

Sharon Wall  
*The Nurture of Nature: Childhood,  
 Antimodernism, and Ontario Summer Camps,  
 1920–55.*

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Sharon Wall's engaging analysis of the cultural meanings of "fresh air" and "wilderness" within the Canadian iconic camping experience not only provides an important contribution to the study of leisure and recreation in early-twentieth century Canada, but it will also strike a resonate chord for anyone who has experienced camp as a child. In her examination, Wall looks at the intersections between camping, child-rearing and identity formation as it was influenced by the ideology of early camp administrators and educational psychologists of the period. She asks her readers to consider and reflect upon the implications of class, gender, sexuality and race—and how these factors shaped changing notions of childhood within the summer camp experience. The scope of her analysis examines the history of the Ontario camping movement during the interwar and immediate postwar years (1920–1955). As such, it is a tight and focused study. This text offers insights into the ways Canadians struggled to find meaning in modern society through presumably antimodern leisure time pursuits. Wall explores the contradiction that although camps were designed as escapes from modernity, their programming often reinscribed these values. Her premise: "born of antimodernism, the summer camp was a modern animal" (250).

Methodologically, Wall's analysis examines the camp experience from the perspectives of camp administrators, camp promoters, and the campers themselves. Through archival camp records and interview data, she investigates the gap between the image of camp as an educational innovation, and first-hand accounts of the campers who experienced it. Framed within the broader contextual scholarship about Canadian attitudes and actions toward wilderness and the appeal of the wild, the focus of her

work is narrowly defined to the sixty-three private, fresh-air and agency camps that were established in Ontario between the First and Second World Wars. As such, her investigation is regionally focused and largely reflects Ontario's urban social values.

Organized thematically in six chapters, Wall begins by identifying the three kinds of camps under investigation: private, fresh air and agency—and how they provided “back to nature” experience for a diversity of affluent, poor and religious groups. Chapter One examines how modernity shaped urban life, and traces the need to categorize space as either “good” or “bad” in modernist thinking. Wall describes the antimodernist agenda—designed to idealize “the natural” and escape the negative influences of the city—and compares this rhetoric to actual camp programs, curriculum, architecture, and the approach to geography that, in effect, transformed “the natural” and “modernized” the wilderness. Chapters Two and Three examine the camp experience as a crucible for class formation, with a focus on private camps for the rich and fresh air camps for the poor. In these chapters, Wall examines how camp curriculum and programming shaped both class and gender normalcy. Private camps socialized upper class children into a place of privilege and leadership via exposure to the rugged outdoors while fresh-air camps aimed to rehabilitate the health of poor children. In the latter, campers and their mothers were exposed to middle-class values designed to reform their habits and shape moral character. In Chapter Four, Wall examines the summer camp environment as one of the most significant educational innovations of the century for advocates of progressive education. As an environment that was both natural and isolated (away from the influence of home or consumer culture) the camp experience offered the potential of “making modern childhood the natural way” (140). Wall explores the impact of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century theories of child development and mental hygiene, and discusses the shift from hereditarian views of mental deficiency to progressivist ideas of environmental intervention. Despite their antimodernist agenda, however, Wall exposes camp administrators' intent as one of mixed success. She argues that camp administrators may have boasted that their programs were truly progressive and child-centered, yet the camp experience was largely characterized by modernist practices that promoted order, clear authoritarian demarcation, and regimentation.

Finally, in Chapters Five and Six, Wall considers how gender and sexuality and Native-white relations found expression in the camp context. For example, Wall examines how sex-specific camp experiences were designed to reinforce gender norms (to teach boys codes of manliness and civility, and for the girls, to protect femininity and inculcate domesticity) while coeducational camps reinforced “the natural” choice of heterosexuality through specific camp protocols (sanctions against the sharing of beds and any physical intimacy). In Chapter Six, Wall examines romanticized representations of Aboriginal people as those who lived “the enviable simple life” whereas whites were “impoverished by modernity's flow” (230). She critiques the white, modernist, colonialist fascination of “playing Indian,” and explores the camping movement's contribution to the ongoing rationalization of colonization through the promotion of negative images of Indian savagery. She argues that camp activities both silenced the history of Aboriginal culture and served to convey a false and

fabricated presentation of Aboriginal traditions.

For scholars who are interested in the history of the interplay between the environment and experiential education, and for those who wish to ponder the ways in which Canadians tried to find meaning in modernity, *The Nurture of Nature* has much to offer. As Graeme Wynn suggests in his foreword, Wall provides no definitive answers to this paradox—and “challenges us to wonder if whether we can, so to speak, ever be (pre)modern ... again” (xvi). Wall’s analysis demonstrates how the realm of leisure (camping) is shaped by relations of power, identity and meaning. As such, it will certainly cause the reader to consider—the next time he or she steps into a canoe—the ways in which the modernist agenda, and the meaning of nature, formed a complicated part of the social, cultural and emotional history of leisure activity for Canadians in the early-twentieth century.