, and climate change.

Synthesizing both old and new evidence, Riley effectively demonstrates that North American aboriginals changed the landscape and ecology before Europeans arrived en masse. One of the book's most significant arguments is that the ecology of the land around the Great Lakes alternated to a great extent over the course of a few hundred years—what the author calls the "great wilding" occurred after the natives were decimated by newcomer diseases, as their vastly reduced numbers left them unable to modify their surroundings to the same extent. When Europeans visited places like Huronia in the late eighteenth century, they encountered some very different landscapes (e.g., trees instead of meadows) compared to those experienced by the likes of Samuel de Champlain. Starting in the second half of the nineteenth century, the mass removal of flora and fauna accelerated; Riley notes that there is today no substantial stands of original old-growth forest in the southern Great Lakes lowlands. There are also few remnants of the substantial prairies that once graced the region. In sum, both fecundity and diversity have been reduced considerably.

Yet this thoughtful book provides grounds for optimism. Riley goes to great lengths to establish that nature in the region has never been static. There is no precontact "Eden" to which we could return. Nature was always changing; it just had periods of more and less equilibrium, and slower and smaller scales of change. Riley convincingly argues, for example, that removing current invasive species is indicative of some of the same hubris that led to many introduced organisms in the first place. Focusing mainly on terrestrial invasives, Riley contends that we can resist or soften their impact rather than "taking on the impossible task of eliminating them" and we could "deliberately endorse and support" certain species, allowing for a return to some of the historic levels of biological diversity. But we need to trust in nature and "accept that the world will never be the same again, assume full responsibility, and move on" (p. 275). These asser-

tions are persuasive, though they might be considered somewhat radical within the larger restoration community.

The narrative frequently crosses the border and speaks to both national sides of the Great Lakes, but American readers will likely feel that U.S. territory does not receive as much attention. This stems from the fact that Riley is a Canadian whose career as a conservation scientist has been based in Ontario. This geographic emphasis reinforces some of the ways that borders do matter in environmental/ecological history, even as this book simultaneously points to important ways that nature ignores such political divides and underlines the extent to which there is a broader Great Lakes region that transcends borders. Yet I think the author missed opportunities to more directly address the issue of differing national approaches to, and attitudes toward, the environment. One of the central points is that similar views of land tenure and economic development in both Canada and the United States have been major shapers of environmental change, but it would seem that there are equally some important observations that can be made about how different legal, cultural, and cultural regimes are reflected in the landscapes and waterscapes.

Seeing that this book frames itself as an "ecological history," a pertinent question becomes: what is the difference between an ecological and an environmental history? Both consider the anthropogenic role in ecological change, but ecological historians are most interested in the effects on ecosystems, while environmental historians are often most interested in the effects on humans (i.e., social, political, legal, cultural, etc.). To provide an example, consider a topic discussed in the book: the introduction of the emerald ash borer. An ecological approach would focus on the ecological ripples caused by the beetle's spread (e.g., loss of a tree species, attendant disruption to certain insect species that depend on the tree, loss of further species that were perhaps pollinated by said insects, and so on), whereas an environmental historian would be more apt to hone in on institutional, political, and economic aspects—such as trade, transportation, and laws—related to the introduction, spread, and attempt to combat the beetle. Thus, Riley is more concerned with assessing the environmental impacts of gradual, cumulative anthropogenic trends, generalizing about human efforts in order to be more specific about how it all plays out ecologically.

Of course, ecological and environmental history are not watertight compartments, and there are ample

grounds for objecting to my delineation. But this book also seems to aspire to be environmental history, at least in emphasis, approach, and the types of academic literature it references. Considering that, plus the forum in which this review is being published, I feel therefore compelled to evaluate the book as a work of environmental history and environmental humanities.

In some respects, this is excellent environmental history—most environmental historians would love to be able to discuss ecology with Riley’s level of sophistication. He has done a better job than historians usually do of bridging the gap in the other direction. The author demonstrates the benefits of an ecologist utilizing sources often thought to be the domain of the historian or social scientist, such as travel writing, diaries, and government and fur trade records. Cumulatively, such sources allow Riley to piece together what the Great Lakes country was like at past points in time, even if this flirts with being too environmentally determinist.

I think all environmental historians of the Great Lakes need to read this work, but it is as environmental history that this book sometimes stumbles. The use of environmental history approaches often seems superficial. There is precious little on policy and institutional change. The obligatory mentions of William Cronon, Richard White, John McNeill, and Alfred Crosby are there; but outside of Margaret Beattie Bogue and Wayne Grady there is no mention, in the text, references, or bibliography, of other academic and general audience scholarship on the environmental and ecological past of the Great Lakes by the likes of Dave Dempsey, Phil Weller, William Ashworth, Mark Sproule-Jones, Gregory Beck and Bruce Littlejohn, Lee Botts and Paul Muldoon, and Peter Anin. As a result, Riley missed opportunities to situate and build on certain findings and themes within the literature, and to contribute to pertinent disciplinary debates.

Riley is strongest on the pre-twentieth-century his-

tory, while the section on the twentieth century is quite uneven. In early chapters, he pays great attention to human political, economic, and agricultural activities, so the lack of attention in later chapters to these same activities is striking. Perhaps the relative lack of ecological and scientific data available for the pre-twentieth century explains this emphasis. Moreover, the post-1900 scale of population, industrial, and urban growth, and the concomitant environmental impact, probably warrants an entire book on the twentieth century.

While the three modern themes (urbanization, invasive species, climate change) make eminent sense, a number of developments with significant ecological impacts receive scant attention. For example, mining is inexplicably absent. As this book ignores water in favor of land, there is virtually nothing on water levels, diversions, hydraulic engineering, or hydroelectricity. Riley does not even mention, or at best gives perfunctory treatment, to such topics as the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project, the remaking of Niagara for power production, Ogoki-Long Lac diversions, and the Erie and Welland canals. Even if engineering and political aspects of megaprojects like the seaway do not fully fall under the purview of ecological history, it was a primary vector through which new species, many with effects damaging to ecological balance and human interests, have entered the Great Lakes system. And the Chicago diversion is notoriously on the verge of serving as the vector by which Asian carp will enter the Great Lakes system. All of these issues are of central importance to Great Lakes environmental historians.

Nonetheless, *The Once and Future Great Lakes Country* is a masterful recounting of the implications of human actions for nature. It now stands, in my opinion, as the best single-volume survey of the Great Lakes environmental past. Historians of the Great Lakes country must read this book, as must any concerned citizen.

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