

Representing nature in Elizabeth Posthuma Simcoe's Diary: An examination of Toronto's colonial past

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Abstract

In this article the author examines how gender, class, and race are important factors in the construction of historical discourses of nature. Using a close reading of the diary of a government official's wife at the turn of the nineteenth century, three themes of colonialism appear. The contradictions of rationalizing the landscape through cartography, counting nature using botany and natural history, and romanticizing the landscape through painting and nature writing, highlight how the colonial project was a complex weave of ideas about nature, as commodity, scientific fact, and moral instruction. By exploring the diverse media in Elizabeth Posthuma Simcoe's Diary – maps, paintings, and writings – a nuanced picture of an upper-class, white woman's role in the Upper Canadian colonial project is drawn in relief. The article explores the ways that historic discourses of nature remain in cities and are easily (and often uncritically) incorporated in current day geographies. The author argues that the colonial past must be thoroughly interrogated in order to understand how discourses of nature have been constructed to serve certain interests, disguise the processes of colonialism, and reinforce certain ideas about gender and nature in the present.

Introduction

Popular environmental legends underlie the construction of urban natures in most cities. Often competing environmental narratives employ the tropes found in these legends to different ends. As the literature of urban political ecology has shown, these narratives are often integral to urban environmental struggles and exemplify the ways that nature, and ideas about nature, are often used to represent larger questions of social power (Gandy 2002; Desfor and Keil 2004). This article examines how the colonial era diary of the wife of the first Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada has been used to represent a romanticized version of life in the Toronto area before the urbanization of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This construction of nature, which was clearly set in a historical context that produced it, has in turn been used by environmentalists to call for a "re-naturalization" of a river valley using the language and images that Elizabeth Posthuma Simcoe wrote and drew over two-hundred years ago. The durability of this romantic depiction of nature through the reproduction of her diary, maps, paintings

and drawings, both in print and on the Internet, are representative of both the fascination with the diary as an artefact and this woman as a character. The fact that this diary was written by a woman who was seen as more environmentally sensitive than her military husband has added another dimension to the place that it has received in the popular history and legend of the Lower Don Valley.

Through policy documents, media representations, and popular education, the story of Elizabeth Posthuma Simcoe (née Gwillim) has become foundational to the environmental discourses of the Lower Don Valley, Toronto, Canada over the last two hundred years. From 1792-1796, she wrote and illustrated a diary about her travels with her husband John. Elizabeth recorded not only the scenes she saw, but also her interpretations of what she encountered; from this record we can begin to read her place in the imperialist/colonialist project. The parts of her Diary that detail her life from Québec to Niagara-on-the-Lake, including the few years spent in Toronto, have come to represent the 'pristine nature' which 'existed' before gross-scale European settlement in Canada (Miller 2002). Parts of her diary were

published in some form from 1896 to 2002 (Scadding 1896; Robertson 1911[1973]; Innis 1965), and an interest in her art (watercolor paintings, charcoal sketches, and ink drawings) has been sustained until the present through websites where one can explore her work over 200 years later (Welch and Pura 2002). The construction of Elizabeth Simcoe as a young, environmentally sensitive, woman writer and artist has contributed to a mythology where she stands as the “patron saint” (Desfor and Keil 2004: 81) of many local environmental activists of the twentieth century who refer to her descriptions of an ‘unspoiled natural landscape’ in the current location of the City of Toronto.

However, there is something problematic in this construction of ‘nature as pristine’ until the ‘first (white) contact’ that must be noted, and the use of Simcoe as a saint must be problematized. Bruce Braun has argued that colonialism is so entrenched in Canada’s history that looking at questions of ‘nature’ without asking about the influence of the colonialist project is naïve and power-blind (Braun 2002; Braun and Wainwright 2001; Willems-Braun 1997). Historians, social scientists, and policymakers set an artificial base to their understandings of ‘nature’ by discounting the occupation of territory, and environmental use of aboriginal peoples, and as such are on an unstable foundation. In order to begin to correct this, the colonial encounter must be analyzed as a real event, and set in a historicity that is appropriate to begin illustrating the intellectual and religio-moral contexts of the colonizers and the colonized. Through recognizing the colonial influences on environmental discourses we increase our ability to negotiate tropes that have been inscribed onto our landscapes, and have entered into our understandings in taken-for-granted ways (Gregory 2001).

A postcolonial approach has similarly been applied to researching the intersections between colonialism and gender in historical travel writing and natural history¹. Two recent edited collections, on women and Canada’s colonial past edited by Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherdale (2005) and on women and the Canadian environment by Melody Hessing, Rebecca Raglon, and Catriona Sandilands (2005), are exemplars of the enormous possibilities of research in this vein. A critical, often feminist, look at history and space through personal accounts in the period of British imperialism and colonization (roughly since 1700) has helped uncover the ways in which lived difference influences the interpretation of colonial practices and places (Jacobs 1996; Pratt 1992; Blunt 1994; Blunt and Rose 1994; Stoler 1995). This literature has largely focused on colonial Victorian women travelers from England to South America, Africa, and India. These studies often directly address questions of ‘race’ and gender and are as such usefully applied to the case of Elizabeth Simcoe in Canada. The narratives in this literature that used a feminist lens also uncover how the disciplines of geography, history, and anthropology have been constructed, and how the restriction of

women and racialized peoples has shaped the production of their knowledge bases in exclusionary ways, both substantively and methodologically in the European and North American academy (Domosh 1991; Scott 1999).

The broad narratives of colonialism and nature, and colonialism and gender have incorporated generous doses of discourse analysis (Gregory 2001; Jacobs 1996). This essay draws from political ecologists and feminist geographers to lend context to the issue of how Elizabeth Simcoe’s *Diary* ascribed certain views of nature to the landscape, and how this, in turn, aided the imperialist project. The time in which Simcoe was traveling, her social class, and education set her apart as far too unique a character from whom to make abstract generalizations, but by rewriting Elizabeth Simcoe as a white woman and not a “saint,” we have the opportunity to address the concepts of ‘race’ and gender in the colonial project (Blunt 1994), and how power has defined the discursive and material context of the Don Valley, and Toronto, Canada.

I will examine the three main themes in Simcoe’s diary that highlight this colonial narrative. These three different themes were addressed in three different media, and to three different audiences. Through this combination of themes, media, and audiences we can see that although the colonial narrative has a tendency to be simplified as direct exploitation, there is a complex network of processes at work which together form the colonial discourse which helped to entrench it as an ideology in Britain in the time period (Jacobs 1996). The first theme is that of a rationalized knowledge the land that Elizabeth Simcoe aided in by drawing and annotating maps for her husband and his military colleagues. The act of recording on paper, while integral to the research conducted here, carries biases when ascribed with cultural values of what constitutes ‘true’ knowledge, and irrefutable evidence (Harley and Laxton 2001). The second is that of collecting and describing the ‘natural history’, that is the plants and animals, of the region which she detailed in her letters to her best friend Mary Anne Burges, who read them to her children (Fryer 1989). These letters incorporated her scientific interest in botany and zoology, and were the beginnings of an inventory of the plants and animals of Upper Canada. Influenced by Carl Linnaeus’ *Systema naturae*, 1735, and the work it inspired which set out a classification system for biotic organisms, this practice of taxonomy became a popular task for the educated urban elite in the 1700s of which Elizabeth could be considered a part even though she chose mainly to live on her family’s country estate (Miller and Reill 1996). The final theme is the romantic which is exemplified in the concept of Picturesque landscape painting and writing where nature is seen as an object, and where wildness is of aesthetic interest for its pureness to the form created by God, and unadulterated by imperfect humans (Miller 2002). Elizabeth Simcoe painted the scenes of Upper Canada on birch bark, some of which she presented to King George III (Gerry 1999). With these themes, I write a nuanced version of one woman’s experience early in the colonial project which contrasts with Victorian era (1839-1901) travel accounts into Africa and South America in terms of Simcoe’s self-reflexivity to the colonial place and peoples (Blunt 1994).

¹My use of “postcolonialism” refers not to a period of ‘after colonialism’, but to the theoretical work which engages with the concept and reality of colonialism to make a conscious effort to examine the history of the colonial moment, and move past colonial constructs, as well as ‘colonized minds’ which reproduce separation, and dualisms (Gregory 2000; Jacobs 1996; Hooks 1990).

“Mrs. Simcoe’s Diary”

Elizabeth Simcoe’s *Diary* is published in three versions: the first is a fragmented set of letters published by Henry Scadding in 1896, the second is Robertson’s annotated version of 1911, and the third is Mary Quayle Innis’ version (1965) which remains truest to the spelling, and capitalization of the original work (Firth 2003). The diary itself was a collection of letters, paintings, maps, and drawings which were compiled by Mary Anne Burges, Elizabeth Simcoe’s best friend in England for the children and friends of the family to stay up to date with the events of the travels (Fryer 1989). Numerous sources have described the *Diary* as the most complete written and visual history of the landscape before 1820 (Don Valley Conservation Report 1950; Sauriol 1981) and, as such, Elizabeth Simcoe has been mythologized as author of this Eden-like setting, which elevates her from a person with an everyday life to an ethereal being as “saint” (Desfor and Keil 2004: 81) and “ghost” (Davidson n.d.: 1) with an omnipotent view.

Elizabeth Simcoe has been described in numerous ways from a “lively, involved, active person” and courageous adventurer (Fryer 1989) to a “little stuttering vixen (sic)” and quiet, romanticizing anthropologist with a superiority complex (Hannah Jarvis, quoted in Firth 2003). Born in Aldwincle, Northamptonshire, England in 1762, she was raised by friends of the family as her father died before she was born, and her mother died in childbirth. As the heiress to her parents’ estate, Elizabeth received the benefits of her social status and class and was educated in botany, natural history, and languages at home by tutors and governesses (Fryer 1989). Her uncle and guardian, John Graves, encouraged Elizabeth’s marriage to his godson John Graves Simcoe. It wasn’t until 1782, when Simcoe was recovering at the home of John Graves from a battle injury incurred fighting with the Queen’s Rangers in Virginia, that the couple spent time together. They soon married. With the wealth Elizabeth inherited from both her mother and father she lived comfortably in an estate at Wolford, England, with John who was ten years her senior, and had one child a year for the first five years of her marriage, and eleven children in total (Fryer 1989).

As her husband rose in rank in the military, he was commissioned to travel to North America in order to survey the lands and organize the governance of the territory of Upper Canada as its first Lieutenant-Governor. Elizabeth and John both had Canadian connections: although neither knew them, both their fathers served in Canada before their deaths, her father as an aide to General Wolfe (Scadding 1896). As members of the British upper class, they also had friends who were living in the colonies as government and military officials (Fryer 1989). Elizabeth Simcoe brought along two of her children, Sophia and Francis, a nurse for each of them as well as some servants, while the rest of the children were left in England. After a long voyage by sea, documented in detail in her *Diary*, they settled into life in the colony.

Discourses of nature in Mrs. Simcoe’s Diary

As introduced above, there are three main connections between Mrs. Simcoe’s *Diary* and the colonial project identifiable through a series of external discourses. A discourse analysis can help unravel the colonialist project’s construction, how it was maintained through everyday practices, and how it managed (and manages) to objectify nature and strip natural processes of their functionality independent of humanity. Elizabeth’s representations –maps, writing, and art– were set in broader artistic discourses of Romanticism and the Picturesque, as well as political and economic investments in natural resources. Through these representations Elizabeth was articulating nature and colonialism in different ways. This rich discourse was durable both across space and time: hundreds of miles across the Atlantic in the period; and over two hundred years to today’s cyberspace renderings (Welch and Pura 2002).

Cartographic expressions of colonialism

Elizabeth Simcoe was a skilled cartographer, and her talent in map reproduction was often employed by her husband John in his military reports (Fryer 1989). On these maps she drew mainly the watercourse, and settlements, annotating them with the English names that her husband preferred: the River Don instead of the Algonquin Nechenquakekonk or Wonscoteonach (104²; Don Valley Conservation Report 1950); and the City of York instead of its previous Toronto (108; Rayburn 1994). The tradition of naming places co-constitutes the cartographic practice; renaming places is a concrete example of how a colonial project can assert its new ‘knowledge’ of places and ‘resources’ on maps. When the colonialists’ names replace those of the people who have been living on the land, especially when the settlers use names from their homelands, this becomes a powerful discursive remnant of the colonial project which reasserts the colonial rule in everyday life in years past the initial event. By erasing ‘pre-colonial’ names, the Aboriginal culture is rendered extinct, eroding awareness of connections between Aboriginal culture and nature.

Even though the Simcoes only spent a few years in Toronto, many of their names have remained entrenched in the landscape today. Castle Frank, the house they named for their son Francis, lends its name to in a subway station and several streets near the house’s old site (170). Several municipalities had also kept the names which are linked to the colonial moment: Scarborough was named after the white cliffs that Elizabeth associated with those of her homeland (102); and York, North York, and East York come from John’s renaming of the city as York from Toronto (108)³. Lake Simcoe to the north, and Gibraltar Point on the Toronto Islands also took their names from John (103). Elizabeth discusses sending and receiving maps in her diary, and makes numerous references to distances from places in miles: it seems she had a ‘geographical imagination’ and was comfort-

²Numbers refer to page references in Innis’ edition of Mrs. Simcoe’s *Diary*, 1965.

³The City of Toronto was amalgamated in 1998. The old municipality names are now used to represent neighbourhoods and community councils.

able using her intellect to rationalize the landscape (Said 1993; Gregory 1994).

Jacobs drawing on Edward Said (1993) has discussed the spatiality of colonial power, and the ways in which cartographic representations have material influences on the colonized landscape and peoples where knowledge hinges with control (1996). Jacobs posits that “the role of the spatial imaginary in the imperial project is perhaps most clearly evident in the spatial practices of mapping and naming.” (1996: 19). This legacy of ‘map as property deed’ brings interesting issues to a postcolonial cartographic practitioner, but by incorporating these considerations in the mapmaking process, there are again possibilities to challenge the hegemony.

Collecting, counting, and classifying nature

In Mary Beacock Fryer’s biography of Elizabeth Simcoe, she uses letters sent to Elizabeth’s best friend Mary Anne Burgess, a noted English intellectual, artist, linguist, and naturalist in order to flesh out her story and illustrate the context of the letters within an intimate relationship (1989). The women had known each other since childhood, and one should read the diary with the knowledge that while Elizabeth was writing for herself, she was also writing for Mary Anne, who read the letters to the children that Elizabeth had left in England. Although Elizabeth had two children with her in Canada, like many women of her class in the late eighteenth century, she employed nurses to care for them, both in their home of England, as well as on her travels in Canada. The letters she sent back to England served as a narrative for the colonialist project, and in that time period helped to image the colonies to the people in the homeland.

One of the key themes that emerges from her letters is her interest in documenting the biota of the country in terms of scenery and food. For consideration of space I have just selected the references to plants and animals she made while in Toronto, although it should be noted that the descriptions she made on her local travels tend to have more detail, although this could be attributed to the summer season in which she traveled. Her language is particularly evocative. Elizabeth documented birds: loons (103), “wild ducks & swamp black birds with red wings” (104), a bald eagle (106), “beautiful black & yellow bird” (108), “wild Pidgeons” (111), an owl (112), and geese (175); insects: “a green Caterpillar” (106), “mosquitos” and a large maggot like insect she could not identify (177); Rattlesnakes (107, 110); fish: salmon (104), Maskalonge and Pickerell (116), Black Bass, perch, and white fish (174); and mammals: “a bat remarkable for its size” (108), a raccoon (112), and deer (113). As well as fruits: berries of Cockspur Thorns (106), and “purple berries from a Creeping Plant” (107), “wild grapes... pleasant but not sweet” (107), “beautiful white berries with a black Eye from red stalks” (107), Cranberries, partridge, fox, and Mountain Tea berries (171); trees: “fine Oaks” (101), poplar (102), Hemlock Spruce (106), “very fine Butternut Trees” (106), Fir trees (110), and birch trees (176); seeds “of Toronto lilies” (108); and other plants: “everlasting Peas creeping in abundance of a purple colour” (102), and a “beautiful species of Polygala” (106). Elizabeth describes ecologies too: “natural meadows” (102), Pine

plains (110), and pine ridges (174). She rarely referred to any of the plant or animal life in a negative way, and the adjectives of fine, very fine, excellent, and beautiful abound in her writing. Additionally, the modifiers of natural and wild are often used in her descriptions referring mainly to her experience in England with the domestication of several of the animals, probably in regard to the texture and quality of the flesh for eating.

Elizabeth discusses sending specimens back to England, and being sent specimens she “had not yet seen” (108) from within the region, such as an owl from Niagara (112), and some rattlesnakes in a barrel caught by a military official (107). Her interest in botany, and natural history are clear from her writing, and she is probably further catering to Mary Anne’s and her children’s interests as well. She comments on a Miss Russell, who has “a Collection of Plants dried by merely shutting them in books, I wish I had thought of doing so,” (179) highlighting again that she was not alone in the pursuit of documenting the nature of Upper Canada. Elizabeth often alludes to the animals and foods of England, and compares the Canadian species to them as a reference, with a reflexive notation although not implying the English as a definitive standard. As Miller and Reill discuss, the late 1700s were highly interesting times in the field of taxonomy (1998). They came before the professionalization of the academic disciplines, so women participated in knowledge production more than they would by the mid-1800s (Shteyn 1987).

As previously discussed, this idea of rational knowledge of the land is an important part of the colonial project. Similarly, ordering the plants and animals upon that land was a similar process whereby the colonizers could begin to order the people and the cultures into the designs set out for them from the imperial headquarters (Mackay 1996). Although in not the same degree as the Darwinian, or Banksian expeditions to the tropics from works cited above, the British colonial presence in Canada was focused more on wildness than the novelty of different plant species. Instead of being an entirely different setting that was exotic, Upper Canada (now Ontario) seemed to be imagined as England before ‘civilization,’ although stretched out over a greater geographic extent. As such, this pre-culture ideal easily became a discourse that was embedded in the history of the English landscape. Clearing trees for pastures, and setting up mills to process these trees for log cabins became rationalized as the obvious thing in the discourse of English knowledge as the correct knowledge. As indigenous scholars have discussed, this claimed and colonized knowledge of the land began a process of cultural domination and exploitation that has had devastating effects for local and global environments (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). By examining these narratives in the context of the extreme dispossession of the colonial project, we can move them further from their romanticized innocence that many environmentalists (paradoxically) have used to promote their causes.

The Picturesque in Elizabeth Simcoe’s paintings

Elizabeth painted numerous scenes of Canada—she claimed that she had a “picturesque eye” (quoted in Firth 2003)—many

of which she gave to King George III (Gerry 1999). Her painting style was formulaic landscape painting: with large trees in the left or right of the foreground, and the focal point in the centre usually of a structure, or natural feature. Although she was influenced by the Picturesque, she did not replicate its form identically: 'nature' was the subject of many of her studies, but she often incorporated architecture and activities in order to illustrate part of her role in Canada – to document what she saw (Firth 2003). The detail and style in which she painted also varied, from tremendously detailed paintings, to short sketches with only the forms and some colors added. Her media ranged from charcoal, ink, and watercolors on a variety of material from birch bark, board, canvas, and paper. All of her work was relatively small, usually under 20cm by 20cm (Welch and Pura 2002) indicative of the miniature style of painting which was considered 'feminine' in the period. As well as presentations to the King of England, Elizabeth and her daughters published some etchings of the drawings that she made after her return to England (Fryer 1989).

Ultimately Elizabeth was describing the wildness of the landscape, and through the artistic context of the time, this was infused with a positive connotation. Traveling as a woman of privilege, with several servants, and the military apparatus to secure her safety, the wildness could be interpreted as exciting and exotic. The prevalence of this view from the settlers with less privilege is uncertain, but this further emphasizes the importance of contextually illustrating the lives of the authors of the colonial accounts. It is unlikely that another commentator with less interest and education in art, poetry and painting would have described scenes as "very wildly picturesque" (111); or with such an attention to visual contrast, beauty, and colour as this passage illustrates:

The mouth of this Creek forms a very fine Scene, a bold spur of the Alleghany appears beautiful in the distance. It is about 3 miles off. Some Cottages are prettily placed on the banks of the River, & a saw Mill affords a quantity of boards which piled up in a wood makes a varied foreground...

The banks are very high of a fine Verdure & the summits covered with Wood which was now reflected with the deepest Shades in the Water & had a most beautiful appearance, which was soon heightened by the rising moon giving more forces to the Shades. Two Houses of Coll. Butler's were distinguished at a distance...

We supped by Star light amid this fine scenery of Wood & Water, the bright fires of the Soldiers below the hill, contrasted with a dark sky now & then brightened by a gleam of Moon light had a beautiful effect. (Saturday May 10th, 1794: 121)

Not only does this passage illustrate Elizabeth's scenic interest, but it also incorporates the military, economic, and travel discussion that are characteristic of her diary. This passage also highlights the detailed descriptions of her local travels which were referred to above. In this passage we can see her use of

painting terminology in scene, shades, foreground, contrast; emphasis on the visual in the effects of light, reflection, and things beautiful, placed prettily.

What is exploitative about describing the land as only picturesque is that it obscures the rich culture that exists in the peoples of the place. If the scene is portrayed as untouched, or 'natural' thus primitive, there is a hegemonic construction at work. If culture is defined by its interaction with an environment (the landscape and biota) and it is ethnocentrically biased by the power position of the reporter, in this case the colonizing people, there is an erasure of any interaction which is not the interaction of the dominant group. Neil Smith discussed how this creation of a primordial, 'external' nature was essential to the transition to capitalism, and also how Europeans traveling to America felt superior in their appreciation of nature in contrast to the new (white) Americans who saw nature as a thing to be subdued (1984). Interestingly, the colonial project in Canada as described by Elizabeth Simcoe seemed to tread between these two view points: wilderness was beautiful, but was often composed of forests, containing trees, which could be transformed into boards needed for building, and settlement.

Concluding Remarks

But reaching truly postimperial or postcolonial perspectives requires more than (re)activating the spatial narratives and imaginings within past project of making empires. The challenge, it would seem, is to register this spatial sensibility in the present and to recognise that while colonialism attempted to carve 'clear outlines' onto the 'haze' of space, this has been an incomplete project. The diasporic movements, the insurgent claims for rights over land, the pervasiveness of imperial nostalgias, all point to the spatial 'haze' of the present. (Jacobs 1996: 22)

This article has argued how Elizabeth Simcoe, because of her social power, could represent Toronto area nature in her Diary which reproduced a colonial discourse in the context of cartography, natural history, and the Picturesque. However, this representation has been illustrated with Jacobs' advice from the above passage in mind. Elizabeth Simcoe's representations have been a part of the spatial imaginary of the nation of Canada, and this conception of pristine nature is continually reproduced in the present through uncontextualized citation of her work. In this sense the discourse is gendered and entirely performative in Judith Butler's sense of the word (1990): people using her work are making an unconscious association with caring and womanhood, and citing the relationship between a woman and her view of nature as somewhat 'purer' than those of, for example, her 'calculating military' husband. Considering this discourse without attention to the power that comes with cultural valuations of 'race', class, and historical positioning is dangerous because, by definition, discourses are embedded and heterogeneous. Removing the context from a discourse forces its meaning to contract, and changes the discourse back into only words decreasing its potential for explanation, and emancipation (Fraser 1997).

These competing visions of nature, both as resource and as beauty, highlight the tensions that are implicit in the colonial project. As numerous other commentators have suggested, the process of colonialism was by no means heterogeneous or monolithic, but a discourse built up through successive layers of representations to and from different individuals who can be connected through similarities of class, gender, nation, race and place, but whose stories will always be unique to their respective historical and geographical specificities. By increasing the intersections of affiliations and identities upon which our analyses of these people and their projects rest, we increase our chances of finding out more about the similarities and differences among the ongoing processes of colonialism which may be hidden within other strategies of power. Analyses of autobiographies and travel writings offer an engaging avenue from which to start this process.

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