

‘The Twenty-Fourth of May is the Queen’s Birthday:’ Civic Holidays and Sport in Two Nineteenth Century Ontario Towns.

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Increasingly, historians are examining social change in the context of struggles over cultural terrain involving disparate social groupings. Nineteenth century small town civic celebrations, which invariably included some form of sporting activity, say much about the process. A close examination of small town holidays produces a clear, yet complex, picture of change. The annual civic holidays became a forum where social groups fought for local cultural supremacy. Although the coalition of interests best denoted as the “Victorian middle class” won this battle, it was neither a complete, nor a truly coherent, victory.

In the small towns of Ingersoll and Woodstock Ontario, this process took place between 1850 and 1900. While a first glance of a typical 1850s or 1860s holiday scenario leaves an impression of fun, shared pride, and patriotism, the antagonism that marked the holidays belies this rosy-colored picture. In particular, traditional cultural forms—Callathumpian parades, scrub horse races, and games of silliness or inversion, such as havoc-wreaking events like the slippery pole climb and greased pig chase—contributed to this sense of antagonism. Middle class holiday organizers, connected to an evolving cult of respectability, sought to eliminate these elements. Over the next five decades, they sought to sublimate the rowdiness and monopolize the forms and meanings that the holidays, holiday parades, and holiday sport was to take. By the late 1880’s, town councils sanctioned them to create local Amateur Athletic Associations (AAAs) to administer the annual holidays, and to regulate local sport on an ongoing basis.

AAA efforts to define legitimate activities for others, like other efforts to sublimate and marginalize alternate traditions, however, remained an ongoing process, constantly subject to various forms of resistance. In fact, middle class holiday reformers had to make some concessions if they were to successfully create a public consensus acceptable to all. Thus Callathumpian parade traditions were co-opted, but not eliminated altogether. In sports, organizers managed to remove rowdy and silly games from the athletic grounds, but silliness only moved to the beach and rowdiness to the stands. Ironically, it was another middle class concern, boosterism, which allowed for the latter transposition. These elements point to the resilience of alternate traditions, while illustrating the range of mechanisms available for the creation of a hegemonic, consensus-based, power structure.