Making Tracks: Alan MacEachern

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In the “Making Tracks” series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

“Albrecht and Alan at the Alte”

By **Alan MacEachern**

In retrospect, mine was the least dissolute of dissolute youths. But spending post-undergraduate time traveling around Europe, drinking cheap beer, and sharing in overloud barroom debates on the human condition was, I thought, the real deal. By night I slept in damp hostels; by day I wandered the art galleries trying to look complicated. But I did genuinely come to love some artists, whatever that means. In Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum, it was Rembrandt. In Vienna’s Kunsthistorisches Museum, it was Pieter Breughel. And in Munich’s Alte Pinakothek, it was Albrecht Altdorfer and, more particularly, his *Saint George and the Dragon*. As difficult as it is to trace inspiration, that painting, as much as anything or anyone, nudged me in the direction of environmental history.

In my memory, *Saint George and the Dragon* is a large canvas, but I now see online that it’s actually no larger than a standard sheet of paper. The knight sits on his horse before a large …frog, it would seem. But the supposed subject of the piece really just seems to be an afterthought anyway. The painting is instead dominated by trees, which loom over the figures and all but block out the landscape behind. Thousands of leaves, some almost the size of Saint George’s head, are executed in painstaking detail. It is this painting, I later learned, that has led Altdorfer to be called the first modern landscape artist. What attracted me to it, drawing me back to it a number of times over a number of hours, was not its beauty, let alone the accuracy of its depiction of a German forest. Rather, I was taken by the thought of the artist in Munich in 1510, apparently consigning himself to a conventional, classical theme, but instead allowing himself to be directed by the topic that truly inspired him: nature.

I grew up on a small farm on Prince Edward Island, Canada that had been in the family since the 1830s. My childhood memories are filled with the ubiquitous natural elements of that place: dirt, thistles, cattle, stones, mice, raspberries, manure, cold, snow, mud, hay, horses, potatoes, corn, wind, rain, fire, foxes, milk, cream, straw, grain, grass, pigs. Yet like many families, perhaps, we never talked about the things that were most present in our lives, like "nature" or "love," so I also grew up not thinking this world had much relevance for my future. Likewise, when I majored in History at university—it was the '80s, and I assumed the US and USSR were going to blow up the world, so I might as well learn what I wanted, job be damned—I never associated the field with my own background. I took for granted that history happened out there, somewhere, to other people.

Saint George and the Dragon helped me recognize both my appreciation for nature and that perhaps, like Altdorfer, I could figure out a way to bring that appreciation to the foreground. Histories, even personal histories, are never linear. I feel obliged to add I was also inspired in this time of my life by Gerald Pocius' ***A Place to Belong***, R.E.M.'s ***Lifes Rich Pageant***, my parents, John Irving's "**You've got to get obsessed and stay obsessed**," H.D. Thoreau's ***The Maine Woods***, Colin A.M. Duncan's ***The Centrality of Agriculture***—and the example Colin set as an environmental scholar—and undoubtedly other people, films, quotations, experiences, poems, albums, songs, impressions, dreams, television shows, advertisements, epigrams, epitaphs, and books whose impact I have misjudged or momentarily forgotten.

After a short misstep as a speechwriter, I went to graduate school, gravitated toward the burgeoning field of environmental history, completed a PhD, got a job, and now, somehow, am approaching fifty.

My environmental history writing has always been grounded in where I come from: the back-to-the-land movement on Prince Edward Island, a forest fire in nearby New Brunswick, national parks in Atlantic Canada, and so on. But having been immersed in works that demonstrate the interconnectedness of histories and environments, it is only natural that my conception of "where I come from" has grown. Yet my work has seldom moved beyond Canada; writing its environmental history can seem daunting enough. More daunting still has been asking whether what I write will matter—to people, to the planet. Maybe that is why the most satisfying part of my career to date has been facilitating the creation and development of a network of environmental humanities scholars, **NiCHE: Network in Canadian History & Environment / Nouvelle initiative canadienne en histoire**

de l’environnement, in the belief that, if there are more of us, the chances of finding answers grow.

If this post—this career—has a moral, it is to discover what you love and then look for ways to express it. As I write this at the Rachel Carson Center, Altdorfer’s *Saint George and the Dragon* is presumably little more than a kilometer away. But I have yet to stand before it again. The Alte Pinakothek is under renovation for the next few years, and the Altdorfer is not part of the smaller collection being exhibited. I don’t really need to see it anyway. Its work has already been done.