

INTRODUCTION

Writing a History of Place

The wide expanse of fresh water,
the granite rock, the insistent presence of the elements,
have steadied the perspective when at times
the whole undertaking threatened to become overwhelming.

– Kathleen Coburn, *In Pursuit of Coleridge* (1977)

I fell in love with *Night, Pine Island*, the first time I saw it (Plate 5). *Night*, now owned by the National Gallery of Canada, is a small oil painting by A.Y. Jackson from 1924. It shows an island of coral-coloured granite fractured by crevices, heaped with sworls of rock cradling a dark and still pool of water, the island guarded by a line of upright pines silhouetted darkly against an indigo sky pierced by pure white stars. Despite the incredibly vivid colouring there is a feeling of utter stillness and timelessness. In a heartbeat I was transported back to a summer night on Georgian Bay. I had a similar reaction when I first read Douglas LePan's poem "Islands of Summer"; I was stunned to discover someone had been able to articulate my impression of the Bay so perfectly:

Abrupt granite rising from the clearest
water in all the world. Crowned with a tangled diadem
of blue green foliage ...
And always beneath birdsong the sound of water.¹

By the time I was five years old, my father and grandmother had each spent thirty years in Georgian Bay, working at a boys' camp called Camp Hurontario, located just north of Twelve Mile Bay. In the camp's dining hall is a series of mottoes nailed to the rafters, which say things like: "In still waters, things reflect most clearly," "To every island there is a lee," and "The west wind shapes the pine." Growing up, I saw how people can become truly passionate about a place: my father, our friends at Hurontario,

and, it seemed, everyone I met who knew “the Bay.” The west wind had shaped their lives just as it had shaped their beloved landscape.

If the Bay could evoke this reaction on a personal level and in the arts, then clearly landscape mattered – and has mattered more than we often think. From this emerged questions about how people have responded to the Bay in the past. I began to discover a treasure of cultural artifacts ranging from local ghost stories to some of the most famous paintings in Canadian art, which, like the dining hall at Hurontario, express how people have felt about the Bay. This response may be practical or imaginative, personal or collective, but it demonstrates the extent to which our culture shapes the environment or is shaped by it. Our reaction to Georgian Bay reveals our ideas about nature, but at the same time, the landscape itself shapes these ideas. Looking at the silent night on Pine Island, we are looking into the past, at how the Canadian experience has been inextricably intertwined with the natural environment.

By virtue of its size, location, and history, Georgian Bay deserves to be considered one of the Great Lakes. Though inextricably bound to the Great Lakes system in general and Huron in particular, its rich history and distinctive geography do seem to warrant a special status – certainly more than just an arm of Lake Huron. It is almost closed off from the main body of Lake Huron by the limestone ridge of the Bruce Peninsula and Manitoulin Island. At two hundred kilometres long, it is almost as large in surface area as Lake Ontario, and large enough to be among the world’s twenty largest lakes. Not surprisingly, the Bay was identified as a separate lake, “Lake Manitoolin,” when Capt. William Owen of the British Admiralty drew up the first modern charts of the Great Lakes in 1815.² James Barry thus expressed a popular sentiment when he subtitled his 1968 history of the Bay “The Sixth Great Lake.”³ Holding one-fifth of the world’s surface freshwater, the Great Lakes bring maritime culture into the continental interior.

The Lakes basin as we know it dates from about 10,000 years ago, shaped by a succession of ice sheets and glacial lakes. Georgian Bay angles north-east alongside Lake Huron, with a shoreline that encompasses four very different geological sections. The southern shore around to the Severn River is the northern edge of the St. Lawrence lowlands; the limestone ridge of the Niagara Escarpment runs through the Bruce Peninsula and Manitoulin and adjacent islands; and the two sections of the Canadian Shield are divided by the French River, the older Huron province to the north (which includes the La Cloche hills), and the younger Grenville Province on the east shore. Incidentally, it is usually known as Georgian



Map 1 The Great Lakes

Bay, but historically references to “the Georgian Bay” are also quite common. I grew up saying “the” Georgian Bay, but I use Georgian Bay here in a concession to modern usage.

This study focuses on the archipelago of the east shore, from the Severn to the North Channel, a territory sometimes referred to as the Thirty Thousand Islands. It is the least hospitable of the four shores: the gneiss bedrock is home to scrubby vegetation such as juniper, white pine, red oak, and cedar, but the acidic, shallow, poorly drained soils could never support the mixed agriculture and density of settlement found on the south or west shores. First Nations used the Bay seasonally for fishing and trading, and whites only began settling the southern islands at the end of the nineteenth century. In human terms, the archipelago is best defined as the vertical corridor of communities that depend on the shore and “derive their character and economic survival from the waters of the Bay.” Communities on the islands and inland lakes might use a slightly more stringent definition of water-access only.⁴ But it is not a narrow or isolated subject. The Bay is positioned at an intersection of historical influences that have converged from the rest of Ontario, the Great Lakes, and eastern North America.



Map 2 The Georgian Bay area. The inset is a detail of the coastline showing some of the many thousands of islands that dot Georgian Bay.

This convergence is evident in the remarkable range of sources that refer to Georgian Bay, though the bulk of these dates only from the past century or so. Cartography, art, and photography offer different visual portraits of the landscape. Literature includes a vernacular record in voyageur, logging, and shipwreck ballads; personal memoirs; fiction and poetry, in which landscape acts as setting and symbol; and tourism material, which, by treating nature as a marketing tool, reveals what it was presumed people sought in the outdoors. Oral histories are a source of colourful stories but also a valuable measure of popular environmental attitudes, user conflicts, and public reactions to political policy. Boat or cottage designs, along with archaeological remnants of underwater cribs, sunken logs, and anchor rings, provide clues to ways in which people used the land. Thanks to the division of powers in Canada's federalist system, all levels of government have been concerned with natural resources. The most important records in this case come from the federal Departments of Indian Affairs and Marine and Fisheries, and the National Parks Branch, together with the provincial ministries responsible for natural resources, municipal affairs, and tourism. Working with such disparate sources – impressionist and documentary, textual and visual, high and popular culture – is challenging, but ultimately it rewards us with a much more complete image of the past. We might “read” the influence of the Canadian Shield, for instance, in geological and mining surveys; in patterns of travel on the rivers that formed in fault lines, or in failed agricultural settlements attempted in stony soils; in architectural adaptations to an intractable rocky foundation; or in paintings or literary descriptions of “miles of ancient rock twisted in lava layers, laid out in swirls, rolled into boulders, opened in crevices.”⁵ These clues fit together for a coherent telling of a place's history, particularly when the same messages about a place recur across time and in different media.

Studying landscape means taking a broad view of history. The very word “landscape” implies seeing things in context, a context that may be thematic, spatial, or functional. It draws on a wide range of subjects in the humanities and the social sciences: history, geography, political science, economics, literature, art, and design. Integrating different disciplines into a single story of the past is a better reflection of actual historical experience, and may keep academic scholarship accessible to the general public. As these different disciplines became more and more specialized, they became increasingly isolated from one another and less

intelligible to the rest of us. This has been a major problem with cultural theory and art criticism, for instance. Canoeist, filmmaker, and painter Bill Mason probably spoke for many of us when he wrote, “Much of what I read about art is beyond my comprehension. In some cases I haven’t the foggiest idea what they are writing about, and sometimes I think the writers, reviewers and critics don’t know either.”⁶ Art or literary criticism normally has a very narrow focus: a close reading of a select group of works or the career of a single artist (or writer), emphasizing the formal or stylistic qualities of his or her work. Even then, interpretations vary widely depending on the critic’s point of view. One looks at Tom Thomson’s work and sees flattened foregrounds, another sees distant horizons and expansive sightlines. Frank Underhill decided the “tortured” rocks and trees in the paintings by the Group of Seven were an unconscious metaphor for the urban wasteland. Evidently he was unaware that the rocks and trees *are* twisted and ravaged, a physical reality that has nothing to do with Toronto’s moral bankruptcy or the Group’s psychological state and everything to do with the effects of the glaciers and the northwest wind.⁷ And the enduring popularity of the Group is a classic example of how the opinion of the general public – who believe they know “what they like about art” – is rarely mirrored in the writing of professional art critics. But for the historian, art (and art criticism) can be a valuable piece of evidence when seen as an illustration of attitudes toward nature at a certain time and place.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, though, nature fell out of favour among cultural scholars. It has been decades since Northrop Frye stated that “everything that is central in Canadian writing seems to be marked by the imminence of the natural world” – a conclusion that many would now consider dated in its fidelity to geography.⁸ (Curiously, arts criticism turned away from the environment just as other disciplines, such as folklore, landscape studies, or geography, began to consider it in new ways.) Equally surprising is the dearth of regional studies about cultural production in Ontario. Fortunately, the interest in regional cultures elsewhere, specifically the Maritimes and the Prairie West, maintained the interest in landscape and identity. Indeed, scholars of Ontario and Quebec would benefit from conceptualizing central Canada as a region more often.⁹ Ontario has always assumed it speaks for Canada; the Group of Seven, who made a name for themselves by painting northern Ontario, somehow became Canada’s national artists, and the Canadian Shield is held up, by the Group and others, as the landscape most representative

of national experience. Yet, in a cultural mosaic of Canada, Ontario is likely to be represented either by the Toronto skyline or by small-town life in the southern part of the province, by writers such as Stephen Leacock, Robertson Davies, and Alice Munro. Whether their Ontario is rural or urban, social rather than environmental factors are the main concern. “Wilderness” is reserved for the agricultural frontier of the early nineteenth century (for instance, Catharine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie) or the far north. We have yet to fully catalogue the cultures of Ontario’s diverse landscapes, including its resource and recreational frontiers. It seems odd that no one has asked why and how an iconic landscape was created from the Shield and pine of the near north, especially given the major figures in the arts associated with Georgian Bay, from Paul Kane to the Group of Seven, from Margaret Atwood to Douglass LePan.

As one historian has observed, “Lake Huron and Georgian Bay remains one of the best kept secrets of Canadian history.”¹⁰ The region has been a significant cultural, economic, and political resource in modern Canada but has never really been studied, apart from a few popular histories. James Barry was the first to devote a full study to it, with *Georgian Bay: The Sixth Great Lake*. In 1994 Lynx Images published *Ghosts of the Bay: The Forgotten History of Georgian Bay*, followed in 1996 by *Alone in the Night: Lighthouses of Georgian Bay, Manitoulin Island and the North Channel*. As part of a series of popular books and videos about the Great Lakes, these effectively combined a dramatic, even lurid, writing style, with detailed directions to shipwreck sites around the Bay. General histories of the Great Lakes rarely mention the Bay, a remarkable oversight in light of the history and geography it shares with the rest of the Lakes. It is given a small part as either seventeenth-century Huronia with explorers and missionaries at the dawn of a saga of nation building, or as the site of rising industrial centres at Midland, Owen Sound, and Collingwood in the mid-nineteenth century. This is because historical writing on the Great Lakes has traditionally focused on shipping – the romance of the age of sail followed by the energetic progress of the age of steam – and the golden age of industry with its sense of optimism and prosperity. The natural environment is simply a resource incidental to “progress” or a backdrop to human heroism in “the eternal battle of men against the elements, of courage shining in a dark hour, of sailors going down with their ships ... fighting to the last.”¹¹ Local histories also tend to be anecdotal: biographies of ships, lumber companies, or cottage communities told in isolation from their cultural or geographical setting. The story of the

transformation into an overwhelmingly recreational landscape in the twentieth century has not yet been explored, yet the complexities and ramifications of this industry are as important and as intriguing as any aspect of the region's history.

That said, there are excellent examples of regional writing in the Great Lakes area, many of which emphasize the role of the natural environment. Though Victoria Brehm savages the existing historiography of the Great Lakes, she makes an impassioned argument for regional history when written as part of a continental history as well as a place-based history.¹² Patterns of exploration, transportation, industry, political evolution – all these pull us outward from a locality. Bruce Hodgins and Jamie Benidickson have chronicled how competing actors converged on a single landscape in northern Ontario in *The Temagami Experience: Recreation, Resources, and Aboriginal Rights in the Northern Ontario Wilderness* (1987). The collection of essays in *The Great Lakes Forest: An Environmental and Social History* (1983) uses a regional ecosystem as a starting point for historical analysis. An increasingly common term in the literature is “bioregionalism,” which essentially means place-based behaviour: using natural systems as a reference for human agency or activity, and the idea that human societies should exist within patterns set by the natural environment; incorporating indigenous knowledge and community participation into environmental management to respect local economic needs; and what Doug Aberley calls a “defiant decentralism.” John Wadland explains the benefits of this approach to the historian:

This bioregional perspective, far from being parochial and inward, is essential to an understanding of national history apprehended as the relationship between its parts. It becomes quite literally a grassroots study, seen from the ground up. It is a history meant to be guided by a felt sense of place, attuned to the subtleties and nuances of the particular ... On the ground, and at the root, is the landscape of the place. No cultural activity occurs exclusive of the environment required to sustain it.¹³

Taking a thematic approach, asking questions about the relationship between culture and environment, gives regional history a theoretical sophistication. Yet, at the same time, regional experience and local sources give academic concepts a much-needed relevance by anchoring them to a specific place and reality.

This has been the trend in environmental history outside the Great Lakes as well. Many of the best-known works in the field are in fact histo-

ries of environmental thought. Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967), Donald Worster's *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (1985), and Max Oelschlaeger's *The Idea of Wilderness* (1991) trace the evolution of ideas about nature in western culture from biblical times, through the science of the Enlightenment and its answer in Romanticism to their descendants in the utilitarian and preservationist wings of modern environmentalism. But we need to know what people were thinking of and looking at when they expounded on "nature" – in other words, their physical as well as their societal environment. Increasingly, historians have sought to situate this kind of intellectual history in a regional and experiential context, to show how these ideas worked out in practice in specific places. Some studies have been more oriented toward functional relationships between humans and nature, as in William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991), or the ecological consequences of human interaction, as in Worster's *Dust Bowl* (1979) or Barry Potyondi's *In Palliser's Triangle: Living in the Grasslands, 1850-1930* (1995). Others have concentrated on policy, particularly park policy, as applied to local communities, as in Alan MacEachern's analysis of Parks Canada and its agenda in *Natural Selections: Natural Parks in Atlantic Canada, 1935-1970* (2001). Still others have explored how a place is constructed differently over time through its representation in popular culture, scientific thought, and the arts. Doug Owrarn applied this approach to the Canadian West in *Promise of Eden: the Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West, 1856-1900* (1980), while Stephen Pyne focused on the creation of meanings for a single physical phenomenon in *How the Canyon Became Grand* (1998). And there is new interest in regional communities that evolve as social and environmental, if not political, entities, like that in Beth LaDow's *The Medicine Line: Life and Death on a North American Borderland* (2001).

My study draws on all these different approaches to some extent. Chapters 1 and 2 discuss the attempts to establish some kind of useful or profitable role for the Bay. Chapter 3 notes the historical image of the Bay (and its Aboriginal inhabitants) in popular culture, and Chapter 5 traces its changing representation in science, literature, and art, as well as the emergence of community identity in a process of regional definition. By focusing on the record of encounters with the two defining elements of the Bay – rock and water – Chapter 4 presents a different perspective on daily life on a Great Lake and the evolution of a "maritime" identity. Chapter 6 explores the experiments with conservation and parks, and the emergence of community activism. Like these other historians, I am in-

terested in the interplay between historical context and local conditions. In this case, it means the reactions to a place for which people were frequently unprepared. Often Georgian Bay challenged the usual attitudes toward nature, but sometimes it reinforced them: as Chapter 3 demonstrates, its physical and racial features (notably the First Nations) could illustrate and affirm popular stereotypes about wilderness in Canadian culture. Writing environmental history from a regional perspective and from the ground up shows how ideas shaped, and were shaped by, encounters with specific places.

This was not always the case. For a century, North American historians wrote from the outside looking in, envisaging landscape in grand, national, almost abstract terms. Frederick Jackson Turner, for example, pronounced the American frontier as the formative influence of a national character – a thesis which itself became a formative influence in American historiography. For Canadian scholars, continental geography provided a natural basis for a national narrative, an explanation – and justification – of a transcontinental dominion of the North. The expansive foundation of the Canadian (or Laurentian) Shield was particularly important to demonstrating a natural coherence, and so lent its name to much of the writing (and art) that emerged from central Canada in the early and mid-twentieth century. Their territorial imaginings were shaped by different emphases – for Harold Innis, it was the technologies used to penetrate the continent and to export natural resources or “staples”; for Donald Creighton, it was the dynamics of a commercial empire based in the St. Lawrence valley. But they shared a fascination with the vastness of the continent and, in particular, its waterways as transportation routes, as well as a belief that political union emerged naturally from economic patterns that in turn were derived from geography. These theories rested not only on the Canadian Shield but on rather imperial assumptions about the importance of centralizing forces and the leadership of Central Canada’s urban centres – assumptions that implicitly fashioned other parts of the country as hinterlands and supporting players to the national story. The preoccupation with Shield country was closely related to another fundamental aspect of historiography and nationalist thought: expansive, heroic ideas about the North. Scholars identified the Canadian Shield as northern terrain and, as such, the defining landscape of the national character.¹⁴

By the 1970s, however, the landscape of historical writing looked quite different. First, the homogeneity of a national framework, geographic or historical, had come under attack. Led by William Morton’s early criti-

cism of its dismissive attitude toward hinterlands, and energized by J.M.S. Careless's call for writing history by tracing the evolution of "limited" rather than national identities, historians embraced a variety of regional landscapes. To borrow Cole Harris's wonderful metaphor, the illusion of Canada as a single unit bound by continental networks dissolved into an archipelago of disconnected islands.¹⁵ Second, with scholars across the humanities and social scientists, historians increasingly approached historical records and landscapes as texts – an artifact of human thought and action – rather than as an objective reality. Reading historical documents as a subjective account, one which expressed a point of view, undermined the concept of a single narrative of Canadian history, as did the interest in writing a region's history as a product of a distinctive combination of historical factors apart from a single central actor or infrastructure. It also led to some profound questions about what we mean by nature and wilderness, and the recognition that such concepts are both historically and culturally specific:

Not only is nature affected pervasively by human action, but our very conception of nature has emerged historically and differs widely from one cultural tradition to another. What we mean by nature, our beliefs about wilderness, the recognition of landscape, our very sense of environment have all made a historical appearance and been understood differently at different times and places.¹⁶

Influenced by postmodernism and its concern with power relations, competing voices, and symbolism, scholars also became interested in the ways in which landscapes are constructed and contested: constructed according to factors such as class, gender and ethnicity, cultural preferences and political agendas; and contested between different groups.¹⁷ Daniel Clayton, for example, explored the competing geographies and spatial politics of First Nations and Europeans in *Islands of Truth: The Imperial Fashioning of Vancouver Island* (1999). Whites and First Nations have had economic dealings in Georgian Bay since the early seventeenth century, and non-Natives have selectively borrowed ideas and practices about the "wilderness" of the Thirty Thousand Islands from Native residents. I, however, deliberately limited my study to perceptions of Natives in Georgian Bay – in part out of respect for cultural difference; in part because Native history and pre-history draws so heavily on disciplines such as archaeology and ethnography, in which I am very much a layperson; and in part because other historians have profiled these Native societies in compre-

hensive and admirable research, as Bruce Trigger has in his work on the Huron. There are profound differences between European and Aboriginal attitudes toward nature, and complex historical and pre-historical relationships between the Wendat, Iroquois, and Anishinabe, which are beyond the scope of this work.¹⁸ Most of the records of Georgian Bay were produced by a fairly homogenous group of generally white, generally male, and generally middle-class tourists or seasonal residents, who delivered a consistent message about the place. Those sent to investigate the Bay in terms of official agendas for the hinterland reported its uselessness; those who came for leisure described a blissfully recalcitrant wilderness. So it is impossible to write a history of place that does not acknowledge cultural processes of perspective and negotiation. But in the past decade some historians have challenged the concept of nature as a purely cultural creation. Instead, they suggest thinking of our relationship with nature as dialectical, and “a process of discovery and adaptation.”¹⁹ Place is a site of exchange where influence flows in both directions. We need to understand the cultural assumptions that people brought to Georgian Bay – and the physical setting in which they found themselves.

The relationship between nature and culture lies at the heart of landscape study. The landscape school emerged in the 1920s within the field of historical geography, as a reaction to the environmental determinism that characterized the discipline at the time. Instead of emphasizing the effect of nature on society – such as the effect of the frontier on American history or the American character – the landscape school, led by geographer Carl Sauer, inverted the relationship to examine the impact of culture on the environment. As Sauer said, “Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result.” This is a critical distinction for scholars: unlike the “environment” or “nature,” landscape is a synthetic space. It is a product of human history, interests, and ideas.²⁰ Accordingly, landscape geographers were concerned particularly with man-made, material features, artifacts (such as architectural and settlement patterns) that demonstrated changing cultural imperatives over time. For example, Thomas McIlwraith’s *Looking for Old Ontario* (1997) is a visual reading of the built and natural landscape, reading architecture and patterns of settlement as a kind of archaeology of past use and past ethnic influences (American, British, and so forth) on community designs. Landscape study is intrinsically geographical because it begins with a particular place – its distinctive appearance, or collective knowledge about it. But it is concerned with the history of that landscape’s

construction, and the cultural forces applied to it. Not surprisingly, the emphasis on culture has made landscape study extraordinary fluid, increasingly interdisciplinary, and theoretically complex. In the past few decades, it has embraced a range of strongly humanistic approaches that have also appeared in related disciplines, such as historical geography and cultural history: psychological and emotional perceptions of nature and the bases of place attachment; reading ideas about nature in artistic representations of place; and the use of physical places as a means to secure social power, community identity, or group cohesion. Landscape study is about the making of places, not only through functional relationships with the natural environment, as was the case before, but as the “subjective and intersubjective construction of places through imagination and discourse.” As in the field of history, there has been a shift from identifying landscapes of national concern to studying more localized ethnic, class, and regional landscapes.²¹

Research about landscape can often be applied only tangentially, because the study of landscape is by definition essentially place-specific. Whereas environmental history has been concerned with discussing ideas about wilderness, culture, and nature in a broad sense, landscape study is rooted in the study of particular (and especially vernacular) communities and places. Yet, increasingly, scholars have sought to draw from both in order to understand the evolution of landscapes. Simon Schama’s *Landscape and Memory* (1995) is arguably best described as an intellectual environmental history, for it explores the symbolism and myths of nature in Western culture. But by locating these myths in particular times and places – from classical Rome to Elizabethan England to Nazi Germany – he demonstrates that they are not universal.²² The meaning of nature depends largely on its relationship with the local culture. A concept like wilderness means different things in different communities and in different national myths. But this raises another problem. How much information can be gleaned from Renaissance Tuscany, early modern England, or the American South and put toward understanding twentieth-century Ontario? Such place biographies favour the study of distinct, long-established, coherent settlements in rural areas (or to a lesser extent, urban neighbourhoods), where there is a visible ethnic or class imprint. The seigneurial system in rural Quebec would be an ideal choice; Georgian Bay, a resource and recreational space with a history of transient populations, is not.²³ And yet Canada, a postcolonial nation-state of enormously diverse geography, may be uniquely poised to contribute to the field of land-

scape study precisely for this reason: endless case studies of encounter and adaptation, as ideas of nature inherited from European colonizers are acted out in distinctly North American environments to produce new forms.

That said, one of the most common, and most useful for our purposes, ways of thinking about landscapes is the classification of vernacular, designed, and associative landscapes. Vernacular landscapes are usually working landscapes that evolve organically over time, often in rural communities. Designed landscapes are ordered arrangements such as the formal gardens created for aristocratic Baroque estates. Ethnographic or associative landscapes possess cultural or heritage value for a particular group.²⁴ Any place, though, can exist as more than one type simultaneously. Georgian Bay and the Canadian Shield are easily associative landscapes (“Oh, like the Group of Seven” is the most common response I get when I tell someone I study Georgian Bay) but, after a century or more of settlement, they have elements of the vernacular as well. Vernacular landscapes in particular are indicative of the adaptation of imported agendas to local conditions; early cottages in Georgian Bay were shaped by both the pragmatic concerns of local builders and cottagers’ enthusiasm for rustic “wilderness” escapes. Not only are the boundaries blurred between these classifications but so are the lines between “here” and “there.” I agree that any cultural landscape is the product of human imagination – how we think of a place, and what we learn to expect from it, determines how we act there and how we alter that place. But these ideas and expectations are best understood not only through in situ artifacts such as architecture and patterns of settlement but by artifacts such as art and literature that record encounters with the natural environment and then are exported from the place to shape a wider collective imagination. How Canadians think about Georgian Bay, in other words, is shaped by the early cottages of Go Home Bay and Cognashene, but also by the National Gallery of Canada.

Indeed, scholars in a variety of disciplines have been addressing the subjects of environment, region, and identity in different ways. Much of the environmental history in Canada has come from historical geographers. This is particularly evident in Atlantic Canada, and the work of scholars from Andrew Hill Clark to Graeme Wynn. Though they retained a geographer’s interest in spatial patterns, concerning settlement and land use, they turned to archival research and a regional focus – in the case of Clark, at a time when Canadian historians were still preoccupied with national and political stories. Closer to home, Conrad Heidenreich’s

study of Huronia announces that one of the principal themes of historical geography is the reconstruction of past landscapes; in this case, in order to assess the Huron's functional relationships with their physical environment. Like their compatriots in landscape study, however, historical geography is increasingly diverse in its methodologies, encompassing the spatial and quantitative interests dominant in geography and social history in the 1960s, the newer "humanism" and theories about cultural analysis, and ground-level experience.²⁵ Here they share interests with scholars of folklore, who study the concept of a sense of place, "homelands," and how experiential knowledge of a place is contained in such diverse sources as maps, material culture, and personal narratives. The folklorist literature, however, often selects a single ethnic community to study how it has incorporated the landscape into its cultural life or bonded to that place, not necessarily how the landscape set out boundaries between communities.²⁶ It is important to remember that in Georgian Bay there is no single, homogenous population responsible for a local vernacular; First Nations, seasonal resource workers, and cottagers all contributed to the regional culture. Oral history is another indispensable tool in local and environmental history because it unearths information not found anywhere else, about unusual subjects such as youth camping, ice boats called scoots, or cottage communities, and from the perspective of people with a historical investment in the area. And it is a record of lived experience, to complement the prescriptive sources often used in environmental and social history. Reading only camp brochures or the correspondence of camp directors, for example, would suggest children's camping is a highly structured and manipulated social experience, unless it is balanced by campers' own thoughts about their exposure to wilderness. The study of tourism originated in literary criticism with a critical reading of travelogues, though this tends to emphasize the judgmental perspective and the preconceptions of visitors commenting on a new place. Nothing in England's Lake District had prepared poet Rupert Brooke for the Great Lakes: "I have a perpetual feeling," he writes, "that a lake ought not to be this size."²⁷ More recently, scholars have focused on the consumption of nature through the construction and marketing of tourist space. Patricia Jasen's *Wild Things: Nature, Culture, and Tourism in Ontario, 1790-1914* (1995) addresses the Ontario experience, but some of the most interesting work in tourism, heritage construction, and contested landscapes has been done by scholars in the Maritimes.²⁸

The emphasis on representation, imagery, and ideal or constructed landscapes combined with the critical textual readings of cultural studies has

infused landscape history with a kind of skepticism. Scholars assume that when people described a place, they were expressing learned prejudices or agendas typical of the age. A landscape painting or a travelogue is as much a portrait of contemporary aesthetic ideals – what people thought nature should look like – as of a particular landscape; a picture of what the artist expected or wanted to see (or thought his or her audience expected or wanted to see) rather than what the artist actually saw. A scene might be described negatively because it did not match expectation, some details omitted and others emphasized to conform as closely as possible to the prevailing ideal. Or it may be framed for visual consumption by dressing, for example, the landscape of North America in the softened pastels of contemporary British watercolours. This kind of scholarship has emphasized the cultural and mental arena into which nature is received and manipulated, the “perception *of* landscapes rather than experience *in* landscapes.” Maps are read as an ordering of place, a projection of political agendas and imposition of cultural authority; art as a mechanical application of learned conventions and aesthetic preferences; architecture as a product of social exchange; place identity as a psychological, cognitive phenomenon.²⁹ The distinct physical features of a region are often pushed to the background. W.H. New’s study of space in Canadian literature deals entirely with “the politics involved in the possession of the language of place”; Greg Halseth’s interest in the “politics of turf” makes little mention of the nature of the turf itself.³⁰ What the place actually is often seems almost irrelevant.

This is an unfortunately anthropocentric and misleading way of understanding history. Nature “cannot be obliterated,” Ronald Bordsessa has written; “geography is beyond denial ... at the very heart of our understanding of what Canada is and who we are as moral and social beings.”³¹ Studying a map or painting or government report, we obviously need to consider the author and the context in which it was created, asking what was considered beautiful or useful or valuable at the time. But to assume that our response to nature is entirely predetermined by cultural circumstances – that someone describing Georgian Bay in 1850 is really only expressing the prejudices and opinions of 1850 – ignores the dynamic relationship between environment and history, and between individuals and their surroundings. We may experience nature subjectively according to our personal, social, and historical circumstances, but it also exists independently of us. “You can’t create a landscape,” A.Y. Jackson flatly told *Canadian Art* magazine in 1960; “I can’t make them up and I don’t know anyone who can.”³² Descriptions of Georgian Bay reflect mainstream

attitudes toward the environment, but they are also the product of the specific circumstances of the Bay itself. Storms that blow in from “the Open,” the open water to the west, appear in the Ojibwa propitiation rituals witnessed by Alexander Henry in 1761; the mysterious loss of the steamer *Waubuno* and all its hands in November 1879; the power in J.E.H. MacDonald’s 1916 painting *The Elements*, which signalled a new direction in Canadian art (Plate 8); and Douglas LePan’s thrilling experience in the poem “Red Rock Light,” “cowering and exultant / in a November gale.”³³ None of these responses could have been evoked in a vacuum. Looking at the vibrant coral and azure of Arthur Lismer’s painting *The Happy Isles* (1925), critic Barker Fairley acknowledged that it reflected “the intense mood of the beholder,” but added, “no other part of the world could have helped the artist to such a result.”³⁴

Perceptions of nature need to be situated in their historical and geographical contexts. Pinning history to a particular place emphasizes the influence that the physical environment has had over human history. This book is the story of the reactions people have when they encounter an unfamiliar landscape: the plans they concoct for it, and the changes it forces them to make. “Agency” is a term historians sometimes use to describe how people have influenced their surroundings and the historical process. As Ted Steinberg writes, we need to take a more humble view of human agency. Nature is not a passive object of human design, but something capable of upsetting human plans and directing historical events.³⁵ The environment is a factor, a force that has never been controlled or predicted, and a consideration in almost every decision made in Georgian Bay. Assigning it “agency,” however, suggests a personification of nature, a consciousness or agenda that isn’t there. Instead we might think of human agency working within the constraints and opportunities nature provides. People have to always contend with nature. Unlike the older kind of determinism, which took physical geography as a starting point, guiding principle, and permanent force directing human history, this approach sees nature and people as interrelated and dialectical. Each constantly affects and reshapes the other.

The same is true of that double helix of history, change and continuity. Here too, focusing on a single place reveals how supposedly opposing forces coexist and interact. On the one hand, Georgian Bay challenges the assumption that nature has been seen differently over time. It resisted manipulation, physical and imaginative, and people had to respond to the same basic elements. A surveyor in 1868 and a cottager in 1998 faced the same granite bedrock, just as a fisherman in 1850 and a yachter

a century later shared concerns about dangerous shoal-filled waters (albeit with different technologies). At the same time, the archipelago was constantly buffeted by the ideas, events, and changes of modern North America. The “wilderness” of popular myth has been criss-crossed by Native peoples, invaded and harvested by industries, and settled by cottagers – a succession of users with different expectations of the Great Lakes and the interior. To distill the story into one of environmental resistance or steady progress would make the history of both Georgian Bay and attitudes toward nature too simple. Sometimes people adopted a new type of transportation or modified a park policy because inherited technologies or methods simply didn’t work well, and it was easier to adapt to the physical reality of the archipelago than to alter it. But in many ways, the archipelago has been transformed by human presence. If Samuel de Champlain and his Huron allies were to paddle through the Bay today, their canoes rocked by motorboat wakes, they would see a largely foreign landscape: a shoreline divided into cottage properties and Indian reserves, waterways marked by Coast Guard buoys herding a steady stream of traffic along the main boat channel. We might think the Bay of a century ago equally alien: our outboards trapped by massive timber booms, the famous wind-bent pines surrounded by pine slash, wharves at Parry Sound or Killarney laden with huge nets of whitefish. Yet, the landscape would still be recognizable. Erase the boundaries of a provincial park, and the La Cloche Mountains still gleam white from the north. Remove the huge shore light at O’Donnell Point, and the exposed point is no less dramatic or dangerous. It took billions of years to weather the Canadian Shield into these contours; they have not changed in a matter of decades.

What defines Georgian Bay as a region, then, is its history of negotiation and interaction. Human activity and ideas were constrained by the natural environment even as they pushed against its limits. The archipelago is a littoral, a zone of transition between sea and shore; its history too is a littoral, between human and natural forces, and between competing and coexisting perspectives. No single vantage point encompasses the history of the Bay; rather, it has always been refracted through several perspectives.³⁶ We may experience a place in several ways simultaneously. This is why this book is structured as it is. Each chapter profiles a different type of encounter, a different way of seeing the Bay. Within each perspective we can follow the tension between change and continuity, and between nature and culture. Chapter 6, for example, focuses on the political arena. Competing political actors, driven by changing economic motives, vie to manage a “wilderness” that constantly challenged the usual



Figure 1 Scenery from Killarney.

strategies of conservation or preservation. Circling through these different perspectives – explorers and surveyors, loggers and fishermen, campers and cottagers, artists and historians, politicians and bureaucrats – gives us a three-dimensional view of the Bay. No one characterization of nature has been exclusively responsible for shaping its public identity.

The first chapter “surveys” four centuries of human history in Georgian Bay from the perspective of mapmakers and surveyors, from the period of contact between Aboriginal and European explorers to modern-day marine charting. Mapping was one way in which people sought to make sense of the apparent chaos of the archipelago, to orient themselves in a geographical location, and to order it in the ideological and political contexts of the day. This chapter provides a chronological outline of the past four hundred years by introducing most of the major players who have asked, where is here? and whose maps explain their purpose on the Bay: continental exploration, military campaigns, industrial traffic, and cottage sales. Nineteenth-century naval and government surveyors played a particularly prominent role in authoring the enduring characterization of the archipelago as a hostile wilderness. Different kinds of mapping and different generations of mapmakers also articulated the most preva-

lent attitudes toward nature in North America: pragmatic, utilitarian, romantic, artistic. These reports emphasize the labour and practical difficulties involved, but the process of mapping also draws attention to the representational or imaginative dilemmas, and the recent political repercussions, of the struggle to reconcile measurement with description, abstract reasoning and geometric lines with lived experience. Maps were one way of providing information about the Bay, and demands for such information inevitably arose from plans to use the region in some way. This leads naturally into an overview of changing land uses and the succession of industries that attempted to gain a foothold in the archipelago. Chapter 2 opens with a discussion of the declining fur trade and moves through the disappointment of agricultural settlement and the mixed success of mining exploration; the technological ambitions of canal and railway construction, and the healthy shipping traffic on the Bay; and the fortunes of the best-known industries in the region, the commercial fishery and lumber trade. I spend some time showing how forests, in particular, were reinterpreted from a physical to an aesthetic resource as the Bay was remade from a resource to a recreational hinterland with the arrival of the final “industry” and the colonization of the islands by cottagers. Each group of users sought different things from the Bay and evaluated it differently as “nature,” but they all adapted in some way to the limits of the landscape. The industries that endured – shipping and recreation – were usually those that built on those very limits.

Despite this activity, the archipelago’s resistance to development and a history populated by figures of classic Canadiana (such as Samuel de Champlain) fuelled an image of the northeast shore as a primeval wilderness, a relic of an earlier age, and an intractable frontier. The construction of that image – and its implications – is the subject of Chapter 3. The obstreperous landscape that defied physical manipulation lent itself more easily to intellectual and imaginative uses because it suited so well popular romantic, anti-modern, and nationalist ideas about wilderness. The First Nations were particularly convincing proof of its wilderness status, and were deeply affected by their association with a *terre sauvage*. Historical references became an essential part of the region’s public identity. Recreationists were drawn to the Bay because it promised a physical link to a heroic past, and supposedly a chance to experience the kind of wilderness experienced by the explorers and voyageurs. For those living and working in the archipelago, however, the unforgiving realities of an inland sea were a much more immediate and much less romantic way of participating in history. Shared experience with an inflexible environ-

ment has been an important source of continuity and tradition for the community “up the shore.” Much of the historical record can be traced directly to the basic elements of water and rock in a maritime environment (exposed open water, a confined archipelago, storm weather). Chapter 4 explores some of the pragmatic adaptations and aesthetic expressions directly inspired by these physical features. A wide range of cultural artifacts, from paintings to architecture to boat design, represent the responses of various users to similar conditions. I look at the atmosphere of peril in a dangerous environment and reflect on aspects of the environmental and historical complexity of a *mer douce* and an inland sea.

Its maritime history differentiates the archipelago from the interior, a difference integral to the local sense of identity. The process of defining that locality is the subject of Chapter 5, which examines when and how people acknowledged its distinctiveness and set out its boundaries. In other words, it is about the gradual construction of a regional identity, in both high and vernacular culture, by defining a place from without and from within. I argue that even the standard colonial languages of science and art begin to incorporate place-specific experiences in their descriptions of nature when they confront the Bay. The evolution is most famously expressed in the extensive body of work by the Group of Seven. Next I trace the long history of distinguishing the archipelago from surrounding landscapes within Ontario and the Lakes basin based on a recognition of their physical differences. Residents developed a prized sense of difference – and distance – from the rest of “cottage country” by emphasizing the distinct ways of life on the islands. Yet, the irony is that once Georgian Bay was recognizable as a distinct locale, its leaning pine and rocky shores became a highly visible symbol of nationalism in Central Canada. Imagining the Bay in the political realm is discussed in Chapter 6, which situates Georgian Bay in the history of North American environmental policy and management. “Protective” designations followed the arc of changing use from resource to recreation and were usually designed to facilitate those uses. Measures directed toward fish, forests, and parkland in Georgian Bay reflected the larger shift from conservation to preservation, from protecting resources for industrial production to providing recreational space. I emphasize, though, that the unique landscape of the archipelago often challenged the usual understanding of environmental management and again produced regional variations in standard policy. The Massasauga Provincial Park is one example of how typical park planning (with its divided loyalties to recreational use and ecological integrity) took shape within the physical and political constraints of

the archipelago. This chapter brings us to the present and to some of the issues facing the Bay today, as a landscape inhabited by many stakeholders and layered under multiple jurisdictions.

This might seem a disjointed way of writing history but, in fact, the kaleidoscope of perspectives is tied to a chronological arc. (Chronology is still comforting, and necessary, for historians as much as for anyone.) An unknown frontier is exploited as a resource hinterland and then settled as a recreational space. Cultural expectations confront a particular physical reality and gradually define a distinct regional identity. The book opens with a discussion of the First Nations who met the explorers of the seventeenth century and ends with a look at the dilemmas of managing an international marine environment in the twenty-first century. The work as a whole is animated by the spirit of public history. I wanted to establish the significance of Georgian Bay in Canadian historiography but also to make the research relevant and accessible to a wider audience. I wanted to study Georgian Bay as an academically trained historian but also as someone who has loved the Bay since childhood. This is not hard to do – because in my mind’s eye I am still simply looking out to the Open, listening to the water and the wind in the pine.