

The People and the Bay: A Social and Environmental History of Hamilton Harbour by Nancy B. Bouchier and Ken Cruikshank

Dale Barbour

Volume 108, Number 2, Fall 2016

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050605ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050605ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Barbour, D. (2016). Review of [*The People and the Bay: A Social and Environmental History of Hamilton Harbour* by Nancy B. Bouchier and Ken Cruikshank]. *Ontario History*, 108(2), 273–274.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1050605ar>

The People and the Bay *A Social and Environmental History of Hamilton Harbour*

by Nancy B. Bouchier and Ken Cruikshank

Vancouver, British Columbia: BC Press, 2016. 344 pages. \$34.95 paperback. ISBN 978-0-7748-3042-3 (www.ubcpress.ca).

It was worth the wait. Nancy B. Bouchier and Ken Cruikshank have been working towards *The People and the Bay: A Social and Environmental History of Hamilton Harbour* for over twenty years. In that time the two McMaster University scholars have contributed a body of work on the Hamilton region that includes a film and over a half dozen journal articles. And yet *The People and the Bay* still feels fresh; the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

The prime question for Bouchier and Cruikshank, as environmental and historical geographer Graeme Wynn suggests in his foreword, is, “Whose harbour is this?” The authors pose that question beginning with European settlement of Burlington Bay in the nineteenth century and then walk it through the next 200 years as settlers and plants and animals, for that matter, jockeyed for control; not just of the harbour as a physical environment but as a social space to live, fish, bathe, work or play.

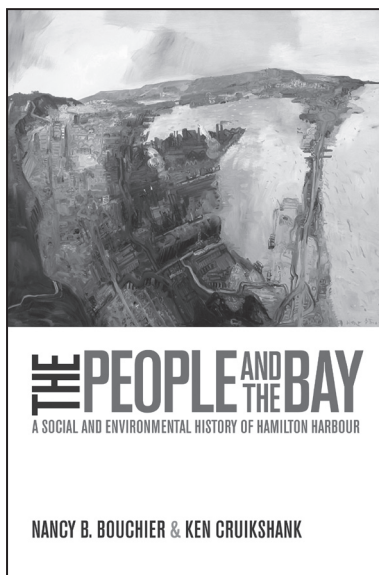
Bouchier and Cruikshank give us a tight eight chapters that introduce us to the city of Hamilton and its environment and then walk us through the flashpoints of its growth and transformation: from early ef-

forts at conservation, to civic (and industrial) boosterism at the turn of the century, reform-era efforts to promote recreation and reform behaviour, city beautiful visions of an environment that could uplift the masses, through the postwar quickening of industrialization and pollution and finally to calls for change and efforts at remediation of the polluted harbour. It would be easy to portray this as a progressive narrative of despoilment and recovery;

from a point in 1990 when only two per cent of the harbour’s shoreline was accessible to the public, Hamilton has slowly taken back access to portions of its bay.

But Bouchier and Cruikshank deny us this lazy narrative. There were always choices when it came to Burlington Bay. Even as the first smokestacks were rising in Hamilton there were people who questioned their impact on the environment. Working in Hamilton, Bouchier and

Cruikshank are able to draw on a powerful collection of sources—oral, textual, and photographic—that track the efforts of different civic, government or industrial bodies as they tried to control, study, transform or remediate the places and people of the bay. But the authors also humanize the



ideologies that were in play by seeing how they coalesced within individual actors. In the 1860s Hamilton fishery inspector John William Kerr watched the changing environment around him and realized that industrial polluters were the primary threat to fishing stock rather than the farmers and working class people who, borrowing a practice from Aboriginal people, speared a day's catch of fish through winter ice. T.B. McQuesten, Hamilton alderman, MPP, and a tireless promoter of parks illustrates a city beautiful influenced vision for Hamilton harbour in the twentieth century and the practical limitations involved in carrying out such a vision. Finally, Gillian Simmons, Hamilton resident and advocate for the remediation of the bay, demonstrates how by the 1970s there was a growing effort to take back a bay that had been viewed as lost to industrialization.

The most powerful chapters of this book come at the end when Bouchier and Cruikshank, in a deliberately presentist approach, pull Kerr, Simmons and McQuesten in to illustrate how remediating the Burlington Bay environment required learning from each of them. Kerr illustrated the need to be flexible and work with those impacted by environmental policies, Simmons demonstrated how the broader public had to be drawn in and have a reason to care about the bay, and finally the grand vision of McQuesten was needed but on a more intimate scale to rework the environment to benefit non-industrial users, whether they be people, plants, or animals. There is no end to this story. Burlington Bay remains a work in progress. As the authors conclude, neither its industrial sites, its parks, nor its restored habitats are natural settings; they have all been altered, or deliberately left untouched, to serve a particular role.

Bouchier is an associate professor of history and associate member of the De-

partment of Kinesiology at McMaster University while Cruikshank is a professor of history and dean of humanities at McMaster. Part of UBC Press's Nature | History | Society series, *The People and the Bay* is a collaborative effort between the two and the collaboration moves seamlessly throughout the book; there are no shifts in tone or style to suggest where one author left off and the other began.

The work is unabashedly focused on the Hamilton environment and will be a joy to people looking for an intimate understanding of their own community. It also plays a critical role in expanding the repertoire of environmental and urban histories in Canada. While Bouchier and Cruikshank kick off their story with European settlement it would have been nice to know more about how the distinctive environment of Burlington Bay formed. We know the surrounding Niagara escarpment is a legacy of glaciation but the distinctive environments that formed within that hollow, from marshy Cootes Paradise, to Burlington Bay, to the fragile beach strip that separates the bay from Lake Ontario could use more explanation. At the opposite end of the timeline, there are moments when the Hamilton story could have been more directly linked in with the historiography of popular movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The battles being fought in Hamilton and tactics being deployed were used in other communities—Torontonians held a funeral for the Don River just as Hamilton people held one for Cootes Paradise—Bouchier and Cruikshanks give us hints of this, but it would have been interesting to learn more about how these different groups talked to each other.

Dale Barbour, PhD candidate
Department of History
University of Toronto