

# The Games People Played Tavern Amusements and Colonial Social Relations

Julia Roberts

Volume 102, Number 2, Fall 2010

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

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065580ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065580ar>

[See table of contents](#)

## Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

## ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

## Cite this article

Roberts, J. (2010). The Games People Played: Tavern Amusements and Colonial Social Relations. *Ontario History*, 102(2), 154–174.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1065580ar>

## Article abstract

Play was serious business. 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. As we see them “throwing sticks and stones,” playing “sleight of hand tricks,” dancing jigs and “8 reels,” or “gambling and drinking around a large table,” we see that play was a defining part of a social world linked to the tavern. Play was a means through which tavern-goers bound themselves together, but a means also, and paradoxically, through which they could define social distance and cultural space.

# The Games People Played: Tavern Amusements and Colonial Social Relations

by Julia Roberts

On Easter Day in British-occupied Detroit, 1793, at about 11 o'clock in the morning, four labouring men named Francis Lalonde, Felix Mettiz, Antoine Prevost, and Louis Roy “were diverting themselves” both inside Gouin’s tavern and outside it on the road. They were “throwing sticks, stones, and mud at each other.” They were drinking and perhaps “a little intoxicated.” By accident, Roy hit Lalonde on the head with a mis-thrown stone and stood trial for his “felonious murder.” A jury of Roy’s peers that included four yeoman (independent farmers), a cooper, three innkeepers, a joiner (carpenter), a shoemaker, an armourer (gun maker and repairman) and a blacksmith, found him “guilty of excusable homicide by misfortune.” Roy’s social equals recognized the tavern-based rough play for what it was—a popular entertainment gone awry. So too did a handful of his social betters—“gentlemen” close enough to see the events of the day and those called later to court. Yet

in his charge to the jury, the judge called the men’s amusement “rude” and “coarse play.” His choice of language suggests his own distance from them, his privileged ability to place cultural judgement upon what labouring men did for fun, and suggests too that different people, located in different places on the colonial social spectrum, had different ideas about the best forms of public entertainment. A game of sticks and stones that did worse than break some bones is a suitably serious introduction to the subject of colonial tavern amusements. For though this article catches Upper Canadians at their play, it argues that through it historians can begin to map the geography of power within tavern spaces, how class, gender, and race were enacted there spatially. In particular, colonial gentlemen staged their amusements in the public houses in ways that asserted privilege, maleness and whiteness, although not always successfully.<sup>1</sup>

By wending their way in and out of

---

<sup>1</sup> William Renwick Riddell, *Michigan under British Rule: Law and Law Courts, 1760-1796* (Lansing, MI: Michigan Historical Commission, 1926), 345.

## *Abstract*

*Play was serious business. 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. As we see them “throwing sticks and stones,” playing “sleight of hand tricks,” dancing jigs and “8 reels,” or “gambling and drinking around a large table,” we see that play was a defining part of a social world linked to the tavern. Play was a means through which tavern-goers bound themselves together, but a means also, and paradoxically, through which they could define social distance and cultural space.*

**Résumé:** *Se divertir était alors une affaire sérieuse. En prenant part aux différentes formes de divertissement public qui leur étaient offertes dans le Haut-Canada, les participants définissaient les contours du pouvoir social dans cette société coloniale. Jouer aux ‘bâtons et pierres,’ faire des tours de prestidigitation, danser des ‘jigs’ et des ‘reels,’ jouer à des jeux de hasards ou boire autour d’une grande table, tous ces divertissements aidaient à déterminer une structure sociale liée à la taverne. Pour ceux qui fréquentaient les tavernes, le divertissement était un moyen de fraterniser, mais aussi, et paradoxalement, un moyen d’établir des distances sociales et de définir un espace culturel.*

Gouin’s tavern, from its public room to the public street, four labourers also wended their way, by accident, into a courtroom and into a legal record that enables us, today, to ask questions about public life, public entertainment, and ownership over colonial public space. The analysis here draws upon such legal records, as well as other primary sources—those documents that remain from the colonial past to tell its stories to the present—correspondence with government officials,

published travelogues, two diaries (one of a tavern-keeper, one of a tavern-goer), account books, licensing records, and newspaper reports and advertisements. Yet, evidence about the amusements of the colonial taverns is rare, fragmentary, and discoverable more through serendipity in the archives than through any rigorous research plan. As such, some paragraphs in what follows have appeared before: these are the examples of tavern amusements that I have and here they are examined through a new lens—one that allows us to focus upon the ways that play defined and enacted the contours of social power in this colo-

onial society.<sup>2</sup> Still, some of the sources are so opaque as to make historical certainty about what they might mean unreachable, but they encourage us to query their meanings. For example, though we know that in the spring of 1846, a clockmaker named Isaac Macdonald called at Sebach’s Tavern on the Huron Road (today, Highway 8, Mitchell, Ontario) and passed a Sunday afternoon there “telling some stories,” drinking a little beer, and playing “sleight of hand tricks,” “for amusement,”

<sup>2</sup> Julia Roberts, *In Mixed Company: Taverns and Public Life in Upper Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009), 80-5. The material appears with the kind permission of the UBC Press.

we hardly understand what those tricks were. What does it mean that he was “endeavouring to put a ring on a wooden ramrod which was in Jacob Cramer’s hands [and] succeeded in getting the ring on the rod while Cramer held both ends?” What does it mean that Macdonald then “performed the feat of lifting a chair by the spars?” Why is it important that “no treats were bet on the outcome?”—that is, no drinks were wagered—and why does the historical record tell us that after all of this, when Macdonald sat down, William Sebach then “knocked his hat over his eyes...in fun?” Everyone there, at Sebach’s in 1846, understood these words, these feats, the joke with the hat, and the social and cultural context in which they resided. Even the Chief Justice of the colony of Upper Canada, John Beverley Robinson, once wrote about the “kind of sport that people in the bar room of an Inn constantly indulge in.” Even this highly privileged, well educated, accomplished, and successful man, distant from the Isaac Macdonalds of his world, had an intrinsic understanding of the contested cultural and social meanings of public, tavern-based entertainments.<sup>3</sup>

We lack that. This article, in a special “Entertainment in Upper Canada” issue of *Ontario History* has two goals in

consequence: a thorough listing, as far as the sources will allow, of the many forms of tavern-based public entertainment in Upper Canada, and, again as the sources allow, an analysis of what access to tavern-based public entertainment tells us about different peoples’ membership in public life and public space, be they identifiable as First Nations or other racialized identities (including white), be they men, women, or members of particular faiths, poor or privileged, those opposed to the taverns’ ready supply of alcohol, those not, and other colonial permutations of ‘identity.’ Historiographically, then, this article slips into that space where social and cultural history meets alcohol studies, a space which can usefully be called the ‘new tavern history.’ The published literature is already enormous and exponentially growing, international in scope, diverse in terms of analysis, but shares a common preoccupation to read drink and drink supported amusements for what they reveal about, for example, the nature of gendered power in a society, or the relationship between “polite” and “popular” culture, or the ways in which racialized identities carried the benefits of privilege or the burdens of discrimination.<sup>4</sup>

A tavern in Upper Canada, varied across time and space. For example, a one

<sup>3</sup> *Stratford Beacon and Perth County Intelligencer*, 4 April 1846; Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Upper Canada Sundries, RG 5 C1 Provincial Secretary’s Office. Correspondence Canada West, volume 270, file 1515, J.B. Robinson to Secretary Harrison, 8 May 1843.

<sup>4</sup> For example, for the U.S. see: Sharon V. Salinger, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Peter Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution: Tavern-going and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia*, Early American Studies (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); David Conroy, *In Public Houses: Drink and the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1995). On the public houses of Europe see Peter Clark, *The English*



*Smith's Tavern, near Hamilton, 1795. E.G. Guillet, *Pioneer Inns and Taverns*. Backwoods taverns offered the most basic of accommodations.*

or two room log-cabin, located in the backwoods and providing only the simplest fare and accommodation (salt pork and whiskey, for example and the likelihood of shared beds), such as Smith's Tavern, above, shaped colonial public life differently than the solid minor houses that numerically dominated in the trade, and the handful of truly principal taverns or hotels that belonged primarily in urban centres. Travellers and colonists alike understood these backwoods taverns to be temporary affairs, dictated by the frontier conditions of settlement, and hardly ideal as the venues of public life and public entertainment.

The vast majority of taverns in the colony were the minor public houses and they ranged in size and sophistication from small, family affairs in rural areas, such as Andrew's Inn, to more substantial houses such as the beautiful Fairfield Tavern, on the shore of Lake Ontario, near Kingston. All minor houses provided far more possibilities for public entertainment: solid and sometimes excellent vernacular fare, a good array of liquor in the bar, and rooms that enabled choices. Every good minor house balanced rooms allowing for relative privacy (a parlour or upstairs sitting rooms, in particular) with those that encouraged full public engagement (the barroom especially).

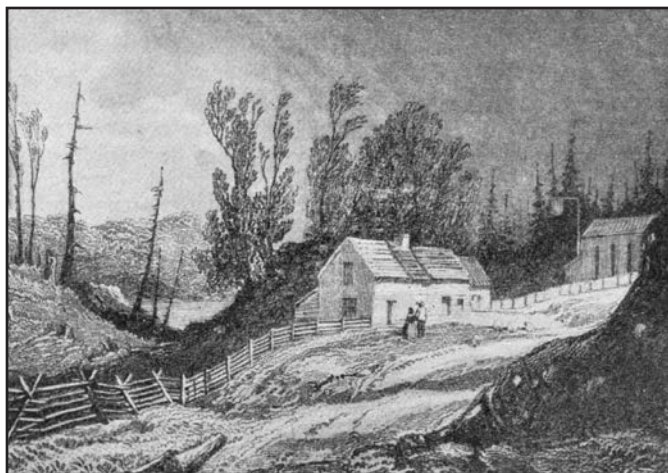
The principal houses, or hotels, were taverns too. They differed from most by of-

---

*Alehouse A Social History 1200-1830* (London: Longman, 1983); Thomas Brennan, *Public Drinking and Popular Culture in Eighteenth Century Paris* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988); W. Scott Haine, *World of the Paris Café: Sociability among the French Working Class, 1789-1914* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Beverley Ann Tlusty, *Bacchus and Civic Order: The Culture of Drink in Early Modern Germany* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001); Beat Kümin and B. Ann Tlusty eds., *World of the Tavern: Public Houses in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2002); Adam Smyth, ed., *A Pleasing Sinne: Drink and Conviviality in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Boydell and Brewer, 2004); In the medieval period, see Barbara A. Hanawalt, *'Of Good and Ill Repute': Gender and Social Control in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

In Canada, Edwin C. Guillet, *Pioneer Inns and Taverns* (Toronto: The Author, 1954-1962); Margaret McBurney and Mary Byers, *Tavern in the Town: Early Inns and Taverns of Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); for more scholarly treatments see, Peter deLottinville, "Joe Beef of Montreal: Working Class Culture and the Tavern, 1869-1889," *Labour/Le Travail* 8-9, (Autumn 1981/Spring 1982); Cheryl Krasnick Warsh, ed. *Drink in Canada: Historical Essays* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); Robert A. Campbell, *Sit Down and Drink Your Beer: Regulating Vancouver's Beer Parlours, 1925-1954* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Craig Heron, *Booze: A Distilled History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003), and his, "The Boys and Their Booze: Masculinities and Public Drinking in Working-class Hamilton 1890-1946," *Canadian Historical Review*, 86:3 (Sept. 2005), 411-52.





*Left, from top to bottom: Andrew's Tavern, near Mallory's Town, 1850. John Bigsby, The Shoe and Canoe. Both a family home and a tavern, Andrew's Inn offered the accommodations typical of a small minor house in the countryside.*

*Fairfield's Tavern, outside Kingston on the Bath Road. The tavern was an extremely good minor house, patronized by gentlemen and ladies as well as travellers. It still stands.*

*James Pattison Cockburn, Pavillion Hotel, Niagara Falls, 1830. E.G. Guillet, Pioneer Inns and Taverns. At the Pavillion, patrons dressed for dinner and enjoyed the services of a mostly black wait staff.*



fering access to fine appointments, fine dining, fine liquors, true privacy if desired, and, their proprietors worked hard to craft an air of fashionability and exclusivity.

All taverns, despite their material differences in location and size, in elegance and appointments, in the related quality of food and liquor available to patrons, and in the degree of privacy or promiscuity accommodation assumed, shared three primary characteristics: the public had free, almost undisturbed access to them at almost all hours; taverns were licensed to sell liquor by small measure—(by the glass, gill (4 oz.), half-pint or pint) and they provided refreshment and lodging for a charge, though of enormously varying quality as the images reveal.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Roberts, *In Mixed Company*, 22-28.

And while a black traveller, for example, or working women, or ladies in the company of gentlemen, or First Nations traders seeking amusement or refreshment might well find that their terms of access to the taverns differed from that of the white men who dominated numerically and culturally, colonists and travellers alike understood the public houses as valuable public spaces, an identity specific to the context of a colonial and pre-industrial setting. The taverns crucially supported the economy, the transportation network, political life and, most importantly for a discussion of tavern-based entertainment, they supported public association, in any number of forms.

The sheer array of entertainments—be they organized events, travelling professional players, commercialized amusements, or spontaneous group activities—hosted by taverns and tavern keepers, defies categorization. Yet they emerge in the vignettes and analyses that follow as defining parts of a social world linked to the tavern: as practices through which tavern-goers bound themselves together, to be sure, but which stood, paradoxically, as practices through which they could define social distance and cultural space.

Tavern-goers sang together perpetually. “As usual,” wrote one tavern keeper, “the house was ... full of noisy company singing in two or three rooms at once.” At Perry’s,

John Wallington led the barroom in rounds of in *God Save the King*, “ordering hats off at the chorus of his song.” At Goodwin’s in Kingston in 1841, two young lawyers sang together “from dinner ‘till tea.”<sup>6</sup> Song united drinking companions by creating a sense of shared conviviality.

Dancing worked similarly. With “company a’Dancing and Lester playing the fiddle,” Moore’s tavern rocked in early York. “Some itinerant Italian Organists ... played lively tunes in the bar” of a tavern near Forty Mile Creek, while soldiers “danced jigs.” In a backwood’s stage-house, patrons assembled for a show “fell to dancing” when a fiddler took up his bow. We know the fiddler was black because as our diarist put it, the company had “a blacky for a musician, who scraped away in good style.” Later the fiddler found himself in the position of “grumbling and wrangling about the smallness of his pay.” And a country traveller “found a fiddler at Burwell’s and danced French fours and 8 reels until midnight.”<sup>7</sup> Music and dance created the company in these instances, created the comradeship and good fellowship that the word implies. Yet, at Wheeler’s, on the Talbot Road, “a black man came forward and danced.” Not of the company, but performing for it, the dancer shows the limits of inclusiveness wrought by entertainment in public space and race as a clear barometer of power.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Archives of Ontario, Playter [Ely] Diary [EP], 6 July 1802; RG22-390, 3-3, Macaulay, Western/Gore, July-Oct. 1835, *K v John Wallington*; Lambton County Archives, Wyoming, Ontario. Henry John Jones Diary [HJ] 6 Dec. 1841.

<sup>7</sup> EP, 7 July 1802; James Alexander, *L’Acadie: Or, Seven Years’ Explorations in British North America*, vol. 1 (London: Henry Colburn, 1849), 196-97; William Pope Journal, Part 2, *Western Ontario History Nuggets*, 16 (London, Ont.: Lawson Memorial Library, University of Western Ontario, 1952), 46; HJ 12 Nov. 1834.

<sup>8</sup> James Alexander, *L’Acadie*, 135.

Still, tavern dance could be put to explicitly cohesive, if exclusive, purposes. "Professional men, merchants, civil and military officers, and members of the Provincial Parliament" with women of similar social rank, for example, liked to celebrate their exclusivity by organizing balls at the principal public houses. As a gentleman who attended described the process:

Subscription balls are very prevalent. For this purpose every respectable tavern ... is always provided with an extensive ballroom. Stewards ... send tickets to the different subscribers, give orders for the accommodations, attend to suitable decorations of the house and collect the amount of subscriptions for which the proprietor of the hotel always considers them accountable. A gentleman's subscription is generally about five dollars: the ladies never pay anything. For this sum you are entitled to bring with you a partner and servant.<sup>9</sup>

The description reeks of group privilege celebrated in style and depicts the principal taverns in ways gentlemen and ladies preferred them—as exclusive clubs, as allies in the quest to define a separate gentrified identity—as spaces devoid of their public character.

Still, there was no assurance that the genteel's willingness to enact their privileged identity in public space would be tolerated by a popular tavern company. Imagine this gentleman diarist's consternation when he arrived at O'Neil's tavern near London, exhausted from a day on the stage coach, seeking drink and dining in a good house, and sleep for a 4:30 am start and found instead: "the house in an

uproar." Billed as a "lecture on astronomy ... the astronomical part of the exhibition was confined to two or three magic lantern pictures of the most conspicuous heavenly bodies ... the moon, however, very soon gave place to 'catching a pig by the tail,' Saturn's ring to 'the witch's dance on broomsticks,' and the sun to (by your permission Ladies and Gentlemen), General Jackson, the whole to conclude with the much admired comic song 'Darly O'Gallagher' by the Astronomer. The last part of the performance was to me the most annoying ... as it effectually prevented my sleeping." In this description of tavern entertainment penned by an English gentleman and Crown Lands Agent, is evidence in his choice of tone, and general snitty disapproval, of the willingness of some relatively privileged contemporaries to place judgement upon popular culture and seek distance from it. There is also evidence of the power of the popular to resist the assertions of privilege.

Story-telling, which had a natural home in the barroom, created group identification of a different sort. It allowed listeners common entry, as audience, into funny, fascinating or awe-inspiring tales. It also existed as a form of social currency, accruing at least temporary status to the teller. For example, the lone survivor of a steamer wreck on Lake Erie in 1840 became, in the barroom, "a sort of lion, in his way, and told his 'thrice-told tale' of all the perils and dangers he had escaped."<sup>10</sup> In 1835 "a Yorkshireman was entertain-

<sup>9</sup> Edward Allen Talbot, *Five Years' Residence in the Canadas: Including a Tour Through Part of the United States of America in the Year 1823*, vol 2 (London: Longman et al., 1824), 20-1.

<sup>10</sup> Morleigh, *Life in the West, Backwoods Leaves and Prairie Flowers: Rough Sketches on the Borders of*



ing many listeners in the bar-room of the hotel .... This character was dressed in his smock coat, with tight lacing boots and leggans as if come from his native country a minute before and was telling cock and bull stories about his shooting feats with Lord Liverpool.”<sup>11</sup> Conversation could have the same element of audience and performance. For example, at the Exchange, in Detroit (which colonists from Windsor and area treated as one of their local taverns) the barroom company “smoked and listened to an animated theological discussion between a christian and a free thinking Yankee which though blasphemous was very amusing.”<sup>12</sup> This was not a private conversation, but a public exchange conducted, in part, for the appreciation of other tavern-goers. There was social power to be had with a witty turn of phrase, or a well-placed joke.

Tavern-goers also convened over cards and betting, such as the “boisterous crowd who were gambling and drinking around a large table” in a country tavern in the Western District in 1809. Ely Playter “called at Hamilton’s,” met some friends “and we agreed for a rubber at whist, we played a long time for beer.” “Gentlemen,” observed a colonist in 1824, “are in the habit of assembling in parties at taverns where they gamble pretty highly.”

In 1836, at Tesimond’s country tavern in the Western District William Bâby “made a wager with some friends that we could bag a certain number of ducks (25 brace) by a certain time.” Two black men “commenced playing dominoes” at the Canada Hotel in 1836. A woman played “sundry games of backgammon” with her brother at Lawson’s tavern in the Western District in 1837. At a tavern near Niagara in 1837, James Stevenson “said he would bet he had the heaviest watch in the room. Jesse Fletcher said he would bet a dollar on it.” At Fairfield’s, outside Kingston in 1841, “Galt and Kelly [were] playing écarté very furiously for immense sums—... and not too sober—what they won or lost remained a mystery particularly to themselves.” At Robinson’s, in Prescott, tavern-goers bet treats on a boat race in 1846. A couple lodging at the St Mary’s Hotel in 1856 “played at bagatelle in a neighbouring Saloon.” At the time “the young lady, about 17 years of age [was] dressed in male attire ... and cohabiting with a certain individual who gave his name as J.P. Dopp, a jailbird of black leg notoriety.” (The last phrase accuses him of being a swindler, perhaps at horses, perhaps at cards.)<sup>13</sup>

The trouble with most of this activity was its illegality. In Upper Canada almost

---

*the Picturesque, the Sublime, and the Ridiculous: Extracts from the Notebook of Morleigh in Search of an Estate* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1842), 228-29.

<sup>11</sup> Patrick Shirreff, *A Tour Through North America: Together with a Comprehensive View of Canada and the United States as Adapted for Agricultural Emigration* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1835), 204-205.

<sup>12</sup> HJ, 21 Aug. 1837.

<sup>13</sup> Abel Stevens, *Life and Times of Nathan Bangs* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1863), 143; EP 23 Dec. 1805; Talbot, *Five Years’ Residence*, 28 (gentlemen); W.L. Bâby, *Souvenirs of the Past, with Illustrations: An instructive and amusing work, giving a correct account of the customs and habits of the pioneers of Canada* (Windsor, ON, 1896), 20 (ducks); *Canadian Emigrant*, 26 July 1836 (dominoes); HJ, 27 Nov.

all games played for money stakes in taverns were unlawful.<sup>14</sup> And tavern keepers' licenses, from the 1790s, barred them from permitting "unlawfull games to be used in the house."<sup>15</sup> (One could get a separate license for billiards.) It is debatable how seriously tavern keepers took these rules. Still, Daniel Haskell lost his license over gaming—though the circumstances are suspicious, at least as he told it: Rufus Pooler came to his Niagara tavern in 1825 "and spoke to some of his intention of Gambling." Haskell "took their cards ... showed them where to sleep ... went to bed and after about 2 or 3 hours of sleep awoke and heard some talking in the Barroom ... found they had a new supply of implements for their Sport—immediately showed them their beds again which was the end of their Naughtiness." In this version, Pooler turned Haskell in to the authorities out of spite, and Haskell was successfully prosecuted.<sup>16</sup>

Other evidence clearly suggests a tolerance for gambling reasonably conducted. In fact, taverns were regarded, if not exactly as bastions of respectability in this regard, then at least as under appropriate control. For example, when the Mayor of Toronto, William Lyon Mac-

Kenzie, wrote in 1834, of "the haunts of the worthless and dissipated" that "afforded place and room for gambling & vice in its blackest shapes, which, if not checked would leave Toronto with "little to boast in point of manners over New Orleans,"<sup>17</sup> he was referring to *un*licensed, illegal, drinking houses in "obscure parts of the city," *not* to taverns, licensed by definition. Licensed facilities were orderly he argued, precisely because they stood open and accessible to public view and regulation. That this public eye often winked at orderly transgressions of the gaming ban is apparent. Indeed, those uniting in an illegal hand of cards for money stakes joined through it in tavern ritual conducive to mutuality.

Sport brought men and women to the taverns, as participants and fans. The Union Cricket Club used Robinson's at Prescott as its clubhouse. His fields hosted their matches, for in August 1845 he received payment from the Port Wellington Club "on account of expenses of their match game of Cricket." His house supported their celebrations—the players and their supporters drank "2 gallons of beer" and "20 glasses" of other liquor after one game.<sup>18</sup>

---

1837 (backgammon); RG22-390, 4-1, Macaulay, Niagara, 1837, *Q v James Stevenson and John Milton* (watch); HJ, 28-9 Aug. 1841 (ecarte); Upper Canada Village Archives, Thomas Robinson Account Book, 1843-58, p110 (boat race); *Stratford and Perth County Intelligencer*, 27 July, 1855 (bagatelle).

<sup>14</sup> British legislation dating from the reign of George II (30 George II, C.24) was in force in Upper Canada, within a piece of colonial legislation referred to as the 'Tavern Act,' 59 Geo. III, C.2 (1818). It banned in any house 'licensed to sell any sorts of liquors ... any gaming with cards, dice, draughts, shuffle boards, mississippi or billiard tables, skittles, nine pins....'

<sup>15</sup> For example, 'Rules and Regulations,' Huron District, 1849, Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions, no. 52535.

<sup>16</sup> NA, RG5 A1, Vol. 74, p.39488-90, Petition of Daniel Haskell, nd, inserted with Sept.-Oct. 1825.

<sup>17</sup> NA, RG5 A1, Vol 141, p.76923-9, Toronto, 5 May 1834, W.L. Mackenzie, Mayor's Office

<sup>18</sup> Upper Canada Village Archives, Thomas Robinson Account Book, 69, 106, 144, 148, 189, 224.

Men wrestled and boxed in taverns. At Playter's, before "a barroom full of people, A. Galloway and a McBride [were] wrestling—the latter strained his leg and that ended the matter." At Waugh's, Cooper and another regular "wrestled in play," they "often wrestled together, but not in anger." Their roughhousing was different than real conflict, even if the line could be thin. At Playter's tavern in February 1802 for instance: "We had a high caper with J. Thorn who being in Liquor and getting offended at Orton would Box him. Orton humouring the joke in great earnest made the company very merry and all subsided very well in a short time." In the boxing match between Thorn and Orton—which actually didn't amount to much in the end—the tavern-keeper's anxiety that all might not, in fact, "subside well" is palpable. But evident too is Orton's co-operation in maintaining good order by "humouring" the inebriated Thorn.<sup>19</sup> Though roughhousing raised the spectre of disruption to good order and potential property damage, it had more in common with story-telling than with real violence. It was a generally orderly form of social display, that showcased, before the assembled public, admired masculine traits, such as strength, skill, and agility, and it also brought social rewards for this prowess.

Bloodsport, such as cock and dog fighting, enjoyed centuries-old links to

the taverns of England, where it tended to be associated with particular venues.<sup>20</sup> It was legal until 1835, although subject to increasing condemnation. In Upper Canada, some taverns continued the tradition. For example, in 1830 a group of about twenty Irishmen usually seen about the wharf and the canal gathered at Fraser's tavern in the Midland District, ostensibly for a dog fight, though they denied knowing anything about it. David Clendenning had "never heard of a dog fight." McGuire insisted, "there was no cockfight or dogfight that he knew of." And in his denial is the suggestion that battling cocks were a tavern phenomenon in the colony as in the old country.<sup>21</sup> In the apparent social composition of this group—Irish canallers—is also the suggestion that bloodsport was the property of the labouring ranks, although we do not know who else may have been there. There is no evidence of bear-baiting in Upper Canadian taverns, although one might expect to find it, given its ties to the public houses of Great Britain. Bear-baiting took place in a theatre-like outdoor setting, a pit specially designed for the purpose, usually in tavern yards. The bear was chained to a stake, sometimes declawed, and set upon by trained dogs, until either the bear or the dogs were killed. It attracted a very mixed crowd, from labourers to the aristocracy. Despite the lack of positive evidence

<sup>19</sup> EP, 19 Feb., 1802; RG22-390, 21-1, Robinson, Home District, 1832, *Waugh v Cooper* and *Underhill v Cooper et al.*

<sup>20</sup> Robert Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700-1850* (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), 40-50, 46.

<sup>21</sup> RG22-390, 1-8, Macaulay, Midland District, 1830, *K v William O'Brien, Hugh Alynne, Patrick Killette, Hanrington.*

of this 'sport' in Upper Canada, bears were kept captive in some barrooms. Joe Beef's tavern in industrializing Montreal is the best-known example. It suggests a link between animal amusements and a specifically working-class clientele. However, earlier, in the 1830s, in Toronto, it was the British Coffee House, patronized by the gentry and members of provincial parliament, as much as by farmers and local residents, that housed "the bear, which with the black squirrel and turtle was very well."<sup>22</sup> There is no hint that these bears were intended for baiting, but certainly Upper Canadians had few qualms about bleeding animals for sport. For example, the tavern keepers at Niagara Falls, about 1824, in a bid "to attract customers and amuse the public," clubbed together and bought an old schooner, herded "a number of wild animals on board, two bears, some foxes, and a buffalo, cats, dogs, geese, &c.," conducted it "to the head of the rapids and then left [it] to be carried down by the current." Nine thousand spectators lined the sides of the river.<sup>23</sup>

Horse-racing was similarly popular. At Gilbert's tavern in Niagara, in 1805, "there was great bantering on horse racing toward the evening," a mile and half sprint between two horses, and a bar-room so crowded that the tavern keeper asked for help behind the bar. Though

advertisements to 'sportsmen' wishing to encourage horse racing called them 'gentlemen' and asked them to attend at James Wilson's Hotel, also in Niagara, and though the sport was one of the 'principal amusements' of the gentry, it is unlikely that any exclusivity was maintained. The very publicness of the taverns worked against it. Nor were there ever enough 'gentlemen' in early Niagara to fill Gilbert's to capacity. Indeed, as late as 1876, when a developing class structure was part of social relations, a small town horse race attracted a very mixed crowd to a tavern. The "bar-room swarmed," the stairs "were blocked with people," and the "sitting room was full of lads and lasses looking out."<sup>24</sup>

The assortment of events and organized amusements hosted by tavern keepers, defies categorization. In 1820s Kingston, Moore's Coffee House hosted a circus in its yard. A Mr Rowley gave "an entertainment ... at Mrs. Darley's Inn consisting of Slack Wire Performance, Tumbling &c." At York a "Grand Caravan of Living Animals," such as tigers, lions, a camel, a lama and a leopard exhibited at Howard's Steamboat Hotel. One could also listen to the "grand musics machine from Germany." Forty people came to a 'mountebank's' show at a tavern near St Thomas. 'Siamese Twin Brothers' were displayed at Allen's Steam Boat Hotel' in

<sup>22</sup> Peter de Lottinville, 'Joe Beef of Montreal: Working Class Culture and the Tavern, 1869-89,' *Labour / Le Travail* 8/9 (Autumn/Spring 1981/2), 9-40; HJ, 11 July 1834.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Pickering, *Enquiries of an Emigrant: Being the Narrative of an English Farmer from the Years 1824 to 1830* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1831), 99.

<sup>24</sup> EP, 2 Sept. 1805; *Niagara Herald*, 18 July 1801; Talbot, *Five Years' Residence*, 28; David Kennedy Jr., *Kennedy's Colonial Travel: A Narrative of Four Years' Tour through Australia, New Zealand, Canada, &c* (London: Simpkin Marshall 1876), 386-87.

Sandwich in 1834. A tavern in Chatham hosted an “exhibition of wax figures” in 1834, which one attendee described as “a most miserable affair: Sir W. Wallace in ‘genuine’ highland costume looked rogue enough ... Lady Helen Mar in a fly cap and modern cook maid’s costume looked very little better than she should.” Everybody knew who they were: the famous Scottish rebel, executed by the King of England and a fictional heroine, from Jane Porter’s 1810, *The Scottish Chiefs*, who adulterously fell in love with Wallace and married him secretly on the eve of his execution. A ‘Yankee show’ in 1831 in a tavern on the road to Ancaster celebrated “the glorious victory over the British at New Orleans,” which at least one British traveller called a ‘public insult.’ The theatre at the City Hotel in Toronto staged *Hunter of the Alps* and *Perfection* in 1840. According to a lawyer who attended there was “very tolerable acting by an English Company.” In 1854 a music and dance show toured the Niagara peninsula. A white man in black face “played the tambourine and danced.” The show stopped at Ben Diffin’s tavern in Pelham, O’Stronger’s in Bayham, at Walden’s and at John Latimore’s in Caledonia. John Kelsey (who drove a threshing machine) said that when it stopped at Clark’s in Canboro “my boys were very anxious to go.”<sup>25</sup> The crowd watching the horse race from the windows of

a small town tavern, the forty people at the mountebank’s show, the ‘uproar’ at O’Neill’s and the eagerness of the Kelsey boys to see the minstrel show, all attest to the substantial audiences who came to the taverns attracted by professional players and travelling exhibits. The crowds affirm the presumption of publicness that characterized tavern space. Seemingly anyone with the price of a drink or a ticket to the show could get in and stay for a time.

Not only the array of entertainments, but the array of people attending them in tavern space is remarkably heterogeneous. The list includes: Lester, a black musician and the mixed company for whom he played; gentlemen and ladies inscribing a classed identity on a public space and more “Ladies and Gentlemen” inscribing something rather different at the raucous O’Neil’s; a Christian and a Yankee; two black men playing dominoes; a woman playing backgammon; women among the forty people watching a mountebank; co-joined male twins; another black fiddler; gentlemen on a hunting trip; Italians, soldiers; a black dancer; a cross-dressing woman; a small time crook; and “lads and lasses” innumerable. It is tempting to celebrate the list for its seeming inclusivity, to interpret it as evidence of a nascent multi-culturalism, as tentatively expressed by a colonial populace later destined to create a nation premised upon it. Yet, and for example,

<sup>25</sup> Edwin E. Horsey, *Kingston: A Century Ago* (Kingston: Kingston Historical Society, 1938), 11, 12; *Kingston Chronicle*, 29 Sept. 1829; *Canadian Freeman*, 19 June 1828; William Pope Journal, Part 2, 45; HJ, 24 July 1834; *Canadian Emigrant*, 27 July 1833; Alexander, *L’Acadie*, 196-7; HJ, 6 Aug. 1834; Pickering, *Enquiries of an Emigrant*, 45; Mary Larratt Smith, ed., *Young Mr Smith in Upper Canada* (UTP, 1980), 40; ‘Trial of William Townsend ... at Merrittsville, Canada West,’ 1854, from the *Hamilton Spectator*, Canadian Institute of Historical Microreproductions, #63556, 8, 16, 19.



several of the black men on the list (there are no black women) appear as entertainers, the 'entertainment,' not as those with access to the tavern company cohering through public amusements. And by the time the minstrel show toured Niagara in the 1850s, the black community in Upper Canada had long articulated a strong critique of blackface, its racist underpinnings, especially what we would call, in today's language, blackface's 'cultural appropriation.' And the two men at the Canada Hotel, playing dominoes, got called "impudent" and "provoking" and the tavern-keeper violently showed them the door. The atypical (the co-joined brothers) are exploitable, commercialized property. Women appear exclusively in the company of men. And the young woman bold enough to toy with gendered propriety got her just deserts: a later edition of the same newspaper that regaled readers with her tale added that she was "far advanced in pregnancy and has been sent home to her parents."<sup>26</sup> Apparent heterogeneity, then, translates into nothing like certain membership in a tavern company seeking its entertainment.

Not to be overlooked in the tavern environment is drinking as a form of public entertainment. Indeed, the licensed provision of drink in small measure, to sustain sociability was unique to the taverns and largely defined them and the nature of the public space within. When John Howison, for example, found a "tavern crowded with people" in 1821, near the

Talbot Settlement, its "public room contained a wonderful medley of persons ... drinking, talking, smoking, swearing, and spitting promiscuously." He emphasized publicity and the amusements entwined with drink. Similarly, three male friends met "drank a horn and had a long confab. in the evening in Larned's barroom."<sup>27</sup> Tavern-goers used drinking ritual and custom to forge social bonds. Because tavern-going, and especially drinking in tavern company granted feelings of membership, the space could become contested on any number of grounds. Drinking customs, sing-songs, gaming, and barroom sport worked to include many only because they excluded others. And drink itself symbolized much. Tavern-goers treated by buying it for each other at the bar. There are hints that women treated. Patrick Roach has left a tavern account book from the mid-1850s, for his Railway Inn, in what is now downtown Toronto, in the port district. Even then it was a working-class district. Women's names mingle on its pages, with the more numerous male patrons and many charged drink to their accounts. In one absolutely clear instance, we can see a woman buying drink to treat: Mary Haron charged twelve glasses of liquor to her account in September 1855, debiting it by a full 2 shillings (or 2d a glass). The account book does not let us "see" who her companions were, but the amount she bought, in single shots, is too much, even for a spree drinker, and indicates,

<sup>26</sup> *Stratford and Perth County Intelligencer*, 24 Aug. 1855.

<sup>27</sup> John Howison, *Sketches of Upper Canada: Domestic, Local and Characteristic* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1821), 207-208; HJ, 31 March 1838.

instead, a working woman's integration into the treating ritual and its meanings.<sup>28</sup> Still, far more often treating functioned to bind men together by simultaneously emphasizing their social power to exclude a range of 'others' that included women. The offer of a treat and its acceptance (or refusal) carried meanings of reciprocity and mutuality, or, could affirm hierarchy between the parties (as when a man treated his wife in the barroom.) Drink's power lay in its ability to support multiple social bonds, both of the temporary bar-buddy sort, or more intimate associations of longer standing, which need not be understood as equitable. It also earned appreciation and respect as a substance.

Patrons and keeps alike were only too well aware of the dangers of liquor. They had a nuanced understanding of its effects. They knew it could affect bodies, feelings, and minds. They knew that different people reacted differently to drink. In response, barroom companions co-operated with each other and with tavern-keepers to keep the use of alcohol within community norms (which were different than ours.) As a result drinking was surprisingly controlled in these spaces. Of course people got drunk, some were habitual drunkards (what we call alcoholics), but tavern-goers and keepers agreed with licensing regulations that good order had to be maintained, even if it was not always. Upper Canadian tavern-goers never drank more than anyone else in the North Atlantic world of their day.

Still, drink stood also as a substance

with the power to disrupt the very social ties tavern-goers hoped to forge. Because nobody wanted a liquor-induced 'quarrel,' tavern-goers deployed informal rules and regulations that worked against violent eruptions. For instance, an early tavern-keeper noted that: "we had some trouble with two American soldiers ... they had a great drunken bout & got Quarrelling in the Barroom—with some difficulty we got them parted and put to bed."<sup>29</sup> The tavern-keeper was worried about the orderliness of his house—as were his patrons—there is active co-operation in quelling the disorder caused by the soldiers. As a result, occurrences of tavern violence were isolated, ritualized, and well contained. Strong words always predicated blows. When a man took off his coat he showed he was ready to fight. In the event, tavern companions monitored any exchange of blows closely, actively intervening as necessary. What they meant to ensure was a fair fight and never really questioned the use of violence itself, properly conducted, as a legitimate means of social negotiation. As a result, precisely because of their stature as public space, taverns served, at times, as sites for planned confrontations. These could be group occurrences that expressed ongoing social tensions, between, for example, competing nationalities, ethnicities, 'races,' or political opponents. Far more often individuals used the taverns' publicness to stage a violent defence of personal honour and reputation. This suggests that an understanding of the place of violence

<sup>28</sup> OA, Toronto tavern keeper daybook, 1855-59, F 4296, 12 September 1855 (Haron on p. 31).

<sup>29</sup> EP, 29 June 1802.

within masculinity in the colonial era needs to acknowledge the intense value men placed on their social networks, and the standing of their 'good names' within them. Yet every tavern brawl that made the news, or the rounds of gossip, or ended up in court, took place within a context that worked against it. What is striking about tavern drinking and brawling is the success of keepers' and goers' self-regulation in maintaining taverns, overwhelmingly, as sites of good order.

Which is not to say that tolerance ruled the day. Because tavern-based rituals brought a sense of belonging, tavern space could be contested in many ways. Classist, racialized and gendered responses to 'others' all affected the formation of tavern companies. For example, highly privileged white men of education, good salaries and abundant leisure used the better taverns to sustain a distinct and selective identity premised on their degrees of separation from the majority of tavern patrons. Novelist John Richardson recognized the place of such public consumption in elite sociability in his 1840 *Canadian Brothers*.

The room in which the dinner was given was on the ground floor [of the hotel].... Sounds of loud revelry, mixed with laughter and the strains of music...attesting that the banquet was at its height, and the wine fast taking its effect.... he caught an indistinct and confused view of the company within, most of whom glittered in the gay trappings of military uniforms...there were crowds of the

humbler citizens of the place collected round the windows to view the revelry within....<sup>30</sup>

The sense in which consumption acted as a literal stage for the performance of masculine elite identity is enhanced in this depiction by the presence of an audience of 'humbler' folk. The passage points too, to the powerfully gendered freedoms elite men had to define classed masculine identities in public, through such pageants of consumption. This evidence challenges a prevailing historiography that sorts out the sites of nineteenth-century public sociability: placing rough culture in the taverns and respectable culture in the churches and voluntary associations. Instead we have a version of 'white-male-middle class' history that includes taverns as integral parts of everyday life. The colonial male elite gathered in socially exclusive groupings for entertainment over food and drink in these expensive settings, where their patterns of consumption contravened the values of moderation, self-restraint, responsibility and seriousness of purpose at the core of early Victorian masculinity. That they did so often amongst themselves—absent the company of women—is of note. They illustrate the profoundly wider parameters that surrounded male decisions to transgress gendered ideals of comportment—indeed their freedom to construct, in public, a display of masculinity at odds with the moral certainties of Victorian respectability. They suggest uniquely male freedoms and privileges to escape, on occasion, the constraints of gender.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> John Richardson, *The Canadian Brothers, or the Prophecy Fulfilled: a Tale of the late American War* (Montreal: Armour, 1840), 196-97.

<sup>31</sup> See also, Mike J. Huggins, "More Sinful Pleasures? Leisure, Respectability and the Male Middle Classes in Victorian England," *Journal of Social History* 33:3 (Spring 2000), 585-600.

Taverns show how 'race' (or racialized identities), shaped ordinary human encounters in the colony. Ties of good fellowship, generated in a tavern company, sometimes included racialized 'others.' Unpredictably these same ties became barriers that closed against a multi-racial public life. Taverns, contrarily, supported mixed sociability at the same time that some tavern companions protected the 'whiteness' of public life. Especially early in the century, First Nations peoples frequented the taverns, making Native-white association part of everyday life in these public spaces. For example, a successful Native fur trader, named Captain Thomas joined a travelling English gentleman for a tavern dinner, suggesting his willingness to participate and find entertainment in the Westernized rituals of dinner.

I sent him my compliments [wrote Campbell], and if agreeable made offer to join him; his answer was that he would be happy at it. After I joined him he asked me very politely what I would choose to drink; I answered whatever was agreeable to him. He then called for a small bowl of punch, of which he took but very little, excused himself by saying he had dined in a private family, and drank too freely after dinner. We slept in the same room. He was a tall handsome man, extremely well dressed in the English fashion, and had nothing particular about him but a string of small silver buckles hung down on his breast, fastened to his long lank black hair, from each side of his head. He spoke French fluently but not English enough to enable us to converse freely in that language; however he understood it better

than he could speak, and enough to make me enjoy his company very much.<sup>32</sup>

There is no judgement here about the 'authenticity' of Captain Thomas' tastes: as an affluent First Nations man he may well have used the taverns to extend the hospitality and sharing central to many indigenous cultures. Yet the terms of Native patronage demanded accommodation to the Anglo-American languages and rituals that governed interaction there, as in this exchange over the dining table. Such cultural exchanges suggest *not* as a mutuality but the reinforcement of newcomer ways of understanding entertainment in public space.

For the colony's black population public life in the taverns contained opposing possibilities. Though recognized legally and constitutionally as equal citizens, racialized antagonism imposed a second-class status. Racialized constructions of identity made challenges to black access a reality, and the potential for racialized confrontations and violence a reality. We saw this at the Canada Hotel, when the white keep and patrons within ejected two men expecting to play dominoes. Moreover, in glimpses of black fiddlers and dancers are glimpses of the niche black colonists 'legitimately' occupied in Upper Canadian public space: as entertainers, not entertained, as the support staff for expressions of elite identity. This is particularly apparent in descriptions of the principal houses. For example at the Clifton House, in Toronto, English gentlewoman and settler, Susanna Moodie wrote:

<sup>32</sup> Patrick Campbell, *Travels in the Interior Parts of North America* (Edinburgh: John Guthrie, 1793), 157.

It would have done Mrs. Stowe's heart good to have seen the fine corps of well dressed negro waiters who served the tables, most of whom were runaway slaves from the States. The perfect ease and dexterity with which they supplied the guests, without making a single mistake out of a variety of dishes, was well worthy of notice. It gave me pleasure to watch the quickness of all their motions, the politeness with which they received so many complicated orders, and the noiseless celerity with which they were performed. This cost them no effort, but seemed natural to them. There were a dozen of these blacks in attendance, all of them young, and some, in spite of their dark colouring, handsome, intelligent looking men.<sup>33</sup>

The passage is all about colonialist responses to racialized identity. Moodie might think she is expressing 'tolerance' but more apparent are racialized assumptions: the sense of the rightness, indeed naturalness, of the racial hierarchy and the certainness of a racialized prerogative to objectify and rate black male physicality. Tavern entertainment, here the property of the privileged at the Clifton, emerges as a site where racialized encounter worked to bolster the whiteness of elite identities through the act of public consumption. Contrarily there were also opportunities for mixed sociability, as many taverns opened to a mixed clientele.<sup>34</sup> Still, a black colonial voice suggests the fragility of mixed, tavern-based entertainment: Nero Lyons of Amherstburg,

who was black, wrote to his local magistrates in 1840, asking to have his tavern license back. His argument was that "with regard to there being one tavern already kept by a coloured man in the place, yr. humble petitioner wishes their forbearance to state that it is attended principally by Europeans so that the Coloured population of this town and vicinity have not a publick house that they can resort to."<sup>35</sup> From the black perspective one just never knew. A moment of peaceful sociability could be transformed, without warning, into a dangerous challenge. The evidence is spotty, and contradictory, but the glimpses we have of blacks engaged in public house entertainments suggest that where belonging could be challenged on the basis of white whims, those defined by the majority as racialized others, lacked the ability, in practice, to exercise their citizenship.

Understanding tavern-based entertainment, both as imbricated with drink and not, is also a way of doing women's history. Gendered identity limited women's membership in the public. It did so more sharply by the middle of the nineteenth-century than it had at the beginning. By then, temperance activists had redefined the meaning of drink and Victorian gender norms held increasing sway, theoretically, or ideologically, redefining the meaning of 'public' for women and placing it beyond their proper sphere.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Susanna Moodie, *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush* (London: R. Bentley, 1853), 348-49.

<sup>34</sup> See Julia Roberts, "A Mixed Assemblage of Persons': Race and Tavern Space in Upper Canada," *Canadian Historical Review* 83:1 (March 2002), 1-28

<sup>35</sup> AO, Court of General Quarter Sessions of the Peace. Tavern- and shop-licensing records, Essex County, Windsor (formerly within Hiram Walker Collection), MS 205 Reel 6. Petition of Nero Lyons, Windsor licensing records, 1840, p. 5490.

<sup>36</sup> Jan Noel, *Canada Dry: Temperance Crusades before Confederation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 97-102; Craig Heron, *Booze: A Distilled History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003), 121-



Taverns, which combined drink and public space, were a deadly combination, one that threatened the superior morality and purity at the essence of womanhood. Yet, not only did women continue to keep taverns, work, lodge, and live at them, there is indisputable evidence that they went there to drink and socialize. Historical writing cannot account for this. Perhaps we have taken Victorian ideologues too seriously as accurate barometers of women's mid-century lives. The tavern evidence shows that women and men negotiated for themselves the meaning of public life and the terms of access to it. This does not mean they negotiated on an even playing field, but it does mess up our tidy picture of women outside and men inside the taverns.

Gender worked powerfully to contain women's autonomy in public space in relation to men's. Custom dictated the need of a male chaperone. On the one hand, this could be lightly borne. Wives, mothers, and sisters enjoyed tavern-going with husbands, sons, and brothers: we saw this in the forty people at the mountebank's show at the beginning of this paper, and in the lads and lasses watching a horserace. Women enjoyed female-only or female-centred gatherings in areas like parlours, or balconies, separate from the bar. Female travellers appreciated the ladies-only waiting rooms, and 'family wings' in larger hotels that catered to gender and class specific cultural groups by the 1840s. And of

course there were those who continued to drink in public, together with men. Here, for example, is an 1837 diarist's account of mixed public drinking:

Met an old lady at Lawson's, named Lizar's, the mother of the famous Edinborough Professor of that name. She has several other sons one equally famous as an engraver. She is very Scotch and has one great failing—that of getting drunk—dead drunk—after dinner. Queer habit. Mrs Lawson who is notorious in that line herself was very severe on her.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand, these gendered terms of access and spatial use clearly privileged men.

Men stood as the gatekeepers to public space in the taverns. The need of male chaperonage reveals women's lack of free and equitable access in both literal and symbolic ways. The presence of male company meant women remained carefully contained by the same hierarchical gendered authority that structured household, community, political, and economic relations. In the context of close male companionship, women posed no threat to the composition of the colonial public itself, despite their frequently welcome presence within it. Despite this dependence and lack of autonomy in public space, women included taverns within their social worlds. Some really did only frequent them in male company or for festive community or family gatherings. Others felt free enough to charge drinks on their own account. That any of them

28; Cheryl Krasnick-Warsh, "'Oh Lord Pour a Cordial on Her Wounded Heart': The Drinking Woman in Victorian and Edwardian Canada," in *Drink in Canada: Historical Essays*, ed. Krasnick-Warsh (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993) 570-91.

<sup>37</sup> HJ, 5 June 1834.

did so warns us about taking the new, Victorian, ideologies defining women too seriously as indicators of actual behaviour. Taverns are less meaningfully understood as male space than they are as sites where gendered power relations played out in defining membership in the public.

There is a myth that men and women lived in separate existential spheres for much of the Nineteenth-Century. That myth is encapsulated in the textbooks that we hand our undergraduate students to read. The one I am currently using, Francis and Smith's *Origins*, puts it this way: in the nineteenth-century "women [were] restricted essentially to the private sphere of the home and family." The Bumsted survey has women who "withdrew into the privacy of the home," and Conrad & Finkel write of women "relegated to the private sphere of domesticity." Textbooks cannot convey the nuanced historiography that has developed over the past decade and more as feminist scholars have critiqued and

reshaped separate spheres as an interpretive paradigm. My point is that despite a plethora of challenges,<sup>38</sup> somehow separate spheres reigns supreme and this article participates in its critique. This is because, within the historiographical context of separate spheres, it is virtually impossible to elucidate the activities of women in public (or in public houses!) because we are focussed upon their absence.<sup>39</sup>

Yet one striking image makes the non-absence of women evident, as drinkers, seeking their public entertainment over drink, clear. Here is Mary Macdonald's tavern bill at Roach's in Toronto in 1855. It shows regular patronage for drink (there are charges for beer, rum, whiskey and wine) and suggests, together with Mary Haron's tab in the same tavern, as noted above, that women, like men, could centre drink-based entertainment and the sociability it sustained, within the public space of the taverns. In other words even though the historiog-

<sup>38</sup> Kathy Peiss, "Going Public: Women in Nineteenth-Century Cultural History," *American Literary History* 3:4 (1991), 817; In Upper Canada, see the Introductions to: Cecilia Morgan, *Public Men and Virtuous Women: The Gendered Languages of Religion and Politics in Upper Canada, 1791-1850* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) and Elizabeth Jane Errington, *Wives and Mothers, Schoolmistresses and Scullery Maids: Working Women in Upper Canada, 1790-1840* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press, 1995). Julie Roy Jeffrey, "Permeable Boundaries: Abolitionist Women and Separate Spheres," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 21:1 (Spring 2001), 80, 88, 92; Mary Kelley, "Beyond the Boundaries," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 21:1 (Spring 2001), 75, 78; Sarah Wilson, "Melville and the Architecture of Antebellum Masculinity," *American Literature*, 76:1 (2004), 60, 80; Laura McCall and Donald Yacovone, eds., "Introduction," *Shared Experience: Men, Women, and the History of Gender* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 1-2; Carol Lasser, "Beyond Separate Spheres: The Power of Public Opinion," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 21:1 (Spring 2001), 116, 121; see also, Mary Louise Roberts, "True Womanhood Revisited," *Journal of Women's History*, 14:1 (2002), 150-55.

<sup>39</sup> J.M. Bumsted, *Peoples of Canada: A Pre-Confederation History*, 2nd ed. (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2003), 322; R. Douglas Francis, Richard Jones, Donald B. Smith, *Origins: Canadian History to Confederation*, 5th ed. (Scarborough, ON: Thomson Nelson, 2004), 282; Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel, *History of the Canadian Peoples: Beginnings to 1867*, 4th ed. (Toronto: Pearson Longman, 2006), 383.



female absence that permeates separate spheres discourse.

Probably the most powerful implication of the separate spheres paradigm is that space beyond the clearly private was in reality “exclusively male anti-domestic space.”<sup>42</sup> When historians write of mid-nineteenth-century Canadian taverns, they certainly present them as such. They were “male-only,” “world[s] of male association and privilege,” that offered “escape from the confinement of the family,” “male establishment[s]” where a “male subculture flourished” and an “absence of women” set the tone.<sup>43</sup> The evidence of women’s entertainments in the colonial taverns, both over drink and not, does nothing to undermine the precedence men enjoyed there, but it does call the ideology of separate spheres into doubt as a descriptor of real life and complicates historians’ willingness to see this particular tavern-based public as particularly male.

Tavern entertainment ranged from labouring men “throwing sticks, stones, and mud at each other,” to gentlemen engaged in “confabulations” over drink, to moments when a tavern company all “fell to dancing,” to working women treating in a working-class tavern in mid-century Toronto, to the “the feat” of lifting a chair

by its spars during a beery afternoon. And while the evidence of the colonial taverns suggests the presence of everyone in the taverns’ public spaces, it does so in ways which question the easiness of heterogeneity. A Judge, for example, called the labourers “coarse” and “rude.” Gentlemanly confabs, especially in the principal houses were staged in ways that asserted privilege, maleness, and whiteness in distinction to those excluded and those waiting at table. When dancing broke out in tavern space, we know that the fiddler was often black. We know that gentlemen about their “confabulation” often consciously excluded women. And women’s access to tavern-based entertainment, especially as linked to drink, frequently depended upon male gatekeepers. Thus, while we can clearly read in an early tavern-keeper’s account book that “Tobias Indian” took a gill of rum with his breakfast at Dolsen’s Tavern on the Thames River in 1798,<sup>44</sup> what we have simultaneously read about the status of racialized others in particular, in tavern entertainments, and the uncertain participation of women, warns us not to read Matthew Dolsen’s account book as evidence of anything like an early multi-cultural Canada.

---

<sup>42</sup> Sarah Wilson, “Melville and the Architecture of Antebellum Masculinity,” *American Literature* 76:1 (2004), 79.

<sup>43</sup> Heron, *Booze*, 36; Bryan D. Palmer, *Working Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* 2nd ed. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992), 102; Krasnick-Warsh, “Introduction,” *Drink in Canada*, 5, 8, 12.

<sup>44</sup> Chatham-Kent Museum Archives, Chatham, Ontario, Matthew Dolsen journal, 2 March 1798.