

Sea to Sea on a Bike: Perspectives of Canada and Canadians

We stand pondering the multitudes of choices among the bright colours of gleaming produce in the Sioux Sault Marie supermarket. A smiling stranger approaches and begins...“Excuse me, we passed you a couple of hours ago on the road... would you mind if I asked where you are headed?... Where did you start?... Are you family?... How long is it taking?... Why are you doing this?... Wow, that’s amazing!... I have lived here my whole life... I admire you... Yup, this is a quiet town... It is struggling... I work at the... The big issue is...”

This sort of interaction was a daily occurrence on our three-month plus family bicycle trip across Canada from sea to sea in the spring and summer of 2011. We traveled more than 7600 kilometers, and the “Fellowship”, to borrow a term from a set of more famous adventurers, included my wife Ginny, my two adult sons, Shane and Evan, plus Evan’s partner Leah and me. My aim here is two-fold: (1) to illustrate the process of experiencing and learning about community, culture and geography by traveling through it on a bike, and (2) to share some of the subjective and personal perspectives and understandings I gained of Canada and Canadians through this process. Let me begin by arguing that a marathon bike trip can be a very powerful interpretive and experiential process of place that facilitates a unique and valuable means of understanding diverse cultural and geographical landscapes.

Why is cultural meaning finding particularly suited to a long bike trip? First, it provides a mammoth amount of rich and multifaceted experience— highs, lows, wind, rain, snow, people, communities and culture. We moved across the lands slowly and generally rode alone, though our trip mates were not far away. This provided lots of time for repeated cycles of experience, observation, reflection, and questioning. The time on our bicycles gave us the space to generate ideas for a daily blog that we took turns writing, uploading it from an iphone. The blog posts increased our tendency to discuss, document and find meaning in our daily adventures, as we wanted to discuss our perceptions and stories with each other before typing them into the phone.

Second, a long bike journey facilitates an openness to experience that enables diverse opportunities for learning. We quickly gave up any inclination to set goals in a daily or weekly context, or to seriously try to strategically plan or control our destiny. Bicyclists are at the whim of Mother Nature and must be open and spontaneous in looking for opportunities and destinations on the road ahead. We could try to set a goal to get to a specific town by the end of the day or week, but if the wind turned or the heavens opened, we would not arrive. We quickly learned that fighting the elements was a

dangerous, losing battle. If we arrived to find no campground, we were at the mercy of those we met. The long bike trip pushed us to live patiently and openly in the present. The past faded after a couple weeks of cycling. The future beyond the trip was distant and overwhelmed by the immediacy of cycling, eating and sleeping. We were constantly moving through places we had never been. We knew no one, so understanding and asking questions about our immediate world became the modus operandi. We were self-sufficient and had no ongoing stake in these communities and no need to influence them. Since we were endlessly moving, the differences between one place and another jumped out at us. We were not blinded by the implicit assumptions of one context. Comparisons were inevitably a part of our daily existence.

Third, the trip was a rich research process because it presented a myriad of fascinating opportunities to interact with and understand the lives of others and their communities. In part because we were on bikes doing what many perceived to be a crazy adventure, and in part because we kept to the small towns and small roads, many people invited us into their lives. When I have walked into a community grocery store as a car traveler passing through, rarely have I attracted lengthy conversations. If we walked into a grocery store with bike helmets and safety vests, it took a long time to get out even if we never initiated a conversation. People were curious and they approached us and soon we were learning about their worlds and vice versa. We were accessible to a wide range of people because in rural Canada, the one thing everyone shares is the need to be on the road. They often felt they had “met” us on the road before we met them, and they were curious. We had the what, where, why conversation hundreds of times, and after we shared our story, inevitably we ended up talking to them about their lives. People said how they admired the passion, vision, and/or exertion that it took to undertake our journey, and they were impressed that we were doing it as a family. In turn, they were then open to sharing their passions, views and priorities. We were not there to pass judgment. We were transitory and non-threatening to their lives, so they shared.

We were also non-threatening because given our attire and hybrid, upright bikes; we were clearly not “expert” bikers. Our roughshod appearance communicated that we were not a financial opportunity for tourism entrepreneurs. Whenever we needed help, and even when we did not, people empathized with our situation and volunteered assistance.

I stood behind Ginny in the broiling late afternoon heat in the cramped office of the Trois Riviere Municipal Campground. Ginny was staring down the exasperated summer student clerk. Even with my limited French, I could comprehend the crisis. Ginny would never agree to the campsite terms and fees, and she was right, yet it was too late to bike anywhere else. Ginny repeated in French, “that is outrageous, you cannot require us pay \$74 for two campsites, we are just 5 people with

bikes, and the water is not even drinkable.” The clerk glared back and repeated her position... “I am sorry madam, that is your only choice, where else are you going to go?”... Back and forth the stand off continued... We had finally met our match; no one would help us out of this mess... Then from behind the clerk came a voice, and Michael, a campground staff person, stepped forward. “OK, come along, I get it, you all can come home with me and camp in our backyard. I’ll get my car.”

There was always someone there to lend a hand. Many folks would say things like, “I want to help because I know that I will need help some day, or one of my family will, and what goes around, comes around.” People saw themselves in our experiences, even if they did not have the slightest desire to undertake such a trip.

In sum, the bike trip was an excellent context for learning and interpretive research. We were grounded in the present, open to everything around us with the time to reflect, compare and question. We were non-threatening and accessible to everyone, and wide ranges of people were keen to share with us the meaning and priorities in their lives.

Of course there were significant limitations as well. Rarely did we have more than one conversation with an individual and often only a few conversations in a specific area. There was little ability to question intensively or to document our observations beyond the blog. We experienced and observed the landscapes deeply, but we were only hearing the issues on the top of peoples’ minds. This process holds great potential for misinterpretation and reliance on stereotypes.

A second major limitation is that we only traveled on a few roads, in some places, and my interpretations are based on these experiences and interpreted through my values. Others may go different places with different results. My use of the terms “Canada” and “Canadians” is loose and inaccurate, more appropriately read as a bit of Canada and some Canadians. We did not travel at all in the North, Prince Edward Island, or Newfoundland. Regardless, we did experience an enormous number of places. With these large caveats in mind, what did I learn about “Canada” and “Canadians” based on seeing the country on a bike?

Cross-Country Themes

Canadians grapple with whether there is one national identity, and after three months on the road, it was the diversity of perspectives that seemed most prominent. The differences in priorities and worldviews from residents of BC ski resorts to dusty prairie towns, to Northern Ontario mining centres, to small Québec farming communities or Acadian coastal villages seemed enormous. There only seemed to be one common characteristic across this land, the willingness in every community to welcome us and help us whatever the circumstances.

We gobble down our giant, delicious breakfasts at the Dalhousie New Brunswick truck stop, finally warming up after getting soaked riding to the restaurant through the pouring rain on an infrequent rest day. A middle-aged woman approached us... "Excuse me, I hear you are biking across the country. Is it for a cause?" Evan responded, "No, it's just for ourselves." "Oh," she replies, "well here's \$20 toward your breakfast because I really admire what you are doing."

In the oil fracking town of Stoughton, Saskatchewan, a woman walking her dog invited us to camp in her backyard when we approached her with a question as to where to buy bottled water. A friendly biker stopped to fix our bike on Manitoulin Island, a stranger we never talked to bought us muffins in Sparwood, British Columbia. Frequently we seemed to have little in common with the people we encountered in terms of lifestyle or values. The welcome and the warmth were the consistent Canadian characteristics.

A second consistent cross-country theme was geographical, and would seem blatantly obvious to travelers from past times. The routes and experience of living and traveling across Canada are defined by water. The waters are beautiful, and ever present, from the mountain glaciers and raging rivers of British Columbia, to the Prairie pastures and farms drained by alternatively drought stricken or flooding waterways, to the undeniable power of the Great Lakes and the Saint Lawrence River, and then on to the Atlantic Ocean. The major east-west roads across this country follow the waterways because they were built after the waterways had been established as the primary travel routes. Aboriginal peoples and early Europeans moved by water. We paralleled a major body of water for most all of our three-month journey. In an era of cars, trucks and airplanes, it is important to remember that it is water that defines how we move through and live on this landscape. At times it was whipped up with the wind, at times gentle, at times raging, but it was ever present. It moved us profoundly to experience the beauty of this country, slowly and deeply in diverse seasons and weather conditions.

A final consistent theme was socio-economic. Rural Canada, where we spent most all of our time, is struggling, with the apparent exception of the towns and villages of the Saint Lawrence River Valley. Each region had its own challenges, but the poor infrastructure, loss of young people, deteriorating downtowns and shopping centre sprawl were consistent themes. These problems are deep and complex but most upsetting was the destructiveness of the shopping malls dominated by multinational chains. Walmart is the poster child for many others outlets. The malls centralize the activity across a region and suck dry the economic vitality of towns and small centres across a wide area. Government then centralizes health and education services in these locales. Wrentham, Alberta was a powerful example. We planned to stop there to camp for the evening and drop into the local store to get water and ask about the camping options. As we entered

town, we met a man and his son in their driveway. They explained that the last of the three stores had recently closed, and the school and health centre had shifted 35 km away to Taber.

The reality that the economic pie is getting smaller in Rural Canada is very challenging to address, the fact that the pie centres on one location and everyone drives there is particularly pernicious. People see and complain about the destructive trend, but we did not hear of initiatives to control or reverse the process. In Québec, where rural areas seemed far healthier, the sprawl was less present and less dominant. Community values seemed to encompass a lifestyle where people patronized their small towns and recognized the social and economic benefits. Signs on the road said: "We value agriculture."

Finally, and sadly, at the very bottom of the socio-economic pile, in all regions across the country were aboriginal communities. We had few interactions with aboriginal Canadians but the poor housing conditions and social problems were very evident as we bicycled through numbers of First Nations. There were a couple of exceptions in Northern Ontario where there were new, evidently flourishing businesses and community centres demonstrating cultural pride. I could not pretend to grasp all of the issues, but clearly there are major challenges here and a need to support community development.

The Prairies

Beyond the pan-Canadian themes, there were particular issues that seemed characteristic of specific regions. Possibly because we knew the least about the Prairies at the outset, the lifestyles and struggles here seemed the most alien, complex and difficult to fathom. We spent most all of our time near the American border as we crossed Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Isolation and abandonment characterized our experience of local communities with the exception of southeastern Saskatchewan and southeastern Manitoba. Ranches and farms have grown and grown through industrialization to the point that there are not enough people on the land to support a rural infrastructure. Desperate for a camping spot one night in Southern Alberta, after seeing nothing for miles, we finally found a house and knocked on the door. A friendly woman offered us a nearby field for the night. She explained that it is "sparse around here because this ranch we manage is 21,000 acres with 3000 cattle, so no one else lives in the vicinity."

Our analysis of the destructiveness of big agriculture did not seem to be shared by those we met. People bemoaned the deteriorating state of things but there was little appetite for regulation or cooperative endeavour to shift things. One local Alberta hotel owner strikingly commented, "it is sad to say but this town is dying." Another Saskatchewan small town resident gave us a pleasant diatribe about the horror of previous Saskatchewan administrations, saying that they never did anything for rural Saskatchewan, He wanted the government to fix up the roads and otherwise leave them

alone. He also had absolutely no need for the federal government, which he saw as being run out of Southern Ontario for its benefit. There seemed to be a prairie frustration that they were at the mercy of powers beyond their control, who never listened to their concerns. There appeared to be very little awareness or understanding of global or national socio-economic, cultural or environmental realities. There was limited visible evidence of people working together to improve their community infrastructure, though the Coop in Saskatchewan was a shining exception that seemed to be a centre point keeping a good number of small towns alive.

We were struck by the lack of attention to aesthetics across the Prairies. We rarely saw flowers in towns or even in front of homes. There was no attention to growing produce locally, even though this is Canada's foremost agricultural region. Instead, there were small numbers of people using massive machinery to till enormous fields or manage huge numbers of livestock across wide-ranging pastures. The main articulated concern was the horrible weather, which that spring included enormous rainfall and flooding such that 80% of the fields in Southern Manitoba were not planted. The previous year was a similar flood scenario, but before that there was a series of years with gut wrenching drought. Given the capital requirements of running the enormous farms, there is no ability to adjust to the vagaries of Mother Nature (or climate change as I would see it); hence a broad despair seemed endemic to community life.

The picture painted above is depressing and reflects only the areas we traveled through, excluding major urban centres. However, we experienced two rural areas across the Prairies that seemed different. Southeastern Saskatchewan was awash in oil money with a boom resulting from the use of new oil fracking technology to fetch previously inaccessible reserves. There were enormous numbers of large vehicles on roads that were not built to handle them. Prices for sub-standard accommodations where oil workers lived (i.e., a swampy trailer park) were skyrocketing and populated by transient men working three weeks on and a week off. There was little commitment to the wellbeing of local communities and to quote one oil fields worker, "fracking was putting a witch's brew of chemicals into the ground." The water in his community had been undrinkable for several years, though he said no official was willing to pinpoint the cause. Farmers had given up agriculture because renting their fields for oil wells was far more profitable. Oil activity and dollars were pouring out everywhere, but I could only see a deteriorating quality of life.

Southeastern Manitoba seemed somewhat of an exception as well to the depopulating trend of rural areas across the Prairies. There were desperate agricultural issues due to the enormous rains and flooded fields. Yet here towns seemed livelier with attention paid to aesthetics. There were more comprehensive and attractive recreation facilities and farms seemed more prosperous, and possibly a bit smaller. We tentatively hypothesized that

this was due to a stronger communal culture and work ethic based on the Mennonite and Christian belief systems still evident in these communities, but this would take deeper conversations to confirm or understand.

Although the above rendition of our experiences on the Prairies may be critical and depressing, it is essential to underline the wonderful warmth and hospitality offered to us by everyone we met. People went out of their way to welcome and assist us, and to share their perspectives and ideas. Yet I found their worldviews limiting and restricted. I wondered why, both historically and currently, individual rights seemed to be valued and consistently given priority over community and social needs, even if this seemed detrimental to their quality of life? Why not invest in windmills rather than oil wells (they surely have wind resources!)? Why do they not challenge the right wing philosophies that seemed to put them at the whim of distant wealth and power, be it in Ottawa or Calgary? Are these views evidence of our arrogance and stereotyping, or a reflection of the challenges they face? Northern Ontario

Northern Ontario was a world onto itself, a long transition between the Prairies and Central Canada. The road to Thunder Bay from the US border in Lake of the Woods was long, poorly serviced and isolated, in many ways like the long stretches of roads across the prairies. The shores of Lake Superior were spectacularly beautiful with very few people and long stretches of isolation. Most of the people were there for the short-term because of hunting, fishing, mining or logging, unless they were on a cross-country trek of one type or another.

From a bicyclist's perspective, the horror of the trans-Canada highway from Thunder Bay to Espanola, more than 1000 km, coloured our view of the region. This road was the only option for much of the way. Large, cross-country, 18-wheelers roared by from both directions, with large stretches of pavement with a negligible shoulder. Most truck drivers were supportive and/or courteous, gently honking or giving us a wide berth when they could— but often the poor roads gave no room for bikes and trucks simultaneously. Our hearts were in our throats as the vehicles zipped by, focused on getting to a distant destination as rapidly as possible. On this stretch, unlike the rest of the trip, we were more likely to be treated impersonally as tourists, because most people and businesses were oriented to serving and making money off the people traveling the trans-Canada.

My most prominent observation was that Northern Ontario was ignored and disadvantaged with respect to roads and infrastructure relative to Southern Ontario. The small roads in the south were far better designed and maintained than sections of the trans-Canada in the North, even though the latter was often the only east-west road that could be traversed in a region and had large amounts of traffic. I guessed that this was an example of overall distinctions in government services between the two regions. Central Canada— Southern Ontario & Québec

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Contrast and distinctions are
synonyms. Did you mean
similarities? Or that there are
distinctions between S Ont and
Quebec? It isn't clear.

We experienced Southern Ontario and Québec as a sharp contrast to the Prairies and Northern Ontario, yet there were also strong distinctions between them. Both areas were clearly more affluent with reasonable infrastructure, roads, parks, and community facilities. Small towns were intact and surviving with some mixture of small agriculture, tourism, or the proximity to allow people to commute to work in larger cities. We did not sense the alienation and powerlessness of the Prairies. People were content and quick to say that their town was “a nice place.” Towns were attentively and attractively adorned.

Despite the similarities, Southern Ontario and Québec felt like very different worlds. The beach towns of Wasaga Beach, Ontario and Saint-Luce, Québec were particularly illustrative of the contrasts. Wasaga Beach is an enormous stretch of sand beach on Lake Huron and has developed into a summer escape for the nearby Toronto region. The commercialism was overwhelming with all of the big box stores on the outskirts and the roads filled with traffic. The edges of the beach were packed with rental condominiums that either looked new or were suffering from too many people renting them for short periods and abusing them. We were told to check out the “scene” in the downtown area near beach number one. The “scene” struck us as downtrodden, low-end taverns, snack bars, and souvenir shops that were well past their prime. Everyone acknowledged that Wasaga Beach was a party town with lots of younger folks doing a lot of drinking. Though it was a beautiful natural area, and there were excellent beach facilities, it seemed dirty and lacking in people or a community that cared for it. This was a place where money was to be made, with a lot of entertainment businesses suited to the context. Where affluence was to be found, we needed to peer over walls or behind fences to see larger, up-scale homes or cottages.

Saint-Luce was a sharp contrast, part of a longer stretch of beach from Rimouski to Mont-Joli on the shores of the Saint Lawrence. It seemed to be a beach get-away for Montreal and Québec. In contrast to Wasaga Beach, it was a joy to bike through as we traveled along beautiful bike paths on the shore, passing by lots and lots of small, packed together cottages, and finally the busy public beach. There were lots of people, but it seemed manageable and friendly, with much attention to aesthetics. There were small, well-kept stores and restaurants along the route that seemed aimed at those with modest means. It was a place for friendly and social recreation experiences. Bike and walking infrastructure had a priority not evident anywhere else in the country. Inland, just a few kilometers, were relatively healthy farming communities with small town stores and younger families evident. Largely they were dairy farms and seemed to be benefiting from Québec regulation of agriculture through supply management structures. There seemed to be an underlying sense of social, recreational and community values taking prominence over commercial ones. One small farming town had a sign

explicitly welcoming bicyclists. There were malls here and there, but they were smaller and seemed less dominant in their socio-economic impacts.

This area is the heart of sovereignist Québec and tourists were largely French speaking, Québécois. We joked that we finally understood the rationale for the Québec sovereignty agenda. If we lived in this area of natural beauty with the priority on social and community lifestyles and values, what would the rest of Canada have to offer? Wasaga Beach seemed to be as affluent, but commercialism appeared to take priority over other values. The distinction was a starker contrast of similar, subtler differences we experienced between rural Southern Ontario and Québec.

Down East Toward Home

I felt like we were returning home as we crossed the bridge into Campbellton, New Brunswick, although I had never traveled the full length of the shore of New Brunswick from Québec to Nova Scotia. In New Brunswick, we immediately observed the Maritimes' economic challenges relative to Québec. We spent two nights in Dalhousie, a town built on the employment offered by three large industrial plants with two of them recently closed and the third's future uncertain. People were very warm and welcoming with a wonderful Maritime spirit, but clearly the focus was on economic survival and a dependence on large industries to keep towns alive.

The dependence on outsiders to bring in jobs was a theme I recognized from my previous travels across the Maritimes. In contrast to the struggles of Northern New Brunswick, there was the affluence and community facilities of Bouctouche New Brunswick to the south. This was largely due to the generosity of the Irving family of businesses. It reinforced my view of New Brunswick as dependent on and subservient to a few families and industries with economic and social power.

On the other hand, I was struck by the Acadian spirit of Northern New Brunswick and the prevalence of French as the first language. New Brunswick seemed to be functioning very well as a genuinely bilingual place with one language most common in one region but not the other. This was the only province where both languages seemed to have a deep presence across wide areas. In this way, it seemed the people of New Brunswick had much to teach others.

Both New Brunswick and Nova Scotia were woefully deficient in their infrastructure and support for bicyclists. This was a stark contrast to Québec, which is light-years ahead of any other province in terms of providing and supporting bicycling. Québec frequently had separate paths including separate bridges built just for bicyclists. We traveled in and out of Montreal and Québec City without bike lanes suddenly stopping in the midst of a large road, as was often the case in other regions. In fact, Montreal was challenging because there were so many bike lanes that the signage was at times confusing. As we cycled through the Maritimes, we constantly asked, "If they can do it, why can't it happen here?"

We felt even more at home as we crossed the Tantamar Marshes into Nova Scotia. It was hardest to see Nova Scotia with new eyes because we were traveling through countryside and communities that we knew, even if we had not necessarily spent time on the specific roads or in a given community. The limited community resources were evident in comparison to central Canada. The warmth and welcome of Maritimers, some of them friends, characterized a wonderful trip from Amherst through to Halifax, the South Shore and back to the Annapolis Valley.

Reflections and Learning

British Columbia was skipped as I moved from west to east describing our perspectives of regional landscapes. This is largely because I did not observe common patterns or perspectives as we traveled east across Southern British Columbia from Vancouver to the Alberta border. At the start our focus was on the physical, psychological and team challenges of getting over the mountains and across the country on bikes. It also seemed that there were small sections of British Columbia that I later saw as regional themes in other locales across the country. Place to place seemed so distinctive, be it the counter culture feel and tourism of Nelson, the one industry struggling town image of Princeton, the middle class feeling of Castlegar, or the mountain resort tourism of Fernie. British Columbia seemed a microcosm of the rest of the country, warm welcoming people, interested in and willing to help us, but often differing greatly in their lifestyles and values.

This sense of differences, and the distinctiveness of regions, came through as my most prominent perception of Canada. The experience of the country on a bicycle had in subtle ways changed me. I am less strident in thinking that my prescriptions and values can be applied to other people and communities, more humble and willing to listen to the views of others. I feel more able to see complexity in the social, economic, community challenges to be faced. I am also more confident in believing that it is possible to grow and prosper to create stronger and more sustainable communities. Most importantly, it reinforced my appreciation of the value and importance of traveling this great land. If more people travel in Canada and share experiences, they will discover the successful innovations elsewhere that others in their home communities say are impossible. If Nova Scotia planners and decision-makers could visit Québec, they might realize that continuous effective bike paths are not unobtainable for a city like Halifax. If people from Stoughton, Saskatchewan could visit Altona, Manitoba, they might discover that a small town can use its funds and tax dollars to support a multifaceted community recreation infrastructure used by people in the whole region. Wasaga Beach would have much to learn from Saint-Luce Québec.

A sea-to-sea bike trip is one powerful means to deeply experience and understand Canadian landscapes and communities. It highlights the country's differences that are built on the common foundation of a warm,

welcoming and respectful people. This is the rural Canadian identity I discovered. The country would benefit from more appreciation of differences and interchange of innovations. "If it can be done here, why can it not be done there?" Inevitably there are reasons not to change and distinct obstacles in each place, but by traveling and experiencing the country, the possibilities become greater and the obstacles smaller.