Scenic tourism on the northeastern borderland: Lake Memphremagog's steamboat excursions and resort hotels, 1850–1900

J.I. Little

History Department, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada V5A 1S6

Abstract

Lacking the salt-water beaches, accessible mineral springs, and rugged mountains that attracted the first tourists to the northeastern United States, the Vermont–Quebec borderland did boast a number of clear and picturesque bodies of water, the largest of which was Lake Memphremagog. Once this lake became accessible by rail, American and Canadian promotional literature and graphic illustrations emphasized the romantic nature of its paddle-wheel excursions, scenic landscape, and resort hotels. This type of tourism was depicted as essentially a passive, civilizing experience in which participants affirmed their aesthetic sensibility and social status by admiring the view of lake and mountains from boat decks and hotel verandahs. But the exclusive nature of this romantic sensibility was undermined to some extent by the fact that local newspapers and railway companies encouraged groups of people from the surrounding communities to join the sight seeing tours. Local entrepreneurs were also quick to take advantage of the market for scenery and, in contrast to other tourist zones, there was no apparent conflict with the industrial development that was taking place at both ends of the lake.
© 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Tourism; Landscape; Nineteenth century; Quebec–Vermont borderland; Paddlewheelers; Resort hotels

In 1926 the Newport printer, William Bryant Bullock, described the 'bewitching scene' on Lake Memphremagog as he imagined it would have unfolded for the lake's first settler, Nicholas Austin, a Loyalist from New Hampshire.[1] Setting out by canoe in 1791 from the lake's southern tip in Vermont, Austin would have viewed 'emerald islands scattered in profusion upon the cerulean expanse of the lake; the jutting points and promontories; the sylvan bays lined with pebbled beaches; the receding vistas of headlands, shores and mountains, bathed in the soft glow of the summer sunshine.' Further north, having crossed into the British colony of Quebec, he would have been awed by 'the rugged grandeur of Owl's Head, the towering highlands of Magoon's Ridge and the uneven heights of Sugarloaf Mt.'[2] Austin and the American settlers who followed in his footsteps likely had more pressing preoccupations than the scenery, but Bullock was drawing on imagery that had been used to promote local tourism as soon as the region became accessible by rail in the middle of the nineteenth century. Following the norms defined in late eighteenth-century England by Edmund Burke, William Gilpin, and others, local newspapers and railway guide books described the view from the deck of a steamboat as it crossed the forty-fifth parallel and sailed northward into the 'wilderness' of Canada as transforming from the beautiful, to the picturesque, to the sublime.[3]

Historians have tended to associate the passenger experience aboard steamboats with that on trains which, German cultural historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch notes, restricted the view and superimposed modern, metropolitan concepts of time and space over traditional, local ones.[4] But Lake Memphremagog's steamers zig-zagged between small settlements, resort hotels, and even the docks of the wealthy estate owners as they made their way up the lake, providing ample opportunity for passengers who were so inclined to develop a spiritual affinity with their scenic surroundings [see Fig. 1].[5] Reflecting the narrowness and great length of the lake, the view was described in the promotional literature as a slowly unfolding panorama, just as it was to steamboat tourists further south on the Connecticut and Hudson Rivers.[6]

---

[1] See Harry B. Shufelt, *Nicholas Austin the Quaker and the Township of Bolton*, Knowlton, QC, 1971.

[2] William Bryant Bullock, *Beautiful Waters, Devoted to the Memphremagog Region*, Newport, VT, 1926, 18–19.

[3] The beautiful was defined as 'pastoral, orderly, smiling, and serene', the picturesque as 'rocky, irregular, alternating light and shadow', and the sublime as 'inspiring awe, reverence, and humility.' See Susan Glickman, *The Picturesque and the Sublime: a Poetics of the Canadian Landscape*, Montreal and Kingston, 1998, 9–12; and Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century*, Washington and London, 1995, 34. For more details on the link between the picturesque and the sublime, on the one hand, and tourism on the other, see Orvar Löfgren, *On Holiday: a History of Vacationing*, Berkeley, 1999, chapter 1.

[4] Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the 19th Century*, Oxford, 1979, 4. Löfgren, *On Holiday* (note 3), 41–48 fails to note this distinction in his discussion of water cruises and railway journeys, and Brown, *Inventing New England* (note 3), 25 also emphasizes the speed of the steamboats. See also Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, London, 1964, reprint 1972, 242–254.

[5] John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*, London, 1990, 4, 10. Theodore Clarke Smith, who spent many summers at a lakeside camp, recalled that the *Lady of the Lake* 'was usually behind time.' On one occasion, as the steamer approached Newport, the captain 'glanced at his watch and observed "Late is our watchword"'. Theodore Clarke Smith, *Camp by the Cliff*, chapter 1 (1884–1889), unpublished typescript kindly made available by John Scott, 17.

[6] John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century*, New York and Oxford, 1989, 49–52, 57–59. Tony Hughes-d'Aeth argues that the picturesque convention 'gave tourists a specific purpose, a rationale, a plan of action, a reward system and, most important of all, it provided them with a language to order and convey their experience.' Tony Hughes-d'Aeth, *Paper Nation: the Story of the Picturesque Atlas of Australia, 1886–1888*, Melbourne, 2001, 51.