

# The People and the Bay

## A Social and Environmental History of Hamilton Harbour

NANCY B. BOUCHIER AND  
KEN CRUIKSHANK

FOREWORD BY GRAEME WYNN



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## FOREWORD

# Down by the Bay

*Graeme Wynn*

ONE OF THE FINEST, and yet most unusual, pieces of historical-geographical writing that I know is by poet, writer, and cabinetmaker John Terpstra.<sup>1</sup> It is a wonderfully thoughtful, evocative, and sensitive rumination on “what happens when one person becomes completely enamoured of the landscape, and a particular feature of the landscape, in the city where he lives.” That city is Hamilton, Ontario, and the particular landscape feature for which Terpstra declares his love is the “superannuated” sandbar that divides Hamilton Harbour (2,150 hectares) from the marshy 250-hectare extent of Cootes Paradise – a locale that helps to define the western end of Lake Ontario to which historians Nancy Bouchier and Ken Cruikshank direct their own clear-eyed attention in *The People and the Bay*.

When John Graves, the lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada, and Elizabeth Simcoe, his lady, journeyed, in June 1796, across a quiet patch of water (soon to be known as Burlington Bay) sheltered from larger Lake Ontario by a ribbon of sand, they happened upon a prospect that pleased them mightily. By Elizabeth’s account, the bay was “full of canoes; the Indians were fishing; we bought some fine salmon of them.”<sup>2</sup> The Simcoes’ destination, the log home of Henrietta and Richard Beasley, Loyalists from New York and the first settlers at the head of the lake, seemed a “very pretty object” to the lady diarist as she and her husband landed and “walked up the hill from whence is a beautiful view of the lake, with wooded points breaking the line of shore.” In her estimation, the hill was “quite like a park, fine turf with large Oak trees dispersed but no underwood.” The Beasleys’ home was nestled between the bay and the Iroquois Bar, a gravel

deposit – once the beach of glacial lake Iroquois – that rises a hundred feet or so above the present level of Lake Ontario. Here the Simcoes stayed overnight, to dine and to enjoy walks in the “park” and along the shore.

Today, most of those contemplating Hamilton Harbour do so more fleetingly than did the Simcoes. Whether they view it from one of the 150,000 vehicles a day crossing the Burlington Bay James N. Allan Skyway, which carries the Queen Elizabeth Way high across the man-made channel that now cuts through the sand bar to link lake and bay, or from the trains and automobiles that follow the six sets of tracks, the six lanes of highway, and the four lanes of secondary road that run the length of the Iroquois Bar, the scenes they behold are vastly different from those the Beasleys knew. Half a century after the Simcoes’ visit, the City of Hamilton was incorporated. By 1914, one hundred thousand people lived there, twice as many as at the turn of the century. By 1950, the population had doubled again, and in the 1970s it reached three hundred thousand. When the city was amalgamated with five neighbouring municipalities in 2001, it counted approximately half a million residents.<sup>3</sup>

Commerce, manufacturing, and general economic expansion drove early growth. Then the railway boom of the 1850s spawned new industries. In the late nineteenth century this was known as a go-ahead place, with the first commercial telephone service in Canada and the first telephone exchange in the British Empire. Early in the twentieth century, Hamilton attracted major steel mills and other manufacturing. In the boom years after the Second World War, the city prospered from the production of automobiles, appliances, elevators, and farm equipment. Although the major steel works cut jobs by half late in the twentieth century, manufacturing, service, and other activities helped ameliorate the downturn that reduced much of the heavy-industrial heartland south of the Great Lakes to rustbelt status during these years.<sup>4</sup> In the new millennium, however, manufacturing jobs accounted for a shrinking proportion of Hamilton’s labour force (down from 22 to 12 percent in the decade after 2003), and one of the steel plants shuttered its facilities in 2013.<sup>5</sup>

Bald as it is, this simple summary of population growth and economic activity captures a sense of Hamilton’s transformation – a transformation that also had dramatic effects, over the course of two centuries, upon the landscape of this region nestled below the Niagara Escarpment. “Clearings in the trees, rail fencing, farms, orchards,” these, Terpstra imagines, were what George Hamilton saw after the War of 1812, “when he first thought to arrange this marriage of place and people” that carries his name into the present.<sup>6</sup> First, a few buildings “at a fork in the path materializing into

a town.” Then the opening of a canal through the outer sandbar, bringing schooners and steamers into the bay and stimulating trade in the new administrative centre of the Gore District. At mid-century, the railway came steaming into town on the bayside of the Iroquois Bar, attracting manufacturers of stoves and farm implements and serving the clothing and sewing machine industries that grew during the American Civil War.

Later in the century, after decades of effort in the cause of progress, that great mantra of the Victorian age, some Ontarians began to count the costs of their devotion by venerating pioneer cemeteries, admiring abandoned farmsteads, and revering watermills silenced by steam power. George Washington Johnson, a Hamilton schoolteacher, tapped into this vein early, and in deeply personal tones, in “When you and I were young, Maggie,” a melancholic poem for his ailing love that became a musical hall standard: “The green grove is gone from the hill, Maggie, / Where first the daisies sprung; / The creaking old mill is still, Maggie / Since you and I were young.”<sup>7</sup> But though its effects might be lamented, the juggernaut of industrial growth continued its transformation of Hamilton. Steel mills and other industrial plants clustered along the bay, which became a major port. Squeezed between “the Mountain” escarpment and the water, the city spread more or less east-west along the southern edge of the bay and created new space for development by filling inlets and extending the shoreline. Before long, Hamilton became known as Steeltown or Steel Town.<sup>8</sup> Either way, it was a gritty city, its “life, economy and physical environment” – its geography, character, and politics – defined according to a retrospective article in the local newspaper, *The Hamilton Spectator*, by the two steel manufacturing giants that formed the backbone of its industrial economy.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, there was more to Hamilton than this. Communities and societies are complex multifaceted entities; human-environment relations are intricate ever-shifting engagements; and though simple nomenclatures (Steeltown; “gritty city”) may identify a telling or essential element of a place, they rarely capture the full diversity of land and life as they are intertwined and understood *in situ* each and every day. Both John Terpstra’s *Falling into Place* and Nancy Bouchier and Ken Cruikshank’s *The People and the Bay* help to complicate and advance our appreciation of these convoluted realities, but they do so in remarkably different ways that, taken together, serve to illuminate variant forms of scholarly practice, heighten appreciation of the ways in which people know and shape places, offer important insights into various modes of human engagement with nature, and convey a good deal of information about that particular corner of

Ontario known to its first European settlers as Head-of-the-Lake. In all of this, Terpstra's work provides a revealing counterpoint to that developed in the pages that follow.

*Falling into Place* is a marvellous meditation on meaning in the landscape. It ranges more widely across time than does *The People and the Bay* (which focuses on the last 150 years) to hint at the Indigenous Attiwandaron presence at the head of the lake before the arrival of Europeans and to discuss, in detail, the scene at the turn of the third millennium; spatially, its focus is rather narrower than that of *The People and the Bay*, on the six kilometres of the Iroquois Bar and the areas immediately adjacent to it (although there are excursions up the escarpment to Niagara Falls and to the author's ancestral home in Friesland). *Falling into Place* is richly historical but it eschews chronology; it is profoundly geographical but (despite its four maps) it responds to, rather than charts, the landscape. To turn Terpstra's pages is to be carried on a deeply personal exploration in the company of a writer reflexive enough to wonder whether the immigrant experience impels one to understand the landscape in order to explain one's presence within it, and sensitive enough to know that he is part of the story.

In Terpstra's eloquent and imaginative prose, the very landscape is personalized, even occasionally anthropomorphized. He encourages readers to imagine the Niagara Escarpment as a giant asleep on his left arm, "which reaches out diagonally across a beach. The upper half of the arm rests on the sand, where much smaller figures have constructed houses and buildings, a city, tying down this Gulliver with bands of asphalt. From elbow to hand the arm lies half-submerged in water." This is that section of the Iroquois Bar dividing Cootes Paradise from the bay. Initially, the imagined fist is clenched as the outlet of the marsh curves between its knuckles and the far shore of the lake. But then railway builders see this arm as a useful route into town. They bridge the narrow channel with thirty metres of fill, and it is "as though the clenched fist of the sleeping giant had released his little finger, which now reached to the opposite shore." A few years later, there was another railway and another earth bridge: "this time the attachment was an index finger." And so the outlet channel was cut off and reduced to a pond between two earthen dams.<sup>10</sup>

Terpstra early declares his love for the Iroquois Bar, and his courtship of its history is deeply sensuous. He caresses and probes his chosen landscape, fondly marking each rise and declivity. Glacial landscapes, he says, "have a low-key, inviting energy that draws you into their features, folds and cleavages, their rolling roundnesses, into their meetings of land and water."<sup>11</sup> After two hundred years of settlement and city growth, the

contours of nature are no longer as obvious as they once were. But to those who know this body of land, an approach to the top of the bar is signalled by an incline sufficient to raise “the body temperatures of walkers and cyclists” though barely steep enough to require drivers cocooned in automobiles to exert extra pressure on the accelerator.<sup>12</sup>

Elsewhere, as he contemplated the configuration of the Iroquois Bar beneath the property lines and infrastructure of modern-day development, Terpstra realized that the topography “still curved and climbed.” Its lines “remained as true as they could to where they were first drawn.”<sup>13</sup> There was a process at work here. The landscape is modelled and remodelled through time; it is a palimpsest, an object made for one purpose and then used for another, and another, so that earlier forms are variously obscured and obliterated as new (land)marks are etched over and upon those of preceding generations. In describing this process, Terpstra comes close to understanding landscape change as “sequent occupance,” a phrase coined by geographer Derwent Whittlesey, who insisted that human settlement carried within itself the seeds of its own transformation, and that successive stages of occupation could be identified in the landscape.<sup>14</sup> In Terpstra’s formulation, as change is layered upon change, “the changes that occur in one generation overlap the changes of the preceding generation in a kind of civic sedimentary layering. Together these layers become part of the “natural” landscape for the next generation, while the original lay of the land is secreted away underneath.”<sup>15</sup>

Coupling this insight with his memory of the way his grandmother embodied generations of life in Friesland, Terpstra concludes that “the earth remembers.” His book is, in one important sense, a concerted attempt to recover that memory. Forced to grapple with the challenge of understanding change in space and time together, he adopts what historical geographers once formalized as the retrospective method, by working backwards from the present as one might peel back the layers of an onion to discover the origins of current patterns in the landscape.<sup>16</sup> But *Falling into Place* is neither a study in sequent occupance nor an exemplar of that retrospective method. It achieves more than most work in these disciplinary veins precisely because Terpstra proceeds unencumbered by the baggage of formal methodology and seeks personal meaning in his quest to know the landscape. His is a poetic rumination:

The earth remembers. What a thought. The battered earth remembers; on top of which, I shared that memory. By virtue of birth ... and choice of residence, I was inextricably part of the land-filling, refuse-dumping,

train-riding, steel-making, car-driving family of earthlings who dwelt here, but by virtue of what a few old maps in the library downtown had shown me, and what I had pieced together driving around, awake to the shapes surrounding me, I was also part of this other relation.<sup>17</sup>

Years ago, geographer Phil Wagner pointed to the difficulties involved in understanding places and landscapes, difficulties that he attributed to the fact that “place, person, time and act form an indivisible unity.”<sup>18</sup> Terpstra comes close to weaving this whole cloth as he tells of the ways in which his loved landscape “reveals itself to me over time in a kind of slow, affectionate undressing.”<sup>19</sup>

*The People and the Bay* is a markedly different book – and its achievement is clarified by comparing it with *Falling into Place*. Where Terpstra essays “a kind of bioregional love story,” Bouchier and Cruikshank shape their work to the more orthodox scholarly lasts of environmental and social history.<sup>20</sup> Largely eschewing the imaginative detours and sensuous engagement with the earth that distinguish Terpstra’s pages, they focus on the people of Hamilton and their use of the bay to gain perspective on “the environmental changes associated with the modern processes of urbanization and modernization.” Their story begins in the middle decades of the nineteenth century and unfolds in tight chronological lockstep as the nature of the bay is civilized and conserved (to 1893), boosted, organized, and planned (1893–1940), confined (1931–59), unchained (1958–85), and remediated (1981–2015). With clear thematic emphases, these eight chapters focus both the social and the environmental history of Hamilton through the prism of its residents’ connections with the adjacent water. Resembling the numerous, charming bird’s-eye views of the city sketched from the escarpment during the nineteenth century, this book offers a panoramic view of Hamilton and its harbour, although each chapter is drawn from a slightly different vantage point to emphasize and illuminate Hamiltonians’ shifting recreational, residential, commercial, industrial, medical, and ecological interests in the aquatic/lacustrine environment.

To elaborate: *The People and the Bay* is, clearly, an environmental history, in that it pays close attention to the ways that people have defined “what a resource is, which sorts of behavior may be environmentally degrading and ought to be prohibited,” and the ways in which they generally chose “the ends to which nature is put.”<sup>21</sup> The first parts of the book trace the establishment of the city beside the bay and the attitudes and practices that shaped early interactions between people and the harbour environment; the second set of chapters examines the intensifying exploitation of

the bay and shoreline, and efforts to manage these developments and their consequences through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the city pursued a vision of orderly industrial modernity. The final three chapters reckon with the environmental legacies of this vision between the Second World War and the present, from the apex of Hamilton's industrial prosperity to postindustrial concerns with bay pollution and environmental amenities.

In tracing this arc, Bouchier and Cruikshank also ask a fundamental question that imparts a strong social dimension to their analysis: Whose harbour is this? In teasing out their answers, and by revealing how social inequality and power relations helped shape the landscape, the authors provide rich accounts of the diverse neighbourhoods and environments surrounding the bay, from the Burlington Heights and Cootes Paradise districts, upon which Terpstra heaps attention, to the Beach Strip and neighbouring areas of land reclaimed for industrial purposes that largely escape his concern. Ever sensitive to the ways in which race, class, and gender shape perceptions and understandings, Bouchier and Cruikshank illustrate how various individuals and groups rallied round or contested particular uses of (and visions for) the harbour, as change impinged (or was anticipated to impinge) differently, and unevenly, upon material circumstances.<sup>22</sup>

Translating these general claims into “real world substance” through the pages of their book, Bouchier and Cruikshank mount an extended argument demonstrating that the “power-brokers” of Hamilton worked, generation by generation, with and against the inertia of earlier decisions about and investments in the landscape to shape natural and social worlds according to their own particular visions of order (to be sought after) and disorder (to be reduced). In the middle years of the nineteenth century, these influential members of society aspired to discipline human conduct and to tame and tidy nature: “stability” and “improvement” were their watchwords. Early in the twentieth century, economic growth and livability were the overarching goals; these it seemed could be achieved by the efficient organization of society and space: public investment was turned to sorting out a seemingly anarchic waterfront, to creating better beaches here and pleasant parks there, and to sponsoring opportunities for healthy play intended “to fit the younger generation … for the great work that lies ahead.”

Through economic depression and war, the commitment to public investment in recreation and beautification waned; Hamilton became a “lunch bucket” city in which environmental degradation was accepted as

the necessary price of progress and prosperity. Come the 1960s, however, civic leaders began to believe that degraded nature was “a source and symbol of urban disorder” even as they and the public lost faith in the capacity of governments to deal with such problems and embraced more democratic decision making and greater community engagement to address their concerns. Through all of this, unruly (or imperfectly understood) nature foiled or undid the intentions of civic leaders, and some less-than-docile citizens refused to bend to the will of authorities. The city was neither a simple artifact of human invention nor an expression of the collective ambitions of its inhabitants: “those in power … had to contend with a social world in which the less powerful could have conflicting objectives and exert some influence, and with a natural world that did not always bend to their designs or respond as expected.”

Read along a slightly different grain, *The People and the Bay* impresses for the scope of topics and literatures with which it engages. Historians of sport will find much of interest in discussions (in Chapter 4 and elsewhere) of recreation in the city (including swimming, angling, sailing, rowing, and running); there are insights as well as local details here for those interested in sewage and sanitation in the city (and they are, perhaps, surprisingly numerous). The Canadian literature on civic boosterism and town planning is enriched by discussions within these pages. Those fascinated by the rise of widespread environmental concern in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as its local expressions (on which we have too little good scholarship in Canada), will find new nuggets in “Gillian Simmons’s Backyard” (a chapter centred on the activist who led the charge to “save our bay” from further development). More broadly, this book is a significant addition to the still thin literature on the environmental history of Canadian cities. Its close focus on Hamilton, notwithstanding, *The People and the Bay* offers important perspectives on the challenges involved in trying to grasp and mark the significance of environmental and social change in Canada and beyond.

Among the many accomplishments of this book, one must number its treatment of complexity and constraint. Deeply rooted in all the standard sources of historical research, the rich tapestry woven through the pages of *The People and the Bay* is intricate and complicated. In working its way towards an understanding of what happened when, why, and how around Burlington Bay, this book trades in careful argument rather than sweeping claim. Its important contentions and timely strictures are the more robust for that – but the form of their delivery also poses a question, in this age of the sound bite, instant messaging, and unequivocal

cal pronouncements, about whether Bouchier and Cruikshank's thoughtful intervention will have the influence it ought among those concerned with human (mis)treatment of Earth.

Consider. Late in the twentieth century, Carol Ann Sokoloff wrote a poem in response to developments along the Toronto waterfront during her childhood and later years. In the late 1950s and 1960s, the viability of her father's motel on Lakeshore Boulevard had been undermined by construction of the Gardiner Expressway, and the parents of friends had protested the continued infilling of Toronto Harbour; two decades later, those friends had opposed efforts to evict residents of Toronto Island.<sup>23</sup> Sokoloff's poem is called "Denial."<sup>24</sup> It reads, in part:

Our cities have turned their backs  
upon their source,  
like a sated child that  
pushes away the breast,  
....

At water's edge men  
erected railyards and speedways  
the modern medieval walls,  
to keep from consciousness  
all that is mysterious, vast and deep,  
that cannot be understood;  
....

... as if to assert their own omnipotence [city fathers]  
defiled the living spirit of the waves  
pouring the wastes of commerce,  
the poisons of greed,  
relentlessly into the clear pools,  
the well into which we still dip  
for sustenance.

In ancient days cities built walls  
to keep invaders out,  
and invaders sought first to take  
the water source,  
without which the city must fall.

The cancer of our age  
is that we have become the invaders  
of our own self,  
and have built

the wall  
to keep us  
from our source

There are lessons to learn in juxtaposing this poem with Bouchier and Cruikshank's scholarship and Terpstra's rumination. Not least among them is that there are horses for courses. Any number of stories can be told about essentially the same people, places, and events, and the what and the how of their telling reflect their purpose, even as they do much to determine their audience, their reach, and their impact. The imagery of Sokoloff's poem is vivid, its message clear and arresting. These few verses might be taken to refer to Hamilton – or Melbourne, Australia, or Portland, Oregon, for that matter – in the third quarter of the twentieth century. The poem speaks, surely, to opposition, to protest, to the propensities of urban developers and the environmental anxieties of that period – and to some degree our own. Just as surely (as any reader of Terpstra, or Bouchier and Cruikshank, or the substantial historical literature on the Toronto waterfront will recognize), however, it simplifies for effect.<sup>25</sup> That is its strength (as an evocation of sentiment) and its weakness (as an account of events).

Working the borderlands between memoir and creative nonfiction, Terpstra is free to engage in what has been termed “instant archaeology,” exploring the question “How much past is past?” (posed, according to W.J. Keith, by Hugh Hood in *A New Athens*).<sup>26</sup> Much of his book rests on painstaking research, but he makes no pretense at “objectivity” in the “dry, pseudo-scientific sense” of that term. His collection of closely inter-related but in other ways disparate essays includes (among other things) personal reminiscences, careful accounts of local history and geology, the testimonies of longtime residents, and meditations on the ways in which people think of themselves, the world, and the future.<sup>27</sup> In sum, it speaks in intelligent but accessible tones to those who seek to build a proper relationship between the earth and humankind.

Engaged in serious academic, historical scholarship, Bouchier and Cruikshank seek much the same audience, but they are necessarily more constrained in framing and delivering their message. Not for them the imaginative Terpstra-like riff (“Imagine Cootes Paradise-Hamilton Harbour as an Aboriginal arrowhead, its tip still piercing the ribs of the giant escarpment, though the finely serrated edge created by the careful chiseling of flakes, that once formed the inlets of the southern bay, has been lopped off by land reclamation and buried by the behemoth structures of heavy industry.” Perchance?). Nor do Bouchier and Cruikshank declare

abiding love for this place (apart from a quiet confession, tucked into the acknowledgments, to being hooked on its history). Few historians these days pretend to objectivity in any absolute sense, but they remain tied to sources and committed to showing that their interpretations are supported by evidence. The results may take longer to digest than striking poetic lines or musings in lyrical prose, but they are the “meat and potatoes” upon which so much else rests.

Yet for all their differences, “Denial,” *Falling into Place*, and *The People and the Bay* reflect, in essence, upon the human transformation of land- and waterscapes. The two books deal with a tiny expanse at the western end of Lake Ontario (though the latter encompasses more of this territory than the former, and the former ranges more deeply through time than the latter). “Denial” speaks to proximate and parallel circumstances. The poem offers a firm indictment of actions but attributes responsibility for these only to broad, faceless groups (“men,” “city fathers,” “we”). Both *Falling into Place* and *The People and the Bay* include an extended dramatis personae, and a comparison of the two books reveals that they are peopled by many of the same individuals, although they play different roles and their characters are developed in dissimilar ways. In the end, all three works ask readers to reflect upon similar basic questions, and the books’ authors reach hauntingly parallel, arresting conclusions. Here are Bouchier and Cruikshank: “There are no spaces … that we should not care about … if history teaches us anything, it is that the choices we have to make are not easy and that their consequences are hard to predict or control.” Here is Terpstra: “Just who is guest and who is host in this relationship to the earth we share with others of our regenerative species? I am so pleased with this place, despite the hurt and history.”<sup>28</sup> Blending, borrowing, and paraphrasing the insights of our authors leaves little doubt that love, of place or person, is a complex, contradictory, and embattled business in which mistakes will be made along the way but that we should not be deterred – as the unfolding story of *The People and the Bay* makes plain – in our efforts both to build a better relationship with the earth and to do right by humankind.

## INTRODUCTION

# Whose Harbour?

---

ON A COLD AND WINTRY SUNDAY in 1865, John Smoke, the son of a local farmer, sat huddled in a fishing hut on Burlington Bay as he speared black bass fish through a hole in the ice. Along came the newly appointed fishery inspector for the Province of Canada West, John Kerr, who caught him red-handed breaking the Fisheries Act. Wanting to make Smoke an example to others in his campaign to uphold the law and conserve Lake Ontario's declining fish stocks, Inspector Kerr charged him with three infractions – fishing with a spear, possessing bass caught with a spear, and fishing on a Sunday. Later that week, the two men appeared before Hamilton's Police Court. Magistrate James Cahill, having seen the inspector's evidence and jurisdiction challenged in his courtroom on other occasions, advised Kerr to drop the first two charges, which he did. The magistrate then found Smoke guilty of fishing on the Sabbath, remarking as he passed his sentence that all too often men like Smoke seemed to think "that they were at liberty to do as they pleased with Her Majesty's property."<sup>1</sup>

Many citizens of Hamilton and the nearby area struggled against nature, and against each other, to determine the appropriate uses of "Her Majesty's property." All three men in this story – the farmer's son John Smoke, the fishery inspector John Kerr, and the police magistrate James Cahill – may have agreed that Burlington Bay belonged to the community, but their behaviours reveal that they disagreed about what that actually meant. Like others in Hamilton, John Smoke fished in the bay, seeing it as a community property and resource that was accessible to anyone. In the winter, he

fished with a spear, a method that efficiently caught fresh, firm, and flavourful fish. Spearing put easily gotten food on his wintertime dinner table and a bit of off-season income in his pocket, from local dealers who bought his surplus catch. Fishery Inspector John Kerr held a different view of the bay. He policed this specially designated area on behalf of the Government of Canada West, aiming to protect black bass and other fish in order to sustain the fishery at the western end of Lake Ontario. Formerly the secretary of a local conservation-minded angling club, Kerr saw spearing as an unsportsmanlike threat to the province's fish populations. Police Magistrate James Cahill doubted that Her Majesty had granted Kerr or he himself the kind of authority that Kerr wanted. He had little doubt, however, of the state's authority to enforce the law against Sunday fishing, to ensure that the bay was a place where public morality and respect for the Crown were at all times preserved. As Cahill's comment suggests, he viewed the natural setting of the bay, with its city-lined shore, as being dangerously liberating, encouraging people "to do as they pleased."

The material world – the frozen bay and its fish – provided the setting for very human conflicts on Burlington Bay (later renamed Hamilton Harbour). Her Majesty's property was not just the stage setting for Her Majesty's subjects, however. It acted and reacted to human activities in ways that often were – and still are – poorly understood. The courtroom drama would not have taken place at all were it not for a change in the non-human world – the decline of certain fish populations in the bay. Of course, the courtroom drama represented a very human response to this decline, dependent on cultural ideas of what particular fish were to be valued and ideas about how best to account for the loss of a resource that once seemed so abundant. The behaviour of humans like John Smoke and James Cahill complicated Kerr's attempts to protect the fishery. So too did the habits and behaviours of the fish.

This small courtroom encounter in 1865, therefore, offers an introduction to our environmental and social history of Hamilton's bay. These three men, with their differing social positions and relationships to the natural world, encountered and envisioned the bay as community property in very different ways. Over the next century or so, as the city of Hamilton grew and emerged as a major Canadian industrial town and a significant Great Lakes port, others would see the bay in their own way too. Some saw it as a recreational playground – a place of fun for anglers, swimmers, and sailors. Others saw it as a practical source of sustenance – for its fish, game, ice, and water – key ingredients for supporting an urban population and fuelling local businesses. Some saw the bay as a

beauty spot – an attractive site for gardens, cottages, parks, beaches, and philanthropic enterprises, making it a public place to see and be seen. Still others saw it as a convenient dump for residential and industrial wastes. As the work of Fishery Inspector John Kerr suggests, it did not take long to determine that this triangular, thirty-square-kilometre body of water and its adjoining marshlands and creeks might not be able to sustain all of those diverse activities.<sup>2</sup> As Hamilton grew, a bay that once seemed large and abundant enough to accommodate many uses and many different peoples appeared much less so. Human actors struggled to understand, control, and manage nature – and each other – to ensure that the bay would continue to be, or would become, the kind of place that they wanted it to be.

In the pages that follow, we offer an environmental history of Burlington Bay and Hamilton Harbour. We think of our history as environmental because it seeks to respond to Donald Worster's 1990 plea that historians pay more attention to the ways that people in the past have defined "what a resource is, which sorts of behavior may be environmentally degrading and ought to be prohibited" and the ways in which they generally chose "the ends to which nature is put."<sup>3</sup> Worster was most interested in encouraging his colleagues to consider these issues in relation to agricultural practices – capitalist agricultural practices in particular – and was criticized for being less interested in industrialization and urbanization, two other processes associated with the emergence of modern North America. So, like many environmental historians then and since, we are interested in Worster's questions, but in the ends to which nature is put in a setting that can seem so divorced from nature – the industrial city.

Hamilton is not an exceptional metropolitan giant such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, or Manchester, but the work of several historians has presented it as a good example of perhaps a more common type of North American city.<sup>4</sup> And it is a Canadian city, as our initial focus on Her Majesty's property clearly underlines. As Alan MacEachern recently noted, environmental historians have been slow to consider the city, being "often preoccupied by the Canada of the north and the Canada of the wild."<sup>5</sup> We join others such as Michèle Dagenais and co-authors Christopher Armstrong, Matthew Evenden, and H.V. Nelles in trying to ensure that Canadians better understand the environmental dynamics of urban industrial change in their country.<sup>6</sup> Like these authors, we are particularly interested in the fate of urban waters, and urban water.

Ours is also a social history of Burlington Bay and Hamilton Harbour. As scholars have turned to the examination of urban environments, they

have focused on how the categories of interest to social historians, particularly class, race, and gender, shaped human conceptions of, and interactions with, the non-human world. We continue to see Andrew Hurley's pioneering work on the steel city of Gary, Indiana, as a model study, for he tried to understand how social groups conceived of their material environment – both for its problems and for its possibilities – in very different ways, while also showing that they experienced environmental change very differently.<sup>7</sup> Hurley's work also points to the important role that recreation could play in thinking about the urban environment. Conceptions of nature and the uses of the bay and the waterfront often incorporated some notion of the harbour as a site for sports and leisure. Recreational historians have for many years been interested in examining how sports and leisure activities were shaped by and could shape the social power of diverse groups in society. Although the harbour clearly differed from an urban park in important respects, our work is particularly informed by studies of urban parks. Historians such as Stephen Hardy, Robert A.J. McDonald, Sean Kheraj, and co-authors Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar have all shown how in a potentially common urban space, various groups sought to produce and apply their own perspectives on nature.<sup>8</sup>

In writing a history of the harbour of another steel city, we have tried to recognize that not all ways of encountering, envisioning, and knowing the bay held equal social and political power. The contest over what the bay should be and how it should be used was shaped by inequalities in people's economic, social, and political power. It was, after all, the farmer's son and neither the government inspector nor the police magistrate who gave up almost two weeks' worth of earnings as a consequence of his behaviour. John Smoke learned whose harbour it was, and whose it wasn't. The bay might be community property, but the use of public authority clearly revealed who did, and who did not, have power over Her Majesty's property. There was no golden age when all members of the community shared in its abundant resources; from the outset, those with power struggled to shape nature to serve what they believed were their best interests.

Of course, the resulting material world did not necessarily correspond to what the most powerful members of the community wanted it to be. The power to remake the world was always restricted. Power was limited by the social world; the less dominant struggled to sustain their own conceptions of the non-human natural world, and the powerful did not always have the resources to overcome these other views. Power was also limited by the material world. The work of a generation of urban environmental

historians makes us conscious that an environmental history must not lose track of the materiality of the non-human world, its potential to mould our behaviour and to act independently of our ideas about how it ought to respond to our efforts to manage it. As Swedish human ecology scholar Alf Hornborg rightly notes, attention to materiality does not mean, as it once might have, “believing that cultural patterns of consumption and production are determined by the physical environment, only that cultural behavior takes place within a material world whose properties constrain what is possible and determine the environmental consequences of that behavior.”<sup>9</sup> To a considerable extent, we are interested in what certain groups of people did to and in nature. Nature did talk back, however, and we do our best to recognize that. How it talked back is often hard to tease out of the sources and, of course, is often mediated by either historical or current understandings of natural processes. Humans did not fully control fish populations, some of which declined while others thrived, but historical observations of fish populations are often episodic, and our current understanding of fish population dynamics is still not perfect. The natural environment of Hamilton Harbour played a role in the emergence of Hamilton as a major industrial city, but the precise role changed over time, in part because material and social processes complicated what needed to be done to achieve environmental and social goals.

OUR STORY BEGINS after Old World settlers began to arrive in the region, and after the almost enclosed waters of the bay were opened by a small canal to Lake Ontario in the 1820s and 1830s. John Smoke was part of a community of Hamilton-area fishers who had first learned winter spearing from observing or working with the Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples who regularly visited the shores of the bay. Long before them, and probably since the last ice age, North American peoples had migrated seasonally to use the resources of the bay and western marsh, which may have been full of wild rice – rather than cattails – before around 1100 CE. They modified it in various ways; some of the earliest maize growing in the region occurred near the marsh shoreline. If more settled farms and villages appeared, however, they were disrupted by the disease and warfare that followed in the wake of early contact with Europeans. Neutral Indian tribes settled in the bay area before the seventeenth century but dispersed during the Five Nations Iroquois invasions of that century. Neither the Iroquois nor the Mississauga peoples who had displaced them by the early eighteenth century seem to have settled at the bay, perhaps preferring locations with more direct access to the lake. By the time that Europeans from

across the sea or from the colonies to the south began to seriously settle the region in the late seventeen hundreds, therefore, it had again been used for seasonal occupation.<sup>10</sup> We begin where we do, not because it was pristine and untouched by human hands, nor because its social and environmental history starts at this point, nor because there were no earlier conflicts over who ought to use the bay and who ought to access the resources. We do so largely because we are interested in the environmental changes associated with the modern processes of urbanization and industrialization.

We start our story, then, in the period from the 1820s to the 1890s, when Hamilton's social and political leaders struggled to construct an Old World city in the New World on the western end of Lake Ontario. To achieve this goal, the local government and residents had to civilize nature's wilderness. Thus, Chapter 1, "Civilizing Nature," examines the efforts of Hamilton's social and economic leaders to create a working port for trade and commerce, and their attempts to counteract natural processes – such as fire and disease – that threatened the urban dwellers in their port city. It also considers several ways in which these individuals sought to secure their own position within the society and their efforts to create distinct social and geographical recreational spaces for those who would appreciate and use the bay's natural setting. The process of civilizing nature often meant excluding the rougher elements of a port society and cultivating "proper" social behaviour among the middle classes. Chapter 2, "Conserving Nature," returns to a more detailed accounting of the larger story of Inspector John Kerr, examining how he and others worked to conserve the fishery in Hamilton. We connect his story to broader movements that promoted civilized recreational behaviour in nature, while illustrating the limits of those efforts. We reveal the face of the Victorian state through John Kerr, exploring how both time and experience led him to change his views about the challenges facing the fishery that he was charged to protect.

The next three chapters cover the period from the 1890s through to the early 1940s generally, as Hamilton grew significantly and as large industrial employers came to dominate its physical and economic landscape. This era witnessed a much greater emphasis on the scientific management and organization of nature, recreation, and the city, and, in important distinction from earlier periods, ensuring that its rapidly growing population of immigrants and industrial workers had healthy living and wholesome leisure activities available to them. Chapter 3, "Boosting Nature," considers the phenomenon of urban boosterism as it occurred in Hamilton. It

discusses the important consequences and frustrations associated with attracting industrialists to the port and explores the contradictions inherent in selling industrial Hamilton as a healthy place for workers. In Chapter 4, “Organizing Nature,” we focus on the city’s efforts to ensure that healthful waterfront recreation – including fishing and swimming – existed for Hamiltonians of all social classes, even as industrial growth limited these very activities. Chapter 5, “Planning Nature,” explores the world of urban planning through the lens of one prominent social and political leader, Thomas B. McQuesten, who aimed to better organize Hamilton’s planned development and create aesthetically pleasing publicly accessible green spaces for its citizens. In these three chapters, Hamilton’s social leaders are shown to have used public power to reshape nature and people’s experience of it, quite confident that they knew what was best for all residents. They believed that they could create a successful industrial city that was also livable and beautiful. Too often we assume that previous generations prioritized the smokestack over a healthy environment; together, these chapters suggest otherwise.

The final three chapters detail the environmental consequences of harbour development and the struggles and tensions that emerged. Chapter 6, “Confining Nature,” considers the period between the 1930s and the late 1950s, when the smokestack did seem to prevail. Most civic leaders increasingly concentrated on promoting Hamilton Harbour as a heavy industrial port. Between the opening of the “Fourth” Welland Canal in 1932 and the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959, Hamilton’s steel industry and related enterprises colonized much of the eastern waterfront, with little regard for other uses of the harbour. Little was done to counteract the environmental damage of postwar growth, beyond ensuring that the waterworks produced water that was reasonably healthy for residents and useful for industry. For a time, the deterioration of the harbour seemed to have been accepted as a price of prosperity. But not for long. Chapter 7, “Un-chaining Nature,” turns to the late 1950s through the mid-1980s, when some local citizens – including a key figure in this chapter, Gillian Simmons – challenged the status quo. Her concerns over a waterfront development project in her North End neighbourhood were transformed into a larger crusade for a more balanced use of the harbour. She and others identified public accessibility as a critical issue for the health of the waterfront, asserting that people who knew and encountered the bay’s shoreline would take better care of its waters. They also argued for the importance of working *with* communities affected by the environmentally poor state of the harbour, as opposed to planning *for* them.

These developments paved the way for a more collaborative approach to fixing the degraded and damaged harbour environment, which we consider in Chapter 8, “Remediating Nature.” At the end of the twentieth century, Hamilton’s social and political leaders sought once again to balance the uses of the harbour, but they aimed to involve more people in the decision-making process and to accommodate differing visions of the harbour. They also sought to ensure that non-human nature and natural processes – at least as they understood them – would be considered and respected. In 2015, no less than in 1865, human and non-human nature complicated outcomes.

In the pages that follow, then, we offer an environmental and social history of one city’s harbour. We invite readers not to think of the past as an alien place where bad things were done to nature because it was not seen as an important part of the city. Instead, we hope readers might see the past as a familiar if different place where well-meaning social groups sought to build what they deemed a healthy and livable town, and believed that nature had a role to play in creating it. If at times we focus on the limits of their achievements, if we consider how they did not always understand or control the consequences of their actions, and if we seek to highlight the social and moral assumptions that shaped their efforts, we do so in the hope that we might more effectively reflect upon the present and future of our own urban societies and landscape. We invite readers to enter into and consider past worlds, but we do so that they might think about their own world differently. Cities are one of the places where human societies have dramatically transformed the non-human world, yet that world remains always present and active. We encourage readers to think about their own city as a vibrant place where the non-human world is always present and active, and where human actors seek to control the intended and unintended consequences of their encounters with both it and each other. We all have difficult moral and political choices to make about the social and natural world around us, just like those who came before us.<sup>11</sup>