

## **Culturing Wilderness in Jasper National Park: Studies in Two Centuries of Human History in the Upper Athabasca River Watershed**

*Edited by I. MacLaren 2007. University of Alberta Press, Edmonton, Alberta. 356 pages. 45.00 CAD Paper.*

I was captivated by this book, starting with the cover – I’ve stood on that same spot on Tonquin Hill looking out over Amethyst Lakes and The Ramparts, near the Continental Divide in Jasper National Park (JNP). I patrolled Tonquin Valley as a park warden in 1986. This book would have been very useful when I worked as a park naturalist in JNP in the early 1980s, interpreting the history of the park to the public. The most recent historical treatise at that time was a limited circulation monograph by Brenda Gainer, which I still have, full of yellow highlights and annotations in the margins.

It’s hard to define the audience for this book. It is published by an academic press and has nearly 700 footnotes. There is lots of interesting information in the footnotes, but it is difficult to switch back-and-forth from the text to them. Incorporating more of the information into the text would have made it more accessible, but just the same, it flows smoothly enough to be of interest to a dedicated general interest reader.

Editor Ian MacLaren compiled essays by a number of authors that address the main history of the area now known as JNP — or at least that area encompassed by the Athabasca Valley. It is a major part of the park, and certainly the main east-west corridor through the mountains that people travelled, but it is much more influenced by humans than the rest of the park. The premise seems to be to challenge what the authors consider the dominant view of the park as “wilderness” – yet there are vast areas of the park that are wilderness away from the Athabasca Valley.

But the authors have done an admirable job of chronicling the major epochs of the history of the Athabasca Valley. Michael Payne starts with the fur trade in the early 1800s, which sets the stage for the claim that the valley was far from being wilderness by the time it was established as a national park in 1907 (that chapter alone has 99 footnotes). This is followed by Ian MacLaren’s examination of the travels of Henry James Warre and Paul Kane, who captured the essence of the fur trade era using paint and pencil. I recall using a Warre sketch as a cover illustration on a short historical chronology that I compiled for Parks Canada and the Jasper-Yellowhead Historical Society in the early 1980s. While many of their paintings were romanticised, both artists brought to life the triumphs and travails of the times. While there is a “partial toponymy” at the beginning of the book, a map of Western Canada showing some of the fur trading posts and routes, as well as the travels of Thompson, Warre and Kane, would have served readers well.

The third chapter, by Peter J. Murphy, traces the political manoeuvrings to establish the boundaries of

the national park, and the forest reserve that pre-dated the park. Few Canadians know that the Rocky Mountain national parks were once much larger than today, but that federal-provincial struggles meant that areas that had industrial potential (e.g., coal mining, forestry, hydro electric) were eventually excised from park protection. Fold-out maps help the reader to follow the convoluted boundary changes. The parks were initially established as forest reserves, predominantly to protect watersheds; interestingly, in a time of climate change we are once again realising that the mountains on the Continental Divide are the water towers of Western Canada.

Murphy follows that chapter with an interview with Edward Moberly, whose family ties in the Athabasca Valley extended from the fur trade in 1855 until the last of the Moberlys were evicted from the new Jasper Forest Park in 1909. Mr. Moberly’s vivid recollections add a very human touch to what can at times be dry reading.

The next four chapters address different aspects of tourism in the new park, from Mary Schäffer’s now-famous explorations and surveys of Maligne Lake to conversion of the public from packtrips to mass tourism by road and rail. While JNP is not as well known for mountaineering as its neighbouring parks to the south, it too attracted many eminent mountaineers and saw the shift from climbing expeditions led by Swiss guides to self-guided trips.

The final chapter is by Eric Higgs, a restoration ecologist who is now at the University of Victoria. Higgs argues that taking historical context into consideration is key to ecological restoration of the Athabasca Valley. Eric’s work in the area focussed on re-taking historical photographs from the exact same location and using these to interpret landscape change. Some of the differences are quite stunning, especially where forest now totally covers what were grasslands. The original photographer was Morrison Parsons Bridgland, a Dominion Land Surveyor, who had taken systematic photographs from peaks in the park. Higgs implies that the park did not know who the photographer was, but I vividly recall finding the small bound volumes of black-and-white photographs in 1981 in the park library, and knowing who the photographer was.

I recommend this book to anyone who has a serious interest in Jasper National Park and wants to understand more about the human history behind the wilderness curtain.

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