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# Mining and communities in Northern Canada : history, politics, and memory

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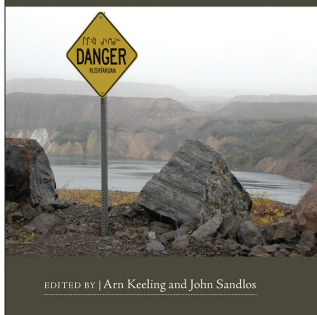
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Mining and  
Communities in  
Northern Canada

History, Politics, and Memory



EDITED BY | Arn Keeling and John Sandlos

**MINING AND COMMUNITIES IN NORTHERN CANADA: HISTORY, POLITICS, AND MEMORY**  
Edited by Arn Keeling and John Sandlos

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# Conclusion

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## *Arn Keeling and John Sandlos*

Mining controversies are not new. The noted late-medieval scholar Georgius Agricola opened his classic text, *De Re Metallica* (1556), with an extensive defence of mining against critics who cited its environmental impact, hazardous work conditions, and economic instability. But he also suggested that opinions on mining had long been divergent: “There has always been the greatest disagreement amongst men concerning metals and mining, some praising, others utterly condemning them.”<sup>1</sup> In a period when large-scale mining was just beginning to exploit the riches beneath indigenous lands in the New World, there remained no consensus on the relative value of minerals when weighed against the social and environmental costs of development.

The issues Agricola discussed nearly half a millennium ago continue to resonate throughout the world’s mining regions. In Canada, there has always been a particular intensity and longevity to debates about mineral development, perhaps matched only by environmental battles over clear-cut logging in British Columbia in the 1980s and 1990s. Conflicts over mining past and present are often uniquely polarized, with miners derided as profiteers and despoilers of the earth, while mining critics are

branded as “anti-development” types who would “lock up” resources in the name of environmental protection. Like all caricatures, there are uncomfortable elements of truth in these accusations, and presumably one can find extreme examples of each in the historical record (not to mention the daily news).

The case histories of mineral development presented in this volume prompt a more reflective examination of these positions, in light of the complex historical experience of communities adjacent to, or founded by, mining activities in the North. The Abandoned Mines project began as an attempt to understand the role of mineral development in the industrialization of Northern Canada, the impacts of mining in hitherto largely undisturbed northern environments, and the social and cultural changes experienced by local communities, particularly Aboriginal people, in the wake of these developments. What the many contributors to this volume discovered, however, was more than a simple tale of despoliation and decline rooted in the “bad old days” of lax regulation and industrial disregard for people and nature. Certainly the economic instability, community collapse, and environmental impacts associated with northern mining suggests the industry delivered far less in terms of social and economic development than the boosters of northern development in government and business promised time and time again. For some communities, however, mining presented an important economic stopgap against price shocks and resource declines in other sectors of the northern Aboriginal economy, especially hunting and trapping. Perhaps the most remarkable of our collective findings is the ability of many northern Aboriginal communities and individuals to accommodate and assimilate mine work, culture, and communities, while simultaneously engaging in a profound critique of mineral-intensive development strategies. Stories of northern mining encompass widely varying historical experiences of economic dislocation and opportunity, community development and collapse, memories that continue to shape widely divergent local attitudes to northern mineral development in the present day.

But even as the authors in this book reflect on the complexity of individual and local experiences, they by no means reject a critical examination of the industry and its social, environmental, and economic impacts. While never a historical source of violent conflict in Northern Canada

(as it has been elsewhere in the world), mineral development has often reinforced the inequities associated with settler colonialism in the region. The injustices experienced by Aboriginal northerners associated with mineral development documented in these chapters range from territorial dispossession and social and economic marginalization to toxic contamination and degradation of important local environments. These injustices are best understood in connection with the broader suite of federal government neocolonial policies aimed at “modernizing” Aboriginal people and territories in the region in the twentieth century. There is also a strong link between these past experiences and the deep suspicion felt today by many toward the industry (and its promoters in federal and territorial governments). Signs of the physical changes wrought by mining, from open pits to toxic sites to industrial ruins on the landscape, remain potent material reminders of the mining experience, legacies that continue to haunt both the memories and the biophysical environments of local communities. These experiences, memories, and material conditions continue to inform present debates about the costs and benefits of mineral development today, as mining is touted as the economic salvation of supposedly dependent northern communities. Contemporary developments in the vicinity of abandoned mines may threaten to reawaken or reproduce the injustices associated with past developments, regardless of the goodwill of companies or the improvement of regulatory oversight. As several of the chapters also show, attending to the history of mining can raise uncomfortable questions about the persistence of colonial legacies and institutions in the region, even in this era of land claims, impact and benefit agreements, and corporate social responsibility.

Ultimately, we think that a better understanding of the scope and impacts of historical mineral development in the North, as well as its many ongoing legacies, can contribute to wider debates about resources and sustainability in Canada, and beyond. Historically, the goal of mining has only been tangentially (and at times only rhetorically) about the modernization and development of northern communities. Rather, the main aim of mining companies and their government promoters has been to fulfill the insatiable demand for minerals (and profits) in Southern Canada and for export markets. Thus, the story of mining in Northern Canada is one that connects all Canadians, whether consumers of mineral products or

holders of mining stocks in investment portfolios, to the remote, often poorly understood northern places, people, and environments affected by mining. As seen in debates around bitumen development in northern Alberta, southern Canadians (and urbanites in particular) have often been willing to ignore the environmental and public health burdens associated with our material- and energy-intensive lifestyles. Perhaps a better understanding of the historical and contemporary impacts of mining can help lead to a better reckoning of the how the costs and benefits of resource extraction have been distributed among local communities, highly mobile capital, and distant consumers. Certainly the ephemeral local benefits that stem from northern mining—the historical boom and bust cycle that is emblematic of the industry—force Canadians to face the difficult question of what a sustainable economy might look like in the North and in the country as whole.

These histories also highlight the problem of who bears the long-term financial consequences of abandoned mines—in Canada, typically taxpayers have been left on the hook for billions in environmental liabilities associated with cleaning up past industrial developments. These long-term environmental legacies and financial liabilities—the “zombies” that stalk northern mine sites and communities—illustrate the fundamentally unsustainable nature of extractive industries such as mining. Based as they are on finite resources, extractive sites like mines must ultimately decline as deposits are exhausted or, more likely, as the costs of extraction begin to exceed the market value of the product. There is no renewable “resource cycle” associated with minerals, though technological change and market conditions can lead to the revaluation of formerly closed sites or unworked deposits. But as many of the chapters show, the cessation of extractive activity does not necessarily end the costs and controversies associated with mineral development. Toxic contaminants, ecological changes, and the collapse of local resource-dependent economies may resonate for decades or longer after the end of mining, scarring the landscape and displacing communities. Even in cases where some remediation has been undertaken, many of the financial costs associated with these impacts are borne not by the industry, but by the public, individually and collectively. Under new forms of environmental regulation, companies are often required to post financial security during the

life of a mine to cover closure and clean-up costs, though time will tell if today's estimates match the actual cost of cleanup. What cannot be recovered from industry, however, is the massive cost of historic abandoned mines. Despite frequent calls from industry and recent calls from the Canadian government to cut regulatory red tape to speed the pace of northern resource development, the environmental liabilities associated with historic abandoned mines provide a potent reminder of the need for strict environmental assessment, public oversight, and regulation of new northern mineral projects in all phases of their operation.

In broader historical terms, there can be little doubt that mining was one of the most important drivers of social, cultural, and economic change in Northern Canada. This book has attempted to reckon with the precise meaning of these changes, and how they intersected with the broader suite of social, cultural, and economic changes sweeping the region in the twentieth century. In doing so we discovered histories of resource projects that were too often focused narrowly on mineral extraction to the exclusion of social development and environmental issues in adjacent Aboriginal (and in a few cases non-Aboriginal) communities. In some cases these communities responded creatively to the sudden social, economic, and environmental changes associated with northern mineral development. At other times the adjustments to new patterns of work, settlement, and economic exchange proved painful, as did environmental changes that brought toxic exposure, sickness, and sometimes death. As we enter a new era of promises and unbridled optimism about northern development based on minerals and offshore oil, all Canadians would do well to reflect on the opportunities and challenges these types of megaprojects have presented to northern communities in the past, and what kind of issues they might raise for them in the future.

#### NOTE

- 1 Georgius Agricola, *De Re Metallica*, trans. Herbert Clark Hoover and Lou Henry Hoover (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1950 [1556]), 4.





## Notes on Contributors

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**PATRICIA BOULTER** is an MA graduate from Memorial University of Newfoundland. She studied environmental history, focusing primarily on the socio-economic and cultural impacts of mining in Canada's Arctic regions. When she is not out hiking, you can find her in a classroom, where she shares her passion for the environment and history with her students.

**JEAN-SÉBASTIEN BOUTET** holds a master's degree in geography from Memorial University. He now works as a mining policy analyst for the Nunatsiavut Government (Newfoundland and Labrador).

**EMILIE CAMERON** is an assistant professor in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at Carleton University. She is the author of *Far Off Metal River: Inuit Lands, Settler Stories, and the Making of the Contemporary Arctic* (UBC Press, 2015). Her current research focuses on geographies of resource extraction, empire, and labour in the contemporary North.

**SARAH M. GORDON** earned her PhD in folklore at Indiana University and her MA in comparative literature at University College London. Her major research interests include cultural adaptability in colonized communities, with an emphasis on performance theory as it pertains

to oral traditions, folk narratives, and personal experience narratives. She has in the past collaborated with the Délı̄nę Knowledge Project in Délı̄nę, Northwest Territories, Canada, and Traditional Arts Indiana in Bloomington, Indiana, USA.

**HEATHER GREEN** is a doctoral student in the Department of History and Classics at the University of Alberta. She studies social, environmental, and indigenous history of Northern Canada, specifically mining and indigenous communities. Her dissertation examines the Klondike gold rush as a practice in economic colonialism that brought long-term environmental change to the landscape of the central Yukon and created lasting consequences for the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in in the period 1895 to 1945.

**JANE HAMMOND** completed her work on Labrador while pursuing her master's degree in the Department of History at Memorial University of Newfoundland. She is currently completing her PhD in the Department of Geography at Western University in Ontario.

**JOELLA HOGAN** is Manager of Heritage, Culture, and Language with the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun in Mayo, Yukon. Her mandate is the preservation, protection, and promotion of Northern Tutchone language, culture, and heritage. She has degrees in environmental planning (UNBC) and Native and rural development (UAF). Her research interests are in the relationships between the natural environment and cultural identity. She has worked on projects in the Circumpolar North and is passionate about preservation of her Northern Tutchone language and culture.

**ARN KEELING** is a historical-cultural geographer and associate professor at Memorial University in Newfoundland. His research and publications focus on the historical and contemporary encounters of northern indigenous communities with large-scale resource developments, domestic and industrial pollution, and environmental politics, as well as on the history of the conservation/environmental movement.

**TYLER LEVITAN** is a graduate of the Institute of Political Economy at Carleton University, where his research focused on the political economy of northern resource extraction and indigenous–state relations. He is currently working as the coordinator of a Canadian-based human rights organization.

**HEREWARD LONGLEY** is a PhD student at the University of Alberta, studying indigenous and environmental histories of hydrocarbon extraction in northeastern Alberta. Hereward’s research examines how changing economic and political conditions shaped the development of the oil sands industry, and how bitumen extraction has changed human relationships with nature by recreating northeastern Alberta as a resource extraction zone. Hereward holds an MA in history from Memorial University of Newfoundland where he worked with the Abandoned Mines in Northern Canada project. Hereward also works as a research analyst with Willow Springs Strategic Solutions Inc. conducting traditional land use studies for indigenous communities affected by resource extraction and infrastructure projects in northern Alberta.

**SCOTT MIDGLEY** is a graduate from the Department of Geography at Memorial University of Newfoundland. His thesis examined the political economy of High Arctic mining and mine closure in Canada and Norway.

**KEVIN O’REILLY** has resided in Yellowknife, NWT, since 1985, working for Aboriginal, federal, and territorial government agencies on land use planning, environmental assessment, and resource management. He was the research director for the Canadian Arctic Resources Committee from 1995 to 2005. He now serves as the executive director for an independent environmental oversight body on Canada’s first diamond mine. He is a founding board member for MiningWatch Canada, established in 1998, and he helped to form Alternatives North, a Yellowknife-based social justice group, in 1993. He served on the Yellowknife City Council from 1997 to 2006, during the time that the Giant Mine went into receivership. Kevin led the intervention by Alternatives North on the Mackenzie Gas Project and the environmental assessment of the Giant Mine. He holds a BES in environmental studies and an MA in urban

and regional planning from the University of Waterloo. He received the Queen's Diamond Jubilee medal in July 2012 for his work on environmental issues, especially on Giant Mine.

**ANDREA PROCTER** is a post-doctoral fellow at the Labrador Institute, Memorial University of Newfoundland. Her work focuses on the relationships between resource development, indigenous autonomy, and settler colonialism, and she is a co-author of *Settlement, Subsistence, and Change among the Labrador Inuit: The Nunatsiavummiut Experience* (University of Manitoba Press, 2012).

**JOHN SANDLOS** is an associate professor of history at Memorial University of Newfoundland. His research addresses the historical politics of resource development and management in Northern Canada. He has written on the subjects of mining history, wildlife conservation, and human exclusions from national parks in Canada. With Arn Keeling, he has directed the Abandoned Mines in Northern Canada project, as well as a community-based project on the commemoration of arsenic contamination at Yellowknife's Giant Mine.

**ALEXANDRA WINTON** is a master's degree candidate in the Department of Geography at Memorial University of Newfoundland, where she has studied the impact of mine development and closure on northern communities. Her thesis explores the recurring closure and redevelopment of the Yukon's Keno Hill silver mine and the reactions of the communities of Mayo, Keno, and the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun. Being from a mining community herself, she is fascinated with how communities reinvent themselves during times of economic and social change, how mineral development shapes the image of a community, and how people share these stories.

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*“The book situates itself at the intersection of two of the signal developments shaping Canada’s political landscape today: the renewed boom in natural resource extraction and the mobilization of First Nations communities around territorial stewardship and self-determination. The book brings a much-needed historical perspective on this juncture, and its editors are explicit in their hope that the case studies assembled here will have bearing on contemporary debates and policy-crafting.”*

– Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert,  
Department of History and Classical Studies, McGill University

For indigenous communities around the globe, mining has been a historical forerunner of colonialism, introducing new and often disruptive settlement patterns and economic arrangements. Although some communities may benefit from and adapt to the wage labour and training opportunities provided by new mining operations, they are also often left to navigate the complicated process of remediating the long-term ecological changes associated with industrial mining. Thus the mining often inscribes colonialism as a broad set of physical and ecological changes to indigenous lands.

*Mining and Communities in Northern Canada: History, Politics, and Memory* examines historical and contemporary social, economic, and environmental impacts of mining on Aboriginal communities in northern Canada. Combining oral history research with intensive archival study, the contributors juxtapose the perspectives of government and industry with those of local communities. The oral history and ethnographic material provides an extremely significant record of local Aboriginal perspectives on histories of mining and development in their regions.

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