RECENTERING NORTH AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY: pedagogy AND SCHOLARSHI
James Feldman; Lynne Heasley
Environmental History; Oct 2007; 12, 4; Research Library
pg. 951

JAMES FELDMAN AND LYNNE HEASLEY

REFLECTIONS

RECENTERING NORTH AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY: pedagogy AND SCHOLARSHIP IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION

ABSTRACT
We lay out a rationale for a new scholarly subfield—the environmental history of the Great Lakes—that Canadian and U.S. scholars can develop together. This project began as an attempt to teach environmental history in a way that stressed the importance of our region to our Wisconsin- and Michigan-based students. But classroom experiences convinced us that Great Lakes environmental history has been neglected, both because of its transnational character and because of biases within the field of environmental history. The Great Lakes have important stories to tell. They are at once representative of the larger narratives of both the United States and Canada, and also demonstrate the exceptional history of each nation. They provide an opportunity to explore comparative and transnational history. The Great Lakes also are fundamentally important in their own right for their industries, environments, and abundant resources.

IN 2005, WE RECEIVED a Canadian Studies grant from the Canadian government to transform our United States environmental history courses into a more explicitly North American course with a special emphasis on the Great Lakes region. Both our research and our teaching lie within the boundaries of one of the world's most prominent geological features–in satellite images of North America, the Great Lakes basin inevitably attracts the eye. Moreover, the lakes serve as the primary environmental and recreational touchstones for our Wisconsin- and Michigan-based students. We wanted to design a course that was

James Feldman and Lynne Heasley, "Recentering North American Environmental History: Pedagogy and Scholarship in the Great Lakes Region," *Environmental History* 12 (October 2007): 951-58.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

at once transnational and regional. We also thought that faculty in other regions could adapt our nested model of the survey–regional history embedded within a larger North American panorama. While we were revising our courses, however, we saw the need for a more coherent regional history of the Great Lakes. In this article, we lay out the rationale for a new scholarly subfield that Canadian and U.S. scholars can develop together.

Integrating Canadian and U.S. environmental history by taking the Great Lakes region as a unifying frame of reference suggests new avenues for historical scholarship. These, in turn, can unite Canadian and U.S. scholars in a shared transnational project. The environmental histories of both nations are connected in intricate ways. Each nation lies within an international mosaic of geography, politics, economy, and culture, a mosaic shaped in profound ways by environmental patterns and processes of the Great Lakes watershed. Consider, for example: the Middle Ground, where the intersecting dynamics of cultural contact, imperial politics, and the international beaver trade converged; the transportation network made up of the Erie and Welland Canals and the St. Lawrence Seaway that opened the mid-continent and connected it with eastern and European ports; the development of Niagara Falls for hydropower and industrial tourism; the Great Lakes forest cutover, which fueled westward growth and urbanization; the rise of modern environmentalism in response to industrial pollution from chemical, steel, and auto industries; and binational negotiations over Great Lakes water policy.[1]

Despite the critical role of the Great Lakes in the history of North America, environmental historians have largely neglected the region. This is partly because of patterns of scholarship in U.S. environmental history, and partly because the boundaries of the Great Lakes are transnational. The region does not fit within conventional narrative frames of U.S. environmental history or within the growing field of Canadian environmental history. As a result, the Great Lakes have not attracted systematic attention from Canadian or U.S. scholars.

This is nowhere more apparent than in the classroom. "American Environmental History" is now a regular course taught in universities throughout the United States, and increasingly in Canada. In recent years, textbooks and anthologies developed by U.S. historians have provided a general framework for environmental history surveys. The nascent state of environmental history north of the border has meant that Canadian courses have relied on the same American historiography (reinforcing what some of our Canadian colleagues have called American intellectual hegemony).[2] These texts synthesize common narratives, and they emphasize work by the field's most prominent scholars.[3] Therefore, key events, chronologies, and controversies are likely to appear in the survey: Colonist-Indian relationships in New England; land clearance and deforestation; westward expansion; decimation of the bison; the Romantic Movement; conservation versus preservation; the post-World War II rise of the environmental movement; and so on.

But the standard narrative of U.S. environmental history reproduces scholarly biases of the field in key ways. First, it privileges New England and the American

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

West. Despite its mammoth footprint, the Great Lakes region receives scant attention. Second, the narrative offers primarily a national, rather than a multinational or global perspective on environmental history. Few Canadian stories–no matter how relevant to American history–can break into the narrative. The problem is accentuated by the young state of Canadian environmental history. A dynamic group of scholars is developing the Canadian field. However, their collective effort does not yet reveal obvious contours, whether national or transnational.[4]

SO WHAT MIGHT an environmental history of the Great Lakes region look like? What roles should it fulfill?

The Great Lakes as representative. The Great Lakes can be representative of national and international experiences. The role of the Romantic Movement in transforming American ideas about nature and wilderness is a case in point. Thomas Cole and the artists of the Hudson River School painted the landscapes of New England and the Catskill Mountains, while Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran popularized iconic western landscapes like Yosemite and the Grand Canyon. They rooted a sense of spirituality in nature, and suggested that Americans risked losing something close to divine in their quest to conquer the wilderness. Their work was an effective call to preserve remnants of wild nature, especially in the American West.[5] Yet no natural monument was more persistently painted than Niagara Falls–mid-continent, mid-Great Lakes, straddling two countries. Celebrated by French Jesuits, captured in every season and mood by painters and writers, and loved nearly to death by tourists, Niagara Falls is perhaps the first North American shrine of industrial tourism.[6] Far more people visited Niagara in the nineteenth century than took the long train ride to the West, and its popularity continues unabated. The result is modern Niagara's commercialized honky-tonk development, where visitors must decide whether they want to experience nature's awesome power aboard the cruise ship *Maid of the Mist* or in the IMAX theatre. The Great Lakes can narrate this and other quintessential North American stories.

The Great Lakes as exceptional: At the same time, the Great Lakes can do more than simply represent standard historical narratives. One of the most promising organizing themes of Great Lakes history is fundamentally different from that of other regional subfields. Astonishing *abundance*–of transportation routes, fertile soils, wildlife, timber, iron, copper, and especially of water–mark the region. Abundance has defined the cultural, economic, and environmental development of the Great Lakes region and its role nationally and internationally. This is in contrast to the organizing theme of resource scarcity, which has long directed historical scholarship of the North American West.

Since European contact, the Great Lakes have served as an economic turnstile, directing commodities from one part of the continent to another, fueling westward expansion and economic development in both the United States and Canada. Great Lakes lumber laid the railroad tracks that crossed the continent, and Great Lakes

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

copper connected the continent via telephone and telegraph cable.[7] Wheat from the Great Plains traveled to market via Great Lakes shipping corridors, and manufactured goods from eastern factories traveled west along the same routes. While railroads carried this process farther and faster, the lakes indelibly shaped railroad geography.[8]

The national impact of the Erie Canal is a common theme in U.S. environmental history, and one of the best examples of how the region acted as an economic turnstile.[9] The canal tied the northeast to the mid-continent, transforming land use patterns in both regions as western produce reached eastern markets. But the Erie Canal was merely one part of a much larger binational transportation network linking the Great Lakes and expanding their influence worldwide. The Welland canal crosses the Niagara Peninsula and circumvents Niagara Falls, connecting Lakes Erie and Ontario. Completed in 1829 and reconstructed three more times, it was this canal that connected Toronto and the St. Lawrence River (eventually engineered into the St. Lawrence Seaway) to the Great Lakes shipping lanes, creating a 2,500-mile-long international shipping corridor from the Atlantic to Lake Superior.[10]

The region's nineteenth-century role as an economic turnstile produced a host of twentieth-century environmental problems. By 1900, a great industrial corridor had arisen along the Great Lakes: Milwaukee, Gary, Detroit-Windsor, Hamilton, Toronto, Cleveland, and Buffalo. Steel, chemical, paper, and automobile industries flourished on Great Lakes shores. In tandem with growing industry came smog, acid rain, and toxic pollution, which sparked modern environmentalism in both the United States and Canada.[11] Hooker Chemical Company's contamination of Love Canal gave rise to a grassroots, citizen-based movement, and eventually to the establishment of milestone laws like Superfund. Love Canal exposed the connection between industrial pollution and class, which along with race is now understood as a problem of environmental justice.[12] The binational transportation network created another intransigent environmental problem: aquatic invasive species. Since completion of the Erie and Welland Canals, more than 140 invasive species have become established in the Great Lakes. These include the sea lamprey, which moved up the lakes after the expansion of the Welland Canal in 1919, ravishing lake trout fisheries. In the late 1980s, zebra mussels traveling in the ballast water of ocean vessels threatened Great Lakes ecosystems and industry, fouling shorelines and clogging intake pipes in water and power plants. The cost of invasive species now runs in the billions of dollars each year.

The Great Lakes as the site of comparative and transnational history: The Great Lakes lend themselves to comparative and transnational history, and provide opportunities to challenge assumptions about the histories of both nations.[13] Exceptionalism frames most explanations of changing American ideas about wilderness. In terms of painting, for example, the Hudson River School of the mid-nineteenth century both created and expressed an appreciation for American wilderness by tying American nationalism to sublime, wild nature. Seventy years after the Hudson River School, another New World artistic tradition

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

coalesced. In Canada of the early twentieth century, Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven treated similar themes of national identity and wilderness preservation through Great Lakes landscapes like the north shore of Lake Superior, Algonquin Provincial Park, and Georgian Bay.[14] The Group of Seven has generated controversy for its exclusion of First Nation peoples from northern (and often native-controlled) landscapes.[15] Perhaps together, the Romantic Movement and the Group of Seven present a more interesting North American picture than the singular treatment of the Hudson River School and U.S.-based notions of American exceptionalism.[16]

Other examples illuminate differences between the countries. In the mid-twentieth century, economic decline, social unrest, racial tension, and a loss of political power defined the urban environments of the U.S. Great Lakes. Cities such as Gary and Detroit gave the region its nickname, the Rust Belt. In contrast, Canadian manufacturing centers fared better—they lost jobs and faced plant closings, but generally retained their economic and political power, earning a less derisive moniker: the Golden Horseshoe. How can we explain these differences? Canadian historian Steven High suggests that during the post-World War II economic boom, American factories focused on expansion rather than modernization. Eventually faced with stiff foreign competition, American factories became obsolete. Industrialization came later in Canada, and government assistance aided modernization. The Canadian labor movement also formed national (and nationalistic) alliances that helped prevent plant closings, whereas the American movement did not. High's comparative approach sharpens the regional picture even as it highlights the different historical forces at work in each country.[17]

In the case of the Great Lakes region especially, national historical analyses have neglected histories of environmental change and environmental policy that occurred because of the U.S.-Canada border, that blurred the border, or that transcended the border altogether. A transnational approach could fill this gap. Fisheries management is an important example. Highly decentralized in the United States (each state manages the fisheries in its offshore waters), state-level policies could not or would not prevent the collapse of Great Lakes commercial fisheries between 1880 and 1930.[18] Nor could stronger and more unified Canadian regulations help the fisheries. American fishermen flouted regulations in both countries by crossing the border and plying Canadian waters.[19]

The Great Lakes as fundamentally important in their own right. In calling for the development of a "Great Lakes environmental history," we are following the lead of people throughout the region. Policy makers, politicians, ecologists, environmentalists, journalists, artists, and residents—like our students and their families—see the health of the Great Lakes as fundamentally important in its own right. No wonder. The five lakes contain 20 percent of the world's freshwater and 84 percent of the freshwater in the North America, and make up a 300,000-square-mile watershed home to 35 million people.

A strong regional identity is already in place, one characterized by an

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

environmental sensibility.[20] In Canada and the United States, policy makers, environmentalists, and politicians of many political stripes responded passionately to the "death" of Lake Erie from phosphorus-caused eutrophication, and again when states and provinces began posting advisories warning pregnant women and children not to eat large game fish because they contained dangerously high levels of persistent pollutants like PCBs and mercury.[21] The perceived threat of water diversion currently prompts a kind of regional paranoia. One scheme proposed transferring water from Canada's James Bay via canal to the Great Lakes, and then by pipe from our "water rich" region to the thirsty and "water poor" American southwest. Canada and the United States have mediated their respective economic and ecological interests in the Great Lakes through a unique binational framework. The Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909, a compact to resolve disputes over water use in the Great Lakes basin, established the International Joint Commission, a landmark environmental agency shared by the two countries.[22] The history of such a complex management regime is certainly worthy of the same scholarly attention that policy histories of national forests, national parks, and dam development have received.

Outlining a regional narrative that resonated with our students was the motivation for our original Canadian Studies grant. After all, if students come away from an environmental history course with little understanding of their own place, then faculty will have lost a crucial chance to reach them at intellectual and personal levels. We all want our students to embrace the significance of their home, to understand their connection to it and its connection to other places. That place matters is a given. But we came to believe that our particular project required a much larger, sustained scholarly exploration. We envision a fertile new avenue for environmental history, one that unites a diverse, binational group of scholars to develop the historical contours of the Great Lakes region. We hope these scholars will cross the border frequently, to see the lakes from different points of view.

James Feldman *is assistant professor of environmental studies and history at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. He is currently completing a book on the environmental history of wilderness in the Apostle Islands of Lake Superior entitled* A Storied Wilderness: Nature, History, and the Rewilding of Apostle Islands National Lakeshore. ***Lynne Heasley*** *is associate professor of history and environmental studies at Western Michigan University, and author of* A Thousand Pieces of Paradise: Landscape and Property in the Kickapoo Valley *(Wisconsin, 2005). They plan to develop an edited anthology of Great Lakes environmental history with Canadian and U.S. researchers.*

NOTES

1. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
2. These texts include Carolyn Merchant, *Major Problems in American Environmental History* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1993); Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role*

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

in American History (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Louis S. Warren, *American Environmental History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

3. For example, William Cronon's *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983) is typically excerpted to discuss Indian-European contact in colonial New England.
4. For the first published anthology of Canadian environmental history, see Chad Gaffield and Pam Gaffield, eds., *Consuming Canada: Readings in Environmental History* (Toronto: Copp Clark Ltd., 1995). Alan MacEachern explains the slow turn to environmental history in Canada in "Voices Crying in the Wilderness: Recent Works in Canadian Environmental History" *Acadiensis* 31 (2002): 215-26. Other prominent Canadian historians are working to synthesize the environmental history of Canada, including Graeme Wynn, *Canada and Arctic North America: An Environmental History* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC Clio, 2007).
5. The standard treatment is Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).
6. Linda L. Revie, *The Niagara Companion: Explorers, Artists, and Writers at the Falls, from Discovery through the Twentieth Century* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2003); John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Patricia Jasen, *Wild Things: Nature, Culture, and Tourism in Ontario, 1790-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Elizabeth R. McKinsey, *Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
7. For histories of forest and copper in the Great Lakes, see Susan A. Flader, ed., *The Great Lakes Forest: An Environmental and Social History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); James Kates, *Planning a Wilderness: Regenerating the Great Lakes Cutover Region* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); and Larry Lankton, *Beyond the Boundaries: Life and Landscape at the Lake Superior Copper Mines, 1840-1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
8. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991).
9. See Carol Sheriff, *The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1996).
10. John N. Jackson, with John Burtniak and Gregory P. Stein, *The Mighty Niagara: One River, Two Frontiers* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003).
11. See, for example, Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary Indiana, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Tom Kuchenberg, *Reflections in a Tarnished Mirror: The Use and Abuse of the Great Lakes* (Sturgeon Bay, WI: Golden Glow Publishing, 1978), 52-67; and Dave Dempsey, *On the Brink: The Great Lakes in the 21st Century* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004).
12. Thomas H. Fletcher, *From Love Canal to Environmental Justice: The Politics of Hazardous Waste on the Canada-U.S. Border* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2003).
13. For the analytical potential of transnational Great Lakes history, see the fine work of migration historians John J. Bukowczyk, et al., *Permeable Border: The Great Lakes Basin as Transnational Region, 1650-1990* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005).
14. David P. Silcox, *The Group of Seven and Tom Thomson* (Toronto: Firefly Books, 2003). On the cultural construction of Canadian wilderness, see Bruce W. Hodgins, "Refiguring Wilderness: A Personal Odyssey," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 33:2 (1998): 12-26.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

15. Jonathan Bordo, "Jack Pine–Wilderness Sublime or the Erasure of the Aboriginal Presence from the Landscape," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 27 (1992): 98-128; also, Lynda Jessup, "Prospectors, Bushwhackers, Painters: Antimodernism and the Group of Seven," *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 17 (1998): 193-214.
16. For a comparative analysis, see Thomas R. Dunlap, *Nature and the English Diaspora: Environment and History in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
17. Steven C. High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of the North American Rustbelt, 1969-1984* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).
18. Kristin Szylvian shows how Michigan agencies deliberately displaced the state's commercial fishing industry in favor of a recreational fishing industry. See Kristin Szylvian, "Transforming Lake Michigan into the 'World's Greatest Fishing Hole': The Environmental Politics of Michigan's Great Lakes Sport Fishing, 1965-1985," *Environmental History* 9 (January 2004): 102-27.
19. The most advanced development of a Great Lakes scholarship has been in maritime and fisheries history. Excellent studies include Stephen Bocking, "Fishing the Inland Seas: Great Lakes Research, Fisheries Management, and Environmental Policy in Ontario," *Environmental History* 2 (1997): 52-73; Margaret Beattie Bogue, *Fishing the Great Lakes: An Environmental History, 1783-1933* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000); and Michael J. Chiarappa and Kristin M. Szylvian, *Fish for All: An Oral History of Multiple Claims and Divided Sentiment on Lake Michigan* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2003).
20. One of the most popular spokespeople for the region's landscape and communities is nature writer Jerry Dennis, whose work includes *The Living Great Lakes: Searching for the Heart of the Inland Seas* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2003).
21. William McGucken, *Lake Erie Rehabilitated: Controlling Cultural Eutrophication, 1960s-1990s* (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 2000); Kuchenberg, *Reflections in a Tarnished Mirror*; William Ashworth, *The Late, Great Lakes: An Environmental History* (New York: Knopf, 1986); Dempsey, *On the Brink*, 167.
22. For a chronology of the treaty, see Lee Botts and Paul Muldoon, *Evolution of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.