

Reclaiming the Don: An Environmental History of Toronto's Don River Valley

By Jennifer L. Bonnell. 2014. University of Toronto Press, 10 St. Mary Street, Suite 700, Toronto, ON, Canada, M4Y 2W8. 316 pages, 65.00 CAD, Cloth.

Rivers are where they come together: the environmental forces and human interventions that shape a landscape. This has been the story of Canada's biggest rivers: the Fraser, Mackenzie, and St. Lawrence, each recapitulating the environmental history of their regions. But as Jennifer Bonnell shows, this is also true for smaller rivers. With headwaters only 38 km from its mouth, and draining only a tiny fraction of southern Ontario, the Don River is nevertheless among the most familiar of rivers, located as it is within Canada's largest city. Her account of its history demonstrates the value of considering a river as we seek to understand how

nature and our relationship with it have been transformed through time.

Bonnell explains how the history of the Don is the history of southern Ontario: glacial retreat, Aboriginal settlement (of which few traces survive), European colonization, the growth of industry (including mills and other developments that relied on water, whether for power or process), the increasingly intense use of the river as a receptacle for waste, the apparently unstoppable expansion of Toronto's suburbs, and efforts to conserve selected features of the landscape, including river valleys. The consequence of this history has

been the transformation of the watershed environment, including the elimination of streams, wetlands, open land and forests. Until the early 1950s Toronto's ravines were often used as informal waste disposal sites; 47 abandoned landfills have been mapped in the Don watershed alone. Sawmills helped destroy salmon runs: after the 1860s no more would spawn in the Don. This and the later channelization of the lower river, to "improve" its capacity to transport water and silt, epitomized the diverse consequences of transformation of the river ecosystem.

But this is not only a simple story of destruction of a landscape. A new landscape emerged, exhibiting new relations between river, valley, and city. Human activities now dominate, and natural processes have been heavily modified, but these processes nevertheless continue, and often resist control – a persistence experienced through periodic flooding and other events, and through the continuing vitality of natural areas within the watershed. That many of these areas still exist is partly due to the caution imposed on development by floods, especially that of Hurricane Hazel in 1954, but it's also the product of the efforts of conservationists, especially Charles Sauriol. The story of Sauriol's advo-

cacy over several decades for conservation of the Don watershed nicely recapitulates the history of land and water conservation in Ontario – from the Don Valley Conservation Association to the Nature Conservancy of Canada, and from conservation to environmentalism. Conservation in the Don Valley also raises interesting issues about how Canadians define what nature is worth protecting: not just pristine wilderness but habitats influenced by humans, and not just distant places but the backyards of our biggest cities. Bonnell thus performs the valuable service of bringing the history of nature conservation closer to the experience of most Canadians.

She also presents a history that should be of interest beyond the boundaries of the Don watershed. This is a history of not just physical transformation, but of changing ideas about nature: from seeing the river and its landscape as a wilderness to be converted into an orderly garden in Europe's image, or as a problem to be engineered into a convenient transportation conduit, or, most recently, a place worth restoring.

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