

Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation by Suzanne Zeller

Ross Fair

Volume 103, numéro 2, fall 2011

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065459ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065459ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Fair, R. (2011). Compte rendu de [*Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation* by Suzanne Zeller]. *Ontario History*, 103(2), 228–229. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065459ar>

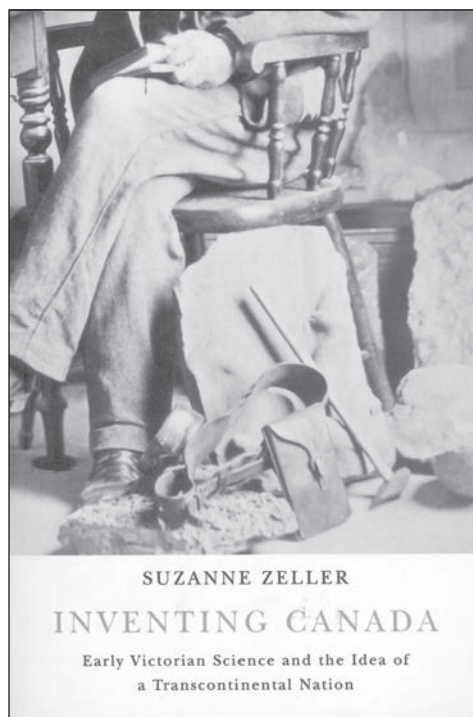
*Inventing Canada:
Early Victorian Science
and the Idea of a
Transcontinental Nation*

by Suzanne Zeller

Carleton Library Series #214. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009. xxxvi+356 pages. \$29.95 softcover. ISBN 978-0-773535-61-9 (www.mqup@mcgill.ca)

Suzanne Zeller's 1987 study of Victorian science in the context of British North American dreams of transcontinental expansion explored the ways in which the inventory sciences provided new ways to itemize, categorize, and comprehend the physical world of the continent. By studying the developing Victorian scientific fields of geology, terrestrial magnetism, meteorology, and botany, Zeller concluded that these and other inventory sciences "contributed substantially to the modern intellectual framework within which Canada was 'invented' and even re-invented by historians of the 'nationalist' school." (274) At once a history of early Canadian science and an investigation into the associational world of the Victorian era, *Inventing Canada* was Zeller's attempt to emphasize the role that science played in shaping Canadian nationalism.

To Victorian British North America, she argued, geology promised great mineral wealth for a new transcontinental nation. For example, the Canadas possessed no coal deposits upon which they could grow self-sufficient industries. As geologists inventoried mineral supplies elsewhere to the east and to the northwest, they highlighted the necessity and benefits of a transcontinental nation. For their part, the fields of terrestrial magnetism and me-



teorology provided scientific evidence that the territories beyond the north-western borders of the Canadas possessed the soil and climate for both habitation and cultivation. Finally, botany's chief contribution was the evidence of geographic distribution, which further informed British North Americans that their world could thrive in its northerly existence. Significantly, Zeller claimed, the understanding of botanical varieties helped invent an idea of nation that saw Canadians as a hardy northern variety, still loyal to their British heritage but with a relationship to the mother country that would most certainly evolve in future.

Some twenty years after the appearance of *Inventing Canada*, the Carleton Library Series' reprint includes a new reflective essay by Zeller as a means to (re)introduce her book. In "Inventing Canada Redux," Zeller outlines the intel-

lectual and historical influences behind her study and offers a modest assessment of the influence her work has had on scholarship. She devotes much space to describing the developments and frustrations in the historical study of Canadian science since the 1980s, though she does mention her study's impact beyond this field, particularly in historical geography and environmental history. Unfortunately, Zeller does not discuss her views on the book's impact on our understanding of early Canadian nationalism.

As Zeller admits, assessing the impact of one's own work is a difficult task. However, her book did argue that, "Victorian inventory science defined premises upon which a certain Canadian nation could be built, and which gave rise to 'national' policies designed to safeguard that existence" (269), and when it appeared, *Inventing Canada* spawned debate as to whether or not Zeller had argued this claim convincingly. Therefore, it might have been useful to read her reflections on this aspect of her study in light of what has been published since her arguments first appeared. That said, perhaps there is little she could say. Many graduate students in the 1990s rushed headlong into new studies of twentieth-century Canada. Likewise, a parallel trend to regionalism in Canadian history has meant that few scholars have tackled the question of what sparked and fuelled a transcontinental vision amongst the Victorians. Nevertheless, cultural theory investigations into visions of the Canadian nation have been published, as have studies of Victorian liberalism and the associational world of the Canadas. For example, in her *Inglorious Arts of Peace* (1999), Elsbeth Heaman explores Victorian exhibitions and their invention of particular visions of Canada and Canadians, while Darren Ferry's *Uniting in Measures of Common Good*

(2008) considers the construction of Victorian liberalism in central Canada by examining voluntary associations of the period. As a result, Zeller's reflections on the book's impact on the history of science in Canada seems a bit too narrowly focused to assess properly its strengths and promises.

In short, much historical investigation and interpretation remains to be done to prove or disprove Zeller's arguments, despite the passage of more than twenty years. One can hope that her introductory essay might cause historians to reflect on the reasons why her work has not generated a better depth and breadth of historical research in early Canada nationalism. Furthermore, one can hope that it might draw the attention of young scholars and encourage them to conduct new research that builds upon the foundation of her investigations into Victorian science, the associations based upon its study and, especially, the role that science played in generating the transcontinental vision of Confederation. Others, too, might attempt to fill significant historical gaps that Zeller's study highlighted. For example, she claimed quite rightly that there were important links between Enlightenment and Victorian science, yet her pursuit of the latter topic left the former completely unexplored. To fully appreciate the world of Victorian science in British North America, we need to understand the influence that Enlightenment science had on colonial development in the earlier Georgian era.

For all these reasons, *Inventing Canada* should be an important reissue, as it continues to hold the promise of future historical investigation and debate. It is up to Canadian historians to make it so.

Ross Fair,
Ryerson University