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Like “The Thames at Westminster”: British Sportsmen and the Appropriation of Landscape in the British North American West

As part of a larger process of cultural imperialism, British sportsmen used their elitist aesthetic principles to appropriate the landscape of colonial territories. The principles of the picturesque and the sublime facilitated the act of appropriation, constructing unknown lands into recognizable English landscapes. By imposing these landscape conventions on Canada, British sportsmen reveal that the imperial project consisted of elements beyond the political and economic. The appropriation of nineteenth-century Canada into the British Empire included an aesthetic component.

This paper argues that British sportsmen used landscape aesthetics to express an imperial ideology. It draws analyses of late nineteenth century travel books written by British sportsmen in Western Canada. A sampling includes Sir Frederick Ulric Graham, *Notes of a Sporting Expedition in the Far West of Canada in 1847* (London, 1898) and James Carnegie, *Saskatchewan and the Rocky*

Mountains. A Diary and Narrative of Travel, Sport, and Adventure, in 1859 and 1860 (Edinburgh, 1875).

In this study the term landscape does not refer to a specific physical environment but rather, to a form of cultural representation – an imperial way of seeing and knowing the world. Narrative descriptions, engravings, paintings, and photographs of landscape are never neutral and portray specific cultural framings of the world. In this regard, the sportsmen’s construction of landscape projects the ideology of British imperialism onto the land aesthetically incorporating Canada into the Empire. Examination of the British sportsmen’s construction of landscape subsequently reveals as much about the process of cultural imperialism as Canadian physical geography.
