

The Ward Uncovered: The Archaeology of Everyday Life edited
by Holly Martelle, Michael McClelland, Tatum Taylor, and John
Lorinc

Camille Begin

Volume 112, Number 1, Spring 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069021ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069021ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Begin, C. (2020). Review of [*The Ward Uncovered: The Archaeology of Everyday Life* edited by Holly Martelle, Michael McClelland, Tatum Taylor, and John Lorinc]. *Ontario History*, 112(1), 125–126. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069021ar>

The Ward Uncovered

The Archaeology of Everyday Life

Edited by Holly Martelle, Michael McClelland, Tatum Taylor, and John Lorinc

Toronto: Coach House Books, 2018. 303 pages. \$27.95 softcover. ISBN 9781552453698 (www.chbooks.com)

The Ward Uncovered is a sequel to the award-winning, *The Ward: The Life and Loss of Toronto's First Immigrant Neighbourhood* (2015). Like the best sequels, it stands independently. Taking the opportunity of the once-in-a-generation archaeological survey of a barely touched plot of land in downtown Toronto (it was a parking lot for decades), the editors continue their exploration of a neighbourhood that was a landing area and a changing community for generations of migrants of diverse origins. Some made it big, some stayed put in the neighbourhood. They all used the privies at the back of their buildings and dumped all sort of garbage there, either accidentally or on purpose. The unearthing of these “very rich and very ripe wood-lined privies” (240), to quote archaeologist Holly Martelle, yielded an incomparable array of artefacts that allows for the painting of a variegated picture of the Ward’s inhabitants social, cultural, religious, and work lives. Particular attention is paid to the Black, Jewish, and Chinese communities.

I read this book the way it was certainly not intended to be read, and the way it should probably not be read: cover-to-cover (I am a zealous reviewer). Its short chapters, some barely two pages, should rather be sampled over several months, as morsels in-between other readings or as a change from scrolling through your social media feed. The chapters, divided in six parts and written by a myriad of authors, are a mix of “personal essays, journalistic accounts,

and [short] academic chapters” (13). The book’s production, like most Coach House books, is polished, with the inclusion of visuals for key artefacts, maps, and archival photographs, making this volume worthy of your coffee table.

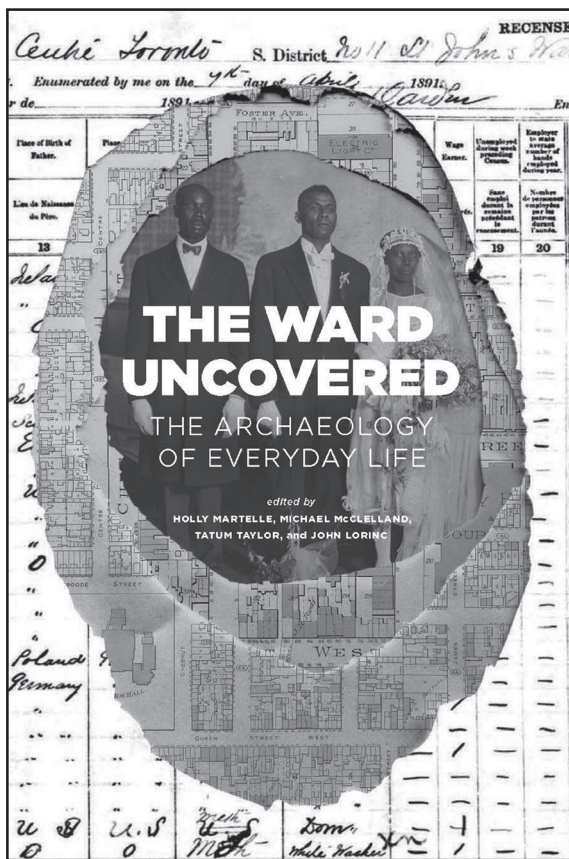
The book opens on a series of essays providing historical context on the history of the Ward in general and the dig site in particular, as well as a quick crash course in “garbology,” the science of turning trash found in privies into archaeological treasures. This allows for a series of articles on food habits (“Coconuts in Latrines!” by Elizabeth Driver for instance); growing up in the Ward; and the industrious working lives of Ward’s denizens. Later articles focus on social and religious life, tracing the history of Jewish synagogues out of the Ward and through the city, and highlighting the role of the British Episcopal Church in the Black community. The building, the foundations of which were exposed during the dig, later became a Chinese Canadian congregation of the United Church of Canada.

As one of the editors notes, “archaeology is a combination of science and story telling.” The emphasis is on the latter and the science stays accessible, for instance with Michael McClelland’s exploration of the dig via maps and cross sections of archaeological layers (246-51). This means that, towards to middle of the book, the archaeological focus occasionally gets lost. While a number of chapters offer needed historical context to understand the story

of specific artefacts, others can seem unwarranted. The reader is left wanting to know more. Similarly, the book is noticeably silent on topics such as the sex lives of people of the Ward—and sex work in the Ward—a topic that Elise Chenier’s contribution in the first volume had started to explore.

Still, it all comes together in the last parts of the book when chapters focusing on individual lives connect artefacts, urban spaces, and life stories. Karolyn Smardz Frost’s back-to-back accounts of the lives of Cecelia Holmes—who married the man who helped her escape slavery via the Underground Railroad—and Francis Griffon Simpson, a Black shoemaker and activist born free in New York State, come to mind. This last portrait is followed by passages of Simpson’s interview with the post-Civil War American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, providing an important reminder that freedom in nineteenth-century Toronto did not mean escaping racism. In Simpson’s words: “leaving the law out of question, I find that prejudice here is equally strong as on the other side.” Craig Heron’s account of bootlegger’s Annie Whalen life using mostly her family’s recorded encounters with the court system is another masterful chapter in this part of the book.

This dig site will soon be the location of the Ontario Court of Justice new building designed by ‘starchitect’ Renzo Piano. One of the inaugural chapters, “Doing Justice to the Courthouse Site” (34-37), by Tatum Taylor offers a needed reflection on the challenges of this judiciary institution coming to occupy a site of memory for communities that have struggled, and still struggle, to achieve equality under the law.



This history will be commemorated on the site once construction is done and some of the dig’s artefacts have been on rotating display at Toronto City Hall for the past few years (find them by the elevators).

Provided you do not attempt at reading this book in one (or even two or three) sitting and are open to the occasional side-lining of archeology, it will gently unfold, while you follow story lines and topics nicely threaded throughout. Like its predecessor, it is a both a solid introduction to and, a must read on, the history of nineteenth and twentieth-century Toronto.

Camille Begin
Heritage Toronto