
Reflections on Creating Critical Sport History for a Popular Audience: *The People and the Bay*

by Nancy B. Bouchier

DEPARTMENT OF KINESIOLOGY
MCMASTER UNIVERSITY

and

Ken Cruikshank

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
MCMASTER UNIVERSITY

In December 1994 a survey published in the *Journal of American History* indicated that many academic historians sense that they are losing touch with their public audience,¹ that their work rarely transcends traditional academic forms of communication such as the book, the scholarly article, or editorials written for popular magazines or newspapers. This sense of lost connection may have taken on a touch of urgency recently since the “public historical sphere” has increased phenomenally with the proliferation of institutions and people that produce and circulate meanings about the past.² This is happening while a growing academic climate is pushing academicians from their narrow areas of specialization out into the larger community. At universities, the language of fiscal responsibility has generated demands for accountability in research. Or, as the current head of the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council put it bluntly, it has generated demands that researchers “go public or perish.”³

The expansion of the public historical sphere is both a challenge to and an opportunity for academic historians to reach out to a wider audience. Historians like Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig have identified new directions for academic involvement in the public historical sphere, developing the literature on public history beyond *how-to-do-it*⁴ to provide critical approaches intended to “dissect the message and the methods of popular historical presentations.”⁵ Sport historians have clearly joined in this endeavor, engaging themselves in professional critical

dialogue on the subject. In his insightful introduction to the Museum and Film Review section of the Fall 1996 issue of the *JSH*, editor Steven Pope calls for sport historians to scrutinize public exhibits on sport, such as the sport Halls of Fame, which are “chock-full of memorabilia and nostalgic images.”⁶ These institutions, Pope notes, are inherently problematic for sports scholars since they tend to beatify, not critique, sports figures and our sporting past. In this vein, Bruce Kidd’s cogent analysis of the Hockey Hall of Fame as a cultural artifact guides both scholars and their students into new ways to think about and use Hall of Fame displays. Acknowledging the strategic role that such sporting institutions play in contemporary culture, Kidd calls upon sports scholars not to accept at face value the information presented by Halls of Fame but, rather, to problematize and deconstruct the artifacts “so reverentially placed on display.”⁷

But how does one make the transition from critical consumer to creator of critical sport history for the public? From all accounts, the curators of the much-acclaimed “Nazi Olympics: Berlin, 1936” special exhibition held from July 1996 to July 1997 at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., have provided a good and useful model. In his review of the exhibition published in the *JSH*, Roy Rosenzweig argues that keys to its success lay in its *context* (presented at the Holocaust Museum, the exhibit was geared toward a serious and attentive audience) and its *timeliness* (coinciding with the Atlanta Olympics).⁸ By focusing upon difficult issues in a sensitive and thoughtful way, the exhibition conveyed powerfully the sadness and the tragedy of the Nazi Olympics, reminding us all of the profound human dimensions of sport—both in the past and now.

In this paper, we reflect briefly upon our own attempt to overcome barriers of academic writing and the structural constraints inherent in working in the public domain as we created our museum exhibit, *The People and the Bay: A Popular History of Hamilton Harbour*, for our home town of Hamilton.⁹ The exhibition, held from July 10 until October 31, 1997, at the Ontario Workers’ Arts and Heritage Centre (OWAHC), was part of our larger program of research exploring environment, regulation, and popular use of the harbor. It situated contests for control over public recreational space amid multiple uses of the body of water in the face of ongoing pollution.¹⁰ It tells a sad tale—one of conflict and loss and hopes for a better future as local researchers and community leaders coordinate a remedial action plan, aimed at cleaning up the water, re-establishing fish and wildlife habitats, and improving recreational facilities for future generations. We would like to address certain problems we faced in bringing our research into the public realm, in order to contribute to professional dialogue on critical sport history for public consumption. We will reflect upon key issues, particularly *context* and *timeliness*, which face all sport historians who seek to keep in touch with their public audience, and we will discuss some of the strategies that we used to appeal to our audience while nevertheless broaching difficult subject matter in a critical way.

Our experience has shown us that curators make their exhibits in conditions not of their own making; forces, such as the context of institutional purpose and funding, shape and constrain, but do not necessarily determine, the nature of an

exhibition.¹¹ We chose work with an institution whose mandate is to preserve, display, and communicate the heritage and arts of Ontario workers and their unions in one of Canada's greatest industrial centers, Hamilton, also known as "Steel City."¹² OWAHC's ideological basis is clearly stated and carefully adhered to, influenced by the contemporary labor movement and its concerns. OWAHC is a center for political meetings and advocacy, rooted in contemporary work and working-class life. It is a place where workers' culture is created and celebrated, not just a repository for a distant past frozen in time. Housed in a historic building alongside the waterfront—the grand old Custom House on the bay—it is funded chiefly through small exhibition grants from provincial and municipal governments, from donations from labor unions, from admission and bookstore fees, and from rental use. Created in 1996, it lives from hand to mouth, constantly seeking ways to stay afloat while adhering to its mission statement. Led by savvy political activists who understand well the importance of working people's votes to municipal politicians in a place known as "Steel City," OWAHC has managed to etch out an interesting and unique role in the cultural life of the workers' city.

While it is concerned about public appeal, OWAHC maintains a hard edge in its exhibits and activities. It is an organization that takes class conflict as a given in the process of cultural formation—not something to tread lightly around. Given this forum, we faced a number of obstacles in creating the *People and the Bay* exhibit. We had to find ways to convey a history that might be at odds with some of the expectations of our sponsors, especially the Hamilton Harbour Commissioners, who are generally seen as champions of port development over all other competing uses of the harbor.¹³ With few fiscal resources—a budget of a mere \$7,000—we also could not include material culture items, which are the very "stuff" of museum display.¹⁴ In our exhibit, there were to be no expensive display cases and no climate-control devices, and the closest we came to "high technology" was a computer display. Moreover, in keeping with OWAHC's desire to avoid the elitism inherent in separating the viewer from the viewed, we were instructed to use no physical barriers to keep people from the items on exhibit. This scenario required us to tell our story principally through visual images framed through multiple layers of text written by us as well as taken from historical sources such as oral histories, newspapers, and municipal documents.

Our subject matter was difficult in some ways because the bay today is not what it once was, owing to in-filling, which has claimed roughly one-third of its area, and owing to restrictions on public access to the industrial areas of the harborfront. Publicly run swimming beaches have now been closed for some 50 years. The authors of the *Hornby Island Official Community Plan* speak to this dilemma when they argue that the "hardest nut to crack, of all the difficult nuts of environmental deterioration, is the very real human capacity to forget something not now present that was once of considerable importance to our lives, and the obvious inability to miss something we've never experienced."¹⁵ Our exhibit, we hoped, would help museum-goers remember or discover a harbor that was once the social and commercial center of our community, something that people of a younger generation likely have never experienced. Further, we aimed to

demonstrate that, in thinking about the harbor and its past, present, and future recreational uses, *social class matters*. We made every effort to document the recreational lives of ordinary working-class people, particularly from the industrial North End of Hamilton near the water's edge, where OWAHC is situated.

In our work, we learned that a museum exhibit is far more than a book pasted on the walls; it is above all a visual presentation, relying heavily on the nature of the objects and pictorial images it contains. Photographic images dominated our effort, and such images, as Allan Sekula observes, carry "a powerful impression of reality." He also points out that the "meaning" of such images is always "directed by layout, captions, text, and site and mode of presentation."¹⁶ Yet, as we all know well, photographs transcend rational, logical argument by tapping into our emotional experience and carrying their own dramatic appeal. A consultant who assisted in the initial and final stages of exhibition design captured this tension quite neatly when he looked over our proposed materials and observed: "The pictures are great, but the text is a bit of a downer."¹⁷ Aiming to present a critical, rather than nostalgic edge, we had to find ways, in the words of Michael Frisch, to "broaden, challenge, and transcend" the conventional assumptions of our audience, and to do so in a manner that somehow appealed to—rather than offended—them.¹⁸ We needed to find ways to excite and inspire our audience, rather than "turn them off." We did this through a variety of means of which the following are a few examples.

To ensure the *timeliness* of our exhibition, we scheduled its opening to coincide with the city's AquaFest, an annual three-day cultural festival focusing on the bay's waters. AquaFest brings the city together to play, listen to music, purchase craft items, and watch water sport events, such as the annual "Burlington Races," which involve historic tall ships in the re-enactment of a key battle in the maritime history of the War of 1812. After a gala opening for our exhibit, we used the *Empire Sandy*, Canada's largest tall ship, to give historic boat tours around the bay, advertising our exhibit and pointing out the areas emphasized in it to the many people who had never observed the shoreline from the vantage of the bay's waters. The tours were a decided success. In them we emphasized the key elements from a critical perspective: issues of social class, the location and use of recreational facilities in the past, the historic tale of the degradation of the bay's waters, current efforts by the City Council to create new parklands around the bay, and the work of the area environmentalists to improve the quality of its waters.

We also used a section of our exhibit, which we called "Visions of the Bay," to connect the past with the present and the future. We used historic plans for bayside parks to frame an architectural plan borrowed from the city that depicts future development. Our commentary read:

Every generation has created its own vision for the Bay. City Councillors, Harbour Commissioners, and various citizen-based groups have championed their own visions in an effort to satisfy what they believe to be the needs of Hamiltonians. This has always been done in the face of urban and industrial pollution. In the 1990s residents of the Bay area— young and old, rich and poor, able-bodied and disabled, male and female—

want to be able to live, work, and play on the waterfront. And now, as in the past, they want to find a way to create and sustain a healthy Harbour.¹⁹

We used texts from old newspapers from 1919 and 1924 to reinforce the social forces behind waterfront development:

No waterfront development is complete or adequately meets the requirements of a large industrial city if ample provision is not made for recreation purposes.²⁰

We ought to consider ways and means of providing exercise and amusement that will offset the movies and the dance halls. The parks ought to be made for the people, not the people for the parks. Bathing facilities, properly guarded, would be a big forward step . . . towards providing wholesome outdoor amusement.²¹

Throughout the rest of our exhibit, we use text from oral histories, newspaper accounts, and court records to accompany the photographs, showing the conflicts between social groups over issues of recreation: how social agencies and the state attempted to regulate social behaviors in the face of the pervasive skinny-dipping, cockfighting, gambling, and other “immoral behaviors” in boathouses of “ill-repute,” which persisted along the water’s edge.

While much of our exhibit was in the form of pictures, we did manage to use some items of material culture, including a spectacular antique boat—a 1929 mahogany hydroplane named *Mickey Boy* in mint condition with its original hardware—to whet the public’s appetite for items of antiquarian interest. We placed the boat strategically in our display room so that passersby on the street could see it and be drawn in to the exhibition. The strategy worked, yet the messages that we chose to convey about the artifact had little to do with our audience’s initial interest in the boat. Our framing text contextualized boating on the bay in the following way:

The Bay has always been home to a variety of watercraft. During the late 19th century, amateur sport organizations, such as the Canadian Association of Amateur Oarsmen, explicitly barred “labourers” from amateur competition, and membership rules for elite sports clubs kept working men and all women out. Today, more democratic boat clubs provide Hamiltonians with opportunities to play on the water regardless of their occupation. But financial resources are still an issue for many, despite community-sponsored boat programs.²²

To accompany *Mickey Boy*, we wrote the following:

Most Hamilton workers could only dream of owning a boat such as this 1929 outboard hydroplane, *Mickey Boy*. Before long, however, workers could afford products like outboard motors and aluminum boats, spending hard-earned cash for power-boating pleasure. Those workers who couldn’t afford a boat of their own could watch boat races from the shoreline. Better yet, they could rent rowboats for an afternoon of pleasure on the Bay.²³

We used another boat, an old rowboat made by the local Thompson boat-building firm about sixty years ago, which was rescued from somebody's trash, to counterbalance *Mickey Boy*. This was a decrepit old relic of the boats that people of "lesser means" could rent for a day of pleasure. As Peter Vergo would suggest, its poor condition, juxtaposed against the hydroplane's pristine splendor, suggested the social space between rich and poor, between the haves and have-nots who played on the bay.²⁴ We used texts from oral history interviews to reinforce the point:

The North Enders didn't have boats, these boats were all rented out to what we'd call rich people.²⁵

We used to go down to Askew's and rent a boat. . . . We'd get way out into the middle of the Bay and start chasing each other, and rowing, and . . . we'd all jump into the one and dump it over. Out in the middle of the Bay, over the boat would go. Of course, we'd all get underneath it and take one deep breath and heave, flip it over. And climb back in, start all over again. Till the harbour patrol come out-the police come out and tied us onto the back of the police boat and towed us back in. . . . The next weekend we'd rent us another boat.²⁶

The regulating of social behaviors on the bay, evident here in the action of the Harbour Police, was an important theme of our exhibit. So, too, was the resistance of those who wished to play on the bay's waters unimpeded.

Judging by a review in the local press that hailed our exhibit as "a must-see for everyone," and its six-week extension by popular demand, our attempts at presenting critical sport history were considered to be successful by those who visited OWAHC.²⁷ Perhaps this was because our historiographic question was attuned to a public question.²⁸ We managed to convey the sense that pollution and its effect upon local recreation is not a new thing, despite the photographic images that we used in the display that depicted "the joy and silliness that water brings out in people."²⁹ Indeed, by framing visual images that evoked both fun and nostalgia, with critical text, we were able to weave a story of social contrasts, and to do so in a way that brought issues of contemporary concern into dialogue with the past.

Upon reflection, we would agree with Roy Rosenzweig's observation that *context* and *timeliness* are important keys to success in presenting critical sport history to the public. If sport historians are to move to the public sphere, they must look carefully at the context and purpose of the institutions with which they choose to work. We would suggest that sports Halls of Fame might very well be sites in which they more easily *engage* in critical sport history (as Kidd would suggest), rather than *create* it. Anything more might just be too much to expect from them, given the nature of the beast. Yet in other areas of the public historical sphere—heritage sites, cultural centers, history television channels, and now even on the World Wide Web—opportunities to "get in touch" with our public audience are rife, and if the effort is timely, much can be accomplished. We would suggest that the effort is well worth it.

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1. David Thelen, "The Practice of American History," *Journal of American History* (December 1994), 933-60.
 2. Alan Brinkley, "Historians and their Publics," *Journal of American History* (December 1994), 1027-30.
 3. Mark Renaud, address given to the Humanities and Social Sciences Federation of Canada, General Assembly meeting, Ottawa, November 29, 1997.
 4. For example, see *The Museum Experience* by John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking (Washington, D.C.: Whalesback Books, 1994) and *Exhibitions in Museums* by Michael Belcher (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).
 5. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), xvi. See also *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment*, Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989) and "Part 3 New Analyses" in *Towards the Museum of the Future: New European Perspectives*, Roger Miles and Lauro Zavala, eds., (New York: Routledge, 1994), 147-98.
 6. S.W. Pope, "Sports Films and Hall of Fame Museums: An Editorial Introduction," *Journal of Sport History* 23(3)(Fall 1996), 311.
 7. Bruce Kidd, "The Making of a Hockey Artifact: A Review of the Hockey Hall of Fame," *Journal of Sport History* 23(3)(Fall 1996), 328.
 8. Roy Rosenzweig, "The Nazi Olympics: Berlin 1936," *Journal of Sport History* 24(1)(Spring 1997), 77-78.
 9. *The People and the Bay: A Popular History of Hamilton Harbour*. July 10-September 14, 1997 (held over until October 31), Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, 51 Stuart Street, Hamilton, Ontario, (905) 522-3003.
 10. For example, see our "'Dirty Spaces': Environment, the State, and Recreational Swimming on the Hamilton Harbour," *Sport History Review* 29 (1)(1998), 1-20, and "Sportsmen and Pot-Hunters: Environment, Social Class, and Regulation in the Fishing of the Hamilton Harbour, 1850-1939," *Sport History Review* 28 (1)(1997), 1-18.
 11. Leon and Rosenzweig emphasize this point in their introduction to *History Museums in the United States*, xviii-xx.
 12. The center also has a mandate to reflect "fully the broad cultural and racial diversity of Ontario and the role of women; to foster the display and interpretation of the creative expression of work as depicted through the fine, decorative, and performing arts."
 13. For example, see our treatment of the HHC in "'Dirty Spaces': Environment, the State, and Recreational Swimming on the Hamilton Harbour," *Sport History Review* 29 (1)(1998), 1-20.
 14. Thomas J. Schlereth, "History Museums and Material Culture," *History Museums in the United States*, 294-320.
 15. As cited in *Openings: A Meditation on History, Method and Sumas Lake* by Laura Cameron (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 11.
 16. Allan Sekula, "Photography between Labour and Capital," *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures*, edited by Leslie Shedden (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983), 195.
 17. Danny Lummiss, July 9, 1997, Hamilton.
 18. Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 216.

19. Most of the text and photographs used in the exhibit are found in *The People and the Bay: A Popular History of Hamilton Harbour* by Nancy B. Bouchier and Ken Cruikshank (Hamilton: OWAHC, 1997).
20. *Hamilton Herald*, December 20, 1919.
21. *Hamilton Herald*, June 19, 1924.
22. Bouchier and Cruikshank, *The People and the Bay*.
23. This text was not included in *The People and the Bay* book.
24. Peter Vergo, "The Rhetoric of Display," *Towards the Museum of the Future*, Miles and Zavala, eds., 151.
25. OWAHC, Interview, April 1995.
26. OWAHC, Interview, December 1995.
27. "On the Beach. Retrospective on Hamilton Bay a Definite Must-See for Everyone." *Hamilton Spectator*, August 8, 1997.
28. Thomas Bender, "Venturesome and Cautious!: American History in the 1990s," *Journal of American History* (December 1994), 999.
29. "On the Beach. Retrospective on Hamilton Bay a Definite Must-See for Everyone." *Hamilton Spectator*, August 8, 1997.