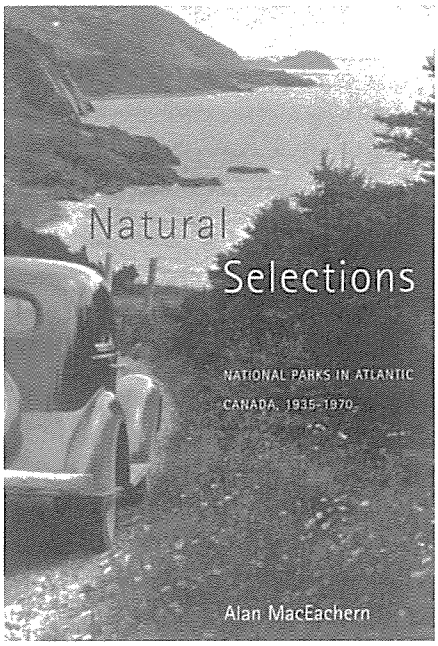
ALAN MACEACHERN'S
Natural Selections: National Parks in Atlantic Canada, 1935-1970



THIS BOOK HAS A GREAT COVER. A BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO DONE OVER IN SHADES OF BLUE SHOWS A 1930S SEDAN SEEMINGLY TAKING IN THE VIEW—A WILD SEASCAPE OF SLOPING MOUNTAINS AND WATER OFF CAP ROUGE, CAPE BRETON ISLAND, BESIDE A COUNTRYSIDE OF SCATTERED HOUSES AND WINDING ROADS.

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REVIEWED BY James Murton, Queen's University

I start this way because the dust-jacket image is so appropriate to the book's content. This work is about beautiful places and the human presence in them. In telling the story of the creation of four national parks in Atlantic Canada – Cape Breton Highlands, Prince Edward Island, Fundy, and Terra Nova – Alan MacEachern has fashioned a fascinating look at the complications and contradictions in 20th century attempts to save nature by preserving representative chunks of it.

Natural Selections uses the stories of these four parks to range more broadly into the history of Parks Canada's policies and beliefs, and beyond into big questions of the relationship between nature and culture in Canada. MacEachern's major point is that parks are more cultural than they are natural, places where humans have decided to let nature flourish. They reflect our (changing) ideas of what ideally nature is, what it should do for us and, above all, what it should look like. They are therefore products of contemporary politics and aesthetics. Created by humans for human purposes, they are saddled with the eternal problem of balancing preservation with use.

This book is one of the first Canadian monographs to draw explicitly on the field of environmental history, which concerns itself with the human relationship with nature. It argues that nature is always an actor in the historical play, not just the stage on which history is played out. MacEachern's arguments are in line with some of the latest scholarship in this field. Environmental historians have become deeply skeptical of the truth and value of standard understandings of nature. These tend to hold that places are more or less natural depending on the degree of human influence on them (thus seascape is more natural than countryside). Yet as historian William Cronon argues, these ideas run up against the pervasive human influence on the entire environment. Further, setting off samples of wilderness does not help us to understand how we might live with and as part of nature.

In making such arguments MacEachern sets himself in opposition to park defenders and wilderness advocates. In Janet Foster's pioneering work of Canadian environmental history, 1978's *Working for Wildlife: The Beginning of Preservation in Canada*, Foster established a key interpretation of Parks Canada' early history, now widely embraced by parks defenders. She argued that the Parks Branch, and in particular J.B. Harkin, the first Commissioner, were early (1920s) visionaries, defending an ideal of parks as nature sanctuaries against the threats of a Canadian government dedicated to resource exploitation and parks as tourist attractions. When Harkin spoke of parks as revenue generators, Foster and others argue, he was making a concession to less enlightened politicians.

Nonsense, MacEachern says, ensuring that Foster and her friends are unlikely to invite him to sit around their campfire anytime soon. Both Harkin and the politicians, he clearly establishes, simply saw no inherent contradiction between preservation and use. Parks were preserved so that

they could be enjoyed by the people. Further, they were preserved for a certain class of people, for it was assumed that only the cultured could draw the meaning out of unadorned mountains, lakes and wildlife.

Parks were not primarily established to preserve nature, MacEachern further argues, but out of a variety of aesthetic, political, and economic factors, in addition to environmental factors. Park boundaries were largely arbitrary from an ecological standpoint. They were dependent on provincial politicians' desires to establish the park without overly threatening resource extraction and Parks Canada's desire to get the best scenery and recreational opportunities inside the boundaries. The "best" resembled the iconic western mountain parks – large, beautiful in a rugged and spectacular way, and full of desirable wildlife such as moose and deer.

Such a place was hard to come by in Atlantic Canada, and it is MacEachern's careful dissection of the way that the Parks Branch dealt with this problem that brings out some of his key points. The clash between vision and reality was most clear in the establishment of Prince Edward Island National Park, a narrow strip of seashore along the northern edge of the island. Faced with this most un-western landscape, the Parks Branch fell back on its sense that parks should be institutions of high culture. The environmental realities suggested the park could be only a recreation space, yet it could at least be a top quality one. Green Gables, the house that inspired Lucy Maud Montgomery, would be fully restored, including having its gables painted green. A golf course would be built, and the Branch insisted that a high-class resort hotel be included at Dalvay in the eastern end of the park.

As this example shows, MacEachern is not arguing that people can manipulate a natural setting to become whatever they wish it to become. In response to what they found in PEI, the Parks Branch was forced to improvise and redefine what a park was. Yet the (cultural) vision remained key to the way the park was constructed.

After World War II the west versus east problem was largely surpassed as parks were established under new criteria. At Fundy National Park in 1947, the Parks Branch established a highly developed park. These developments, and MacEachern's restrained yet clear disdain for them, are summed up in his dry caption to a photo showing crowds around a concrete salt water swimming pool: "At the Fundy National Park swimming pool. The Bay of Fundy is in the background." By 1957 the definition of what a park was had changed yet again, and development in Newfoundland's Terra Nova park was restrained by a growing dedication in the Parks Branch to nature preservation.

The problem of preservation versus use was a constant one for the Parks Branch. This becomes clear in MacEachern's accounts of the plight of evicted landowners and resource users. At PEI, land that had been farmed for hundreds of years was fenced off and replanted with trees, emphasizing the cultural, created nature of the place. Yet in the parks themselves, MacEachern argues in the book's final two chapters, preservation versus use is a false dichotomy best abandoned. He suggests that we can best evaluate the Parks Branch's relationship to the nature under their care by examining the level of intervention they allowed in the name of both use and preservation. In the postwar period, in fact, the Parks Branch engaged in heavy intervention – poisoning then restocking lakes, spraying DDT – in the name of preserving the sort of nature they wanted.

This is a complex and challenging book that is nevertheless clear and approachable. MacEachern has a relaxed style and an eye for the enlivening and illuminating anecdote, though he does descend into sarcasm on occasion. He guides a potentially unwieldy tale of multiple conflicting interests in the service of large, complex ideals with a sure and even hand. In the first part of the book, where he delineates the establishment of the parks, he is almost entirely successful. A lone concern would be his tight focus on the four parks, which, unfortunately, makes generalizations to the national parks as a whole somewhat difficult. It may be that the parks are more obviously cultural products in the more human-influenced landscapes of Atlantic Canada.

The book's second part, where the author examines preservation and use, is ultimately less satisfying. MacEachern's argument here is a response to park historians such as Leslie Bella who are critical of any attempts to have the parks serve economic purposes. This is unrealistic, he says, and proposes his yardstick of intervention level instead. But why the particular sorts of intervention carried out in the parks? Whatever cultural authority the Parks Branch possessed came from its role as the protector of a generally accepted ideal of nature. Violate this, and the Branch loses authority. So what ideal of nature was being served by poisoning lakes?

In his own book *Saving America's Wildlife*, Thomas Dunlap has argued that postwar management of nature was designed to protect species valuable for aesthetic reasons or to hunters. MacEachern seems to be saying that this was the basis for postwar interventions but never really uses the idea to show how and why various instances of intervention made sense in the postwar cultural context. He is so sympathetic to displaced landowners, and spends so much time developing his parks as culture argument, that we lose much of a sense that the parks were about nature as well. Yet as chapter two makes clear, the Parks Branch—at least in the 1920s—had at the very least a well-developed philosophy about the value of nature preserves for uplifting and healing people and societies. We get little sense here of the joy that people get out of parks.

This is an important book with broad implications. In a too-short closing, MacEachern notes the essential contradiction of parks. They attempt to set off a portion of nature as separate and distinct from the nature that surrounds it. Yet, as he notes, "Seeds float or are carried across borders, deer wander back and forth, and air circulates over the land equally." We cannot deal with our troubled relationship with the environment by isolating choice parts of it. "Humans create a park to be an island for nature," MacEachern notes, "and in doing so prove the difficulty we have incorporating nature into our everyday world."