

*Undressed Toronto: From the Swimming Hole to Sunnyside,  
How a City Learned to Love the Beach, 1850-1935* by Dale  
Barbour

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of the League of Indians of Canada.

Smith's mastery of the field is impressive as is evidenced by the 120 pages of notes. The volume is a treasure trove of information and analysis for both casual reader and expert alike. The first half of the book in which Smith concentrates whole chapters on particular individuals such as Macdonald, Grant, and Scott are the strongest and most focused. The latter half of the book which examines individuals who began to shift the dialogue towards respect and inclusion is highly interesting, but at times feels somewhat unfocussed and not as well contextualized in terms of how and why these shifts occurred. Smith pursues some of this analysis in his autobiographical prologue and in the epilogue where he notes that the change in attitudes was linked to the "erosion of European self-confidence" (267) in the aftermath of two brutal and dehumanizing wars. This line of argumentation would be worthwhile pursuing in a little more depth. Instead, readers get a rather disappointing list of important events in settler Indigenous relations since

the 1969 White Paper to conclude the volume. The other line of analysis that would be worth pursuing is how Indigenous Canadians refused to remain unseen even in the face of the ignorance and indifference of settler Canadians. How much did the courageous persistence of Indigenous people to refuse to be erased influence non-Indigenous Canadians to shift their perspectives? The brief introduction of Harold Cardinal in the final chapter hints at these influences, but this line of analysis awaits future scholars to investigate more fully.

Overall, *Seen Not Seen* is an impressive and fitting coda to Smith's decades of first rate scholarship in the field. Despite its focus on individuals, *Seen not Seen* reminds settler Canadians of their collective responsibility in the treatment of Indigenous peoples as well as their commitment to reconciliation to repair decades of determined and purposeful erasure.

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## *Undressed Toronto*

### *From the Swimming Hole to Sunnyside, How a City Learned to Love the Beach, 1850-1935*

By Dale Barbour

Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2021. 328 pages. \$27.95  
Paper, ISBN: 978-0-88755-947-1 (uofmpress.ca)

Dale Barbour's *Undressed Toronto* is a fascinating and thorough overview of Toronto's relationship with public bathing between 1850 and 1935. This time frame is important as it is the era surrounding the transition from vernacular bathing, what the author explains being able to bathe without being restricted by certain rules

whilst following community knowledge of the area, and to public bathing spaces, with all the restrictions and changes that would bring. The author is no stranger to the social history surrounding our relationship with bathing, as he previously explored Winnipeg's relationship with the beach in *Winnipeg Beach: Leisure and Courtship*

*in a Resort Town, 1900-1967*. This time, he dives into four unique settings, from Toronto's waterfront and rivers to beaches and baths, all of which experienced different evolutions and public perceptions. Divided into six chapters that examine themes like the role of bathing in identity formation of young boys, nostalgia, and gender roles, *Undressed Toronto* gives a fascinating perspective on a slice of history that is rarely examined. Barbour's historical analysis is structured in a way that will interest readers from academic backgrounds and history fans alike.

In the Introduction, Barbour is clear about his intentions and the structure of his argument, nothing that *Undressed Toronto* is not just a story about water; it's also about gender dynamics, social classes, and the distinctive relationship between Toronto and its environment. The first two chapters analyse Toronto's central waterfront, from discussing the Toronto Purchase right through to the establishment of the Esplanade, a project that started in the 1850s to establish a more industrial order around the waterfront, whilst also discussing various changes in laws and the discomfort surrounding nude bathing. The third chapter explores Toronto Island's beaches, a real escape from civilization, where the construction of swimming baths in the 1880s changed the rules of bathing, giving women a place to go and introducing a mixed-gender environment, a synonym of a more

modern city. The fourth chapter looks at another environment altogether—the Don River—and provides a dramatic telling of the many drownings that took place in the river's murky waters. Being a space predominantly meant for boys, the Don became a rite of passage for men and the multiple photographs included within the chapter support the argument. On the opposite end of the spectrum was the Humber River,

the subject of the fifth chapter. Meant to be more of a social space without the scandalous sight of nude bodies bathing, the Humber was an aquatic promenade where couples could slowly paddle in a canoe or take an evening stroll along the banks. The chapter has an undeniably romantic feel, and its placement within the book was well thought, bringing a softer energy to the book. Finally, chapter six centres on the Sunnyside project, which was finally opened in 1922, one of



the biggest projects to date for the Toronto Harbour Commission, including the reconstruction of the waterfront into a beach, multiple buildings (including Sunnyside Pavilion), and an amusement park meant to act as the “cash cow” for the whole development. This chapter also explores how strict rules and lifesaving programs became central to the administration of the beach and the Sunnyside project, which had never been policed before—or at least, very little. Barbour also includes an Epilogue where he discusses Hanlan's Point, one of two legal

nude beaches in the country, which became a permanent, sanctioned City site in 2002. A very well thought ending to the book, with a more recent update on the Toronto waterfront, showing how far things have come in 150 years, from prohibiting nudity to creating a public space for it.

Lighthearted in its subject, *Undressed Toronto* touches serious matters when discussing the hazardous reality of these waters and the various laws surrounding bathing. Barbour uses examples taken from a wide variety of primary sources, including maps, photographs, police reports, postcards, and newspaper editorials to make his points. He takes his time to explain in depth at the start of every chapter how each particular space was used and how it changed dramatically over the years. Not only are laws examined, but also class dynamics and the relation of gender to space. The nostalgia theme is also very important throughout the book and is an essential element to understand peoples' connection to the waterfront. For example, the author discusses the nostalgic gloss that surrounded the Don River, sometimes shrouding the river's perils and risks. That also came with a certain performance of gender and sexuality, as the Don River was associated with boyhood, erasing other age groups and women from the narrative at the time. Even more than that, as the Don and vernacular bathing in the area was considered a rite of passage for men, adding an element of tradition and symbolism associated with the river. On the other side of the city, the Humber River also was a space where gender and sexuality were performed, the river promenade being a well-known spot for courtship, but in addition it was where class was very apparent since not everyone could afford to rent a canoe and show themselves paddling around. The bathing suit element also brought challenges, as the city wanted to preserve some

areas for vernacular bathing, whilst also regulating other areas to allow everyone to bathe in peace. Many women were requesting a space to bathe like the ones in Europe, where they would have a changing room and where they wouldn't be subjected to the male gaze. The Wyman bath on Toronto Island provided a solution at the time, but more regulated spaces were to come. From the very start of the book the author addresses the historiography and what has been studied so far about these waterfronts and their social aura, and he is clear about his own personal conclusion, which he secures extremely well throughout the book. The reader is frequently reminded of how important the relationship between the bodies of water and the actual human bodies immersed in them, and how it was going through important changes during the span of the years the book dived into.

At times, Barbour dives deep into the distant historical past, making for a rather dull start to some sections. I also found myself wanting to know more about social differences, and how the waterways and beaches were used by minorities. However, I can understand how such subtleties might be hard to find in the sources from this period.

*Undressed Toronto* is a unique take on social and environmental history. It invokes a nostalgia for summer days of beachside revels, while also reminding us that bathing gave nineteenth-century women a new pastime, gave men a new way to demonstrate masculinity, and provided citizens with natural spaces to escape to from the increasingly industrialised city. Exploring Toronto through its waterways and beaches, *Undressed Toronto* is as delightful and refreshing as a summer evening's dip.

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