

Places of Last Resort: The Expansion of the Farm Frontier into the Boreal Forest in Canada, c.1910-1940 By J. David Wood

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Places of Last Resort: The Expansion of the Farm Frontier into the Boreal Forest in Canada, c.1910-1940

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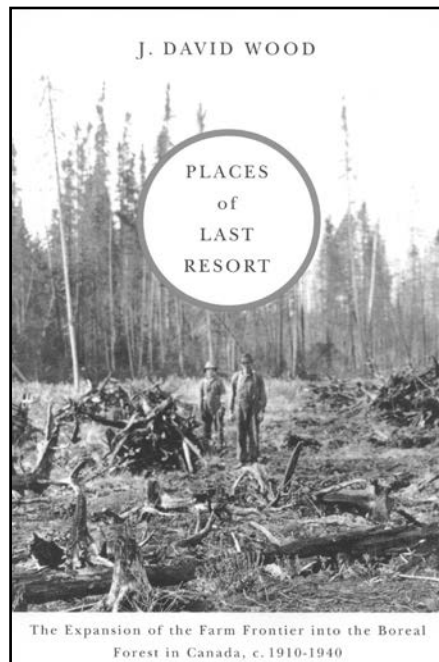
The latest monograph by historical geographer J. David Wood examines the extension of agricultural settlement northward into Canada's boreal forest during the first half of the twentieth century. Using as a launching point the investigations of the Canadian Pioneer Problems Committee and Isaiah Bowman's attempt to devise a 'science of settlement' (p. 11) during the 1930s, the author undertakes a critical inquiry into the motivations behind this expansion and the reasons behind widespread farm failure. The book establishes a cohesive narrative of settlement from a series of case studies dispersed along the 3,000-kilometre frontier. Stretching from the Abitibi district of northern Quebec to the Peace River in Alberta, these case studies may be viewed as regional expressions of an ill-advised national project. Encounter with the boreal margin – a glacier-gouged land known for its coniferous forests, mosquito-infested swamps, thin soils and a short frost-free season – is the experience that binds these geographically-dispersed sagas. The characteristics of this environment are illuminated using evocative settler accounts, and they prove to be crucial to our understanding of the hardships endured by set-

tlers and why farm abandonment was so common on the late frontier.

The Great Clay Belt of northern Ontario provides one of the case studies often referred to in Wood's thematic chapters. By the start of the twentieth century good land for homesteading had become scarce in the Ontario, so when pockets of workable soil were found adjacent to the new railway the provincial government began to develop a colonization scheme. B.E. Fernow, dean of the School of Forestry at the University of Toronto, was asked to perform a soil survey for this region in 1912. His report confirmed earlier tests completed by the Ontario Agricultural College and concluded that "there was no certainty about the area supporting an agricultural population." (p. 14)

In spite of this report, the government went ahead with its scheme.

In desperate search of land, settlers on Canada's late frontier often took up farms in areas where others were known to have failed before them. The allure of the boreal margin was linked to a belief that hard work could conquer the limitations imposed by natural conditions and faith in the "Power of Positive Thinking." (p. 29) In northern Ontario, the earliest agricul-



tural colony promoted by government was established at Kapuskasing by servicemen returning from the Great War in Europe. In 1926, a small group of Mennonites that had fled Bolshevik Russia decided to occupy land in Eilber Township, about sixty kilometres west of Kapuskasing. Many of the religious groups that sought a place on the boreal margin were drawn to these distant lands because of the promise of refuge and freedom from persecution. Within a decade of arrival both of these colonies had fallen on hard times, but the flow of settlers to northern Ontario did not stop. By 1931, the region displayed the sort of ethnic mix that was common across the late frontier: sizeable groups of British and American origin, and smaller communities from Finland, Poland, Italy and Yugoslavia. (p. 24) During the Great Depression, government fear of the disgruntled urban poor led to the Back-to-the-Land Movement, a programme by which welfare cases were paid to leave the cities and settle on the margin. While Wood's discussion focuses attention on the paths followed by settlement groups and the fluctuating fortunes of particular regions, he subtly constructs the boreal margin as a dumping ground for people that governments could not easily integrate into the modern, and increasingly urban, economic structure of Canadian society.

This 'frontier solution' largely failed to generate the level of agricultural production and class of independent farmers that governments had hoped would arise on the boreal margin. The cool climate and unsuitable soils resulted in many operations struggling for years before an early frost or insect plague caused total crop failure and pushed people off the land. Farm failure was a highly personal experience, and its many facets are brought out in the chapter titled "Living the Marginal Experience, From Abitibi to Peace River." Whereas earlier chapters

harnessed census data and promotional literature to address issues of demographic history and government enticements for potential farmers, here Wood takes the story a crucial step further and delves into the diaries and personal letters of settlers to convey the physical and emotional endurance required for the pioneer existence. Transcripts of interviews tell us about settler diets, community responses to disease outbreaks and muskeg fires, as well as the hard isolation felt by women on the frontier. Soil maps illustrate the troublesome topography and patchwork soils of the boreal margin, while photographs give a sense of the rough clearings that were cultivated and the ox carts that provided mobility.

In *Places of Last Resort* Wood presents a thoughtful assessment of the settlement process and explains how widespread failure on the boreal margin brought an end to the idea of frontier extension in Canada. The work is both accessible and engaging, enriched by comparisons between regions and given necessary international context through references to concurrent processes underway in Australia. Although the role of crop science in frontier agriculture and the legacy of marginal settlement in the cultural landscape are given little attention, these are minor gaps in what is otherwise a scholarly tour de force. *Places of Last Resort* makes an important contribution to our understanding of Canadian settlement history and provides valuable lessons in an age when warmer climatic conditions may lead us to reassess the potential for agriculture on the boreal margin.

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