

The Nurture of Nature

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NATURE | HISTORY | SOCIETY

The Nurture of Nature

Childhood, Antimodernism, and
Ontario Summer Camps, 1920-55

SHARON WALL

FOREWORD BY GRAEME WYNN



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FOREWORD

Modernism in Camp: A Wilderness Paradox

by Graeme Wynn

Some forty years ago, as the environmental movement gained popular impetus and environmental history began to develop as a distinct field of inquiry, the appearance of Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* gave shape and direction to both of these endeavours. The book – which traced the intellectual roots of the wilderness concept and which was once characterized as the environmentalists' "Book of Genesis" – soon gained canonical status. The *Los Angeles Times* counted it one of the most influential books of the late twentieth century and *Outside* magazine included it in a list of "books that changed our world."¹

There has been no Canadian equivalent, tracing the shifts that occurred in British North American/Canadian thinking about wild places over the long course of European settlement in the northern reaches of the continent, although several scholars have written around the edges of this topic. Among them, Patricia Jasen (in *Wild Things: Nature, Culture and Tourism in Ontario, 1790-1914*) deserves acknowledgment for revealing much about the wilderness idea while exploring the appeal of the wild and primitive in attracting European and North American tourists to Ontario in search of the picturesque and the sublime. Others, exploring the histories of

1 Roderick F. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). New editions were published in 1973, 1982, and 2001, by which time the book had gone through some twenty printings. See Bryan McDonald, "Considering the Nature of Wilderness: Reflections on Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*," *Organization and Environment* 14, 2 (2001): 188-201.

national and provincial parks, have illuminated some of the ways in which wilderness has been regarded by Canadians, but most have framed their studies as institutional rather than intellectual or environmental histories and have given limited attention to broader environmental and cultural trends. Students of literary texts, including Northrop Frye, Margaret Atwood, Marcia Kline, and D.G. Jones, have identified a distinctive set of Canadian attitudes to wilderness in poetry and fiction, suggesting (in the words of Marcia Kline) that Canadians rejected “the New World environment, [and] opted for an instrumentality that fostered their dependence on the parent civilization – thereby opening the floodgates to terror when they did have to meet the wild and natural.” By contrast, on this account, Americans did almost the opposite. “Cutting themselves loose from civilization ... [they] went happily into their New World,” singing joyfully of the natural environment and “banishing terror” from their artistic and emotional vocabularies.²

- 2 Patricia Jasen, *Wild Things: Nature, Culture and Tourism in Ontario, 1790-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Paul Kopas, *Taking the Air: Ideas and Change in Canada's National Parks* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007); Sid Marty, *A Grand and Fabulous Notion: The First Century of Canada's Parks* (Toronto: NC Press, 1984); W.F. Lothian, *A Brief History of Canada's National Parks* (Ottawa: Supply and Services, 1987). J.G. Nelson and R.C. Scace, eds., *The Canadian National Parks: Today and Tomorrow*, 2 volumes (Calgary: National and Provincial Parks Association of Canada and the University of Calgary, 1969); J.G. Nelson and R.C. Scace, eds., *Canadian Parks in Perspective: Based on the Conference, The Canadian National Parks: Today and Tomorrow* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1970). Sylvia Van Kirk, “The Development of National Park Policy in Canada's Mountain National Parks, 1885-1930,” unpublished Master's thesis, University of Alberta, 1969; Ronald Clifford Arthur Johnson, “The Effect of Contemporary Thought Upon Park Policy and Landscape Change in Canada's National Parks, 1885-1911,” unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1972; Rick Rollins and Philip Dearden, eds., *Parks and Protected Areas in Canada: Planning and Management* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993); John S. Marsh and Bruce W. Hodgins, eds., *Changing Parks: The History, Future and Cultural Context of Parks and Heritage Landscapes* (Toronto: Natural Heritage/Natural History, 1998); C.J. Taylor, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Canada's National Historic Parks and Sites* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990); Leslie Bella, *Parks for Profit* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1987); Alan MacEachern, *Natural Selections: National Parks in Atlantic Canada, 1935-1970* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); John Sandlos, *Hunters at the Margin: Native People and Wildlife Conservation in the Northwest Territories* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007); I.S. MacLaren, *Culturing Wilderness in Jasper National Park: Studies in Two Centuries of Human History in the Upper Athabasca River Watershed* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2007); Theodore Binnema and Melanie Niemi, “‘Let the line be drawn now’: Wilderness, Conservation and the Exclusion of Aboriginal People from Banff National Park in Canada,” *Environmental History* 11 (2006): 724-50. Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian*

But these arguments centred on imaginative writing are too easily made. Ways of thinking about the environment are rarely monolithic. Complex, evanescent ideas shift, sprawl, and all-too-often contradict broad generalizations about popular (or national) conceptions of nature. Without a “big picture” book based on close familiarity with a broad spectrum of sources, much remains to be understood about Canadian attitudes and actions toward wilderness and nature. In this context, Sharon Wall’s thoughtful, probing, and impressive monograph, *The Nurture of Nature* is especially welcome. Although its frame and focus are tight, it makes a significant contribution to understanding the ways in which many Canadians sought to come to grips with the changing circumstances of their lives after the First World War. They often did this by looking backward toward a time when people were more intimately engaged with the environment than they seemed to be in the nation’s rapidly growing towns and cities. Indeed if, as Roderick Nash suggested recently, one way of coming to terms with the complexity of nature-society relations and of realizing the possibilities of change, is by “ferret[ing] out the ... stories of the people and the causes that have made and are making a difference,” this book is an important step forward.³

Early in the 1950s, dozens of summer camps in Ontario were providing a “back-to-nature” experience for about 150,000 children each year. Competing for campers and catering to different socio-economic groups as well as to different sensibilities, these camps varied considerably in the activities they offered, as well as in their comfort, duration, location, and underlying philosophy. But there can be no doubt that “camp,” in the broadest most general sense, was a right-of-passage for a substantial fraction of Canadian children through the first half of the twentieth century (at least one in twenty, the sources suggest), and that grasping the meaning of the camp experience brings one a step closer to understanding Canada and the place of nature in the minds and lives of its citizens.

The effects, upon the young individuals who went to camp, of a more-or-less extended and more-or-less demanding summer sojourn in the “northern wilds” surely varied even more than did the camps themselves.

Literature (Toronto: Anansi, 1972); Northrop Frye, “Conclusion,” in Carl F. Klinck, ed., *Literary History of Canada* (Toronto: 1965), 821-49; D.G. Jones, *Butterfly on Rock: A Study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970); Marcia B. Kline, *Beyond the Land Itself: Views of Nature in Canada and the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970) 53-61.

3 “Interview: Roderick Nash,” *Environmental History* 12, 2 (2007): 399-407.

Some had “the time of their lives,” many endorsed the adventure by returning year after year, and some, no doubt, felt loneliness or experienced the full gamut of emotions while away from home and family. It was surely not by chance that American comedian Allan Sherman’s “Camp Granada” song (to the tune of Amilcare Ponchielli’s *Dance of the Hours*) struck a nostalgic chord north of the border in the late 1960s: “Take me home, oh muddah, fadduh / Take me home, I hate Granada! / Don’t leave me out in the forest / Where I might get eaten by a bear / ... Wait a minute, it’s stopped hailing / Guys are swimming, guys are sailing / Playing baseball, gee that’s bettah / Muddah, faddah kindly disregard this letter!”⁴

In providing the fullest account to date of the Ontario camp movement, Sharon Wall is less concerned than was Allan Sherman with the immediate sentiments and reactions of individual campers to their circumstances. But her study brings us, nonetheless, to contemplate the longer term and broader implications (both personal and cultural) of this fascinating phenomenon. Whether or not they echoed the comedian’s amusing satirical encapsulation of the experience of attending summer camp, the lessons, emotions, and effects of time spent in such places left their imprint upon hundreds of thousands of children. By seeking and revealing the cultural meanings of “fresh air” and “wilderness” camping, and of the activities in which campers engaged, while exploring some of the ways in which a significant number of eastern Canadians embraced nature as an antidote to the perception that contemporary circumstances were imperilling the young, Sharon Wall has produced a multifaceted study that has much to say to historians of the environment. Time and again, *The Nurture of Nature* reveals the contradictory qualities of the summer camp, even as it offers new insights into the ways in which Canadians struggled to find meaning in modernity.

One of the most striking vignettes in Roderick Nash’s 1967 book is the story of Joe Knowles who “plunged naked” into the Maine woods in August 1913 to live as “a primitive man,” entirely dependent upon his hands and his wits for survival.⁵ Occasional notes, written in charcoal on birch bark and sent back to civilization, informed a growing audience of fascinated newspaper readers that Knowles had made fire by rubbing together two sticks, that he had fashioned clothing from strips of bark, and that he was

4 Formally titled “Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh (A Letter from Camp),” the song appeared on an album by Allan Sherman entitled *My Son, the Nut*, released in 1963. For lyrics see “Camp Granada Song” at Boy Scout Trail, <http://www.boy scout trail.com/content/song/song-462.asp>.

5 Nash, *Wilderness*, 141-51.

able to eat a varied diet of berries, trout, and venison. When he emerged from the wilderness, dishevelled but healthy in early October, public enthusiasm seemed to know no bounds. Thousands of people gathered to hear him speak at stops along the route of his triumphal train journey to Boston, where thousands more lined the streets to cheer his motorcade on to Boston Common, where 20,000 congregated to hear him speak. In New England, at least, Knowles even upstaged baseball's 1913 World Series at the New York Polo Grounds. His account of his exploits, published that same year as *Alone in the Wilderness*, reportedly sold 300,000 copies.⁶

For Nash, all of this stood as a "single and rather grotesque manifestation" of a surging public interest in "wildness," indicating that in the United States, at least, "appreciation of wilderness had spread from a relatively small group of Romantic and patriotic literati to become a national cult." Spurred by a growing sense that America's "pioneering" spirit was being weakened by the forms and trappings of modern urban life – reflected in and given shape by Frederick Jackson Turner's arguments about the consequences flowing from the disappearance of the western frontier, and resting as well perhaps on a (social) Darwinian sense of competition and "survival of the fittest" – easterners, in particular, came to venerate wilderness as a source of virility and toughness. In the northeastern United States and in eastern Canada "retreating" into the "wilderness" came to be seen as beneficial, even essential, for those worn down by the daily grind of modern life. For some this meant hunting or fishing, manly pursuits that would allow people to recapture the thrill of the chase. For others afflicted by stress, worry, sickness, and weakness, ailments that plagued those forced to live and work in cities, remedy might be found by taking a "rest cure in a canoe." Exhaustion induced by hard physical recreation in nature would purge the ills of civilization and be rewarded by a transcendental sense of fulfillment that would revitalize the spirit and provide a sense of perspective on life. Or so believed many (including future Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The Scots-Canadian and naturalized American citizen Ernest Thompson Seton (famous for his realistic animal stories) played a prominent role in bringing such convictions into wider circulation, and in making them of particular relevance to the raising of children and youth.⁷ Living in Connecticut early in the twentieth century, Seton chose to tell stories

6 Joseph Knowles, *Alone in the Wilderness* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1913).

7 See "Blue Sky! – The Ernest Thompson Seton Pages" at <http://www.etsetoninstitute.org/welcome>.

about native peoples and nature to a small group of boys who had vandalized his property, rather than punish them by law. Inspired, the boys formed a “Woodcraft tribe,” from which the Woodcraft Indians, and later the Woodcraft League of America developed. Seton described the early part of this story in a series of articles in *Lady’s Home Journal* and they were published as *The Birch-bark Roll of the Woodcraft Indians* and *The Book of Woodcraft and Indian Lore*.⁸ The opening page of the former informs readers: “This is a time when the whole nation is turning toward the outdoor life, seeking in it the physical regeneration so needful for continued national existence” and that “those live longest who live nearest to the ground, that is, who live the simple life of primitive times.”⁹ The latter defines Woodcraft, “the first of all the sciences,” as “outdoor life in its broadest sense” and declares that “it was Woodcraft that made man out of brutish material, and Woodcraft in its highest form may save him from decay.”

Others had tugged at these sentiments before. Even in the nineteenth century, North American parents worried about the influences of crime comics, pulp fiction, movie theatres, and dance halls on their children and, as Sharon Wall shows in the pages that follow, both summer camps for the sons of the relatively affluent and fresh air camps for the children of the urban poor operated before 1900. The YMCA was involved in camp work early on, and by the second decade of the twentieth century there was an almost bewildering array of organizations engaged in providing outdoor experience for the young: Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, Girl Guides, Canadian Girls in Training, and so on took their places alongside the Woodcraft Indians, and all shared in some degree, a basic credo of the Woodcraft Way: “Outdoor activity is an inexpensive and delightful experience. It is a mental and physical restoration from the strains imposed by our modern existence. Camp life, although not the central focus of Woodcraft, has an honored place in the program. Adventure in the wilderness is ideal. Many of the same benefits may be obtained under less rigorous conditions.”¹⁰

8 Ernest Thompson Seton, *The Birch-bark Roll of the Woodcraft Indians, Containing their Constitution, Laws, Games, and Deeds* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1907), 1; Ernest Thompson Seton, *The Book of Woodcraft and Indian Lore* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1912), v.

9 This 1907 phrasing is repeated verbatim on page 1 of Seton, *The Book of Woodcraft and Indian Lore*.

10 “The Woodcraft Way,” part of “Blue Sky! – The Ernest Thompson Seton Pages” at <http://www.etsetoninstitute.org/the-woodcraft-way>.

Described in such terms, the appeal of outdoor activity and wilderness recreation (and the boundary between them was unmistakably blurred) was both nostalgic and redemptive. It harked back to earlier times and circumstances, provided an escape from the present, and offered opportunities for individuals to find, explore, and hone their strengths (or gird their loins for the challenges of daily life in the modern world). Against this canvas, the contention that summer camps “emerged as a reaction to urban, industrial culture and represented yet another manifestation of bourgeois longing for authentic experience and nostalgia for simpler times” (p. 254 herein) seems entirely coherent. Indeed, as Wall rightly acknowledges, “camps were designed as escapes from modernity in geographic, temporal, and cultural terms” (p. 14).

This is the beginning rather than the end of Wall’s argument in *The Nature of Nurture*, however. Although her first chapter nicely summarizes the anti-urbanism as well as “the antimodern romanticization of nature and the simple life” upon which the camps drew, the rest of her book is given to careful analysis of different parts of the camp story, and each thematic chapter invites readers to think again about taken-for-granted assumptions, by reconfiguring and re-examining one or another aspect of the camp phenomenon. What are the implications of the class-based distinction between elite and fresh air camps? How did summer camps reflect and influence changing notions of childhood? What role did new psychological and educational principles play in structuring camp activities, and vice versa? In what ways did antimodernist sentiment influence ideals of masculinity and femininity, and questions of sexuality and co-education through the early twentieth century? What should we make of the common camp practice of “playing Indian” in relation to early twentieth- and twenty-first-century ways of thinking about race, and in the context of shifting sensibilities about Native-white relations?

Surprising and important insights flow from this approach. Although camps “embraced many facets of antimodern nostalgia” by romanticizing nature, celebrating wilderness, glorifying the simple life, and espousing “the primitive,” as they “celebrated a physically and mentally tough masculinity,” they were also “thoroughly implicated in the project of modernity.” Camp administrators, Wall’s analysis reveals, “displayed some very modern tendencies,” including a strong attachment to the ideals of order and efficiency and a desire to order and organize human experience. Even as they capitalized on the perception that they offered a return to simpler, freer circumstances, camps borrowed from contemporary theory advocating “rigid and controlled approaches to child rearing.” In short, Wall insists,

the summer camp enshrined not simply a “rejection of modern life” but a set of complex contradictions resulting from the challenges inherent in the many negotiations of modernity taking place in and remaking early twentieth-century Canada (pages 14, 15, 253).

Similar contradictions marked the camps’ and campers’ engagements with nature. As Wall points out, “devotion to the ideals of order and efficiency” often led camp operators to “‘clean up’ the natural environment” and to engage in efforts to “rationally order and control landscapes prized for their ‘wildness’” (page 14). Even when they left nature untouched, their often-extravagant embrace of pre-modern sensibilities – of wild and primitive nature – meant that camp leaders both contributed to and reinforced ideas of wilderness that rested upon the conviction that society was separate from nature. Thus to read this book is to understand that camps were hybrid phenomena. Thoroughly modern creations “born of antimodern sentiment,” they attributed their “therapeutic” qualities to the opportunities they provided young moderns to experience that “intangible but much lauded entity called nature.” But these claims derived their potency from pointed contrasts with prevailing notions of the city, the factory, and “progress” (page 14). Moreover, as camp leaders lamented the divorce of people from nature, and looked “longingly, if only occasionally and half-heartedly, for a bridge back,” they encouraged “the construction of nature as an entity existing apart from the machinations of the human world, [as] a distinct and separate space, [as] a place one could visit, indeed should visit, to reconnect with what it meant to be truly human” (page 251). And there lies the final irony, because the celebration of earlier forms of connection between nature and society only served to reinforce the dualistic view of nature/culture so central to the modern conscience. If *The Nurture of Nature* provides no direct answers to this paradox, it nonetheless challenges us to wonder whether we can, so to speak, ever be (pre)modern, and to appreciate, again, Sharon Wall’s deep and subtle treatment of the ways in which summer campers constructed their ideas of wilderness and nature in the particular contexts of their changing times.¹¹

11 The oblique reference is to Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf / Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

Acknowledgments

When I was a child, I loved reading books. Looking back, I'll admit I often preferred them to people. When Sunday school friends asked me if I wanted to come over and play after church, I dutifully went and asked my mother but quietly whispered, "Say, no, Mom." I wanted to go home and read my book. To try to make me play with her, my younger sister delighted in stealing "my book" and having me chase her around the house to retrieve it. It was my usual habit to keep a book under my pillow at night so it would be "right there" when I woke up in the morning.

I can't say now that my child-self gave one iota of thought as to where a book came from or that it had actually been written by someone, who, toiling behind the pages of words, also had the help of many other people. Well, innocence is lost. I am now very aware of what is involved in making a book, at least one something like this one. In fact, my new acid test for those who tell me they might like to write one is to ask them, "How do you feel about sitting in a room alone for eight years?"

Now that the long process of book writing is over, I have many people to thank – some for concrete and practical help, some for inspiration and advice, and some, quite simply, for helping me to believe that I could get to the end of this process (and for making it a lot more fun getting there).

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In terms of making this a richer study, I would like to thank interviewees in a special way. Their willingness to share their (often) much-treasured memories of camp with a relative stranger will always be remembered. Because of them, I believe this is a more valuable study than it might have been. When finished our interview, one interviewee told me: "I've now talked more about camp to you than I have to anyone in the last forty years." I am very grateful for that and I hope that she, and others, will feel it was worth the time spent.

Although no one can write your book for you, in my case, it certainly helped to have supportive colleagues, friends, and family along the way. For a number of years now, several good friends have been a lifeline of support for me. Catherine Carstairs has always been ready to analyze any piece of history (and, more importantly, life) with me. Janet Miron has (for some reason) always believed in me, and Marcia Ostashewski has been ready to listen to my woes and trials (book-related and otherwise!) and to actually make me feel better. In their own ways, Fiona Miller and Steve Penfold also helped me to believe that I could finish this book. Further along the way, Lara Campbell, Tasha Riley, and Michelle Swann provided friendship and distraction from book-writing at just the right times. For helping me hang on to the goal of finishing a book during the first crazy years of teaching (and for bonding with me in new "northern" climes), I have a number of people to thank. Katrina Srigley, Rob Teigrob, Peter Cook, Mark Crane, Hilary Earl, and Angela Failer helped me to survive while working seven days a week in North Bay. In Prince George, Lorraine Lavalée, Josée Lavoie, and Lisa Dickson always kept life interesting. Jonathan Swainger made me feel I really could do this. Holly Nathan let me drive her truck and was the friend I got to know in the nick of time. Finally, this book is partly responsible for landing me back in the city, Winnipeg, where I first started out and where I gained a whole new slew of colleagues who welcomed and encouraged me as I undertook the final stages of the book-writing process.

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I can't imagine anyone would want to keep this book under their pillow at night or dodge social engagements to finish reading it, but if anyone gets a fraction of the satisfaction that I found in some of my childhood books, it will have been worth the effort.

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The Nurture of Nature

Introduction

To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction.

– Marshall Berman,
All That Is Solid Melts into Air

Thousands of Canadians are familiar with the image of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, sun-tanned and buckskin-clad, canoeing solo through the glass-like waters of a nameless Canadian river, flanked by luminous autumn foliage. The image is from the 1994 video-biography of this colourful and controversial former prime minister, a man who was eulogized at his funeral for “lov[ing] the outdoors, like so many Canadians.”¹ Fewer Canadians are aware that, at the age of ten, Trudeau was immersed in a full summer of outdoor recreation at Camp Ahmek in Algonquin Park, one of Ontario’s most prestigious summer camps. Already at this young age, Trudeau was adept at mastering contrasting elements of the modern experience. According to his biographer, other campers at this elite camp “were astonished by this thin kid from Montreal who vied with them at diving and canoeing while quoting Baudelaire at the same time.”² This (and other) back-to-nature experiences of Trudeau’s childhood apparently left their mark. At the age of twenty-five, Trudeau offered his poetic homage to the outdoors in an essay entitled “Exhaustion and Fulfilment: The Ascetic in a Canoe”:

What fabulous and undeveloped mines are to be found in nature, friendship and oneself! The paddler has no choice but to draw everything from them. Later ... he will be astonished to find so many resources within himself ... How does the trip affect your personality? Allow me to make a fine distinction, and I would say that you return not so much a man who reasons more, but a more reasonable man. For throughout this time, your

mind has learned to exercise itself in the working conditions which nature intended. Its primordial role has been to sustain the body in the struggle against a powerful universe. A good camper knows that it is more important to be ingenious than a genius.³

To this way of thinking, the canoe trip was not just a venture into nature but a journey back to the “real self.” “Ideally,” Trudeau wrote, “the trip should end only when the members are making no further progress within themselves.”⁴ Canoeing was a transcendental experience. “It purifies you more rapidly and inescapably than any other,” he concluded. “Travel a thousand miles by train and you are a brute; pedal five hundred on a bicycle and you remain basically a bourgeois; paddle a hundred in a canoe and you are already a child of nature.”⁵

Despite his youthful idealism, in his adult life, Trudeau was not successful in escaping either modernity or bourgeois culture. On the contrary, while in office, his governments did their best to modernize Canadian legislative and constitutional frameworks. Indeed, this prime minister played a significant hand in initiating a range of modern, liberal reforms, from the liberalizing of laws governing divorce, homosexuality, and birth control, to the repatriation of the nation’s Constitution and adoption of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Clearly, this nature-loving prime minister was also an avid devotee of modern liberalism who applied the test of reason to all things political, attacking tradition – in social values, in parliamentary procedure, in constitutional relations – and exalting the status of the individual above any “special interests.” Here was a prime example of the paradox and contradiction of being “modern.”

This is not a study of Trudeau; it is a study of what his case broadly symbolizes – that is, attempts to find meaning in modernity through antimodern leisure-time pursuits, specifically, the summer camp. Outdoor recreation was only one among many antimodernist responses to the nature of modern life in Canada. Since the late nineteenth century, anti-modernists had been lamenting the pace and direction of cultural change, the humdrum and monotonous regularity of modern living, and the impact of what they called “overcivilization.” Canadian historians have charted how their search for meaning and for more intense experience shaped the nature of English-Canadian imperialism, artistic nationalism, wildlife conservation, and big-game hunting, among other things. In early twentieth-century Nova Scotia, a growing aversion to the impact of industrial modernity spawned what historian Ian McKay has termed a “quest of The Folk” – a search for identity and meaning in a premodern

incarnation of Nova Scotians. Folklorists and cultural producers claimed and popularized an image of an unpretentious fisherfolk as the province's true cultural identity. This image essentially denied the history of industrial development in Nova Scotia, but what did this matter as it also proved to be the goldmine that fuelled modern tourism in that province?⁶

The summer camp shared several characteristics with this broader array of antimodern phenomena. As much as it seemed a rejection of modern society, the camp was ultimately part of that society, helped individuals to adjust to it, and, at times, even fuelled the culture of commodification and consumption that lay at the heart of modernity itself. After all, camp may have provided one kind of escape, but this was usually at a cost – sometimes a high one. Ultimately, camp offered children escape from the city, but it may also have sapped desire to change the environments they were (presumably) escaping. In fact, camp directors frequently replicated the dynamics of social life “back home” and routinely saw the isolated setting of camp as ideal not for extending children's freedom but, rather, for furthering adult control. In this sense, Trudeau's belief in the use value of the canoe trip and its transformative potential echoes the modern functionalist approach of many summer camp administrators – an intriguing phenomenon, when one considers that the camp was most often marketed for its antimodern virtues. From another perspective, the camp can also be seen, like other antimodern phenomena, as the attempt by everyday individuals to create meaning and purpose in areas of their life still deemed within their control. Even children themselves wielded their own kinds of control within the camp setting. This book, I hope, shows something of both realities and also sheds light on the broader contours of Canadian society and culture in these years.

The summer camp emerged as a result of broader social and cultural developments; key among these was increasing scepticism regarding the impact of urban life. As early as the 1870s and 1880s, bourgeois observers across the nation began voicing their concerns about the negative impact of urban growth. For a nation that had defined itself largely in agricultural terms, rural depopulation was regarded as serious cause for concern.⁷ As Paul Rutherford argues, “the Canadian response to the urban fact, especially to the appearance of the ‘big city,’ was generally unfavourable.”⁸ In the critiques of those who denounced urban growth, the city was alternately characterized as dirty, immoral, cold, and indifferent; it was also seen as the site of a host of temptations, including excessive drinking, prostitution, and all sorts of other consumer products and entertainments.

Young working-class women – drawn to large cities by the increasing opportunities for paid labour – were thought to be particularly imperiled by the fact of urban life in terms physical, sexual, and economic.⁹ While some were drawn there for its pleasures, others agonized over its risks. For those who could not escape its daily grind, the city was blamed for inflicting the psychological pain of an increasingly stressful pace of life. The end result was what professionals termed “neurasthenia,” more popularly referred to as “Worry: The Disease of the Age.”¹⁰ The general sense of crisis shared by these (mainly) middle-class observers spurred them on to initiate a host of reforms intent on improving everything from public health and social welfare to town planning and municipal governance.¹¹

While some sought to improve the city, others sought to escape it, and a range of back-to-nature solutions was the result. As social and environmental historians have shown, the view of nature implicit in these solutions represented a distinct departure from earlier ones. Indeed, in the mid- to late nineteenth century, when it first became fashionable to think of nature as benevolent and health-giving, such a stance represented a reversal of centuries of thinking about the human relationship to the natural world. Europeans who colonized the New World were certainly no nature-lovers; they brought with them fundamentally Judeo-Christian notions of wild spaces as hostile and alien, wilderness regions to be tamed and subdued by the artful human hand. As Bill Cronon points out, “To be a wilderness was to be ‘deserted,’ ‘savage,’ ‘desolate,’ ‘barren,’ in short, a ‘waste,’ the word’s nearest synonym.”¹² North American pioneers had similarly ambivalent attitudes towards the natural environment, with which they struggled on a daily basis. Not surprisingly, those who worked for years to clear stubborn stumps from recently reclaimed land, those dependent on the vagaries of climate and weather for their subsistence, were not inclined to regard nature as the benevolent Mother Earth that later generations would venerate. The more holistic views of Aboriginal peoples apart, the statement by nineteenth-century literary figure, Anna Jameson, that “a Canadian settler hates a tree,” was perhaps overly dramatic but likely expressed an essential truth.¹³

In the intervening decades, Europeans and Euro-Canadians alike began expressing more positive views of nature. In fact, changes in thinking were evident in the long-settled Old World long before they emerged in the New World. As Raymond Williams has shown in the British context, nostalgia for “the country” – for the good old England of a simpler time – dates back some four hundred years.¹⁴ More specifically, the emergence of European Romanticism as a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism

shaped new tastes for the sublime and for “wilder” natural landscapes in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This new appreciation for nature in its less ordered manifestations had its impact on both sides of the Atlantic. Well-to-do nineteenth-century North Americans consumed their own versions of the sublime at sites like Niagara Falls, while also taking more placid enjoyment in pleasure cruises through the Great Lakes.¹⁵ The trend towards more positive assessments of nature accelerated with industrialization and the routinization of work as “Mother Nature” was valued increasingly for her therapeutic qualities.¹⁶ In Ontario, as elsewhere, this resulted in the taste for nature-based recreation, the “rest cure in a canoe” becoming popular as a remedy for urban anxiety and stress. For those who could afford it, big-game hunting, canoe-tripping, cottaging, and resort holidays were all fashionable uses of summer leisure time.¹⁷ For times when total escape was not viable, citizen groups and city planners alike sought to bring nature to the city with Garden City initiatives in Europe and City Beautiful campaigns in North America.¹⁸

Worries about urban living were magnified when middle-class observers considered modernity’s impact on the young. Typically, they feared that children steeped in consumer culture might become incapable of enjoying life’s simpler pleasures or of understanding the importance of physical exertion and hard work. Paradoxically, having fought to limit the most extreme forms of child labour, middle-class Canadians now worried about how children would use their expanding hours of leisure time. In their eyes, children were especially vulnerable to the lure of consumer culture. Anxious parents and educators worried about the impact of crime comics and pulp novels, movie theatres and youth dance halls, and some worked to prohibit or restrict access to these.¹⁹ Indeed, to Canadians in the first half of the twentieth century, children seemed to need protection from the very culture that surrounded them.

Restricting and regulating children’s exposure to consumer culture was one response to changing conditions; providing recreational alternatives was another. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a network of child- and youth-oriented institutions emerged across Canada and the United States that sought to provide “wholesome” outlets for children’s leisure time. Beyond the playground movement, which sought mainly to provide spaces for supervised children’s play, other youth organizations designed more ambitious programs to fill children’s leisure time. Concerned to counter the ill effects of city living and to infuse young men’s leisure habits with a more spiritual tone, the YMCA established itself in both the United States and then Canada in the late nineteenth century. As David

MacLeod argues, by the 1870s, the Y was shifting its emphasis to adolescent (and middle-class) boys. By the early twentieth century, the Y was collaborating with the Protestant churches to deliver the Tuxis and Trail Ranger programs, designed in hopes of keeping older boys involved in the church. More critical of organized religion, but equally concerned about modernity's impact on youth, Ernest Thompson Seton had established his hugely popular League of Woodcraft Indians just a few years earlier. Aside from attracting thousands of urban boys to its recreational program in the first decade of the century, it is generally recognized as the inspiration for the Boy Scouts movement, which affected millions more. (In fact, Seton upbraided Robert Baden-Powell, the Scouts' founder, for essentially "stealing" his ideas.) Baden-Powell, however, took these ideas and shaped them according to a more militaristic and imperialist bent.²⁰

A number of these institutions had their female-oriented counterparts. The YWCA developed shortly after the YMCA and had similarly religious aims and views of urban life. The female counterpart to the Scouts, the Girl Guides, emerged in Britain in 1909 and quickly spread to North America. In 1915, the Canadian Girls in Training was founded by some who thought the Girl Guides offered an excessively British model for Canadian girls, one many also considered too competitive, authoritarian, hierarchical, and secular. Established mainly by YWCA women, in consultation with those involved in girls' work, the CGIT had a more clearly religious mandate than the Guides; groups were formed out of Sunday school classes and came under the control of the individual Protestant denominations. The organization was also influenced by ideas of "new womanhood" and by modern educational principles, as Margaret Prang has demonstrated. Targeting adolescents in particular – and using summer camps to do so – it was quite the interwar success, drawing over 250,000 Canadian girls to its program during this period.²¹

Taken together, these youth-oriented institutions had a major impact on the life and leisure activities of thousands of Canadian children and youth. Organizations targeting boys aimed to prop up flagging urban masculinity, those targeting girls sought to keep urban girls appropriately feminine, and each was also shaped variously by religious, nationalistic, and imperialist values. Whatever the varying approaches of these institutions, they shared the worry that modern childhood and youth were in peril, that children needed to be treated separately from adults, and that leisure-time institutions, under adult control, might help to bridge the developing gap between the generations.

ROOTS AND BRANCHES OF THE SUMMER CAMP MOVEMENT

Both in its aims and its membership, the summer camp movement grew out of this background of recreational innovations for the young. (Indeed, back-to-nature programming was on the agenda of a number of youth organizations.)²² To a greater degree than other recreational institutions, the summer camp combined fears over modern childhood with the expanded faith in back-to-nature solutions. It was also a mainly North American phenomenon. While Germany, Britain, and Australia experimented with open-air schools in the early decades of the twentieth century, and a few European countries experimented with summer camps, residential summer camping was (and remains) a predominantly North American activity.²³ The earliest camps were found on both sides of the Canada/United States border, in a broadly contiguous area encompassing the New England States and Ontario (with a few early camps also founded in Quebec and Nova Scotia).

American camps were the first to emerge. In 1861, private boarding school headmaster, Frederick William Gunn, began taking his students on two-week camping trips away from the school in Connecticut. These loosely organized trips evolved, over the next sixty years, into a network of very profitable ventures known as the Keewaydin camps. The first opened in Maine in 1894 and was relocated to the Temagami region of Ontario in 1904. While some refer to Gunn as the “father of American camping,” others argue that his early camp-outs were not the true precursors of organized summer camping. In the latter view, the establishment of permanent campsites (and not the simple act of “going camping”) marks the true beginning of the summer camp’s history, and a number of these were established in the 1870s and 1880s, some ten or twenty years before the first permanent Keewaydin camp. Most of these were private camps for boys that catered to upper-class clientele. Among them was New Hampshire’s elite Camp Chocorua, running from 1881 to 1889. There, young gentlemen-to-be learned to share in the quasi-military democracy of this “Boys’ Republic.” By 1900, some twenty private camps were in existence, all but one in the Northeast.²⁴

The first fresh air camps for the urban poor emerged in New York City. As Leslie Paris explains, the New York Children’s Aid Society began sending children to a summer house on nearby Staten Island as early as 1872. Other New York institutions targeting the urban poor followed suit, organizing a range of summertime day excursions and longer vacations not

far from city limits. Settlement houses, run by churches and other charitable organizations that sought the integration of immigrants into North American urban life, also established camps. These offered a combination of recreation and education for moral uplift at little or no cost. Assimilationist and even anti-immigrant sentiment was strong at these camps; administrations typically saw their contributions as “Americanizing” immigrant and racial others. By 1897, Peter Schmidt claimed that seventeen American cities had established similar ventures for the urban working class, serving over 500,000 mothers and children each summer.²⁵

Organizational or agency camps for the middle class formed a third group of American camp ventures. The first of these, Camp Dudley, was established by the New York YMCA in 1885. Y camps multiplied quickly thereafter; twenty years later, some three hundred were operating nationally. Aside from the Y, other groups were prominent in camp work, including the Boy Scouts, Seton’s Woodcraft Indians, and the Sons of Daniel Boone. Initially, the development of camps for girls lagged considerably behind that for boys, but it was given a boost with the formation of the Girl Scouts and the Camp Fire Girls in the second decade of the century. As Paris describes, because they were non-profit and, hence, charged lower fees, agency camps offered recreational opportunities for many more children than did private camps. On the other hand, as the years went on, many also resembled private camps in their striving to offer an increasing range of amenities. All told, American camps of these three types reached “a staggering number of children,” as Peter Schmidt puts it; David MacLeod estimates that, by 1924, over seven hundred private camps and roughly five hundred agency camps were welcoming American children.²⁶

In Ontario, the first camps fell into the same categories of private, fresh air, and agency-run. The very first Canadian camp was established in Nova Scotia in 1889, when the Truro YMCA set up camp in Chance Harbour. Four years later, the Ottawa YMCA founded Camp On-da-da-waks on the Ottawa River. In 1894, the Toronto City Mission established the first fresh air camp on Lake Ontario near the town of Bronte, and fresh air work was given an added boost in 1901 with the establishment of the (still-existing) *Toronto Star* Fresh Air Fund, which helped these camps stay afloat. Private camps soon followed. Camp Keewaydin, relocated from the Maine site, and Camp Temagami, both on Lake Temagami, were established in the opening years of the twentieth century. In fact, since early in the century, the two have vied for the title of “first” and “oldest” private camp. Sorting out exactly which camp was first is a somewhat complicated matter and, perhaps, not the most important point. More interesting is the

fact that both camps saw the title of “first” as something valuable, something historian Alan Gordon argues also operated in the realm of national heritage sites.²⁷ Clearly, camps were meant to be appealing because they took people back in time, returned children to “a simpler life.” The notion that one was the “first” could serve as a valuable marketing tool. Whoever was first, others soon followed. By 1920, at least nineteen camps were known to be operating in Ontario: eleven private camps, five fresh air camps, and three agency camps.²⁸

As far as the history of Ontario’s residential camping is concerned, the pre-First World War period differed in some important ways from the later period, upon which this book is primarily focused. During these years, camps were few in number and operated outside the context of an organized camping movement. Religious impulse was often the main influence in their founding and organization. Typically, camp amenities were few, educational influences were minimal, programming followed fairly simple patterns, and bureaucratic tendencies were rare. In terms of the types of children served, the range was limited; according to the Ontario Camping Association, before the First World War, the typical camper was usually an adolescent boy.²⁹

From a smattering of camps established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a recognizable camping movement emerged during the interwar years. One basis of this movement was growth in the total number of camps. Between the First World War and the Second World War, at least sixty-three camps were established in Ontario. While agency camps were said to be “springing up all over,”³⁰ fresh air camps were thriving, and new private camps were also on the increase.³¹ In 1933, the directors of six or seven private camps came together to form the Ontario Camping Association (OCA), a central event in the shaping of an Ontario camp movement. As an organization, the OCA organized conferences, distributed literature, and, generally, coordinated collective action to raise the profile of residential summer camping in the province. As Meg Stanley explains, though the OCA encouraged camps to raise their own standards of camping, it was not, officially, an accrediting body until 1965.³²

From the start, this Ontario movement was closely linked to the American one, with the OCA being a chapter of the American Camping Association (ACA), which was established in 1910. OCA members attended American conferences, read American literature, and evinced a “great feeling of fraternity” with the American movement.³³ Even after the founding of the Canadian Camping Association in 1936, both it and the OCA

remained sections of the ACA.³⁴ Clearly, while this book focuses on Ontario, the summer camp was a North American phenomenon.

From these interwar roots, the Ontario camping movement truly flourished in the postwar period, the early years of which this book also explores. Numbers of OCA-affiliated camps grew from twenty-three in 1939 to 146 in 1955. Of these, almost 40 percent were established in the ten short years between 1945 and 1955.³⁵ Records of the Ontario Ministry of Education, which began licensing camps in 1941, also suggest that this was a period of significant growth.³⁶ The OCA was clearly optimistic about the future and began declaring the “new order of things” in 1946, the same year it first established a permanent office with one full-time staff member.³⁷ The OCA’s *Bulletin* now claimed that camps that “twenty-five years ago ... continued to expect applications right up until the day camp opened” were now sometimes turning away parents months before the summer’s start. In their view, this surely indicated that parents had accepted camping as “a most necessary part of a child’s education.”³⁸ In the same spirit, two prominent camp educators announced the camp’s “coming of age within the educational and social welfare structure of (North) American life.”³⁹

National statistics also suggest that summer camps were booming in the 1950s. In 1952, *Saturday Night* magazine claimed that “between 5 and 7 percent of all Canadian children attend a summer camp,” while in the pages of the *Financial Post*, a young Peter C. Newman quantified this at 150,000 children by 1954.⁴⁰ Newman, who sought to capture any trend of national significance and who would later make his name documenting the workings of the Canadian business and political elite, commented on the financial potential of the summer camp phenomenon. In his opinion, “Canada’s summer camps are today more than fun. They’ve become big business.”⁴¹ Claiming that these “outdoor fun palladiums” had their tents “full to the flaps with bookings,” he ventured that 1954 “promises to be the best in Canadian camping history.” Ontario camps accounted for a good deal of this growth, and OCA members felt themselves to be riding the recreational wave of the future.

WRITING THE HISTORY OF THE SUMMER CAMP

In the United States and, to a lesser extent, in Canada, a literature tracing the history of the summer camp has begun to emerge. For those involved in the movement, the goal in writing its history has been largely to trace

early developments and to give “credit” to its early founders.⁴² On the other hand, scholarly treatments with a more analytic bent are also appearing, and a number of distinct themes have begun to emerge. The significance of the camp’s natural setting and deconstructions of the notion of “wilderness” in the American context have drawn the attention of historians Leslie Paris and Michel Smith as well as architectural historian Abigail Van Slyck. Influenced by the questions and perspective of environmental history, Smith’s study of American camps focuses on the camp as a special place, a unique environment in which to shape children. Smith also underlines the persistent understanding of “nature” and “culture” as distinct and separate entities that endured throughout the twentieth century. Paris’s study is especially strong in setting the camp within a broad cultural context and in exploring the close connections between urban and camp communities. Indeed, taken together, these works explore not only the physical but also the cultural landscape of camp. Paris and Van Slyck offer analyses of the rituals of summer camp, with Paris being particularly adept at showing the tensions between some of these – which relied on the incorporation of consumer culture – and the camps’ commitment to a rhetoric of nostalgia. The shaping of modern childhood at camp and camp as an educational innovation are other emerging themes of these works.⁴³

Within these works (and others) the racialized aspects of camping are also receiving attention. Camps’ “Indian” programming and (in the American setting) traditions of “blackface” minstrelsy at camp have been analyzed for what they implied about racial “Others” and about the broader racial politics of the twentieth century. In terms of ethnicity, the camp’s role in North American immigrant and Jewish communities is also being explored. One of the first book-length studies of summer camps, Paul Mishler’s *Raising Reds*, examines a collection of radical (leftist) summer camps, concluding that they were useful in “Americanizing” new immigrant groups while, at the same time, affirming the “differentness” of these children and fostering the preservation of their immigrant cultures. For their part, Nancy Mykoff and Leslie Paris take up the theme of ethnicity and cultural transfer at camp in the context of American Jewish communities.

When it comes to gender, girls’ camps and models of femininity have received increasing attention. Perhaps because the link between youth, recreation, and masculinity has been explored in earlier studies of the YMCA and the Boy Scouts, recently, the construction of girls’ relationship to nature and physical fitness has been the more intriguing question. Susan Miller’s American study focuses explicitly on girls’ camping, as do

a smattering of articles in the American and Canadian context. All seem to agree that girls' camps recreated, but also sometimes challenged, traditional notions of femininity or, at the very least, provided girls with challenging outdoor experiences.⁴⁴

This book draws on previous work, tracing the history of the summer camp in the Canadian (and, specifically, Ontarian) context. At many points, it suggests similarities with the American movement. Most important, it endorses similar conclusions concerning the camp's implication in modernity and its ambivalence regarding questions of escape, isolation, wilderness, and roughing it. It also pays special attention to tensions within the camp movement, in particular, how the issue of modernity was negotiated at camp. Ultimately, I conclude that, as in most contexts, modernity was neither wholly resisted nor wholly embraced; rather, camps were hybrid institutions. They embraced many facets of antimodern nostalgia. Romanticization of nature, celebration of wilderness, glorification of the simple life, and fascination with "the primitive" were all important aspects of camp life, which also typically celebrated a physically and mentally tough masculinity, reinforced traditional compartmentalization of experience by gender, and valued community, belonging, and a "natural" spiritual experience. In a real sense, then, camps were designed as escapes from modernity in geographic, temporal, and cultural terms.

Yet, camps were also thoroughly implicated in the project of modernity. Camp administrators, for one, displayed some very modern tendencies. Most obvious was a devotion to the ideals of order and efficiency that resulted in efforts to "clean up" the natural environment and to rationally order and control landscapes prized for their "wildness." Even when they strove to leave nature untouched, they contributed to the creation of another modern construction – namely, "wilderness" – and reinforced the dualistic view of nature/culture so central to modernism. Adherence to modern ideals of childhood and child-rearing at camp also reveals an inclination to order not just space but also human experience. That childhood should consist of a set of homogenous and, significantly, happy experiences, unconnected to the world of productive labour, was a fundamental premise of camp life. Professional expertise was relied upon to guide an understanding of children and to mould healthy personalities, while long-respected and informal approaches to child-rearing were regarded with suspicion.

Born of antimodern sentiment, the summer camp was ultimately a modern phenomenon, a "therapeutic space" as much dependent on the city, the factory, and "progress" to define its parameters as on that intangible

but much lauded entity called nature. In short, the summer camp should best be read not as a simple rejection of modern life but, rather, as one of the complex negotiations of modernity taking place in mid-twentieth century Canada. If camp was an escape, it was never more than a temporary one. As camp literature frankly acknowledged, "Our ... children are not going to be bushmen all their lives; they are going to come back to be city dwellers."⁴⁵ Outlining the limits of this antimodern, primitivist adventure, another observer explained, "There is ... no reason why civilized people should either return to the savage state or that they should necessarily acquire the primitive arts of life for which modern living provides few outlets. There are undoubtedly, however, substantial values to be derived from occasional or frequent returns to the primitive."⁴⁶ In essence, the summer camp was another instance of what historian Ian McKay calls "modernizing antimodernism."⁴⁷ At the same time that it romanticized a natural, simple life of community and connection, it was also implicated in, and even celebratory of, some of modernity's central organizing principles.

This study, then, is not a romantic or hagiographic account of the rise of summer camps in Ontario. It seeks to understand the *meaning* of the summer camp phenomenon by addressing several broad questions: why and under what conditions did the summer camp emerge? who founded camps and what types of children were accommodated? how did relations of class, gender, and race play out in camp programming and in the daily life of camp? what relationship did summer camp administrators have with emerging ideologies of childhood promoted by child psychologists and educational professionals? To answer these questions, this study relies greatly on the ideas, programs, and practices of camp founders and administrators, but it also tries, where possible and with the aid of oral history, to look at camp through the eyes of campers themselves. At camp, as elsewhere, adults wielded power over children and youth, but that control was never total. Campers helped shape the meanings of camp, and camps also need to be studied from the camper's eye view.

This study also remains mindful that youthful experience, like any other, was forged out of the existing frameworks of class, race, gender, and sexuality, all of which are products of culture, however deeply embedded and seemingly natural. Still, these cultural products had powerful effects on the lives of individuals. Social class shaped the nature of choices parents faced when contemplating sending a child to camp; it also shaped the nature of camp amenities and programming. For their part, boys and girls did not experience camp in the same way, nor were they meant to. Programs were deeply gendered, informed by a fundamental belief in the different

abilities of each sex. Failure to conform to dominant gender ideals could mean being labelled “delinquent,” a “he-man,” a “sissy,” or a “tomboy,” depending on the role from which one deviated. Aboriginal staff members, for their part, were aware of other aspects of difference; in particular, the social distance separating themselves from those campers and staff labelled “white.” Even had they believed that no such thing as “race” existed, their everyday experience would repeatedly have told them otherwise.

Age is clearly another important facet of experience (and of power) that I take into account. The compartmentalizing of human experience according to broad phases of the human life span has gone on, in some way, for centuries; however, as Howard Chudacoff argues, real “age consciousness” was a development of the late nineteenth and, especially, twentieth centuries. In the leisure-time setting of summer camp, as in the educational and medical settings Chudacoff explores, the importance of age was again emphasized and specific age norms reinforced. Summer camps, like schools and children’s hospitals, were premised on the notion that children deserved distinct treatment from adults, but it was also believed that this treatment needed to be tailored to fit the needs of children of different ages. Age-specific programming and special treatment of youth were both part of summer camp agendas.⁴⁸

This, then, is a history that analyzes structure and power. Power operated at the level of structure to perpetuate and sometimes contest norms of age, gender, sexuality, class, and race. It also contributed to the colonization of space and place, and it was reflected in appeals to professional expertise and in the appropriation of Aboriginal culture. Power also played out between identifiable groups: children and camp staff, camp staff (including Aboriginal workers) and administrators, administrators and parents, and, sometimes, between different groups of campers themselves.

Systems of power may operate everywhere, but they operate in unique ways in distinct contexts. The focus here is Ontario. In the first half of the twentieth century, summer camps operated across the country, but Ontario was unique both in the number of its camps and in the vibrancy of its camping movement. Even the founding of the Canadian Camping Association (CCA) in 1936 did not represent a true nationalizing of the movement; Ontario camp directors were its central players for some years to come. A decade after its founding, one of its members, Mary Northway, admitted that its board had been “composed of Toronto people for ten years” and that “the rest of Canada was rather ‘honourary.’”⁴⁹ One of its main objects, “to function in localities where there is no local association,”⁵⁰

pointed to a lack of comparable organization in other parts of the country. Other sources confirm that Ontario dominated the history of camping. In 1960, the *Toronto Star* estimated that “about 70% of Canadian camping is done in Ontario.”⁵¹ While summer camps certainly emerged in other provinces, historians interested in the movement have come to think of it as a “peculiarly Ontario phenomenon,” a situation that persists to the present day.⁵² Ontario’s special role can also be linked to the central theme here; that is, the camp’s fundamental connection to conditions of modernity, which were often most advanced in that province. In short, then, my study is a regional one, based in Ontario. In many ways, it is also a study of urban values and culture. Camp, by definition, took place outside large urban centres, sometimes as far away as the Muskoka, Algonquin Park, and Temagami regions. Yet, it was largely urban Ontarians – many of them Torontonians – who filled the roster of campers and who took up positions within the movement. While studying these urban Ontarians, I consciously avoid confusing Ontario with Canada, a mistake often made by nationalists, politicians, and historians alike.⁵³

Certain individuals and directors stand out as key members of this camping movement, and their names come up frequently here. All had their strongest connections with private camps. Taylor Statten, founder of the upscale and widely known Ahmek and Wapomeo camps in Algonquin Park, was the most prominent individual involved in Ontario camping. Born in 1882 to an upper-middle-class family in southern Ontario, Statten became involved with children and youth in both recreational and educational capacities. At the age of twenty, he signed on as a voluntary worker with the Toronto Central YMCA in 1905, becoming the full-time secretary of boys’ work and, in 1912, the Y’s national boys’ work secretary. While active in the Y for roughly twenty years, Statten became widely known in Canada as a captivating public speaker and for his part in developing the Canadian Standard Efficiency Test (CSET), a series of tests and awards used by the Trail Rangers and Tuxis groups and designed to develop boys’ intellectual, spiritual, physical, and social capacities.⁵⁴ Due to his growing reputation, Statten was approached in 1924 to join the staff of the newly reopened Pickering College (a private boarding school for boys). Statten agreed, becoming Pickering’s director of character education and, according to his biographer, the first vocational guidance counsellor in Canada. Clearly, the various aspects of Statten’s professional career fed into his camp work. Through the Y, Statten launched his first experiments with camping, while his work at Pickering College brought him into contact with boys of the privileged classes, many of whom he later brought

to Camp Ahmek, which he founded in 1921. He stayed on as director of Ahmek until his death in 1956.⁵⁵

Several others who became important players in the summer camp movement in Ontario had similar prior experience with youth organizations and with the educational system. A.L. Cochrane and A.S. Clarke – founders of the first boys' camps in Temagami in the opening years of the century – both held positions at private schools: Cochrane at Toronto's Upper Canada College (UCC) and Clarke at the Gunnery School, a Connecticut preparatory school. Both were effective in linking school and camp work and in recruiting campers from among their students. Both also started life outside of Canada and shared the perspective that Canada was the place for true wilderness adventure. There, however, the similarities ended. Cochrane, born in England in 1870, ran away from home as a teen to join the British army. Somehow, he found his way to the "right" circles, for when he arrived in Canada in 1894, he came with a letter of introduction to the distinguished historian Dr. Goldwin Smith. With these connections, he landed his position as physical education instructor at UCC, where he taught until 1921. According to one of his daughters, Cochrane had "quite a military bearing and a very nice English accent which went over quite well at UCC." In her view, "they took him on because he was such a nice English gentleman, [laughing] not because he knew anything much."⁵⁶ She also saw his "craving for wild life" and his desire to immerse himself in the outdoors as somewhat at odds with his military background and position at UCC. Nevertheless, he apparently combined these interests well, staying on at UCC for twenty-seven years and, for almost twenty of them, also directing Camp Temagami (also known as "Cochrane's Camp"), which grew "beyond all expectations." In the 1930s, he was named honorary president of both the Ontario Camping Association and the Canadian Camping Association.⁵⁷

By contrast, rather than a "nice English gentleman," American A.S. Clarke, founder of Keewaydin Camp in Temagami, is remembered by some as "a born salesman." Attending the Gunnery School (run by American "father" of camping, William Gunn) as a child in the 1880s, Clarke went on to Harvard Law School and eventually served as a probate judge and as a representative in the Connecticut legislature. Throughout much of this same period, Clarke ran Keewaydin, a camp with a somewhat "macho" reputation, where boys spent much of the two months of summer out canoe tripping. As a business, the camp was quite successful, allowing Clarke to take on camp work full-time in latter life.⁵⁸

Prominent women camp directors also came from relatively privileged backgrounds, but uniquely for them camp work represented the rare chance for personal independence and an economic alternative to marriage. Mary S. Edgar, who founded Glen Bernard Camp near her hometown of Sundridge in 1922, was also involved in the YWCA, the CGIT, and the Girl Guides. A contemporary and friend of Statten's, Edgar was, at heart, more a literary than an organizational type, who expressed herself in poetry and storytelling at camp and, later, as the first editor of the CCA's *Canadian Camping Bulletin* in 1949. While growing up the daughter of a general store owner in northern Ontario, Edgar left to complete her high school education at Havergal College, a private girls' school in Toronto, which named her honorary trustee later in life. Unlike the directors of many camps, Edgar founded Glen Bernard in the community in which she had grown up, and she kept up good relations with that community throughout her years as camp director. According to former camper and staff person Mary Northway, "she knew everyone in the village and in the outlying farms," and she kept the camp connected to the community through charitable ventures, camp performances, and her practice of buying local supplies.⁵⁹

Mary Hamilton, founder of Tanamakoon in Algonquin Park in 1925, was, like several others, also intimately connected to educational circles in Toronto. A friend of both Edgar and Statten, she began her professional life teaching physical education at a number of Toronto's private girls' schools before becoming head of physical education at Toronto's Margaret Eaton School. The school played an important role in providing female physical education instructors across Toronto in the interwar years. Hamilton's founding of Tanamakoon was envisioned as an extension of her work at the school. In the 1930s, a decade after taking on the school's principalship, she had camp counsellor training added to the course in physical education. Like other camp directors with school positions, she created tight links between camp and school, arranging for students to apply their skills as new counsellors at Tanamakoon for the two months of summer.⁶⁰

Dr. Mary Northway, though something of a second-generation pioneer, held a similarly important place in the early history of Ontario camping. Her camping "career" began as a camper at Edgar's Glen Bernard in the 1920s, and it continued on as she became program director in the 1930s and, finally, the co-director of her own camp in the 1940s. During these same years, Northway also pursued higher education, ultimately obtaining

a PhD in psychology from the University of Toronto. There, she had the distinction of being one of the favoured students of renowned psychologist William Blatz. Once she completed her dissertation in 1938, Blatz took her on as lecturer at the prestigious Institute of Child Study. Northway's accomplished academic career drew on her life-long interest in camping. Her doctoral research consists of a case study of children's social relationships at camp and was researched at Glen Bernard, the camp of her own childhood and youth. By the 1940s, Northway filled a number of different roles, including professor of psychology, camp director, and Ontario Camping Association committee chair.⁶¹

In exploring the history of these individuals, their camps, and the wider camping movement, this book draws on the literature and (where possible) records of private, fresh air, and agency camps. Taken as a group, their founders were urban and middle class, but, as elsewhere, they served sets of quite contrasting clientele. Private, for-profit camps, often located in the desirable Muskoka, Haliburton, Algonquin, and Temagami regions of the province, formed what I refer to as the "elite" of the Ontario camping community. They catered to a well-to-do, upwardly mobile, middle- and upper-class clientele. At the other end of the social spectrum, fresh air camps provided subsidized camp holidays for the poorest sector of Ontario's working class. So that they might do so, these camps were usually located just outside of large urban centres. Camp Bolton, located just outside Toronto and the largest of its kind in the province, here provides a case study of the fresh air experience, while published fund-raising appeals of the *Toronto Star* Fresh Air Fund offer a broad picture of fresh air camps in general. The third group, agency camps, were run by a host of youth organizations and churches. These were fee-charging but also non-profit camps that were scattered across the province. They served a broadly middle-class (though also, at least partly, working-class) clientele – those not wealthy enough to afford fees at upscale private camps but not disadvantaged enough to be considered for the subsidized fresh air experience. Here, camps run by the CGIT, several camps run by the YMCA, and a counsellor-training camp run by the Ontario government provide a window onto this type of camp; the first two also provide examples of the influence of religion in early twentieth-century Ontario camping.⁶² These three types of camps – private, fresh air, and agency – did not represent hermetically sealed categories of experience (some children, for instance, might have attended a YMCA camp one year and a private camp the next), but they do point to the broadly class-segregated nature of the camp phenomenon.



Location of camps mentioned frequently in the book

In the case of individual camps, the nature of source material varies. Published sources include brochures, camp manuals, academic publications, and newspaper articles. In addition to records of individual camps, a broader view of the camping “movement” was obtained by studying the records of the Ontario and Canadian camping associations. Finally, in order to understand the gendered dimensions of camping, this study considers boys’, girls’, and coeducational camps.

While published sources tell us a lot about the perspective of camp administrators and promoters, I also explore the daily life of the camp as it existed beyond the pages of the published report. I consulted unpublished records of individual camps, including administrative reports, correspondence, and committee proceedings. Directories of member camps published by the Ontario Camping Association also supplied broad statistical information on the number of each type of camp as well as on their fees and locations. In addition, I rely on interviews carried out with former campers and directors. A substantial number of interviews, undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s by members of the OCA, are on file with the Trent University Archives, and I draw upon a number of these. Additionally, I conducted interviews with eighteen former campers and two former directors/camp owners expressly for this study. The majority were Toronto people; two grew up in the United States and attended camps in Ontario.⁶³ A majority (though not all) interviewees attended camp in the 1940s and 1950s, which helped balance out print sources (which were more abundant for the interwar years). Interviewees also offered a perspective beyond that of camp administrators and their published (and often self-congratulatory) accounts. Recollections of on-the-spot campers were useful not only in confirming (or sometimes dispelling) impressions gained during the course of archival research but also in offering glimpses into the “culture of childhood” at camp. Like all sources, oral history is not infallible. On the other hand, memory – its faultiness included – has something to tell the historian. How individuals choose to tell the story of their lives is also a part of our ongoing history, a reality I have tried to integrate into this book.⁶⁴

This book traces significant changes and continuities in Ontario’s camping history. Over the years from 1920 to 1955, changes occurred not only at the statistical level but also within the gates of individual camps. These took place at many levels, altering the look and feel of camp life, camp accessibility, the nature of camper populations, and the organization of camp programming. In the early histories of most camps, the desire to

bring order to wild nature affected the spatial and physical dimensions of camp life, while, over the years, improvements in transportation infrastructure brought people more easily to camp. Technological innovations were, in many cases, gradually integrated into camp life, while, in others, camps were shaped by their conscious rejection of modern amenities. The emergence of academic psychology and new educational pedagogy altered the thinking about and execution of camp programming. Campers were organized into increasingly age-specific categories, and administrators more prominently considered their emotional and educational needs. Finally, changing notions of gender and sexuality prompted the emergence of coeducational camping, while changing racial politics and notions of cultural “respect” influenced the decline of “Indian” programming.

Summer camps were affected not only by broad social and cultural changes but also by important moments in Canadian economic and political history. The Great Depression, the Second World War, and the postwar economic boom all had real impacts on summer camps, which were never as isolated as their literature claimed. While new camps continued to appear during the 1930s, at existing private camps enrolments fell, while fresh air camps faced growing wait lists of needy children and declining budgets with which to accommodate them. An abundance of labour power was one positive outcome of the Depression for summer camps, but this situation was completely reversed during wartime. During the Second World War, the King government’s decision to provide all-out support for the “mother” country also affected camp life. As the state sought the total mobilization of available labour power, all camps suffered from labour shortages. Fresh air camps, largely dependent on charitable donations for their survival, suffered from lack of funds due to competition with wartime fund-raising. For their part, camp administrators responded to the hard years of depression and war by promoting the camp as ever more useful with regard to protecting children from the harsh conditions in the outside world. In postwar years, general economic affluence did for individual camps what it did for the camping movement on a grander scale. Agency and private camps were increasingly sure of attracting campers; due to the opening of international travel, some came from increasingly distant corners of the earth. For the first time in their history, fresh air camps felt that material deprivation was a less pressing issue for its clientele. As material security was more taken for granted, emphasis on campers’ emotional security and personality development intensified at all types of camps.

Clearly, life at camp changed over the course of the early twentieth century, but there were also important continuities, often the very things that kept campers coming back year after year and generation after generation. Administrators might alter camp landscapes and add to the list of comforts available, but camps throughout this period would be seen as fundamentally natural spaces, spaces that offered a physical, emotional, and geographical contrast with daily life. Over the years, parents – rich and poor – welcomed the temporary break from child care that camps afforded and, at the same time, saw their children as profiting from the experience. To children, camp was a fun, challenging, and occasionally miserable experience. Some looked on camp life as a trial to be endured; many others enjoyed their camp holidays and looked back on them with fond memories. For these children, activities were novel, canoe trips were exciting, and friendships brought a sense of community often treasured long after childhood. Indeed, camps offered community to modern individuals in a number of different forms. While campers are more likely to remember the personal aspect of community, camps also built community on broader levels. Private camps strengthened ties between children of the middle and upper classes, ties that fostered not only friendships but also broader social connections to elite social circles in Canadian society. Agency camps kept youth connected to church and religious organizations and fostered a sense of Christian community that encouraged a social gospel orientation towards the wider society. Perhaps less successfully, but with no less energy, fresh air camps worked to make community between distinct classes. Indirectly, they also offered a space for working-class Ontarians to foster their own distinct sense of community. Finally, throughout the period under study, camps were persistently (if not strictly) divided by class and, for much of it, by gender too. Even as coeducational camping emerged, the belief that boy and girl campers required different treatment was another continuity of camp life.

This book examines these changes and continuities in the history of camp life in six thematically organized chapters. Chapter 1 begins with an exploration of anti-urbanism and the antimodern romanticization of nature and the simple life that lay at the root of the camp phenomenon. It also considers the geographically divided nature of the camping movement as well as the extent to which the natural environment was reordered and the camp program rationalized in contrast to the rhetoric of “wildness” and “freedom.” Chapters 2 and 3 explore the class-segregated nature of the Ontario camp phenomenon. Their primary focus is the two ends of the

class spectrum: Chapter 2 focuses on the nature and function of the elite camp experience and Chapter 3 on the history of fresh air camps and their impact on working-class campers and communities. Along the way, the middle-class experience of agency camps is also explored. Chapter 4 returns more directly to a consideration of the modernizing aspects of the summer camp in assessing its contribution to a new notion of childhood and the espousal of psychological and educational principles. Chapter 5 considers the gendered nature of the camp experience, how antimodernist sentiment influenced ideals of masculinity and femininity, and issues of sexuality and coeducation, which became the modern educational norm. Finally, Chapter 6 takes a look at the role of Indian programming and the popularity of “playing Indian” at camp, offering a consideration of its relationship to Native-white relations and the category of “whiteness” in early twentieth-century Ontario. Each chapter is a reconfiguration and re-exploration of the contradictory nature of the camp phenomenon, of both its avowed antimodernism and its seemingly inescapable modernity.

My particular analysis of the camp experience might have come as a surprise to the original founders of Ontario’s camps, quite possibly to the thousands of Ontario citizens who attended summer camp, and perhaps, even today, to some of those who agreed to be interviewed for this book. For all that, I hope that former campers will find in its pages a recognizable recreation of the camping world that so many of them anticipated each year, experienced each summer, and remembered, often long years after childhood. If my analysis leads frequently to conclusions concerning the social relations of power, and if my investigation of camp’s modern elements exposes a less often contemplated side to the movement, this is not to cast the story in a conspiratorial light. It is meant to remind us that, in liberal capitalist societies and under conditions of modernity, the seemingly innocuous realm of leisure is shaped by the same relations of power, and problems of identity, authenticity, and meaning, that we are led to believe are left far behind when we pack up our bags, head out of the city, and get “back to nature.”

I

Back to Nature: Escaping the City, Ordering the Wild

Modernity as an idea is difficult to pin down. How the forces of modernity changed the physical landscapes of Canadian societies is a more straightforward matter. In early twentieth-century Ontario, as elsewhere, modernity meant changed space. More than that, not just space itself but thinking about spatial use was transformed. The lure of industrial employment caused massive shifts in population from country to city, a consequent “emptying” of rural areas, and a seemingly unending transformation of urban landscapes. Technology transformed the streets of burgeoning cities, with a clutter of telephone cables, streetcar wires, and an ever-increasing number of automobiles. Other technological innovations and the growth of consumer and youth cultures gave birth to new urban spaces: the pleasure garden, the dance hall, and the movie theatre, to mention just a few examples. Attempts to cope with the negative aspects of urban change spawned yet other spatial transformations. Innovations in transportation (first streetcar, then car) made suburban development possible, allowing some to escape the noisy, crowded, and polluted world those innovations were partly responsible for creating. Urban parks offered bits of cultured nature, temporary escapes from the pace and activity of the rest of the urban scene.¹

Thinking about space changed too. As Keith Walden and others have noted, increasing numbers and scale encouraged “more intensive differentiation of space,” where uses were increasingly separated, one from another, in contrast with the integrated and heterogeneous preindustrial walking city. Urban living was an increasingly anonymous experience,

where personal appearance did not always tell you “who was who” and who could be trusted. Ordering the environment spatially was one response meant to give meaning to this potentially chaotic social world. “Middle classes,” Walden argues for the late Victorian period, “became more inclined to quarantine problematic social groups, isolate unpleasant activities and insulate their own territories from competing sources of power.”² With their world thus neatly (though never fully) ordered, it was but a small step to categorizing spaces into good and bad, “healthy” and “unhealthy.” Where something (or someone) was located was now seen as providing essential information. A street in the slums, even if one had never been there, could be assumed to be crowded, dirty, and dangerous. A visit to a well-tended park in a middle-class neighbourhood could be assumed to put one in a state of relaxed calm. For those of antimodernist leanings, spaces of modernity were viewed with suspicion and concern. Many viewed “the city” and many urban spaces as bad, unhealthy spaces. While urban parks and playgrounds might temporarily counter the ill effects of city living, many believed that only spaces outside the city’s limits were truly good and healthy.

The history of the camping movement in Ontario provides one example of this dichotomous thinking about space and of generating spatial solutions to perceived social problems. It also offers another example of the enthusiasm for “the natural,” which had been shaping middle- and upper-class sensibilities from the late nineteenth-century onward. That natural spaces were good was one of the fundamental assumptions of the camp movement as a whole. From this perspective, nature seemed to offer everything the city lacked: tranquility, purity, and character-building opportunities. To the same degree that “the city” was condemned in this literature, nature was extolled.

This praise of the natural world was delivered in general terms, but camp enthusiasts also articulated a particular vision of “life in the woods” as their antidote to urban life. The summer camp – as their answer to the problem of urban “artificiality” – was first and foremost geographically rooted in the setting of nature. If nature was the stage, the set design was to be minimal; architecture was to be as natural as possible and activities were to centre around the healthful arts of “the simple life.” Whatever the rhetoric, however, the stance taken vis-à-vis modern culture was ambivalent rather than simply critical. In this sense, what is telling about the summer camp phenomenon is not only its lofty goals but also its limitations. Even as “the natural” was regularly glorified, on the ground, camp administrators had a hand in “improving” it. Increasing material comforts were part of

the unfolding story of twentieth-century life; camps could never wholly resist them. When it came to social class, camps never succeeded in transcending the dynamics of the society that surrounded them. If all children were thought to benefit from “direct contact with Mother Earth,” children from different economic backgrounds generally found themselves attending camps in geographically distinct parts of the province.

Summer camp was, in many ways, a world apart – removed from the city, centred in nature, and offering a set of novel activities and experiences. On the other hand, the truth is that a general faith in order and efficiency, technological advances, and class divisions shaped camping experiences much as they did life at home. This chapter examines the dual nature of the summer camp, the pull of both modern and antimodern, especially as it relates to the natural landscape.

ESCAPING THE METROPOLIS: THE CAMP AS ALTERNATE SPACE

Anti-urbanism was nothing new in the interwar period, but the nature of city living was. For the first time, during these years, urban living became the dominant Canadian experience. The forces of modernity acted at different rates on different parts of the country, however, and central Canada was most rapidly transformed. The pace of industrial capitalism in Ontario meant that, by the interwar years, it was the most thoroughly urbanized province. In 1921, when 47 percent of all Canadians were urban dwellers, the number in Ontario was close to 60 percent. By 1951, when the national average reached 62 percent, in Ontario the figure was already 10 percent higher than that.³ While “the city” might be the object of derision and scorn, a majority of Ontarians had – willingly or otherwise – accepted it as their home. For a good many, that home was Toronto, whose population tripled from roughly 208,000 to 675,000 in the first half of the twentieth century.⁴ More probable than not, many who were critical of urban life were not likely to live anywhere else. The facts were that most Ontarians were now urban dwellers and that they were living in cities that had larger populations than ever before. In these cities, Ontarians encountered an expanding array of commercial leisure options. While Victorian and turn-of-the-century bourgeois observers feared the social impact of the saloon, the roller rink, and (even) indiscriminate tobogganing, twentieth century onlookers feared alarming new temptations such as dance halls, movies, and American crime comics.

Camp founders, like so many others, were influenced by the anti-urban sensibilities of their day. Like other bourgeois observers, their tendency was to demonize the city as crowded, unhealthy, and the site of an expanding landscape of commercial entertainments and independent youth culture. Indeed, anti-urban rhetoric was the stock-in-trade of the camping movement in Ontario. In contrast to Victorian Canadians, this brand of anti-urbanist was more likely to characterize the city as “artificial” than immoral – an affront to nature rather than to God. As a Fresh Air Fund promoter stated in 1924, “We often hear it said that city people do not live natural lives and there is much of truth in the statement.”⁵ Fundraisers for more illustrious camps shared remarkably similar views. In 1931, the editor of the Camp Ahmek newsletter, ruminating over the emergence of the summer camp, argued that it was “the increasing artificiality of city life with its standardized customs and habits of living, with its ready-made appliances for performing all the tasks of the modern home, that has brought into prominence the institution known as the summer camp.”⁶ Clearly, if the twentieth century saw the increasing social prestige of science and technology, it also witnessed a growing counter-cultural pessimism regarding the social impacts of these advances.

Whether rescuing young unfortunates from urban slums, shaping future leaders out of youthful elites, or reinvigorating church and youth work, camp administrators shared a mistrust of urban life. In their eyes, the city was an especially dangerous place for children and youth. Promoters of fresh air camps for the poor were particularly dependent on a narrative of urban space as artificial and unhealthy. The picture they painted was one of a looming metropolis of concrete and steel, of hot pavement and tenement buildings. This rhetoric persisted throughout the interwar, war, and postwar years, though it could be expressed differently according to the times. In 1941, the *Toronto Daily Star* expanded on the city’s shortcomings, borrowing wartime imagery to heighten the intensity of its appeal:

No barbwire bristles on the boundaries of Toronto ... But Toronto, nevertheless, is just one huge and stifling concentration camp to many youngsters who live in its heat all through the summertime. Children like to feel green grass under their bare toes, like to swim and fish, like outdoor fun and sunshine. They don’t find much of all these in the city. Hot pavement burns their feet. Horn-tooting traffic shrilly orders them off the street, sometimes knocks them down. There’s not much fun and fresh air.⁷

In the postwar years, the *Star* continued with its critique of urban life. In 1946, it stated: “Ronald and Donald are two in a family of nine children. They hate the city. Just a few months ago a baby brother died. The doctor said it was T.B. – but their mother said it was the city. ‘The city killed him,’ she said, ‘and if we don’t get away it’s going to kill all of us.’”⁸ Increasing automobile use, considered a sign of progress by many Canadians, was deemed another threat to the poorest of the poor, especially to children, who were threatened by the dangers of increased traffic.⁹ Overall, the city emerged as a space completely outside nature, its polar opposite. Article titles such as “No Trees or Grass in Sight” and “No Trees, No Grass, No Fun, You Can Give Kiddies All Three” were typical fare in the pages of the *Star*.¹⁰ At times, the argument was made that not only was there not *enough* nature in cities but that what was there was not of the right sort. Medical experts were sought out to bolster these claims in the *Star*. “It would do ... more good than medicines,” a Toronto physician declared regarding the benefits of an out-of-city holiday in 1935. “You don’t get the right kind of sunshine in cities.”¹¹ During the same year, another article urged potential donors to send children to camp, where “stars look like real stars.”¹²

Private camp literature shared this anti-urban bent, though it was expressed in slightly different ways. When it came to middle- and upper-class children, worries centred not around squalid conditions and crowded housing but on the city’s harmful consumer culture and “mechanized” way of life. If the physical well-being of middle- and upper-class children could generally be taken for granted, their spiritual and emotional welfare could not. Taylor Statten, founder of the upscale Camp Ahmek and Camp Wapomeo, believed that camp life was so necessary precisely because it provided “an outlet for all sorts of yearnings and pent-up emotions” that the city and its “gilded palaces of amusement” could not.¹³ In 1935, Statten, himself a product of small-town Ontario, lamented the passing of rural society and contemplated urbanization’s impact on modern boyhood:

With the trend of our population from the country to the town, it is no longer possible to keep the boys busy during vacation time, raking hay, hoeing corn or even weeding the backyard garden. The dynamic energy with which every active, red-blooded boy is charged must find an outlet. If the energy is not directed and turned to account, it will certainly lead the boy into mischief and quite often into evil ways that will follow him through life. The streets of every city offer no end of dark corners which boys, left to their own devices, will frequent.¹⁴

Agency camp literature also made its anti-urban and antimodern outlook known. Though it did not give specifics, a YMCA camp director's manual referred to the "ills of civilization," no doubt assuming his audience understood these implicitly. At CGIT camps, "Morning Watch" exercises, meant to guide girls' solitary spiritual development, suggested in 1940 that one of the city's pitfalls was the lack of quiet. Referring to the sound of a bird singing or a chipmunk chattering, it suggested that "such a tiny sound would never have lived at all" in "city, town or village," a significant indictment for those who saw stillness as a prerequisite for spiritual connection.¹⁵ The "evil" that Statten mentioned lurking in urban spaces was interpreted in more explicitly religious terms by the CGIT. In the pages of *The Torch*, the organization's journal for girls, one writer wondered in 1933 whether "the attraction of trashy literature and movies and radio have deadened [the girls'] capacity for spiritual response," adding that "the Christian community" had to address such problems if it wanted to succeed with youth.¹⁶

Clearly, "the city" was often the lightning rod for criticism of a host of social developments, as it had been in earlier decades. Behind tirades against towers of concrete and hot pavement lay a more general apprehension about technological change, modernity's homogenizing tendencies, and the loss of individual initiative. Already in childhood, it was thought, Canadians were becoming soft, habituated to technological comforts and alienated from "real" experience. "Children today, especially in large cities, have little opportunity for really creative living," one camp director lamented in 1941. "Lights go on at a switch, heat comes when a knob is turned ... [and] drama means sitting in the movies."¹⁷ Certain observers suggested this trend was rooted in new conditions of work. In 1939, in terms sharply critical, camp literature warned: "The mechanization of industry, the corporate form of business, and the rapid increase of routine activities in general seriously threaten to submerge initiative, self-expression, and creative effort in the great masses of people."¹⁸ In the postwar years, as fears regarding mass society and the rise of the "organization man" increased, Canada's acting director of physical fitness, Doris Plewes, went so far as to say that "the assembly line" and the "routine of business" and "even the professions" were responsible for "confinement of persons" and "curtailment of expression."¹⁹

If such passages took on quasi-socialist tones, for the most part, the proposed solutions pointed in more conservative directions.²⁰ In essence, this camp literature implied that the pathway to a better life was via the wise use of leisure. While Shirley Tillotson examines the postwar period

for interest in leisure as the one remaining realm in which citizens could experience true democracy, the history of camping suggests such viewpoints had earlier roots.²¹ As early as 1928, Camp Ahmek's counsellor handbook described modern society as "mechanized," "corporate," and "routinized," lamenting that "the only chance for the majority to secure the sense of self-respect and dignity that comes from the use of their abilities and creative capacities will be in avocational and leisure-time experience."²² State bureaucrats who welcomed the establishment of summer camps in the postwar period later echoed these sentiments, stating that the only solution to finding a "fuller life" was to "live in our leisure ... in a word, [to] turn to RECREATION."²³

Typically, for those who made this argument, the problem of leisure was cast as one of poor choices, a stance that reflected a broader distrust of popular culture. In the view of camp promoters, when left to their own devices, much of the public was inclined to partake of the shallowest of entertainment options. Activities that came in for particular criticism were those that failed to demand *involvement* of the participants, as other historians of leisure have pointed out.²⁴ Radio, movies, even spectator sports were to blame for offering the most passive of pastimes and for spreading what Camp Ahmek literature referred to as "the disease of bleacheritis." In 1928, it was argued that, rather than involving themselves in "active, self-propulsive types of leisure pursuits," "multitudes today are almost entirely dependent upon amusements that are supplied for them, which they take sitting down – watching, riding, or listening."²⁵ All in all, the realm of leisure, which promised such satisfaction, was more often seen as impoverishing than enriching the lives of modern Ontarians. "Having fun," it seemed, could be a matter of serious concern.

GETTING BACK TO NATURE

In addition to its anti-urbanism and implicit critique of consumer culture, the summer camp phenomenon was part and parcel of the broad revisioning of the human relationship to nature that had been under way since the mid-nineteenth century. Like promoters of other wilderness and nature-based experiences, camp administrators promoted their particular back-to-nature activity as the healthy antithesis of modern urban life. In promotional brochures and in the pages of staff manuals, they constructed nature as an unquestionably positive and life-enhancing force, a realm to be sought out and embraced, never feared. They also commonly

equated nature with “real life” and the city with a wholly artificial existence. What city children needed, they argued, was a space apart, a miniature world that existed outside the limits of modern urban living. From this perspective, camp space was valued for two reasons: first, for its distance from the taint of “artificial” consumer culture and, second, for its link to all that was natural. In Camp Ahmek’s literature, camp was extolled for providing upper-class youth with “fresh strength with every contact with Mother Earth,”²⁶ and the wilds of Algonquin Park were extolled for offering “a cure for most real and all fancied ills.”²⁷ Even more emphatically, a writer for the *Toronto Daily Star* insisted that “a good dose of outdoors cures almost anything.”²⁸ For children of the inner city, who regularly endured the worst of urban conditions, connections with nature were believed to have near enchanting effects, as suggested by another *Star* appeal in 1924:

Spirited away from the city’s heat and their own unsettled environment, these children would at once enter a delectable fairyland where every activity would be a solace for tired, undernourished bodies. Under the magic influence of cool lake breezes during play time and sleep time worry’s problems would quickly be erased from their mental slates.²⁹

Camp was offering not simply recreational choices, this literature seemed to insist; contact with nature was considered a prerequisite for physical, emotional, and spiritual health. To this way of thinking, outdoor experiences were meant for more than the privileged few. “Every child has an instinctive yearning to get back to the natural and to the simple fundamentals of the green earth,” one *Star* writer asserted in 1920, while, in 1943, another described “the inner longing for the country” that presumably resided within every youthful soul.³⁰ Camp, then, was no superfluous luxury. In Camp Ahmek’s 1939 private camp counsellor handbook, the language of necessity, and not choice, was used to describe the summer camp’s origins:

If the camp had not been invented, we should now have to create it, such need there is today of the steady offices of direct contact with the earth: the constancy of evening and morning, the sureness of brooks and tides, the firmly planted trees, the upholding hills. Is it not well for us all early to find a close relationship with the earth, our long home? ... A camping experience may be valuable if it does nothing more than to help a child enjoy being a first-hand part of roads and trails, fire and water, sunrise and dusk.³¹

For agency camps with, often, more explicitly religious agendas, the benefits of the back-to-nature experience were understood in highly spiritual terms. Organizations like the YMCA and the CGIT shared their society's generally positive attitudes to the natural world – to “God’s great outdoors” as they might call it – but, for them, camp life had even more strictly functional purposes. Getting children to camp was seen not as an end in itself but as a way of counteracting what many saw as youth’s growing disinterest in religion. As A.W. Milks, YMCA Camp On-da-waks director, put it, “In no other place are boys so susceptible to spiritual influences as at camp,” a statement many assumed applied equally to girls.³² Echoing the “nature-as-temple” perspective common in this period, CGIT camp literature frequently reiterated that nature had an awe-inspiring effect on teenaged campers, drawing them naturally closer to God. According to a 1929 camp report, “nature surroundings” created “reality in worship ... which does not seem to exist even in church.” So powerful was nature’s influence deemed to be that its religious message frequently required no articulation. Continuing the discussion of nature-based “worship,” the same camp report explained: “Often in the evening we gather together informally to watch the sun sink into the west. Sometimes we sing hymns ... but more often we sit in silence, awed by the great beauty.”³³ For youth who didn’t make automatic connections between nature and godliness, a 1955 poem in one CGIT camp newsletter reminded them how much time Jesus himself spent outdoors, arguing that he “would [have made] a great camper.”³⁴

The belief in nature’s powerful, even subliminal influence was the backdrop against which all summer camp projects were launched. Whatever goals a camp held, so the thinking held, they were more likely to be achieved in a natural setting. Almost unaided, nature was assumed to have an inherently educative impact on youthful characters. Nature, so it seemed, wiped children clean of all negative influence, allowing ambitious educators of both secular and religious bents to imprint their new messages on the childish slate.

LIVING THE SIMPLE LIFE

Summer camps had much in common with other nature-based holidays, but they were also unique. In the minds of administrators, camp was not simply one more outdoor leisure option, one more opportunity to relax at the lakeside. In the American context, camps were sometimes explicitly

marketed as an alternative to the pampered resort holiday.³⁵ On both sides of the border, camp was regarded as an experience that touched children in a way that other outdoor recreations could not. It was not just the simple fact of being “out of doors” that accounted for the transformation in young campers. If this were true, the pleasure trip, the resort holiday, or even the city park would, presumably, have done as well. Uniquely, the summer camp promised sustained and direct contact with nature, unmitigated by comforts and technological buffers. It was a point of pride that, at camp, nature was not simply viewed from a deck chair or passenger seat or treated as some kind of passing wilderness picture show. Instead, it was there to be wrestled with as one learned to paddle stern over choppy waters, boil water over an open fire, or build an impromptu lean-to in anticipation of a rainy night on the trail. In short, camp offered lessons in the arts of the simple life. Much more than contact with nature, camp promised immersion.

In an era, then, when the public consciousness was assaulted with the promises of comforts and the wonders of all manner of consumer products, camp promoters simultaneously preached the gospel of simplicity and appealed to Canadians to discover the joys of “roughing it.” In this they manifest yet another desire for the “simple life,” what historian David Shi has shown to be a recurring if minority tradition in comfortable North American society. The meaning of the simple life was never fixed, however. Depending on the context, Shi tells us, simple life advocates showed “hostility toward luxury,” “a reverence for nature,” “a desire for personal self-reliance,” “a nostalgia for the past,” and “an aesthetic taste for the plain and functional.”³⁶ All of these also shaped camp life.

In the architectural realm, simplicity was clearly the watchword. In one sense, architecture represented the antithesis of camp life. By definition, it was human-made, constructed, rather than natural, one of the crowning achievements of civilization and not nature. References to the “great outdoors” implied a critique of life “indoors” and the containment of humanly designed structures. In the world of camping, the response to this apparent contradiction was the adoption of one of the earliest forms of human shelter, an almost anti-architectural structure known as the tent. By definition, it was movable and reduced the distance from the outside world to a minimum, a space where changes in weather and transitions from day to night had immediate and unavoidable effects. At a number of camps, tents (as opposed to cabins) were the only form of shelter provided for campers in the earliest years. In some cases, tents and cabins were used side by side, occasionally out of necessity but sometimes with the

former reserved as a special treat for those considered up for the challenge of truly roughing it.³⁷

As camps sought to establish permanent sites and to secure steady clientele, the use of buildings was eventually seen as unavoidable. By 1931, aside from sleeping cabins, Camp Ahmek boasted a new dining hall (with seating for four hundred), several camp offices, a carpenter's shop, an Indian village, a medical centre, a theatre, a post office, and a "hotel" for visiting parents.³⁸ Still, in the planning of camp buildings, aesthetics was an important factor. Camp literature stated explicitly that buildings, as much as setting and program, should reflect the ethos of natural simplicity that purportedly infused all of camp life. Simple, however, did not mean unplanned. Far from ad hoc or arbitrary, camp buildings and space were quite consciously designed to enhance experience of the natural in quiet, understated fashion. As Mary Northway recalled of Glen Bernard Camp's design: "It was very simple ... We lived in wooden cabins with open windows – no window panes, no glass – with mosquito netting across them."³⁹ In 1946, an OCA Camp Bulletin put in writing the principle to which many camps had long been adhering: "Our buildings and furnishings ... should be of such a type as to blend with their environment. They should be of such character as to contribute to the health of the camper but not so as to make him soft."⁴⁰ Such recommendations translated into a general preference for the rustic and the rough. The log cabin-style structure, preferably "with the bark on," as noted at Ahmek,⁴¹ was one of the most popular choices where it could be afforded.

In their attempt to design "natural" buildings, summer camps were not striking out in an entirely novel direction. In fact, the taste for "rusticity" – which also surfaced at parks and resorts – had roots that went as far back as the eighteenth-century English landscape garden and the Romantic taste for blending architectural structure with wild space.⁴² Invocation of the rustic represented "an attempt to bring the outdoors within," as writer Craig Kilbourn puts it, to express fundamental harmony with nature, a goal especially attractive to urban-weary upper middle-class society.⁴³ In much the same way, camp architecture in Ontario "toed the line between nature and culture, wildness and civility,"⁴⁴ as Barksdale Maynard argues with regard to the American camp.

Drawing on earlier traditions, summer camps worked to have architecture suit their unique purposes. If materials used in the construction of rustic buildings sought to bring nature within, other architectural features promised to draw one's focus outwards. Even when indoors, the camper was meant to feel part of the surrounding environment. Paneless windows



Craft building, Bolton Camp, c. 1940s. Using logs “with the bark on,” the craft building at Bolton was one example of the natural architectural style adopted at many camps. The abundance of windows was meant to draw the eye outward. *Copyright Family Service Association of Toronto.*

– with only screens to keep out the bugs – reduced the barrier between inside and outside, while porches and verandahs encouraged the contemplation of nature, even if from comfortable, protected locations. The design of one cabin at Ahmek illustrates this attempt to blur the line between indoor and outdoor spaces. An official history of the camp explains:

This structure, built at the lake’s edge, was of the standard Adirondack pattern, with a sloping roof and an overhang over the doorway and window area. The flooring was flagstone and there was no glass or screening in the windows, nor was there a door to close. This was great for those who liked to rush out of bed in the morning and do a swan dive straight into Canoe Lake, just one yard from the door.⁴⁵

Outdoor theatres and chapels were other popular features that sought to maximize contact with the surrounding landscape. Theatres provided shelter and stage for performers, while audiences were entertained completely *al fresco*. Outdoor chapels ran on the same basic principle and were common at many camps, even those with less explicitly religious goals. Many were not buildings at all but merely designated space, geographically distinct from the rest of the camp. Frequently situated on hillsides or islands, they often included, as at Ahmek, nothing more than “a rustic pulpit and rude benches” arranged in amphitheater fashion. From such vantage points and with these minimal furnishings, it was believed that these chapels allowed the presence of the sacred to be more keenly felt. Here “nature as temple” took on both literal and metaphoric meanings. To heighten the sense of listening to nature’s spiritual messages, a CGIT camp manual advised that “a tradition of ‘no-talking’ from the time the campers pass a certain spot on the path to the chapel will add to the reverent atmosphere.” Some of nature’s annoyances could also be avoided, it was suggested, by finding a spot that eliminated the possibility of “sun in the worshippers eyes” and excessively strong winds.⁴⁶



Outdoor chapel, Camp Tanamakoon, c. 1920. Camp “chapels” were often not buildings at all. Instead, as pictured here, they made use of the natural surroundings to create the appropriate feelings of awe. *Algonquin Park Museum Archives #3151 (George May)*.



The theatre at Camp Ahmek, c. 1940. Campers couldn't get much more "into" nature than when attending outdoor theatres like this one, where the audience followed the action from the vantage point of their canoes. *Algonquin Park Museum Archives #3131* (Hugh Colson).



Camp Tanamakoon girls, c. 1940. Another example of the outdoor theatre at camp. *Algonquin Park Museum Archives #3148* (George May).

In the effort to create a natural aesthetic, placement of buildings was also regarded as a factor of strategic importance. Above all, the goal was to avoid a regimented or too orderly look. Looking back on the early years of Camp Tanamakoon, Director Mary Hamilton explained that cabins were “scattered on either side of [the main lodge] along the shore wherever there was open space” since, as camp administrators claimed, “we prized our trees and never wantonly cut them down.”⁴⁷ Though this could not be said of all camps, even at the highly manicured and sprawling Bolton Camp, efforts were made to create a natural aesthetic. “There are four dormitories and a few tents,” a 1941 report explained, “but by far the larger number of us live in cheerful, airy cabins – not set out in rows, but arranged engagingly here and there to take advantage of a good view, or perched high above the winding creek.”⁴⁸ Above all, nothing was to appear orchestrated or unnatural. Buildings were meant to look as if they – like the trees from which they had been constructed – had sprouted from the earth around them.

A backward-looking longing for “simpler days” guided not only the camps’ use of space but also their programming. Typical programs emphasized skills that were considered to be basic to human survival and that promoted valuable self-sufficiency. Since the ability to transport oneself wherever one might need to go was considered fundamental, many camp programs placed strong emphasis on instruction in swimming, canoeing, and hiking. The compulsory “morning-dip” was something of an institution at many camps, while “nature hikes” were undertaken at even the most “citified” locations.⁴⁹ Once campers reached their destination, other skills were required. Woodcraft – everything from axe-handling and fire-starting to outdoor cookery – was deemed essential know-how. Adding a domestic spin to their description of these skills, Tanamakoon’s literature argued that their female campers learned “almost anything one must know how to do in order to be at home in the woods.”⁵⁰ The need to understand the natural environments in which campers moved also translated into lessons in nature lore, another camp staple.⁵¹ Ultimately, many camp administrators would likely have agreed with Ontario’s director of education, who stated explicitly in 1947: “[Camping] brings the boy and girl back to the fundamental problems of humanity – the problems that have faced man from earliest times – the problems of shelter, food and transportation.” He elaborated:

The hut or tent is once again the shelter that wards off the elements ... On overnight trips, the camper learns the art of travel on foot, with his pack on

his back – or by canoe with his own strength providing the motive force. He learns the urgency of co-operation at the journey's end, in setting up his camp ... and he learns the joy of satisfying the hunger his exertions have induced with food he has earned by his own efforts.⁵²

Without question, the canoe trip represented the pinnacle of this search for simple living and, for many, the essence of the summer camp experience. The canoe trip was considered simple because it reduced life to two primary concerns: movement and survival. Paddling and portaging moved one along; making and breaking camp, collecting wood, starting fires, and campfire cooking provided the means of survival. Canoe trips were also “simple” in another sense. Here, no one was a specialist; rather, all campers were to take pride in being self-sufficient generalists, each sharing equally in all tasks. Pride of accomplishment also came from surviving the more unpleasant aspects of the trip. As historian Jamie Benidickson has noted, for the canoe-tripper there could be “something intensely satisfying about lying in a damp sleeping bag, sipping hot tea” in the context of an adventure that promoted self-sufficiency.⁵³ In this sense, experiencing discomfort – the difficulties of the simple life, if you will – was definitely part of the package, as Ahmek camper James Buchanan remembers of the 1950s:

On some of these canoe trips, you swore that you would never go on one of these trips again. These portages were absolutely murder ... carrying a seventy-pound pack before these prefabricated foods came out – it was rough ... [But when] you got back to camp, or back home, whether or not one [went] back on a canoe trip in one's life, you thought of it as a positive experience.⁵⁴

Physical isolation was another factor that was thought to “simplify” camp life. Camps varied in their isolation from urban centres, but, by definition, camp was something of an isolated world. Administrators were well aware of, and openly commented on, the camp's delightful removal from the larger society. As one put it, looking back, “There were two parts of life: camp in the summer and the city in the winter and they didn't overlap.”⁵⁵ Taking the antimodern view, accessibility, here, was regarded in negative terms; in short, the harder to get to, the better. Elite private camps in Algonquin and Temagami were the winners here. In the interwar years, a trip to Algonquin was a full day's train ride away, with an additional two-mile walk into Camp Ahmek.⁵⁶ By 1950, the ride had been



Camp Temagami boys, c. 1930. Portages during private camp canoe trips were often strenuous activities – especially when they lasted up to two miles – but they also built up boys’ pride and sense of manly accomplishment. *Courtesy Upper Canada College Archives.*

shortened, but only by three hours.⁵⁷ Temagami was even harder to reach. Though the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway reached the town by 1904, this still entailed a ten-hour ride from Toronto. For American campers, who made up the bulk of the clientele at a number of Algonquin and Temagami camps, journeys were even longer.⁵⁸ Complicating the trip in for all Camp Keewaydin campers was the camp’s island location, a factor that also affected travel to other camps, including Temagami and Wapomeo.

The island camp held a particular allure for outdoor administrators, enamoured as they were with the positive qualities of isolation. In such locations, the separation from society and from technological comforts that many camps espoused took on added geographical dimensions. To those interested in child psychology and development, this naturally bounded space represented the perfect laboratory for the testing of new theories. On the other hand, given the hard-to-reach location of many