

NATIONAL PARKS: WHAT ARE THEY GOOD FOR?

A Review Essay

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Guardians of the Wild: A History of the Warden Service of Canada's National Parks

Robert J. Burns with Mike Schintz

Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2000. Parks and Heritage Series, no. 2. ix, 390 pp. Illus., ports. \$24.95 paper.

Where the Mountains Meet the Prairies: A History of Waterton Country

Graham A. MacDonald

Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2000. Parks and Heritage Series, no. 1. ix, 210 pp. Illus., maps. \$24.95 paper.

Natural Selections: National Parks in Atlantic Canada, 1935-1970

Alan MacEachern

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001. xiii, 328 pp. Illus. \$49.95 cloth.

Phantom Parks: The Struggle to Save Canada's National Parks

Rick (D. Richard) Searle

Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2000. 262 pp. \$19.95 paper.

MY NATIONAL PARK is Pacific Rim, on Vancouver Island's west coast. From my childhood visits there I remember long sandy beaches, jumbles of logs thrown up against the dunes and the coastal forest, salt spray, sea lions, gulls, giant kelp, and sand dollars. I also remember the Wickaninnish Inn, a resort that was encouraged to close up when the

park came into being.¹ I remember that the quality of the road surface suddenly deteriorated the moment one left the park on the way to the small village of Tofino. I remember getting up before 6:00 AM to get in line for a

¹ The current Wickaninnish Inn is a different building located outside the park boundaries. The original inn now houses a Parks Canada interpretive centre.

spot at Greenpoint, the park's campground. I remember as well the interpretive signs at Florencia Bay, explaining that the bay was named after a famous shipwreck that happened off the coast.

All of these things – inspiring natural landscapes obviously, but also conflicts with neighbours and private business, overuse, and the human history of the place – make up the story of the national parks. Parks are inherently contradictory, places where nature is preserved from the very humanity that wants to visit and enjoy it. The books discussed here make it clear that preservation as a strategy for allowing humans and nature to co-exist is increasingly in trouble, for reasons having to do with the history of the parks and, in a larger sense, with what Canadians expect from nature and so from our parks.

As historians have noted, the idea of parks as ecological preserves is of fairly recent origin. The founding of British Columbia's original four national parks – Glacier (1886), Yoho (1911), Mount Revelstoke (1914), and Kootenay (1920) – had to do with tourism, recreation, and local boosterism rather than with the preservation of ecological integrity. Yoho, for instance, came about through pressure from the Appalachian Mountain Club and the Canadian Pacific Railway to preserve such scenic wonders as the Yoho Valley and Emerald Lake. Mount Revelstoke was the result of pressure from the local MP to make a national park out of a popular local mountaineering spot. All four were located in the Selkirk and Rocky Mountain ranges, where one could more easily find what the legendary James Harkin, first commissioner of Parks Canada, described as the sort of “sublime grandeur” and “primeval solitudes” then considered necessary to a park (MacEachern, 35).

As Alan MacEachern makes clear in *Natural Selections*, the origins of British Columbia's parks were hardly unusual. MacEachern's book takes on historians such as Janet Foster, who argued in a groundbreaking 1978 study that James Harkin and his colleagues were early preservationist visionaries. MacEachern argues that Foster and her supporters, generally parks and wilderness advocates, have been too quick to see in Harkin a precursor to themselves. The parks were more about culture than nature, he argues, preservation more about creating high-class cultural institutions than nature for its own sake.

MacEachern teases out this argument by carefully charting the establishment of the Atlantic Canada parks. He notes that in Prince Edward Island Park, a strip of seashore along the edge of a mostly flat and agricultural landscape, the sort of sublimity found in the mountain parks was sorely lacking. The ideal of the mountain parks created a sense in Parks Canada that parks should be institutions of taste and refinement. “Sublime nature,” it was thought, “was of interest to those who could draw out its emotive power ... while nature like the Island's was of interest to the many satisfied with pleasant surroundings” (81). In other words, the landscape of PEI was more pleasure ground than park. But taste and refinement, at least, could be retained. Green Gables, the house that inspired Lucy Maud Montgomery, was fully restored, its gables painted green. A golf course was built, and Parks Canada insisted that a high-class resort hotel be established at Dalvay at the eastern end of the park.

MacEachern's argument is sophisticated, subtle, and convincing, his writing clear and accessible. However he does tend to lose sight of the fact

that, though the bounds of parks may have been ecologically arbitrary, the act of preservation more about keeping out low-class commercialism than saving nature, at the end of the day Parks Canada was genuine in its desire to preserve wildlife. Robert Burns's history of Parks Canada's warden service, *Guardians of the Wild*, offers a welcome focus on the people actually working in the parks, clearly revealing their efforts at preservation. For instance, wardens made strenuous efforts to control hunters, ensuring that, while in the park, their rifles were sealed with lead (3-4) and patrolling the park bounds to keep hunters from pursuing game into the protected area (68). Burns's study also reveals that, in the early years of the park, preservation actually meant the preservation of game animals. Wardens – mostly former local outfitters, guides, and packers – therefore spent much of their time culling predators, the better to preserve stocks of deer and other game.

Burns shows the shift away from such practices over time, and in doing so demonstrates the same evolution in philosophy towards ecosystem management pointed out by parks historians such as Thomas Dunlap, Alfred Runte, and Kevin McNamee. Interpretation of such trends, however, is mostly lacking. Burns's book is mostly a hagiography of the Warden Service. The amount of detail, and the way it is presented (Burns favours long block quotations, often with minimal explanation) stunts the narrative. As well, the book could have used a more careful editing. On a couple of occasions Burns introduces the same person or concept twice and repeats sentences.

Graham MacDonald's *Where the Mountains Meet the Prairies*, a history of Waterton Lakes National Park, is a much

better book. MacDonald acknowledges the arbitrariness of park boundaries and deals with this by placing Waterton within the context of its entire regional history. He starts with a look at First Nations activity in the area and charts the decline of the buffalo and the earliest local incursions of Europeans as members of two 1858 survey expeditions: the Royal Geographical Society's Palliser Expedition and the joint British-American boundary commission. He then goes on to detail events both inside and outside the park. He tells the story of "Kootenai" Brown, legendary frontiersman and resident of the Waterton region. He shows how the park has moved from supporting oil drilling, lumbering, and livestock grazing to working to fulfill its obligations as a UNESCO biosphere reserve, a designation it gained in 1979.

Placing the park within a broad context avoids treating it as more of a naturally contiguous region than it really is. At the same time it has the effect, in the early chapters, of seemingly placing Waterton at the centre of events that had to do with far more than just this area. Later in the book MacDonald's strategy has the opposite effect, decentering Waterton and making it simply a result of changes in ideas of what constitutes a park. What Waterton can tell us about these changes, and their contradictions and complexities, is unclear. Still, for those who know and love the park or who are simply interested in the variety of uses that the national parks have served over the years, this is an interesting read.

MacDonald ends his book with a map from a 2000 Parks Canada study showing the vast complex of activities taking place on Waterton's borders, including logging, oil and gas wells, wildlife poaching, livestock trespassing, and residential subdivisions (160). As

Rick Searle makes clear in *Phantom Parks*, his polemical survey of the current state of the national parks system, such activities are a clear threat to ecological integrity. Hunting on the borders damages wildlife that happen to wander out of the protected zone; recreational subdivisions bring pollution; and logging and mining reduce parks to islands too small to support significant wildlife populations.

Nor is such "trouble with the neighbours," as Searle puts it, the only problem. The parks are threatened by development and overuse as well as by the wider environmental problems of atmospheric pollution and global warming. For Searle, Parks Canada itself cannot and will not take proper responsibility for the legacy it has been given to protect. It is threatened by politicians eager to have the parks turn a profit (though Searle is mostly complimentary with regard to Sheila Copps, currently the minister responsible for Parks Canada) and is confused, bitter, and divided, wracked by years of budget cuts and the unwillingness of senior brass to support the efforts of those in the field.

Parks Canada's mandate to preserve ecological integrity is actually of fairly recent origin, as Searle acknowledges. Preservation was designated the parks system's "most fundamental and important obligation" only in 1964. This commitment was strengthened in 1979 and, finally, in 1988 further legislation made maintaining ecological integrity the parks systems' central goal.

For Searle this change has hardly come soon enough, for both the parks and for society more generally. The real problem for him is one of values. For wilderness to be protected we must "find our way back to that sense of at-oneness with the essential Self, which identifies with others, including non-

human life forms and the planet" (217). Wilderness, he says, is "sacred" (25), and as a society we need to accept this fact and act accordingly. Parks Canada, he assumes, should be leading in this, not following.

Ultimately, the reader has to accept Searle's theology in order to feel the situation to be as dire as he does. Some clearly do: Searle presents an impressive array of like-minded souls, including academics such as York University's Neil Evernden, Kevin McNamee of the Canadian Nature Federation, Pierre Berton, and an array of angry, disillusioned Parks Canada employees. He weakens his case, however, by presenting almost no one with a different view. Are there no happy Parks Canada employees? Is there no one who feels Parks Canada is doing a good job?

Searle is surely correct, though, to point out that protecting our remaining wilderness areas will involve moving beyond the strategy of preservation. He proposes that we endorse ecological restoration, take seriously UNESCO's biosphere reserve model (in which parks form the central protected core in a regional ecological management plan), and implement wildlife corridors such as the proposed Y2Y (Yellowstone to Yukon) initiative.

What these books suggest is that preservation is an idea whose time may have passed. When the goal was to preserve "pleasure grounds" and sights of scenic beauty, it was a workable strategy. The move to an emphasis on ecology, if it is to be conducted seriously, must involve the parks moving beyond their borders to become partners (in some sense) with local people and the local environment. British Columbia's parks, then, represent both the past and the possible future of the parks system. On the one hand, British Columbia's four mountain parks, all

established over eighty years ago, are the classic preserves of sublime beauty and recreational possibilities. They are relatively small, feature townsites and tourist facilities, and are owned outright by Parks Canada. British Columbia's two newer parks are very different. Pacific Rim and Gwaii Haanas (formerly South Moresby) are designated as national park reserves, indicating that their legal status is in a state of flux pending the resolution of lands claims agreements. Pacific Rim, situated on the edge of Clayquot Sound, has recently been designated a UNESCO biosphere reserve. Gwaii Haanas is explicitly a joint project of Parks Canada and the Haida people, and it is dedicated as much to preserving Haida heritage as it is to preserving natural heritage. Far from being a tourist pleasure ground, it is remote from the centres of settlement in North America. According to Parks Canada statistics, 1,590,596 people visited Kootenay National Park in 2000-01, compared to only 1,805 people who visited Gwaii Haanas.

If we take MacEachern seriously, though, in a very real sense nothing has changed. The parks continue to reflect our ideals of what the non-human world should be and how to relate to it. Satisfying our current desire for serious ecological preserves demands that the parks move away from the pleasure-ground model, that they abandon the strategy of preservation in favour of an ideal of parks as merely one component of an entire landscape dedicated to preserving nature. Whether Canadians are willing to embrace such a strategy, one that

will likely limit recreation in the parks and demand that ecological concerns govern Canadian backyards as much as their nature preserves, remains to be seen.

BOOKS AND ARTICLES MENTIONED:

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Foster, Janet. *Working for Wildlife: The Beginning of Preservation in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998 (1978).

McNamee, Kevin. "From Wild Places to Endangered Spaces: A History of Canada's National Parks." In *Parks and Protected Areas in Canada*, edited by Philip Dearden and Rick Rollins. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 17-44.

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Runte, Alfred. *National Parks: The American Experience*. 3rd ed. Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997 (1979).