

# Imagining New Worlds in the New World Entertainment, Agency, and Power in Upper Canada

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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# IMAGINING NEW WORLDS IN THE NEW WORLD:

## ENTERTAINMENT, AGENCY, AND POWER IN UPPER CANADA

Whenever and wherever people gather they have found ways to entertain themselves. From elaborate communal festivals, parades, and feasts to storytelling around a fire, people interrupt the monotony of daily life with relaxation and conviviality. Despite the universal urge to seek amusement, entertainment takes different forms in different situations. Like other aspects of life, entertainment is socially, culturally, and historically constructed and, therefore, affords important insights into particular societies, cultures, and historical processes. It is curious, therefore, that the study of entertainment has more often been the preserve of sociologists and anthropologists than of historians. Except for a few studies of organized entertainments, such as theatres, parades, the history of sport, as well as a growing body of literature on taverns and tavern culture, Canadian historians have largely ignored entertainment especially in the

early decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

This special issue of *Ontario History* represents the possibilities for the historical analysis of entertainment. While it does not and cannot fill the historiographical void, the articles contained herein do illuminate little considered aspects of the province's past through the prism of entertainment and suggest avenues for new research. The contributors address how colonists and Aboriginals, in seeking to mediate the tensions of empire, creatively constructed collective identities and "imagined" communities. Entertainment and leisure activities, such as theatre or militia musters, provided one means to construct a shared identity with people in other parts of the colony or across the ocean. The contributions reveal that no single hegemonic Upper Canadian identity came into being. Rather, through entertainment and leisure activities, the colony's diverse inhabitants expressed through entertainment and leisure activi-

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Mary Elizabeth Smith, *Too Soon the Curtain Fell: A History of Theatre in Saint John 1789-1900* (Fredericton: Brunswick Press, 1981); Ann Saddlemyer, ed., *Early Stages: Theatre in Ontario, 1800-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small Town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); Colin D. Howell, *Northern Sandlots: A Social History of Maritime Baseball* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Ian Radforth, *Royal Spectacle: The 1860 Visit of the Prince of Wales to Canada and the United States* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Julia Roberts, *In Mixed Company: Taverns and Public Life in Upper Canada* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2009).

ties multiple, overlapping, and competing identities shaped by race, ethnicity, class, geography, and history.

Julia Roberts's work on Upper Canada's taverns and the people who frequented them provides not only a fine synthesis of taverns and tavern going but also maps out a geography of power among the varied groups that frequented taverns. As Roberts argues, play was serious business; it was a means through which tavern-goers bound themselves together and, paradoxically, a means through which they could define social distance and cultural space. By entertaining themselves in many ways in the many public houses of Upper Canada, tavern-goers defined and enacted the contours of social power in this colonial society.

Shifting the focus from popular to elite entertainment, Jane Errington explores how what Upper Canadians in the first half of the nineteenth century thought of as entertainment was fundamentally shaped by their class and their gender. In particular, she examines how the wives and daughters of prominent Upper Canadians and gentlemen farmers consciously embraced the genteel leisure of the domestic circle. Errington argues that, whether living in urban or rural areas, women in Upper Canada sought companionship from others of their rank and sensibilities; and they enjoyed those diversions that both reflected their personal tastes and interests, but also symbolized their essential identity—gentlewomen of the empire.

Michel S. Beaulieu's article builds upon the work of Roberts and Errington

and explores how Upper Canadians were avid participants in "entertainment." It examines their role as spectators and participants in a wide variety of activities that, on one level, provided an opportunity for leisure and social interaction. He demonstrates that the many forms of public and private amusement available in Kingston, Ontario, between 1815 and 1837 also provide a barometer of the social and political atmosphere of the town.

Addressing themes raised by the other articles, James Paxton examines how various forms of entertainment helped to preserve and recreate senses of commonality and belonging among people dislocated and scattered by the Revolutionary war. In this case, the Mohawks and loyalists who had fought together and later moved to the Niagara and Grand River regions of Upper Canada relied on regular rounds of private and semi-private entertainments to draw their community together physically and symbolically. The self-conscious reproduction of a local identity at parties, reunions, and militia musters set this community against other groups of Upper Canadians and the government's social and political vision for the colony.

While each author takes a different approach to the subject and each article stands on its own as a work of scholarship, each also speaks to common themes and issues. Whether the subjects were tavern goers, elite English immigrants, Mohawks, or amusement seekers in Kingston, all were newcomers to Upper Canada and all faced the emigrant's dilemma.

How does one re-establish a role and an identity in a new and unfamiliar land where old social conventions are either absent or have been modified? Removed from familiar surroundings, newcomers imagined new worlds for themselves in the New World. If this process could be disorienting, then entertainment and sociability served as means by which men and women constructed new relationships, negotiated the fluid social milieu,

and replicated, however imperfectly, the gender and class distinctions of home. How Upper Canadians amused themselves reflects efforts to fashion simultaneously a sense of belonging even as such activities created and maintained distinctions of gender, class, race, and ethnicity. As these articles demonstrate, studies of entertainment reveal that entertainment reflects societal values and is a constitutive element of community.

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