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Pragmatism and Poetry: National Parks and the Story of Canada

Claire Elizabeth Campbell

“Our National Parks are the envy of the world.”

– *The Globe and Mail*, 18 March 2011

For environmental historians, the history of national parks in North America tends to spiral around one central question: Were national parks designed for ecological protection or recreational use? If we have insisted on both, how has that impossible duality played out? In Canadian Studies, we begin from a different starting point: by seeking to understand the character and identity, the mechanics and agendas, of Canada as a nation-state; how that nation-state relates to its citizenry, on the one hand, and the international community, on the other. National parks do tell us a great deal about our attitudes toward, or priorities in, the natural world. But they are also artifacts and tools of the prevailing process at work in nineteenth- and twentieth-century North America: the physical, political, and imaginative construction of the nation-state. For Canada and the United States, this meant the acquisition of territory, then the more difficult task of devising ways of governing that territory, making it accessible—physically and intellectually—to a geographically and ethnically disparate population. Designating specific places as parks created spaces for a citizenry to occupy, an environmental sampler by which to understand and possess a complex geography, and a statement of national greatness in environmental wealth. National parks, in short, are a way to understand Canada’s political evolution and political character—essential, in turn, to understanding its environmental policies today.

A North American origin story and a “national dream”

For a country that spends so much time insisting we are *not* American (and relies on our national parks and historic sites to remind us of this), we share a very North American origin story. The political independence of the revolutionary United States at the end of the eighteenth century required a new language or basis of nationalism: what Americans could not claim in *human* antiquity (at least from a European perspective), they would claim in *geological* antiquity and vastness. Such a campaign depended heavily on the

topography and scale of the new western interior. Monuments like Yosemite Valley provided powerful visual icons, and western spaces were also increasingly valuable in sustaining the so-called frontier thesis. If the American character emerged through struggle with a frontier, then the country required permanent wilderness spaces to approximate such an environment in the modern era. To both encourage and regulate visits to such places, the United States created the world's first national park at Yellowstone, famed for its geysers and hot springs, in 1872.

The story was remarkably similar in Canada fifteen years later, exactly in keeping with the rate of these two countries' development: most notably, completing national trans-continental railways fifteen years apart (1869 and 1885). Lacking the revolutionary imperative, Canada after Confederation still needed to acquire suitably distinct and iconic "nation-building" imagery in order to convince the inhabitants formerly known as British North Americans (and the British, and the Americans) of the providence of a Canadian project. The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) proved particularly useful in this regard. As construction reached the Rocky Mountains, workers discovered a natural sulphur spring near the proposed railway route in Banff. Surveyors reported that the site had "features of the greatest beauty, and was admirably adapted for a national park," and in 1887, Parliament passed the Rocky Mountains Park Act, which borrowed language from existing park legislation in the United States to create "a public park and pleasure ground for the benefit, advantage, and enjoyment of the people of Canada."¹

The concept of a restorative, healthful spa visit to a hot springs was not new, given the establishment of an entire resort landscape in, for instance, western Germany by the mid-nineteenth century. But from the start, the small tourist siding became a vehicle for a much larger nationalist project in both countries, particularly useful in Canada, which was faced with claiming a larger territory with a smaller population. First, it created a clear destination deep in the western interior, making a statement of claim to the distant and contested territory that preoccupied much of Ottawa's attention in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Second, it helped validate the enormous financial and political investment (or gamble) that had gone into acquiring the interior and underwriting the railway project. As Prime Minister John A. Macdonald told the House of Commons, the hot springs at Banff would "recuperate the patients and recoup the treasury."² Third, it created permanently

1 *An Act respecting the Rocky Mountain Park of Canada* (assented 23 June 1887).

2 John A. Macdonald, Prime Minister, House of Commons *Debates*, 3 May 1887.

federal spaces while the land was still federal territory (Alberta would not come into being until 1905). Today the five “mountain parks” occupy about sixty-three thousand square kilometres, the largest contiguous area in any province, in Alberta, one of the provinces most likely to challenge the federal government. Fourth, it generated art for an eastern audience that was distinct from, but complementary to the artistic norms of a newly postcolonial Canada taken from London and Paris. The CPR sponsored artists such as John A. Fraser and Lucius O’Brien on trips to the mountains, in what became known a bit prematurely as a “Rocky Mountain School.” Finally, it set in place a formula for citizenship, suggesting an *activity* by which Canadians could affirm their national identity. As historian William L. Morton would write seventy years later, “this alternate penetration of the wilderness and return to civilization is the basic rhythm of Canadian life, and forms the basic elements of Canadian character.”³ The remote nature of the mountain parks was a virtue here: setting up the expectation, or requirement, of travelling across territory, thus allowing a largely eastern population to occupy a western space.

National parks were imagined not as a way of preserving nature from development, but merely as reserving nature from private settlement for public use. Both the western territories and national parks were the responsibility of the Department of the Interior, the powerhouse of the federal government in the decades following Confederation. Its central mandate was “nation-building” through agricultural settlement of the continental interior and development of natural resources in other industries. Recreation was simply a new industry, and one that benefited from a state-corporate partnership. The corporate is a major theme in Canadian history, both in the sense of a financial entity and as a collective unit. And while it is something of a cliché to talk about the transcontinental railroad, it is hard to overstate its role as linchpin in delivering settlers and tourists alike into the Canadian west, and giving Canadians a sense of entitlement to, ownership of, and investment in this distant and “sublime” territory.

Too much geography: Expanding the national parks system

But the creation of the Dominion Parks Branch in 1911—the first time in history a country created an agency devoted specifically to managing national parks—produced a new nationalization of national parks. (While the American narrative as scripted by Ken

3 William L. Morton, *The Canadian Identity* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), 4-5.

Burns presents national parks as “America’s best idea,”⁴ it seems inventing a bureaucracy to manage them is Canada’s best idea. In fact, I would suggest that America’s best idea was actually coining the phrase “unimpaired for future generations,” which appears in the founding legislation of the National Park Service in 1916, fourteen years before it was written into national park legislation in Canada.) The Parks Branch took up what the railway had begun, in both the rationale for national parks and in making nature accessible. First, it heavily and successfully promoted tourism as the purpose of the parks. In 1919, Branch director James B. Harkin argued that through tourism revenue, “scenery” could generate \$13.88 an acre—at least three times that of an acre of wheat on the prairies.⁵ The Branch actively developed parks to accommodate visitors, especially through building roads. And it helped entrench a message about the naturalness of the Canadian presence in these places. For much of the twentieth century, the federal government needed to convince an ethnically complex and historically transient assortment of immigrant communities that we, collectively, belonged here. Pinpointing spots as accessible “national heritage” suggested an inherent emotional affinity for, and territorial right to these places, however distant.

Or close. With “getting back to nature” already popular among the well-to-do in southern Ontario and Quebec, colonizing parts of the Canadian Shield for summer camps and cottages, the Parks Branch began establishing new parks closer to where most Canadians lived. This really was the start of a national park system, one that began to reflect the country’s ecological and regional diversity. This certainly raised the public profile of national parks, and by the 1920s, Canadians generally agreed that parks could be both nationally valuable and locally profitable. But it is at this moment of expansion that, not surprisingly, we see a tension emerge between the central authority of the Parks Branch and numerous communities who may have had very different ideas about what they wanted from a national park. At Prince Albert National Park, cottage holders resisted efforts to eliminate their leases, even as the Branch argued such properties undermined the park idea of wilderness for all Canadians. In this tension between the local and the national, the Parks Branch mirrored the dilemmas of life in a country that, as Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King said, has too much geography.⁶

4 Ken Burns, *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea* (Hollywood, California: PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] Home Video, 2009).

5 J.B. Harkin, “Report of the Commissioner,” Annual Report of the Department of the Interior, 1919, Sessional Paper no. 25 (Ottawa, 1920) 3-4.

6 The full citation is “It is equally true, I should add, that as some countries have too much history, we have too much geography.” W. L. Mackenzie King, Prime Minister, House of Commons *Debates*, 18 June 1936.

The politics of federalism also coloured the creation of parks in the older, settled region of Atlantic Canada. These required the Parks Branch to invent and promote new categories of scenic beauty, such as “the coastal sublime,” to compete with (and justify the turn away from) the alpine, though all were designed for scenic views from the highway or the golf course. But unlike in the western territory, these parks required strategic negotiations with the provincial governments, which constitutionally are responsible for property and natural resources. Land use is typically one of the most fraught questions in federal/provincial relations, but in the crush of the Great Depression, the hard-hit Maritime provinces were more than willing to cooperate in turning land over to the federal government in the hopes that new parks would spur new tourism revenue. Unfortunately for residents, this land was usually acquired through outright expropriation, in order to create appropriately unpeopled landscape views.

“Water, ice, and land”: Complicating parks in the postwar era

Canada emerged from the Second World War with its economy booming, and major transcontinental infrastructure projects in the 1950s and 1960s—the TransCanada pipeline in the West, the St. Lawrence Seaway in the East, and most importantly, the Trans-Canada Highway from sea to sea—seemed to herald a twentieth-century version of the CPR’s “national dream,” literally engineering a new federal presence across provincial borders. Likewise, national parks continued to mark Canada’s transcontinental reach, and were more than ever a useful, accessible space, especially for family-oriented suburban communities enjoying new income levels and leisure time.

By the 1960s, it was clear that Canada’s mountain parks were wearing thin from their own popularity. Concern over their sustainability and overuse prompted a new public presence from an emerging environmentalist lobby on the one hand, and the academic community on the other. At a 1968 landmark conference on “Canada’s National Parks: Today and Tomorrow,” sponsored by the National and Provincial Parks Association (now the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society), scientists and environmentalists levelled pointed criticism at the Parks Branch’s tradition of user-oriented management. The US National Park Service actually retreated in the face of new concern about park overdevelopment, and the preservationist directive of the 1964 Wilderness Act. Although Canada had no equivalent to the Wilderness Act (and why this case is a story still to be written),

Canadians were becoming uncomfortably aware that national parks were not wilderness sanctuaries, though we nevertheless persisted—and persist—in referring to them as such. Films such as *Enduring Wilderness* (1963), produced by the National Film Board, urged viewers to see the parks as pieces of Canada preserved “in their original state,” even as the narrator asked, “How can we use the parks without spoiling them?” (The film’s title was translated in French as *Jardins Sauvages*—in some ways a more accurate description.)⁷

A number of factors coalesced by the late 1960s to generate a strong flurry (if not perfect storm) of activity around national parks. The partly complementary, partly contradictory twin enthusiasms for outdoor recreation and environmental protection met with a maturing of the Parks Branch’s bureaucratic capacity, a certain generational idealism about the capacity of the liberal state, a definite nationalist language around the country’s Centennial, and a new interest in Canada’s northern territory. Ottawa created new parks with remarkable speed, from sea (the Atlantic shores of Newfoundland) to sea (the Pacific shores of British Columbia) to sea (the Arctic watershed). Thinking of Canada in this expansive, triangular, and maritime way was new in national parks, but very much in keeping with the times. A National Parks System Plan divided the country into thirty-nine natural regions and promised to have at least one park representative of each; this remains the governing approach to park creation today. While it claimed to be “*fondé sur les sciences naturelles et être dégagé de toute entrave politique ou sociale* [founded on the natural sciences and free from all political or social hindrances],” such a claim was either naïve or outright disingenuous. Redrawing an area of rural Quebec in La Mauricie as wilderness, and representative of one of Canada’s most iconic landscapes—the boreal forest of the Canadian Shield—neatly cleared the area of its history of resource use (and reference to people), instated “objective” ecological categories, and bolstered federal authority in a separatist-leaning Quebec.

Yet it was at precisely this moment that thinking of parks as human eco-zones became problematic, because Parks Canada was being forced to acknowledge that people lived in these “natural regions.” The most dramatic conflict arose in northern New Brunswick, in a decade-long protest over the expropriation of land for Kouchibouguac National Park. For the francophone Acadians who lived here, expropriation seemed too near to the memory of expulsion: namely, the expulsion of 1755, when the British forcibly

7 Ernest Reid/National Film Board of Canada, *Enduring Wilderness/Jardins Sauvages* (1963).

deported thousands of Acadians before the Seven Years' War. Resistance to the national park included occupying and burning park buildings, amidst an outpouring of Acadian nationalist writing. (In February 2011, the House of Commons issued an official apology to people whose properties were expropriated to create Forillon National Park in 1970.)

But it was the new voices of aboriginal history and aboriginal politics that most effectively challenged conventional thinking about national parks. The rapid expansion of the parks system in the early 1970s intersected precisely with a watershed in relations between the Canadian state and Canada's First Nations. Widespread opposition to the "White Paper" of 1969 (a policy paper that recommended the elimination of Indian status and the apparatus of the Department of Indian Affairs), and televised hearings over a proposed pipeline through the Northwest Territories, presented to a national audience really for the first time in Canada's history a highly mobilized, highly visible First Nations community: one result of which was a more consistent treatment of land claims. In 1974, the National Parks Act was amended to allow traditional hunting and fishing practices, and introduce a new concept of national park reserve, meaning land set aside for a future national park pending the settlement of land claims. Acknowledging aboriginal claims of occupation required Parks Canada to recast parks from wilderness zones to "cultural landscapes" inhabited by sites of cultural and spiritual significance, and adopt new processes of consultation and co-management.

Still, for most southerners (including Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, who canoed the Nahanni River in 1970), the North still represented the last, best Canadian wilderness—hence its appeal. While the presence of humans living and working within protected areas is common in European countries, I would suggest that in Canada, it is thought of primarily as an aboriginal feature; ironically, further evidence of its wilderness character. Nahanni, the homeland of the Decho, Dene and Métis, remains a park reserve thirty-five years after its designation. In 2009, however, the reserve was expanded six fold (from five thousand square kilometers to over thirty thousand square kilometers), a dramatic reminder that despite outstanding claims, the North is still conveniently federal territory. These northern park reserves also remind us of Canada's longstanding tendency to see nature as both wilderness and resource. Whether through climate change or seabed mapping technology, the North is increasingly accessible to mining exploration. The Nahanni expansion and its new neighbor, the Naats'ihch'oh reserve (2008), carefully excluded existing mining leases, claims, and two working mines.

Asserting Canada's presence in the North, of course, has been the other defining feature of the parks system and Canadian politics since the 1970s. There had been concerns about American and Russian presence in the Arctic since the turn of the twentieth century, though these became much more acute from the Second World War into the Cold War. But the uninvited crossing of the S.S. Manhattan through the Northwest Passage in 1969 sparked a focus on Canadian sovereignty in the region that was cloaked in, or at least married to, assertions of environmental protection. In this new national policy, northern parks still demonstrate Canada's territorial authority; unlike the mountain parks of a century ago, however, they are presented not as aids to the national treasury but as evidence of a distinctly Canadian sense of ecological responsibility for this place. After the Manhattan crossing, Trudeau told the House that:

Canada regards herself as responsible to all mankind for the peculiar ecological balance that now exists so precariously in the water, ice and land areas of the Arctic Archipelago. We do not doubt for a moment that the rest of the world would find us at fault, and hold us liable, should we fail to ensure adequate protection of that environment from pollution or artificial deterioration. Canada will not permit this to happen.⁸

According to a 2011 poll, a majority of Canadians believe that Arctic sovereignty should be the country's first priority in foreign policy. And Canadian governments—including Stephen Harper's Conservatives since 2006—generally have been committed to this by whatever means are convenient. In August 2010, the Canadian Forces ran their second consecutive joint exercise in Nunavut, code-named Nanook; four months later, the government announced a park reserve at Lancaster Sound at the eastern mouth of the Northwest Passage (a mere twenty-five years after a policy recommendation to this effect). From this perspective, national parks are simply one tool among many by which to show the flag.

Where to from here and now?

By way of closing, I would like to highlight three directions in which Parks Canada appears to be heading with our national parks in the twenty-first century.

⁸ Pierre E. Trudeau, Prime Minister, House of Commons *Debates*, 24 October 1969.

1. For the past forty years, the most consistent effort has gone into making parks in the North. We now have ever-larger parks, to which only a few people go. In 2009-10, Quttinirpaaq National Park, on Ellesmere Island, counted 2 visitors; Kluane National Park, in the Yukon, and right on the Alaska Highway, just under 42,000; Banff, over 3.1 million. Are we making two classes of parks, one for our “benefit, education, and enjoyment” and the other for keeping “unimpaired”? Or is this a good strategy of deflecting human impact by concentrating it in older areas, and keeping less-trodden parts of the North as ecological reserves?
2. Engaging with the northern archipelago and its thousands upon thousands of kilometers of coastline has produced another frontier for park creation: marine ecosystems. Introduced in 1987, National Marine Conservation Areas have been proposed in the Great Lakes and across Canada’s three oceans in a system plan that attempts to both consolidate and extend Parks Canada’s authority—much like an earlier system plan. In 2010, for example, Ottawa announced a national park on Sable Island, three hundred kilometers off the shores of Nova Scotia at the edge of the Scotian Shelf (and like Lancaster Sound, in the midst of oil and gas exploration).
3. In the Darwinian world of federal politics, Parks Canada needs to justify its own existence as much as the lands for which it is responsible. In its centennial year, Canadians have been treated to waves of publicity materials that celebrate the agency as a world leader in environmental protection, and a steward of our “national treasures” that are, apparently, the envy of the world. Meanwhile, anxious to cultivate new audiences among, in particular, urban and immigrant populations (who may well come to Canada with different cultural traditions toward nature and wilderness), it has embraced a public relations campaign to woo visitors into parks that evokes the unprecedented tourism advertising of the 1920s. “Learn to camp” weekends, for example, promise a gentle introduction to life in the outdoors. Happy campers are happy citizens.

So generations of national parks tell us as much about Canada’s political landscape as its biophysical one. Ours is a New World story of pragmatism infused with poetry. We have contentedly used nature for political and economic gain, while cultivating a romance and mythology about wilderness. But both are to the same end: to affirm a young country’s claim to its place on the globe. We can see the political priorities of a

maturing nation-state as it wrestles with territorial expansion and constitutional jurisdiction as well as shifting public opinion. Parks Canada's famous dual mandate, to provide national parks for our "benefit, education, and enjoyment" as well as keep them "unimpaired for future generations," really says something about how Canadians have always wanted to have our environmental cake and eat it too. Certainly Parks Canada is a world leader in the management of protected places. But national parks should compel us to talk about all the kinds of relationships that Canadians have, want to have, and should have, with the natural world in the fullest sense. We can hardly congratulate ourselves on protecting our national treasures while an hour's flight north of Banff are the Athabaska tar sands. In this, our nineteenth-century predecessors were at least a bit more honest.

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