



BORDER FLOWS: A Century of the Canadian-American Water Relationship Edited by Lynne Heasley and Daniel Macfarlane

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Keeping Up the Flow

GRAEME WYNN

My first, perhaps unfathomable, reaction to Border Flows was to think of the authors of this diverse set of essays as mearcstapas. The term comes from Old English; its most well-known occurrence is probably in Beowulf, where it is used to characterize Grendel, the foremost, fearsome antagonist of the hero of that eponymous epic poem. Literally translated as "mark-stepper" (or one who walks borders or boundaries—i.e., "marks"), the word conjures up, for Oxford English scholar John Carey, "a whole way of thinking about territory, and the need to keep safe within it, and what horrors lie beyond it, that no modern word can represent." So, it seemed to me, the essays gathered here provoked new modes of thinking about the extended, discontinuous (and surprisingly fluid) territory marked by the border between Canada and the United States of America. They also pointed, in various ways, to anxieties about security and coexistence, and included more-than-passing reference to once unimagined or blissfully remote, but now all-too-threatening, horrors (such as synthetic chemicals and sea lamprey). But then I recoiled. Grendel, after all, was a monstrous giant shrouded in darkness. Great though their stature may be/come, our authors belie such an association by throwing new light on old questions and taken-for-granted topics.

Boundaries, borders, and borderlands have long been a focus of scholarly interest. Historians, political scientists, sociologists, economists, anthropologists, and others have all had their analytical ways with them.

According to the rather formal language of the Dictionary of Human Geography, boundaries are at once both geographical markers and geographical makers of "regulative authority in social relations"; borders are a particular form of boundary associated with the rise of the modern nation-state; and the term "borderlands" connotes the geographical regions surrounding international borders. Further, we are told, "there has been a recent explosion of articles and edited volumes on border-region development that are increasingly attuned to the ways in which such regions make manifest diverse political geographies of reterritorialization." All of which is to say, these brief exegeses continue, that "borderlands provide usefully prismatic lenses on to the changing geography of power in the context of globalization."2 Looking at these distinctions slightly differently, we might rest content with the view that borders are primarily barriers, or lines of separation and division, whereas borderlands are areas of "exchange, interaction, and integration . . . in which hyphenated identities are allowed to exist and encouraged to flourish."3

Yet the world is neither quite as simple nor quite as static as such phrases imply. In Africa, borders drawn through preexisting tribal territories by colonial powers are being re-envisaged to lessen the divisions they created.⁴ In a somewhat different vein, leaders of the European Union have recently sought ways to transform the external borders of the EU "from areas of demarcation and division to areas of exchange and interaction" as they wrestle with the challenge of fixing "final frontiers, while preventing future EU borders from becoming hard exclusionary boundaries." Thus, the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) aims both "to promote border security and develop cross-border contacts and cooperation between the enlarged EU and its neighbours."⁵

So too the Canadian-American border ill fits the clean abstractions of dictionary definitions. Since the twentieth century, at least, its location as a line on a map has been settled (except for the still-disputed question about the limits and extent of Canadian sovereignty in high Arctic waters [the Northwest Passage], and a small handful of minor differences such as those over Machias Seal Island—occupied by a Canadian lighthouse but claimed by the United States—and neighbouring North Rock; the Exclusive Economic Zone at the Pacific entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca; and Dixon Entrance, regarded by Canada as part of its territorial waters but subject to a middle-water line claim by the United States).

Almost nine thousand kilometres in length, this Can-Am line was touted, for decades, as the longest undefended border in the world. Indeed, a 2005 volume written by John Bukowczyk, Nora Faires, David Smith, and Randy Widdis announced in its title the existence of a "permeable border" and treated the Great Lakes Basin between 1650 and 1990 as a transnational region. A decade after the book's publication, however, such assertions have been rendered questionable by the events of September 11, 2001—and the subsequently heightened concern of U.S. officials about "homeland security"—which reduced both the porosity of the border and the postnational optimism that seized the minds of some North Americans a quarter century ago.

Against this backdrop, the doubled meaning of the title *Border Flows* gains both clarity and significance. This book is a self-declared environmental history of water along the border between Canada and the United States, but it is also an exploration of transboundary flows—flows of people, ideas, animals, objects, and power (in both political and energetic senses)—across the borderland. As Heasley and Macfarlane point out, the borderline between Canada and the United States is remarkably fluid—in the sense that a considerable part of it is drawn on water rather than land, and because it is crossed, ignored, transcended, and contested in a variety of ways that defy its conceptualization as an immutable object. By focusing their concerns upon the watery sections of this boundary, contributors to this volume enhance and add nuance to our understanding of considerable parts of the North American continent, even as they broaden the compass of environmental historical scholarship.

The international boundary at the heart of this book is, of course, a jurisdictional tangle. Eight Canadian provinces and territories and thirteen American states share the line. Well over 2,000 kilometres of Alaska, Ontario, and British Columbia abut foreign country; Michigan and Yukon count about 1,200 kilometres in this category; Maine, Minnesota, and Montana face Canada for 800 to 1,000 kilometres; and Quebec shares approximately 800 kilometres of its perimeter with the United States. At the other end of the scale, New Hampshire, Idaho, and Pennsylvania are each involved with their northern neighbour for less than 100 kilometres. These simple metrics suggest a certain complexity, but at one level they are straightforward and mean only that different legal systems prevail across space. So highway speed limits may vary north and south of the

international boundary. So American teenagers anxious to celebrate their birthdays with a beer can do so legally at age eighteen in Alberta, Manitoba, and Quebec but need to wait another year to slake their thirst if they cross into Saskatchewan or Ontario, and two more after that if they remain stateside. And woe betide the twenty-year-old British Columbian in a Washington State campground who unthinkingly opens an ale at the end of the day, as he might do at home. Such things are clear, and humans adapt to them more or less easily.

Things get much more complicated when nonhuman nature is introduced into the picture. As several chapters in this collection show, birds, deer, wolves, fish, wind, and fire don't read boundary markers and are not, for the most part, subject to legal restraint. But human interactions with "wild nature" are often governed by laws (those governing hunting seasons, permitting logging or mining, or restricting the catch if contaminant levels exceed certain thresholds, for example), and competing sovereignties and the strongly defended rights of provinces/states have often conspired against unified, consistent management of the nonhuman. History tells us that boundaries are often-contested human constructs, nature reminds us that human efforts to organize and manage the world are constrained, and Border Flows assists variously in identifying the challenges that result, in understanding our human capacities to respond to them, and in recognizing those particular conjunctures of circumstances that enable divides (between jurisdictions, interests, humans, and nonhumans) to be bridged in ways that sustain rather than destroy Earth's productivity and potential.

The essays in this book do much to sharpen appreciation and deepen understanding of core themes identified in the introduction: "binational conflict and cooperation; water governance and control of natural resources; ecological impacts on economy and politics (and vice versa); multiple identities; a sense of place." Measured against earlier efforts to essay the border—or parts thereof—these contributions stand out in many ways. Sensitive to the give-and-take of politics and the tensions between national autonomy and shared interests, this volume is as bright day to the dark night of mid-twentieth-century portrayals of Canada as a quaint and trivial American frontier in a string of movies characterized as "Northerns." In this genre, argues Richard Baker, "the line separating Canada from the U.S. fades beneath the furtive skulk of stealthy criminals and the frantic passing of galloping cowboys." Attentive to ecological questions, these

essays carry discussion of the border into realms untilled by works such as the aforementioned *Permeable Border* that emphasize the twinned themes of nation building and capital formation. With case studies ranged along the Canada-U.S. line (including its Arctic reaches), Border Flows has a broader, inherently more comparative, spatial scope than John Riley's *The* Once and Future Great Lakes Country, which offers a detailed history of the environment and environmental change in that area through five hundred years.8 Although there are inevitably some points of substantive overlap between these two volumes—between Langston's chapter "Resiliency and Collapse" and Riley's "Invasives" (nicely subtitled "The Unintended Consequences of the Uninvited"), for example—most of the essays in Border Flows draw upon the perspectives of political ecology and consistently espouse a more critical analytical approach than is offered in Riley's pages. And if Riley's recollections of his own roles as resident and conservation worker in Ontario add an important sense of place to his account, this effect is achieved in multiple ways in the reflections that constitute the fourth section of Border Flows.

Reading, and learning, from Border Flows in the drought-afflicted western North American summer of 2015, when every forest fire seems to be attributed to climate change and people grumble about not being allowed to wash their sport-utility vehicles, I am inclined to ask, along with Swarthmore professor and environmental activist Giovanna Di Chiro, whether "our environmental imaginations [are] robust or capacious enough to grasp an understanding of the 'close to home' issues affecting daily life (i.e. the 'local scale' comprising our neighbourhoods, families, children) while conceiving of the 'global scale' concerns of the earth and its systems and processes (including big issues like global warming and climate change, problems that can seem overly abstract, distant, and perhaps too big to comprehend)."9 After years of being encouraged to think globally and act locally, many people still find it difficult to think and act across the range of scales, or to develop the sort of scale-crossing environmental consciousness upon which effective responses to the environmental challenges that now confront us must depend.

This, I think, is why the sort of thoughtful, intelligent, tightly focused, border-straddling, scale-shifting analysis on display in these pages is both helpful and hopeful in pointing a way forward. Although the chapters in this volume focus, legitimately and usefully, on various aspects of border

flows, climate change runs through them as a subtext, precisely because it stands to influence so many of the specific themes discussed in this book including, as James W. Feldman summarizes them, "border ecologies, invasive species, blowdowns, [and] fire management." The editors raise the spectre of climate change in their introductory discussion of abundance and scarcity and when they discern an emergent Pan-American narrative of water shortages. Other chapters include allusions to the possible implications of northward-moving biomes, melting polar ice caps, and the pipelines that carry oil from Canadian wells (and "fields") to American refineries (and automobiles). All, importantly, are anchored in specific times and places, deal with particular thematic concerns, and range collectively across scales. Together they constitute, to borrow a luminous phrase from Lynne Heasley's luminous reflection, "story upon story reconciled for a moment in the layers of a place." Ignore for the moment that that place the border—is attenuated, diverse, and fluid (and thus rather unplace-like), and savour the accomplishment of this collection: taken as a whole (and especially if we attend to "the humble scenes outside the frame," as Heasley encourages us to do), these essays lead us to think anew about our place in the world.

Borders generally set things apart. In days of old, parishioners used to beat the bounds of *their* ecclesiastical domain. Today, we divide *our* property from both public space and the private holdings of neighbours with picket fences, hedges, or walls. We describe those who cross borders to enter our territory as "come-from-aways," "foreigners," or "aliens" depending upon the importance attached to the boundary they transgress. Nine thousand kilometres of international boundary separate my Canadian home from American space. But half the contributors to this book would reverse that assertion. Still, we rarely think of the border between Canada and the United States as a fence or a wall. The international boundary is a line (or more accurately a number of lines) on a map, made material along parts of its length by border-crossing posts, linear clearcuts in the forest, motion-detection sensors, and the like, but impossible to see on the lakes and unmarked and invisible in many remote areas. A library and opera house, a tavern, and several homes straddle the border between Quebec and neighbouring states. Half a dozen airports—legacies of a diplomatic manoeuvre to facilitate the transfer of military aircraft under the Lend-Lease Program early in World War II—also stand astride the line.

This boundary is more complicated, and fluid, than mere semantics might suggest. The Peace Arch border crossing in British Columbia bears two inscriptions: on the American side, "Children of a common mother"; on the Canadian, "Brethren dwelling together in unity." The saccharin sentiments seem dated, but at base they imply that the Earth, north and south, is part of the family home, and they remind us that we share responsibility for its stewardship.

So, in their various ways, do many of the chapters in this volume, by detailing the negotiations, treaties, disputes, resolutions, and compromises that have addressed the selfsame challenge of figuring out how Americans and Canadians might live together, and mutually beneficially, in and across the liminal space of the international boundary. Perhaps we need to recalibrate our sense of borders as dividers. Changing scale can help in this. Let us, in conclusion, narrow our gaze to think not (at least directly) of nine thousand kilometres of international borderline, but of another form of boundary: the stone walls that marked the perimeter of many a New England farm in decades gone by. And let us follow the inspired lead, in this, of legal/environmental scholar Eric Freyfogle, by summoning that great American poet and chronicler of everyday experience, Robert Frost, as our guide.¹⁰

Frost's "Mending Wall" is "a narrative poem about boundaries and walls in nature, culture, and the human mind."11 It tells of the spring ritual when two farmers meet at their shared boundary, at an hour previously agreed upon, each to walk his side of the wall and repair, in tandem, the ravages of time, nature, and other humans. Its most well-known line, the only utterance of the dour member of the toiling pair, is now a mantra repeated almost unthinkingly: "Good fences make good neighbors." But the second farmer thinks more than this. Musing about the gaps that appear in the wall each spring, some so wide that "even two can pass abreast," though "No one has seen them made or heard them made," he wonders at their cause and more fundamentally about the very purpose of the wall itself. "Walls make sense when there are cows," he says, but these neighbouring farms have no stock. "He is all pine and I am apple orchard. / My apple trees will never get across / And eat the cones under his pines." Hunters have no use for walls, and pull stone from stone to "have the rabbit out of hiding, / To please the yelping dogs." Would it not be sensible, the narrator wonders, to know what needed to be walled in or out, and to whom the building of a wall "was like to give offense," before erecting (or maintaining) one. Clearly, the springtime ritual of picking up and re-emplacing the fallen stones suggests that there is "Something... that doesn't love a wall, / That wants it down"; the likeliest of culprits in the mind of the narrator is nature, which "sends the frozen-ground-swell under it, / And spills the upper boulders in the sun." But, equally, the annual continuation of the rebuilding ritual suggests a very human need for boundaries and the importance of custom and cooperation in maintaining them.

This wonderfully insightful and provocative poem raises enduring questions about living on the land, boundary making, and territoriality. For Freyfogle it forces us to think "about why we like walls so much and how they reflect and shape who we are."12 Frost's vignette of a quotidian event in backcountry New England resonates with tension—between accepting tradition and questioning it; between individual and community; between freedom and solidarity; between the human need for boundaries and the unboundedness of nature. But these oppositional pairings are not the proprietary possessions of the poet or the region. Switch scale and registers once more, from orchard edge to international boundary and from "Mending Wall" to Border Flows, and find their echoes in the pages of the latter. We have heard the "good fences make good neighbors" adage invoked several times in reference to the Canadian-American boundary over the years, but the contributors to this volume are the antithesis of Frost's dour farmer who owns those words and "moves in darkness as it seems to me, / Not of woods only and the shade of trees." They lead us to think again, and more deeply, about the lines that divide, the things that bring us together, and the nature that we residents of Canada and the United States share as North Americans. I was indeed mistaken about Grendel. The contributors to this collection are less mearcstapas than tidfaran, or [border-crossing] travellers whose time has come.

Notes

- John Carey, The Unexpected Professor: An Oxford Life in Books (London: Faber & Faber, 2014), 103.
- 2 The Dictionary of Human Geography, 5th ed., ed. Derek Gregory et al. (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), s.vv. "border," "borderlands," "boundary," by Matthew Sparke.
- 3 Michele Comelli, Ettore Greco, and Nathalie Tocci, "From Boundary to Borderland: Transforming the Meaning of Borders through the European Neighbourhood Policy," European Foreign Affairs Review 12, no. 2 (2007): 204.
- 4 K. Bennafla, "Les frontières africaines: Nouvelles significations, nouveaux enjeux," Bulletin de l'association de géographes français 79, no. 2 (2002): 134–46.
- 5 Comelli, Greco, and Tocci, "From Boundary to Borderland," 208.
- 6 John J. Bukowczyk et al., Permeable Border: The Great Lakes Basin as Transnational Region, 1650–1990 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005).
- 7 Richard G. Baker, "'Nothing But Hill and Hollow': The Canadian Border as American Frontier in the Hollywood Northern," Comparative American Studies 13, no. 1–2 (2015): 114.

- 8 John Riley, *The Once and Future Great Lakes Country: An Ecological History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013).
- 9 Giovanna Di Chiro, "Climate Justice Now! Imagining Grassroots Ecocosmopolitanism," in American Studies, Ecocriticism, and Citizenship: Thinking and Acting in the Local and Global Commons, ed. Joni Adamson and Kimberly N. Ruffin (New York: Routledge, 2013), 206.
- Eric T. Freyfogle, "Bounded People, Boundless Lands," in Stewardship across Boundaries, ed. Richard L. Knight and Peter B. Landres (Washington, DC: Island, 1998), 15–38; Eric T. Freyfogle, Bounded People, Boundless Lands: Envisioning a New Land Ethic (Washington, DC: Island, 1998), 3–6.
- 11 Freyfogle, "Bounded People, Boundless Lands," 15. See Robert Frost, "Mending Wall," in *The* Poetry of Robert Frost, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969), 33–34.
- 12 Freyfogle, "Bounded People, Boundless Lands," 17.