

Heat, Light and Work in Canadian Homes: A Social History of Energy, 1850-1950

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In the twenty-first century, as people around the world take in the unwelcome news from scientists about the surprisingly virulent environmental impact of burning fossil fuel, we are being reminded daily of the deep connections amongst our domestic lives, the systems that provide us with heat, light and work, and the larger social and material environments in which we live. With *Heat, Light and Work in Canadian Homes: A Social History of Energy, 1850-1950*, I will provide the first nation-wide overview of how Canadians experienced the last great energy transition, from what E.A. Wrigley termed the Organic Energy Regime of wood, wind, water and muscle power, to the Mineral Energy Regime of fossil fuels and electricity. My focus is primarily on the changing practices of daily life as worked out in homes and on farms, during the era most commonly associated with industrialization and ‘modernization’ in Canada, 1850-1950. Before the mineral energy regime, people obtained the energy they required through direct, personal relationships with the environment, mediated largely by their own skills, knowledge and tools. As they moved from the vernacular to the ‘technosphere’, peoples’ relationships with their local environments were replaced by a set of remote, technologically-dependent, socially-mediated relations that required little or no environmental knowledge. The ways people adopted, rejected and modified their daily energy practices tells a lot about changing relationships to environment and to each other. Arguably at this level of analysis - the harvesting of energy - Canadians’ new and modern relationship to their environment was most potently experienced, and is most visible to the historian.

Social historians are increasingly recognizing energy as a discrete force in shaping and changing societies, just as scholars within energy studies are beginning to acknowledge the importance of the social historical, and not just the technological and economic, contexts within which energy transitions have occurred. A convergence amongst social, environmental, and energy historians has created what has been termed a new socio-ecological approach to energy transitions, and one that emphasizes their historical contingency. Scholars within the energy humanities have sought (in Stefania Barca’s words) “to put labor, human bodies and landscapes into the story of energy transitions.”ⁱ My manuscript adds the household to this list.

My research is contextualized in international literature, documenting the pivotal role played by fossil fuels and later electricity in the social and environmental transformations associated with industrialization. Also relevant are recent studies documenting the unusual nature of Canada’s energy transition relative to other industrializing countries (Unger and Thistle, 2013; Sandwell, forthcoming). While Britain was deriving 90% of its energy from fossil fuels by 1845, it took Canadians 110 years to reach that benchmark. In 1941, wood was providing more energy than oil, and was still heating most of the country’s homes. The lens of everyday life helps explain Canadians’ longstanding distinctively high energy consumption, and their slow and late transition to the modern energy regime. Patterns of daily life, particularly the energy practices of the country’s rural population, a majority until the Second World War, provide important insights into and explanations for the changing relationship between people and environment that characterized their late shift to the industrial regime.

ⁱ Stefania Barca, “Energy, Property and the Industrial Revolution” *Ecological Economics and Environmental History*, vol. 70, issue 7, May 15, 2011, 1314