Andrew Watson has shaped his new book, *Making Muskoka: Tourism, Rural Identity, and Sustainability 1870-1920*, around the people who made a living in Muskoka and the characteristics of the places they occupied. Scholars of tourism history (for example, Patricia Jasen and Will Mackintosh) have typically investigated the perspective of the tourist, but Watson focuses on the local settler with some brief but insightful forays into Indigenous experiences of settler-colonialism. His framework of sustainability makes “a comparison of economic, social, and environmental dimensions of rural identity across space and over time” (p. 4). Inspired by Fernand Braudel’s “structures of everyday life,” he considers the details of the lives of people who have occupied this territory, using such sources as excerpts from settlers’ diaries, journals, and memoirs (p. 175). Rather than a moral study of the implications of tourism in the region, Watson’s book examines the role of tourism—how it changed over time to become more, or less, sustainable and how different environments influenced the work and identities of settlers.

Watson’s neomaterialist approach to history is modeled after Timothy J. LeCain, arguing that identity is a continually transforming creative process influenced by interaction with the material environment through work. He does not use the concept of “identity” to reify groups of people into categories of analysis, which he criticizes post-structuralist and postmodernist theories for enabling; neither does he approach environment as a passive and deterministic setting for history to take place. Like Tim Ingold, who theorizes about an “ecology of materials,” Watson conceives of environment as temporal and in a constant process of change, neither neutral backdrop nor entirely culturally ordered, and always incorporating the people and things that dwell in a place. For Watson, the ability to “reproduce” an identity is contingent on a direct relationship with the material
environment. This implies that the action of identity construction can be distributed across a field of human and nonhuman interactions, which is reminiscent of Jane Bennett’s theories of assemblage in political ecology. This emphasizes the nonlinear nature of Watson’s concept of “sustainability” and the plurality of occupations settlers engaged in to adapt to changes in the rhythms of the land and local economy.

The book is divided into five topically and temporally defined chapters. Chapter 1, “Rural Identity and Resettlement of the Canadian Shield, 1860–80,” discusses the settlement of colonial societies into the low agricultural potential of Muskoka and subsequent growth of tourism and the logging industries. Watson considers settlers’ personal accounts of the material realities of life, the complex of laws that influenced settlement and economic patterns, environmental impacts of agricultural practices, and various technological changes to transportation that brought stability but unevenly benefited settlers. These many factors explicate divergences in economic patterns and rural identities between the lower lakes and the backwoods. This is the essential point of the chapter: how a polyrhythmic variety of ideologies, technologies, environments, and human activities worked in concert to shape and be shaped by each other in Muskoka.

In chapter 2, “Indigenous Identity, Settler Colonialism, and Tourism, 1850-1920,” Watson reframes Indigenous people away from the entrenched devalued stereotype of nomads who occasionally occupied wasted land. Instead, Anishinaabe clan-based structures of economy, territory, and governance are emphasized in this chapter as expert seasonal designs that facilitate fair and orderly access to resources and create sustainable reproductions of distinctive identity constructs. Watson describes how “settler interests often came up against Indigenous ways of living” but also emphasizes how Indigenous people responded to settler-colonialism to find the means to continue their traditional ways—rather than equate change inherently with loss (p. 50). Watson’s scope is limited to the instantiation of commodity exchange and access to resources, not the roles specific commodities and resource harvesting practices take in Indigenous people’s lives. This stresses the efforts Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee communities made to build cooperative alliances, repurpose knowledge, and take advantage of new opportunities presented by tourism while also asserting their land use rights in formalized legal processes. Expanding on how Indigenous people fit into the burgeoning consumer culture and how they were influenced by representations of modern material progress and new technologies after 1900 would have added a valuable dimension to the book.

Chapter 3, “Rural Identity and Tourism, 1870-1900,” and chapter 4, “The Promise of Wood-Resource Harvesting, 1870-1920,” describe different ways that settlers adapted to the early failures of agriculture. The waterways became a transportation corridor for steamboats that brought tourists and cottagers into seasonal exchange with settlers, enabling settlers on the lakeside to become more interdependent and to sell accommodation, supplies, services, and produce to visitors. Many settlers, especially in the backwoods where tourism did not reach, practiced occupational pluralism by working agriculture during the growing seasons and then selling their labor to large-scale logging camps over winter. These new economic patterns did not distribute power equally across the region but instead concentrated multiple economies to nodes of activity across a web of industries and circumstances.

Chapter 5, “Fossil Fuels, Consumer Culture, and the Tourism Economy 1900-20,” describes how, “over time and in subtle ways, the resiliency of local interdependencies was eroded,” for settlers, “by new links with the greater world,” such as the import of coal fuel and the use of gasoline to fuel motorboats (p. 163). The affluent urbanite
cottagers who visited Muskoka for its “wilderness” began to expect modern amenities that were accommodated by mineral energies, which “disconnected the energy requirements of tourism from the local economy” (p. 162). Causing a similar disconnect, mail-order services began to compete with local suppliers to provide items like meat and produce, supplanting interdependent relationships between neighbors. This loss of control continues to be a threat to the sustainability of the touristic rural identity of settlers, and Watson concludes that tourism can only persist into the future if the area's history and interdependency are recovered.

Watson’s book lays out environmental-historical groundwork for tourism in Muskoka that urges further study of economic exchange in neomaterialist terms. Topics can be taken up in more detail to further investigate the history of the Muskoka region, elaborate on the fundamental roles specific locations and resources have for Indigenous people (for example, memory, medicine, spiritual practice), expand on consideration of nonhuman histories, or translate Watson’s framework of sustainability and concept of identity reproduction into analyses of other regions. The integration of the oft-abstracted notion of identity with a theory of reproducible relations to the environment has important implications (for example, to politics of recognition that Indigenous people must contend with today to secure land rights). It also makes the case that rural identities do not always correspond to an agrarian way of life, which breaks down the naturalized dichotomy between city and country.

Watson’s material approach to history finds common ground between settlers and Indigenous people, not equating life experiences but implying that when distant markets are newly imported to an interdependent environment there will be effects, some deleterious, on any population and place. This book will be of interest to those analyzing spatial configurations of bodies in the context of laws, economic patterns, environmental change, or racialization, among other topics. It makes for interesting reading alongside other materialist theory and is uniquely situated between camps that exclusively address human agency and those that may overstate the significance of nonhuman actors. Making Muskoka considers the environmental groundwork of economic patterns from which tourism arises on the Canadian Shield, emphasizing a gathering of human and nonhuman elements that are volatile and confounding yet integrated and emergent.