

In Mixed Company: Taverns and Public Life in Upper Canada By Julia Roberts

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In Mixed Company: Taverns and Public Life in Upper Canada

By Julia Roberts

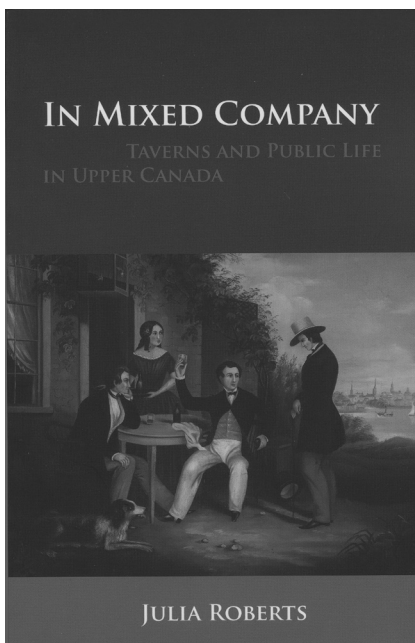
Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009. x + 228 pages. \$32.95 softcover. ISBN 978-0-7748-1576-5 (www.ubcpress.ca)

In 1843 Upper Canada held 1,611 licensed taverns, roughly one for every 323 of its residents. That ratio, of taverns to people, remained relatively constant throughout the decades from 1801 to Confederation, even in the 1850s when the temperance movement was in full swing. The taverns endured because they were central to colonial society. They were the nodes of its transportation system; they were entrepôts for commerce and trade; they housed

social events, from horse races and auctions to religious gatherings; they were civic centres for election meetings and courts; and, above all, they were places where colonists could agreeably socialize.

The role of the tavern as public and political space has been well documented, notably in E.C. Guillet's five-volume *Pioneer Inns and Taverns* (1954-62) and more recently in Margaret McBurney and Mary Byers' *Tavern in the Town* (1987). Professor Roberts devotes one chapter to this subject, but does so almost apologetically as outside her principal interest.

Her subject is not so much the taverns as their customers and the relationships—



both discriminatory and tolerant—among them. In pursuing her topic she subjects the Upper Canadian public house to unprecedented scrutiny, mining tavern account books and inventories, diaries, and other documents from a baker's dozen of archives as well as more familiar recollections of travelers and colonists.

Roberts finds that the public house was less heterogeneous than the society using it, but very different from its common characterization as

male-dominated and less than respectable. While being open to all, it provided exclusive facilities for those who sought (or could afford) them. The typical Georgian tavern, in its architecture—the public bar room, the smaller and more formal parlour, the bedrooms and domestic quarters—and in its furnishings, provided for the competing claims placed upon it by a mixed clientele. What appalled gentle visitors to the ruder frontier tavern was the promiscuous use of space where all were served together.

Roberts' examination calls into question a number of conventional views about Upper Canada's inns and taverns, among them that:

Taverns were not respectable. John Beverley Robinson, pillar of the colonial elite, was the stepson of an innkeeper, Elisha Beman, and in later life waxed eloquent about the sociability he saw in tavern life. Harry Jones, a middle-level civil servant in Kingston, whose salary was too low to permit marriage, spent most evenings dining with equally respectable bachelor friends in taverns in the 1830s and '40s, using them as surrogate gentlemen's clubs. They were only occasionally bothered by disorderly patrons of lesser status.

Taverns were primarily for men. Women frequented them regularly. In most cases they ran them, even if the licence was in the name of a husband who worked elsewhere, and raised their children there; they did most of the work, as owners or as servants. Taverns thus blended public and household life. In the young colony an innkeeper's wife might use the tavern parlour as her own, entertaining women guests. In early industrial Toronto, working women treated one another at Roach's tavern. Even at mid-century, when women and men were considered to live in separate social spheres, a respectably dressed woman might commandeer the best seat by the fire in the public space, though inns also set aside rooms exclusively for gentlewomen and catered for them in other ways—for example, with their own viewing balcony at Niagara Falls. (The latter annoyed the governor general, Lord Sydenham, who complained of ladies peering through his window as he shaved.) Nevertheless, men generally dominated the public space.

Taverns were dens of drunkenness. Most patrons drank, but not to excess. In fifty years of diary keeping, Harry Jones recorded visits to 224 taverns but mentioned only eleven cases of men being tipsy or drunk. Roberts calculated that on average men and women consumed no more alcohol

than might be acceptable today. Drunkenness occurred but was tolerated as long as it was infrequent and not abusive.

Taverns excluded non-whites. Natives as a whole were marginalized but many visited taverns for business or negotiation. A tavern keeper charged with selling liquor to Natives testified that because they "were dressed like ourselves, and spoke good English, he never thought of refusing them." Blacks could expect a more fickle reception and were often discriminated against.

Taverns were political hotbeds of vote-buying and patronage. Many taverns encouraged contact among patrons of diverse opinions. Some subscribed to newspapers of politically differing views. By comparing account books, census returns, newspapers, and court records, Roberts found that, in one tavern in the Orange bastion of Prescott, about half the patrons were Protestant and a third Catholic, yet there was no recorded evidence of fractiousness.

These are some of the details and insights with which *In Mixed Company* abounds. Unfortunately, some chapters retain the tone and over-explication of the thesis from which it is derived. Local historians, moreover, may complain about the absence of place names in the index. It will be regrettable if, as a result, the book does not reach the broader audience outside the academy that its lively subject matter, fresh views, and thorough scholarship deserve.

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