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A Temperate Empire: Climate Change and Settler Colonialism in Early America

My book project is a cultural and environmental history of colonization in the cold climates of early New England and Nova Scotia. It examines the process of British settlement in the region, focusing on how popular and scientific ideas about its natural disadvantages—especially its winters—influenced and were reshaped by colonization, agricultural expansion, and transatlantic political and economic developments.

The earliest European migrants to Northeastern America were unprepared for its frigid, windy, and long winters, because they expected nature in the Old and New Worlds to be roughly the same across latitude. According to this logic, Boston should correspond to Marseilles, Plymouth to Rome. But as they discovered, latitude failed to predict perfect geographical similarities; Plymouth was no Rome or even London, least of all in terms of the weather. Farmers learned to cope with such differences by adapting to local conditions. For local and imperial elites, however, the environment proved to be more problematic and a persistent source of anxiety. They worried that widespread reports about its harshness would limit permanent settlement and discourage new migrants or investors. By writing and circulating their own reports, they sought to control outsiders' perceptions. They also became intensely interested in understanding the natural history of the region's peculiarities and, ultimately, in overcoming them. By doing so, they generated arguments and evidence—both rhetorical and material—for climate change.

By the late eighteenth century, naturalists, large landowners, and officials maintained that two centuries of colonization had changed the regional climate, softening the winters and making all the seasons milder. These transformations were universally welcomed, not only for economic reasons but also for their cultural implications. Moderate environments were a corollary to enlightened inhabitants. People—at least “civilized” societies like their own—were undoubtedly agents of climate change, specifically of climate warming or tempering. I argue that these ideas (which contrast strikingly to contemporary controversies over the origin and scope of climate change), fit within a broader goal of settler elites throughout the British Empire: to create homogenous climates and societies that were, as one eighteenth-century naturalist in the region put it, “more temperate, uniform, and equal” than before colonization. However, as the book will demonstrate, most projects pursued in the name of such large-scale changes were rejected by ordinary farmers and marginalized settlers, or otherwise failed to materialize.