

Time and A Place: An Environmental History of Prince Edward Island

Edited by Edward MacDonald, Joshua MacFayden, and Irene Novaczek. 2016. McGill-Queen's University Press, 1010 Sherbrooke West, Suite 1720, Montreal, QC, Canada, H3A 2R7 / Douglas Library Building, 93 University Avenue, Kingston, ON, Canada K7L 5C4, and Island Studies Press, Room 204, Main Building at UPEI, 550 University Avenue, Charlottetown, PEI, Canada, C1A 4P3. 442 pages, 34.95 CAD, Paper.

Time and A Place enjoys the dual distinction of being the first environmental history of Prince Edward Island (PEI) and, indeed, "Canada's first provincial environmental history" (p. 10). PEI is unique in several ways among Canada's provinces and territories, in addition to being the only island. It is Canada's smallest province, at once its "most densely populated" (p. 7), lowest in absolute population numbers, and most rural, with about 53% of its people living in the country; its geology differs from that of the rest of Canada, built

as it is on sandstone-covered ancient silt; and its human past dates from its emergence as a land mass 5000 years ago. Thus, its environment has been shaped and reshaped by human actions for millennia. As the editors explain in their helpful introduction, environmental history is about environments, not nature, for these millennia of human activity have left "little that resembles wilderness or untouched nature on Prince Edward Island" (p. 7). Are field naturalists able to play a role in

understanding this place, and receive benefits from the attempt?

Environmental history is a relatively new field in the broader discipline of Canadian history. Doing environmental history requires drawing contexts from several disciplines, such as bioregionalism, natural history, ecology, and nissology, the study of islands. This book flowed from the *Time and A Place* conference that did just that, drawing some “60 local, national, and international participants” to UPEI’s L. M. Montgomery Institute on June 13–18, 2010 [<http://www.lmmontgomery.ca/content/2010-time-and-place-conference-june-13-18>]. The papers gathered here are more than conference proceedings, however, having been expanded for this book, a recent addition to the McGill-Queen’s Rural, Wildland, and Resource Studies Series.

Time and A Place is an ambitious work: it attempts to cover all aspects of the environmental history of PEI, from its geological formation to the several phases of use and occupation by Aboriginal peoples, already present in the Maritime region for 13 millennia, to the impacts flowing from the relatively late settlement by European peoples after 1720. The book opens with an introduction providing theoretical context and overviews of the 11 main chapters, organized in three sections. It concludes with a thoughtful epilogue that brings out the themes of the book. An appendix lists two centuries of provincial legislation, primarily regulations relating to forestry, hunting, fishing, and agriculture from 1770–1970, a pre-conservation period characterized by protection of resources for continuing use. An extensive bibliography and notes on contributors round out the book. The black-and-white illustrations are not a strong point, unfortunately, the small maps in particular being generally difficult to decipher.

A theoretical framework for approaching the study of islands is provided in the two papers comprising the first section. The generally accepted view is that islands are simply chunks of land surrounded by water. Not so simple, asserts Gillis, as he introduces the concept of the ecotone, or boundary zone, that introduces us to islands as “terraqueous” areas (p. 35). The geographer Wynne expands on this in his critique of the notion that islands, being self-contained, are ideal museums or laboratories for research. To understand islands, one needs to study both land and water and how each, separately and together, shape an island’s history, economy, and culture.

The rest of the book demonstrates the point. The four chapters in Section II, Shaping Abegweit, focus on people and the environment; the five chapters in Section III examine development and the environment. The distinction is impossibly neat, of course, for people and development figure in most chapters.

Archaeologists Keenleyside and Kristmanson begin the analysis of people and the environment by recounting the long arc of Aboriginal use and occupation of the Island over some 5000 years. The difficulties inher-

ent in estimating pre-contact numbers of Aboriginal people mean it is also difficult to assess their imprint on the land, which appears to have been extensive yet sustainable. This shifted as the increasing numbers of European newcomers quickly disrupted the ancient balance (pp. 77–79). The European settlers came initially from France after 1720 and Britain some 50 years later, changing the Island landscape forever. As environmental biologist (and published CFN author) Sobey shows, forests provided them with resources at many levels, from personal to industrial. Early settlers were farmers and farming meant clearing forested lands. Two-thirds of the original forest cover had disappeared by 1900, 77% by 1910 (p. 107). Surprisingly, Sobey’s is the first attempt to provide a complete overview of the history of forest use on the Island (p. 82). While the need to conserve the forest was recognized as early as 1902 (p. 108), conservation for environmental reasons rather than as a guarantee of continuing use did not become a movement until much later, a topic demonstrated in the regulations contained in the appendix and informing the next chapter. Curley’s exploration of public attitudes toward wildlife and habitat.

As with several of the authors, biologist Curley begins with the long view, touching on Aboriginal resource use before quickly moving to the impacts of early settlers’ commercial exploitation of wildlife. These included the extinction of several species and the pollution and degradation of waterways through agricultural activities. Curley explores the slowly changing attitudes of citizens to these impacts and offers cautious hope that efforts such as the creation of parks and other protected areas, engagement through citizen science, and better-informed government action will make a positive difference. This chapter and Novaczek’s study of marine species, which covers similar themes, are perhaps of most interest to field naturalists. That said, the histories of land use help us understand that PEI nature is now couched in centuries of human activities. To understand it, having some appreciation of those histories is useful.

The third section shifts the focus to development, although people cannot be left out. Agriculture is analysed extensively in two papers that differ in approach and style. McFayden’s treatment of the 1869–1971 period attempts to critique if not dispel several of the ‘normal’ concepts of agriculture using a wide variety of sources, including social accounts. Bringing the discussion up to 2014, former provincial director of forestry Arseneault presents a fact-based account, heavily dependent on government studies and reports, that mixes in observations of failure to act with some notes of tentative progress and hope for the future.

But an island includes its waters, and MacDonald and Becke offer a fascinating account of the changing nature of Island fisheries. The focus shifts from species to species – mussels, oysters, lobster – but the human element is also changing, a result of continually advanc-

ing technologies and expanding market economies. Villages that coalesced along shorelines when all the work was muscle-powered disappeared under the effects of improved roads and transportation, industrial technologies, and the ability to reach far-away markets.

These changes contribute to new perceptions of the shoreline and nostalgia for a romanticized past. The historian MacEachern explores the resulting tension in his analysis of tourism guides, published annually by the PEI government for over 60 years. His study reveals shifting perceptions of both the beauty of nature and the nature of beauty, with resulting changes of emphasis and description of PEI's natural attributes, such as its forests, no longer wilderness as Sobey demonstrated, and its beaches, no longer sites of fisheries, now spots for tourists to enjoy.

I can vouch for the Island's beauty, having visited every summer for the past 25 years, but evidences of the modern industrial world are increasing everywhere. One omission from this discussion is the impact of the Confederation Bridge, a divisive issue for Islanders at the time that receives only occasional and passing reference. Perhaps it's simply too soon to assess its impact.

These industrial changes are not all negative; for example, reforestation is increasing, as elsewhere in the world, as farmland is abandoned. And, as Stuart notes in her optimistic look at energy, an island with no oil or capacity for hydro-electric production has had to learn early on to innovate if it wants to stay warm and get work done. Stuart asserts that this necessitates a ready, pragmatic acceptance of new energy technologies. The result is higher than average use of 'green power', firsts in Canada in such initiatives as household waste management, and experience with alternative energy sources such as wind power.

Evidence is accumulating that Islanders are generally, though not yet universally, coming around to the view that protection of the environment and its biodiversity is increasingly urgent and essential. As noted above, that biodiversity has been understudied, even compared to other Maritime provinces. It is here that field naturalists can no doubt make their greatest contributions. Hopefully, *Time and a Place* will inspire just such an outcome.

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