

## Placing History

Claire Elizabeth Campbell, *Nature, Place, and Story: Rethinking Historic Sites in Canada*. McGill-Queen's UP, 2017. vii + 214 pp.

Canada is home to nearly 1000 federally designated historic sites. Claire Elizabeth Campbell's *Nature, Place, and Story* weaves a "braided narrative of natural history, culture, and political choices" by analyzing the ways in which these sites represent not just a "national story" but also a record of "occupying, transforming, and adapting to new environments and landscapes" (4). She begins and ends the book with brief personal anecdotes that connect this "braided narrative" to her own formative belief that "history is affected by *where* it happens" (3, emphasis added). This is the story that her book aims to tell: a story of history *in place* rather than one that merely celebrates the place of history in a national context. As an historian, she is a skillful storyteller in her own right, particularly when it comes to reviewing the varied histories of the individual sites she examines throughout the text. Campbell's obvious passion for her subject matter is readily adopted by the reader as well, in part because of the author's accessible, engaging writing style.

At just 131 pages (excluding the endnotes), the book is unexpectedly brief for a work of history. While this slimmness makes for an inviting read, the fact that the notes take up more than a third of the total volume results in a more cumbersome reading experience than necessary. This imbalance between text and endnotes aside, the book is thoroughly researched and convincing in its claims. It addresses a significant gap in scholarship on Canada's national historic sites: the only monograph on the subject (besides her own) is C.J. Taylor's *Negotiating the Past*, published nearly thirty years ago; other existing research, according to Campbell, rarely considers the relationship between public history and the environment (although her extensive note here offers a thorough survey of any work that comes close), despite the growing popularity of environmental history (11, 23). Campbell's study responds to both aspects of this disparity by bringing together what she calls the "two solitudes" of national heritage and the natural environment (8). In her view, Canada's national historic sites "remain profoundly anthropocentric," wherein "[t]he environment is generally framed as backdrop to heroic human endeavour, or raw material for human innovation" (8); in other words,

“[t]he land is acted upon, not actor, in the story of building a nation” (8). Yet as she rightly points out, “these sites were never the result *solely* of human ingenuity or effort. That effort was guided, sometimes encouraged, sometimes thwarted, by the environment in which people found themselves” (8).

Of course, the land as actor is a common feature in Canadian writing (whether as friend or foe), and so the relative lack of attention to environmental issues as they relate to Canada’s national historic sites may come as somewhat of a surprise to literary scholars. While Canadian literature and literary criticism “have long made relations between people and environments a topic of primary importance,” as the editors of *Greening the Maple* (2013) make clear (xv), the same cannot be said of Canadian public history, which faces political pressure to pit the land as either “a source of national identity” or “a national possession” (Campbell 17). For Campbell, it’s the relational aspect that’s missing here: heroizing or romanticizing the land becomes especially problematic because it allows us to dissociate the environment from both “imperial and industrial expansion” and “current economic activity” (9). Hence the driving argument for her book as a whole: that “the histories and issues at historic sites can be directly tied to current questions in environmental health and sustainability” (21). Although she never directly acknowledges Canadian ecocritical writing as an alternative means of approaching the crossroads of nature, place, and story, readers of *Canadian Poetry* will be interested to know that she does intermittently cite Canadian poets, from D.C. Scott to James Reaney to Douglas LePan (among others), as illustrative examples of the sorts of perspectives she seeks.

One of the biggest strengths of *Nature, Place, and Story* is its exploratory tone, as demonstrated by the series of research questions Campbell includes in her introduction (and throughout the text). Her willingness to ask worthy questions lends the book a sense of the possible not always found in historical analyses. This approach does mean that, within each individual chapter, her own original contributions are a long time coming, making them feel somewhat cursory (this is especially true of chapter 3, for example); however, the insights expressed by the end of the text more than make up for this chapter-level drawback. That the book as a whole ultimately fulfills her own threefold purpose – “to script alternative histories for well-known sites” focused on “people’s relationships with nature” (23); “to use history as a means of integration, spatially and temporally,” by examining “regional ecologies in a national framework”; and to envision the specific sites she examines “not as

islands of history but as part of a larger habitat of our own making” (24) – testifies to the extent of her overall accomplishment.

Collectively offering good regional coverage and an admirable diversity of locales, each of the book’s five core chapters profiles a single historic site, moving from east to west across the country: L’Anse aux Meadows, Grand Pré, Fort William, the Forks of the Red River, and the Bar U Ranch. Her choice of these particular sites is driven, in part, by the fact that they are “among the most iconic of Canada’s historic places” and some of the “largest public history projects undertaken in Canada” (5); however, the sites are also well-suited to the *both/and* nature of her larger project, in that each one represents a fundamental component of Canada’s national history while also highlighting specific environmental realities (both historical and ongoing). Chapter 1, for instance, discusses the significance of L’Anse aux Meadows as Canada’s inaugural World Heritage Site and the “only confirmed site of Norse settlement in North America” (25), just as it showcases the lessons the site has to teach us about how “current environmental issues are rooted in past actions” (53). The sheer remoteness of this Newfoundland site (in both time and space) makes it seem removed from environmental realities, and yet Campbell reveals that it is (and always has been) enmeshed in them. She contends that the primary issues at stake here – climate change, resource extraction, and sustainability – inform the site’s past as much as its present (26) and so need to be acknowledged more directly from a public history perspective.

Campbell’s privileging of the vantage point afforded by environmental history as a lens that emphasizes both continuity and change shapes the book’s other chapters as well. In Chapter 2, she tackles the rural national historic district that is Nova Scotia’s Grand Pré, a site that not only memorializes Acadian displacement but one that is also publicly celebrated for both its ingenuity as an example of “early European coastal land management” and its proud “living tradition of agricultural practice”; her problem with this framing is that it “permits and even encourages us to vault over the intervening era of industrial agriculture” that helped to shape the region as a whole (54). Because it “perpetuates a rural idyll, an image of place that has migrated easily from an older romantic nostalgia to the newer language of environmental and community sustainability” (54), the site has become “iconic as non-industrial,” all the while participating in a “global industrial economy” (55). Frequently touted as a clear iteration of the “profitable pastoral” (63), Grand Pré functions as an example of the “idealized, singular

periodization” (69) that is not uncommon in Atlantic Canada writ large. This messaging has been good for various stakeholders, notes Campbell, but it is also misleading in that it isolates the site from the “larger economic and ecological life” of the Annapolis Valley in which it sits (68). Her aim with chapter 2 is to consider the dangers at stake here by acknowledging the “continuity of the *industrial* past” (55, emphasis added) and the role of “environmental change” in the region’s development (56). She thus encourages readers to view the site in “*relational terms*” rather than nostalgic ones (70).

The book’s remaining chapters offer variations on this pattern of critique and reassessment. Chapter 3, for example, relays how Ontario’s Fort William Historical Park has “assumed a fixed and imagined wilderness in the public mind” (90), with little consideration of the larger surrounding environment. As Campbell describes them, the problems associated with this particular heritage project – “the largest reconstructed fur trade post and one of the most complete representations of fur trade life in the world” (71) – stem from a complex blend of privatization, relocation, authenticity, and profitability. Chapter 4 similarly engages with the intersection of commercial enterprise and public history by analyzing the Forks of the Red River as Manitoba’s “most visited attraction” (93) and the only “urban reclamation” project discussed in the book (92). More than the other historic sites she examines, Campbell deems the Forks to be a “hopeful” space (108), not least because the vision for this site was twofold from the beginning: it was to function as “an entry to a river park” and “an urban attraction” at the same time (97). Indeed, in the years after the site first opened (1989-1995), it was associated with a “public message of environmental history and environmental engagement” (105). Although the promise of such environmental citizenship has since been lost (or never fully realized in the first place), the site has, in Campbell’s view, successfully made “a significant portion of an urban waterfront accessible and enjoyable,” as well as “useful” (108), thus combining “recreation and conservation” (97) in an encouraging way.

It is no coincidence that Campbell’s most successful chapter is her last, given that, of the five national historic sites under discussion, Alberta’s Bar U Ranch “holds the most ambitious, and controversial, environmental story, and the one that reveals the most about ourselves as a country” (109). This is also the chapter in which her message is argued most convincingly. Not unlike the other sites in the book, the Bar U Ranch has been publicly presented as both wilderness and garden, but as

is the case throughout her earlier chapters, she contends in chapter 5 that this portrait is “not entirely accurate” because the site is also industrial in significant ways (110). “The industrial features of nineteenth-century ranching,” writes Campbell, “were almost immediately obscured by a popular nostalgia for the mythical free range” (116). Although the site ultimately testifies to the “weaknesses of a resource economy” and so acts as a “cautionary tale for the Canadian economy as a whole” (115), it has persistently been characterized in romantic terms (116). Even more troubling for Campbell is the fact that this site actually represents “a story of corporate success and longevity” (119); it was only available for official designation in the first place, she explains, “because it had weathered (literally) meteorological and market shocks more successfully than the other large ranches” in the region (119). The tension that exists at Bar U is that, even though it serves as an example of industrial success in many ways, the site itself does not exhibit “a landscape of industrial modernity” but rather “allows us to *escape* the environmental costs of such an economy” (122). In Campbell’s estimation, this tension has only been exacerbated by Alberta’s modern resource economy and its accompanying growth. She argues, for example, that celebrating national parks and historic sites while simultaneously ignoring the oil sands is a hypocritical stance, because the two are “products of the same national trajectory” (126). Her broader concern “is that the Bar U and places like it act as an alibi for our unsustainable, extractive national economy” instead of informing “how we approach our resource frontiers” going forward (126).

Campbell’s conclusion comes full circle by re-emphasizing the centrality of place to Canada’s historic sites. While the book makes a strong case for the idea that natural landscapes and human interventions cannot be separated, its author reminds us that national historic sites have not done a good job of acknowledging this truth. Given the “enormous amount of environmental knowledge contained in these places: stories of hubris, adaptation, failure, exchange, [and] resilience,” she maintains that we must learn to “read nation building through an environmental lens” (128) as a means of challenging the ways in which Canada’s national historic sites have been (and continue to be) selected and celebrated. To her mind, environmental history brings important (if as yet unheeded) contributions to public heritage projects, because it requires us to better contextualize historic sites in order to see them as “analogies to some of our current dilemmas” (129). In this way, historic sites not only “explain the making of a Canadian habitat,” including the “making of a national

imagination,” but they also speak to the “transformative effect of that imagination on the land it claimed as territory” in the first place (129). Her final recommendation is a simple one: that environmental policy and planning in Canada must deliberately look to the past and not just the present or future; for her, national historic sites such as the ones she analyzes in *Nature, Place, and Story* offer a meaningful way to do just that (131).

## Works Cited

Soper, Ella, and Nicholas Bradley, editors. *Greening the Maple: Canadian Ecocriticism in Context*. U of Calgary P, 2013 Energy, Ecology, and the Environment.

Brooke Pratt