

## *The Reluctant Land: Society, Space, and Environment in Canada before Confederation* By Cole Harris

Chris Mayda

---

Volume 101, Number 1, Spring 2009

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065680ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065680ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

**Publisher(s)**

The Ontario Historical Society

**ISSN**

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

**Cite this review**

Mayda, C. (2009). Review of [*The Reluctant Land: Society, Space, and Environment in Canada before Confederation* By Cole Harris]. *Ontario History*, 101(1), 106–107. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065680ar>

## *The Reluctant Land: Society, Space, and Environment in Canada before Confederation.*

By Cole Harris.

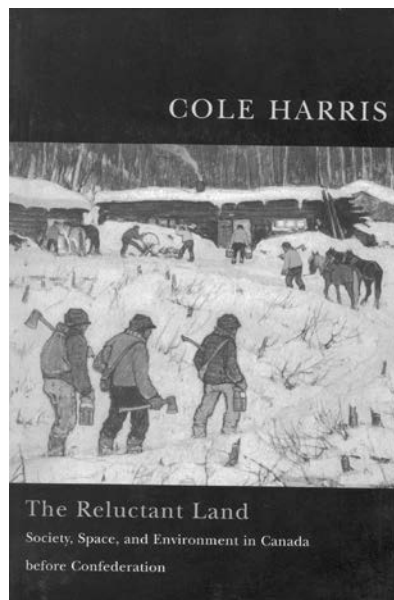
Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008. 486 pages. \$39.95 softcover. ISBN 0-7748-1450-8 ([www.ubcpress.ca](http://www.ubcpress.ca))

Cole Harris is a highly accomplished Canadian historical geographer who, though now emeritus (University of British Columbia), obviously loves what he does and continues to produce important and enlightening books about the formation of Canada. His latest book, *The Reluctant Land*, is a masterpiece of history, geography, and ecology. He compiles and references the work of many historical geographers and then weaves the story of land, settlers and indigenous populations into a seamless tapestry that sets the stage for today's Canada. The book follows the settlement of the land from east to north to west, its twelve chapters defining key regions and illustrated with more than a hundred maps, graphs and artists' renderings of historic Canada. *The Reluctant Land* offers a clear understanding of the confederation of Canada, and is worthy of reading by an interested general public; it is essential for Canadian scholars.

The story begins with the indigenous life worlds prior to European settlement. The manner of life was, of course we know now, so different from the European's that it took hundreds of years for them to understand the sustainable way of life that had previously been the standard in this fierce landscape. "Centuries later," Harris writes, "when an Indian reserve commissioner in northern British Columbia asked a

chief what work he did, the chief replied that he did not work. His father and uncles had taught him how to live, and he would teach his children." (p. 7)

*The Reluctant Land* continues to inform and offer interesting tidbits that fill blanks in the Canadian story, landscape and ecology, both regionally and historically. In the earliest years of northwestern Atlantic settlement Harris explains Champlain's systematic gathering of knowledge about the landscape and the birch bark canoe transport system through the Great Lakes and St Lawrence waterways. He unfolds the complicated



history of Acadia where British and French fought repeatedly for purchase. Harris questions how settlers adapted to the new land, and how the small groups that re-presented their homelands in the new world changed themselves, while changing the land they found. "Indeed, the whole Acadian way of life might be thought of as a distinctive dialect of French peasant culture that reflected more of its particular New World context and less of its diverse French inheritance with each generation." (p. 63)

Harris next introduces the continental interior prior to the fall of New France in 1760 and how a few Europeans wandering into the Great Lakes interior could have profound impact upon the native cultures. But

it was a two-way street, and both Europeans and the Natives prospered. "In these years, the Native response to missionaries and fur traders seems to have been essentially pragmatic: both were useful for specific purposes. The missionaries were welcome if they could heal, win battles, and secure food supplies. When they could not, native support for them ebbed." (p. 99)

Ontario – Upper Canada – receives the largest chapter, documenting the settlers of this parsimonious land, starting with the United Empire Loyalists who were generally not "ideologically committed," and continuing through the various strains of Irish and Scots that arrived at different periods in the nineteenth century. All shared a political refugee status and most also had shared a threatened livelihood in their old homes. Harris argues that British emigration policy and cost of land might have re-created in Upper Canada the same stratified, hierarchical society that most immigrants were trying to leave behind. He finds, however, that this exercise in imperial social engineering was a failure (p. 318); colonial land and labour conditions were sufficiently at odds with those in England to prevent replication.

The settlers of Upper Canada were pioneers surely, but they wanted farms that spoke of well-established home to them, much as any person displaced in America wants today. The settlers wanted their own pieces of land and communities of common ethnicity, providing "a measure of cultural and economic security in strange places." (p. 326) But most of all they wanted to work to make their lives better. They were committed to the extent that they kept on moving, moving, moving to find that common goal: home place stability where "its primary value may well have been...the luxury of family immobility."

All of this quest was, of course, at a cost: lost wildlife habitat, forests transformed into monoculture fields, polluted streams, eroded

land. Harris records that such ecological changes supported livelihoods and earned profits, at least briefly. Yet the human species never seems able to look beyond its own welfare, even when it is tied to the rest of the world. Western society has worked for short-term gain at the cost of ecological damage.

Farm production from the Upper Canadian woodland landscape could not compete with the easily cultivated grasslands of the United States. By the mid-nineteenth century these decidedly English subjects were thinking about melding with their French, Irish and Scottish neighbours and building a Canadian political position independent of the United States. The fear of Canadians, then and even now, is being swallowed up by the abundance that is south of this harsh land.

*The Reluctant Land* culminates in the period of Confederation. Here Harris weaves the fragments of pre-Confederation Canada into the bigger story, where they all fit today and often shape the future. Harris echoes the sentiments of a proud but sometimes fractured Canadian nationalism in his closing sentence. An unambiguous nationalism, he tells us, "does not fit what is most precious in this country, and what, at its best, Canada is, a society that respects and appreciates the differences of which it is composed, and ironically, in so doing establishes its own identity more clearly." I agree, yet the world is changing so quickly these days that this closing may already be outdated. Canada may need to reflect on how to maintain its integrity after the impact of an economic hubris, however unsustainable it may be, in the United States.

Chris Mayda,  
Eastern Michigan University

*Bibliography*

Harris, Cole, and Geoffrey Matthews. *Historical Atlas of Canada: From the Beginning to 1800*. Toronto: