A Canadian Bethesda: Reading Banff as a Health Resort, 1883-1902

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Abstract

When two railway workers discovered Banff's hot springs in 1885, an isolated mountain siding quickly became the object of national and international interest. This paper highlights a hitherto neglected factor in the creation of Canada's first national park: the rich nineteenth-century health theories and philosophies, particularly medical geography, that invested the springs and the surrounding environment with salutary properties and drove Banff's early development as a health and pleasure resort. Before the conservation movement took a firm hold of the national park mandate, the region's physical, psychological, and moral health benefits were the focus. The curative mineral springs, pure air, and ennobling scenery intrigued a financially struggling government, a powerful railway company, and work-weary urbanites alike, and the vision of a luxury hotel and bathing resort soon expanded to a vast and healthful adventure playground. Banff was at once a region to be civilized and developed into a modern resort, and a natural antidote to the evils of modern life. Canada's national park system originated in the popular and profitable association between health and the natural environment; medical and environmental histories are inextricably linked in the study of Banff's first two decades.

Full Text:

PDF

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.21971/P70883