

Graeme Wynn: The Historical Geography of Environment and Empire from the Edges

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Graeme Wynn is an outstanding academic and productive writer, but he is a modest person and it is therefore both appropriate and a pleasure to review and parade some of his ideas and writings. We need to do so not only to laud a researcher and teacher with a long and outstanding career, but also – and perhaps more importantly – to remind ourselves of the positive difference that a single scholar can make. In Graeme’s case, this has been not only to his discipline, but also to other related fields of study, in addition to his impact on his university and as a public intellectual. Graeme’s CV attests to the many prizes he has received, distinguished visitor invitations, election to prestigious academies and positions within them, and to his remarkable contribution to the teaching and administration of geography as a discipline of study.

In his CV, Graeme Wynn has described his academic career in the following way: “For more than forty years, I have sought to understand human transformations of the earth.” These two words – “human” and “transformations” – are portmanteaus freighted with contradictions, complexities, histories, and, of course, geographies. To an understanding of many of these elements, Graeme has done justice. Unlike many academics who explain their work as being in the widest of fields but yet focus only on minutiae, Graeme’s achievement has been to keep the larger perspective in mind while always interrogating its rich contextual detail. In the layers of both scope and locality, he has made an immense contribution in a voluminous publication record.

In reflecting on Graeme’s thinking and writing about environment and empire, we are left in no doubt of his conviction that of those human transformations he seeks to understand, the imperial period of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been the most pivotal. The impact of British imperialism captured his imagination in the 1970s when he first set out to examine New Zealand and Australia and, since the 1980s, Canada.¹ These early studies of segments of the British world were seminal in first drawing his attention to how imperialism had transformed all geographies, be they political, social, cultural, economic, and environmental. Graeme’s personal biography itself straddles the British world of settler societies and he has written of these from the inside out rather than of the British Empire *per se* from the outside in. Born in South Africa, educated in England, a teacher in New Zealand, a researcher in Australia, and a resident, teacher, and visiting professor in many places in Canada, the University of British Columbia primarily, there is probably no single geographer with better personal experience of many elements of the emerging modern British Commonwealth and its significant settler societies.

Geography is essentially a child, handmaid and catalyst of empire. In the nineteenth century it transformed itself into a professional discipline with intellectual authority over economic, environmental, social, political, and cultural evidence. By the end of that century, it was “the queen of all imperial sciences . . . inseparable from state knowledge.”² It was geopolitically powerful, but inseparable also from knowledge of natural resources and their exploitation.³ Geography facilitated the exercise of political power, giving conceptual hegemony even where

real control might be lacking, and – as was the case with the forests of Canada and the minerals of southern Africa – economic hegemony as well. Graeme is aware of geography’s power, and that of historical geography in particular with its twin and equal emphasis on space and time. This, for him, is its essential and distinctive importance as a field of study.

Graeme has referred to settler societies as “containers” that absorbed hundreds of thousands of British immigrants. Certainly, he has argued, they belong within the imperial frame, but we need constantly to question that frame.⁴ Graeme’s understanding of the development of European settlements overseas, the history of migration, and the connections between environment and empire have been expressed in many of his publications, especially those dealing with Canada and the exploitation of its natural resources.⁵ In doing so he has invigorated imperial studies in historical geography by analysing the tensions between margins and periphery, imperial and colonial, as they ebb and flow. Graeme Wynn works at those ebbs and flows, investigating the sub-imperialisms within settler societies at larger and smaller scales, uncovering fresh complications, nuances, and human and environmental relationships. He is alert to the many forms that imperialism may take, and he is well placed to consider varieties that may be French, British Canadian, Pākehā, Boer, or even the capitalist imperialism of the United States. Wynn’s ongoing project on the “Commonwealth of Scholarship” in British settler societies, in many respects uniting Canada, South Africa, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand with Britain, will certainly be a landmark in its analysis of the intellectual and disciplinary networks and the exchange of ideas within this matrix of historical geography of common as well as distinctive forms of imperialism.

Graeme’s work has always been rooted in locale and in studying the humans and natural resources in them. Although in English-speaking circles the word empire immediately brings to mind the British imperial and colonial project, the civilising mission, etc., within empire there are sub-imperial thrusts, particularly from settler societies, of which Graeme is well aware and about which he has written.⁶ I believe that this uncovering of the deeper layers and configurations of sub-imperialisms is where one of his research strengths lies. As Graeme has recognised in his work with Matthew Evenden, empires are also multi-manifestations (if there is such a word) of political empires, but borders and boundaries between them are often porous, as they write “claimed and contested . . . re-territorialised as national and imperial space.” Essentially imperial, colonial and national boundaries cross-cut bioregional spaces and occlude what might be termed “naturally” bounded demarcations like drainage basins, vegetation biomes, and ecological zones.⁷

The University of British Columbia appears to be a worthy nursery for eminent scholars of empire. In his article in issue 4 of *The Canadian Historical Review* of 2014, Graeme paid tribute to John McKenzie who was among the first historians deliberately to link imperialism and nature. John, anxious to escape what he regarded as the confines of Britain, obtained his PhD from the University of British Columbia after experiencing, in different ways, Glasgow, Zambia, and London. He thus shares a cosmopolitan biography with Graeme Wynn. Reading Wynn’s article which, in tribute to McKenzie, is sub-titled “Empires of Nature and the Nature of Empires,” I doubt that Graeme would welcome being referred to directly as a scholar of empire, because he has subverted it, in a sense, by concentrating on its effects on indigenous people and settlers rather than analysing the empire as such.⁸ His contribution to *The Illustrated History of Canada* reflects this ability to probe the interstices of empire, to consider its margins – New Zealand for instance – and to draw from various histories, forestry being just one, the changing impact of the imperial project on the landscape and on various human communities.⁹

It is appropriate that there was a panel presentation to celebrate Graeme’s contribution to his discipline at the International Conference of Historical Geographers held in London in July 2015 at the august premises of the Royal Geographical Society, with its resonances both of

geography and empire. Much of the eminence of the Royal Geographical Society had to do with the energetic and politically-minded president, Sir Roderick Murchison, who linked the society's geographic role with the scientific bureaucracy and political leadership, giving the public "an authentic, though culturally conditioned, vision of the diversity of environments and cultures into which their representatives were prying."¹⁰ Graeme's achievement has been to complicate that cultural conditioning by considering the undercurrents that developed within the colonial order among human communities that—in time—came to envisage their spaces, environments, and their histories, differently.

Graeme has made his approach to his discipline quite clear. He readily accepts that "historical geography has to evolve, and that its future form will likely be quite different from its current and earlier manifestations."¹¹ This is so because, he believes (quoting Carl Sauer), that the subject needs to be ruled by inquisitiveness, not by demarcating boundaries, policing them and remaining within them. Scholars need to produce works that bring new perspectives and that are read with excitement.¹² This is, I consider, what he has achieved in his adventurous interpretation of environment and empire in settler societies. He delights in the theoretical rigour of historical geography on the one hand, and its specificity as an interpretive tool on the other. Historical geography in Canada is distinctive and strong, thanks in part to Wynn's contributions, but he has enlarged and augmented it by considering the country within the wider ambit of empire, thus venturing into historical waters that require an extended set of intellectual skills. Historical geography is one of the broadest of fields, and Graeme's focus has always included the historiographical while never losing the particularities of space, time, and environment.¹³ Graeme is a self-reflective scholar, never losing sight of his own thinking in the maelstrom of ever-changing disciplinary trajectories. Empire is the hanger on which Graeme hangs different geographies and histories. These are not discrete: Graeme is carefully attuned to the changing nature of space and, importantly, is bold in straddling the disciplines that consider it.¹⁴ Of these, studies of places—such as empires, settler societies, and expanding nationalities—that form a transnational network where disciplines intersect and multiply, and where transculturation is vitally important; Graeme Wynn has become a master of many of them.¹⁵

NOTES

- 1 Graeme Wynn, "Notes on Society and Environment in Old Ontario," *Journal of Social History* 13 (1979): 49-65; Graeme Wynn, "Industrialism, Entrepreneurship and Opportunity in the New Brunswick Timber Trade," in *The Enterprising Canadians: Entrepreneurs and Economic Development in Eastern Canada, 1820-1914*, eds. L.R. Fischer and E.W. Sager (St. John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland 1979), 5-22; Graeme Wynn, "Life on the Goldfields of Victoria: Fifteen Letters," *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 64 (1979): 258-69; Graeme Wynn, "Conservation and Society in late nineteenth century New Zealand," *New Zealand Journal of History* 11 (1977): 124-36; Graeme Wynn, "Administration in Adversity: Deputy Surveyors and control of the New Brunswick Crown Forest before 1844," *Acadiensis* 7 (1977): 49-65; Graeme Wynn, "Discovering the Antipodes: A review of historical geography in Australia and New Zealand 1969-1975, with a bibliography," *Journal of Historical Geography* 3 (1977): 251-265; Graeme Wynn, "New Brunswick Parish Boundaries in the pre-1861 census years," *Acadiensis* 6 (1977): 95-105; Graeme Wynn, "Derivative Symbolism: Urban Architecture of the Victorian period in New Zealand," *Historical News* (March, 1977): 1-6.
- 2 Morag Bell, Robin A. Butlin and Michael Hefferman, "Introduction: Geography and Imperialism," in *Geography and Imperialism, 1820-1840*, eds. M. Bell, R. Butlin and M. Hefferman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 45. See also A. Godlewska and N. Smith, *Geography and Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) and F. Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

- 3 J. M. MacKenzie, "Introduction," in *Imperialism and the Natural World*, ed. J.M. MacKenzie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 10.
- 4 Graeme Wynn, "The landscape of Canadian Environmental History: Empires of nature and the nature of empires," *Canadian Historical Review* 95, no. 4 (2014): 586-591.
- 5 Graeme Wynn, "Peeping Through the Cracks: Seeking Connections, Comparisons, and Understanding in Unstable Space," in *Connections and Comparisons: New England and Atlantic Canada*, eds. J. Reid and S. Hornsby (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005): 295-313, 404-6; Graeme Wynn, "Realizing the Idea of Canada," in *North America: The historical geography of a changing continent*, eds. E. Muller and T. F. McIlwraith (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 357-78; Graeme Wynn, "Places at the Margin: The Atlantic Provinces," in *Heartland and Hinterland: A Geography of Canada*, eds. L. D. McCann and A. Gunn (Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall, 1998), 169-226; Graeme Wynn, "On the Margins of Empire (1760-1840)," in *The Illustrated History of Canada*, ed. R. Craig Brown (Toronto: Lester Publishing, 1987), 189-278.
- 6 William Beinart and Lotte Hughes, *Environment and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 33, 44.
- 7 Matthew Evenden and Graeme Wynn, "Fifty-four, Forty, or Fight: Writing within and across borders in North American environmental history," in *Nature's End: History and the Environment*, eds. S. Sörlin and P. Warde (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 215-246.
- 8 Wynn, "The Landscape of Canadian Environmental History."
- 9 Graeme Wynn, "Peeping Through the Cracks: Seeking Connections, Comparisons, and Understanding in Unstable Space," in *Connections and Comparisons: New England and Atlantic Canada*, eds. J. Reid and S. Hornsby (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 295-313, 404-6.
- 10 R.A. Stafford, *Scientist of Empire: Sir Roderick Murchison, Scientific Exploration and the Victorian Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 189.
- 11 Graeme Wynn, review of J. Morrissey, D. Nally, U. Strohmyer and Y. Whalen, eds. *Key Concepts in Historical Geography* (London: Sage Publications, 2014).
- 12 Wynn, "The landscape of Canadian Environmental History," 590-591.
- 13 Alan R. H. Baker, *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 14 Graeme Wynn, "Forging a Canadian nation," in *North America: The Historical Geography of a Changing Continent*, eds. R.D. Mitchell and P.A. Groves (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987), 373-409.
- 15 Graeme Wynn, "Understanding Canada as Transcultural Space" (Keynote Address, 10th Graduate Student Conference of the Association for Canadian Studies in German-Speaking Countries, University of Trier, July 2013).