THE NATURE OF CANADA

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 3

NATURE AND NATION 25
Graeme Wynn

PAINTING THE MAP RED 51
Graeme Wynn

LISTENING FOR DIFFERENT STORIES 85
Julie Cruikshank

ELDORADO NORTH? 101
Stephen J. Hornsby and Graeme Wynn

BACK TO THE LAND 123
Colin M. Coates

NATURE WE CANNOT SEE 143
Graeme Wynn

THE WEALTH OF WILDERNESS 167
Claire E. Campbell

IMAGINING THE CITY 185
Michèle Dagenais

NEVER JUST A HOLE IN THE GROUND 203
Arn Keeling and John Sandlos

EVERY CREEPING THING ... 223
Ken Cruikshank

THE POWER OF CANADA 243
Steve Penfold

QUESTIONS OF SCALE 263
Tina Loo

A GENDERED SENSE OF NATURE 281
Joanna Dean

ADVOCATES AND ACTIVISTS 299
Graeme Wynn, with Jennifer Bonnell

CLIMATES OF OUR TIMES 319
Liza Piper

TIME CHASED ME DOWN,
AND I STOPPED LOOKING AWAY 335
Heather E. McGregor

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 353

CONTRIBUTORS 356

INDEX 359

INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK GRAPPLES WITH two deceptively simple but ultimately complicated questions. How have people engaged with Canadian nature, and what do these engagements reveal about the nature of Canada (and Canadians)? We are not the first to explore these questions. Generations of scholars, creative writers, cultural commentators, and others have pondered them, but most took the idea of nature for granted. Rather than limiting and fixing its meaning, in the way that nineteenth-century naturalists pinned butterflies to cardboard in their efforts to put life in order, they lived and worked with a degree of imprecision. Forsaking rigid definition in favour of the Humpty Dumpty–like assumption that "when I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean," they bolstered the common claim that nature is "perhaps the most complex word in the language."

Nature is many things. It is the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the earth upon which we walk. In another register, it marks the essential qualities or innate disposition of a person or thing. The gifted athlete is "a natural"; a calm friend has a "placid nature." Traditionally, the term marked a distinction between the natural and artificial elements of Earth. To enter the wilderness was to "return to nature" – a place unaltered by humans.

In this sense, nature is the antithesis of culture, everything not made by humankind. But people shaded new and different meanings onto this

black-and-white distinction over time. At the turn of the twentieth century, Canadians thought of nature in many different ways, including as a benevolent provider (Mother Nature), as a storehouse of resources, and as a place of worship. More recently, the pervasiveness of human influence upon the earth – seen in the pollution of remote oceans, the dissemination of species across continents, and global climate change – has blurred the boundaries between the natural and "made" worlds. To make this point, the American environmentalist Bill McKibben's 1989 book bore the title *The End of Nature.* At pretty much the same time, rising interest in the use of language to categorize the world and establish its taken-for-granted realities spawned the claim that nature is a social construction – nothing more than a widely accepted idea constituted by language rather than a pre-existent reality described by the word. Today – as the essays in this book reveal – the concept of nature retains its chameleon-like qualities. In addition to earlier connotations such as "unspoiled nature," "Mother Nature," or "the essence of things," the term signals the environment (the habitat of persons, animals, or plants), the landscape (the surface upon which cultures inscribe their marks), and a mix of biological processes. Furthermore, nature is now widely understood as a hybrid object – produced by the complex interactions between biological, chemical, physical, and organic processes on the one hand and by people pursuing their diverse interests on the other. Together, these forces constitute the web of life.

Among those Canadians who thought to ponder the questions at the heart of this book, many, like us, found inspiration in what they saw around them, even as they learned from earlier efforts to consider "nature in some one of its many relations with humanity." Take Charles G.D. Roberts as a solitary but shining example. A leading light among the Confederation poets of the late nineteenth century, Roberts won fame on two fronts. He was celebrated for his poetic sensibility to the relations between humans and the natural world. And he was equally well known for his animal stories, intended to lead "us back to the old kinship of earth." He understood

the long European traditions of writing in both of these genres. Like those who shaped these traditions, Roberts wanted to illuminate the "many vital relationships between external nature and 'the deep heart of man.'" But he gave voice to a very Canadian sensibility as he wrestled with the tensions between permanence and transience and sought ways "to catch within the transitory, something of the permanent in nature."

As students of and commentators on Canada's environmental history, we follow in Roberts's footsteps. But our point of departure is quite different. We make no claim to share his poetic and creative genius. We are also conscious that circumstances have changed, that new flakes of knowledge and understanding have accumulated where Roberts once trod, changing the landscape that he dinted.

By far the most consequential of these new flakes began to form in the 1940s. Gradually, they accumulated until they began to fall in an intense flurry. The storm was seeded by Northrop Frye, the outstanding literary critic of his generation. Frye was famous for his efforts to identify the typical forms and myth-making designs of literature. Reviewing a 1943 anthology of poetry as he wrestled with this larger challenge, he identified a consistent, ominous theme in Canadian verse – nature was an ever-present threat to human existence. More than this, it seemed that Canadians paired "the unconscious horror of nature" with "subconscious horrors of the mind" as they attempted to give imaginative shape to a cruel and meaningless world. As Frye expressed it: "Whatever sinister lurks in nature lurks also in us." For Frye, the "outstanding achievement" of Canadian poets lay in their "evocation of stark terror."

Seventeen years later, in 1960, Warren Tallman, an American-born poet and professor of English at the University of British Columbia, added an existential twist to Frye's austere perception of Canadians as fallen people in a fallen world. While reading a handful of important novels, he was struck by the vast, implacable nature of Canada. The engulfing silence, he concluded, bore in upon people oppressed and isolated by the grim,

primeval, and tragic qualities of their surroundings. In his view, transplanted Europeans who tried to set roots in the northern reaches of the continent were met with profound indifference. The country's harsh climes blunted the universal human desire that drove people on "their strange journeys toward fulfilment." Influenced by American modernism, Tallman insisted that "the continent itself – the gray wolf whose shadow is underneath the snow – has resisted the culture, the cultivation, the civilization which is indigenous to Europe but alien to North America." Tallman and Frye found few signs in Canadian letters of humans refusing "to be bullied by space and time." There was all too little "affirmation of the supremacy of intelligence and humanity over stupid power."

Claims such as these soon became convention. In a contribution to a sweeping history of English Canadian literature published in 1965, Hugo McPherson found the essence of postwar fiction in the "struggle against the violence, or the snowy indifference of nature." Later in the same volume, Frye concluded that literature reflected the way that Canada had developed as a conglomeration of small and isolated communities, as a collection of "closely knit and beleaguered societies" surrounded by and confronted with "a huge unthinking, menacing and formidable physical setting." The consequences were momentous. Huddled together for defence against a sinister, menacing nature, Canadians had developed a narrow, cowering garrison mentality that hardened moral conviction and stifled originality.

As Canadians celebrated the centenary of Confederation, many of the country's intellectuals grew anxious about the mushrooming influence of American culture on Canadian society. Seeking to assert a distinctive Canadian identity, a new generation of writers argued that the country and its people had been forged in the struggle with merciless nature. Foremost among them was Margaret Atwood. Her powerful influence was exercised in two short but important works. In 1970 she published *The Journals of Susanna Moodie,* which the publisher described as "perhaps the most

memorable evocation in modern Canadian literature of the myth of the wilderness, the immigrant experience, and the alienating and schizophrenic effects of the colonial mentality." In this cycle of poems, "the rocks ignore," and the land is "a large darkness" that presents "vistas of desolation." Those who attempt to cultivate and humanize the wilderness will be "surrounded, stormed, broken / in upon" if they cease toiling for even a moment to contemplate the overwhelming, formidable nature that encircles them.

Two years later, in a popular guide to Canadian literature, Atwood responded to contemporary angst about what it meant to be Canadian by noting that we "are forever taking the national pulse like doctors at a sickbed." She identified survival as the central symbol of Canadianness. Taking this multifaceted and adaptable idea as the title of her book, she found the leitmotif of Canadian experience in the simple act of "hanging on, staying alive" in the "face of 'hostile' elements." The archetypal Canadian story was not about "those who made it" but about "those who made it back," back, that is to say, "from the awful experience – the North, the snowstorm, the sinking ship – that killed everyone else." In this telling, "death by nature" was a Canadian obsession. Fatalities attributable to nature in the guise of a monster, dangerous woman, or ice goddess haunted the Canadian imagination. Survival was a welcome relief – although it failed to generate much sense of excitement, adventure, or security. Canadians, Atwood told her readers, were victims (actual or potential) of forbidding forces beyond their control. They lived in a state of "almost intolerable anxiety." Revealingly, if not perhaps surprisingly, Canadian heroes almost invariably died or failed. For all that, Atwood's sweeping assertions struck a responsive chord. Canadians seemed ready to understand tales of survival in the bush as metaphors for the necessity of hanging on in the face of growing economic and social domination by the United States.

In the light of a later day, many of these claims seem exaggerated. Vivid though the "survival in a garrison" motif may be, it diminishes the variety of Canadian experience and reduces strong and resourceful pioneers to

pawns of their environmental circumstances. The motif is reductive and geographically deterministic. The Frye-Atwood story about Canadians frightened and browbeaten by nature is also ahistorical in its projection of twentieth-century political, social, cultural, and psychological concerns onto nineteenth-century lives. Those who have attempted to shore up the thesis by softening its claims acknowledge that nature has been a haven and an opportunity as well as a threat in the development of Canada. But such concessions bypass larger concerns. For Frye, Canada had no Atlantic seaboard. Europeans coming into the country edged into it "like a tiny Jonah entering an inconceivably large whale"; they were "silently swallowed by an alien continent." But not every newcomer had the "intimidating experience" of entering the country this way, and developing communities soon helped to temper the forbidding qualities of the reluctant land.

By much the same token, many settlers along the St. Lawrence and elsewhere embraced the "book of nature." Rather than being cowed by their settings, they sought to "gather wisdom from the expanded leaves of creation." Some believed that "every flower … hath its instruction." Not until late in the nineteenth century were these impulses nudged aside by evolutionary ideas about the survival of the fittest and "nature red in tooth and claw." As these new views permeated colonial imaginations, they provided grist for dramatic claims about nasty, amoral nature. But earlier impulses were never banished.

In short, Canadians have understood their settings in radically different ways, and many of them have known a great deal about nature in the places where they lived and worked. Indigenous groups envisaged the fish of the rivers and the trees of the forests as kin. Farmers watched the weather and recognized the rhythms of the seasons. Natural history buffs collected, catalogued, and studied many elements of the environment, from flowers to molluscs to butterflies. Urban dwellers knew the sounds and smells of lives lived in close proximity. Fishermen found wonder and mystery in the sea as they studied its tides and sensed its moods. Prospectors turned the

stones of time into valuable commodities by transmuting rocks into resources. Engineers calculated the strength of strata and the flow of waters as they planned dams that would (to some extent) tame nature. But they rarely committed their innermost thoughts about their relationship with nature to paper or other records. Perhaps the most we can say, then, in echo of Prairie novelist Rudy Wiebe, is that whether farmer or writer, "the way a man feels with and lives with that living earth with which he is always labouring to live" is always deeply personal. The sum of these understandings is both as wide as the horizon and as deep as time.

Those who wrote in the nineteenth century of the development of British North America and what would become Canada generally shunned such complexities. Their works emphasized the achievements of settlers who subdued the wilderness. In these accounts, Indigenous peoples were mostly an irrelevance, and nature was a barrier to progress, advancement, and improvement. By contrast, many of the books written after the First World War by the first generation of professionally trained Canadian historians gave the environment a strong role in shaping society. Many of their contemporaries believed that environments moulded humans and societies in particular ways. Working in a country that Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King described as having "too much geography," Canadian scholars emphasized the importance of geographical considerations (such as distance, space, and the harshness of the climate) to the story of their country. Among them, Arthur R.M. Lower, the most nationalistic English Canadian historian of his day, saw the history of Canada (and that of the "New World" more generally) as a product of the environment. The "war with the wilderness," he wrote in 1938, had been "the ever-present factor, the constant influence shaping the mentality and conduct of every inhabitant." Lower's contemporary, Harold Innis, perhaps the most celebrated Canadian student of economic development, characterized the Canadian Pacific Railway as an enormous commitment of human energy to "the conquest of geographical barriers." In Innis's histories, geography provided

"the grooves which determine the cause and to a large extent the character of economic life." In the 1960s, a new generation of historians turned their interests to urban and social concerns and to issues in labour, class, ethnic, and women's history. Mostly city-born and -bred, they exhibited what a senior Prairie historian dubbed a "pavement mentality." They were oblivious to "the revolution of the seasons … and the relevance of time and place." Dismissive and overstated though it was, this claim more or less reflected shifting emphases in Canadian scholarship. Less intentionally, it also identified some of the foundations from which important changes in individual and societal attitudes towards nature sprang in the closing decades of the twentieth century.

John Crosbie, prominent Newfoundlander and sometime federal cabinet minister, captured the essence of these changes with characteristic wit and exaggeration when he said, in the 1980s, "Ten years ago we didn't know about the environment – but now it is all around us." Crosbie's witticism pointed to a sea change in public attitudes towards life on Earth. Late in the twentieth century, Canadians and others began to regard nature in new ways. In broad terms, they expanded the scale of their concern from the relatively local to the continental and the global. Scientists developed new ways of thinking that stressed the interdependence of component parts in a system. Ecologists emphasized that everything was connected to everything else. Many worried at the destructive power of human ingenuity, epitomized by the Promethean fire of nuclear warheads. Demographers chimed in with concerns about the "population bomb," which threatened disaster as human reproduction outpaced the earth's capacity to feed its people. New images from space drove home the finite, fragile, and ultimately beautiful qualities of "our only planet," silhouetted against the black void of the universe. All of this spawned unease about the unprecedented toll that humans were (and are) exacting from the earth. Arguments for rethinking the relationship between humankind and our habitat gained strength. The environment became an important focus of political and societal

concern. The level of disquiet and engagement has waxed and waned, but environmentalism, as this emergent consciousness came to be known, has reshaped how Canadians (and others) interact with nature.

The environmental movement also stimulated new ways of thinking about the world. Because scholars are influenced by contemporary concerns, many turned their attention to the ways in which peoples and environments have interacted through time. Historians first traced changes in the ways that people thought about their physical surroundings – as wilderness, as garden, or as pastoral middle ground, for example. Before long, they came to recognize nature's capacity to affect human lives. In this they neither echoed Arthur Lower's muted environmental determinism nor mirrored Harold Innis's sense of the landscape (or geography) as an obstacle to be overcome. Rather than being a setting that determined the script or a stage upon which human dramas were enacted, nature became a participant in the play. Dynamic rather than static, it changed according to its own rules (the so-called laws of nature), which signalled resistance or adaptation to human actions. Simple examples include the recolonization, by shrubs and trees, of pastures cleared by arduous human toil; the sudden upsurge of certain animal populations after ecological disturbances such as the clearing of forest or the removal of predators; or the clogging of irrigation ditches with weeds. Whether nature had agency remained a matter of debate. Those who felt the word *agency* implied volition doubted that it did. But the hybrid, interactive quality of human-nature systems was widely recognized. So, too, was the notion that any understanding of the world reflects the context in which it is formulated and can, therefore, be challenged or revised.

Ecologists and other scientists also began to recognize contingency and chaos in the natural world and to write historical accounts of Earth and humans. So-called Big Histories encompassed millions, even billions, of years. All of this opened exciting new conversations across the fences that had long separated different fields of knowledge. The result was an

expansion in both the range of inquiries and the ways in which people thought about past and present, humans and nature. Although historians were relatively cautious about expanding the temporal and spatial range of their inquiries, they forged a recognizable new field commonly known as environmental history, which embraced new methods of understanding human experience. Information from ice cores and tree rings is being used alongside textual records to trace the influence of nonhuman factors in stories of the human past – and vice versa. Recent years have seen a remarkable upsurge of historical writing along these lines in Canada, much of it by contributors to this book. Inspired by a changing intellectual climate and driven by contemporary societal concerns about the depletion of important resources, the runaway growth tendencies of modern industrial economies, and the plundering and defacement of the earth, their work reflects a deeper, abiding interest in the relationship between humans and the material world they have inhabited, imagined, and changed.

The essays featured here explore how our interactions with nature have changed over time. They chart the dependence and influence of Canadians on land, air, and water; their connections to plant, animal, avian, and microbial species; and their attitudes towards the places that sustain them. Challenged to offer new insights in short, pithy essays, the authors, including ourselves, jettison common scholarly blinkers in favour of more provocative argument. We grapple with changes unfolding at various scales, from the local to the global, and at various rates, from the near instantaneous to the almost infinitesimally slow. Together, we explore a range of issues, ranging from the creation of the continents to the economic bases of Canadian development to climate change. We also ponder important ideas that have shaped how Canadians view the wilderness, the city, the environment, and appropriate forms of knowledge about these things. Each essay invites you to think anew about what we know of the development of Canada, and each will help you grapple with the increasingly urgent challenge of reframing relations between humans and nature.

We open with what might be described as a little Big History of Canada. By considering deep time – the eons, eras, periods, epochs, and ages of the geological time scale that encompasses billions of years – "Nature and Nation" raises two essential points. First, that profound and not-so-long-ago-unimaginable natural processes have been essential to the development of the nation as we know it. And second, that our human tenure on the globe and the place now known as Canada has been but a fleeting moment. This juxtaposition – of our species' short-lived existence and our dependence on the rock of ages – drives home the resilience of nature. This long (but ever foreshortening) view also emphasizes the precariousness of humankind's existence on Earth. We cannot escape this truth.

Many scientists argue that we are living in a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, distinguished by the transformative, quickening impact of human activity on Earth ecosystems. Precisely when the Anthropocene began remains a matter of debate. But few now doubt that shrinking Arctic sea ice, retreating glaciers, rising sea levels, and increasing global mean temperatures are signs of significant change. Canadians have not been solely responsible for these changes. We do, though, share culpability with others. Time and again in the pages that follow we see newcomers to northern North America (non-Indigenous peoples) pursuing economic and social development with scant regard for the environmental costs. In some sense, this trend began with the earliest encounters, when fish and furs, whales and birds seemed inexhaustible. There were efforts to regulate and control exploitation, but many of them were flawed in conception, implementation, or both. Particular casts of mind favoured transforming the earth. Settler-farmers were praised for converting "waste lands" into productive acres, even though cutting forests increased run-off and erosion and resulted in silted streams and altered ecologies.

After the Second World War, these trends continued and picked up speed with the embrace of ever-more powerful technologies that spawned demand for improvements in transportation and new markets for minerals

and fossil fuels. Science, technology, and the development imperative have greatly improved the material circumstances of most (though certainly not all) Canadians. Compare the conditions in which we live with those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We have larger, warmer houses; move more easily across the vastness of the country; consume at unprecedented levels; and know countless luxuries unimaginable to our predecessors. Clearly, the toil and persistence of those who came before us helped to make the country what it is today. But the day of reckoning approaches. As "Time Chased Me Down, and I Stopped Looking Away," the luminous final essay in this volume, reminds us, we can no longer afford to turn blind eyes to the cumulative and continuing impact of humans on the natural world.

Between these discussions of deep time and time slipping away, we reflect on the ways that people have interacted with Canadian nature through the decades and consider what various groups and generations of individuals thought about those interactions. Together, we reveal some of the choices and chances, ideas and forces that lie behind many of the most vexing challenges now facing Canadians. "Painting the Map Red" and "Listening for Different Stories" jointly establish the broad parameters of human engagement with Canadian nature. The first focuses on three maps that illuminate, in turn, early European encounters with northern North America, the progress of newcomer settlement and economic development into the twentieth century, and the ways that maps (and histories) reflect the views of the victors rather than the vanquished in any struggle for power and territory. That is why it is important, as Julie Cruikshank argues with remarkable eloquence in the essay that follows, to listen for different stories in and of the past. The message is simple: environmental despoliation (and a great deal of individual and social anguish) might have been tempered had greater heed been paid to Indigenous views of nature.

For all the attention lavished on explorers in traditional histories of the continent, acquisitiveness trumped inquisitiveness as the driver of newcomer

interest. Fish, whales, and furs drew sailors and traders – "merchant adventurers" all – across the Atlantic, into the icy edges of the Arctic islands, and across the interior. The prospect of farms, independence, and at least modest prosperity (the very realization of what philosophers of liberalism call possessive individualism) lured hundreds of thousands more to settle the land. In the process, as the cartographic installation discussed in "Painting the Map Red" makes clear, Indigenous peoples were marginalized and dispossessed. Forests were felled to erect and heat buildings but also, with increasing fervour in the nineteenth century, to meet market demands for wood in Britain and the United States. Later, precious and base minerals and a succession of fuels (coal, oil, gas, uranium, and bitumen) served to foster development and economic growth.

Some of the first Spaniards to reach South America heard of a mythical king, El Hombre Dorado, who dusted himself in gold. Successive iterations of this story transmuted the golden man into a golden city and, eventually, an empire, Eldorado. There was gold far to the north, but until the Fraser and Yukon gold rushes of the late nineteenth century, Canada's Eldorado was much more prosaic than its Andean namesake. In *The Nature of Canada,* we deal in different ways with some of the resources that constituted Canada's wealth and underpinned its development: fish from the sea and furs from the forest (in "Eldorado North?"); metals, minerals, and fossil fuels from the earth (in "Never Just a Hole in the Ground" and "The Power of Canada"); and the various products, animal and vegetable, that came from toil in hard-won fields (in "Back to the Land"). Together, these discussions help us calibrate the technological forces and guiding assumptions that have shaped the trajectory of Canadian economic growth, even as they allow us to measure the environmental consequences of the path we have taken.

Of course, in the moment, consequences may be unintended, unforeseen, or unrecognized. The essays "Nature We Cannot See" and "Every Creeping Thing …" turn on this specific point, although it is one that has

larger relevance to most environmental studies. Debilitating and deadly pathogens have made their way into northern North America unwanted and unheralded for centuries. After hitching rides across the oceans on human transporters, many of them wrought havoc on the unsuspecting and unprepared inhabitants of the new world in which they were unleashed. From first to last, from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, these invisible invaders spawned terror and panic among the populations they infected, and people struggled to understand the nature of their afflictions. The unintended consequences of the various communication corridors – railways, pipelines, airlines, and telecommunications networks – that opened up and tied together the spaces of the nation have been less dramatic but hardly less significant for the animal inhabitants of the continent. Humans impact nature in many ways, on countless scales, and often in a surprising fashion.

Ideas and assumptions are crucial guides and mediators of human action, and they rightly figure large in our discussions of the interactions between humans and nature. But ideas can be tricky things, shape-shifting will-o'-the-wisps or chameleon-like notions that present different hues in different circumstances. Wild nature is something that (most people believe) Canada possesses in abundance. But the accumulation of PCBs and other chemical substances in the bodies of polar bears, the clutter of ocean-borne detritus on beaches, and the poisoning of lakes by acid rain suggest that few parts of nature are truly wild or untouched by human influence any more. Indeed, Canadians' attitudes towards the vast, "empty" spaces of their country are nothing if not ambiguous. Many regard these spaces as frontiers for exploitation. Others consider them pristine places of bare rock, sparkling lakes, and clear air that allow the spirit of the wild to endure among predominantly urban Canadians. How can we set aside and treasure wilderness parks but encourage more and more people to visit them? These conundrums lie at the heart of "The Wealth of Wilderness."

If nature is "that 'given' world we have marred but not made," as novelist and poet Janice Kulyk Keefer so beautifully characterized it, cities are the most marred of places, especially in contrast to wilderness parks. But it is a matter of degree. In cities, nature is everywhere – in street trees, in cracks and crevices, in the air and water that courses through them, in the birds that fly above us and feed on discarded crumbs, and in the pets and parks and gardens that we meet at every turn. Cities are classic hybrid spaces. Like parks, they are designed according to certain precepts, to achieve certain ends. In "Imagining the City," you'll see that even our largest urban places were envisaged before they were built and that their realization changed ideas about the appeal, or otherwise, of different forms of urban design, and about urbanism more generally.

Ideas have the power to shape actions and worlds. The high modernist impulse, which combined the celebrated power of science and the transformative capacity of brute force technologies, was felt worldwide. Its consequences in Canada were as monumental as the St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project and as personal as the loss of a family orchard. High modernism is generally criticized for denying the complexity and diversity of nature and riding roughshod over local concerns. In "Questions of Scale," it is presented as both a powerful abstraction and a practice grounded in detailed (albeit scientific) knowledge of particular places that did much to remake the country. "A Gendered Sense of Nature" turns our attention to Voice of Women and Greenpeace, two parallel but surprisingly intertwined protest movements generated by the testing of nuclear armaments in the 1960s, a pivotal moment in the development of environmentalism, both in Canada and globally. The essay deepens our understanding of the ideas at play and the issues at stake during these years. In arguing that gender shaped how the protest actions were conceived and executed, it also raises an important, often bypassed question: Do men and women have different environmental histories?

In 2012, a well-known leader of the Canadian environmental movement lamented the failure of that cause, but the authors of "Advocates and Activists" take a more moderate view. Yes, logging, pollution, and the despoliation of nature (the target of countless protest marches, barricades, and oppositional struggles over half a century and more) continue. And human blockades and various efforts to alert the public to the damage being inflicted on the natural world have failed to halt economic expansion. Ecological understanding may not be top of mind for most twenty-first-century Canadians, but many of them appreciate our collective need to tread more lightly on the earth. Nature is no longer assaulted as relentlessly as it once was. Debates that were framed in simple confrontational terms – prosperity versus protection, development versus wilderness, economy versus environment – are now a lot more complicated. This complexity stems, in large part, from increased recognition of Indigenous voices in discussions of resource development, territorial claims, and social and environmental justice.

The world is real, but we can't escape the fact that people make sense of it in diverse ways. Individuals interpret their surroundings differently, depending on their context, beliefs, and experiences. Consider, for example, the concept of wilderness. Travel to England, and you'll find signposted "wilderness walks" within the walled courtyard gardens of country houses. On the west coast of Canada, a document produced by the University of British Columbia describes a campus bordered by wilderness, presumably a reference to the second- and third-growth forests of Pacific Spirit Park, immediately to the east. Tended by rangers, cut through by heavily used roads, and threaded with trails thick with joggers, cyclists, dog walkers, and bird watchers, the park is hardly more wild than Vancouver, the busy, booming metropolis on its eastern edge. But as the discussion in "Climates of Our Times" reminds us, even seemingly secure and scientific ideas such as "the climate" are intellectual constructions with particular histories. Armed with this insight, we can better comprehend how we frame and understand

larger issues such as climate change. We can also recognize that all knowledge is made, not given. Our understanding of the world reflects the circumstances in which it was produced and speaks to particular times and places.

The Nature of Canada offers several insights to help meet the challenges of living more sustainable lives in Canada. First, beware of simplifying fictions such as "Economics is more important than ecology," "The complexities of nature can be ignored," or "We can have it all" (whether it be sustainable mines or wild places that are at once pristine and exploited). Likewise, remember that wilderness, climate, and nation are not real and incontrovertible things but rather complex, contingent, and constructed concepts. Second, the cultural and material dimensions of our existence are deeply intertwined. For all the power of our intellects and imaginations, we depend on nature. This dependence was more obvious in times past, when, for example, family hearths were warmed by wood hewed, chopped, and hauled by members of the household. But we are no less dependent on nature's bounty today, even though we generally have few links to the processes that produce electricity and gasoline. Third, human-nature interactions are embodied experiences. Males and females, young and old, rich and poor, Indigenous peoples and newcomers have (and have had) different experiences of, relations with, and beliefs about the environment. Fourth, environmental transformations help to constitute society and the power relations threaded through it. Fifth, personal and societal aspirations must be reconciled with environmental realities to sustain human life on Earth. The human drive to domination must take nature's limits into consideration. Sixth, it is hard to find transcendent truths to light our way forward. Finally, the significant shifts in human attitudes to and interactions with nature traced in these pages offer hope that changes for the better remain possible.

Inconsistencies – paradoxes – confront us at every turn, but the manner in which we face, respond to, and attempt to resolve the environmental

challenges ahead will be shaped by history and who we understand ourselves to be. Collaboration and coexistence rather than confrontation will be essential as we rethink the human-nature relationship. We hope that these pages will encourage you to think again and anew about the causes and consequences of our interactions with the earth. The futures of Canada, of Canadians, of humankind, and of the only world we have are at stake.

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