

The Nurture of Nature: Childhood, Antimodernism, and Ontario Summer Camps, 1920-1955 By Sharon Wall

Thomas F. McIlwraith

Volume 102, Number 1, Spring 2010

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065609ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065609ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

McIlwraith, T. F. (2010). Review of [*The Nurture of Nature: Childhood, Antimodernism, and Ontario Summer Camps, 1920-1955* By Sharon Wall]. *Ontario History*, 102(1), 139–140. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065609ar>

butions during the 1837 rebellion.

None of the above comments should detract from the outstanding contribution Landon made to this subject. The fact that serious scholars of the Underground Railroad and Black history in early Canada still refer to Landon's work is a testament to his importance as a scholar. Even his overly rosy picture of race relations in Upper Canada is of value as a balance to some scholarship that has focused perhaps too heavily on the racism Blacks experienced in this province.

This collection is likely to be found most valuable for its historiographical contribution. The reader not only learns a great deal about the Underground Railroad and the work of those who assisted Black fugitives, but also how the pioneer scholar of this subject interpreted it in writings that covered half a century. *Ontario's African-Canadian Heritage* is definitely a worthwhile collection for both the scholar and the general reader.

Colin McFarquhar, Toronto, Ontario

*The Nurture of Nature:
Childhood, Antimodernism, and Ontario
Summer Camps, 1920-1955*

By Sharon Wall

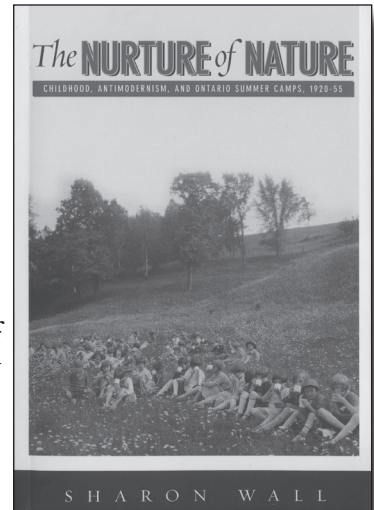
Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009. xx + 369 pages.
\$32.95 softcover. ISBN 978-0-7748-1640-3 (www.ubcpres.ca)

I must open with a disclaimer: I am one of thousands of ex-campers that sustain Sharon Wall's account of *Childhood, Antimodernism, and Ontario Summer Camps, 1920-1955*, her subtitle to *The Nurture of Nature*. Summer camps have been in my family for several generations, and Tanamakoon and Temagami have been household words throughout my life. So have Kilcoo and Kagawong. It is an unusual privilege to review a book in which one is an anonymous participant.

Wall, a history professor at the University of Winnipeg, has written an erudite, well-informed, and thoroughly readable account of a slice of life no doubt lurking in the minds of many *Ontario History* readers and perhaps retained anecdotally in childhood letters home, stashed away in a shoebox in the attic. Now, here it is, those memoirs articulated and placed in the context they warrant, using interviews with former campers and staff to enrich the documen-

tary evidence. Wall writes of the sociology and psychology – even the anthropology – of camp life, and of the energy

by private enterprise to retain for urban youth a natural world experience increasingly lost in the twentieth century. I never encountered a fellow camper from a farm. Cottaging and camping people regarded agricultural Ontario between Toronto and Muskoka or Haliburton as merely an inconsequential space en route to perceived wilderness. But then, as Wall attests, youth camps gradually introduced modernity by replacing tents with cabins, oil lamps with electricity and, in the case of Cochrane's camp in Temagami (where I canoe-tripped 28 days in 1955), by hacking out a small golf course on a Shield islet.



Those thoughts lead into role-playing. Wall commits a full chapter (one of six) to “playing Indian”: that is, camps’ use of the First Nations theme to enhance the wilderness experience, complete with council fires and misplaced (for Ontario) elements such as totem poles and feather headdresses. City folk, set in wild places yet comfortably and safely sheltered from them, were playing out fantasies too. That is what made canoe-tripping through the *real* bush so exhilarating. Girls’ camps went one step further, hiring Indian guides for their canoe trips (boys were expected to cope on their own). Youth camps also employed Natives as staff in kitchens and workshops, and sometimes in arts and crafts programmes, thus bringing two solitudes together in subtle ways.

Wall repeatedly drums the paradox of wilderness and modernity, casting the youth camp as a sort of middle ground. Softening the rough edges, while simultaneously sustaining the innate wildness in each of us, is a tough assignment, gradually understood through the interwar years by a generation of distinguished private camp leaders such as Mary Hamilton, A.L. Cochrane, Mary Northway and Taylor Statton. Their philosophy and idealism, always tempered by pragmatism, permeate this book.

Wall gives relatively less attention to agency camps, those run mainly by churches and the YM/YWCA. These tended to be less luxurious and less costly than the private camps, but were similar in locale, activities and outlook. Fresh-air camps were quite different, however, and Bolton Camp becomes the counterpoint, given prominence by the book’s cover picture of a line-up of youngsters having “mug-up” on a pastoral hillside. Bolton camp was in—indeed *was*—the middle ground (it’s site is well within the GTA in 2009), a place where working-class girls and boys from the smoky neigh-

bourhoods of industrial West Toronto or Hamilton’s Corktown romped over meadows, breathed fresh air, marveled at daisies, butterflies and stars, and dipped in cement swimming pools. Charitable agencies, particularly the *Toronto Daily Star* Fresh Air Fund, contributed substantially. Children attended Bolton for perhaps ten days, and their mothers came along and learned domestic skills. Many a young life took a positive turn, thanks to Bolton.

The Nurture of Nature is ultimately about the land and environmental education, and is published in a UBC Press series written by some of Canada’s most distinguished environmental historians. Wall impresses upon readers the thought that camps have, for a century, been alerting young minds to their place in today’s larger world of Kyoto, Copenhagen and beyond. She also offers an accounting of human behaviour, of parents seeking a maturing, ‘Canadian’ experience for their children, or simply abdicating parental duties. (Some campers were at boarding school the rest of the year.) *The Nurture of Nature* might have been titled “the nature of nurture,” and people who have no special interest in, or connection to, Ontario’s youth camps may read this book for its many insights into education, religion and mental health, and the mixing of social classes and genders. For me, however, I read it for the recollections stirred: of sailing dinghies solo in Balsam Lake, of mail call, of trading comic books as if they were currency, and being crudman (I was small) on the long canoe-trip portage to Lady Evelyn Lake. *The Nurture of Nature* is a most engaging read, and now I shall pass my copy on to my Tanamakoon sister (I think she is in one of the pictures) for the pleasure it will give her.

Thomas F. McIlwraith
University of Toronto