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## Perspectives

How to cite:

MacEachern, Alan. "A Little Essay on Big: Towards a History of Canada's Size." In: "Big Country, Big Issues: Canada's Environment, Culture, and History," edited by Nadine Klopfer and Christof Mauch, *RCC Perspectives* 2011, no. 4, 6–15.

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Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN 2190-8087

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## A Little Essay on Big: Towards a History of Canada's Size

Alan MacEachern

Beaver and Justin Bieber notwithstanding, Canada is best known for being big. It is the second largest nation on earth, almost ten million square kilometers, stretching across six time zones, eighty-eight degrees of longitude and forty-two degrees of latitude. And yet despite a long national tradition of historical geography and a developing one in environmental history, there is no literature on Canada's size. While there are certainly books that consider how Canadians have thought about and been shaped by the surrounding wilds, the frontier, or, more prevalent still, the North, I can think of not a single historical work that focuses directly on Canada's size. What have Canadians thought about living in a big country? How has that size informed the nation's development?

Perhaps our nation's scholars thought it bad form to draw attention to size. Canada covers 6.7 percent of the Earth's land area, yet is in the possession of just 34 million people, 0.5 percent of humanity. It is this discrepancy that makes Canadians among the wealthiest people in the world. Canada contains a vast array of globally valued resources, from oil to potash, from iron ore to diamonds. Much of Canada may be muskeg and tundra, but its sheer size means that it also has an immense amount of farmland; only fourteen nations have more. Canada's huge freshwater bodies help give its people the best water-poverty ranking on the planet and ten times the per capita water supply of the average human. In 2011, the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development ranked Canada second in the world on its Better Life index.<sup>1</sup> Canada's great good fortune was that its borders swelled and were set during centuries that saw the ascension of the nation state, so that it was able to establish legitimacy over this vast territory and yet saw no other nation state fully grasp the value of such holdings or be in a position to appropriate them. It is perhaps not surprising that Canadians have made national slogans of foreigners' inability to gauge our value, such as explorer Jacques Cartier's dismissal of Labrador (and so, in memory, of all

I wish to thank Claire E. Campbell, Colin Coates, and Jeannie Prinsen for their valuable comments on a draft of this essay.

1 See United Nations Development Programme, et al., *World Resources 2008: Routes of Resilience* 15 and 9, [http://pdf.wri.org/world\\_resources\\_2008\\_roots\\_of\\_resilience\\_tables.pdf](http://pdf.wri.org/world_resources_2008_roots_of_resilience_tables.pdf), accessed 25 July 2011; OECD Better Life Initiative, accessed 25 July 2011, <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org>; and "Pursuit of Happiness: Canada Scores High on OECD Index," *Globe and Mail*, 24 May 2011.

present-day Canada) as “the land God gave to Cain” or Voltaire’s quip that Canada was but “a few acres of snow.” There is more than a hint of self-satisfaction in our self-deprecation; living well is the best revenge.

It may be argued that size has, in fact, been a constant theme, if not an outright fixation, of Canadian scholarship and thought. Countless writers have argued that our relationship to the country’s vast spaces has been foundational to our national character. Northrop Frye, for example, argued that Canadians developed a “garrison mentality” as a result of being “confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting.”<sup>2</sup> Margaret Atwood identified Canadians’ informing symbol as “survival,” initially against an alien and inhospitable environment and, now that the wild has been largely tamed, against an existential angst for which the environment remains a potent metaphor.<sup>3</sup> Historian J. M. S. Careless contrasted the American frontier model with a Canadian one that focused on the constant interconnection between the metropolitan and the hinterland.<sup>4</sup> In comparing Canadian society to the wilds beyond, most writers have found in the difference something that paradoxically binds us together. “This alternate penetration of the wilderness and return to civilization,” wrote historian W. L. Morton, “is the basic rhythm of Canadian life, and forms the basic elements of Canadian character.”<sup>5</sup>

But there are real cracks in such formulations, not least the fact that most Canadians no longer experience wilderness regularly, if they ever did. Nine of our ten national parks north of fifty-five degrees latitude which, because of their obligatory visitor services, are some of the most domesticated places in the northern three quarters of the nation—had a combined attendance of less than four thousand people in 2010-11, for instance.<sup>6</sup> (The point is not so much that most Canadians do not see most of Canada, it is that most of Canada is seen by hardly anyone.) More problematically, the gaze that

2 Northrop Frye, “Conclusion to *A Literary History of Canada*,” in *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1971), 225.

3 Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2004, first published in 1972 by Anansi), esp. 40-2.

4 J. M. S. Careless, “Frontierism, Metropolitanism, and Canadian History,” *Canadian Historical Review* 35, no.1 (March 1954): 1-21. This conceptualization has informed the field of urban environmental history, most notably William Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).

5 W. L. Morton, *The Canadian Identity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), 5.

6 The tenth, situated near the territorial capital of Whitehorse, had an attendance of almost fifty thousand. See “Attendance 2006-07 to 2010-11: National Parks, Park Reserves, & Marine Conservation Areas,” Parks Canada, last modified 19 July 2011, accessed 25 July 2011, <http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/docs/pc/attend/tab-le3.aspx>. There are, in fact, a few other northern national parks, but with no attendance listed.

identifies Canada's vast spaces as alien while simultaneously assigning them to us is profoundly colonial: not just we but the spaces also become defined as naturally and necessarily Canadian in the process. And because the gaze looks outward to the wild, it lets us define Canada without taking into consideration the land that we actually live on, the ground beneath our feet. Perhaps that is why so much writing about the relationship between nature and national identity in Canada has focused on the North, a relative term that ultimately just means anywhere north of where we are.<sup>7</sup>

A map of the nation's ecumene, or inhabited space, serves as a useful palate cleanser when considering Canada's size. This suggestion may seem counterintuitive, since the ecumene solidifies the distinction between well-populated and less-populated regions, but it does so in a way that moves their relationship beyond simple abstraction. The federal agency Statistics Canada on its maps typically ignores areas with a population of less than 0.4 persons per square kilometer—much lower than the national density of 3.5 persons per square kilometer, itself one of the lowest densities in the world—so as not to visually skew the significance of sparsely settled areas. The resulting “ungeneralized population ecumene” (Figure 1) presents a populated Canada that largely hugs the American border, with only a northern rise into the prairie provinces and a few pockets of “northern”—or, more accurately, south-central to central—British Columbia, Quebec, and Ontario. The map confirms Canadians' connections to the wilderness or to the North only to the degree that it suggests these places begin in our backyard and continue to the Pole. The map's obvious reminder is that the Canada of people is much, much smaller than the Canada of land: the long, thin ecumene is the shape of Chile and, at just over one million square kilometers, about the size of Colombia.<sup>8</sup> A history of Canada's size would contemplate how this small, relatively localized population came to have possession of a much larger land area, and how they came to think it natural that they had done so.

What might a history of Canada's size look like? Mine would begin before European contact, utilizing the archaeological record to help discern the “aboriginal ecumene:”

7 See, for example, Sherrill Grace, *Canada and the Idea of North* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001) and Renée Hulan, *Northern Experience and the Myths of Canadian Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002). If I can get autobiographical for a moment, an old girlfriend from Timmins (latitude: 48°) heaped considerable scorn on Neil Young for singing “There is a town in north Ontario” about Omemeé (latitude: 44°).

8 Although Colombia has its own, smaller ecumene, of course.



Figure 1:  
"Canadian ungeneralized population ecumene," adapted from Statistics Canada publication *The Population Ecumene of Canada: Exploring the Past and Present*, Catalogue 92F0138MIE, Issue 2008003, Census Year 2006, No. 3, page 24, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/bsolc/olc-cel/olc-cel?catno=92F0138MIE&lang=eng>.

that is, which parts of present-day Canada were populated extensively by the First Nations, which parts occasionally, and which parts not at all? The point would be to open up honest discussion of past land use and conceptions of territoriality, not in any way to question or undermine present-day native claims. After all, a standard estimate puts the population of northern North America in 1500 at one million of a global population of 450 million, or just over 0.2 percent, whereas five centuries on, it is 34 million of a global population of 7,000 million, or just under 0.5 percent. While this shows an increased occupation of Canada since European contact, the rise is hardly extravagant—and it begs the question, of course, as to what population level is required to make sovereignty legitimate. Since Canada's population is still so small in global terms, one could argue that we still have not reached that point today.

My history would then turn to early European conceptions of Canada. It would consider early maps such as Juan de la Cosa's of circa 1500 or James Beare's of 1578, which saw this newfound land as either just a protuberance of China or a manageable obstruction on the way to it. It would treat the growing recognition by European explorers, missionaries, settlers, and soldiers of the place's size and what that meant to the colonial project. In their *Relations*, seventeenth-century Jesuits, for example, had to somehow convey to their French readers what a 1,200 kilometer canoe trip from Quebec to Huronia entailed. Likewise, in the early 1700s, fur trader and explorer Sieur de la Vérendrye had to overcome not only the physical reality of the continent when searching out a "great Western Sea" beyond Lake Superior, and the skepticism within the French court that his westward trek could possibly be so long that it required all the men and supplies he requested—he also had to adjust to the entirely foreign sense of space of the aboriginals he met, such as those who chose not to trade with him because they were content to go to the English fort "only" twenty days' journey away.

The key series of moments in this history would be the periodic territorial expansions that have occurred over the past two-and-a-half centuries, making Canada's boundaries what they are today. Was there only a dawning general realization of expansion's great value, even when there were no immediate plans for the land, or were there always a few forward-looking folks who took quiet delight as the boundaries of this political jurisdiction grew larger and larger? My history students are invariably insulted to learn that Britain, having taken Quebec in 1759, considered giving it back to France in the ensuing peace, so as to retain Guadeloupe. But why not? New France had become a twenty-million-livre per year drain on the French economy, whereas the sugar islands accounted for half of all French imports. Size was not everything at a time when a land's resources were valuable only to the degree that they could be transported efficiently, which tended to mean by water. (Even as great an explorer as Samuel Hearne, who in 1792 reached the Coppermine River and followed it to the Arctic Ocean, ended his report by shrugging: "Though my discoveries are not likely to prove of any material advantage to the Nation at large, or indeed to the Hudson's Bay Company, yet I have the pleasure to think that I have fully complied with the orders of my Masters.")<sup>9</sup> Still, tracing a history of Canada's size would mean keeping an eye out

9 Samuel Hearne, *A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1911, first published in 1795 by A. Strathan & T. Cadell), 295.

for visionaries, those who in judging its value weighed the possibilities of riches that might become known or more accessible in the future.

“The age of guessing is passed away,” declared surveyor David Thompson early in the nineteenth century, his statement simultaneously recognizing the need for a more comprehensive geographical understanding of northern North America and indicating that such an understanding was well underway.<sup>10</sup> The Hudson’s Bay Company, in particular, was fanning through the North and West, mapping and measuring it and in 1822 taking the first comprehensive survey of the First Nations who lived there. Canada’s great size—and all the barriers it imposed, all the opportunities it offered—was becoming more firmly known. When Alexander Mackenzie became the first person to reach the Pacific Ocean from the Atlantic, he practically rubbed his hands in glee, proclaiming that besides the prospect of controlling the fur trade of the entire continent, “to this might be added the fishing in both seas and the markets of the four quarters of the globe.”<sup>11</sup>

With greater understanding and appreciation of the size of northern North America came an associated insistence that its distant corners should be clearly joined to British North America and, as of 1867, to Canada. The 1840s to the 1870s saw the rapid consolidation and articulation of a globally unprecedented amount of land under the control of a single nation state; that it was a new nation with a population of just 3.5 million at Confederation makes the occurrence all the more phenomenal. These three key decades saw the resolution of the international boundary with the United States in 1846, the 1858 creation of British Columbia as a colony on the Pacific coast, the creation of Canada out of four older, eastern colonies in 1867, the 1868 purchase of Rupert’s Land and the North-Western Territory (at over 7.7 million square kilometers, an area slightly larger than Australia and a spectacular acquisition for a one-year-old nation), the integration of Manitoba, British Columbia, and Prince Edward Island as new provinces in Canada’s first few years, and Canada’s acceptance of Britain’s Arctic possessions in 1878 (as it would turn out, another one million square kilometers—another 1 percent of the globe), which were officially transferred two years later.

10 David Thompson quoted in *David Thompson’s Narrative 1784-1812*, ed. Richard Glover (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1962), 213.

11 Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans in 1789 and 1793*, Vol. 2 (Toronto: Morang, 1901), 358.

Three things about what motivated Canadian consolidation of territory in this period stand out. First, there was a strong sense that size would be Canada's quickest and likeliest path to international prominence, so there was virtue in accumulation for the sake of accumulation. As an Ontario politician said in 1857, it would be the taking and developing of the northwest that would determine "whether this country shall ultimately become a Petty State, or one of the Great Powers of the earth."<sup>12</sup> (This was rather high-handed, considering "this country" was not yet a country.) Second, Canadians had only a vague idea as to what these vast real estate holdings contained or of what benefit they might possibly be. And third, the land should nevertheless become Canadian if only so that it would stay out of American hands. All three features are evident, for example, in the 1878 parliamentary discussion of whether to ask Britain to formally turn over her Arctic lands once and for all. When an independent member spoke against the transfer on the grounds that it would force Canada to assume responsibility for a huge territory, the government majority offered precious little in the way of positive reasons why Canada might want the land. Instead, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald focused on the fact that Canada would look "faint-hearted" if it did not take it: "It would be unworthy of us ... were we to throw away this charge." Most critically for Macdonald, "an American was said to have boasted on the natural limits of the United States, that it was bound by Cape Horn, and the Aurora Borealis; we must cut them out of that, we must extend our territory to that bright luminary."<sup>13</sup> The motion passed. In 1885, author Charles Tuttle would look back on the previous decades and conclude, "the narrow, little, rugged country on the margins of the St. Lawrence has extended its borders from Atlantic to Pacific, and to the Arctic Circle of the north. ... With these changes ... Canada is putting on the garments of preparation to enter the race of nations."<sup>14</sup> The phrasing is instructive: Canada was still only preparing to enter the race. Becoming one of the largest nations of the world was, quite literally, groundwork.

In the nineteenth century, the young country had shown itself to be a colonial power, scrambling to gain territory on the far fringes of the continent and using cultural, economic, and political rationales for doing so. At the start of the twentieth century, it turned its colonial impulse inward, developing its territories economically and, where feasible,

12 Quoted in Doug Owsam, *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West, 1856-1900*, vol. 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980) 49.

13 See Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 3 May 1878, 2386-91.

14 Charles Tuttle, *Our North Land: Being a Full Account of the Canadian North-West and Hudson's Bay Route...* (Toronto: C. Blackett Robinson, 1885), 18.



elevating them to full provinces. When a flood of immigration to the prairies led to calls for provincial status there, Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier was compelled to articulate the difference between a province and a territory—and, by extension, between the ecumene and the rest of Canada. Noting that the territory under discussion was as large as the seven existing provinces combined, Laurier stated, “I believe that when provinces are not the result of historic tradition, when they have not come to us formed and when we have the control of events, it is preferable that the provinces should be as near as possible about the same size. Therefore, it is impossible to suppose that this immense territory of 1,112,527 [square] miles should be formed into one single province.”<sup>15</sup> Of course, neither he nor any other Canadian has ever suggested that Canada is too immense to be a single country. The Laurier government ultimately chose to create two new Prairie provinces, Alberta and Saskatchewan, which stretched all the way to 60° latitude and later to extend Manitoba’s, Ontario’s, and Quebec’s northern boundaries, too—thus giving to many of the provinces the same benefit of a huge hinterland that the overall nation enjoyed.

With the exception of some Newfoundlanders, who joined Confederation in 1949, no Canadian alive today has lived through Canada’s growing pains. The federal government has had to fight over the past century to preserve national sovereignty, episodically in terms of Pacific and Atlantic fisheries and continuously in terms of the far North—and the Quebecois and First Nations have long reminded us that the idea of a single Canadian “nation” is far from clear cut—but in the main Canada’s physical structure has remained intact. More than that, our size now seems utterly natural, a given. I remember as a child thinking how perfect it was for calendar makers that Canada had ten provinces and two territories. Everyone gets a month! How did other countries do it? (The establishment of Nunavut as a third territory in 1999 has not led to a constitutional/ calendrical crisis: there is usually a separate picture on the cover.) A history of Canada’s size—besides providing a useful case study of early modern and modern attitudes toward the unknown, toward property, and toward the structuring and cohesion of nation states—could simply go a small way to reminding Canadians how unusual, how lucky, and even how globally inequitable our national path has been.

During the 1905 parliamentary discussion about creating new prairie provinces, Prime Minister Laurier noted it had been said “that as the nineteenth century had been the century of the United States, so the twentieth century would be the century of

15 Wilfrid Laurier in Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 21 February 1905, 1426.

Canada.”<sup>16</sup> As prosperous as this past century was for Canada, it could hardly be called ours. But in retrospect, the earlier centuries of remarkable, unobtrusive growth may be one of two principal factors making the twenty-first century ours. The other is climate change. The US National Intelligence Council, for example, has dubbed Canada a likely “Climate Change Winner.” Agricultural growing seasons will lengthen and crop yields will rise; northern resources such as tar sands and gas hydrates will come online; the Arctic Ocean and Hudson Bay will open up more for shipping; the boreal forest and other vegetation will move north.<sup>17</sup> The picture is not really so rosy, of course: thawing permafrost will hugely disrupt road and runway infrastructure; agriculture will experience more pests and disease; drought and fire will eat away at forests; some populated areas will receive dramatically less moisture.<sup>18</sup> The Canadian ecumene will likely stay much as it is. Agriculture will not suddenly move north onto the Canadian Shield, for example, because it is hard to farm on rock. And our populated places are well established along the southern border. Nevertheless, climate change is on balance predicted to have somewhat less of a cataclysmic impact on Canada than it will have on many other nations (which may not be saying much).

If such a future does come about, it is difficult to imagine other nations not being profoundly bitter about Canada’s good fortune: such a small, wealthy population holding such a large, wealthy corner of the globe. But it is equally hard to imagine that opinion ultimately mattering much: the nation state system is far too well entrenched—too convenient a delivery system for property law, resource extraction, and international trade—for the fortunes of a single nation to call the legitimacy of that system into question. Still, it would be nice if Canadians recognized the degree to which our prosperity is not a timeless entitlement but a historical accident. Canada cannot give away our territory, of course, if for no other reason than the First Nations would insist it is not fully ours to do so. The best we can do is ensure we are stewards of this place, that we treat its environmental and economic value in a manner that is enduring and belonging to the world. The map of Canada’s ecumene should ultimately teach us to act, in the best sense of the word, ecumenically.

16 Ibid, 1421. The original quote is actually always attributed to him, but in a 1904 speech.

17 US National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 2008). Russia is the council’s other listed “winner.” Laurence C. Smith (*The World in 2050: Four Forces Shaping Civilization’s Northern Future* (New York: Dutton, 2010)) is also very bullish on a Canadian future during climate change.

18 See Natural Resources Canada, *Climate Change Impacts and Adaptations: A Canadian Perspective* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2004) [http://adaptation.nrcan.gc.ca/perspective\\_e.asp](http://adaptation.nrcan.gc.ca/perspective_e.asp) and Donald Stanley Lemmen et al., eds. *From Impacts to Adaptation: Canada in a Changing Climate 2007* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2008). <http://adaptation2007.nrcan.gc.ca>.

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