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Expressive Acts: Celebrations and Demonstrations in the Streets of Victorian Toronto by Ian Radforth

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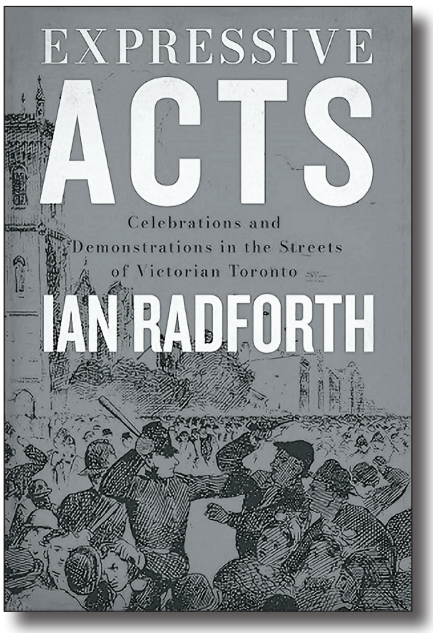
Expressive Acts
Celebrations and Demonstrations in the Streets of Victorian Toronto

by Ian Radforth

Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2023, 237 pages. $38.95 paperback, $90 hardcover, $38.95 EBook. ISBN978-1-4875-4574-1 (cloth), 4577-2 (paper). (utorontopress.com)

Violence and street demonstrations may no longer be major factors in political expression, but as Ian Radforth describes it, they were certainly a huge manifestation of public feeling in Victorian Toronto. It is a subject he is closely familiar with and he has already covered aspects of it in various journal articles throughout his long career. It is a pleasure to see the topic discussed in full in this publication.



His study begins with the Rebellion Losses Bill of 1849 and the outrage at compensating Lower Canadians for damages incurred during the Rebellion of 1837-38. To the Tory element, this was compensating traitors, and demonstrations marked by the burning in effigy of those who supported the bill was all the rage. In some communities, one of the effigies was that of the Governor General, Lord Elgin. As the author explains, effigy-burning had "deep roots in British culture" (26) and enabled participants under the cover of night to become actors displaying their political convictions. He contrasts these events with Elgin's tour of Canada West in late 1849 where the Reformers toasted their hero with an enthusiastic welcome. Interestingly, he cites the Montreal *Courier* where a reporter noted that some effigy-burners now "received him (Elgin) with cheers" (35). Was participation in these demonstrations a mark of political conviction or engaging in the passions of the moment?

On the face of it, the Prince of Wales tour of Canada in 1860 generated universal feelings of good-will. This time, the defining symbol became arches. When the Orange Lodge insisted that the Prince pass under its arch just outside of St. James Cathedral where the Prince was at services, his political advisor objected. The Orange Lodge was seen as a deeply divisive force and the Prince was instructed not to honor it. This led, not so much to a demonstration, as to a crazy race from the Cathedral to Government House to avoid going under the arch. While non-violent, the incident revealed that "Rituals meant to demonstrate loyalty and community became triggers of confrontation between rival factions" (83).

This became even more apparent when Toronto's minority of Roman Catholics attempted public displays of their faith on Toronto streets. The deep religious animosities existing in Toronto were exposed, and collective violence was barely beneath the surface. At the Corpus Christi procession of 1864 within the grounds of St. Michael's Cathedral, a Protestant mob attacked Catholic worshippers.

But it was the control of public space that was all-important and in the "Jubilee riots" of 1875, Catholic processions on Toronto streets were subjected to rock-throwing and attacks. The Orange Young Britons were at the forefront of the street violence, asserting their groups entitlement to public spaces. In a development that surprised many and suggested that the law would be applied fairly to all, the police protected Catholic marchers and subdued their attackers. Equally unexpected were the comments in the *Globe* on the class-dynamic of the riots. The newspaper dismissed them as being instigated by an ignorant working-class mob and exonerated the middle class.

The author is especially sensitive to the overlooked gender and racial aspects of demonstrations. He notes that the Catholic parades included women, a statement that they were an integral part of the community. However, the physical confrontations that resulted were all-male affairs. Black participation in public events was limited and they were excluded from participating in the welcome to the Prince of Wales in 1860. He further states that "Racialized women were never so much as mentioned in any depiction of public displays in Toronto" (180). Perhaps he is unaware of the demonstration in favour of the acquittal of a Black woman, Clara Ford, in 1895. A mob (likely all white males) paraded a Black woman, who had almost certainly murdered an eighteen-year-old boy, in triumph through the streets. It was a measure of the ignorance of such demonstrations that a murderer would become a mob favourite.

As the author admits, there are limitations in attributing any focused political motive to many demonstrations. The vast majority of Torontonians did not take part, and of those who did, many "would have struggled to explain the religious issues involved" (105). It did enable testosterone fueled street theatre against the other side that resulted in a few broken heads, but seldom in fatalities. Young men featured prominently in these riots which were usually Orange versus Green affairs, but sometimes, as in the "Circus Riot" of 1855, could simply be directed at outsiders.

The author describes the reception given to Toronto's volunteers returning from the North West Rebellion in 1885, but it seems difficult to attribute any political direction to the event. Far more focused were the labour struggles of the 1880s and the street performances that accompanied the organization of fledgling unions. The March 1886 lock-out of street car workers by the autocrat of the Toronto Street Railway, Frank Smith, escaladed from playful performances to violent confrontation as the police sought to crush demonstrators. The incidents revealed a "divided city" where "a substantial part of the working class had taken to the streets in support of the strikers..." (169). Yet, he is careful to note that the controlled actions of the union were designed to avoid offending the citizens but enough to keep up pressure on the owners. It was an emergence from the riotous affairs of the past to the more choreographed labour disputes of modern times.

Expressive Acts is a sprightly and entertaining examination of the physical side of political expression in the 1800s. But many readers will have in the back of their minds the event of 6 January 2021 when a mass demonstration morphed into a violent attempt to overthrow the U.S. government. Complete with its call to "hang Mike Pence" (the real thing and not an effigy) this mob, at least in its mindless enthusiasm, would have been comparable to those of early Victorian Toronto.

Patrick Brode