

A Timeless Place: The Ontario Cottage by Julia Harrison

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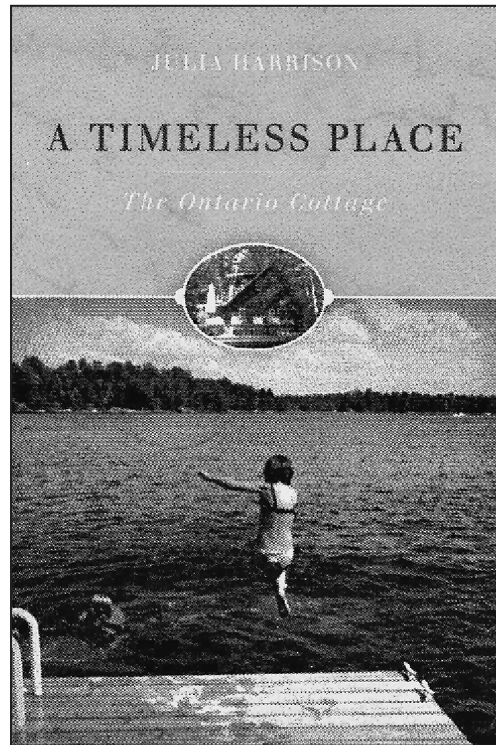
A Timeless Place: The Ontario Cottage

By Julia Harrison

Vancouver: The University of British Columbia Press, 2014. 308 pages. \$32.95 paperback. ISBN 978-0-77482-608-2 (www.ubcpres.ca)

Like many Ontario readers, I have a personal perspective on this volume. I arrived in Canada from Colorado in 1967 and, within a year, we had bought a “cabin” on Brule Lake in northern Frontenac in the Land of Lakes cottage country. What followed turned out to be a mythic backwoods experience and construction project, a family infatuation and mythic place, a financial drain and profitable investment. It introduced me to the history of eastern Ontario and a perspective on Canada that still haunts my imagination and scholarship to this day

All of this and more resonates with the several themes of Julia Harrison’s most recent volume, *A Timeless Place: The Ontario Cottage*. A professor of anthropology at Trent University and author of an earlier work, *Being a Tourist: Finding Meaning in Pleasure Travel*, Harrison has embarked on a new intellectual odyssey. It moves her away from understanding the rationale of international travel to seeking insights into modern leisure strategies at home. In particular, *A Timeless Place* explores the “meaningfulness of the cottage experience” and why it “generates such strong emotional attachment and commitment.” Defining herself as essentially a “non-cottager,” she turns to Ontario’s Haliburton region, the “poor man’s Muskoka,” to reflect on, and to expose, the “deeply held meaning” of the post-World War II cottage in symbolic, social, cultural, personal, and even moral



terms, as an iconic place with all of its ambiguities and contradictions. But, as suggested above, her findings resonate with other cottaging realms, at least in Ontario.

Harrison’s rich insights deliberately avoided the “traditional participant observation” method to avoid “bartering the goodwill” of cottager-friends. Rather, she favoured a strategy of semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and e-mail interactions with some fifty-four Haliburton cottagers. Other sources were the materials produced by such advocacy groups as various cottage associations, as well as articles in the magazine, *Cottage Life*, and relevant sections of *The Globe and Mail* and *National Post*. But, just like every well-constructed cottage, this literary structure is “well-studded” with theoretical insights from a range of scholarly authorities from Heidegger to Halbwachs, and well deco-

rated by artistic flourishes from such fictive writers as Ondaatje, Purdy, and Atwood.

With the aid of these perspectives, Harrison herself constructs a rich interpretation of the core-beliefs and contradictions, of the practical realities, values, and symbolic life of the “cottage aesthetic” and “cottage feeling.” Central to this critique is her identification of three categories of cottagers: the traditionalists (modest structures, concerned with feeling, traditional recreation, romantic association, “real” cottagers); the socialites (modern comforts, entertainments, amenities, consuming the experience); the transients (temporary visitors, voyeurs of place and experience, ignorant of “cottage culture.”) This analysis is grounded on a firm foundation of such theoretical underpinnings as “sense of place,” “layered landscapes,” “memoryscapes,” and “karmic connections.” But Harrison goes further. She explores how the “cottage is entangled with community, at both a very local and a national level,” and even contributes to “what it means to be Canadian.” That is, understanding how the Haliburton experience defines the meaning of being Canadian in terms of place, history, and world citizenship.

At the local community level, for some, the cottage serves to help “narrate ‘family’ into being” through a rage of cottaging rituals: the kinetic experience of driving to and from the summer location; the practised exercise of putative masculine and feminine roles; ritualised barbecues and campfires, water-sports and communal games. But there is another view of this experience touted by traditionalists to be the material anchor of identity. Harrison demonstrates how, for some women, it was a stressful prison of routine and responsibility, and, for some men, their strategy of escaping from the demands of their “real” careers was a challenge for their “primal masculin-

ity” (A personal recollection: “Not bad for a professor, Dad!”) So, as Harrison presents it, these remembered family rituals of pleasures and “penance” can constitute “a complex social, cultural, and political—thus implicitly exclusionary—practice.”

As for the representation of a pan-Canadian identity, Harrison argues that the profusion of flags in cottage country suggests a “nostalgic nationalism” that encapsulates the “iconic Canadian landscape” of the popularised images of the Group of Seven and the “golden age” of historicised Canadian development. But are these codes changing in mid-21st Century Canada? Are there different expectations of modern Canada? For the past sixty years or so, assumptions about gender and class, family and community, nation and race have been fundamental to constructing the perceptions of life at a Haliburton cottage. But, as Harrison puts it, “Change is swirling around life at the cottage.” So what’s happening!

First, perhaps future generations may have to re-construct their traditional image of what is a “real” cottager and even a “real” Canadian as the formerly dominant “traditional” cottager is challenged by the growing ethos of the “socialites” and monster structures of *nouveau riche*. Secondly, Haliburton like so many other cottaging regions has been “a place of whiteness” whereas modern Canada is a place of racial-cultural diversity and so many of the new Canadians are not connected to Canada’s mythic metanarratives of place and history. Thirdly, what about the “presumptions of the normal heterosexual family” in a new world of gender relations? Fourthly, the traditional *genre de vie* of cottages that favoured healthy bodies only is being challenged by an aging populace?

All of these alternative concepts of cottage life and others have been proposed in

Harrison's excellent historical and sociological study, *A Timeless Place*, but others come to mind as well. First, while the Aboriginal presence is alluded to in a historical context in the introduction, their continued presence is ignored. The concerns of the "Idle No More Movement" are echoed in recent developments such as the recent Algonquin Agreement with the Province of Ontario that is on the agenda of so many cottagers' associations throughout the Ottawa Valley. Similarly, the concerns of the Mississauga throughout southern Ontario reflect the recent Supreme Court decision on the legality of the Royal Proclamation of 1763. No longer an historical footnote, the Aboriginal population are reasserting their presence as the First Nations as recognised by King George III.

And then there's the issue of cottaging and the post-modern age. Given Harrison's expertise on trends in contemporary tourism demonstrated in her previous book, *Being a Tourist*, I would have welcomed her expansion on her thoughts on what's

happening now at the macro-level. While the significance of the ageing of Canada's population is related to the booming mega-cruise boat industry and winter vacationing in the American and Mexican "souths," is there something else going on? Perhaps some Canadians at least are transcending their former fixation on a mythic fur-trade, lumber-minerals economy, forests-iceberg rationale of national identity. Perhaps they are embracing and enjoying the culture—and climate!—of an emerging cosmopolitan and trans-national identity. Even if that's far-fetched, it beats the joys of an outdoor toilet and another rendering of "My paddle's keen and bright"!

But thank you, Professor Harrison, for launching my flights of fancy with your thoughtful and provocative scholarship and imagination on the history and future of such an important dimension of Ontario's recent history.

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The Nature of Empires and the Empires of Nature: Indigenous Peoples and the Great Lakes Environment

Karle S. Hele editor

Waterloo Ontario, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013. \$85.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-1-55458-328-7. \$49.95 digital. ISBN 978-55458-422-2 (www.wlupress.wlu.ca)

At first blush this work appears very similar to Professor Hele's 2008 edited volume: *Lines Drawn Upon the Water: First Nations and the Great Lakes Borders and Borderlands*. [Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Aboriginal Studies Series, 2008]. Both are composed of conference submissions, the present collection being a product of a joint York University-Walpole

Island First Nation workshop. Each essay is assigned its own chapter. Several of the participants appear in both works and offer similar subject matter. There is also a comprehensive bibliography. Where Hele's previous book worked on the theme of borderlands as both physical and animate rather than political and static divisions, his new volume explores Nature's power