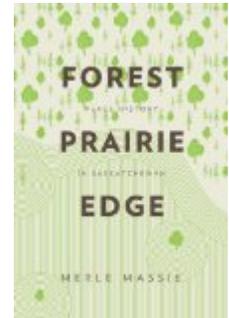




Merle Massie. *Forest Prairie Edge: Place History in Saskatchewan.* Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2014. 336 pp. \$31.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-88755-763-7.



Reviewed by Mark McLaughlin

Published on H-Canada (January, 2015)

Commissioned by Corey Slumkoski (Mount Saint Vincent University)

I would like to begin with a confession: I was born and raised in Canada's Maritime provinces and have never been to Saskatchewan. Luckily for me, and others like me, environmental historian Merle Massie has written *Forest Prairie Edge: Place History in Saskatchewan*. Through a deep-time place history of her home region of Prince Albert, Massie has produced an impressive analysis that adds much to our historical understanding of western Canada. She draws attention to Saskatchewan's two main ecosystems or "solitudes," the well-known prairie in the south and the lesser-known boreal forest in the north, by focusing on the transitional landscape (ecotone) between them, the boreal forest edge (p. 3).

The book revolves in large part around what the author refers to as "edge theory." Massie explains that where forest meets prairie is not merely an ecological delineation on the landscape, where one ecosystem simply ends and another begins, but rather a point of convergence and contrast for both humans and nonhuman nature. She identifies four key concepts used to explore the

historical development of the boreal forest edge: "edge as hinge (connection, linkage, and exchange), edge as imagination (wilderness versus civilization), edge as refuge (place of safety), and edge as nexus (centre, place of pluralism, mixing, and resilience). Each had a role in shaping the cultural conception of the forest fringe and ultimately in shaping nature and setting out terms for human uses of the environment" (p. 15). I consider this to be an intriguing theoretical framework, one that could possibly be used with great effectiveness by other environmental historians of Canada and elsewhere when examining potential edge areas. For example, what about where land meets sea, mountains meet plains, or even where different forest regions meet?

Forest Prairie Edge draws upon an impressive mixture of sources, including archival collections, government documents, interviews, films, newspapers, websites, and books and articles. I was particularly pleased to discover that Massie puts so much stock in local histories. As with any source, local histories need to be used with cau-

tion, but they often contain rich detail that you cannot find anywhere else.

Divided into eight chapters, the book gradually reveals the many historical layers of the Prince Albert region. In many ways, the first two chapters are foundational for much of the rest of the book. Chapter 1, a brief but detailed overview of the soil, topography, hydrology, ecology, and climate of Saskatchewan's boreal forest edge, provides the reader with a basic body of knowledge that proves useful throughout the text, and allows the author to precisely define the edge area being examined. The second chapter examines the history of the First Nations in the region, Cree and Assiniboine, particularly from the arrival of the first Europeans up until the signing of Treaty 6 and the creation of the reserve system in the late nineteenth century. Here Massie establishes the idea of the forest edge as a place of longtime human use and cultural exchange, where woodland and prairie bands relied on the area for a variety of reasons at different times of the year over many centuries. Of course, traditional seasonal rounds were increasingly disrupted as Europeans moved into the area, yet Massie is careful not to simply portray Indigenous peoples as victims of colonialism, with sections on the fur trade, the "pemmican empire," and boreal agriculture highlighting the adaptive responses of First Nations. I also appreciate how the author does not confine Indigenous content to one chapter, but continues to include First Nations perspectives throughout the book.

The next two chapters outline the development of the lumber and agriculture industries that created the conditions for permanent, non-indigenous settlement along this boreal forest edge. Chapter 3, the one on the lumber industry, is important due to the fact, as Massie notes, "There have not been, to date, sufficient publications that tell the story of Saskatchewan's colourful, dynamic, and dramatic early forest industry" (p. 91). This part of the book helps to fill in this historiographi-

cal gap, detailing the economic centrality of the lumber industry to the Prince Albert region from the transfer of the Hudson Bay Company lands to the Canadian government in 1870, followed by the construction of the railway, to the end of the First World War. Massie then presents the fourth chapter as a corrective to the popular perception that only the wheat boom mattered when it came to agriculture in Saskatchewan. She argues convincingly that mixed farming, a combination of grain and domesticated animals, was promoted as an agricultural ideal in the Prince Albert region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and that, while difficult, mixed farming offered settlers a varied and resilient way of living.

Chapters 5 to 7 explore social and economic diversification after the initial waves of permanent, nonindigenous settlers. The fifth chapter documents the implementation of soldier settlement and immigration programs in the years after the First World War. Although Saskatchewan joined Confederation in 1905, control of Crown lands remained under federal jurisdiction. Massie observes astutely that early federal homesteading policies adhered to a "do or die" mentality, but that postwar schemes were more interventionist and centered on "building and sustaining farms, not just creating them" (p. 126). In chapter 6, the author describes growing connections between mixed farming and the forest landscape. Off-farm industrial opportunities, such as overland freighting, commercial fishing, cutting cordwood, and mining, provided homesteaders with infusions of much-needed cash, and according to Massie, this seasonally based occupational pluralism contributed to the Prince Albert region's image as a "poor man's paradise" (p. 154). The author uses the seventh chapter to explain the rise of the local tourist industry, from sportsmen in the late nineteenth century, to lake excursions in the early twentieth century, to the opening of Prince Albert National Park in 1927. Massie makes the compelling case that tourism promoters used the region's ecological divide to their advantage, as most of the area's

visitors came from the prairie south and nearby cities, in search of "accessible wilderness" in the boreal north (p. 177).

The eighth and final chapter is a reexamination of the internal migration of an estimated 45,000 people from southern Saskatchewan to the north during the Great Depression, known as the "Great Trek." Many previous assessments of this historical event characterized those moving northward as doing so out of desperation; that is, they were pushed to seek out a meagre living in the boreal north by even worse conditions in the prairie south. Massie complicates this interpretation by pointing out that there were pull factors involved as well, that the boreal forest edge was in fact viewed as a desirable refuge by those who migrated there. She concludes, "It was a northern paradigm of resilience that drew heavily on mixed farming, occupational pluralism, and forest resources to provide a practical, self-sufficient way of life in which subsistence was the first priority" (p. 214).

I do have a couple of minor criticisms. One of the subthemes in the book is the usefulness/limitations of a regional outlook within Canadian history. While Massie's concentrated focus on the boreal forest edge made for a fascinating and informative analysis, I sometimes found myself wishing that Massie had done more to contextualize what was happening at the local level in Saskatchewan with events in other regions and at the national and even international levels. This is not to suggest that there were no contexts provided, only that I would have liked to have seen more of them, such as in the sections on the lumber industry, soldier settlement, tourism, and the Great Trek. Furthermore, while I find edge theory to be intriguing, it does have potential pitfalls. It is undoubtedly difficult to write a successful and balanced historical analysis which includes a number of landscapes, ecosystems, and peoples. For the most part, Massie gets it right, but there were one or two times when I was somewhat confused

by a particular point in the text and had to return to an earlier chapter for clarification.

On the whole, though, this book is a very good example of solid environmental history. The way in which Massie exposes the many historical layers of the Prince Albert region is admirable. Her work reveals new narratives, rewrites others, and is yet another demonstration of the excellent environmental history scholarship that has been produced in Canada in recent years. As Massie states in the last paragraph, "In the end, what matters is not that I have told some new stories about a place that you might never see. What matters is that I have now (I sincerely hope) upended some of your perspectives on Saskatchewan" (p. 262). In the case of this Maritimer, goal achieved.

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Citation: Mark McLaughlin. Review of Massie, Merle. *Forest Prairie Edge: Place History in Saskatchewan*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. January, 2015.

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