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The Myth of Superabundance Meets the Circle of Relations around the Great Lakes

The Once and Future Great Lakes Country: An Ecological History by JOHN L. RILEY
McGill-Queen's UP, 2013 \$29.95

Reviewed by **DEBORAH BOWEN**

In his foreword to this wide-ranging book, emeritus history professor Ramsay Cook attests that the author's

knowledge, practical experience, and determination make this a singular work that combines historical scholarship, scientific understanding, and subtle, low-key advocacy. (xiii)

He's right. This book covers an enormous amount of material, geographically, historically, and biologically, in meticulous detail, and manages at the same time gently to suggest where the reader's sympathies should most properly lie.

Riley knows whereof he speaks. He is senior science advisor at the Nature Conservancy of Canada and has worked as a public servant with provincial and national government agencies over many years. "An ecologist," he starts out, "cannot help but read history differently" (vii), and he tells us that it was Ramsay Cook himself who challenged him that "every geography deserves to have its ecological story told" (viii). It's the story of the changes in Great Lakes geography, physical and social, that Riley sets out to tell in this book, and particularly of what he calls "the forensics of the blunt trauma of securing, disbursing, and converting the Great Lakes country into a new Europe" in the centuries after European settlement (260). Factual claims

are supported from original historical sources: excerpts from early European explorers and the First Peoples they encountered sit alongside excerpts from the works of missionaries, traders, land surveyors, and literary raconteurs (such as Catharine Parr Traill and Anna Jameson), as well as from paleoecologists, politicians, and contemporary activists. "Can this book be categorized?" asks Cook with evident pleasure.

Within this collection of data about two Canadian provinces and nine American states around the Great Lakes from prehistoric times to the present, Riley includes many stories of ecological distress or recovery. The stories, in my opinion, are the best part — Riley's own voice and perspective are evident in them, and the narrative sparkles. I loved finding sections that began, "Consider the elk" (147) or "Consider the lowly earthworm" (269). Some parts of the book read more like an official report, and these can be daunting, even when the material is, in itself, fascinating. But, whether you want to learn about Native agricultural practices pre-European settlement, or about the rise and fall of a particular fish species at different periods in one of the Great Lakes, or the amazing lifespans of white pine, sugar maple, and beech (more than 450 years!), Riley will give you the goods.

He frames the entire book with the story of his own reclamation of a derelict farm in Mono Township, "in the high country between Lake Ontario and Lake Huron, near the midpoint of the Niagara Escarpment," with the Nottawasaga valley below, Huronia (ancient Wendake) on the northeast horizon, and the Oak Ridges to the south (xv-xvi). This personal connection resonates throughout:

The story of the land in Mono repeated itself remorselessly across all of northeast North America over the past four centuries. [...] The story of Nature writ large on the wider landscape—of collapse and restoration—I see through the lens of a farm that is just like a thousand others. (xvi)

And it is a fascinating lens. The first part of the book explores early aboriginal land use, “in particular as a guide to an ancient circle of relations that is of increasing interest today” (xxii). This section tells the story of the often destructive ways in which “[m]any nations called this place home, and many nations contested it” (xxii). Riley argues that, when the British came, they “saw treaties as the means to expedite land transactions, not as a legitimization of land rights,” and explores what this meant for early settlement (99). 95 percent of the total population of First Nations people around the Great Lakes was killed by European diseases within 130 years of contact, which Riley calls “the greatest sudden collapse of human life and culture in human history” (41), and which, together with Native wars and European aggression, had significant impact on the ecology of the region: “a culture of sophisticated, place-based farming and wildlife harvest was finished” (45). Thus European settlement could be seen as “the worst possible assault on a landscape” (107).

The second part of the book considers this assault on “the earthly paradise of North America” described in early accounts, as settlers set out to convert it into a new and better Europe (xxiii). This is the story of how “[t]he Native polyculture was mechanized into a non-Native

monoculture” (146). As Steward Udall, U.S. secretary of the interior in the 1960s, put it,

It was the intoxicating profusion of the American continent which induced a state of mind that made waste and plunder inevitable. A temperate continent, rich in soils and minerals and forests and wildlife, enticed men to think in terms of infinity rather than facts, and produced an overriding fallacy that was nearly our undoing—the myth of superabundance. (qtd. 147-148)

Riley comments that

this story of early native abundance and use, destroyed by libertarian overharvest and mismanagement, and soured by extinctions and invasives, is unequalled. Yet we rarely acknowledge it, seldom teach it, and never mourn it. (153)

The third part of the book asks today’s questions: “How will cheap food, climate warming, and globalization play themselves out? How long can they co-exist with some semblance of social equality, cultural diversity, and native ecology?” (xxiii-xxiv). One of the surprises of this book is the extent to which Riley’s answers to these questions are, on the whole, hopeful ones. He never underplays the fact that the landscape of the Great Lakes is radically different from what it was like in its abundant pre-European settlement. And he knows that “[f]rom space at night, the planet looks to be slowly burning. [...] The Great Lakes country and Atlantic seaboard are the brightest places on Earth, the most incandescent waste of light and energy in

history” (285). He includes eye-opening materials on the ecological consequences of globalization — for instance, the way in which invasive species are its inevitable concomitant. But “Nature,” Riley says, “is always full on, it never repeats itself” (344), and since “our history on this landscape underscores just how muscular we once were[, w]e could be domineering again, on behalf of nature” (193-4). He gives encouraging accounts of what has in fact been achieved over the last hundred years in terms of restoration, revitalization, and “re-wilding”: “[w]e are finally putting some of our lands on life support” (156). And so, “[f]undamentally, we can recalculate the carrying capacity of Great Lakes country, in pursuit of a future more durable than the one we inherited” (348). This book may be one factor in encouraging just such a positive vision.

DEBORAH BOWEN is Professor Emerita of English at Redeemer University College, just having retired this past summer. She will continue to teach part-time, and looks forward to teaching Environmental Literature again in 2018-19. She is presently working on a SSHRC-funded project entitled “The Voice of Environmental Hope in Contemporary Ontarian Poetry.”