

## *Reclaiming the Don: An Environmental History of Toronto's Don River Valley* by Jennifer L. Bonnell

Andrew Watson

---

Volume 108, Number 1, Spring 2016

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050624ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050624ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

**Publisher(s)**

The Ontario Historical Society

**ISSN**

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

**Cite this review**

Watson, A. (2016). Review of [*Reclaiming the Don: An Environmental History of Toronto's Don River Valley* by Jennifer L. Bonnell]. *Ontario History*, 108(1), 144–146. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050624ar>

## *Reclaiming the Don*

### *An Environmental History of Toronto's Don River Valley*

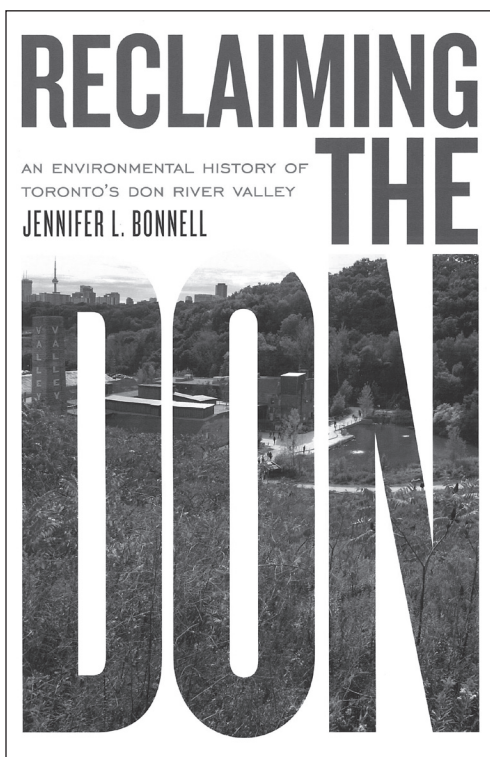
By Jennifer L. Bonnell

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. 316 Pages. \$29.95 Paper, ISBN 9781442612259. \$65.00 Cloth, ISBN 9781442643840. \$29.95ebook (EPUB format) ISBN 9781442696815. ([www.utppublishing.com](http://www.utppublishing.com))

In *Reclaiming the Don*, Jennifer L. Bonnell explores the ambiguous and overlooked history of the Don River Valley, which discreetly shaped Toronto by bisecting the city's urban landscape. Covering over 200 years, from the resettlement of the river mouth by United Empire Loyalists in the late eighteenth century to twenty-first century plans that used the river's past to promote the renaturalization of the same space, *Reclaiming the Don* is both an environmental history of how people con-

ceived of and modified the river valley and a social history of how those ideas and their consequences affected city residents. What sets Bonnell's work apart from the historiography on urban rivers and the scholarship on Toronto's history in particular, is that she positions a largely ignored feature of the urban fabric at the centre of the city's social, cultural, political, economic and environmental history.

The history of urban rivers has tended to focus on large rivers, such as the Thames or the Mississippi, that dominated the surrounding urban landscape. The Don River is quite a bit smaller than Canada's other major urban rivers: the St. Lawrence, the Ottawa, the Fraser, and the Bow. In Ontario, Ottawa and London have much larger rivers. In fact, the Don is not even the largest river in Toronto! As Bonnell points out, "the Don is a small urban river, bearing little resemblance to great rivers... that have been harnessed by other cities for urban infrastructure projects" (71). But it is precisely because the Don is so small that this book is so important. Bonnell argues that the ways people imagined the river and its future had as much influence on the history of the city as the actual material changes made to the river. This focus on the relationship between what people thought was necessary in order to improve the natural world and the unintended consequences of the efforts to make those ideas a reality places *Reclaiming the Don* within a wider constellation of urban environmen-



tal history in North America. But, as Bonnell shows, what sets this history apart are the consequences of trying to make a small river do big things for the city.

Bonnell introduces the idea of ‘imagined futures’ to analyze how the Don shaped the urban environment. Implicit in this analysis is the choice to juxtapose all the schemes and efforts to ‘improve’ the river valley with the disagreeable, ambiguous and marginal aspects of this space. The imagined future of the Don as a pastoral agricultural landscape in the nineteenth century is contrasted with the realities of Ashbridge’s Bay as a site of malarial disease. The enthusiasm that led to the industrialization of the river and the Don Improvement Project is set against ecological degradation and the river’s frustrating inadequacy. The desire to retain the valley as green space or renaturalize the Lower Don is compromised by utilitarian uses and political apathy. In each case, the river valley fails to live up to the expectations of these imagined futures, and remains on the physical and psychological margins of the city. As with all great urban environmental history scholarship, the reader is left grappling with the conflicting narratives of progress and decline. Interestingly, Bonnell seems to suggest that its ambiguous place within the city afforded it a less tragic history than other urban rivers, while at the same time discouraging any real improvement. The tension between these two narratives (the numerous imagined futures for the valley versus the reality of its marginal place in the city) is perhaps best captured when, on the same page, Bonnell refers to the river valley as both “one of Toronto’s most iconic landscapes” and “constructed as marginal” (189).

Reading *Reclaiming the Don*, it is clear that some of the ambiguity related to this iconic/marginal landscape stems from the difficulty people have had distinguishing

the agency of the river from that of the valley itself. Indeed, it is not always clear that Bonnell maintains a clear distinction between the river and the valley. Using evidence from a diversity of documentary sources, including memoirs, planning reports, court records, and newspapers, Bonnell divides her study into a variety of case studies on the colonial era, industrialization, marginalized peoples, conservation, and postwar highway construction to convincingly demonstrate that the river never had to be big to have a big impact on the city’s history. The valley, however, is very big; it cuts the city in two. During the nineteenth century, the river had more influence on the city than the valley, but at some point in the early twentieth century the valley became more important than the river. Similarly, a geographical distinction seems crucial. In the Lower Don Lands the river and the valley are synonymous. But the valley, not the river, dominates the landscape at Bloor Street. Bonnell states quite clearly in the Introduction that “The valley’s geography, with its steep ravine walls and wide plateaux, was even more influential [than the river on the course of Toronto’s history]” (xxiii). Analysis switches back and forth between the river and the valley depending on the sources, but it is not methodologically obvious when and why a distinction between the river and the valley matters to Bonnell’s argument. One of the great strengths of the book is Bonnell’s ability to weave together continuity and change. Clearly, the Don River Valley is not the same place it was a century or two ago. But Bonnell’s attention to “the area’s layered history” (180-181) enables lessons from the past to easily navigate into contemporary debates over the river. In addition to a thoughtful discussion in chapter seven on using the past to inform current efforts to renaturalize the Lower

Don Lands, Bonnell peppers the books with passages that Toronto residents will find eerily relevant today. Referring to the Don Improvement Project of the 1880s: “For residents of Toronto’s east end, the idea of the improvement conjured images of prosperity and revitalization for an area that had long been relegated to the margins of the city” (55). And: “By sloughing off as too costly, ambitious, or extravagant significant components of the original plan as the reality of funds and time became apparent, the city created a project of half-

measures, reducing considerably its ability to meet expectations” (73).

In the past, the Don River Valley has not loomed large in the minds of Torontonians. To be fair, it doesn’t particularly loom large in the present either. But perhaps it should. Because as Jennifer Bonnell so brilliantly demonstrates, the future of the river depends very much on how people imagined it in the past.

Andrew Watson  
University of Saskatchewan

## *In the Power of Government*

*The Rise and Fall of Newsprint in Ontario, 1894–1932*

By Mark Kuhlberg

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. 404 pages. \$27.71  
Paperback ISBN 9781442614536. \$60.00 Cloth 9781442614536. \$27.95  
Ebook (EPUB) ISBN 9781442666214. (utppublishing.com)

Mark Kuhlberg’s *In the Power of Government* is a narrative history of the pulp and paper industry in Ontario from its birth at the end of the nineteenth-century, through its peak of health in the early 1920s, to its debt-ridden decline in the early 1930s. The industry consumed mainly spruce-wood, its main product was newsprint, and it operated from the north shore of Georgian Bay westwards past Thunder Bay. Readers interested in environmental history will find useful material in the book, but those looking for insights into labour or social his-

tory will not. The central theme is business-government relations, and important secondary themes include the rise of mass circulation newspapers and periodicals, natural resources management, provincial state formation, and Ontario political leadership.

The engaging prose, useful maps, charts, and photographs are enjoyable, and they complement Kuhlberg’s analysis. The author’s major contribution is the ample evidence he provides that relations between the paper making business and the provincial state were strained by competing visions of

