



**University
of Victoria**

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

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MA (University of Guelph, 2009)
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**“A ‘Colony of Unrequited Dreams’?
Settler Colonialism and the Failed-Settlement Narrative
in the Ottawa-Huron Tract, 1850–1910”**

Department of History

Thursday, March 1, 2018
9:30 A.M.
Clearihue Building
Room B007

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Eric Sager, Department of History, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Lynne Marks, Department of History, UVic (Member)
Dr. Peter Baskerville, Department of History and Classics, University of Alberta (Outside Member)

External Examiner:

Dr. Jack Little, Department of History, Simon Fraser University

Chair of Oral Examination:

Dr. Marie Vautier, Department of French, UVic

Dr. Stephen Evans, Acting Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies

Abstract

In the 1850s, the government of Canada West initiated a project to colonize a vast region of the Canadian Shield known as the Ottawa-Huron Tract. Later, in his influential interpretation, Arthur Lower argued the myth of the inexorable forward movement of the settlement frontier was here shattered by a reality of lakes, rocks, and forest inherently unsuitable for farming. This refrain continues to be repeated by proponents of what I call the failed-settlement narrative. A contrasting narrative emphasizes the perseverance of settlers and their descendants and highlights a distinctive culture which emerged from the mixing of an ethnically-diverse population. This dissertation was born of an interest in the tension between these competing narratives. On the one hand, the failed-settlement narrative ignores the fact many people succeeded in farming on the Shield. On the other hand, the romanticized image of the pioneer is disconnected from the larger historical contexts which shaped the settlement process and informed those notions of success and failure by which we judge the actions of people in the past. If the colonization project was an unmitigated failure, how do we account for the persistence of settlers and their descendants? If the landscape and soils of the Shield were unsuited to cultivation, why did people continue to cultivate the land for decades after the settlement project was condemned? What follows is an exploration of these questions, focusing on the township of Brudenell, Ontario as a site of Canadian colonial experimentation.

Failure and desertion were certainly important parts of the settlement experience in the Ottawa-Huron Tract, but these themes have been overemphasized by historians. Early on, many settlers realized the variability of the landscape in places like Brudenell and found small parcels of land which they turned to a variety of purposes. Settlers took advantage of government policies that made landowning a realistic goal even for those of modest means and diverse backgrounds. By embracing new and emerging forms of local authority settlers were also able to tune the structures of the colonial state to further their own interests. They profited from the proximate shanty market for agricultural produce wherever practicable, while also pursuing economic activities oriented toward both local, regional, and national markets. Economic opportunities and the accessibility of land in Brudenell allowed cultural groups to develop spatially-distinct communities, which expanded to fill much of the available land in the township. This revision of the failed settlement narrative stands out in the historiography of the Ottawa-Huron Tract, but dovetails with histories of settlement in other agriculturally-marginal regions of nineteenth-century Canada.