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Nature, Place, and Story: Rethinking Historic Sites in Canada by Claire Campbell

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Reclaiming Site: Emphasizing the Environment in Canadian Public History

Nature, Place, and Story: Rethinking Historic Sites in Canada by CLAIRE CAMPBELL

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017
\$34.95

Reviewed by EMMA MORGAN-THORP

Claire Campbell's *Nature, Place, and Story: Rethinking Historic Sites in Canada* is a manifesto in support of public environmental history, and it is simultaneously a love letter to Canada's historic sites. Campbell opens her book by sharing her experience with and affective ties to the history of place in Canada, explaining that from an early age she came to understand that "history is affected by where it happens, and that learning history *in situ*, or 'in place,' can be extraordinarily powerful" (3).

Her project is to argue for the implementation of public environmental history — rather than simply public history — in the design and use of national historic sites in Canada. More specifically, she is preoccupied with how historic sites might help us understand contemporary environmental issues, by situating them within the history of settler engagement with the land. She defends her thesis through five case studies, each presented in a concise and captivating chapter: "Gateway to a New World: L'Anse aux Meadows"; "Idyll and Industry: Grand Pre"; "Wilderness, Lost and Found: Fort William"; "Variety, Heritage, Adventure, and Park: The Forks of the Red River"; and "Nature's Gentlemen and a Nation's Frontier: The Bar U Ranch."

This is a beautifully organized book: each case study demonstrates the project's

central argument while simultaneously elucidating a site-specific issue and defining the key concepts pertinent to each. For instance, the first chapter offers an introduction to representations of Norse ("Viking") history in Newfoundland, muses on how essential land and landscape are to heritage tourism, and clarifies what is meant by the terms "environmental history," "climate change," and "public history." Chapter Five, about the The Bar U Ranch, illustrates the dangers of romanticizing uninhabited or pristine landscapes, which are only safe thanks to zoning and designation from the Canadian culture of resource extraction and industrial modernity. These areas — here, the beautiful frontier — allow us to maintain the illusion that the land has been unaffected by our use of it. This final chapter ends with a rousing indictment of Canada's extractive mentality and the complicity of historic sites which can act as alibis for unsustainable practices.

In her second chapter, Campbell explains the necessity of understanding site in "*relational terms*" (70), as neither geographically nor temporally separate from its surroundings. She emphasizes, here and throughout the book, that no historic site is an island: doing environmental history means appreciating context. Although she defines disciplinary terms and concepts with the ease of a practiced educator, Campbell has not produced a work of pure theory: she also offers straightforward proposals for accountable and honest storytelling at historic sites. In this chapter, she proposes "a second narrative for Grand Pre [...] that recognizes the continuity of the industrial past as well as the continuity of dykeland farming" (55).

Campbell supports her assertions and suggestions with a wide range of

supplementary material: a passage from Longfellow segues into a comprehensive description of saltwater biology; later, a Rindisbacher illustration from 1821 is joined by a 1967 market analysis of Winnipeg and ARC Management's 1981 *Red River Corridor Master Development Plan*; we even get to see the author's own photograph of Bar U Ranch. Similarly, alongside the works of history that populate her list of sources are journal and newspaper reviews of historic sites. The seventy-four pages of endnotes make for an inspiring list for further reading. This use of mixed source media points to an interdisciplinarity that lies at the heart of Canadian Studies, and which will render this book appealing to a wide range of readers.

Despite, or perhaps because of, her clear love of Canadian history and the land in which it comes to be, Campbell has produced a book that excoriates the use of national historic sites in the production of a Canadian national imaginary. Certainly, this book is a testament to the importance of loving critically, and of doing academic criticism lovingly. I admire the calm, measured, and no-nonsense way that the author lays out shocking facts about how the Canadian state has mobilized national parks and historic sites in support of patriotism, border naturalization, and resource exploitation.

There were moments — in particular, one memorable passage that identifies both historic sites and the tar sands as “products of the same national trajectory, the same extractive logics of modernity” (126) — when a point was made with such fierce clarity that I wanted to stand up and applaud. Campbell has set out to convince us that we could mobilize historic sites so much more meaningfully if we did not divorce them from their environments, that we could take up the historic knowledge of the land in service of building more sustainable practices in the present. The result is both accessible and engaging, and will be of interest not only to historians and Canadianists, but to non-academics, environmentalists, and concerned citizens alike.

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