

Shaped by the West Wind: Nature and History in Georgian Bay By Claire Elizabeth Campbell

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Book Reviews

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Shaped by the West Wind

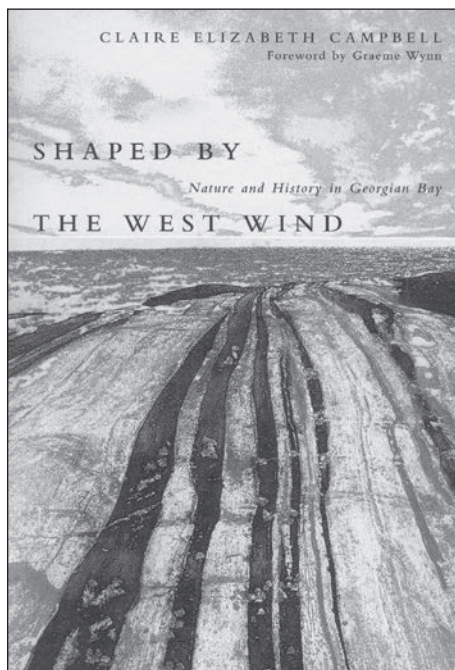
*Nature and History
in Georgian Bay*

Claire Elizabeth Campbell. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005. xx + 282 pp. \$85.00 hardcover, ISBN 0-7748-1098-X. \$29.95 softcover, ISBN 0-7748-1099-8.

The eastern shore of Georgian Bay and its Thirty Thousand Islands precludes easy navigation, intellectual or otherwise. I've only visited it once, but remember thinking, as our motorboat chugged past yet another nameless outcropping of rocks and trees, that this was not a place one travels through. There has to be a destination, and only the destination – the opportunity to know and perhaps own this land in miniature – explains the getting there. Claire Elizabeth Campbell's *Shaped by the West Wind* is a landscape study much like the landscape itself: extensive, challenging, and worthy of exploration for its fine details.

The launching of a Nature/History/Society series by UBC Press, with *Shaped*

- ◆ Shaped by the West Wind
- ◆ Contact Zones: Aboriginal and Settler Women in Canada's Colonial Past
- ◆ Ghost Empire: How the French Almost Conquered North America
- ◆ 4Square: An introduction to the Sharon Temple National Historic Site
- ◆ Le Saint-Laurent et les Grands Lacs au temps de la vapeur, 1850-1950
- ◆ English Bloods in the Backwoods of Muskoka, 1878
- ◆ Images of a Century: The City of Niagara Falls, Canada, 1904-2004
- ◆ Beautiful Barrie: The City and its People



by *the West Wind* its first title, signals the significant growth that environmental history has experienced in Canada in recent years. A whole generation of young scholars is now working on topics bridging history and nature, and Campbell is perhaps the most fearless writer of them all. In the first place, she engages a big topic, more than four centuries of Georgian Bay's history, and does so from an amazing number of perspectives. This is not only a book that travels from Samuel de Champlain to Sea-Doos, but one that incorporates elements of art history, public history, literary criticism, geography, and other disciplines in doing so. This "kaleidoscope of perspectives" (p. 22) is very well-integrated and surprisingly effective.

Secondly, Campbell writes with passion about her own experiences on the Bay, even wearing her heart on her sleeve at times. I generally found this approach refreshing, particularly because Campbell is such a good writer. Here is how she presents the role nature plays in history: "Assigning it 'agency' ... suggests a personification of nature, a consciousness or agenda that isn't there. Instead we might think of human agency working within the constraints and opportunities nature provides." (p. 17) This is so elegant that one might forget how much difficulty environmental writers have with such formulations. (More typically, Campbell and series editor Graeme Wynn call nature and culture "inextricably" intertwined/bound/interconnected four times by page 2! My first foray in revisionist environmental history will be to argue that the interconnectedness of nature and culture is, in fact, extricable.)

Thirdly, Campbell offers an unconventional, even romantic thesis. Although much environmental scholarship at

present chronicles the cultural construction of nature – the ways in which a culture interprets nature in its own image, for its own purposes – Campbell in effect argues that these are also "natural constructions" (my phrase, not hers), in that they are made in response to real places and real attempts to come to grips with those places. So, for example, whereas recent authors have discussed the Group of Seven in terms of the painters' cozy commercial relationships with the National Gallery and the Canadian Pacific Railway, or have seen the Group's popularity as a regional identity legitimated as a national one, Campbell deviates. She sees the Group of Seven and their audiences as making an authentic attempt to know Georgian Bay, and, by extension, Canada.

"[T]here is a consensus that accepted these images as the Canada we *want* to have. It was not a picture of a foreign and unattainable ideal, like the strained examples of the picturesque, the softened pastoral images that preceded it; nor was it divorced from the known world, like the abstract art that would follow. ... If the style suited the subject, then the subject suited the audience. The art popularized by the Group of Seven is a rare example of high and popular culture – too often treated as unrelated phenomena – overtly and deliberately converging." (p. 147)

Such passages are reminiscent of Jonathan Vance's *Death So Noble*. Vance (who was Campbell's thesis advisor) argues that one should not see the myth that Canadians developed in the 1920s and 1930s about the First World War as delusional or the product of hegemony, but rather as an authentic attempt to give meaning to the war.

Some readers will find Campbell's argument altogether too convenient, ac-

cording the Group of Seven and their Georgian Bay subjects a sort of preordained, deserved fame. A to-be-expected result of the author's fearlessness is that *Shaped by the West Wind* tends to overextend itself. Rarely among books that I have enjoyed have I penciled in so many marginal "?" and "!!" We are told that "repeated characterization of the archipelago as wilderness by its own users seems somewhat naïve, even disingenuous, and factually inaccurate." (p. 181) Yet Campbell herself has used the word wilderness unproblematically, and without definition, up until then. And consider the section that begins: "But Canadians rarely think of Georgian Bay as a region The Prairies and the Maritimes and the North are regions." (p. 155) How

could anyone imagine that the relatively small Bay area deserves comparable status, particularly when the book only concerns itself with the Bay's eastern shore? Owen Sound and Collingwood barely make it into the index, Tobermory and Wiarton not at all.

Shaped by the West Wind is a book that will delight, occasionally madden, and always engage thoughtful readers.

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Bibliography:

Vance, Jonathan F. *Death so Noble: memory, meaning, and the First World War*. Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1997.

Contact Zones

Aboriginal and Settler Women in Canada's Colonial Past

Edited by Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherdale. Vancouver:
University of British Columbia Press, 2005.
x + 308 pp. Illustrations. \$85.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-7748-1135-8.

In her influential book, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt coined the term "contact zones," and it has become a catchphrase for historians studying relationships between colonizers and the colonized in many contexts, including Canada. By contact zones Pratt means "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict." (p. 6) Such encounters are the focus of the essays in *Contact Zones*. Encouraged by a growing international

body of work on gender and empire, Canadian historians have begun to investigate the gendered and racialized nature of the relationships that existed among Natives, non-Natives, and mixed-race people during Britain's (and Canada's) effort to create a white settler society. This fascinating collection is the result.

Contact Zones builds on previous collections in Canadian women's history, but it is the first to focus on Native and mixed-race women and their relationships with non-Natives and the Canadian government. Editors Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherdale bring together work by thirteen specialists in history, art history, women's studies, Native studies, English