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Eric C. Jones
Boston University

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The Frontier Environment and Social Order

Michael Redclift

Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, UK, 2000.

128 pp. \$65.00 hardcover.

Reviewed by Eric C. Jones, International Honors Program, Boston University

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The Canadian wild west of the mid-19th century-the Ottawa River and its tributaries-is the setting for Redclift's examination of how human alteration of the biophysical environment depends on human social structure and ideology, and vice versa. The data consist of letters home to England from Francis Codd, who was a country doctor in British and Irish (Upper) Canada. Broadly, the book is of interest to those studying human-environment interfaces, and to those familiar with Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis," which holds that the egalitarian nature of the U.S. frontier was instrumental in the development of democracy. Methodologically, ethnohistorians might be intrigued by Redclift's extraction of ethnoecological precepts of that time period from the letters he analyzes.

In Part I, both an introduction and a commentary on Codd's life precede the verbatim letters that make up Chapter Three, the longest chapter in the book. Part II then comprises the final one-third of the book via the chapters "Revisiting the 'frontier'" and "Upper Canada in the mid-nineteenth century," which deal comprehensively with the international and historical context in which the colonization of Upper Canada occurred.

The book's thesis holds that sustainable resource use was a wholly foreign concept to the colonists of Upper Canada. What alternatives were there to pillaging the forests? Redclift argues that people did not really see any other alternative. As a result, logging and agriculture became tied to private property and the public institutions that could support private property. Ideas about civilized life converged with open access to land and the productivity of resource extraction; thus, settlers demanded greater civil and political rights and responsibilities than they had experienced in their places of origin-quite akin to Turner's thesis. However, Redclift is even-handed and notes the contrary example of frontiers in Latin America, which have often been characterized as highly anti-democratic.

The middle portion of *The Frontier Environment and Social Order* consists of Francis Codd's letters to family members who lived in Norfolk in eastern England. Codd, his parents, and his siblings had lived on an inheritance from his paternal grandfather until it ran out. Then his father took the family to the vicarage to which the grandfather had purchased the 'living', or right to collect tithes and live off the parish, where his father then served as vicar. This decline in family wealth was one of the factors that propelled the young Codd to Canada.

Describing what it was like to first arrive on the frontier, Codd wrote to his brother in detail of the prospects for immigration to Canada. The letters often encourage his brother and father to immigrate, but only if life cannot be improved in England. The correspondence mainly describes his reaction to "civilizing" the frontier. Redclift points out that Codd's idea of civilization involves both making productive use of the biophysical environment and bringing "refinement" and "manners" to its settlers. His fairly privileged background often gives way to his excitement for

democracy and the experience of "civilizing" the frontier. Thompson (1973) refers to this process in which wealthy urbanites cope with frontier difficulties as "ruralization."

Codd's letters leave out a number of things, and thus Redclift's analysis must fall silent on discussion of the life of the poor, the relations between colonists and Native Americans, and life in French Canada. It is unfortunate that we get little sense of the development of class structure or other in-group behavior on the frontier, other than Codd's constant disdain for "bad manners" and "incivility" and his mention of how the Catholic Church was a unifying force. If the frontier is relatively egalitarian at the beginning, and tends to encourage democracy under certain circumstances, we still do not have a good idea of the process by which people come to differentiate socioeconomic status after initial equality.

Redclift defines a "frontier" based largely on Prescott (1965) and Turner (1961). A frontier: 1) is a geographic margin; 2) is dominated by transitional features; 3) has ambiguous legal relationships to the state; 4) is perceived to possess boundless resources; and 5) creates new social identities that depend partly on settlers' experiences with the 'natural' biophysical environment. Redclift picks and chooses pieces from Turner carefully, as the last half-century of scholarship has included a number of other factors also responsible for the development of North American democracy.

The author's interest in ecological sustainability leads him to outline a comparative look at frontier societies. The chapter 'Revisiting the Frontier' begins with a comparison between North American and Latin American frontier societies. Redclift argues that North American frontier society's emphasis on capital investment in agriculture, as opposed to gold or silver, which was the emphasis in Latin America, is one of the main differences responsible for resultant political structures in each of these two regions. He also notes the fact that colonists in Upper Canada retain relatively stronger ties to their homelands (in the British Isles) than do the colonists of Latin America.

The book brings other important points to the reader's attention but does not investigate them in a comparative fashion. These include land speculation, state assistance with colonization, and the "Clearances" in Great Britain. Redclift also explores the integrative role of the Catholic Church in Canada, as well as the diversity in the motivations for and conditions of colonization. He holds that while the frontier is more economically "equal" than the home society, it is not egalitarian. Nonetheless, the frontier remains a place in which human societies experience new possibilities.

Redclift is primarily concerned with how these possibilities play out in terms of the ideology or logic that people use to explain their lives on the frontier. The two most prominent attitudes among Codd's fellow settlers concerned 1) bountiful nature and 2) hostile nature in need of taming. While somewhat contradictory, the latter actually could lead to the former. Both ideas reflected comparisons with their homeland by settlers. In the homeland of the British Isles, agriculturists and laborers continued the struggle to feed their families on the land they had. In Canada, when land fertility petered out, settlers moved on to the next frontier, selling their land to speculators.

The broad question addressed here is: How does the tension between competing myths such as wilderness vs. civilization or independence vs. social order forge a collective memory? The final paragraph of the book notes that civil institutions affect the way that nature is transformed or destroyed, and that this interaction with the biophysical environment also influences settlers' ideas about civil society. While frontier ideology is a feedback loop that leaves neither nature nor civil society intact, Redclift shows how ideology eventually becomes institutionalized through resource utilization, individual aspiration and social myth.

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