

A Mile of Make-Believe: A History of the Eaton's Santa Claus Parade by Steve Penfold

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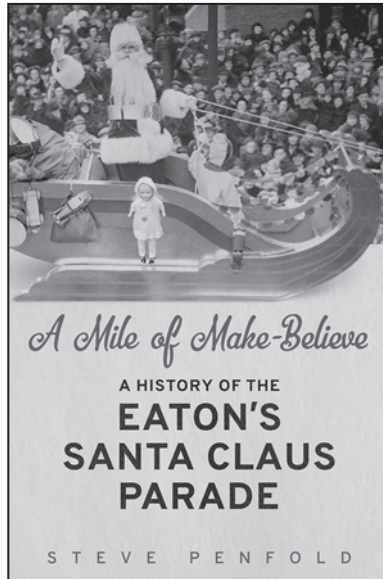
A Mile of Make-Believe
A History of the Eaton's Santa Claus Parade

By Steve Penfold

Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2016. 256 pps. \$65.00 cloth. ISBN 9781442630963. \$27.95 paper and epub. ISBN 9781442629240 (www.utppublishing.com)

Steve Penfold's latest project promises a behind-the-scenes tour of the spectacle that was part of many twentieth-century Canadian childhoods. With photographs and vivid descriptions of parade floats, costumed figures, and loud audiences, *A Mile of Make-Believe: A History of the Eaton's Santa Claus Parade* transports readers to the curbside and provides crucial historical perspective on this important annual event. Why did the Santa Claus Parade look the way it did? How did it expand and change? And what can its popularity in the twentieth century tell us about consumer and corporate culture, as well as spectacle? These are the questions Penfold answers as he explores the history of Eaton's Santa Claus Parade as a "particular moment in the cultural history of capitalism" (7).

The parade was a corporate spectacle from its inception. In Chapter 1, Penfold demonstrates how Eaton's parade grew in length, number, and popularity, but consistently reflected a particular aesthetic. The company moved away from the spontaneity, fervor, and most of the militarism



of nineteenth-century marches and parades, relying on nursery rhymes, storybook characters, and circuses. It avoided overtly religious figures, and associated Christmas and Santa with childhood wonder, play, and plenty. It was "both corporate and fantastic" (63) – a tightly-managed and well-funded event that created name awareness and public goodwill for Eaton's and helped to reshape the meaning of Christmas in the first

half of the twentieth century. Chapter 2 explores some of the challenges of Santa's public appearance. The parade brought Santa physically into the streets, "disrupting the entire structure of urban space" (66). The parades drew huge crowds, caused traffic congestion, and required additional police. But beyond the disruption of the event, Penfold argues successfully that over time the parades (like the department stores themselves) reshape Canadians' understanding of "downtown" as a commercial and cultural space, a place one travelled to for work, leisure, and shopping, rather than a place where one lived. The crowd shots included offer fascinat-

ing glimpses into the experience of waiting for, and watching the parade, especially for child spectators whose voices are mostly missing from the written records Penfold uses.

In Chapter 3 Penfold takes the reader from the streets to the small screen to explore how the parade changed in the 1950s when television broadcasting began. Histories of Canadian television programming are rare, making Penfold's analysis of the "mediated Santa" all the more valuable. Penfold examines some of the technical challenges of televising the parade, and notes how the parade changed aesthetically in order to attract and accommodate a growing national television audience. Colour and corporate branding became more important. The broadcast also created what Penfold calls a virtual connection with Canadians, beaming the company's corporate power, and the image of urban Canada, into millions of homes across the country (and in the United States) by the 1970s.

While the title suggests that Eaton's is the sole subject of this book, Chapter 4 dives into the history of service organizations in Canada's small cities and towns in order to expose and explain the people and ideas behind the countless parades *not* organized by Eaton's. Inspired by the department store model, Santa Claus parades spread across North America in the decades between the First and Second World Wars. While often similar in theme and appearance, these parades worked towards different ends. Penfold demonstrates how their organizers – including the Junior Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary Club, and local Retail Merchant Associations – relied on volunteer labour to create spectacles that would reinforce community pride

and sense of belonging.

Chapter 5 focuses on the parade's decline, and documents department stores' diminishing market share in the 1970s and 1980s, the effects of economic recession on Eaton's bottom line, and the results of mismanagement (or indifferent management) by the Eaton family in the years before the parade was canceled in 1982. Penfold's rich and critical analysis of these events contributes to our understanding of a Canadian business and the retail sector in this period.

While Penfold notes that community-organized parades became the norm in the 1970s and 1980s as department stores' participation in parade-making waned, his main focus on Eaton's remains appropriate. Eaton's was the first Canadian company to mount a Santa Claus parade. It was also the most successful and sustained effort. Eaton's extensive and rich archives include the files of dedicated parade employees such as Jack Brockie, and allow Penfold to illuminate the level of control the company maintained over the event.

A Mile of Make-Believe covers much more than a mile of ground, its arguments guided by cultural theory and rooted in historical evidence. Historians and students of popular culture, childhood and youth, business, and media will find key insights here, as will those interested in urban spaces, civic organization, and visual culture. And, of course, anyone who once sat bundled up on a cold curb (or a warm couch) who wants to understand the corporate culture and context behind the seemingly-magic Christmas spectacle.

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