Culturing Wilderness in Jasper National Park

Studies in Two Centuries of Human History in the
Upper Athabasca River Watershed
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Foreword

The Rt. Hon. Jean Chrétien
Former Prime Minister of Canada

It is a great moment for Canadian history when Jasper National Park, the largest of our nation’s mountain parks, commemorates its centennial, and I salute the foresight of those early Canadians who established the park as a forest reserve in 1907, just after Alberta’s entry into confederation.

Looking back on my career of public service to Canada, I find that few achievements give me greater pleasure than the creation of national parks and park reserves that occurred during the more than six years when I served as Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (1968–1974) in Prime Minister Trudeau’s cabinet, and during the more than ten years that I myself served as Prime Minister of Canada (1993–2003). From Pacific Rim National Park in British Columbia to Gros Morne National Park in Newfoundland, from La Mauricie National Park in my constituency in Québec to Sirmilik National Park on northern Baffin Island, Nunavut, I had the privilege of setting aside about 150,000 square kilometres for the people of Canada and generations to come.

This work followed a great historical tradition that began when an Order-in-Council created Rocky Mountains (today’s Banff National) Park in 1885, but we need to remember that tradition almost petered out at some points. For more than three decades between the middle of the Depression and the time of Canada’s Centennial in 1967, only two parks—Fundy and Terra Nova—were established. So there was a great deal to be done when I became Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. Ten parks came into being in those years, and another six
got their start while I was prime minister. With the recent announce-
ment that Nahanni National Park, which I had set aside in 1972, will be
expanded to include its full watershed, the rewarding work with which I
was directly involved will be extended, and it will give a further boost to
that esteemed tradition.

Just as it is tough work making parks, it is tough to make parks work!
When I visited Jasper National Park as Minister of Indian Affairs and
Northern Development in 1970, I had to assess the different interests
and concerns of national parks staff and the residents of the Jasper
community. Parks wanted to expand their bureaucratic control by taking
over all matters pertaining to land leases. Their view was that parks
were for people, so all their land should be public, and no one should
be allowed to reside in them. That is well and good for thinly popu-
lated regions like the high North, but what if a park already has in it a
community with a long history, like Jasper or Banff? I found that Jasper
residents were understandably upset with this new policy, and it all
came to a head over the renewal of the lease that the Jasper Ski Club had
first been awarded in 1951. This was a community initiative that operated
a modest downhill skiing facility on the slopes of The Whistlers, and had
built a chalet on the leased land. Parks Canada planned to take over the
chalet and operate it as a hostel. It was a great idea in principle but they
had gone ahead and done so without consulting the community. When
I arrived in Jasper to get my own feel for things, I took a hike around the
site with Roy Everest, a member of the chamber of commerce, and then
set about trying to implement the government’s policy while mollifying
Jasperites. At one point, there was a big public meeting. At it, I joked
that people had alternatives—two of them, in fact: they could take the
Yellowhead Highway west or they could take it east. Nobody laughed.
In the end, though, not only did I succeed in working out acceptable
compensation and encouraging collaboration between the ski club and
the private developers of Marmot Basin, which was in its first years of
operation, but also, working with Peter Lougheed and others in Alberta,
I helped Jasper advance down the road that ultimately saw it become a
municipality during the years when I was prime minister.

Towns in parks are a tricky proposition and I had no blueprint for
the negotiations that had to occur. But as this welcome edition of essays
shows again and again, it is a complex relationship that exists between
the interests of people, whether fur traders, railway builders, or tourism
operators, and the national interest in protecting wilderness unique
to the world. Maintaining a suitable balance requires imagination and commitment, and I heartily welcome a book that brings some of that complexity to light. I trust that when future Canadians come to mark the centenaries of the parks I established, they will continue to show interest in learning about those of us who were involved, and why we strove to safeguard and enhance Canada’s distinguished record of wilderness protection in the form of national parks.
Abbreviations

HBCA  Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Hudson’s Bay Company
      Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba

LAC   Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa (formerly National
      Archives of Canada)

WMCR  Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Banff, Alberta
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Jasper

A Partial Typonymy
LEGEND

1 Amethyst Lake
2 Athabasca Falls
3 Athabasca Pass
4 Athabasca River
5 Bald Hills
6 Bedson Ridge
7 Boat Encampment
8 Brule Hill
9 Brûlé (today, Brule) Lake
10 Colin Range
11 Columbia Icefields
12 Columbia River at Kinbasket Lake
13 Committee’s Punch Bowl
14 Cottonwood Campground
15 Cottonwood Creek
16 Diadem Peak
17 Errington Hill
18 Esplanade Mountain
19 Fiddle River
20 Fraser River
21 Grand Batture
22 Habel Creek
23 Hawk Mountain
24 Henry House (approx. 1810)
25 Horseshoe Lake/Lac Beauvert
26 Jasper House I
27 Jasper House II
28 Jasper Lake
29 Jasper Park Lodge
30 Jonas Creek
31 Kane Meadow
32 Lake Edith
33 Larocque’s Prairie
34 Leah Peak
35 Llysfran Peak
36 Lynx Creek
37 Macarrib Pass
38 Makwa Ridge
39 Maligne Canyon
40 Maligne Lake
41 Maligne River
42 Mallard Peak
43 Marmot Basin
44 Medicine Lake
45 Miette Hot Springs and Campground
46 Miette River
47 Moat Lake
48 Moose Lake
49 Morro Peak
50 Mountain Park
51 Mount Alberta
52 Mount Athabasca
53 Mount Bown
54 Mount Charlton
55 Mount Columbia
56 Mount Edith Cavell
57 Mount Greenock
58 Mount Hooker
59 Mount Kane
60 Mount Mary Vaux
61 Mount Paul
62 Mount Robson
63 Mount Tekarra
64 Mount Unwin
65 Mount Warren
66 Mount Woolley
67 Mumm Peak
68 Old Fort Point
69 Opal Hills
70 The Palisade
71 Palisades Training Centre
72 Patricia Lake
73 Pocahontas
74 Power House Cliff
75 Prairie de la Vache/Buffalo Prairie
76 Pyramid Lake
77 Pyramid Mountain
78 The Ramparts (Amethyst Lakes)
79 The Ramparts (Maligne Lake)
80 Redoubt Peak
81 Roche Miette
82 Roche Ronde
83 Rocky River
84 Ross Cox Creek
85 Samson Narrows
86 Samson Peak
87 Shovel Pass
88 Smoky River
89 Snake River
90 Snaring River
91 Snaring River Bridge
92 Solomon Creek
93 Supply Creek
94 Sunwapta Falls
95 Sunwapta River
96 Talbot Lake
97 Tête Jaune Cache
98 Tonquin Hill
99 Tonquin Valley
100 The Twins
101 Wapiti Campground
102 Whirlpool River
103 The Whistlers
104 Whistlers Campground
105 Woolley Shoulder
106 Yellowhead Pass
I. S. MacLaren

After my family and I emerged from the pool up at Miette Hot Springs one warm August day several years ago, I had a quintessential Jasper moment. Strolling down to the parking lot, my wife and I saw our daughter running back towards us from our vehicle. She was agitated. “Dad, you’re not going to believe this, but the sheep are eating our car!” she cried. I couldn’t fathom her meaning, but when I arrived at the lot, I saw the evidence staring me in the face: several mountain sheep sporting orange moustaches. Sure enough, this nefarious flock had been chowing down on the rusted wheel wells of our jalopy, a.k.a. the family car. Where once there had been just threats of a brittle body about to shatter, now there were gaping holes. We’d spent a leisurely few hours in the pool, so there had been plenty of time for the sheep to enjoy their buffet of salt-laden metal. To make matters worse, the owner of the car parked next to ours had witnessed the destruction and intoned solemnly, “You know, there’s a pretty stiff fine for feeding wildlife in a national park.”

Such stories about human-non-human interaction probably abound, for the upper Athabasca River watershed forms a glorious, gigantic region of the Rocky Mountains. But where are these stories? Is the region just so big that we cannot imagine single stories having any impact? Is it too big to comprehend? Is it just a little too lucky in lying off the beaten track of the Trans-Canada Highway, which storms through Banff, Yoho, Glacier, and Revelstoke national parks farther south? Probably it is the scale that takes your breath away, leaves you feeling that the human activity must always have been slight and beneath notice. That’s not the case at all. In the past two decades, we
have become compelled to understand that the study of ecology and the management of ecosystems very much require historical understanding.\textsuperscript{1} But the sensation persists, all the same.

When it comes to the human history of Jasper National Park, too few stories have been recorded in print, let alone discussed and analyzed in any comprehensive fashion. Many have been preserved in records housed by the Jasper-Yellowhead Museum and Archives and other repositories, or in the memories of members of its historical society, but they seldom come to published light. The essays that comprise this volume have been brought together because centennials occasion memory and retrospection, as well as estimation and speculation. No single book about the park’s human history could do justice to the subject, but the centennial of the establishment of Jasper Forest Park in 1907 forces on us a realization of a notable paucity of available published sources that treat the human history of the upper Athabasca River watershed and Jasper National Park.

In 1999, I was several years into a study of a small portion of the park being undertaken by a number of researchers interested in the human influence on Jasper. The Culture, Ecology and Restoration Project had as its goal the restoration of a small portion of the Athabasca River valley downstream from the town of Jasper. Work on the project advanced slowly for several reasons, but the main one was that it was difficult to learn about the human history of the valley. What was the extent of the influence, and what and who had created it? Railway history, parks history, forest management history, Native history, fur trade history, tourism history, human-influenced ecological history—there was a little of everything but not a great deal of anything. That year, I published an article that attempted a survey and concluded that its treatment of human history, far more suggestive than exhaustive, required thickening and elaboration.\textsuperscript{2} Although the project concluded with a useful report, its chief benefit was the launching of a study of the work of Morrison Parsons Bridgland, the Dominion Lands Surveyor who made the first accurate maps of the central portion of the park by taking a systematic set of more than 700 glass-plate photographs from mountain peaks in the summer of 1915.\textsuperscript{3} Bridgland went on to co-author the park’s first guide book, which included his maps.\textsuperscript{4} While colleagues completed a rephotography project that would permit a comparison of the vegetation and other changes in Jasper over eight decades, I undertook to provide a biography of Bridgland centred on his 1915 field season in Jasper.\textsuperscript{5}
The Culture, Ecology and Restoration and Rocky Mountain Repeat Photography projects benefited a great deal from the most extensive studies about Jasper then available. These take the form of reports by Brenda Gainer, Great Plains Research Consultants [Barry Potyondi], and Gerhard Ens and Barry Potyondi. They were all completed in the 1980s, now more than a quarter-century ago. None of these studies has appeared in published form or is available online.\(^6\) Alan MacEachern was doubtless correct to note in 2001 that “Canadian national parks are some of the most studied places on the planet,” but, for Jasper, his assessment holds only if one both goes beyond human history and manages to access typescript reports. Surprisingly and inexplicably, publications about Jasper that treat people are few and far between.\(^7\) One would expect that such a prominent transmontane thoroughfare as the Yellowhead Pass, formed at low altitude by the Athabasca, Miette, and Fraser rivers, possesses a rich human history, far more of it than a single volume could hope to bring under discussion. Indeed, that history is thick and deep, so the challenge is formidable. And the following essays take it up, claiming to have met the challenge but not in any sense to have exhausted the history. Contributed by nine researchers, these essays either expand and refine the work of Gainer, Potyondi, and Ens, or survey and excavate different historical ground.

Prominent in the volume as in the history is the character created for the upper Athabasca River watershed by virtue of its having formed part of a reserved area. For a century now, the valley and its tributaries have been managed by various federal government units, first the Department of the Interior (1907–1911), then, beginning in 1911, its Dominion Parks Branch, followed by today’s Parks Canada/Parcs Canada department. Although beginning as private concerns, the railways in the upper Athabasca became another government enterprise, Canadian National Railways, by the third decade of the twentieth century. Before it and government, another institution, the Hudson’s Bay Company (the early nineteenth-century world’s largest company in terms of geographical domination) controlled much of the human activity in the Athabasca. *Culturing Wilderness* aims to treat the full two centuries of that institutional history as well as to provide profiles of several key individuals: studies of the fur trade, governance, tourism, railway publicity for the park, alpinism, and the general human influence on non-human nature are complemented by essays about the painter-traveller Paul Kane’s depictions of the valley, homesteading by
the Moberly family, and visits by the notable mountain traveller Mary Schäffer, and by the Japanese climbers led by Yuko Maki, who were the first to climb Mount Alberta.

Such a volume understandably contains several themes. Chief among these are the Athabasca watershed as a transmontane corridor and Jasper Park as a playground. Long before railways built through the valley in the second decade of the twentieth century, the Athabasca, Miette, and Fraser rivers offered Native people and, following their example, fur traders relatively easy access across the Cordillera. Thus, unlike Banff, Jasper includes in its history an extensive fur-trade era. Both the Athabasca and Yellowhead (or Leather) passes served as important stretches of the continental route. David Thompson opened the former for the North West Company in January 1811, and both passes operated for a decade under its management. In 1821, its merger with the Hudson’s Bay Company allowed the English company to operate brigades through both passes regularly until the 1850s and periodically thereafter. During these decades, fur traders and, with them, Native and Métis residents, made of the upper Athabasca River watershed a thriving working milieu. Michael Payne’s essay provides a comprehensive discussion of this fur trade history. As well, it clarifies how, in different places and at different times, the valley hosted posts by the names of Henry, Rocky Mountain, Larocque, and Jasper, and how a steady need for labour created a resident if seasonal population around these posts. To some extent, the fur trade era created the valley’s first identifiable residents, as distinct from seasonal occupants. And because the Athabasca River has never been dammed, it is a heritage river on the banks of which the histories of the fur trade and other periods may still be studied to an extent that is not the case on, for example, the Columbia or Winnipeg rivers.

British military officer Henry James Warre and Canadian artist-traveller Paul Kane passed through the valley in the 1840s. Although native peoples were Kane’s interest as a portrait painter, he is known to have produced only a single sketch portrait during those visits. Perhaps because the mountains offered a painter of the picturesque heightened interest following his lengthy five-month summer sojourn in the short-grass and parkland prairies, Kane concentrated his attention on landscape sketches when he reached the upper Athabasca in the fall of 1846. Together with a few sketches made by Warre earlier in that year, these constitute the earliest surviving visual depictions of the Athabasca
watershed. Now more than a century and a half old, they record the working communities that the fur trade engendered. As well, they speak to the aesthetic pleasure that the valley offered some fur traders and would offer many tourists after the identity of the valley was altered to a “playground” by its identification as a federal park. Some of them testify also to changes in vegetation that parts of the valley have undergone over the intervening 16 decades.

As fur traders defined wilderness in terms of its potential for resource extraction, so the presence of Europeans and Euro-North Americans in the valley conferred on it three ways of representing wilderness that derived from their home cultures: the picturesque in the case of Paul Kane’s watercolour sketches; both the sublime and the picturesque in the case of railway pamphlets that later attracted tourists and told them what to value in wilderness and how to behold it; and the ethics of mountain climbing in the case of the first alpinists. Essays in *Culturing Wilderness* by Gabrielle Zezulka-Mailloux, Zac Robinson, and myself include discussions of these ways of seeing and rendering the upper Athabasca.

The needs of a resource-extractive monopoly like the fur trade put the district to a particular use. But later uses of the upper Athabasca were not inconsistent with that use. The North American parks movement had begun with the establishment of Yellowstone Park in 1872 and Rocky Mountains Park (Banff) in 1885–1887. That movement helped to spawn another: the North American rage for conservation, which called for the protection of game, not the harvesting of it. But in Canada, the Dominion Parks Branch continued until 1930 to permit resource extraction in the forms of logging and mining, even as it prohibited hunting (though the Dominion Forestry Branch did not). When Jasper Forest Park was brought into being in 1907 as Canada’s—and the Rockies’—fifth park, the federal government already had 20 years’ experience in managing protected areas. Although studies of the political aims of the parks movement are as numerous as the history of the parks’ shifting boundaries were frequent, they seldom turn their focus on Jasper. With just such a focus, Peter J. Murphy’s essay offers a detailed delineation of that history up to 1930, when the boundaries became the ones we know today. By attending to the connection between the establishment of forest reserves and parks, Murphy places on view the federal government’s ambitious aims for the Rockies and other western mountain ranges. Making them into playgrounds was but one aim, and it some-
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