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FROM —NATURAL BEAUTIES“ TO PRECAMBRIAN: THE SCIENTIFIC OBJECTIVATION OF NATURE IN LA MAURICIE NATIONAL PARK, 1969-1979.

This paper addresses some of the preliminary findings of my Masters thesis on the history of la Mauricie National Park. After briefly presenting the genesis of the national park ideal in North America, I will argue that the founding representations of Canadian national park nature, born in the mountainous landscapes of western North-America in the late 19th century, where actualized in the 1970s in the case of La Mauricie National Park, but in a special way, through the medium of scientific ecology. I will present how the federal institution Parks Canada, unable to find in the Maurician landscapes the traditional sublime it was meant to represent, turned to scientific ecology to justify a picturesque park in an otherwise anthropized landscape made of industrial exploitation and hunting and fishing uses. By extracting cultural dimensions of the Maurician territoriality through scientific abstractions, Parks Canada was thus able to recreate the romantic conception of « wilderness » on this hybrid territory.

*** To explain the socio-cultural sources of the national park ideal, of which La Mauricie‘s is in direct filiation, many historians have inscribed their studies in the context of the Romantic sensibility and bourgeois culture of the picturesque of the late 19th century.

Mountains and rugged landscapes have effectively inspired numbers of artists and philosophers in a romantic quest for sublime natural authenticity. In criticism to the rationality of the Enlightenment,

Romantics wanted to re-unite with nature trough a culture of the affects and by an emotional comprehension of nature and its phenomena, taken as a holistic being.

This sensibility for a holistic appreciation of nature can also to be found in the scientific approaches of some Anglo-Saxon scientists of the 19th century, especially in the natural histories of the German Naturphilosophen, such as in Alexander von Humboldt‘s Kosmos, in which he strived to unify all branches of human knowledge into a single, holistic system. The Naturphilosophen where Romantics in the sense that they criticized the fragmentation of nature made by the burgeoning industrialism and the rationality of the German Aufklärung. They acknowledged the Eigentümlichkeit of nature, German word for unaltered unity, essence or esprit des lieux. By their classificatory approaches in natural history, they tried to document this unity. This kind of holistic chronicles can be observed, apart from Humboldt‘s ones, in the works of Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire in France, or Louis Agassiz in the United-States, for example.

*** Now, to our subject, one of Louis Agassiz‘s friends at the University of Wisconsin in the 1870s was the amateur geologist, founder of the Sierra Club and ardent promoter of the nationalization of the Sierra Nevada, John Muir. Introduced by his former professor Ezra Carr to notable figures of natural history, such as John Tyndall, and to some writers of the « Transcendentalist » movement, such as Emerson, Muir was in contact with the holistic views of the time, best represented by the influential works of Humboldt, which Muir read. It can thus be safely assumed that this intellectual climate, with the help of his Scottish Calvinist upbringing, influenced Muir‘s sensibility for the sublime of the Yosemite, which he saw as nothing less than a « temple full of God‘s thoughts [1] », « of which no descriptions of Heaven ever heard

seems half so fine [2] ».

Although it as been argued that the preservationist claims of Muir for the nationalization of the Yosemite where not monolithic and that they where opposed, to some extent, by other more pragmatic and economically driven conservationists arguments, such as Gifford Pinchot‘s ones, I will put here that the idea of national parks, in its attempt to preserve landscapes for the sake of their sheer beauty and sublime solitudes had, in its foundation, strong romantic overtones.

*** This point can be seen by studying the Canadian case. Although the first Canadian national park, founded in Banff in 1885, did not have the same preservationist impulses than Yosemite, with the help of first park Commissioner James B. Harkin in 1930, the romantic sensibility for the sublime had found its man. Frequently citing Muir in his notes and rapports, Harkin managed to pass a Bill for the recognition of the scenic values of parks.

[1] John Muir, Our National Parks, New York, AMS Press, 1970, p. 78, cited in Peter Hay, « Environmental Philosophy », in S. Krech III et al., Encyclopedia of World Environmental History, 3 vols., New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 459.
[2] John Muir, My First Summer in the Sierra, 1911, cited in William Cronon, «The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature», in William Cronon (ed.),Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature, New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 1995 p. 80.

Already in 1920, Harkin was considering that « water in the form of falls, rapids, lakes and streams in an absolute essential to scenic beauty [3] » and that, accordingly, it needed to be protected from industrial uses

With Harkin‘s Bill, of which some amendments still have legal power today, scenic beauty became the main criteria at which to judge the parkability of a given land. In effect, according to

Commissioner Harkin in 1927,

> « Areas deemed suitable for a national park must possess scenic beauty and recreational qualities of a character so outstanding and unusual as to be properly classified national rather than merely local[4] ».

Thus, in a period where the Canadian national identity was gaining importance in the political and economical elites, the national Park Branch was crystallizing itself as the sole institution responsible for the promotion of the « outstanding and unusual » in Canadian nature.

*** This specialization was still perceptible in 1970 in the case of La Mauricie national park. After the official deal for the transfer of provincial lands to the federal government in 1971, and with Indian and Northern Affairs minister, also deputy of the local county, Jean Chrétien at the lead, the picturesque of the Canadian national parks was to be, in the three first years of the project, heavily promoted, especially as a quest for the « beautés

[3] Harkin to Cory, May 11, 1920, cited in C. J. Taylor «Legistlating Nature: The National Parks Act of 1930», Canadian Issues, 1991, vol. Vol. XIII, p. 133.
[4] Harkin to C.D. Richard, June 13, 1927, Ibid.

naturelles » of the Maurician region. This sensibility for the natural beauties of parks was not specific to the Maurician case. It was almost policy. When asked to explain the position of his Minister at the Conference on the state of Canadian national parks, held in Calgary in 1968, Jean Chrétien specified that

> « the principle of conservation and national parks in Canada originated here in the West…and it is a simple and important one and it is this: the natural beauty of Canada is a fundamental part of this country‘s national heritage[5] ».

By saying so, Chrétien was simply reaffirming the traditional ideology of Parks Canada, a « park culture [6] » that was proudly seeing itself as the steward of sublime Canadian landscapes.

Those natural beauties, in 1970, where mobilized for the rejuvenation of La Mauricie, an industrial region entrenched in a deep economic depression and high unemployment rates (20% in the late 70s). Situated at 70 kilometres north of the Saint-Lawrence river, near Shawinigan - the home town, it has to be known, of minister Chrétien -, the park promoted there was a highly touristic one. It was a picturesque park, a la Banff, that was presented too - and was almost unanimously wanted by - the local community. This was encouraged by numerous references and organized trips to well-established parks in the West, such as Banff or Jasper and, addressing a local assembly for the promotion of the park in 1971, Mr.

Jean Chrétien, « Our Evolving National Parks System », in J. G Nelson & R. C. Scace, The Canadian National Parks : Today and Tomorow », Calgary, The University of Calgary, 1968, p. 8. [6] A. C. Apostle, The View from the Hill National Park Culture and Gatineau Park, Master thesis, Ontario, Queens University, 1997, 174 p.

Chrétien did confirmed that « just like those of Kootenay, Kejimkujik, Yoho, Banff, Jasper, and all the others, your park will celebrate the beauty and grandeur of our country [7] ».

Those numerous references to the « natural beauties » of parks formed the promotional discourse made to mould the local opinion on the idea of a national park in La Mauricie. They where done before any concrete master-planning. In fact, the territorial reality in the Maurician region, of which the first provisional master-plan published in autumn 1971 had to integrate some of its physical dimensions, was somewhat different than this picturesque and idealized representation. A brief over-view of this industrial and recreational territoriality will help understand how and why Parks

Canada had to use scientific concepts to reinterpret this reality in order to make it fit with its romantic ideals of wild nature.

*** The Maurician woods that made-up La Mauricie national park offered a subtle but nonetheless alive industrial landscape. They have been used for logging purposes from the middle of the 19th century up until the 1970s by numerous timber companies. The two rivers that formed the eastern and northern boundaries of the park, for example, where used for the transportation of logs, and this until 1977. Shawinigan Falls, situated on the Saint-Maurice River, where also used for the production of hydroelectricity, and that from 1898 to present. Those timber lands where also covered with logging roads and camps, many of them opened to public use for fishing and hunting purposes. The industrial reality of the

[7] PC-CDQ, Jean Chrétien, L'aménagement d'un parc en Mauricie, 24 mars 2007, p. 5-6 (our traduction).

landscape was thus readily accessible to the public eye. The firm responsible of the first master plan even noted in 1971 that

> « visitors strolling through paths might have the impression that the forest is considerably disturbed, even dilapidated, for they will have access only to the areas more recently affected by logging [8] ».

Effectively, at the eve of their promotion as a national park in 1970, the park's forests where still used by two logging companies**.** This industrial reality was so inscribed in the landscape that even some of the park's initial delimitations where done according to those uses. In 1971, prior to the official contract between the federal and provincial governments, hard negotiations where held

between Tourism Minister of Quebec Claire Kirkland-Casgrain and Parks Canada to let Hydro-Québec determine the north-east boundaries of the park in accordance with the artificial high-water marks of hydroelectric and log transportation uses of the Matawin and Saint-Maurice rivers, a claim that was finally granted by Parks Canada. The south-west main entrance of the national park was also determined according to the network of logging roads. Minister Chrétien, in a letter addressed to the Consolidated-Bathurst, effectively pointed out that

> « the boundaries of the Park…do not provide access to the south-east end of the Park because of the physical aspect of the lands in that area. The sole practical means of access to the Park is through that portion of land immediately adjacent to the south-east boundary owned, I understand, by your company[9] ».

[8] SEREQ, La Mauricie National Parc, 1971, p. 27.
[9] A.N.C. RG 22, 998, 321-10, 1, Chrétien to Turner, May 31, 1971.

Beside those determinant timber uses, numerous fishing and hunting private clubs also used the lands and its resources. In 1969, 16 private clubs still had hunting and fishing rights on the future park‘s territories. Those clubs where particularly active in experimenting the improvement of some lakes‘ productivity. For example, some tried to introduce, in 1934, different salmon species. Others Clubs planted specimens of wild rice to attract ducks. In 1947, one club putted three tons of fertilizer in one of the lakes to improve the size of fishes. Some others tried to eliminate non-desirable species, with nets or by installing levees to prevent their colonization and such dams where still operational in 1972, one year after the official opening of La Mauricie national park. Locals knew the territory also very well and used it for different uses. They‘ve been traditionally

hunting and fishing (or poaching, if you where a Club‘s member) on those lands and where quite happy when the private clubs where zoned-out by the provincial government in 1971. According to park wardens, during that period of legal no-mans-land where the park did not had a protected area status for a few months, locals literally invaded the park. Authorities, according to an internal note in 1972, emitted « grave concern with regard to the indications received that there could be a massive slaughter of game in the park by poachers[10] ».

All and all, what was to become an example of the « true laurentian wilderness » was in fact a territory deeply inscribed in a network of industrial uses and local consumption. With this local territoriality in mind, how could the traditional « natural values » of the Canadian national Parks, values born, like Chrétien so aptly said, in landscapes such as Banff‘s one, be applied to the Maurician logged forests, marshes and dark lakes? In brief, how could

[10] A.N.C. RG 22, 1229, 321-1, 2, Gordon to Nicol, September 23, 1970.

landscapes singularly antithetical to the romantic ideal of park sublime be considered as « natural beauties » with equal values than the fundamental symbolics of Parks Canada? What was needed was an abstract reinterpretation of this hybrid territory‘s dimensions through the lenses of scientific ecology. Sublime nature, in La Mauricie, had to be constructed trough science.

*** This can be documented by the study of the master-planning division productions. Master plans, as an institutional territorial management tool, served to concretize a simplified representation of the land where certain dimensions are stressed as being important and others totally ignored or evacuated. This is evident in the delimitation of the conservation and recreation areas of the Mauricie National Park. The park‘s « back-country », for example, was determined in a singularly subjective way by an « interpretative specialist » of Parks

Canada, R. C. Gray. With the mission to comment the first master plan produced by a Montreal-based private firm, the SEREQ, Gray criticized the initial delimitations of the conservation areas proposed by the firm. According to Gray, the SEREQ, having offered a master plan that focused mainly on « existing uses of logging and recreational fishing » did not acknowledge « the primary values inherent to this landscape[11] ».

> « The outstanding feature of La Mauricie National Park », said Gray, « is not its lakes and forests, or streams or waterfalls considered as separate land forms. The sum of these parts is more than their separate entities. It is the wilderness that makes La Mauricie National Park a vital addition to the system of National Parks in Canada. It is

[11] PC-ON-BCC, C-8320/L1, « La Mauricie National Park - Visit of the Interpretive Specialist R.C. Gray, June 9th to 15th, 1971 », June 25, 1971.

> the wilderness that dictates the value system we must use when assessing priorities in this new National Park territory[12] »,

he concluded, in direct reminiscence to Harkin‘s views of untouchable scenic values. In brief, according to Gray, « La Mauricie national Park is nothing less than a true ”laurentian Wilderness‘ ». Having put this, he then suggested to change the status of some western lakes previously identified as « intensive use areas » to more lightly used « wilderness areas ». Only then, he noted, « will the lake country of the south-western portion of the Park be true wilderness and officially considered as such ». Those suggestions where taken into account and the master plan zoning was changed.

This first operational representation of the « wilderness » as an « inherent value » of La Mauricie‘s park was further rendered official in 1972, with the publication of the Planning Manual of Parks

Canada‘s network, in which La Mauricie National Park was incorporated. This guide divided Canada into 39 physiographic regions according to the work of Canadian geologist H. S Bostock, a scientific fragmentation that is still operational today. The manual stated in its introduction that the new planning orientations for Canadian parks should be « based on natural sciences and be free of any social or political influences[13] ». By this « rational management » attempt, the guide presented what the new « 19b region » or the « Canadian Shield - Precambrian Central Region of the Saint-Lawrence and of the Great-Lakes » one- had to offer in terms of conservation and interpretative potentials. Great « natural history themes » such as the « Precambrian », « The Age of Primitive

[12] PC-ON-BCC, C-8320/L1, « La Mauricie National Park - Visit of the Interpretive Specialist R.C. Gray, June 9th to 15th, 1971 », June 25, 1971, p. 9.
[13] PC-CDQ, PARCS CANADA, Manuel de planification du réseau des parcs nationaux, 1972, p. 3.

Invertebrates» or « Typical Ecosystems of the Great Lakes and Saint-Lawrence Forest , Section 4a, Laurentides » where presented as such. No attention, though, where given to the human history of La Mauricie national park‘s territories, its logging landscapes or its traditional recreational uses of hunting and fishing. The scientific representation of La Mauricie‘s nature « freed from social and political hindrances » was indeed, on paper at least, complete. The initial « natural beauties » promoted by Minister Chrétien from 1969 to 1971 as touristic amenities where now replaced, and increasingly on from that date, by a scientific representation of La Mauricie‘s « natural values » in order to justify the park‘s implementation.

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But, under its self-proclaimed rationality, this scientific approach still served a rather romantic ideal of sublime and spectacular nature. This can be seen in an interesting passage of the second

provisional Master plan, published by Parks Canada in 1975. At page 31, we can read that

> « An overview of the park‘s territory permits to observe a great homogeneity of its biophysical elements. We see an equal dispersion of those interesting points than can be retained as having interpretative potential. This uniformity is also to be seen at the comparative level. The absence of great contrasts between those elements makes us give greater attention to natural associations that can be found at certain places. Taken as a whole, many isolated phenomena of moderated importance can make, in a same sector, an ensemble with high interpretative potential [14] ».

[14] PC-CDQ, PARCS Canada. Plan directeur provisoire : parc national de la Mauricie, 1975, p. 31, (our traduction).

This holistic view on nature is, to my sense, 19th century Naturphilosophie Romantic ethics. Effectively, the scientific practices done at La Mauricie national park where mainly inventories made to form the material used by the Interpretative Division. The science offered at La Mauricie National Park was based on natural history: it had had to document those « great themes » and popularize them trough interpretive activities that selected elements fitting with the mythical « laurentian wilderness ». Even the 1969 National Parks policy stated that park‘s nature had the function of « something like a museum », and that no science interfering with natural evolution of the park‘s ecosystems was to be permitted. Accordingly, when, in 1970, the director of the Chemistry and Biology department at the University du Québec à Trois-Rivières asked permission to create within the park a station for research and teaching purposes, Chrétien refused it to him, arguing the 1969 policy‘s points. Even though if, one year later, a huge mosquito-control campaign using viral and bacterial methods was held in the near-by region and that, as local biologists said in a press release, it would benefit La Mauricie National park‘s tourism, as the park shared the same marsh-filled bioregion.

This ambivalence towards total protection and recreational uses putted science in a subordinated position. It was instrumentalized for actively recreating the ideal of Parks Canada wild nature, although this ideal was a contemplative one. This paradox can be illustrated when Pierre Desmeules, chief of Natural Resources section, told in a 1971 internal note that

> « considerations should be given to attempting to re-establish populations of fur-bearers such as marten, otter, and fisher. These species have decreased markedly and their re-establishment could be beneficial, although they are not as spectacular from a publicity point of view[15] ».

Clearly, the re-establishment of native fauna or the recognition and popularization of concepts such as the « Precambrian formations » where being used to confirm Parks Canada‘s traditional role as promoter of Canada‘s national sublime, be it the form of picturesque landscapes or scientific concepts.

*** What I wanted to argue in this paper is that typical romantic views on nature, like this sensibility for spectacular fauna or this reverence for « true wilderness », are fundamental in Parks Canada‘s self-representations. From the 19th century holistic ethics like those of Emerson or Humboldt, who both influenced the founder of first north-American national park, John Muir, to the legal acknowledgement of « scenic values » by first park Commissioner James B. Harkin in 1930, who admired Muir‘s works and writings, to Jean Chrétien in 1970, a man faithful to the values of conservation « born here in the West », this reverence for the « wilderness », a romantic concept defined by American historian William Cronon as « this place where we are not », seems to be a constance at Parks Canada.

This idealized pure state of nature, though, was not the case in La Mauricie. Scientific ecology, by objectifying certain dimensions of La Mauricie‘s anthropized landscapes,

[15] PC-ON-BCC, C-98103L1, Desmeules to Lesaux, January 26, 1971.

rendered them abstract. This abstraction permitted an easy reinterpretation of the sociocultural reality of this land, transforming, in a rather unilateral way, a complex territoriality into a recreo-scientific park. La Mauricie national park, apart from being a haven for those who find « Precambrian geological formations » more attractive than hunting, is thus, first of all, a simplified and imposed unit of institutional « wild nature ».