

The Ordinary People of Essex: Environment, Culture, and Economy on the Frontier of Upper Canada By John Clarke

Ross Fair

Volume 104, numéro 1, spring 2012

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065401ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065401ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Fair, R. (2012). Compte rendu de [*The Ordinary People of Essex: Environment, Culture, and Economy on the Frontier of Upper Canada* By John Clarke]. *Ontario History*, 104(1), 216–217. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065401ar>

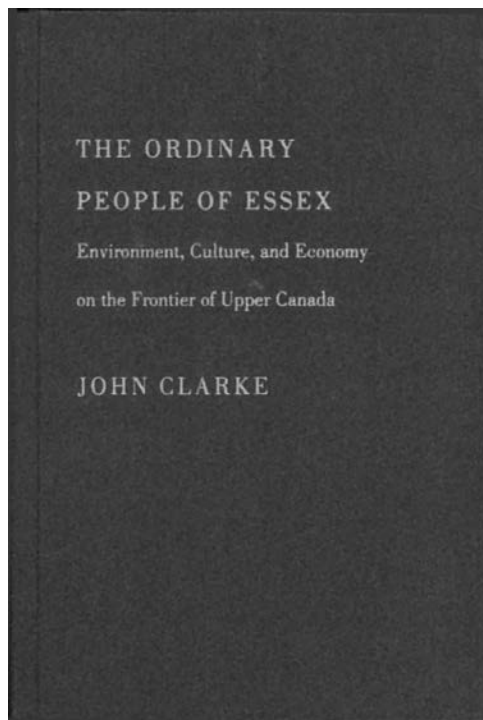
*The Ordinary People of Essex:
Environment, Culture, and
Economy on the Frontier of Upper
Canada*

By John Clarke

Carleton Library Series 218. Montreal and Kingston:
McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010. 738 pages. \$135.00
hardcover. ISBN 978-0-773536--74-6; \$39.95 softcover.
ISBN 978-0-773537-77-4 (www.mqup.ca)

In its promotional statement for *The Ordinary People of Essex*, McGill-Queen's Press declares: "Clarke covers a remarkable number of topics, including geographic factors in the choice of agricultural land, land acquisition and clearance, energy expended in clearing and planting the land, and selection of specific crops and their extent and yields in particular combinations of soils." Indeed, Clarke accomplishes all of this and more in his second monograph focused on Essex County. But what purpose does this detailed analysis of "a remarkable number of topics" serve? In 2001, Clarke produced his *Land, Power, and Economics on the Frontier of Upper Canada*, a lengthy investigation into the methods by which settlers of Essex County acquired, held, and developed land. In this second volume, which provides another 470 pages of analysis and conclusions on associated subjects (plus 230 pages of appendices, notes, and bibliography), Clarke aims to complement his first volume "by concentrating on how individuals made decisions which maximized their personal and family benefits in a dominantly agricultural world which was not static but rather dynamic." (xxix)

At the same time, however, Clarke aims to also illuminate the mid-nineteenth-century culture of the county's "ordinary people," arguing: "Culture is what the early settler in the New World, and in this instance



Essex County, sifted the physical environment with. It was the vehicle by which human beings ordered their experience." (xxv-xxvi) Unfortunately, this part of his analysis remains rather undeveloped. Although Clarke does describe the ethnic and religious dimensions of Essex County in considerable detail, and identifies the processes by which local communities were formed, his historiography and framework for studying culture is rather dated. For example, his chapter on frontier social integration in Upper Canada relies on arguments made by S.D. Clark in 1948 and 1962, thereby omitting more than a generation of study into the religious experiences of Upper Canada. Throughout the book, culture remains an awkward fit to the study that Clarke has produced. Multiple tables, maps, and equations that stem from Clarke's years of meticulous research do support his claims, but his arguments, in general, best illuminate

“how individuals made decisions” (xxix) on the Essex frontier, rather than contribute in any clear way to current scholarship on frontier culture.

In fact, five of Clarke’s nine chapters concern frontier settlement practices: clearing, cultivating, growing crops, raising livestock, employing animal and mechanized labour, among other tasks. Again, while *The Ordinary People of Essex* does provide a comprehensive examination of the county’s population in context of the local environment and economy, Clarke’s “ordinary people” are represented mostly in tabular and map form. His data is supplied by the “single, complete cross section” of the county provided by the 1851/52 census, supplemented by information from township assessment roles (xxx). Only in his concluding chapter does Clarke provide a section entitled “Methodology for Representing the General in the Particular” (451). Here, under the heading “Family Insights” (452-49), he employs several named examples of the “ordinary people of Essex” in a form that most historians would recognize as cultural history.

Significantly, Clarke’s work raises a question he leaves mostly unanswered: What does *The Ordinary People of Essex* tell us that might be applicable to the study of “ordinary people” in frontier societies beyond Essex County’s borders? At the end

of two weighty volumes, it should not be unreasonable to expect that Clarke might make firm conclusions as to whether the settlers of Essex were ordinary or extraordinary in relation to the wider early nineteenth-century settlement experiences in Upper Canada and elsewhere. Although he provides a lengthy concluding chapter, only at its very end does Clarke cast his gaze beyond the Essex borders to provide just three paragraphs that assess the wider significance of his study and suggest avenues for future research.

In spite of its shortcomings pertaining to an analysis of the culture of Essex County’s ordinary people, it must be said that Clarke’s study—in combination with his *Land, Power, and Economics*—stands as an incredibly detailed exploration into settler life in the county. In important ways, it is lamentable that his study stands mostly alone. Were similarly intensive and exhaustive studies conducted by historical geographers for each county of Upper Canada, the depth and breadth of research produced would provide the foundation of a true cultural history of “ordinary” Upper Canadians. One can only echo Clarke’s concluding statement: “Such work is to be welcomed.” (470)

Ross Fair
Department of History
Ryerson University

Revisiting “Our Forest Home” The Immigrant Letters of Frances Stewart

Edited by Jodi Lee Aoki

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2011. 288 pages. \$35.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-1-55488-776-7 (www.dundurn.com)

It has been well over a century since the Upper Canadian letters of Frances Stewart (1794-1872) were first published. Originally compiled in a confusing and erratically-edited volume by Stewart’s daugh-

ter, the 1899 collection proved cumbersome and increasingly elusive for modern readers, and editor Jodi Lee Aoki’s fresh rendering of the correspondence is a necessary and most welcome restoration of an