

Hardscrabble: The High Cost of Free Land by Donna E. Williams

Brian S. Osborne

Volume 107, Number 1, Spring 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050682ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050682ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Osborne, B. S. (2015). Review of [*Hardscrabble: The High Cost of Free Land* by Donna E. Williams]. *Ontario History*, 107(1), 130–133.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1050682ar>

Book Reviews

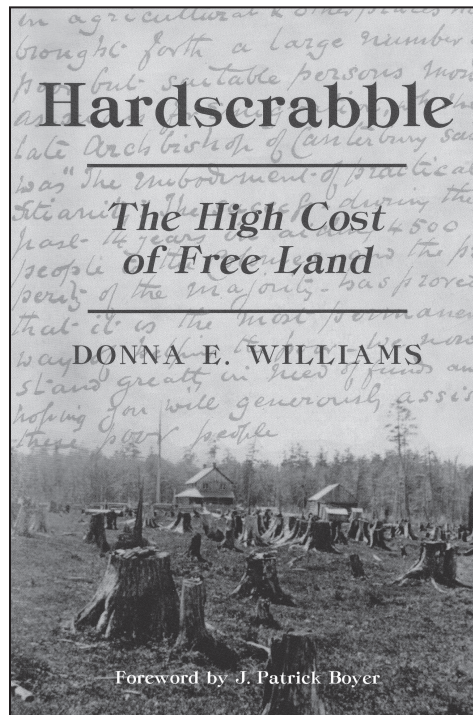
SPRING 2015

Hardscrabble: The High Cost of Free Land

by Donna E. Williams

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2013. 208 pages. \$22.99 paperback. ISBN 978-1-45970-804-4. E-book \$11.99.
ISBN 978-1-45970-806-8 (www.dundurn.com)

In this ground-breaking study (an appropriate allusion here!), Donna Williams tells the hitherto untold story of a Muskoka that is so different from the dominant image of luxury recreational properties and life-style recently analysed by Julia Harrison in *A Timeless Place: The Ontario Cottage* [see *Ontario History*, 106:1 (2014), 131-33]. In her excellent study, Harrison focused her attention on the emotional attachment and commitment to the “cottage experience” and the symbolic and personal meanings of the iconic cottaging realms of Ontario. Williams, however, turns her attention to the “hardscrabble” experience of Muskoka’s farming economy and the “tough-love” character of its agricultural pioneers. In the Foreword to this volume, J. Patrick Boyer, the doyen of Muskoka stud-



ies, compliments Williams, first, for capturing the several motives of the campaign to settle the empty lands of northern Ontario, and also for providing an evocative account of local events and the colourful people in her depiction of what Muskoka has become today. Williams’ essential con-

clusion is summarised in her sub-title, "The High Cost of Free Land."

Recognizing the success of the U.S. Homestead Act of 1862, this study poses the essential question, "what possessed legislators to copy the idea in Muskoka" (23)? Accepting the seduction of "an almost virgin landscape of pine and deciduous forests, glittering lakes, waterfalls—a virtual paradise for aspiring settlers," the fundamental answer is presented early in the analysis: the "serpent in this alleged Garden of Eden" was the ubiquitous rock of the Canadian Shield (22).

But there were other voices. Even experienced surveyors such as Alexander Shirreff (1829) and Robert Bell (1847), who had reported land "fit for settlement," had also noted a "great abundance of Rocks" (39). Even early initiatives such as the Pioneer Land Act of 1853 that opened up the Ottawa-Huron Tract by colonization roads had provided initial experience of this reality. Thus, in 1857, a Department of Agriculture publication had given frank advice; no encouragement to emigration should be given "by sanctioning fancy sketches of rural felicity, or by permitting hopes of prosperity that cannot be completely realised" (25). That should have been it! However, in 1859, free land-grants were offered along the Muskoka Road and, on 28 February 1868, the passage of the Free Grants Act was marked by the arrival of the Lieutenant Governor at the Ontario Legislature, together with full military pomp and circumstance.

But why was the advice of the Department of Agriculture ignored? Williams demonstrates how some had claimed that there were sections of good land to be found, while others had argued that the economic symbiosis of agriculture and lumbering was a viable strategy. This was enough for promoters of immigration to

promise a utopian new-world in Canada, and for emigrant agents and missionary societies to seek their relief of poverty and the social malaise of dystopian old-worlds. Thus, Muskoka's putative opportunities attracted Germans, Scandinavians, Americans, but Canadian emigration authorities preferred those from the "mother country," Great Britain. All soon realised, however, that the "beauty of the region" would not sustain them and that many were ill-prepared for life in the bush.

Consider the contrast between nineteenth-century Muskoka and London. The latter might conjure up images of "Dickensian poverty," but even its most deprived denizens were exposed to a dynamic world of technological innovations, centuries of history, a vibrant street life, and streetscapes studded with parks, mansions, and churches. Contrast this with Muskoka's primitive isolation. Certainly, those charged with inspecting the verities of their experiments commented on this and provoked "A Horner's Nest of Dissent" and acrimonious debate (93). For one missionary-cum-clergyman, his clients were now experiencing a life of "hardship, privation, and wretchedness" and he concluded that "the poorest labourer in England is far better off, and far more comfortable" (110).

Predictably, the 1880 Ontario Agricultural Commission's report on the province's agriculture attributed the failure of settlement in Muskoka to the "moral weakness... lack of agricultural knowledge and prior experience" of the settlers, as well as the "infertility of their land" (146). However, as Williams' analysis demonstrates, a recurring theme had been that no one took responsibility for the obvious misfortunes of the free grants—not the emigrant enthusiasts, philanthropists, politicians, or businessmen. There had been some critics and, eventually, trade unions got into the act when, in 1883,

the Trades and Labour Council presented a report on the detrimental effect of immigration on the Canadian economy and immigrants' quality of life. And there were other factors in the "Waning Free Grants" process (159). The opening of the Canadian West by the Dominion Land Act offered a more attractive option than the free-grants of the Ontario North. In addition, burgeoning urban-industrial opportunities eroded rural society everywhere. Accordingly, the Free Grants Act was discontinued for settlers in 1941 but, ironically, was still available for veterans!

So, despite the rhetoric, Muskoka did not become a major agricultural region, even though there is today a small but healthy farming community stimulated by the demand for local produce. The reality is that Muskoka farms could have prospered in those limited and dispersed areas with good soil and little rock, even if surrounded by forests, which had their own economic opportunities. But the legislated settlement schemes of the day were laid out on a procrustean bed of lot-surveys, not allowing a dynamic functional unit based on potential opportunities determined by the geology, vegetation, and location.

Williams does make the point that there were winners and losers. Despite growing negativity about the settlement experiment, some of Muskoka's towns and villages did thrive. Indeed, in August 1874, Lord and Lady Dufferin visited the nascent Gravenhurst and, the following year, the arrival of Northern Railway of Canada was marked by promotional ceremonies including its president and corporate directors. Other centres such as Bracebridge, Huntsville, Rosseau, Port Carling, and Uffington became more than names on maps as they attracted businesses, agricultural societies, fall fairs, and other trappings of nascent communities.

And, of course, some catered to a burgeoning tourist industry, as people turned to Muskoka, where wilderness was increasingly accessible via steamboats and railroads. Local employment shifted to guiding, the construction of homes, boats, and docks, and other demands of wealthy visitors. However, these were not lucrative and the social fabric was changing as Muskoka became the domain of wealthy seasonal residents, with repercussions for the locals in the twenty-first century. As Muskoka became a destination for the wealthy, for others it was a disadvantaged region with its under-employment or unemployment, high property values, and poor public services.

The author acknowledges the interaction with the Native peoples of the region and demonstrates how the contemporary commentary swung "from contempt to grudging respect" (88). Over the years, the indigenous peoples were gradually relocated to reserves at Christian Islands, the Gibson River area, Parry Island, Beausoleil Island, and Rama. Williams does make a passing allusion to successive governments renegeing on many agreements and to how Native leaders were forced to "repeatedly remind authorities of broken promises" (89). This too is very much part of this counter-narrative of Muskoka and merits more attention in our current society.

Clearly, what emerges out of Williams' scholarship is that, even if the many warnings and abundant experience had been heeded, the Free Grants policy would have still gone ahead. The ethos of populating empty lands dominated the imagination of both the colonizing powers and the colonized. In understanding this, Williams has taken a bottom-up approach with a focus on emigration policy and the experience of thousands of settlers who once attempted settlement in a region now filled with cottages and resorts. The place of the Free

Grant settlers in this region's distinct history had been lost to its new image, and Williams attempts here "to give them the voice and recognition they rarely have been

afforded" (176). She has succeeded!

Brian S. Osborne
Professor emeritus, Queen's University

Italians of Fort William's East End, 1907-1969

by Piovesana Roy

Thunder Bay: Institute of Italian Studies – Lakehead University, 2011.
\$22.95, paperback. 174 pages. ISBN: 978-0-97380-421-8 (www.iisluc.com)

For anyone who has been to the City of Thunder Bay, Italian culture, language, and traditions are an integral aspect of the city's character. Those of Italian descent comprise over 16% of the total population, with the Italian language spoken as a first language (2.8%) more regularly than French (2011 Census). For over 100 years, the contributions of successive waves of migrants from various areas of what is now Italy have played a core role in the region's development and have left a mark on the political, economic, social, and cultural fabric of the city.

In *Italians of Fort William's East End, 1907-1969*, Roy Piovesana provides an important contribution to both regional and national literature exploring the history of Italian-Canadians. He uses the East End of what was then Fort William, now the south side of Thunder Bay, as a lens to undertake, in a classic sense, a social history exploring the "ordinary" lives of Italians who lived in

the area (5).

The East End was figuratively and literally on the other side of the Canadian Pacific Railway Tracks. While in the national narrative the East bound the country together in the decades following Confederation, at the Lakehead the East End symbolized an east-west barrier between the spaces that recently arrived immigrants inhabited and the neighbourhoods dominated by those of British descent and more established, largely Protestant, workers. The East End was a complex and multifaceted area with the largest Slovak community in pre-1914 Canada and five national parish churches (Italian, Polish, Slovak, Ukrainian Catholic, and Ukrainian Greek Orthodox) existed in very close proximity (2-3).

Piovesana's analysis is both inspired by and methodologically built upon that advocated by the late Michael Katz in his landmark study *The People of Hamilton West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth Century City* (1975).

