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Why is Canada so Big? Nature and Size in the Canadian Imagination

Canada is a relatively young nation with a relatively small population that has come to have responsibility for the second largest national land area on the planet. This fact is likely only to grow in significance as climate change opens up the Northwest Passage, reshapes North American vegetation zones, and increases the cost of water and other natural resources. Although Canadian geography has, in some ways, absolutely permeated the study of its history, there has been surprisingly little historical writing focused directly on Canada's size. How did Canadians describe their nation's size through time? Was the periodic and largely peaceful acquisition of new territory to the west and north popularly perceived as beneficial or fundamentally insignificant? How did Canada's size shape the national character—for example, did it encourage or discourage environmentalism?

This research project will benefit greatly by being explored in a course at the LMU Amerika-Institut in summer 2011. The course is built around moments when the borders of Canada, or what was to become Canada, were enlarged or redefined. The first section, focusing on the 1670 creation of the Hudson's Bay Company, explores early European conceptions of northern North America. The second section, focusing on the 1763 French decision to press for Guadeloupe rather than Canada in the Treaty of Paris, deals with the changing value accorded land. The third section, focusing on the 1842 Oregon Treaty, examines conflict and harmony along the American border. The fourth section, focusing on the 1880 British transfer of the Arctic Archipelago, looks at the role of the North in the Canadian imagination. The fifth section, focusing on the 1869-70 Métis resistance in the west and the 1999 creation of the Nunavut territory in the north, treats indigenous ideas of space and its redrawing.