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Notes from the Icehouse



Ecotone Scholarship and Structural Change

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In spring 2011, environmental historians and historical geographers gathered in southern Ontario. Their meeting was organised by the Network in Canadian History and Environment (NiCHE) to discuss the current state and anticipated development of historical scholarship that takes nonhuman nature seriously. Most attendees were researchers focused on the environmental histories of what is now widely known as Canada, though some worked on other areas of the globe. Over a few days, participants reflected on the characteristics of Canadian environmental history and that field's relation to international environmental history. They also considered the influence of Canadian environmental history on government policy-making, a question many regarded as central to effecting real-world change. By all accounts, the meeting was stimulating and productive.¹

¹ 'EHTV Episode 01: EH Plus', NiCHE, Network in Canadian History and

I was recently asked to speak about the road ahead for Canadian environmental history, and I began my preparations with materials from the 2011 meeting.² In the years since, many participants have taken their scholarship in productive new directions, though job market constriction has obliged some valued colleagues to move outside academia. Over the past decade, environmental historians in Canada have developed important new bodies of work on themes like toxins and energy, and they have advanced our understanding of topics of longstanding interest, such as parks and infrastructure.³ Productive connections between Canadian environmental history and the global field have benefited Canadian scholarship by linking it to broader histories.⁴ But ten years on from a meeting that focused substantially on policy-making, there is little explicit concern for this topic in recent literature.

Reasons for this silence lie in our collective preoccupation with

Environment/ Nouvelle initiative Canadienne en histoire de l'environnement, updated 26 May 2011, <https://niche-canada.org/2011/05/26/ehtv-episode-01-eh-plus/>; 'Nature's Past Episode 23: The Next Chapter of Canadian Environmental History', NiCHE, Network in Canadian History and Environment/ Nouvelle initiative Canadienne en histoire de l'environnement, updated 26 May 2011, <https://niche-canada.org/2011/05/26/natures-past-episode-23-the-next-chapter-of-canadian-environmental-history/>

² 'What's Next for Canadian Environmental History: A Live Podcast Event', Youtube, updated 16 April 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6fwMa6AheNM&ab_channel=Nature%27sPast%3ACanadianEnvironmentalHistoryPodcast

³ Jessica Van Horssen, *A Town Called Asbestos: Environmental Contamination, Health, and Resilience in a Resource Community*, Nature/History/Society, ed. Graeme Wynn (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016); R.W. Sandwell (ed.), *Powering Up Canada: The History of Power, Fuel, and Energy from 1600*, Rural, Wildland, and Resource Studies Series, eds Colin A.M. Duncan, James Murton, and R.W. Sandwell (McGill-Queen's Press, 2016); Claire Campbell (ed.), *A Century of Parks Canada, 1911–2011*, Canadian History and Environment, ed. Alan MacEachern (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2011); Sean Kheraj, 'A history of oil spills on long-distance pipelines in Canada', *Canadian Historical Review* 101 (2) (2020): 161–191, DOI: 10.3138/chr.2019-0005

⁴ Joshua MacFadyen, *Flax Americana: A History of the Fibre and Oil that Covered a Continent*, Rural, Wildland, and Resource Studies Series, eds Colin A.M. Duncan, James Murton, and R.W. Sandwell (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018).

the urgent largescale crises of the contemporary moment: a global pandemic laying bare health inequities at scales ranging from the local to the global; the ongoing deadly operation of racism and colonialism even amid increasing calls for rapid and meaningful change; and an accelerating climate crisis disproportionately affecting people already disadvantaged and disempowered. Like many people, I'm concerned about the constellation of social structures and economic systems that define and connect these ongoing disasters. Striving to effect policy change at local or even national levels seems wholly inadequate to the global scale of our most pressing crises.

Canadian environmental history reflects these circumstances. Canadian scholars working at the intersection of history and environment have paid less attention to the specifics of policy in order to more fully encompass the social structures that environmental policies reflect and maintain. This is a significant shift. It bears on how we do our work, how we communicate our findings, and how we pursue the real-world change we continue to seek.

Some of the most innovative work in Canadian environmental history has come from scholars who straddle two or more fields. Any environmental historian familiar with the concept of the ecotone – the diverse transitional area between ecological communities – may not be surprised that scholars oriented toward multiple fields produce particularly rich studies. Recent examples of ecotone scholarship in Canadian environmental history include works that attend not only to environment but also to health and contamination, to science and technology, and to colonialism and Indigenous peoples' experiences. Scholarship at the intersection of Indigenous peoples' histories and environmental history has been the most significant in re-orienting Canadian environmental history toward deliberate engagement with social structures including settler colonialism.

In *Dammed: The Politics of Loss and Survival in Anishinaabe Territory*, historian Brittany Luby offers a powerful example of such scholarship, focusing on the effects of hydroelectric infrastructure on the Niisaachewan Anishinaabe Nation, located along the Winnipeg River system in what's now widely known as northern Ontario. Writing of her ancestors and family, Luby records how the envi-

ronmental changes brought about by dam construction negatively affected household economies reliant on water resources including fish and manomin (also known as wild rice). The book is methodologically innovative, shaped by practices and concepts that reflect Luby's positioning as an Anishinaabe woman and scholar, including a commitment to learning from non-human beings.⁵ The book is also politically oriented, expressly designed to contribute to ongoing efforts at seeking redress. This is evident in the book's foreword by Chief Lorraine Cobiness, elected leader of Niisaachewan Anishinaabe Nation, who connects the ongoing injustices bearing on her community to the continued operation of the *Indian Act*. Passed in 1876, this oppressive federal legislation continues to mediate relations between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state. Cobiness vows to pursue more satisfactory arrangements for the nation she represents; in effect, she commits to disrupt the ongoing operation of settler colonialism in Anishinaabe territory.

Luby's book targets the structure of settler colonialism. Through compelling historical narrative, it establishes the necessity of challenging the prevailing arrangements, typically established by government and capital operating in tandem, by which some Canadians, largely urban settlers, continue to benefit from processes such as hydropower generation that harm Indigenous peoples and communities. As Luby puts it in the final pages of her book, these arrangements generate a 'burden of responsibility' that must be addressed by those who benefit from ongoing colonialism.⁶ As I read the works of ecotone scholars such as Lianne Leddy and Daniel Rück and John Sandlos and Arn Keeling, Canada's environmental historians are increasingly prepared to grapple with Luby's insights.⁷ Today we are a field better equipped

⁵ Brittany Luby, *Dammed: The Politics of Loss and Survival in Anishinaabe Territory* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), p. 14.

⁶ Luby, *Dammed*, p. 172.

⁷ Lianne C. Leddy 'Intersections of Indigenous and environmental history in Canada', *Canadian Historical Review* 98 (1) (2017): 83–95, DOI: 10.3138/chr.98.1.Leddy; Daniel Rück, 'Commons, enclosure, and resistance in Kahnawá:ke Mohawk Territory, 1850–1900', *Canadian Historical Review* 95 (3) (2014), DOI: 10.3138/chr.2556; Arn Keeling and John Sandlos (eds), *Mining and Communities*

to locate environmental policies in larger social structures, to think hard about the relation between the two, and to recognise that failing to foreground this relation might risk shoring up the structures that perpetuate the interlinked ills of the present moment.

Increasing numbers of Canadian historians, even those whose core scholarly concerns lie beyond environmental history, recognise that understanding the operation of settler colonialism means attending to its environmental manifestations. Historian Adele Perry began her presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association with her research into the infrastructure projects that provided fresh water to the City of Winnipeg even as they profoundly disadvantaged the Anishinaabe community of Shoal Lake 40 First Nation. 'How are histories of colonialism shaped by water', Perry asked, 'and vice versa?'⁸ Environmental historians attuned to the diverse waterscapes of northern North America might be overwhelmed by the ramifications of this broad question, thinking of all the various ways rivers, lakes, sea-ways, ice, permafrost and rain have been implicated in and served to complicate ongoing processes of colonialism. But they are not likely to dispute the question's centrality. Perry points precisely to the kind of question that Canadian environmental historians seek to answer in wrestling with the relation between policy and structure.

Foregrounding the relation between policy and structure means reflecting on how we shape our studies. Here, insights from the fertile ecotone between environmental history and political ecology are helpful. According to Diana K. Davis, environmental historians 'conceive of their research chronologically' and political ecologists 'tend to be problem-oriented'.⁹ She argues that 'political ecology research

in Northern Canada: History, Politics, and Memory, Canadian History and Environment, ed. Alan MacEachern (Calgary: University of Calgary, 2015).

⁸ Adele Perry, 'Presidential Address. Starting with water: Canada, colonialism, and history at 2019', *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 30 (1) (2019): 19, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070629ar>

⁹ Diana K. Davis, 'Historical approaches to political ecology', in *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology* eds Tom Perreault, Gavin Bridge and James McCarthy (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 269.

should include critical historical analysis as a key component'.¹⁰ Conversely, perhaps historical research projects should target contemporary problems that reflect the ongoing operation of systems of oppression. Following Brittany Luby, scholars engaged in such projects might work to locate, with the exactness afforded by historical research, the contemporary burdens of responsibility that must be addressed.

Environmental historians might also consider how their findings serve to historicise situations and ideas of contemporary importance. Adele Perry's presidential address was based on her research for *Aqueduct: Colonialism, Resources, and the Histories We Remember*, a project she conceived as 'an intervention into a public conversation' around the water-defined relation between the City of Winnipeg and Shoal Lake 40 First Nation.¹¹ Diana K. Davis, in *The Arid Lands: History, Power, Knowledge*, makes clear how perceptions of arid lands as unproductive and degraded serve political ends that harm peoples and landscapes.¹² Relatively short and clearly written, both books present wide-ranging research and analysis in compelling fashion. They are models for ecotone scholarship aimed at the linked tasks of revealing the operation of oppressive structures and undergirding more responsible policy-making.

Environmental historians might also involve themselves directly in policy development in efforts to counter structures of oppression. Brittany Luby and collaborators have launched the Manomin Project, which aims to develop culturally appropriate crop management techniques to restore manomin in the territory of Niisaachewan Anishinaabe Nation.¹³ Building on Anishinaabe ecological knowledge

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 271.

¹¹ Perry, 'Starting with water', p. 9. Adele Perry, *Aqueduct: Colonialism, Resources, and the Histories We Remember* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2016).

¹² Diana K. Davis, *The Arid Lands: History, Knowledge, Power*, History for a Sustainable Future, eds Michael Egan, Benjamin R. Cohen, Adam Sowards and Peter Alagona (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016).

¹³ 'Manomin Research Project', NiCHE, Network in Canadian History and Environment/ Nouvelle initiative Canadienne en histoire de l'environnement, accessed 25 May 2021, <https://niche-canada.org/manomin/>; Gerald Wichers,

as well as scientific understandings, the project promises to counter colonialism through its outcomes and its methods. Writing for the Environmental Histories of the Future series on the NICHE blog, historian Kent Curtis recently suggested that targeted, real world actions (such as microfarms addressing racialised inequities in food access, in Curtis' current project) might provide compelling new avenues of research dissemination.¹⁴ Perhaps environmental management policy that directly engages structures of oppression could be understood similarly. Restored manomin stands might operate both as a counter to dam-wrought destruction in Anishinaabe territory and, to build on Perry's phrasing, as a contribution to a public conversation about disrupting the operation of settler colonialism.

I was unable to attend the 2011 conference in Canadian environmental history. I was then the mother of an infant and toddler as well as a postdoctoral fellow, and so I didn't apply to participate. Had I attended, I certainly would have been particularly eager to discuss questions of policy, as I hoped my historical work on water management might have policy applications. Some ten years on, I'm mothering two tweens who have grown and changed, and my scholarly goals have also shifted. At this point, I'm keen to read works by colleagues who deliberately locate the burdens of responsibility deriving from the ongoing operation of largescale structures of oppression, and I'm eager to think anew about the relation between policy change and systems change. I trust this will support my efforts to engage in productive conversations publicly, and also privately with my two growing girls, environmentalists and social justice advocates both, who are striving to understand what really matters.

'Manomin Project restoring "Wild rice"' *Manitoba Co-operator*, 16 Nov. 2020, <https://www.manitobacooperator.ca/farm-it-manitoba/manomin-project-restoring-wild-rice/>

¹⁴ Kent Curtis, 'Histories of the future: Urban microfarming as an elegant solution for a just and sustainable world', NiCHE, Network in Canadian History and Environment/ Nouvelle initiative Canadienne en histoire de l'environnement, updated 6 Apr. 2021, <https://niche-canada.org/2021/04/06/histories-of-the-future-urban-microfarming-as-an-elegant-solution-for-a-just-and-sustainable-world/>