The Land Between — Encounters on the Edge of the Canadian Shield

Thomas F. McIlwraith and The Land Between Circle (eds.). 2013. ISBN 978-1-55455-211-5 Fitzhenry & Whiteside, Markhan, ON CAD 29.95

I first heard of “The Land Between” thanks to a television series aired on TVO last year. The series effectively used aerial and time-lapse videography, cinematic historical re-enactments, animation, and hundreds of rare historical photographs and films to introduce viewers to the ever-changing story of how humans have interacted with this special region throughout time. Growing up in Toronto and spending much of my adult life in Ottawa, I have loved The Land Between without knowing its name.

The announcement of this eponymous book in the January/February issue of The Forestry Chronicle peaked my curiosity with its promise of dozens of full-colour photographs, maps, and over 40 discussions detailing the varied environment, life, and culture of this “fascinating and endearing region.”

The Land Between is the name given to the complex, irregularly shaped strip of land between Georgian Bay and the Ottawa Valley, north of the rich farmlands of the Great Lakes Lowlands and south of the forests of the Canadian Shield. It is a mosaic transition zone rich in biodiversity.

My initial disappointment was perhaps unfair. The book was intended to be a way of “accessing and assembling impressions based on experiences, history, cultural orientation and scientific knowledge in the form of memoirs, stories and photographs.” The fact that the 46 essays with their accompanying photographs and the occasional map do not necessarily meet the standards one would expect of scientific journals or National Geographic is probably irrelevant, as the book successfully conveys a sense of the region and its remarkable natural and human histories.

How many readers of the Chronicle think in terms of the three-rut road? I must admit that I had not until I read the essay on “Motoring the Three-Rut Road.” There is an essay about Haliburton stonemason John Henry Billing who built the beautiful stone St. Peter’s Anglican Church near Carnarvon, which I stumbled across and admired years ago when my parents had a cottage nearby. Other essays touch on subjects as diverse as eels, earthworms and erratics as well as canals, colonization roads and railroads. There is even an essay telling us that “Sustainable Forestry Is Alive in The Land Between.” The book includes “A Selection of Related Reading on The Land Between” with sources of more comprehensive information.

In spite of my criticism of the quality of the photographs and maps, I would recommend this book to anyone who is acquainted with The Land Between and anyone who is interested in learning a little about a treasured part of Canada.

Reviewed by
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