

Edward MacDonald, Joshua MacFadyen, and Irené Novaczek (eds) (2016) *Time and a place: An environmental history of Prince Edward Island, Montreal, Kingston and Charlottetown, McGill-Queen's University Press and Island Studies Press at PEI. 442pp, ISBN: 978-0-7735-4693-7. \$CAD34.95.*

This book could serve as a template for what an environmental history should be. In this, Canada's "first provincial environmental history," there is a complex interweaving of biophysicality, humankind, ideas and technologies—all of these, at different points of time, invaders. And there is an understanding, made explicit by the editors, that detailed, place-specific environmental histories nest within deep time and continent-wide accounts, providing rich—or 'thick'—understandings of specific elements within the general.

Much, perhaps most, environmental history is focused narrowly and meticulously. It takes a bounded space—a jurisdiction, perhaps, or the drainage system below a watershed—and exhaustively patterns out the history and geography of human-ecological interactions therein, while typically ignoring the larger spatial and temporal contexts within which these particulars lodge. This is not the approach taken by the editors of *Time and a place*, though the temptation to have done so must have been strong. The various authors do burrow down into the particulars of one island's history, and all the detail you might want is present. But it has been the task of some contributing authors to imagine a *tabula rasa*, and to populate this blank space with incomings from deep time, and incomings from not so deep time. The particular, in other words, is clearly placed within the context of larger currents of 'happening.' The book synthesises these complexities superbly well.

Taking a contextual view enables the contributors to this book, and the editors in particular, to reflect upon the degree of incongruence between Prince Edward Island history and "the grand old theories that dominated Canada's twentieth-century historiography." In becoming "a hinterland without a metropolis, a food-producing province separated by ice and ocean from its growing but industrially decentralized region," the province's historical unwinding fits "awkwardly" (to use the editors' own designator) with established broad theory. A triumph, again, for the particular over the abstract, but not a triumph wrought without thoughtful regard for grand theory, either human or biogeographical. Grand theory is not overturned by this history, but the need to consider such theory as ragged around the edges is firmly established here.

The contributors are keenly aware that their subject is an island, and that the island condition is a delimiting and opportunistic factor in the unfolding of events that they seek to explicate. The significance of the island factor is strongly underlined. I felt like cheering aloud when I read the following passage:

The writing of island history is changing, in part as the discipline of history fractures into sub-genres, and in part because of the emerging field of nissology—the study of islands on their own terms. Instead of a tiny province perched on the periphery of a great landmass where power tilts towards the centre, Prince Edward Island can locate itself within an island-centric world view in which islands are the norm rather than an anomaly.

The editors bring their superb opening essay to a close with a succinct claim for the significance of islands within the skein of environmental crises currently faced and emergent. Island environmental challenges are at once salutary, concentrated, and island-specific in comparison with environmental challenges elsewhere. The editors also insist—as do I—that 'real' islands should be differentiated from other geographical conditions in which 'the island effect' applies. In their closing paragraph, they observe that: "unlike people in the Rockies or

on the Great Plains, islanders and coastal dwellers live in a landscape that changes every six hours and steadily over time. The dynamic possibilities of such an environment hold both threat and promise.”

The individual contributions to this book are of such uniform rigour and readability that it seems unfair to single out individual pieces. But John Gillis’s chapter—the first of the substantive chapters in the book—should become a classic of island scholarship. He stresses the ecotonal nature of islands, sites “where ecosystems intersect,” and this crucially highlights the importance of the element of water. The interaction of that dynamic element with the land makes, in turn, for the extraordinary dynamism of islands as natural systems and explains their inherently ecotonal quality. However, to render down this insightful, far-ranging chapter into such a few trite words is scarcely to do justice to it, and is to neglect, particularly, the author’s capacity to position Prince Edward Island within the sweep of his planet-wide analysis.

A second chapter to merit special mention is Jean-Paul Arsenault’s piece on agriculture in Prince Edward Island post-1969. Given that this chapter focuses upon material that is central to the island’s agrarian mythos, it is of special importance. And what impresses is the absence of pulled punches. This is hard-hitting, heavyweight analysis; myth-puncturing: “the facts show clearly,” Arsenault writes “that the degree of pressure to which the environment has been subjected is directly related to processing potato production. The ebb and flow of key environmental indicators has overwhelmingly depended on how many hectares were grown for French fries. It is that simple.”

I strongly recommend this book, and to all island scholars, not just Prince Edward Islanders. It is superb; meticulous and readable scholarship. In closing, and observing that the second section is entitled ‘Shaping Abegweit’, I am led to speculate whether it is not beyond the resourcefulness of the people of this wonderful island to find a means to remove the name that honours an unremarkable and minor member of a colonising power, to replace it with that beautifully evocative name that predates European coming: Abegweit.

Pete Hay
University of Tasmania
peter.hay@utas.edu.au