

Review

Peter A. Stevens, York University

Sharon Wall. *The Nurture of Nature: Childhood, Antimodernism, and Ontario Summer Camps, 1920-55*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009. 392 pp. ISBN: 0774816406.

Environmental history and the history of childhood have been dynamic fields in recent years, and they come together fruitfully in *The Nurture of Nature*, Sharon Wall's study of Ontario summer camps. Focusing on the period between 1920 and 1955, the book argues that summer camps were "hybrid" institutions that were "designed as escapes from modernity in geographic, temporal, and cultural terms," but which reflected and reinforced modern ideas regarding order, efficiency, nature, progress, childhood, and child-rearing (14).

By the early twentieth century, Wall explains, both nature and childhood had come to be associated with purity and innocence. To many critics, the modern city was crowded and unhealthy, the site of moral and industrial pollution, and the centre for a consumer culture that bred artifice and superficiality. Children, being young and impressionable, were thought to be particularly susceptible to these threats. The summer camp thus emerged as a vehicle for isolating children from the dangers of modern urban life, and for immersing them in a healthier, more wholesome social and physical environment.

Though all camps were conceived as "natural" places where children's characters could be moulded, improved, and cleansed of modernity's negative influences, the summer camp experience was far from homogenous. Wall distinguishes between three types of camp: private, for-profit elite camps, catering mainly to private-school children; fee-charging middle-class organizational camps, run by churches, Girl Guides, and similar groups; and charitable camps for working-class children, sponsored by the *Toronto Star's* Fresh Air Fund. Elite camps typically were expensive; had better facilities; were located in more distant, "wilder" areas; and embraced the simple life through multi-week canoe trips. By contrast, fresh air camps had modest facilities at the outskirts of the city, and their focus was on improving the health of their clientele, who were selected by social workers, and who were admitted only after a series of needs and medical tests. While elite camps aimed to shape privileged young people into the business and political leaders of the future, the goal at fresh air camps was to teach street-wise children to channel their energy and aggression in socially acceptable ways, and to prepare them for lives as well-disciplined manual labourers. Organizational camps fell somewhere in the middle of these two extremes.

The camp experience also was raced and gendered. Wall demonstrates how camp organizers, influenced by contemporary trends in education and psychology, sought to produce well-adjusted, “normal” children who would adopt dominant gender roles, and absorb prevailing assumptions regarding normative heterosexuality. Summer camp also reinforced colonialism through programming that revolved around “playing Indian.” Wall argues that by mimicking “Indian” culture, campers could imagine themselves as inhabitants of a simpler, pre-modern civilization that was free from the various problems that characterized modern, urban life.

Wall succeeds in showing that summer camps simultaneously critiqued and reinforced the modern project. Her reliance on camp records leads to a narrative that privileges the perspective of adults, however. To compensate, she turns to oral history. In addition to having conducted her own interviews with a dozen former campers, Wall draws upon a collection of interviews with camp organizers that the Ontario Camping Association produced during the 1970s and 1980s. These sources enable Wall to conclude each of her chapters with a coda on “Impact,” in which she assesses how children campers accepted and sometimes subverted the agendas of adult camp leaders. Nevertheless, the voices of children remain muted in Wall’s narrative, and when they do appear, they often are inflected with nostalgia. Oral history represents an important means for getting around the paucity of evidence produced by children themselves—a familiar problem for most historians of childhood. But personal interviews also pose difficulties for the researcher, and Wall would have strengthened her discussion had she directly explained her approach to using oral interviews that she and others had conducted.

Other aspects of the book may also surprise readers. Wall’s discussion is lopsided in that elite camps and fresh air camps receive their own chapters, while organizational camps do not. As such, the links between summer camps and religious groups in particular go under-examined. And for all of Wall’s insightful thematic analysis, many of the basic contours of camp life remain indistinct. What was the organizational structure of camps and their staff? What activities were scheduled on a typical day at camp? And, leaving aside camp leaders’ belief in the therapeutic powers of nature, how did individual campers interact with the non-human world that surrounded them? These and other questions go unanswered.

The book, then, doesn’t provide an exhaustive analysis of summer camps, but nor does it claim to. Rather, it provides a solid foundation for future work on the subject while making important contributions to the historiography, especially with respect to childhood and the environment. *The Nurture of Nature* is a fine addition to UBC Press’ Nature|History|Society series, and it deserves a wide

audience, not least amongst social, environmental, and cultural historians, and anyone who has ever attended or worked at a summer camp.