

Urban Explorations: Environmental Histories of the Toronto Region edited by L. Anders Sandberg, Stephen Bocking, Colin Coates and Ken Cruikshank

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Urban Explorations: Environmental Histories of the Toronto Region

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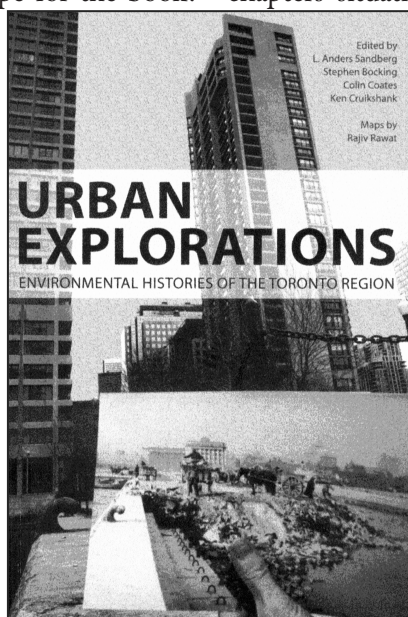
Hamilton: L.R. Wilson Institute for Canadian History, 2013. 356 pages. \$32.00 Paperback.
ISBN 978-1-92663-366-4 (www.bookstore.mcmaster.ca/)

The title “Urban Explorations” alludes to more than the content of this volume—it suggests its origins, purpose and organization. Each of the chapters was developed as a guide for individual field excursions in conjunction with the April 2013 annual meeting of the American Society for Environmental History held in Toronto. Given the potential value of this guide, one certainly can endorse the editors’ call for volumes such as this to accompany other major conferences and symposia.

The introductory essay “Environmental Histories of the Toronto Region” by the editors provides a relatively conventional outline of the scope for the book: defining environmental history in terms of the themes of the city and its surroundings and the impacts of the built on the natural environment. The common theme is the linking of each chapter’s focus on specific sites. The sixteen chapters are an eclectic group—not only in content, but also in the degree which they are actual “field guides” rather than narrative, although each chapter is accompanied by a map prepared by Ra-

jiv Rawat indicating key locations and (in some cases) routes. The body of the book is organized into six thematic sections: Exploring Downtown Landscapes, Exploring Hidden Landscapes, Exploring Animal and Food Landscapes, Exploring Service Landscapes, Exploring Manufactured Landscapes, and Exploring Aesthetic Landscapes. Readers would likely be drawn first to different chapters.

In the two chapters in “Exploring Downtown Landscapes” Jay Young provides a history of the development of downtown Toronto, and Richard White, of the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood. “Exploring Hidden Landscapes” provides chapters situating Indigenous peoples in the Humber watershed (Jon Johnson), an exploration of York University and its surrounding neighbourhoods (Anders Sandberg), and an exploration of sites tied to queer culture in the city (Peter Hobbs and Cate Sandilands). Sean Kheraj’s chapter “Exploring Animal and Food Landscapes” tracing the history of domestic animals in the city is paired with the chapter by Joel Fridman, Lauren Baker and Bronwyn Whyte which explores



the institutions and networks associated with Toronto's foodscape.

The chapters in "Exploring Service Landscapes" are the first to explicitly focus on the nature of technical, social and planning responses to environmental problems. Gene Desfor and Jennifer Bonnell trace the environmental history of the lower Don River and the adjacent Port Lands from the nineteenth century to current times. Michael McMahon's chapter traces the history of R.C. Harris Water Treatment Plant and the Ashbridge's Bay Wastewater Treatment Plant as industrial ecosystems. Perhaps peculiarly, two of the most explicitly biologically focussed chapters are included in the section entitled "Exploring Manufactured Landscapes." In the chapter by Jennifer Foster and Gail Fraser we learn of the changing dynamics of predators-prey relationships on the Leslie Street Spit. Ken Cruikshank and Nancy B. Bouchier provide an environmental history of the Great Lakes Area of Concern in Hamilton Harbour. The third chapter by Daniel Macfarlane focuses on the efforts over time to manage Niagara Falls for contradictory goals: providing an aesthetically pleasing "curtain of water" while drawing water away for power generation.

The section entitled "Exploring Aesthetic Landscapes" includes H.V. Nelles' chapter on the history of development on the Toronto Islands. Rebecca Dirnfeld traces Toronto's Allan Gardens as a cultural landscape. Anders Sandberg and Lisa Wallace take the reader on a field excursion tracing sites illustrating the intertwining of development and conservation issues from city to the Oak Ridges Moraine. Finally, Claire Campbell provides a narrative of sites of significance to the Group of Seven.

Each of the chapters is accompanied by a set of endnotes and a convenient set of suggested readings. It is enlightening to

review the references cited to see how each chapter is situated in relation to the various fields of knowledge concerning urban areas. Several chapters do not reference the literature of Environmental History; accordingly, if there is one quibble to be raised with the collection it is the subtitle's use of the term. In addition to the occasional questionable leaps in an effort to tie the narrative to the environment, such as stretching the Great Fire of 1904 into a "natural process" or conflating landscapes of gay and animal "undesirables" to make some sort of connection to the natural environment, some chapters do distort the common understanding of Environmental History to the point that one may ask if the field encompasses all and anything then does it cease to be discernible? There are chapters which are more narratives of aspects of the history of urbanism and of cultural landscapes than of any substantive connection to the "environment" as commonly understood (and as outlined in the editors' introductory essay). Whether a covert effort to redefine the field or a matter of an expedient assembling of a diverse set of papers under the convenient umbrella of the meeting, the result is perhaps a disservice to both potential reader and authors. Some readers might overlook the book, by assuming that it focuses only on environmental history, and miss the interesting chapters on the history of urban development and on social change in the Toronto region.

Urban Explorations is most readily available by order through the McMaster University Bookstore on a print-on-demand basis. The latter point does not reflect on the generally good production quality of the book.

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