

Belleville: a Popular History By Gerry Boyce

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interaction and other museological initiatives associated with the Standards for Community Museums in Ontario established by the Ministry of Culture. Burke, McLaughlin and Walker together track how the Joseph Schneider Haus has evolved over 25 years, explaining to the public the concept of a successful ‘living history’ museum. *This Old Haus* is enriched by more than 500 photographs, illustrations and images. The intent was, however, not to produce a coffee table book but, instead, to enhance the JSH story of restoration and change.

We need more publications that record Ontario’s museological heritage and the history of individual community museums in our province. *This Old Haus* can be viewed as a handbook and a good example for other community museums to use when chronicling their own histories. It also provides in-

teresting reading for the public at large seeking a better understanding of such cultural institutions in their own communities. *This Old Haus* is an excellent book to add to your library!

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Belleville: a Popular History

By Gerry Boyce

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2008. 311 pages. \$50.00 hardcover. ISBN 1-55488-412-4 (www.dundurn.com)

Don’t pass over this book just because you think you do not need to know anything about Belleville. Read it, because Gerry Boyce has written a book that readers should think of as Theirville, or Anyville. Certainly you will learn much about a small city on the Bay of Quinte – who was the first mayor, when the hospital was renovated: that sort of thing—but you will start thinking about your own town with fresh eyes. *Belleville* reminds would-be urban biographers that they have things to say that may resonate far beyond their town limits. Boyce tells stories to which we all can relate, and makes them focal points along the (perhaps) obligatory chronology. He provides large, thoughtful stepping stones on what so easily could have been a plodding trail.

Many of these stories are like fables. Who

knew that Belleville failed to make the short list of candidates for provincial capital in the 1850s because of paperwork incorrectly filed? Oops! (And Boyce laments that he recalls having seen the explanation of what went wrong, years ago in an archive, but his own flawed record-keeping has prevented him from finding the reference again. Not many researchers would admit to such a *mea culpa* yet we all have done just that.) The Belleville McFarlands hockey team inspired a generation of fans, but gave the city financial fits and taught it a lesson in fiscal management. Whose town has not had that sort of experience? How about the Prince of Wales, whose visit in 1860, so eagerly anticipated (with triumphal arches, bands, and all that), was cancelled because of politically-incorrect demonstrations by Orangemen and (I’ve never heard of these

people) Physiocarnivalogicalists.

Boyce is the sort of author who ferrets out levity and absurdity amid the serious matter. Imagine Belleville's first automobile, a wine-toned Packard delivered on a railway car in 1904, all swathed in cheesecloth and paper. Laugh at the antics of the Wharf Street Debating Club, a men's organization founded sometime before 1920 for serious political discussion. The WSDC counts among its greatest trophies the steel bar thrown through the window (allegedly) by an irritated woman. That souvenir, gilded and mounted with a descriptive plaque, continues displayed in the society's lake-front clubhouse. Great stuff.

Boyce's sense for context assures that the episodes resonate today. The local historical society had a troubled gestation, more than forty years, but is today custodian of significant manuscripts, including letters from the Great War, which he cites and interprets for a current generation. Under the racy subtitle, "sex in the seventies," Boyce draws on the detective-work of high-school students who, in a 1970s class project, pored through the *Intelligencer* of the 1870s in search of the darker side of society. Clearly they found it, and in the process learned a good deal about the role of euphemisms in Victorian prose.

From his lifetime of local research Boyce shares stories of a railroad strike, a cemetery exhumed, a gold rush, a mounted police force, and that "least objectionable" Senator-cum-Prime Minister Mackenzie Bowell. He

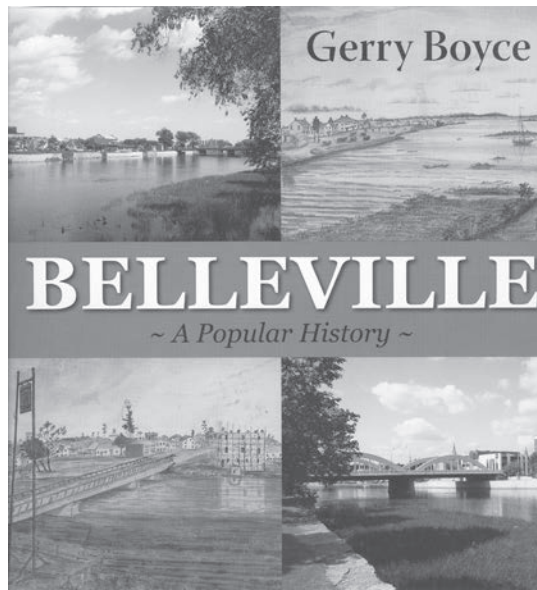
introduces Samuel Greene, the profoundly deaf and inspiring teacher at the Belleville school for the deaf, and recounts moments in the lives of such a disparate group as botanist John Macoun, watercolourist Thomas Burrowes, entertainers Bea Lillie and Oscar Wilde, and authors Susannah Moodie and Farley Mowat. Boyce notes the cottage industry some of these people have generated today, particularly Michael Peterman's career-long study of the Moodies; see a review of his

most recent book in this issue of *Ontario History*. We learn of architectural triumphs and lamented demolitions, and of openings and anniversaries. They span the decades, supported with thoughtfully-selected maps, drawings and photographs. Every Ontario town has its parallel people, places and events; the Boyce formula should work for Innerkip, Ingersoll,

anywhere.

Belleville has excellent annotation and a thorough bibliography, offering readers many avenues for further discovery far beyond the town itself. I note occasional website references, and in 2009 we must find a way to deal with these; they expire, and when they do a thread is lost. My preferred solution is to avoid websites, for I do expect book publishing to persist indefinitely.

Serendipity was at work here, compelling this review upon me at short notice. I know Belleville only slightly, most recently when my wife and I stopped off in the newly opened, and very attractive, public library in



search of elusive fragments of her family history. To our delight – and somewhat astonishment – the librarian led us to a compilation of names culled from more than a half century of *Intelligencer* issues, the labour of love of an unsung local hero. (Nick and Helma Mika, well-known Belleville editors and publishers, get proper credit; so should this person or persons.) We found three entries, including a new-to-us story of a lost child happily found. Boyce's extensive account of the history and archeology of St Thomas Cemetery has reinvigorated our quest for a vanished ancestor we believe may have been buried there. And then there is the really odd coincidence—on page 165, where

I read about the ghost in the kitchen at 226 Bridge Street. That address set off a distant bell, and I scrambled to my voluminous slide collection. There I found, dated May 8, 1966, a photograph of my wife and I posed beside that very house, the parental home of my wife's sister-in-law! I have stood in that kitchen, sans ghost (I think). How unlikely, but how instructive of old Ontario as a richly integrated place. So, read Boyce's *Belleville* because it is an engagingly good book, but also because you might just happen upon a connection you didn't realize you had.

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