

Shaping the Upper Canadian Frontier: Environment, Society, and Culture in the Trent Valley. By Neil S. Forkey. (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2003. 164 p. ISBN 1-55238-049-1 \$34.95)

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Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

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Shaping the Upper Canadian Frontier: Environment, Society, and Culture in the Trent Valley. By Neil S. Forkey. (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2003. 164 p. ISBN 1-55238-049-1 \$34.95)

In this neat little book—the text, which includes a dozen figures and illustrations, is only 113 pages—Neil Forkey attempts several things. His focus on the Valley of the Trent (now more generally known as the Kawartha-Trent waterway) in Ontario is intended, first, to illuminate the settlement and re-settlement of a fascinating territory that straddles the Great Lakes lowlands and the Canadian Shield. Forkey's second intention is to advance the field of environmental history in Canada, and he does this, in part and third, by advocating a bioregional approach to the analysis of past places. All of this leads, further, to the claim that the Trent valley is a “microcosm for much wider human and environmental changes that were occurring throughout North America” (p. 1).

The substance of this study unfolds in five chapters. The first, “Changes in Mississauga Lands,” draws inspiration from William Cronon's 1983 study of New England, entitled *Changes in the Land*, to treat the ecology and economy of the Trent Valley from the late eighteenth century to the 1830s.¹ This is a story, briefly told, of marginalization, as indigenous inhabitants of the area were forced to forsake their hunting/gathering ways, confined to reserves, and encouraged to adopt agriculture and Christianity. “Creating New Home Places”—a title containing clever echoes of earlier scholarship on both bioregionalism and Ireland—treats the arrival and settlement of Anglo-Celtic migrants in the Trent Valley between the 1820s and mid-century. The third and longest and, to my mind, most satisfying chapter in the book narrows the focus to a single township to tease out the ramifying, and in several ways disastrous, consequences that resulted from the construction of what locals believed to be “the largest mill-dam in the world” on the Scugog River. Here Forkey repeats his argument, published in the *Canadian Historical Review*, that “the confluence of settlement, capitalism, and state-led economic development [...] affected the social and ecological foundations” of the community and led residents afflicted by malaria that they attributed to the expansion of swampland around the

millpond into "Damning the Dam."² "The Road from Bobcaygeon" which runs northward into the Shield country, forms the focus of chapter five, which deals with the development of the lumber industry and efforts to encourage colonization in the twenty years or so after mid-century. This is an important story barely, albeit interestingly, sketched here. Chapter six, potentially the most interesting to readers of this journal in that it deals with "The Trent Valley Oracle: Catharine Parr Traill," one of nineteenth-century Canada's most important amateur botanists, is disappointingly short. A dozen pages of text carry the discussion from Catharine's early years in Suffolk, England, to the publication of her *Studies of Plant Life in Canada*³ and the claim (probably justified, despite Philip Henry Gosse's earlier attempt to usurp the title with *The Canadian Naturalist*⁴) that she was "The Canadian Gilbert White." Despite a well-chosen selection of quotations from Traill's works, and the argument that she appreciated as few others did that "the land was . . . an actor" in the history of development in the Valley of the Trent, this discussion begs elaboration and better integration with the material that precedes it.

What then of the larger claims about environmental history, bioregionalism and the Trent Valley as microcosm? Certainly this is a welcome and useful contribution to Canadian environmental history. The field is undeveloped in this country, compared with the United States, and Forkey is right to puncture (as he does, gently, in his first chapter) tired and oft-repeated claims that Canadian history, the story of settlers transforming a new land, is "necessarily" environmental, and that the staples approach represents an indigenous form of proto-environmental history. None of this work really engages with the "reciprocal and non-reciprocal aspects of the human-nature dynamic"—which Forkey and many recent environmental historians take as their mandate for inquiry. The bioregional approach remains enigmatic. With its emphasis on the linkages between "ecological locale and human culture," its insistence on the importance of "natural" rather than political boundaries as the proper objects of attention for those who would understand the interplay of humans and environments, and its aim to uncover a "sense of place," it seems entirely amenable to the concerns of environmental history. But bioregionalism is also a social movement, deriving a pedigree of sorts from the small-is-beautiful, back-to-the-land and sustainability discourses. It is also, in the end, perhaps, more useful as an heuristic than an analytic device.

The same, I suppose, might be said for the microcosm claim. Case studies can and should illuminate general processes. But all cases and places are different. This is by no means an argument for "parish pump" studies—fascinated by and preoccupied with the purely local. History,

environmental or other, derives its quality from the skilful interlacing of particular detail into accounts that have wider import. "Sheep marks," said Clifford Geertz long ago, can "speak to revolutions." Forkey's study of the Trent Valley fulfils this criterion. It uses evidence from a particular watershed to place processes that contributed to the shaping of the Upper Canadian frontier in new light, and reminds us that people on this frontier shared attitudes, and challenges, with their counterparts in many other locales. My disappointment with this book is that—the Ops Township dam story aside—it fails to go as far as it might (and should) have done to utilize the ample and varied sources pertaining to the Valley of the Trent to provide a richer, fresher, more vivid, multi-textured, intricately interwoven portrait of this storied and fascinating place.

Graeme Wynn

1. William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983).
2. Neil S. Forkey, "Damning the Dam: Ecology and Community in Ops Township, Upper Canada," *Canadian Historical Review*, 79, 1 (1998): 68–99.
3. Catharine Parr Traill, *Studies of Plant Life in Canada* (Ottawa: Woodburn, 1885).
4. Philip Henry Gosse, *The Canadian Naturalist: A Series of Conversations on the Natural History of Lower Canada* (London: Voorst, 1840).

Biographical Note: Dr. Graeme Wynn is an historical geographer with particular interests in the environmental history and geography of Canada and New Zealand. The author of *Timber Colony: A historical geography of early nineteenth century New Brunswick* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), and of many articles on Canada, he is currently working on book-length studies tentatively titled *Nature and Culture in Canada* and *Peopling British North America*. Address: Department of Geography, University of British Columbia, 1984 West Mall, Vancouver (British Columbia) V6T 1Z2, Canada. Email: <wynn@geog.ubc.ca>