

## **“Foreigners in Town”: Leisure, Consumption, and Cosmopolitanism in Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century Tillsonburg, Ontario**

Rebecca Beausaert

Volume 23, numéro 1, 2012

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1015733ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015733ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Beausaert, R. (2012). “Foreigners in Town”: Leisure, Consumption, and Cosmopolitanism in Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century Tillsonburg, Ontario. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 23(1), 215–247. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015733ar>

### Résumé de l'article

Au tournant du vingtième siècle, la population de la petite ville de Tillsonburg en Ontario se composait d'une vaste majorité d'habitants d'origine anglo-celtique (environ quatre-vingt-six pourcent de la population). Malgré cette homogénéité, la population de cette petite ville s'intéressait aux cultures étrangères. Elle intégrait d'ailleurs de plus en plus de plats, de costumes et de manières provenant de différents groupes ethniques dans ses activités de loisirs. Se faisant, elle se permettait de devenir momentanément « étrangère » en s'appropriant certaines connaissances sur les autres nations et les autres peuples. Deux des lieux privilégiés où les participants jouaient des rôles inspirés par diverses identités—le « Garden Party of the Nations » ainsi que le club de voyage des femmes—démontrent le désir des habitants de Tillsonburg de s'approprier certains marqueurs identitaires étrangers et leur acceptation des cultures étrangères. Utilisant les activités de loisirs ayant eu lieu à Tillsonburg comme études de cas, cet article examine comment l'appel à des références étrangères dans les activités de loisirs de la ville et leur « consommation » par ses habitants (et en particulier par les femmes) leur permettaient de donner un air cosmopolite et raffiné à leur ville, en réponse aux critiques voulant que les habitants des petites villes étaient isolés et peu sophistiqués. Leur appropriation de références culturelles étrangères dénote toutefois une mauvaise compréhension des notions de race, d'ethnicité et de culture. Bien que les efforts faits par les habitants de Tillsonburg pour devenir plus cosmopolites reposaient sur la volonté de mieux comprendre les cultures étrangères, ils étaient faits seulement dans des espaces contrôlés et dans des limites prédéterminées.

# “Foreigners in Town”: Leisure, Consumption, and Cosmopolitanism in Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century Tillsonburg, Ontario<sup>1</sup>

REBECCA BEAUSAERT

## *Abstract*

*At the turn of the twentieth century, the small town of Tillsonburg, Ontario contained a population that was over eighty-six percent Anglo-Celtic in origin. Increasingly, however, local leisure activities began to incorporate “ethnic” food, dress, and mannerisms so that citizens could momentarily become “foreigners” and “consume” knowledge of other nations and peoples. Two of the more notable venues where participants acted out racialized identities—the “Garden Party of the Nations” and the Ladies’ Travel Club—showcase desires to consume markers of foreignness while concurrently displaying an acceptance of these cultures. Using Tillsonburg as a case study, this article examines how engaging with the “foreign” in patterns of leisure and consumption was a way for citizens (and women in particular) to convey an air of cosmopolitanism and cultural refinement in the face of critiques that small towns were insular and unsophisticated. Their cultural appropriations, however, represent grossly distorted understandings of races, ethnicities, and cultures that existed outside their Euro-Canadian one. Though efforts by Tillsonburg’s populace to appear more cosmopolitan were grounded in a desire to expand understandings of “the foreign,” this occurred only on their own terms and in controlled spaces.*

## *Résumé*

*Au tournant du vingtième siècle, la population de la petite ville de Tillsonburg en Ontario se composait d’une vaste majorité d’habitants d’origine anglo-celtique (environ quatre-vingt-six pourcent de la population). Malgré cette homogénéité, la population de cette petite ville s’intéressait aux cultures étrangères. Elle intégrait d’ailleurs de plus en plus de plats, de costumes et de manières provenant de différents groupes ethniques dans ses activités de loisirs. Se faisant, elle se permettait de devenir momentanément*

*« étrangère » en s'appropriant certaines connaissances sur les autres nations et les autres peuples. Deux des lieux privilégiés où les participants jouaient des rôles inspirés par diverses identités—le « Garden Party of the Nations » ainsi que le club de voyage des femmes—démontrent le désir des habitants de Tillsonburg de s'approprier certains marqueurs identitaires étrangers et leur acceptation des cultures étrangères. Utilisant les activités de loisirs ayant eu lieu à Tillsonburg comme études de cas, cet article examine comment l'appel à des références étrangères dans les activités de loisirs de la ville et leur « consommation » par ses habitants (et en particulier par les femmes) leur permettaient de donner un air cosmopolite et raffiné à leur ville, en réponse aux critiques voulant que les habitants des petites villes étaient isolés et peu sophistiqués. Leur appropriation de références culturelles étrangères dénote toutefois une mauvaise compréhension des notions de race, d'ethnicité et de culture. Bien que les efforts faits par les habitants de Tillsonburg pour devenir plus cosmopolites reposaient sur la volonté de mieux comprendre les cultures étrangères, ils étaient faits seulement dans des espaces contrôlés et dans des limites prédéterminées.*

In the early 1900s, the Tillsonburg Ladies' Travel Club was a popular members-only social organization composed of the town's small yet discernible female elite. Compared to the better-known women's societies that served religious, reform, or charitable purposes, the Travel Club's objectives were more idiosyncratic and personal. They sought to cultivate an appreciation for worldliness, culture, history, travel, and art without the members ever having to leave the comforts of home. In the only surviving photograph from the club's early years, six members are posed in front of an ornate, parlour-esque backdrop where they lounge on cushions atop an Oriental carpet and sip tea dressed in kimonos and twirling parasols. Evidently, the club had chosen Japan as the destination for that year's "trip." As the photograph communicates, play-acting was an integral part of these club members' attempts to interpret and represent the nations, cultures, and people that they fictitiously encountered in their studies. Other turn-of-the-century leisure activities in Tillsonburg, such as Empire Day pageants and ice skating carnivals, also allowed this small town's white participants to momentarily leave their Anglo-Celtic identities behind as they appropriated self-styled racial



Tillsonburg Ladies' Travel Club, *circa* early-1900s. This is the oldest surviving photograph of the club. Five of the six women pictured have been identified: Mabel Borland, Ella Law, Jessie Law, Ethel Ross, and Katie MacPheid. The photograph was taken in the front hall of John and Jane Smith's residence in Tillsonburg.

Source used by permission from: Annandale National Historic Site, Pollard Collection.

identities. Most notably, a community-wide fund-raising bazaar called the "Garden Party of the Nations" was held annually between 1894 and 1897. This event provided locals with the opportunity to visit "all the nations of the earth"<sup>2</sup> and purchase so-called "ethnic" food and goods from costumed interpreters. In this way, Tillsonburg's own suddenly became citizens of a broader transnational community.

The appearance of such foreign-themed entertainments in Tillsonburg in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries was clearly linked to rising consumer consciousness, mass culture, and new modes of consumption. Mass-produced goods and services, greater disposable wealth, new transportation infrastructures, improvements in

domestic technologies, and diverse options for leisure activities allowed locals (and women with the means in particular) to indulge their fondness for material goods and mannerisms associated with middle-class gentility and refinement in the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras. Advice articles appearing in rural and agrarian periodicals, North American ladies' magazines, and even the local weekly newspaper provide evidence that citizens of Tillsonburg, much like their city counterparts, were aware of and willing to engage with modern and novel commodities, services, and activities.

This "cosmopolitan ethos"<sup>3</sup> in leisure activities contradicts some of the sweeping generalizations about rural and small-town life that appeared in nineteenth-century poetry and fiction, artwork and photography, and metropolitan newspapers. Residents of larger urban centres were represented as emblems of modernity, in contrast to the pre-modern and folk-like associations linked to those living outside city limits. While country living continued to be defined by idyllic scenes from the province's pastoral past, some reformers and religious officials condemned small communities for being backward, insular, and, generally, "lacking in social life."<sup>4</sup> This study argues that in the overwhelmingly Anglo-Celtic small town of Tillsonburg, the Garden Party of the Nations and the Ladies' Travel Club served as important modes of recreation for local citizens by allowing them to feel and exude modernism. These were institutions that allowed partakers to assert their own class and racial superiority while embracing a particular version of world mindedness. An awareness of the wider world outside one's own geographic confines was a bulwark of the modernist movement and foreign-themed entertainments provided small-town men and women with the opportunity to nurture their global consciousness. By examining the elite-dominated Travel Club and the community-wide Garden Party together, we see that their fascination with "the foreign" transcended class boundaries in the town. Further, though efforts by Tillsonburg citizens to appear more cosmopolitan were grounded in a desire to expand understandings of "the foreign," this occurred only on their own terms and in controlled spaces. Conscious choices were made regarding who locals wished to learn about and how their cultures would be appropriated. Adopting "foreign personae,"<sup>5</sup> whether it was drinking tea in a kimono or donning Blackface to sell watermelons, served as potent mediums for grappling

with the expanded movement of people, goods, and services across the globe. Though conceptualized as innocent and harmless modes of play, the Travel Club and the Garden Party of the Nations illustrate how citizens' desires to expand their geographic knowledge concurrently reinforced distorted understandings of race, ethnicity, and culture.

Located in Oxford County approximately 175 kilometres southwest of Toronto, the town of Tillsonburg was named after the first acknowledged settler, American migrant George Tillson, who arrived in the mid-1820s. By 1901, the town had evolved into a thriving country metropolis thanks to its strong agricultural base, an abundance of enterprising manufacturers, and its reputation for being forward-thinking and industrious. Two weekly newspapers (the *Tillsonburg Observer* and the short-lived *Tillsonburg Liberal*), daily mail delivery, telegraph and stage coach services, and three rail lines kept locals informed and well-connected. A barrage of civic improvement projects, including the building of a number of new homes and the renovation of older ones, were considered "encouraging prospects for the future," according to the *Tillsonburg Observer* in 1889.<sup>6</sup> Predominantly middle and working class in nature, the town also contained a prominent and well-known assemblage of élites whose money and affluence afforded them the privilege of world travel, summer vacation homes in southern and central Ontario, and access to exclusive social clubs. For the rest of the town and its surrounding rural hinterland, public entertainments, sports teams, religious and secular organizations, a variety of fund-raising socials, and a myriad of other activities "too numerous to mention"<sup>7</sup> provided ample sociability.

According to figures from the 1901 census returns, 1,937 (or 86 percent) of Tillsonburg's 2,241 residents could trace their origins to the British Isles and Ireland. Only 13 percent were descended from continental Europe and less than 0.2 percent, or a mere three individuals, had emigrated from China or Japan. Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Anglicans overwhelmingly represented the town's religious denominations.<sup>8</sup> Tillsonburg's racial, ethnic, and religious cleavages were comparable to other Ontario towns similar in geographic proportion and population in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, including those studied by historians Nancy B. Bouchier, David G. Burley, Andrew C. Holman, and Lynne Marks.<sup>9</sup> Their scholarship has made some important inroads towards acknowledging the shifting social and cultural practices of

small-town Ontario, particularly the extent to which individual and group identities were influenced by voluntary associations, industrial capitalism, sports teams, and Protestantism. This article builds on their findings, but delves into specific aspects of local culture that better demonstrate, I believe, the effects of modernity on smaller communities. Though Tillsonburg's citizens, and especially the prominent women, went out of their way to adopt facets of modernity and cosmopolitanism in both their public and private lives, the extent to which this occurred in similar locales is unclear so further studies are warranted.

As significant numbers of immigrants arrived in Canada throughout the later years of the nineteenth century, multicultural mixing became increasingly worrisome in larger cities. Many hoped that the pioneering spirit allegedly inherent in rural and small-town Ontario's population of hard-working Anglo-Celtic families would help "counter the threat posed by masses of incoming foreigners."<sup>10</sup> Yet these regions were undergoing their own sets of broad social changes. Though it remained racially homogenous, turn-of-the-century Tillsonburg was evolving into an important service centre for the surrounding rural hinterland because of its concentrated population, the services on its well-equipped "main street," small industrial operations, and greater offerings for leisure and recreation. Not only was Tillsonburg becoming modern spatially, but also culturally. In the late-nineteenth century, a sort of intellectual awakening occurred in the town with the establishment of literary and debating societies, art and horticultural exhibitions, and self-improvement associations.<sup>11</sup> These new cultural offerings fulfilled the goal of providing "rational recreation," as well as offering education, amusement, and social intercourse to both male and female participants.

Residents of Tillsonburg were also bombarded with "images and the reality of technology, progress, and consumption"<sup>12</sup> in local newspapers, shops, and magazines, which became catalysts for the increasing use of mechanized equipment on farms and the implementation of running water and gas lighting systems in homes. The *Canadian Home Journal*, for example, pressured rural Canadians in 1910 to install telephones into their homes because they were a "promoter of sociability."<sup>13</sup> The late-nineteenth century fascination with comforts and conveniences representative of "a new middle-class consciousness and consensus" was by no means limited to cities alone.<sup>14</sup> By the 1890s, mail-order catalogues, newspapers,



and agrarian periodicals had become “vehicles for the transmission of shifting social values”<sup>15</sup> in small towns and rural areas through special reports and advertisements on the appropriate ways to decorate homes, spend leisure hours, and what goods to buy. Though local merchants struggled to compete with bigger retailers like Eaton’s, rural and small-town citizens welcomed the catalogue trade because it made the urban department store more accessible to them. According to Donica Belisle, “Eaton’s mail order was an especially powerful civilizing agent. By buying products through the catalogue, the company stated, rural customers could impose order on uncivilized territories.”<sup>16</sup> Rural and small-town consumers privileged enough to afford material goods and able to follow recent trends in leisure activities could better “demonstrate their gentility and respectability, their cosmopolitanism and modernity.”<sup>17</sup>

Not all residents of Tillsonburg blindly followed such prescriptions, however; many lacked the means to acquire and purchase the cornucopia of goods being advertised for consumption.<sup>18</sup> Regardless, hints of the “cosmopolitan ethos” were becoming increasingly evident in other ways, as a result of higher education standards, the organization of self-improvement clubs, and the recent establishment of a public library. Rising literacy rates across rural Ontario<sup>19</sup> meant citizens had wider access to an array of literary genres. As reading for pleasure became an increasingly popular pastime, works by imperialist writers, such as Rudyard Kipling, and reprints of fictional classics, such as *The Arabian Nights*, romanticized and exoticized foreign lands for a new generation of consumers. More tangibly, the appearance of traveling circuses and minstrel shows in Tillsonburg allowed observers to gaze at the odd, the exotic, and the foreign, and in turn use them as a means by which to measure their own evolutionary progress. Every day and through a variety of different mediums, residents of Tillsonburg at the turn of the century were absorbing images of the “the foreign.”

The print media, particularly agrarian periodicals, women’s magazines, and the local *Tillsonburg Observer* began to devote more space and attention to global politics and world affairs, making these sources some of the main ways that information was transmitted to Tillsonburg residents. Stories about colonial conflicts, particularly the Boer War, conveyed specific imperial values and ideologies to readers. Other articles, such as “Iceland and Its People; The Country that is Almost Devoid



of Comfort,” which appeared in 1893, were intended to be pedagogical.<sup>20</sup> Some stories played on fears of “the other”; in 1892, an article appeared under the heading “The Wolf Boy of India,” which described how a missionary claimed to have found an orphaned Indian boy being raised by wolves. In spite of retaining his human form, “he bit and scratched with the ferocity of a wild animal, which he was in all respects.”<sup>21</sup> Serialized fiction was often strategically placed among newspaper articles so that these headline-inspired stories of deceit, intrigue, and scandal could play on fears of “the other” and reinforce Western jingoism.<sup>22</sup> Travel lectures were also popular, especially when they professed to contain didactic objectives. In October of 1893, a physician and missionary gave a lecture in Tillsonburg on “China and its people” at which the audience was “educated” through “graphic pictures of the street life, domestic scenes and other phases of life.”<sup>23</sup> To elevate the lecture’s “pathetic and repulsive” subject matter, the missionary attempted to infuse his speech with “humourous touches.”

The growing preoccupation with presenting distinctively cosmopolitan identities was also perceptible in the prescriptive literature regarding home decoration and domestic practices. As the caretakers and nurturers of domesticity, both urban and small-town women were pressured to bring signifiers of refinement and culture into domestic spaces.<sup>24</sup> Publications that found their way into the homes of Tillsonburg’s well-to-do, including the popular American magazine *Ladies’ Home Journal*, instructed women on how to create “cozy corners,” “colonial schemes,” and “Oriental booths” in their parlours and sitting rooms.<sup>25</sup> Furniture and goods, such as ottomans, Turkish and Oriental carpets, plush and colourful fabrics, and foreign-looking trinkets, were suggested to bring hints of colour, texture, and glamour into the home. At the Tillsonburg Greenhouse, owner Thomas Shuttleworth advertised “Chinese Sacred Lilies” for sale in 1892.<sup>26</sup> Tropical fruits, such as pineapple and bananas, began appearing more frequently on local grocers’ shelves. Magazines, such as the *Canadian Home Journal*, educated women on ways to prepare exotic fruits and other “ethnic” cuisine including Mexican Rice, Creole Puffs, and Scotch Wafers.<sup>27</sup> According to notations from the *Observer* and the *Liberal*, outdoor entertainments hosted by elite and middle-class residents were often illuminated by “Chinese lanterns.”<sup>28</sup>

The turn of the century is often characterized as a peak period in

Victorians' fascination with Orientalist decoration, and citizens of Tillsonburg were eager appropriators. Meant to convey sophistication, many of these foreign-inspired domestic decorations were reproductions of original designs purchased from local shops and mail-order catalogues. The introduction of such foreign goods into domestic spaces had implicit ties to nationalist and imperialist discourses, allowing affluent women to distinguish themselves in the "global scheme of things."<sup>29</sup> This was an enterprise shared across North America, but rural and small-town women are rarely acknowledged by historians as participants in this new culture of foreign consumption. When a Turkish-inspired "harem skirt" made its *début* in the window of a small department store in the town of St. Thomas (located 40 kilometres west of Tillsonburg), the unusual style and risqué cut caused a sensation among the crowd of 500 who gathered for the unveiling.<sup>30</sup> Acquiring objects or goods that were linked with exotic locales allowed citizens unable to travel afar to engage in what historian Kristin L. Hoganson has dubbed the "fictive travel movement."<sup>31</sup> In 1907, for instance, *Ladies' Home Journal* contributor Laura A. Smith advised small-town women unable to travel abroad to acquire pamphlets from tour companies and travel books from the local library as a way to imaginatively join the more privileged tourist crowd.<sup>32</sup> In another example of the widespread appeal of Orientalist decoration, Smith also recommended constructing a Japanese garden in which "fir trees and a weed-choked rill" and a "miniature pagoda of bamboo fishing-rods" could be installed with only "a little energy."

### The "Garden Party of the Nations"

In Tillsonburg, where British ancestry largely defined the local social fabric, evidence of imperialism was omnipresent, from the naming of commercial amusement halls, to the consumption of colonial foodstuffs, to the organizing of elaborate Victoria Day celebrations.<sup>33</sup> Visual spectacles, such as exhibitions, expositions, and fairs, functioned in a similar manner to the ways the local press, literary genres, and public lectures "created, interpreted [and] and mediated"<sup>34</sup> national, colonial, and imperial identities. In his study of modernity and the agricultural fair tradition in Ontario, Keith Walden has suggested that the period around 1900 be regarded as the "age of the exhibition."<sup>35</sup> Dominating in this regard were

the world's fairs, held every few years in Europe, North America, and Australia, followed by the yearly provincial, regional, county, and local fairs. At the larger spectacles, in among the booths advertising domestic goods and agricultural implements, organizers began using midways to showcase carnivalesque attractions, such as sideshows, freak shows, and diorama-like settings of foreign peoples in their so-called natural habitats. Social Darwinist theories and imperial and colonial hierarchies abounded at such displays which, Walden argues, functioned as "instruments of hegemony" by presenting specific taxonomic orders.<sup>36</sup>

In 1893 at least 75 of Tillsonburg's citizens went to Chicago, Illinois, to see the "World's Columbian Exposition" in honour of the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's voyage to the New World. The official dedication ceremony was held in October of 1892 though the fair itself remained closed to the public until May of the following year. According to fair historian Reid Badger, over the course of its six month run 21.5 million paid admissions to the fair were registered.<sup>37</sup> A significant portion of attendees were Canadians because up to that point, the Columbian Exposition was the closest an international exhibition of its calibre had come to Canada. Beginning in June of 1893, the *Tillsonburg Observer* provided weekly reports of when local citizens left town to visit the "big fair." The fact that a trip from Tillsonburg to Chicago could be made in just a few short days only added to the spectacle's appeal. Advertisements for special fair-bound train and steamer excursions appeared in the *Observer* throughout the summer of 1893, along with suggestions for Chicago restaurants and accommodations. Alone, or with friends and family, a number of elite and middle-class men and women left town solely for the purpose of visiting the exposition. Some locals even exhibited the goods of their trade and won prizes.<sup>38</sup> The costs attached to seeing the fair, including travel, accommodations, and the 50 cent admission fee generally limited attendance to the more affluent.<sup>39</sup> Widespread media coverage, however, allowed those unable to travel to Chicago to experience the fair in print. Near the end of its run, the *Observer* noted that the 75 or so locals who had graced the "White City" spent an estimated \$3,000 on travel and other expenses. One reporter pointedly remarked that "a good many hard dollars from Tilsonburg [*sic*] were squandered in taking in the great show before the gates were shut."<sup>40</sup>

Upon their arrival back home, fair goers spoke highly of the sights and sounds they had encountered. Though it only lasted six months, the fair's effects resonated in Tillsonburg for many years after. Some store owners commenced renovations on their interiors and window displays, visibly inspired by the exhibits they had viewed on their trip. According to the *Observer*, dry goods merchant R.F. Williams, for example, was "so loaded up with new ideas that he will hereafter be able to make the store more attractive than ever, which will be pleasing to his many customers and induce others to go inside and take a look around."<sup>41</sup> Similarly, in the United States, historians have noted that visitors' experiences at the Columbian Exposition account for the sudden burst in improvements made to homes, businesses, and even entire towns after the fair closed.<sup>42</sup>

Two other world's fairs were held in North America near the turn of the century: the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, and the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri. In the wake of these events, miniature exhibitions began appearing in larger towns and urban centres throughout the United States and Canada, held primarily as fund-raising ventures for religious and charitable organizations.<sup>43</sup> Eight months after the gates of the Columbian Exposition shut for good, Tillsonburg held its very own version on a warm Tuesday evening in July 1894. Organized under the auspices of the Methodist Church's Epworth League, the event — called the "Garden Party of the Nations" — was held on the vast lawn surrounding the home of E.D. and Mary Ann Tillson, the town's most prestigious family and its namesake. Though the attractions and purposes diverged, the Garden Party of the Nations was clearly inspired by the ethnological villages on display at the Columbian Exposition's Midway Plaisance. The rationale for the party resembled that of "sale of work" bazaars and other nineteenth century fund-raising socials, which served as both community-wide social functions and money-making ventures. Akin to most around-the-world-themed social events, it was also meant to "transport ... guests beyond the realm of the local."<sup>44</sup> Instead of "squandering" their money abroad (as the *Observer* remarked), "the world" was brought home to Tillsonburg, enabling participants to reinvest their money back into the local economy.

When the Garden Party premiered, the *Observer* reported that a number of booths were set up on the Tillsons' manicured lawn, each

colourfully decorated with flags, bunting, and national symbols indicative of the country or ethnic group being represented. Electric lights strung overhead to illuminate the grounds added ambience. The booths employed popular nineteenth-century motifs to symbolize Canada, the southern region of the United States, Iceland, China and Japan (homogenized in one booth), Ireland, Scotland, and England. At each booth local men and women acted as costumed interpreters, doling out “ethnic food,” singing “ethnic songs,” and offering “authentic” handicrafts for a small fee. Dubbed “the greatest novelty of the season”<sup>45</sup> by the *Observer*, Tillsonburg’s first ever Garden Party of the Nations attracted 800 spectators with receipts totaling \$100.

“Belinda,” a special correspondent to the *Observer* who was employed occasionally to provide readers with a “woman’s viewpoint,” attended the spectacle and published a thorough report of its attractions. There are no surviving photographs of the event, so it is only through her eyes and words that we gain a visual sense of the party. The first booth she encountered was that of Canada, populated by “pretty Canadian girls dressed in airy, white gowns trimmed in maple leaves” and a flat-roofed wigwam, replete with an “Indian” who “vigorously” pulled a lunch bell.<sup>46</sup> At the Icelandic booth, she enjoyed a taste of ice cream; at the German booth women with “serious, kindly faces” served pretzels and a non-alcoholic beer substitute; upon entering China and Japan, she drank tea and remarked on a table of Oriental curiosities. She visited Donegal Castle and the famous Blarney stone at the Irish booth before finally reaching Great Britain where the “graceful outlines” of its emblematic lion stood in stark contrast to the “ugly distorted features” of a Japanese deity she encountered earlier in her “travels.” Belinda, however, was most intrigued by the southern United States booth, with its whitewashed cabin, watermelons, and interpreters in Blackface, including “Topsy” who picked a banjo and “sang sweet negro melodies.” The event concluded with all of the nations marching away from the grounds together where, she remarked, “they [had] met and found one another good fellows.”

The Garden Party was held again the following year, no doubt due to the respectable sum raised in 1894. Further parties followed, but the 1895 one was the largest and grandest held until the event disappeared from the town’s social calendar.<sup>47</sup> Under the heading “FOREIGNERS

IN TOWN; The Nations of the Earth Pitch their Tents in Tilsonburg [*sic*],”<sup>48</sup> the *Observer* reported that the number of visitors amounted to 1,500, almost double the figure recorded in 1894 with receipts totaling \$300. The nations represented largely remained the same, with the addition of Italy and a booth dedicated to New England Quakers, where Boston baked beans and pumpkin pie harkened back to the colonial era and, perhaps, hinted at the strength and resiliency of rural life. In contrast to the previous year’s party, the “Indian wigwam” was an entire booth in itself, complete with a “fine collection of relics” and “entertainment ... provided by a band of most natural looking specimens of the noble red man and woman.”<sup>49</sup> The *Observer* noted that the Indigenous curiosities were borrowed from a Mr. Scrivens and the costumes deserved “special mention” though exact details are not provided.

Some of the Epworth League members and local élites who oversaw the planning, organizing, and financing of the Garden Party were part of the large contingent from Tillsonburg who were fortunate enough to experience the Columbian Exposition first-hand. Though religious and secular organizations were incorporating global themes in their socials and fund-raising activities long before North American exhibitions brought the world home to the masses,<sup>50</sup> the timing suggests that the inspiration for the Tillsonburg Garden Party originated in the organizers’ own experiences. Belinda herself says, “National garden party! Midway plaisance! Call it what you will, only let us get into the crowd, mix in and out through it, and be a part of it.”<sup>51</sup> Through their personal experiences, organizers served as “conduits of information” for the rest of the town.<sup>52</sup>

In Canada, Epworth Leagues “attempted to develop a commitment among the young to spiritual growth, education, and mission work and provided a variety of moral social activities.”<sup>53</sup> The group that organized the 1895 Garden Party was largely composed of young, single adults in their late teens and twenties, the majority of whom were women as was common in the League. Most were middle class and living at home with their parents, while others boarded with affluent families in town and worked as typists and school teachers. The League’s constructions of particular racial and ethnic identities at the Garden Party were likely influenced and shaped by missionary efforts during this period and the evangelistic discourse of their leaders. Many, such as Mary Reid, a physician’s wife, were not only active in the local Epworth League but

also the Woman's Missionary Society. In their zeal to Christianize and "Canadianize" the so-called "heathens" of the world, specific colonizer/colonist relationships were forged through missionaries' imperialist gaze,<sup>54</sup> and this outlook inevitably travelled back home and influenced younger generations of Epworth Leaguers and Sunday school students.

The leaders and members of the Epworth League did not just mimic the ethnographic villages on display at the Midway Plaisance; they made pragmatic and cultural choices rooted in their own local sensibilities and possibilities. Make-up and costumes, for instance, were necessary in order to transform locals into foreigners, whereas in Chicago, the reconstructed villages actually contained foreign peoples who had agreed to be on display for a fee. The original Midway Plaisance was populated by a vast array of races, religions, and cultures, including nations from sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, while the Garden Party, with the exception of China and Japan, was devoid of Eastern representations. Organizers of the Tillsonburg Garden Party decided not only to include but also to highlight the Canadian, British, and Irish booths, reflecting their dominant heritage along with the boundaries on their expression of cosmopolitanism. The choices they made differ from those identified by historians examining foreign-themed amusements and fund-raisers in the United States around the same time. Hoganson, for instance, points out that preferences regarding the nations and cultures on display were usually based on the extent of their "foreignness." Organizers and hosts believed that the more foreign the spectacle, the more likely a profit would be turned. Though she admits to have found some exceptions to this, Hoganson contends that it was rare for organizers to choose to represent their own ethnicities simply because they were considered so ordinary and mundane.<sup>55</sup>

Limiting their definition of worldliness to nations that were either predominantly white or celebrated merely for their Orientalist or aesthetic appeal (such as China and Japan), reveals far more about the Garden Party organizers' backgrounds than it does about the people on display. Most notably, perhaps, the nations present highlight how important the British Empire was to Canada and Tillsonburg's citizens specifically. At the turn of the century, articulating imperialism through "highly visual form[s]," such as expositions and parties, was not only a fashionable undertaking, but also a "distinctive feature of British culture"



and a useful way of presenting the feats of the British Empire to a wider cross-section of the population.<sup>56</sup> In Chicago, the White City and the Midway Plaisance were set up purposely and methodically, allowing visitors to see the “millennial advancement of white civilization” first before viewing the “undeveloped barbarism of uncivilized, dark races.”<sup>57</sup> In contrast, Britain was situated last in the linear arrangement of the booths at the Garden Party, though it still presented a chronological “lesson in racial hierarchy”<sup>58</sup> by positioning pre-modern societies first and then concluding with the all-encompassing symbol of the British Empire: the powerful, masculine, and glorious lion.

In Tillsonburg, the various forms that these visual reminders of the empire took, such as the use of costume and preparation of ethnic cuisine, allowed people of white Anglo-Celtic ancestry to momentarily “play” or “act out” nationalisms, races, and ethnicities both inside and outside their own. Food was often the central focus of fairs, clubs, and parties because the physical act of ingesting “foreign cuisines” was considered a “cosmopolitan experience” in itself.<sup>59</sup> In Tillsonburg, incorporating novel forms of individual expression, such as donning racialized garb, allowed men and women to stand out against the conventionally white backdrop of their community. Historians have argued that for late Victorians, the appeal of foreign-looking attire lay in its ability to claim uniqueness and individuality. Though costume parties and masquerades were traditionally the preserve of the élite, middle-class residents were also eagerly donning ethnic garb because of the simple “excitement offered by disguise.”<sup>60</sup> For a while they could be someone different, providing a temporary reprieve from the monotony of day-to-day living.

The Chinese and Japanese booths at the Garden Party and the portrait of the Travel Club dressed in kimonos show how representations of the Far East were usually “limited”<sup>61</sup> to those images and objects (mainly costumes, tea, and domestic bric-a-brac) deemed appropriate by Western fashion magazines. Such familiar modes of cultural symbolism often found their way into play-acting because it “displaced more complicated or unsettling depictions” of the countries and/or people in question.<sup>62</sup> An article that appeared in the *Observer* in the 1895, for example, attempted to downplay their “Otherness” by pointing out how much the “Japs resemble us” in facial structure.<sup>63</sup> Of all the nations that piqued the curiosity of Westerners at the time, historians note that

China and Japan were among the most frequently appropriated in leisure activities because Orientalism had become such a prominent theme in Western art and design schemes. Paradoxically, Oriental motifs were being coveted by fashionable members of the middle and upper classes at the same time that anti-Chinese riots were occurring on the West Coast and “Chinatowns”<sup>64</sup> posed a threat to the moral social order. Aside from its visual appeal, appropriating the Far East theme in everything from leisure activities to parlour decorations<sup>65</sup> became a way to control and curtail fears and misunderstandings of cultural difference. For example, when organizers chose a ten year-old girl to impersonate a Chinese man at the 1897 Garden Party of the Nations, her youth and gender reproduced understandings of Chinese men as infantilized and emasculated, which downplayed fears of hyper-sexuality, villainy, and other behaviours associated with the predatory Asian male.<sup>66</sup>

The ways that the southern United States was presented, particularly the references to watermelon and “negro melodies,” echoed and reiterated racist stereotypes surrounding African Americans in the wake of Reconstruction and the ratification of the Jim Crow laws. While some fairs and expositions strove to showcase achievements being made in African American communities, the Garden Party, like the vast majority of Western popular culture at the time, relied on invented and idyllic images of antebellum plantation life.<sup>67</sup> Though no African Canadians are listed as living in Tillsonburg at this time, a small group had earlier, and the nearby communities of Woodstock, Norwich, and Ingersoll still contained pockets of African Canadians who lived and worked alongside the white majority. The presentation of African American culture at the Garden Party, however, was dominated by fictitious stereotypes entrenched in white understandings, thus simplifying the interpreters (and their homelands) for the audience.<sup>68</sup> Undoubtedly, party organizers who visited the Columbian Exposition would have observed the sub-Saharan African villages on display at the Midway Plaisance, but instead they chose to perpetuate the clichéd “pickaninny” living a happy-go-lucky existence in Dixie.

Perhaps one of the most popular and reproduced images of African American culture — the banjo-playing Topsy — was a familiar face in Tillsonburg long before the Garden Party debuted. When dramatic companies brought their adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s

highly-acclaimed novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to town, the packed audiences looked forward to Topsy's "sallies of wit"<sup>69</sup> and her cheeky dancing, singing, and tumbling. Her youth, her crude appearance, and her back story (a motherless slave child who finds shelter with a white family) often provoked sympathy among middle-class audiences (and women especially). As Jim O'Loughlin has noted, Topsy became "a dominant representation of African American girls"<sup>70</sup> in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, one that was far more pleasing and entertaining to Tillsonburg audiences than the sexually-charged "wench,"<sup>71</sup> who also figured prominently in minstrelsy. Topsy's presence, then, was a way for Garden Party organizers to downplay white fears of "blackness" by cloaking it in the familiar rhetoric of the minstrel show and other forms of post-Civil War entertainment residents were accustomed to.<sup>72</sup> By serving food and drink, Topsy also performed the role of servant at the booth, fulfilling another gendered and racist stereotype that whites consistently associated with African American culture.

At the Garden Party, the First Nations people on display were not posed as savage and uncivilized warriors, as was common at American exhibitions. Normally, the images and objects chosen to construct an all-encompassing representation of Aboriginal culture strove to reinforce notions of a primordial and war-like society on the brink of extermination.<sup>73</sup> According to Paige Raibmon, such live exhibits became "a living yardstick against which to measure the achievements of civilization."<sup>74</sup> At the Garden Party, choosing to use the "Indian" as the ringer of the lunch bell downplayed personifications of their savagery, in this case domesticating him in ways that might quell white fears of scalplings and Indian uprisings.<sup>75</sup> By placing him in a position of servitude and thus below them in class, the elite and middle-class organizers who constructed the booth subsequently imparted their own understandings of the appropriate place of Aboriginal culture in white, Euro-Canadian society. Gendered undertones were also not-so-subtly communicated; the white, Canadian women serving lunch showed the fulfillment of important womanly ideals, while similar imagery of First Nations women is noticeably absent.<sup>76</sup>

The organizers' decision to place Canada and the First Nations in one booth at the 1894 Garden Party allowed visitors to compare cultural

evolution while presenting a highly-distorted illusion of living cooperatively.<sup>77</sup> Whereas the Canadian side was resplendent with symbols of economic progress — sheaves of grain and beavers, for example — on the other side, the flat-topped wigwam shrouded in pine boughs provided a visual contradiction between white prosperity and Aboriginal primitiveness. Here we see how mutually constitutive conceptions of modern and pre-modern were at the event. Visitors were captivated by the costumed interpreters in their “natural state,” but they were also simultaneously provided with a glimpse of the alleged benefits of government assimilation policies. In spite of this, wigwams and feather headdresses continued to make appearances at fairs and exhibitions because the fact remained that “Indians were a spectacle to whites even when they were not behaving spectacularly.”<sup>78</sup> Though those who attended the Garden Party did not have to go far to see “authentic Indians,” they were still fascinated by the appropriations on display. The Six Nations reserve, for example, was 70 kilometers east of town, and the Munsee-Delaware First Nation and the Oneida of the Thames could both be found approximately 60 kilometers west. No effort was made by organizers, however, to distinguish between tribes and traditions, and reality and fantasy. A number of early-twentieth century leisure activities, such as children’s summer camps, operated in a similar fashion. Sharon Wall explains that when campers “played Indian,” it was based on “a fantastical amalgam of Aboriginal traditions projected onto one mythic Indian Other.”<sup>79</sup>

The continental European nations on display, including Germany and Italy, represented the ethnic backgrounds of a handful of the party’s organizers, volunteers, and observers. Filling the booths with folksy, peasant-like interpreters, however, implied that these nations were stuck in some sort of time warp. This romanticized vision of Old Europe was a popular one utilized at bazaars and fund-raising fairs.<sup>80</sup> Here, less-evolved “old world” ideals juxtaposed the “new” (and thus better and more progressive) societies that emigrants allegedly found when they arrived in North America. Middle-class Canadians who were fortunate enough to travel to the European mainland were similarly fixated on the agricultural and artisanal dimensions of the countryside. In the disparaging descriptions of food, clothing, mannerisms, and gendered divisions of labour recorded by Canadian tourists in travelogues, they were

“reassur[ing] themselves,” as Cecilia Morgan suggests, “that they — and the nation they represented — were members of a more progressive, enlightened, and civilized society.”<sup>81</sup> Harkening back to an era of pre-industrial simplicity, however, was a cornerstone of the anti-modernist movement, so the ways that continental Europe was imagined by Garden Party organizers may have actually been intended to be a positive representation and a valorization of rural life.<sup>82</sup> Because a number of the party’s organizers grew up in the era before rail travel and modern conveniences complicated the pace of daily life, using unsophisticated and pastoral symbolism can perhaps be better understood as a way to stave off some of the less desirable changes resulting from industrialization and urbanization. In the case of Germany specifically, fears of its rising power in Europe were somewhat nullified by the organizers’ presentation of German mannerisms, which Belinda described as “amiable” and “steady.”<sup>83</sup> Cloaking Germany in these antiquated characterizations downplayed its growing military, economic, and political powers.

Within the pages of the *Observer*, a sort of playfulness and harmony pervades the description of each nation on display and the Garden Party as a whole. In 1895, reporters made special mention of how well the nations interacted with one another, paying particular attention to China and Japan who, for the duration of the evening, “dwelt peaceably together — recent history to the contrary, notwithstanding.”<sup>84</sup> In the case of Ireland, the realities of internal dissension, poverty, and political turmoil were ignored so that a more pleasing and comical hodgepodge of green and orange, potato cakes, and Blarney stone kissing could be presented, harkening to imaginings of a rural idyll and “the folk.” At the time, however, Canadian travellers to Ireland generally avoided sites and symbols entrenched in Irish folklore (like Blarney Castle), instead drawn to the country’s cities, ruins, and lush coastal scenery.<sup>85</sup> The Irish booth was also situated directly beside that of Britain, a conventional practice at fairs during this period that intended to trick audiences into believing that tumultuous Anglo-Irish relations had been ameliorated and harmony reigned within the empire.<sup>86</sup>

At the Canadian booth, the imperialist and nationalistic sentiments of Tillsonburg’s white citizenry were on full display. The young, “pretty” girls doling out food, resplendent in their white dresses, signified racial and sexual purity and feminine innocence. At similar town

activities where national and imperial themes were at the forefront, the colour white was often invoked to personify patriotism, particularly when it came to women's and girls' costumes. In addition to the colour white, red and blue décor was in abundance, reminiscent of the Union Jack that bound the nations of the British Empire together. More nationalized symbols, such as the maple leaves, snowshoes, and beavers that composed the image of the "great white north," were also used to their full effect. At international exhibitions, comparable imagery could be found at Canadian displays which some local residents witnessed first-hand. The hosts of the Garden Party, E.D. and Mary Ann Tillson, attended a number of international exhibitions because the products of their agro-industrial milling empire were often featured as examples of Canadian industriousness. The combination of many of these so-called uniquely "Canadian" icons with more imperialistic symbols reminded visitors of the dominant whiteness of Tillsonburg's population (as illustrated in the girls' white costumes) and its Anglo-Celtic ancestry. Through these particular constructions, organizers reinforced Canada's superior position in the colonial hierarchy of race compared to other British colonies.

### The Tillsonburg Ladies' Travel Club

In an 1897 issue of the popular women's magazine the *Delineator*, an unnamed columnist mentions that a new social club gaining popularity in rural districts was the "travellers' club."<sup>87</sup> Across North America, the home study club movement of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries bore witness to a massive growth in men's and women's social organizations that were purely educational in nature.<sup>88</sup> These literary associations, amateur dramatic clubs, Shakespearean societies, and travel clubs, however, have not received extensive attention from historians, in spite of the tens of thousands of men and women who found personal fulfillment in the organizations, used them to further their education, and forged lifelong bonds of friendship through their activities. Like the Garden Party of the Nations, travel clubs allowed members to become "armchair travellers" by immersing themselves in foreign cultures without ever leaving the comfort of home. The "travel club" model, which Heather Murray defines as "studying the literature, history, and culture

of a different country yearly,"<sup>89</sup> was often found in the social agendas of other voluntary associations because the imaginary travel theme had become so trendy among élites and the middle class.

Tillsonburg at the turn of the century was by no means devoid of options for club membership, but most were dominated by middle-class desires to enact social change or spearhead local improvement projects. A number of upper-class women exercised their civic duty by joining these organizations, but they still desired a group that catered more to the privileges afforded them due to socio-economic status. Because these women were educated and well-travelled in their own right, a forum that would allow them to exchange stories, share their experiences, and discuss the local library's holdings of travel literature was tremendously appealing.<sup>90</sup> Such a club would allow less experienced travellers to broaden their knowledge of foreign lands, gain an enhanced sense of cultural enlightenment, and engage in an educative (yet sociable) forum. After a Mrs. Holmstead from Toronto visited Tillsonburg with the express purpose of establishing a formal travel club for this group of like-minded women, the Ladies' Travel Club was founded in 1900. It is believed that Holmstead may have been invited by a local woman who had recently visited Toronto and, after becoming acquainted with a travel club there, thought a similar undertaking would flourish in Tillsonburg.<sup>91</sup>

According to its Constitution, the objective of the Travel Club was:

[to] take trips, in imagination, to different countries and learn all that is possible of the practical details of each tour. To read up-to-date magazine articles and notes from guide books and books of travel. ... It is further the aim of the Club to develop individual talent and to cultivate the appreciation of Art in its widest sense of the word, at home as well as abroad, therefore committees will be formed for literature, art and music.<sup>92</sup>

Between October and April of each year, the club met every Monday, alternating between afternoon meetings (held from 3:00–5:00 p.m.) and night meetings (from 7:30–10:00 p.m.), at the home of one of its members. At the conclusion of each meeting, it was expected that tea and one kind of cake, as well as bread and butter would be served. The yearly



membership fee was 50 cents, though a higher fee could be requested if the club required additional funds.<sup>93</sup>

The first Travel Club consisted of 12 members with Mrs. Margaret Livingstone, the 52-year-old wife of a well-known solicitor in town, at the helm as president. An abridged history of the club written in 2000 describes the social backgrounds of each of the charter members, including information related to the member's socio-economic class (based on her husband's occupation), the location of the family home in town, and linkages of kith and kin. Based on this information it is clear that this first group of club-women represented the *crème de la crème* of Tillsonburg society, women who were often born into good families and whose husbands included former mayors, professionals, and merchants. Not all Travel Club members were married, however; in the photograph of club members wearing kimonos, four of the women pictured — Mabel Borland, sisters Ella and Jessie Law, and Ethel Ross — were in their late-twenties and early-thirties and still residing at home with their élite and upper-middle class families.

Given the social circles they inhabited, it is not surprising that Article 4 of the constitution contained explicit instructions, "The Club shall be a limited social one."<sup>94</sup> New members to the group could only be proposed by current ones and the final decision to accept or decline was made by secret ballot. Often, club members were from the same families and neighbourhoods. For this group of affluent women in Tillsonburg, membership in the Travel Club further differentiated them from non-élites. Being part of a recognized association such as the Travel Club bestowed on members the prestige of having the so-called "tourist outlook." This mentality, and the belief that members were more worldly and refined because they were nurturing their knowledge of politics, history, and geography, helped set these women apart from the less privileged "who were not as attuned to the culture of travel."<sup>95</sup> A similar separation occurred for the organizers of the Garden Party of the Nations.

At the end of each year of study, Travel Club members decided the destination for the coming year by secret ballot. Once agreed upon, a programme committee designed a weekly schedule of activities with each member placed in charge of presenting to fellow club members on a specific aspect of that country or ethnic group's history, culture, society, or political system. This took the form of papers and lectures, photographic and lantern slide shows, illustrated guide books, and history lessons.

Vocal and instrumental selections, dance, sampling “local” cuisine, and wearing ethnic garb (as the opening photograph illustrates) were also commonplace. In 1910, when the club “travelled” to Spain, members presented papers and treatises on the Spanish islands, chivalry, Ferdinand and Isabella, Don Quixote, sculpture and wood carving, and quaint customs in Old Madrid. The following year, the club embarked on Russia and explored the Kremlin, short poems of Pushkin, and the church of St. Basil.<sup>96</sup> The choice of destination was not coincidental as contemporary developments in politics and world affairs often influenced their destination choices. The Tillsonburg club’s yearly agendas share many characteristics with those being recommended to other club women in magazines, such as *Harper’s Bazaar*. In 1900, for instance, *Harper’s* columnist Margaret Hamilton Welch responded to several club women’s requests for instructions on how to plan the perfect “trip” to Russia. Closely resembling what the Tillsonburg club studied ten years later, Welch recommended a range of study topics, including Pushkin’s poetry, art and architecture, religion, and Russian topography.<sup>97</sup>

Aside from being a marker of social status, the appeal of joining the Ladies’ Travel Club lay in its ability to temporarily transport women away from their everyday lives and familial duties. Indeed, most leisure activities that invoked the foreign theme allowed participants to momentarily adopt habits, speech, style, and mannerisms considered by their white, Anglo-Celtic societies to be strange, subversive, or exotic. According to Hoganson, middle-class women viewed the travel club as a “hard-earned” break from their daily duties, but Tillsonburg’s club was dominated by women who were relieved of their domestic labour thanks to hired help. Regardless of class, the efforts they put into educating others and expanding their own geographic knowledge became “a source of pride.”<sup>98</sup> The ways that these Tillsonburg women attempted to engage with worldliness were not necessarily malicious in their intent, but in reiterating understandings of difference, they reproduced them and concurrently shored up their own superiority. In this way, their “consumption” of knowledge operated as a form of power. Leisure activities based on the travel theme forged hierarchies of difference, allowing participants to assert their own superiority to travel and to consume knowledge. The intricate detail that often went into constructing these entertainments suggests that participants were more interested in their

own intellectual gain and exercising creative processes rather than disseminating racist rhetoric. But, as Lynne Marks reminds us, small-town Ontario's overwhelmingly white, Anglo-Celtic identity was integral to their "constructions of ... superiority both at home and in the larger world,"<sup>99</sup> resulting in a skewed sense of "ethnographic accuracy."<sup>100</sup>

For less privileged citizens in Tillsonburg, the propensity to use leisure activities as a way to "travel imaginatively" can be best understood as a yearning to explore a wider world in spite of some of the social and economic constraints that bound them to home. Though education and literacy rates were rising, only a handful of the town's citizens were fortunate enough to travel abroad and have face-to-face encounters with the people they read about and appropriated. Conversely, the price of a single admission to the Garden Party of the Nations provided a condensed version of the world where patrons could make a trip around the globe in the span of an hour or two. Visitors were undoubtedly aware that the cultural appropriations on display lacked authenticity, but making money and providing a pleasurable experience were, above all, the Epworth League's primary objectives in organizing the event.

In the face of growing critiques of the staidness of country living, the ways that "around-the-world" themes were increasingly employed in Tillsonburg citizens' patterns of leisure and consumption can be understood as indicative of the desire to exude exaggerated senses of cultivation and civilization via expressions and understandings of travel, geography, and foreign peoples. The Travel Club offers "a lens for viewing the aspirations and enterprises" of Tillsonburg's female elite, as well as "histories of adult education and cultural development" in a smaller community that lacked significant racial diversity.<sup>101</sup> The trait of acquiring a comfortable knowledge of cultures outside one's own was a marker of middle-class respectability and stood in stark contrast to critiques being made by turn-of-the-century social commentators about rural and small-town Ontarians' so-called parochial, unsophisticated, and backwards nature. A number of social critics who decried the effects of "the rural problem" pinpointed lack of leisure as the reason why so many boys and girls left the farm for the big city. Tillsonburg, however, was one community that was certainly not lacking in this regard. The trajectory of the humble garden party, for instance, points to how willing local citizens were when it came to embracing new mediums of modernism. From its

beginnings as a large-scale community picnic to the eventual inclusion of exotic themes and motifs, the garden party of the turn of the century symbolized a fusion between traditional (or pre-modern) and new (modern) social practices. Residents of Tillsonburg did not necessarily want to give up their much-enjoyed yet conventional garden party, so instead they revamped and reconciled it within the burgeoning consumption-driven and cosmopolitan world of which they were a part.

Though the traditional tea social remained a cornerstone of Tillsonburg social life, to appease those with more modern tastes, various fund-raising committees began incorporating the trendy around-the-world theme as a way to both enliven their entertainments and maximize profits. In Caroline French Benton's 1912 treatise *Fairs and Fetes*, for instance, she writes that when it came to fund-raising, "the old-fashioned fair is a thing of the past."<sup>102</sup> As the Garden Party of the Nations shows, even religious bodies at the time were embracing the imaginary travel theme for its educative and money-making benefits. When a 1907 issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal* provided suggestions for hosting religious fund-raising fairs, the "fair of the nations" theme was at the top of the list.<sup>103</sup> In a similar vein, the travel club's preoccupation with pedagogy and self-improvement shows the growing diversity of women's associations. Religious auxiliaries, civic improvement societies, and charitable organizations were no less popular at the turn of the century; but the travel club's objectives indicate a growing awareness of the interests of the individual (as opposed to the collective), and his/her need for personal fulfillment and education.

Attempting to ascertain whether the "cultural performances" on display at the Garden Party or those being interpreted by Travel Club members affected locals' conceptions of their own identities or those of foreign peoples is a challenging task. As H.V. Nelles reminds us, "simply reading the script" is insufficient because "other meanings can be imparted by performance."<sup>104</sup> The ways that the Garden Party in particular was racially and spatially constructed, however, does provide a glimpse of how the organizers themselves internalized the forces and meanings of imperialism, as well as their willing *naïveté* about cultures that existed outside their Euro-Canadian one. Aside from the opportunity to visualize imperial and non-imperial entities, around-the-world-themed recreations were educational, commercial, ambassadorial,<sup>105</sup> and fantastical undertakings

for both the organizers and participants of these events. In the imaginary contact zone of the Garden Party the men, women, and children of Tillsonburg and its surrounding communities encountered highly visual representations of racial progress and the measurable achievements of the British Empire. A utopian and united viewpoint of global relations was offered, while racial, ethnic, and colonial hierarchies were simultaneously broadcast to the hundreds of spectators. Whether done consciously or not, imperial ideas were embedded in this sort of popular culture “even if knowledge and understanding were neither uniform nor erudite.”<sup>106</sup>

At the same time that stereotypical perceptions of foreign cultures were being reinforced, visitors to the Garden Party of the Nations and members of the Travel Club were urged to consume and absorb tangible signifiers of worldliness, including food and drink, costumes, and material objects, such as “authentic” handicrafts. The very act of going to the fair to see “all the nations of the earth” or dressing up in a kimono and sipping tea was a consumptive process. Even viewing and learning about art, history, culture, and politics involved consumption in a metaphysical sense. Consumption and cosmopolitanism coalesced at around-the-world entertainments where tasting foods and/or seeing costumes became a way to compare and measure one’s own identity with others through the amalgamation of East and West and pre-modern and modern.<sup>107</sup> The nations appropriated and the foods and costumes chosen to represent “foreignness” in their leisure activities show that Tillsonburg citizens were willing consumers of race, ethnicity, and cultures outside their own when they positioned their culture as dominant.

In conclusion, by the turn of the twentieth century, industrialization, immigration, urbanization, and transoceanic travel meant that late-Victorians, including those living outside cities, “could not escape difference and representations of difference”;<sup>108</sup> subsequently, this was manifested in a new range of “foreign entertainments” where men and women, as both hosts and attendees of around-the-world functions, “could display their privileged positions in the global scheme of things.”<sup>109</sup> Mimicking the identity-making practices they encountered at the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893, during their world travels, or within periodicals and fictional novels, citizens of Tillsonburg used their leisure activities to convey their own understandings of life outside the geographic confines of their town. In this way, they reacted against perceptions that

country living was backwards and parochial by incorporating modern and unconventional themes and motifs in their domestic spaces and leisure activities. Though most would never leave Ontario, learning about and subsequently representing foreign cultures in their leisure became a satisfying and suitable replacement.

Though foreign-themed entertainments, such as the Garden Party of the Nations and the Tillsonburg Ladies' Travel Club, may have been attempts to identify with other cultures and show a willingness to accept difference, participants and members simultaneously distanced themselves from "the other" by carefully choosing how they would "travel imaginatively" and the ways in which they "faked foreignness." At the Garden Party, visitors from all classes were provided with a particular vantage point of the world which reinforced the dominance of the British Empire. The tourist mentality that elite members of the Travel Club adopted, as a result of their studies, served to distance them from the rest of society due to their new-found appreciation for and knowledge of far-off lands. Together, the appearance of the Garden Party of the Nations between 1894 and 1897 and the establishment of the Ladies' Travel Club in 1900 provide important and useful glimpses into how elite and non-elite citizens from one small town in southern Ontario reconciled their own Anglo-Celtic identities with their desires for knowledge in an increasingly interconnected, consumption-driven, and cosmopolitan world.

\*\*\*

**Rebecca Beusaert** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History at York University. The Garden Party of the Nations and the Tillsonburg Ladies' Travel Club are employed as case studies in her dissertation which explores the growth in leisure activities for women in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century small-town Ontario.

**Rebecca Beusaert** est candidate au doctorat au département d'histoire de York University. Elle étudie le « garden party » des nations ainsi que le club de voyage des femmes de Tillsonburg dans sa thèse doctorale portant le développement des activités de loisirs pour les femmes à la fin du dix-neuvième et au début du vingtième siècle dans les petites villes ontariennes.

## Endnotes:

- 1 The author would like to thank Bettina Bradbury for her valuable comments on earlier versions of this article, as well as the three anonymous reviewers who provided feedback and suggestions.
- 2 *Tillsonburg Observer* (13 July 1894), 1.
- 3 Kristin L. Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 14.
- 4 John MacDougall, *Rural Life in Canada: Its Trend and Tasks, with an Introduction by Robert Craig Brown* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 131. Also see Co-Operating Organizations of the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches, *County of Huron, Ontario: Report on a Rural Survey of the Agricultural, Educational, Social, and Religious life* (December–January 1913–1914). Throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, rural and agrarian periodicals, such as the *Farmer's Advocate and Home Magazine*, the *Canada Farmer*, and the *Rural Canadian*, published various advice articles on ways to enliven rural and small-town social gatherings, ways to keep boys and girls on farms, and more “modern” methods for improving social relations.
- 5 Hoganson, 137.
- 6 For example, see “The Year's Improvements,” *Tillsonburg Observer* (1 November 1889), 1.
- 7 *Ibid.*, (26 November 1875), 2.
- 8 *Census of Canada, 1891 — Population* (Canada: Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1891); *ibid.*, 1901; *Ontario Gazetteer and Business Directory 1884–5* (Toronto: R.L. Polk & Co., 1884), 875–6.
- 9 Nancy B. Bouchier, *For the Love of the Game: Amateur Sport in Small-Town Ontario, 1838–1895* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003); David G. Burley, *A Particular Condition in Life: Self-Employment and Social Mobility in Mid-Victorian Brantford, Ontario* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994); Andrew C. Holman, *A Sense of their Duty: Middle-Class Formation in Victorian Ontario Towns* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000); Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).
- 10 Janet Galligani Casey, *A New Heartland: Women, Modernity, and the Agrarian Ideal in America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 40.
- 11 For more on the “intellectual awakening” of small-town Ontario, see Kenneth C. Dewar's study of Elora in *Charles Clarke, Pen and Ink Warrior* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).
- 12 Julie K. Rose, “Reactions to the Fair,” *The World's Columbian Exposition: Idea, Experience, Aftermath*, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma96/wce/reactions.html>, <viewed 14 May 2012>.



- 13 *Canadian Home Journal* (June 1910): 19.
- 14 Thomas J. Schlereth, "Country Stores, County Fairs, and Mail-Order Catalogues: Consumption in Rural America" in *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880–1920*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 346.
- 15 Casey, 53.
- 16 Donica Belisle, *Retail Nation: Department Stores and the Making of Modern Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), 64.
- 17 Schlereth, 347.
- 18 David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* 2nd ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 133.
- 19 See Adam Crerar, "Writing across the Rural-Urban Divide: The Case of Peter McArthur, 1909–24," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 131n25.
- 20 "Iceland and Its People," *Tillsonburg Observer* (9 June 1893), 7.
- 21 "The Wolf Boy of India," *ibid.* (22 July 1892), 7.
- 22 For example, see "A Remarkable Oriental Experience. A Thrilling Story of Chinese Treachery," *ibid.* (17 March 1893), 7.
- 23 "Lecture on China," *ibid.*, (13 October 1893), 1.
- 24 Adam Crerar, "Ties that Bind: Farming, Agrarian Ideals, and Life in Ontario, 1890–1930," (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1999), 103.
- 25 John Sparrowhawk, "Divans and Cozy Corners," *Ladies' Home Journal* 13, no. 11 (October 1896): 17.
- 26 *Tillsonburg Observer* (4 November 1892), 1.
- 27 *Canadian Home Journal* (April 1912): 53; *ibid.* (June 1910): 41.
- 28 See "Eleven Years Old," *Tillsonburg Observer* (16 August 1895), 4; "Japanese Garden Party," *Tillsonburg Liberal* (13 July 1905), 1; Bert Newman, *Once Upon a Time: Further Reminiscences About Tillsonburg*, ed. Dave Stover (Tillsonburg, Ont.: Otter Printing, 1988), 91.
- 29 Beverly Gordon, *The Saturated World: Aesthetic Meaning, Intimate Objects, Women's Lives, 1890–1940* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2006); Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, eds. *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Kristin L. Hoganson, "The Fashionable World: Imagined Communities of Dress" in *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 260–78; Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium*; Susan Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream, 1790–1935* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
- 30 Elgin County Archives, Anderson Department Store fonds, Archives Storage Room 105, C5 Sh6 B4 F8, newspaper article, "Harem Skirt in Window Was Rival in Interest to Hydro."
- 31 Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium*, 157.

- 32 Laura A. Smith, "The Girl in the Small Town: Spring and Summer Pleasures She May Enjoy," *Ladies' Home Journal* 24, no. 6 (May 1907): 26.
- 33 See Joanna de Groot, "Metropolitan Desires and Colonial Connections: Reflections on Consumption and Empire" in *At Home with the Empire*, 166–90.
- 34 Peter H. Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display: English, Indian, and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 27.
- 35 Keith Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 15.
- 36 Ibid., 15. Also see Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869–1922* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).
- 37 Reid Badger, *The Great American Fair: The World's Columbian Exposition & American Culture* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1979), 109; Elsbeth Heaman states that 27.5 million attended the Columbian Exposition. See Elsbeth Heaman, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace: Exhibitions in Canadian Society During the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 234.
- 38 On 10 July 1896, the *Tillsonburg Observer* announced that Mrs. A.M. Croley finally received the award she won at the 1893 Columbian World Exhibition in Chicago for her exhibit of natural specimens. See *Tillsonburg Observer* (10 July 1896), 1. In October 1893, the *Observer* reported that "Mr. E.D. Tillson has been notified that flour exhibited by him at the World's Fair was awarded a medal on Wednesday." See *Tillsonburg Observer* (20 October 1893), 1.
- 39 Badger, 109.
- 40 *Tillsonburg Observer* (3 November 1893), 1.
- 41 Ibid., (1 September 1893), 4.
- 42 Badger, 115.
- 43 Gordon, 114. Modupe Labode, for instance, has examined the 1906 Carnival of Nations held in Denver, Colorado, that was spearheaded by local socialite Margaret Brown, later immortalized as the "Unsinkable Molly Brown" after the sinking of the *R.M.S. Titanic*. See Modupe Labode, "A Carnival for a Cathedral: The 1906 Carnival of Nations in Denver," *Colorado Heritage* (Autumn 2008): 14–25.
- 44 Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium*, 140.
- 45 *Tillsonburg Observer* (13 July 1894), 1.
- 46 "Belinda," "The National Garden Party," *Tillsonburg Observer* (24 July 1894), 4.
- 47 Issues of the *Tillsonburg Observer* are missing for July and August of 1896, so it is unclear whether the Garden Party of the Nations was held that year.
- 48 "Foreigners in Town," *ibid.* (19 July 1895), 4.
- 49 Ibid.

- 50 Beverly Gordon, *Bazaars and Fair Ladies: The History of the American Fundraising Fair* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 131.
- 51 "The National Garden Party," *Tillsonburg Observer* (24 July 1894), 4.
- 52 Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium*, 24.
- 53 Neil Semple, *The Lord's Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 385.
- 54 Thanks to Dr. Adam Crerar for bringing this possibility to my attention. For female missionaries' constructions of the Aboriginal "other," see Myra Rutherdale, *Women and the White Man's God: Gender and Race in the Canadian Mission Field* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002), 28–49.
- 55 Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium*, 139.
- 56 Ashley Jackson and David Tomkins, *Illustrating Empire: A Visual History of British Imperialism* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, 2011), 174.
- 57 Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 31.
- 58 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 59 Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium*, 143.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 138.
- 61 *Ibid.*, "The Fashionable World," 270.
- 62 *Ibid.*, *Consumers' Imperium*, 146.
- 63 "Japs Resemble Us," *Tillsonburg Observer* (7 June 1895), 7.
- 64 According to historian Kay J. Anderson, "Chinatown" was a place constructed and defined by white Europeans. The concept of Chinatown, and the various meanings ascribed to it, was integral in shaping popular attitudes towards Chinese immigrants in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Canada. See Kay J. Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875–1980* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), 9–10; 80–1.
- 65 For example, see Florence Pegg Taylor, "Some Oriental Ideas," *Ladies' Home Journal* 20, no. 4 (March 1903): 36.
- 66 *Tillsonburg Observer* (9 July 1897), 1.
- 67 Labode, 19–21; Gordon, *The Saturated World*, 115.
- 68 Burton Benedict, "Rituals of Representation: Ethnic Stereotypes and Colonized Peoples at World's Fairs" in *Fair Representations: World's Fairs and the Modern World*, eds. Robert W. Rydell and Nancy E. Gwinn (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994), 31.
- 69 *Tillsonburg Observer* (7 June 1895), 1.
- 70 Jim O'Loughlin, "Articulating 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,'" *New Literary History* 31, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 589.
- 71 Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 26.

- 72 Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium*, 146–8.
- 73 Benedict, 32.
- 74 Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 36.
- 75 Dominic David Alessio, “Domesticating the ‘heart of the wild’: Female Personifications of the Colonies, 1886–1940,” *Women's History Review* 6, no. 2 (1997): 259.
- 76 I am grateful to my friend and colleague Stacey Alexopoulos for bringing this fact to my attention.
- 77 Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 228.
- 78 Heaman, 307.
- 79 Sharon Wall, “Totem Poles, Teepees, and Token Traditions: ‘Playing Indian’ at Ontario Summer Camps, 1920–1955,” *Canadian Historical Review* 86, no. 3 (September 2005): 524.
- 80 Gordon, *Bazaars and Fair Ladies*, 131.
- 81 Cecilia Morgan, *A Happy Holiday: English Canadians and Transatlantic Tourism, 1870–1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 296.
- 82 Hoganson, “The Fashionable World,” 272.
- 83 “Belinda,” 4.
- 84 “Foreigners in Town,” 4.
- 85 See Morgan, 124–60.
- 86 Labode, 23.
- 87 “State Federation of Women's Clubs,” *Delineator* 49, no. 2 (February 1897): 234.
- 88 For more, see Heather Murray, *Come, bright Improvement!: The Literary Societies of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).
- 89 Ibid., “Literary Societies” in *History of the Book in Canada Volume Two 1840–1918*, eds. Yvan Lamonde, Patricia Lockhart Fleming, and Fiona A. Black (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 476.
- 90 Annandale National Historic Site (hereafter ANHS), Documentary Artifact Collection, Box — Travel Club (Tillsonburg Ladies' Travel Club), G.E. Grieve, “Seventy-Five Years of Travel Club, April 1976”; Tillsonburg Public Library (hereafter TPL), *A Century of Travel 1900–2000 Tillsonburg Ladies' Travel Club Established 1900* (n.p., 2000).
- 91 The earlier, unpublished histories of the Travel Club refer to a Mrs. Holmstead, while a later one calls her Mrs. Olmstead. See ANHS, Documentary Artifact Collection, Box — Travel Club (Tillsonburg Ladies' Travel Club), G.E. Grieve, “Seventy-Five Years of Travel Club, April 1976” and the “Tillsonburg Ladies' Travel Club 1961–62”; TPL, *A Century of Travel*.

- 92 ANHS, Documentary Artifact Collection, Box — Travel Club (Tillsonburg Ladies' Travel Club), Tillsonburg Branch of the Travel Club Constitution and By-Laws.
- 93 Ibid.
- 94 Ibid.
- 95 Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium*, 187.
- 96 ANHS, Documentary Artifact Collection, Box — Travel Club (Tillsonburg Ladies' Travel Club), Tillsonburg Branch of the Travel Club Constitution and By-Laws.
- 97 In the 1900s and 1910s, *Harper's Bazaar* contained a column called "Our Home Study Club" where club women wrote in to columnist E.B. Cutting asking for advice and inspiration to take back to meetings. The information about Russia was taken from an earlier column by Margaret Hamilton Welch, "Club Work in Summer." See Margaret Hamilton Welch, "Club Work in Summer: Plan for Club Work," *Harper's Bazaar* 33, no. 38 (22 September 1900): A1346.
- 98 Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium*, 60.
- 99 Marks, 13.
- 100 Gordon, *The Saturated World*, 114.
- 101 Murray, "Literary Societies," 478.
- 102 Carolyn French Benton, *Fairs and Fetes* (Boston: Dana Estes & Company, 1912), vii.
- 103 "The Minister's Social Helper: Suggests Some Fairs and Booths To Those Who, Working Socially in the Churches, Plan to Raise Money by Annual Sales," *Ladies' Home Journal* 24, no. 11 (October 1907): 31.
- 104 H.V. Nelles, *The Art of Nation-Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec's Tercentenary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 169.
- 105 Labode, 18–19.
- 106 Jackson and Tomkins, 150.
- 107 Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium*, 143.
- 108 Ibid., 137.
- 109 Ibid., 146–9.