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Mythologizing Wilderness: The Creation of Algonquin Provincial Park

The term “wilderness” emerged with the transition from hunting-gathering society to agrarian economy because it is only with settled agriculture that a distinction is made between cultivated and uncultivated lands, savage and settled, civilized and uncivilized. The notion of wilderness, then, is a social construct, one marked in both Classical and Romantic traditions. The classical position, which predominated in Western thought during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, venerates human action in civilizing society. For classicists, defeating wilderness was a sign of human achievement and progress, a triumph over the dark forces of nature, while romantics saw wilderness as a place of profound spiritual significance and meaning. In short, classicists want to conquer wilderness while the romantics pursue preservation. Wrapped up in this tension is the myth of wilderness. Myths are not falsehoods, rather they are a mixture of fact and fiction, but given that myths are used and reproduced, the question surrounding them is not “what is true?” but rather “whose truth?”

Myths are portrayed in a variety of ways and for different purposes. One such portrayal relates to the promotion of government-sanctioned environmental spaces, such as Algonquin Provincial Park. Located within a day’s drive of the most densely populated region of Canada, Algonquin Park was established by order of the Algonquin Park Act in 1893. This noted that it was to be “a public park and forest reserve, fish and game preserve, health resort and pleasure ground for the benefit and advantage and enjoyment of the people of the Province.” But simultaneously, the Ontario government continued to allow logging practices within park boundaries, thereby setting up tension between those wishing to conquer and those wishing to venerate the designated land.

The purpose of this study is to examine the factors influencing the development of Algonquin Park and its subsequent promotion by the Ontario provincial government. This research argues that the government employed both classicist and romantic notions of wilderness in an effort to satisfy both the perceived needs of recreationists and the economic imperatives of logging companies. In other words, the provincial government’s actions were designed to serve two masters.

The time period for this study ranges from 1882, when the first notions of Algonquin as recreational wilderness were formulated, to World War II, when technological changes altered the complexion and uses of the park. Sources for this study consist of government documents, park records, newspaper material, photographs and advertisements. This research is informed by Raymond Williams’ (1978) discourse on social relations as reproduced in cultural expression, William Kirk’s (1963) analysis of the social construction of environment and Short’s (1991) conception of wilderness as a socially constructed myth.