

The Once and Future Great Lakes Country: An Ecological History

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Book Reviews and Notices

The Once and Future Great Lakes Country: An Ecological History, by John L. Riley. Rural, Wildland, and Resource Studies Series. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. 2013. xxiv, 488 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$39.95 hardcover; \$29.95 paperback.

Reviewer Kevin C. Brown is a postdoctoral researcher for the American Society for Environmental History. His research and writing have focused on the environment of the cutover lands of Minnesota and Louisiana from the 1870s to the 1930s.

In *The Once and Future Great Lakes Country*, John L. Riley — a senior scientist at the Nature Conservancy of Canada — has assembled a rich and detailed account of the evolving interaction between the human residents and the environment in the Great Lakes region of Canada and the United States from the end of the last ice age to the present. Throughout, he argues that at the hands of human manipulations and the Holocene warming, change has been the only constant for the region's ecology. In fact, "Nature," Riley reminds us, "never repeats itself" (xxiv).

The Once and Future Great Lakes Country extensively documents the declines in the region's ecological health since the arrival of Europeans in North America, but through a careful reading of a range of records produced by colonists, Riley tackles this story with nuance and still conveys the great weight of violence, dispossession, and profit seeking that compelled the degradation of the region's forests, wildlife, and prairies.

He begins by showing how residents of the Great Lakes region altered its ecology long before the arrival of Europeans. A diverse set of Native American societies regularly burned woodlands and prairies to increase their productivity for hunting, gathering, and agriculture, for example. Early European explorers' descriptions of the region's flora and fauna did not reflect a people-less "wilderness," but a land long tended to by Native Americans' stewardship. (The argument here will be familiar to fans of William Cronon's 1983 classic, *Changes in the Land*.)

Two portions of Riley's study show the potential for the land to "recover" from the more destructive human manipulations that followed. He documents a substantial "ecological wilding" (83) across the Great Lakes region during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the interim between the decimation of Native societies (which drastically reduced their ability to manage the landscape) and widespread settlement by Europeans. That this recovery happened as the result of

a profound and brutal demographic transition, however, suggests its limited usefulness for present conservation concerns.

More relevant for the twenty-first century is Riley's optimism about a more recent process of "restoration" (340) in the region's ecology over the past 50 years. Armed with new laws and land management practices, governments around the Great Lakes country have made important gains in recovering some of the health of the woods, prairies, and skies, Riley writes. He argues, however, that this recovery will not turn back the clock to an earlier Great Lakes ecology. Instead, urban-dominated land use planning and the burden of anthropogenic climate change will result in a "new" nature in the region, not the replication of a preindustrial one.

Despite these important insights, *The Once and Future Great Lakes Country* is a frustrating book. One of the great challenges of regional history lies in explaining to readers why the area under examination should be tackled *as a region*. In his introduction, Riley briefly takes up this definitional problem, explaining that the Great Lakes country is *le pays d'en haut* ("the upper country") of New France, but he does not tell readers why taking the seventeenth-century French empire's extent is a solid foundation for this longer history (xxii). As Riley himself demonstrates, ecologically the territory surrounding the Great Lakes is quite diverse, and residents have not always seen (and may not now see) themselves as part of something called "the Great Lakes country." Riley compounds this confusion by prioritizing the experience of southern Ontario over other portions of the region throughout the text. It remains unclear whether this choice reflects the "center of gravity" for the region or simply what Riley feels most comfortable writing about.

The study could have also benefited from tighter editing. In many places its detail and repetition overwhelm the arguments. And although it contains beautifully reproduced color maps, graphs, paintings, and photographs on various aspects of Great Lakes history and ecology, they are poorly integrated into the book's argument. (Figure 24, as just one of several possible examples, explains that a series of color-coded bands stretched across a map of the region illustrates "vegetation hardness zones," but offers in support only a baffling map key and no source for the image.)

One of the central contributions of environmental history to the historical enterprise *writ large* is its ability to show how nature influences and is influenced by human societies across conventional political or cultural boundaries. Despite its problems, Riley's "ecological history" certainly conveys this relationship. It will be useful for teachers of the region's history looking to bring the environment into their classrooms.