Dirty Spaces: Environment, the State, and Recreational Swimming in Hamilton Harbour, 1870–1946

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In July 1924 a city-sponsored swimming program for Hamilton's inner-city children preoccupied the pages of the local press. For several weeks, a series of human-interest stories highlighted the free street-railcar rides being provided by the local City Council for children to travel across the city to the nearby shores of Lake Ontario.1 The program, by simultaneously encouraging healthy play for inner-city children and removing them from the dirty and dangerous streets and waters of Hamilton's industrial North End, was hailed by the local press as a "humane act... designed to fit the younger generation, both mentally and physically, for the great work that lies ahead."2 Newspaper reports included touching accounts and photographs of poor children splashing about, the boys wearing homemade bathing suits fashioned by their mothers out of long sweaters sewn at the crotch and the girls wearing old dresses.

And then there were the descriptions of the streetcar rides, which must have been a great treat for many working-class children. Some five hundred children, voices raised happily in choruses of "Hail, Hail, the Gang's all Here," eagerly jammed themselves onto the radial cars to get to the lake. The ride ended at "the beach," a thin strip of land separating the waters of Lake Ontario from Hamilton's enclosed harbour. The children scrambled out the doors and windows of the streetcar, falling over each other in a mad dash to Lake Ontario. On the first day of the program, reported the paper, "there was a howl of disappointment.... The water was cold."3 The children then confounded the town fathers' scheme by running back over the rails and across the beach strip to dive into the dirtier—but also much warmer—waters of Hamilton's harbour!

The organization of free rides to the beach strip represented one small episode in a larger search for public recreational swimming facilities in industrial Hamilton. The free rides demonstrated the desire of some city residents to prevent working-class children from being infected by the medically and morally dirty spaces of the inner city. The improvised transportation program also

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underlined the difficulties faced by Hamilton’s political leaders in keeping their repeated promise to provide safe, supervised, and clean bathing places—whether in the form of pools in parks or beaches on the bay—within reach of all city residents, regardless of their social background. Three more summers would pass before the long-advocated, civic bathing beach finally opened to serve the working-class residents of Hamilton’s North End. The bathing beach would remain open until 1944, when it, too, would be declared another inner-city dirty space.

Almost fifteen years ago, Alan Metcalfe offered an “exploratory essay” in a special issue of Urban History Review, in which he outlined the provision of recreational facilities in ten Ontario towns between the world wars. Metcalfe sought to show how much sport and urban historians could learn from one another. He concluded his essay with a theme he would develop in his subsequent work in Canadian history:

Our urban environment was created not by some inexorable process but by the calculated decisions of a small group of men. It is in the minds and motives of this small group that we can discover what lies at the heart of urban development.

Metcalfe has been consistently attentive to the interaction of urban development, social class, and the organization of sports and recreation. In doing so, he has made sport history an integral part of the social and cultural history of cities. Building on Metcalfe’s insights, many Canadian social historians now view sports and recreation through the “minds and motives” of those who promoted and those who participated in recreational activities. They have become increasingly interested in examining how the definition and regulation of leisure served as an important part of a larger social and cultural struggle between emerging urban social classes.

In this essay, we draw upon Metcalfe’s insights to offer a specific study of the building of public recreational facilities in the city of Hamilton between the wars. We explore the “minds and motives” of those who promoted recreational swimming and the provision of public swimming facilities, and examine how these ideas shaped and were translated into policy decisions made by Hamilton’s political leaders. Throughout, we emphasize the interaction of urban growth and the development of recreational facilities. Just as Metcalfe built on and responded to the work of urban historians who were interested in the city-building process, our work reflects the current interest among urban historians in the interaction of the city and the natural environment. Many residents of Hamilton had to learn to play in a city increasingly defined as both morally and physically unhealthy. Environmental change complicated the search for recreational order in Hamilton.

Environment

Hamiltonians loved their bay for its beauty and for the many opportunities it offered for exercise, recreation, and inspiration. Nestled at the base of the