

The Nature of Empires and the Empires of Nature: Indigenous Peoples and the Great Lakes Environment edited by Karle S. Hele

Laurie Leclair

Volume 106, Number 1, Spring 2014

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050727ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050727ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Leclair, L. (2014). Review of [*The Nature of Empires and the Empires of Nature: Indigenous Peoples and the Great Lakes Environment* edited by Karle S. Hele]. *Ontario History*, 106(1), 133–136. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050727ar>

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.

Brian S. Osborne
Professor emeritus, Queen's University

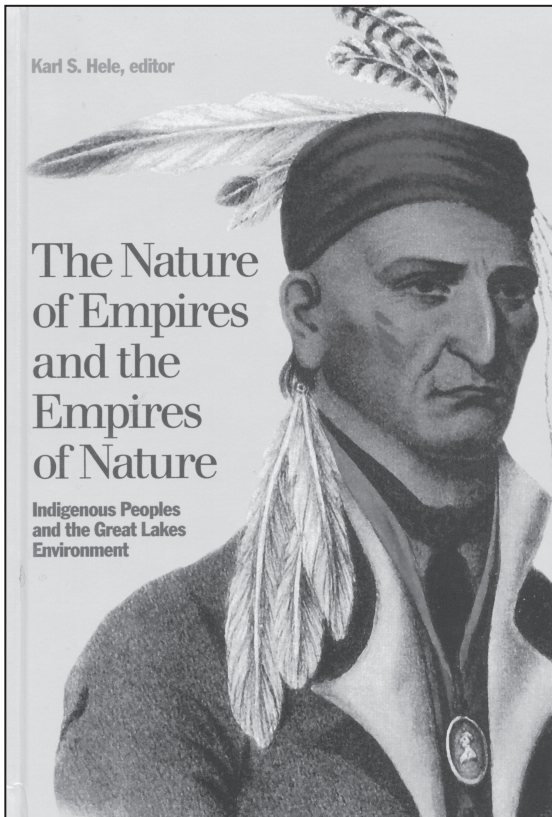
The Nature of Empires and the Empires of Nature: Indigenous Peoples and the Great Lakes Environment

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



and the attempts by the empires of Canada, America and Britain to control it. First Nations are placed alongside Nature, struggling against changes affecting their socio-economic and political structure as well as their physical environment. Together, Hele states, “the resulting collection seeks to address the epistemological chasm between the cultures and nations living within the Great Lakes watershed.” [p. xiii].

The fifteen chapters start with “A Meditation on Environmental History”, a reflection upon a long academic career in Imperialist studies by Professor Emeritus John MacKenzie. MacKenzie’s canon was instrumental in coining the workshop’s mandate of exploring the nature of empires *vis à vis* the empires of nature. For

him, imperialism’s need to conquer its environment interpreted wilderness, and by extension, its indigenous communities, as a dark force to be transformed by bible and plough into an enlightened, Christian state. Other chapters follow from this vantage point setting a stage of diplomatic confusion, environmental disaster and alienation, beginning with Heather Marie Annis’ look at urban societies’ disconnectedness from nature, and the redemptive qualities of story-telling and play in “Tricky Medicine: Something Old for Something New” (Chapter 2). Jon Johnson’s “The Great Indian Bus Tour of Toronto” (Chapter 15) offers a complementary piece with story-telling’s modern manifestation through the urban road trip. Similarly, Ute Lischke examines the writings of the Anishinaabe poet Louise Erdrich, who gives her own eloquent narrative of dispossession, urbanization and the struggle to connect to the natural world. (Chapter 13)

Chapters 3 through 5 consider education. First, Alesha Jane Brekenridge in “Rediscovering Relationships” uses her experiences as both a teacher and a student to argue that Ontario schools should be infused with indigenous ideologies, as our very real environmental predicament requires educators to revamp curriculum and end what she calls the “ecological estrangement” of students. Next, Lori Beth Hallock’s “Learning to Relate: Environmental and Place Based Education in Northern Ontario” suggests a solution to this estrangement through the teachings of Benton Benai. Brian Rice’s fifth chapter “Bridging Academia and Indigenous Environmental Science: Is it Too Late?” questions the rubrics of Indigenous studies programs that continue using standard practical methodologies and established anthropological theories. Instead, he argues, the field should take on a more indig-

enous, holistic approach to learning.

Historians will find the middle section of the book most useful. In "Empire Revisited: The Covenant Chain of Silver, Land Policy, and the Proclamation of 1763 in the Great Lakes Region, 1760-1800" (Chapter 6), Karen J. Travers presents the strongest essay in the collection, examining the elaborate system of diplomacy which reached its zenith after the Revolutionary War. Travers cites aboriginal agency in the creation of large-scale eighteenth and early nineteenth century Indian land grants. These agreements were forged by mutual trust and respect and aimed at securing lands for allies and family such as those Indian agents who took part in the golden age of frontier diplomacy. For those involved in bush politics, a thorough understanding of Native-based statecraft was much more crucial to survival than the edicts of a nebulous and distant Royal Proclamation. The death of William Johnson [1774] was the bellwether of political change, and ironically, when the new civil order curtailed the efforts of a quickly diminishing cadre of Indian Agents, it removed those who could have most effectively enforced its tenets.

As Travers suggests that historians reconsider the role of eighteenth-century Indian Agents, Rhonda Telford's seventh chapter "Surveying Townships after the 1790 Treaty" reminds us of the importance of primary sources found outside of the standard Indian Department record groups. Similarly, David McNab's interpretation of the Journals of Ezhaaswe entitled "Landscape and Mindscape Conjoined" (Chapter 12) will give the researcher hope that important documents may yet lay undiscovered.

Lianne Leddy's "Poisoning the Serpent" (Chapter 8) proposes a modern, prescient discussion of the uranium industry's effects on the Serpent River community.

The reckless establishment of a mine-heavy town like Elliot Lake and the ineffectiveness of socio-economic and scientific studies in the face of politics are exacerbated by the protracted nature of resolution when three levels of government involve themselves in the welfare of a First Nations community. In a similar theme, Christianne V. Stephens and Regna Darnell's "The Water Quality Issue at Walpole Island First Nation" (Chapter 11) demonstrate the use of oral history as a tool to help recognize adverse environmental conditions.

Humanity and environment are not the only casualties of Imperialism. Maureen Richein "Divided Spaces, Divided Stories: Animal Control Programs in Canada's Northern Indigenous Communities" (Chapter 9) draws from her own experience with visiting spay and neuter clinics in Kashechewan and what she has learned about the RCMP-initiated dog slaughters in Nunavut and Northern Quebec to ask whether cross cultural differences in animal ownership can turn compassionate intervention into something akin to "canine colonialism."

Maria Cristina Manzano-Munguia extends the concepts of alienation and displacement among the aboriginal communities of London, Ontario, in "Diasporas in Canada: A Case of Recognition" (Chapter 10). Beginning her narrative with the Royal Proclamation and carrying it through to the 1830's civilization schemes and the removal attempts that followed shortly afterwards she argues that these early efforts engendered policies of dispersal that continue to the present day. Finally, Rick Fehr, in "Settler Narrative and Indigenous Resistance in The Baldoon Mystery" (Chapter 14) attempts the closest adherence to the collection's theme by retelling the old settler myth of the McDonald haunting as an example of Western man's, in this case a farm-

er's, need to subdue nature both temporal and other worldly, and his failure to do so. Conceptually, Hele's previous collection, *Lines Drawn...*, offered a stronger platform for academic discussion. Integrating the concept of an Empire of Nature within the larger realm of contemporary aboriginal studies has the potential to reduce its human subjects to caricatures. What's more, a workshop predicated in part on Mackenzie's observance, "Throughout the world, Europeans have tended to see land and nature in terms of ownership while indigenous people see them in terms of use and relationship" [p.9] risks a mawkish simplicity. Statements like this belie an ignorance of the complex-

ity of traditional land use and ownership, reducing and homogenizing sophisticated systems into one generic way of life, more suitable for folklore than arbitration. And they are potentially dangerous because governments love them. They love them because they take the very visceral struggle of First Nations to protect their land base and treaty rights and reduce it to tales told around a campfire. This is probably the reason why the stronger chapters in the collection barely touch on this theme and stand out as singularly thought-provoking.

Laurie Leclair
Leclair Historical Research, Toronto

The Patriot War along the Michigan-Canada Border: Raiders and Rebels

By Shaun J. McLaughlin

Charleston, South Carolina: History Press, 2013. \$19.19 (U.S.) softcover. 189 pages.
ISBN 978-1-62619-055-9 (www.historypress.net)

The "Patriot War," as a whole series of 1838 invasions of Canada from American border states came to be called (at least in the United States), was a disaster from start to finish. Here, in a companion to his earlier volume on raids along the New York border (reviewed by John Carter in *Ontario History*, CIV, 2, Autumn 2012), Shaun J. McLaughlin continues the sad tale of eagerness, ignorance and incompetence that followed the debacles of the 1837 Upper Canada Rebellion. As the title suggests, many sympathetic Americans saw these raiders—some Canadian exiles, mostly American volunteers—as "Patriots," crossing the border to help re-ignite the fires of Canadian rebellion and thus to expel the British lion from the North American continent. However, to the colony's British governors—and apparently most of its

residents—the raiders were not patriots but pirates, not liberators but invaders, not rescuers but rebel terrorists.

McLaughlin has read much and travelled far—digging in archives, collecting facts, culling quotations, copying images and taking photos. Here he has assembled all his finds into a single narrative. After a brief setting of the scene and a summarizing of the Mackenzie and Duncombe uprisings of 1837, the author describes the first failed invasion: Mackenzie's occupying of Navy Island (although from New York, this raid was not part of McLaughlin's first book). He then moves west to tell the tales of the various ill-fated and inept incursions across the Detroit River, followed by the battle at Pelee Island. The next chapters deal with arrests, trials, and escapes. The author also repeats and augments his earlier volume's