

Studies in Documents

Picturing Conservation in Canada: The Commission of 1909-1921

by DAVID WOOD

It shall be the duty of the Commission to take into consideration all questions which may be brought to its notice relating to the conservation and better utilization of the natural resources of Canada, to make such inventories, collect and disseminate such information, conduct such investigations inside and outside of Canada, and frame such recommendations as seem conducive to the accomplishment of that end.¹

The Commission of Conservation looms large among the agencies that have promoted conservation thought and practice in Canada. It flourished for over a decade and had a high profile inside and outside the country because of its vigour and progressiveness. It produced ten reports of its annual meeting, a four-page monthly newspaper, seven volumes of a periodical called *Conservation of Life*, and over 150 special research reports (many of which had appeared as part of the proceedings of an annual meeting).² As well as being progressive in its research ventures and its theoretical orientations, it also made exceptional effective use of good quality photographs to illustrate its projects and reinforce its proposals. So much the more puzzling, therefore, that it has not carved out a commensurate archival niche.

There is a rumour that the Commission was, in a sense, a casualty of its own success: because it was a free-standing body, formally responsible not to any ministry of the government but only to the Governor in Council through its annual report, the wide-ranging activities of the Commission could trample on the territories and the sensitivities of a number of government departments. Indeed, in 1921 during the House of Commons debate on a bill to repeal the Act under which the Commission was established, Prime Minister Meighen said that the Commission "has invaded the province of one department of government after another, one branch after another, and necessarily it has duplicated services...."³ He charged that the Commission even appropriated work done by government departments, "and very soon the results of the activities of officers of the Government would appear in a very handsomely bound volume with the name of the Conservation Commission on the cover." His coup de grace was to claim that the Commission was "a body for which no one is answerable and over which no one has any

control,” and it “was intended to be, or at least ought to be, temporary.”⁴ He did not point out that the Commission had been the proud creation of the government of a different party.

The establishment of the Commission in 1909 had been suffused with optimism. The Laurier Government was still in office, and its former influential Minister of the Interior, Clifford Sifton, was chosen to head the Commission. The idea of a Commission of Conservation emanated from the United States, where Theodore Roosevelt had established one, and specifically from the “Declaration of Principles” of the North American Conservation Conference of 1909. The declaration of the Conservation Conference was signed by the ten delegates, representing the United States, Canada, Newfoundland, and Mexico. At odds with Meighen’s supposition, the conference insisted that “there should be established in each country a *permanent* Conservation Commission.”⁵ The conference laid down the themes for a conservation movement, beginning, surprisingly, with “Public Health” because “we recognize that to accomplish ... national efficiency in the highest possible degree ... the maintenance and improvement of public health is a first essential.”⁶

Clifford Sifton projected the fervour of the conference’s declaration into his vision of a Commission of Conservation for Canada when he addressed the first annual meeting of the Canadian group in January 1910. He emphasized the Commission’s independence from government ministries, the breadth of membership—thirty-two in all, including *ex officio* members from the federal and all provincial governments, as well as a “working membership” largely from the universities—and the mission to assess Canada’s resource base and to offer advice to anyone who might be eligible to benefit from it. The character of the Commission was so exceptional (to use Sifton’s word) and its membership so finely balanced, to neutralize jealousies and political biases, that it was claimed to be “probably the most truly national ... body that has ever been constituted in Canada. ... It can be the vehicle by which enlightened and educated men can bring an influence directly to bear on the administration of affairs.”⁷

One is inclined to accept Sifton’s insistence that he was dissociating himself from party politics in his dedication to the Commission. Political stripes run deep, however, and it appears that, as much as anything, it was petty and somewhat political jealousies that gradually undermined Sifton’s—and eventually the Commission’s—role. A change of federal government in 1911 brought three Conservative cabinet ministers onto the Commission; they or likeminded successors remained until the death of the Commission in 1921. Despite Sifton’s growing apprehension, culminating in his resignation in 1919, the Commission carried on a vigorous program of inventory and research. Some representative books published by the Commission include *Water-powers of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta* (1916), *The Trent Watershed Survey* (1913), *The Canadian Oyster* (1913), *Altitudes in the Dominion of Canada* (the second edition, 1915), *Conservation of Coal in Canada* (1914), *Conservation of Fish, Birds and Game* (1916), *Forest Protection in Canada* (one volume 1912, another 1913-14), *Electric Generation and Distribution in Canada* (1918), *Fur-farming in Canada* (1913), *Rural Planning and Development* (1917), and *Report of the Preliminary and 2nd Conference of the Civic Improvement League* (1915, 1916).⁸ Many of these

publications were illustrated with generally high quality photographs, in addition to a few diagrams and maps. The Commission also published ten annual reports between 1910 and 1919, and many of the photographs were also used there. The Commission regularly issued its news-sheet (*Conservation*), in English and French, from 1912 to 1921; it was overtly designed to publicize its activities by making information readily available to newspapers, and inviting copying. Not surprisingly, there was a higher incidence of photographs in the news-sheet than in any of the other publications from the Commission. The final publication from this agency was a more scholarly journal, called *Conservation of Life*, which began as a monthly in 1914 but quickly shifted to a quarterly by 1915, changed its name to *Town Planning and Conservation of Life* in 1920, and died with the Commission in 1921.⁹ Few photographs appeared in this publication; most had been used in one of the other publications.

The emphasis in this article is on the collection of photographs left by the Commission of Conservation. Its role as a publicly-funded agency has been discussed in a number of articles and publications.¹⁰ Most of the photographs can be linked to one or other of the committees through which the Commission operated. When the organization was being designed in 1909, it was influenced by the Declaration of Principles of the North American Conservation Conference. The resulting structure included committees focused on the six themes in the Declaration:

- 1) Forests
- 2) Lands
- 3) Minerals
- 4) Health
- 5) Waters and Water-Powers
- 6) Fisheries, Game, and Fur-Bearing Animals.

A reflection of the sophistication and progressiveness of the administration of the Commission was the establishment of a seventh committee devoted entirely to "public relations": the Committee on the Press and Co-operating Organizations.¹¹ The six themes did not lend themselves equally to illustration by photography, and it is likely that the enthusiasm for photographs and the care given to their preservation varied somewhat from committee to committee. The constitution of the collection seems to bear this out.

The Collection

The surviving photographs of the Commission are now in the National Archives of Canada, as Accession 1966-091, although no reference to them is found in the *Guide to Canadian Photographic Archives*¹² or in the card file on the photographic holdings in the National Archives. The collection was eventually tracked down through the computer listing at the National Archives under "Conservation." There are roughly 550 prints mounted on cardboard, in two boxes. While there are no original negatives, copies of a few of the prints have been made recently for this author.

The collection was subjected to at least two systems of classification. The representation of the six committees is very uneven, either because the committee theme did not lend itself to photographs or because some groups of photographs were not preserved. Of the roughly fifty classificatory labels that appear on the prints, about forty per cent of them deal in some way with the forests, and another forty per cent with using the land for farming (including homesteading, and crop and implement improvements). These proportions approximately reflect numbers of prints in the collection, although many of the pictures can relate to more than one theme. The remaining twenty per cent covers a mixture of topics, many under the label miscellaneous, including railway rights of way and maintenance, road construction (with some of heavy machinery cutting down hills in Toronto), and flooding. There were surprisingly few illustrations of mining, water-power installation, or town planning, despite their inherent importance and—in the case of the last—high profile in the activities of the agency. The classification systems, however, are of no use to the modern researcher because there is no obvious organization of the collection. Over the years the grouping of prints has been thoroughly broken up, and dividers and labels have been lost or misplaced. It is possible that some photographs that originated with the Commission will be found in other places. One wonders what hands the collection passed through between the acrimonious abolition of the Commission in 1921 and the arrival of the material at the Archives in the 1960s.

The Commission of Conservation was progressive for its time; its message, however, was an unsubtle mixture of exhortation and instruction (see **Figure 1**). The tenor is revealed by the captions that accompanied the photographs; they are reproduced with the selection included here. Although the photograph was probably more effective than the written word, still the lesson had to be “rubbed in.” It was common for the promotion of agricultural improvement to begin with mild ridicule of the old way (**Figure 2**) and then move to a display of the superior alternative. The error of the farming activity in **Figure 3**, in eastern Canada, is only revealed by reading the caption that berates “a practice that should be discouraged.” The other face of the instructional technique was encouragement by showing what could be done. **Figure 4** is a visual demonstration of an exceptional crop that supposedly was due to an improved strain of barley. There are many other illustrations of good farming, including improved implements, proper storage facilities, field preparation, rotation of crops, and superior stock and seed.

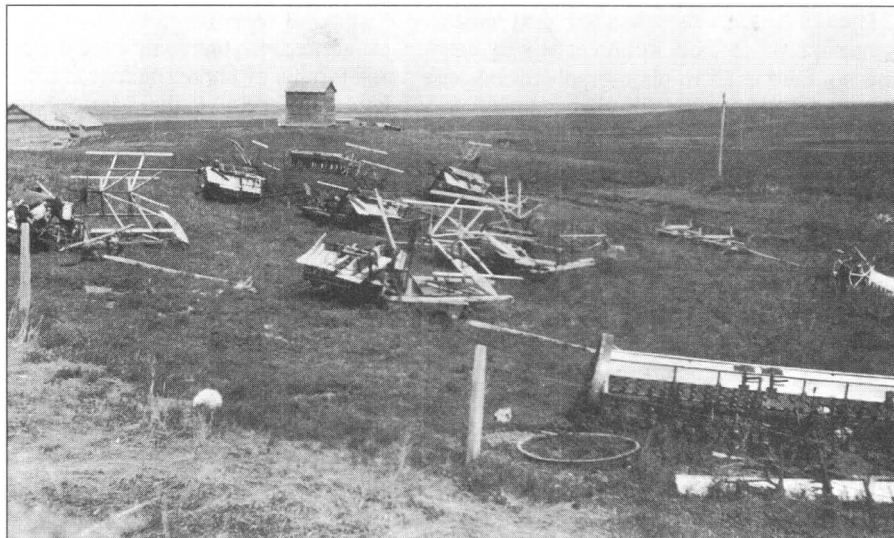


Figure 1 “Wrong way to ‘store’ farm implements” (Commission of Conservation caption). National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), (negative no. PA187140).

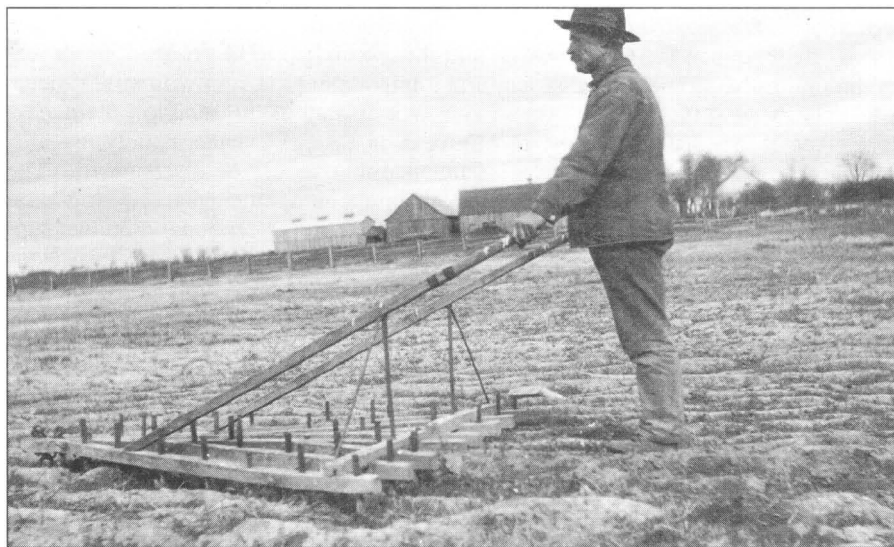


Figure 2 “A type of implement which should be discarded. It does poor work and it requires just as much man-power to operate it as would an up-to-date five or six-section harrow, which would do three times the work.” (PA187142)

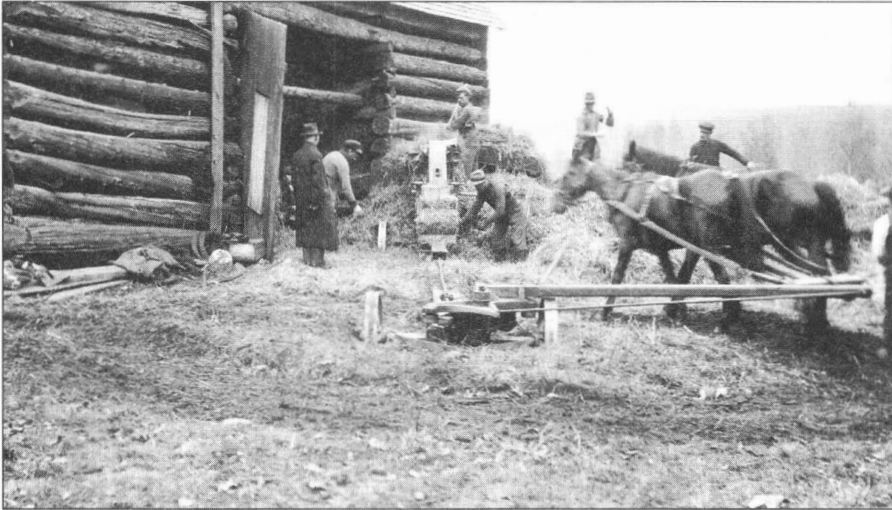


Figure 3 *“Baling straw for shipping away from the farm. This is a practice that should be discouraged.” (PA186748)*



Figure 4 *“O.A.C. Barley, 52 bushels per acre, on the farm of Jas. Sutherland, Namao, Alberta.” (PA187144)*

The largest number of photographs on a specific theme emanated from the various studies of the forests of Canada, with a considerable emphasis on avoiding the fires that destroyed so much valuable timber. Desirable practices were illustrated with examples of the good and the bad in Canada, as well as excellent photographs of United States' practices that could be emulated. These included the proper tidying of a site and disposal of slash after cutting (**Figure 5**), as well as the vitally important clearing of railway rights of way to minimize fires caused by sparks from locomotives. Another aspect of conservation related to forests was the replanting with conifers of excessively light soils in Ontario and Quebec (**Figure 6**). Related to this was the strong recommendation, in Howe and White's *Trent Watershed Survey*, that substantial areas of ruined Shield farms should be returned to trees. Ruined farms meant ruined people, and according to the authors "...the moral tone of some communities was very depressing. The explanation is traceable to the conditions of securing a livelihood, not to the people...[- to] the dreary hopelessness of attempting to secure returns by agricultural activities, from a soil inherently adapted only for forest use."¹³ The only reasonable action for land and people was to evacuate the residents.



Figure 5 "Fire hazard along provincial government wagon road in southern British Columbia, due to failure of construction gang to pile and burn debris when building road. This condition is now being gradually corrected." (PA187139)



Figure 6 “Forest Service plantation of white pine and scotch pine, made in 1911 on sand dunes near Lachute, Quebec.” There were also scenes of similar plantations in Durham and Norfolk counties in Ontario. (PA187145)

From among the many miscellaneous topics illustrated by the collection, the remaining prints provide a sample. There was interest in establishing windbreaks on the interior grasslands, as shown in **Figure 7**, although the species chosen seem rather odd. Some of the best photographs in the collection seem to have originated with the studies of forests in British Columbia, including a fascinating series of the mountains and terrace lands around Lake Okanagan (**Figure 8**). Finally, good planning is presented in a few shots of fine farms such as the carefully planned one on variable land near Antigonish, Nova Scotia (**Figure 9**).



Figure 7 *“Plantation of cottonwood, ash, maple, and elm at Bradwell, Saskatchewan, on the line of the G. T. P. [Grand Trunk Pacific]. Planted in 1906. Photo June, 1910.” (PA187136)*



Figure 8 *“Looking west across the lake to Summerland. Northern end of Okanagan range on the left in the background.” (PA187138)*

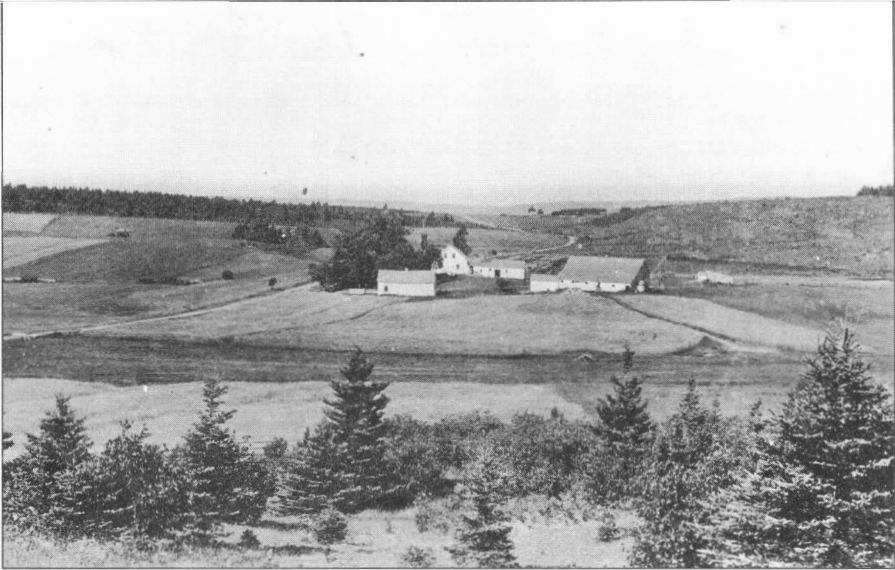


Figure 9 “Maitland Dairy Farm, Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Land properly classified and planned.” (PA187137)

Conclusion

The Commission of Conservation was remarkably modern in the inquiries it initiated and in its operation, including using effective photographs to promote its messages. The major message of the Commission, as with its counterpart in the United States, was “Avoid Waste” of the nation’s resources. The Commission was an agency of progressive environmental management; protection of nature-for-its-own-sake was not part of its mandate. Most of its messages have now been widely accepted; there has been movement toward a more personal definition of conservation and in some quarters even the acceptance of the need to protect nature as a good in itself.

The decade of the Commission of Conservation, despite the period of wrestling with political and professional competitors, was a major period of development of conservation assessment and practice in Canada. While the unique collection of photographs generated in the many inquiries by the Commission is no longer the publicity and instructional tool it was in the 1910s, it is of great value in providing windows on many aspects of Canada at that time.

Notes

- 1 Canada, 8-9 Edw. VII c. 27, "An Act to Establish a Commission for the Conservation of Natural Resources," s. 10.
- 2 Marion Villiers Higgins, *Canadian Government Publications: A Manual for Librarians* (Chicago, 1935), pp. 505-14.
- 3 Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 11-12 Geo. V, 16 May 1921, p. 3959.
- 4 The various quotations are all from *Debates*.
- 5 North American Conservation Conference, "Declaration of Principles," printed as *Canada, Sessional Paper No. 90*, 8-9 Edw. VII (1909), third last paragraph. Emphasis added by author.
- 6 *Ibid.*, fourth paragraph.
- 7 Clifford Sifton, "Inaugural Address," in Canada, Commission of Conservation, *Report of the First Annual Meeting. Held at Ottawa, January 18th to 21st* (Ottawa, 1910), pp. 5, 27.
- 8 M.V. Higgins, *Canadian Government Publications*, pp. 505-14.
- 9 It is noticeable that although there are oblique references to the war in the publications of the Commission, none of the photographs depict "the war effort."
- 10 F.J. Thorpe, "Historical Perspective on the 'Resources for Tomorrow' Conference in Canada," in Northern Affairs and National Resources, *Resources for Tomorrow. Conference Background Papers I* (Ottawa, 1961), pp. 1-13; C. Ray Smith and David R. Witty, "Conservation, Resources and Environment: An Exposition and Critical Evaluation of the Commission of Conservation, Canada," *Plan 11* (1970, 1972), pp. 55-71, 199-216; Alan H. Armstrong, "Thomas Adams and the Commission of Conservation," in L.O. Gertler, ed., *Planning the Canadian Environment* (Montreal, 1968); P.J. Smith, "The Principle of Utility and the Origins of Planning Legislation in Alberta, 1912- 1975," in Alan F.J. Artibise and Gilbert A. Stelter, eds., *The Usable Urban Past: Planning and Politics in the Modern Canadian City* (Toronto, 1979), pp. 196-225; Oiva Saarinen, "The Influence of Thomas Adams and the British New Towns Movement in the Planning of Canadian Resource Communities," in *The Usable Urban Past*, pp. 268-92; A.F.J. Artibise and G.A. Stelter, "Conservation Planning and Urban Planning: the Canadian Commission of Conservation in Historical Perspective," in Roger Kain, ed., *Planning for Conservation* (New York, 1980), pp. 17-36; Stewart Renfrew, "The Commission of Conservation," *Douglas Library Notes XIX* (Spring 1971), pp. 17-27.
- 11 Canada, Commission of Conservation, *Report of First Annual Meeting*, p.xv.
- 12 Christopher Seifried, ed., *Guide to Canadian Photographic Archives* (Ottawa, 1984).
- 13 J.H. White, in C.D. Howe, J.H. White, and B.E. Fernow, *Trent Watershed Survey. A Reconnaissance*. Commission of Conservation, Committee on Forests, 1913, p. 97.