

# The American Historical Review

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## Book Review

### Canada and the United States

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Kurkpatrick Dorsey. *The Dawn of Conservation Diplomacy: U.S.-Canadian Wildlife Protection Treaties in the Progressive Era*. Foreword by William Cronon. (Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books.) Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1998. Pp. xvi, 311. \$35.00.

Kurkpatrick Dorsey utilizes an impressive array of primary and secondary sources to lay bare the political and diplomatic history of three path-breaking North American wildlife treaties. During the Progressive era, the United States and Canada negotiated treaties on behalf of inland fisheries, North Pacific fur seals, and migratory birds. Dorsey explores each of these efforts in detail, comparing them as appropriate and concluding that "the ability of scientists and conservationists to shape the treaties and influence public opinion—in the face of economically driven opposition—determined the success or failure of all three agreements" (p. 4).

Part one is devoted to the ultimately unsuccessful effort to solve the problem of fisheries depletion in the common waters along the international boundary. The economics of depletion was a classic collective goods problem. For fishermen collectively, rational behavior would have been to exercise restraint in the harvest so as to preserve the fisheries upon which all relied. Without regulation, however, rational behavior for each individual fisherman was to catch every fish before someone else did. With the fisheries shared between the United States and Canada, effective regulation required international cooperation. A 1908 treaty appeared to establish a framework for that cooperation, but the fishing industry fought regulation, and absent the public sentiment for preservation that would later be generated on behalf of marine mammals and birds, the treaty was eventually abandoned. It had science on its side but not sentiment. 2

Part two addresses the North Pacific Fur Seal Convention of 1911. The United States owned the islands on which the seals bred and benefitted from a lucrative trade in seal skins. When Canadians began sealing in the open ocean, seal populations plummeted. After years of fractious wrangling, and with extinction of the North Pacific fur seal a real possibility, Canada agreed to give up the pelagic seal hunt in return for a percentage of the terrestrial harvest. Dorsey argues that compromise was possible because it was in both parties' self-interest, because science had demonstrated that pelagic sealing was unsustainable, and because fur seals have a charismatic appeal with the public that made the pelagic slaughter of pregnant females or mothers with pups politically unacceptable. The fur seals had both science and sentiment in their favor. 3

Part three explores the politics of the Migratory Bird Treaty of 1916, which remains in effect today. Migratory birds presented the same collective goods problem presented by fish and fur seals. Species survival required effective regulation of hunting over the vast areas traversed in the course of annual migrations, and effective regulation required treaties. Like fur seals, birds had popular appeal, that, when combined with good science, produced a successful outcome. Perhaps the more interesting story here, however, is how a treaty became the vehicle for federal regulation of migratory birds in a states' rights era. 4

From start to finish, this book is propelled by facts rather than by theory. Each of the three efforts at treaty making is reported chronologically and with a degree of detail that illuminates the varying influence of individual personalities, agency and interagency politics, interest group involvements, partisan politics, federal-state relationships, and foreign policy concerns. It is a good primer on the affected species and their habitats and on the always awkward transition from over harvest to conservation as the myth of resource inexhaustibility is overtaken by empirical evidence to the contrary. Along the way, we experience the relative merits of parliamentary and presidential forms of government and the often conflicting perspectives of conservation activists, natural scientists, elected officials, and agency bureaucrats, including members of the diplomatic corps. 5

Most of a century has passed since the events recounted here, and the world has been remade by technology. Nevertheless, this exploration of conservation diplomacy reminds us how little the essence of politics has changed. Dorsey offers numerous examples of corporate greed, bureaucratic incompetence, and personal vendetta as well as examples of vision, commitment, perseverance, and sacrifice for the public good and for future generations. In a complex world, today's villain is sometimes tomorrow's hero. 6

Dorsey's prose is always clear and sometimes clever. It is supplemented by extensive notes and bibliography, exceptionally readable maps, and twenty-four pages of illustrations. 7

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Published by the  
American Historical  
Association

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February, 2001

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