



## Hardscrabble: The High Cost of Free Land

*Donna E. Williams*

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How emigrants were lured to Ontario's Muskoka in the 1870s in a vain attempt to farm the Canadian Shield.

When the Free Grants and Homestead Act was first introduced in 1868, fierce debates erupted in Ontario's Legislature over whether land in the Muskoka region should be opened to settlement or reserved for the Aboriginal population. From the beginning, many people vented serious doubts about the free grant scheme, citing the district's poor agricultural prospects. In the end, such caution was ignored by overeager boosters.

The story in *Hardscrabble* also takes readers to Britain, where emigration philanthropists urged their government to send the country's poor to Canada, then follows these emigrants as they left the familiar behind to make a new life in the Canadian wilderness. The initial romance of living off the land was soon dispelled as these hapless souls faced clearing the land, building shelters, and sowing crops in desolate, remote locations.

Donna Williams's extensive research leads her to conclude that Muskoka's experience epitomizes the wrongheadedness of placing already poor people on remote land unsuited for farming.

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