**Urban History Review**
**Revue d'histoire urbaine**

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Citer cet article

Goheen, P. G. (1990). Symbols in the Streets: Parades in Victorian Urban Canada. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine, 18*(3), 232–243. https://doi.org/10.7202/1017720ar

# Symbols in the Streets:
## Parades in Victorian Urban Canada

Peter G. Goheen

"Yesterday a whole community - the population of a vast city - turned out into the highways to bury their dead...Montreal has never before seen such a spectacle...the crowds who attended the remains of the late Mr. McGee... were Composed of all that Montreal possesses of a mixed population of several races; of many creeds; of the most varied ranks and characters. Hardly any of our citizens were missing, either from the ranks of the wonderful cortege,... or from the sidewalks of the principal streets, through which the procession passed.[1]"

"Wednesday last may well be regarded as a 'red-letter' day in the history of the workingmen of Hamilton. The 15th of May...(was) the time set apart on which the demand for a nine hour system should be enforced...(by) holding...a demonstration that in grandeur and effect should be worthy of the day and the men....from first to last everything worked to a charm. Of course there were some...who...wished it otherwise...The procession numbered about three thousand men and boys and extended...a mile in length, the men marching four deep. It took a quarter of an hour to pass.[2]"

Parades were newsworthy events in Victorian Canadian cities. These two very different parades were staged within a few years of one another: the first took place in Montreal in April, 1868 and marked the funeral of Thomas D'Arcy McGee; the second occurred in Hamilton at the height of the local campaign by labour to establish the nine-hour working day. It was held in May 1872. Both are characteristic of successful parades in that they attract many participants and the attention of significant numbers of

onlookers; they also presented a carefully organized procession, and a "spectacle" or show of "grandeur" that signifies the time and space of the event as special.

Nineteenth-century parades marked a wide variety of occasions. Their public enactment in the main streets and open spaces of the city gave them ceremonial and symbolic significance as the foci of many events--official and unofficial, consensual and conflictual, happy and sad.[3] Described as a "performance in motion through space," the parade was set apart from routine movement through the streets by such distinctive elements as costume, music, and movement patterns that "present symbols which are basic to the procession's meaning."[4] The parade, in the words of an historian of the nineteenth-century United States, expressed "the public, ceremonial language whereby nineteenth-century Americans made order out of an urban universe that teamed with diversity and change."[5] It was an important instrument that allowed for the expression in public of many values and viewpoints contending for attention in a dynamic urban milieu. Parades were, in effect, public ritual, that is: a "rule-governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance."[6] In form they were thoroughly traditional and well understood, long before the mid-nineteenth century urban streets had become habitual settings for orderly demonstrations, both official and unofficial. This paper will introduce a discussion of parades in Confederation-era Canadian cities with attention to which groups were involved and how they presented themselves in the

symbolically most important public space in the city: the streets.

Important parades bore the hallmark of careful preparation and organization. They are not to be confused with 'crowd scenes' and riots that, although occurring more infrequently, have captured most of the attention of historians.[7] Public processions were not chiefly noted for their confusion or riot; they were in general well marshalled and self-consciously executed to plan. Order, not disorder, was to be their hallmark. This is well illustrated in the two instances already mentioned. In each case, the preparation was detailed, the procession was orderly, and the entire series of associated events highly structured.

Parades, like all ceremonial occasions, are passing pageants, moments of release from ordinary routine and hence charged with meaning. To convey an intended message effectively through the participation of hundreds or thousands of individuals on the streets demands meticulous preparation and control in execution of the event. After his assassination in Ottawa, McGee's funeral took a full week to organize, the minimum time necessary to plan the complex occasion. In Montreal the coordination required to arrange for the participation of scores of groups was daunting. In Ottawa, and in other capitals, the representation of governments was arranged with care. A special train made the journey from Ottawa to Montreal to carry the large number of officials and members of the public to the funeral. Each participating group had to be assigned its place in the procession, a matter of high symbolic significance needing careful

scrutiny. Detailed instructions concerning where to gather and when to fall into the procession were issued to each organization. Each of the thousands of marchers in the cortege had to learn an assigned place.

The Hamilton parade for the "Nine-Hour" movement was the product of planning and discussion which extended over several months. The first meeting was held on 17 January. On 31 January an organization was formed which met on a regular basis. The first strike in support of the movement occurred on the 20th of February. Spring brought concessions of a nine-hour day from a number of important employers in Hamilton, including the firm that had been struck on the 20th of February. Other Hamilton employers mounted a counter offensive, and by four days before the planned parade city employers had locked out over 1100 men. "An event that had been billed as a victory parade would proceed as a virtual general strike."[8] That a drastic change in circumstances did nothing to disrupt the parade, which "was very quiet and orderly throughout," attests to the care invested in its preparation and the control of its performance. "Participants marched throughout the route as laid down in the programme."[9]

Groups participating in parades were clearly identified, often marching behind their banners or wearing uniforms for ease of recognition. The place which each was assigned in the order of procession carried clear meaning and expressed the symbolic nature of the occasion. The distinctions between the two parades under discussion show clearly in the list of participants and their order in the march. Thomas D'Arcy

McGee was a leading political figure in Canada at the time of his assassination. His funeral was organized as a tribute to the career of an eminent public man, and was designed to reflect official society. It came close to being a state occasion (figure 1). Governments of all descriptions, and their servants, claimed pride of place, followed in order by members of the learned and public professions. Then came representatives of societies, organized according to religion, ethnicity, occupation, and social purpose. Religion, organized along ethnic lines, claimed precedence among these groups. National societies without a clear religious focus were accorded less prominent positions. Associations promoting a wide range of other aims were relegated to positions in the rear. Behind all other groups was the place allotted to "Citizens" whose claim to participation was based only on their personal interest. The organizers of this procession sought to portray a well articulated, hierarchical view of society resting on constituted authority and operating on a broad consensual base.[10]

The parade in support of the "Nine-Hour" movement reflected a very different social image and purpose (figure 2). Organized with meticulous care, it expressed the solidarity of Hamilton's workmen and the support of men from neighbouring towns in advancing their claim. Pride of place went to men from the Great Western Railway shops who had pioneered in winning the concession of a nine hour day. Marchers were organized by union and by place of employment. Workingmen from shops which had been granted the concession of a nine-hour day were joined by those whose employers still refused the demand. The event was designed to

display labour solidarity. The participants were identified by the banners behind which they marched and by their work which was displayed on floats. Bands gave a festive air to the occasion. The parade was as carefully executed as it had been planned.[11]

Public processions involved the conscious manipulation of symbols, none of which was more clearly understood than the meaning of the physical space in which the events were set. "Physical elements...had a meaning so clear...that...the targets...glitter in the eye of history as signs of the (participants') conception of the nature of society."[12] The shared arena was the city centre and the shining targets were the streets and institutions which were located there. The symbolic value of access to these streets arose from the recourse which the whole population enjoyed to this quarter where business, politics, and social life focussed on the many and varied institutions established in the city centre.

McGee's funeral route was miles long, commencing at his house in the fashionable, anglophone west end, continuing in a leisurely perambulation through central Montreal and winding northwestward to the cemetery on the flanks of Mount Royal. It moved between two sites, both Roman Catholic churches: the Irish Church and the premier French parish church of the city. Services were conducted at each location. In the former, the funeral mass was said and sung, and in the latter a service of music was held. The route, encompassing the principal business streets of Montreal, was designed to accommodate marchers and crowds of onlookers who were particularly numerous on the streets in the heart of

the commercial district . The route was carefully chosen to reflect the occasion and it reflected the imperative that co-religionists of each language group participate in the ceremony, thus generalizing McGee's status as a leading public figure beyond the confines of the Irish Catholic community of his birth.

The route nevertheless expressed the predominantly anglophone quality of the occasion: the procession scarcely entered into francophone Montreal, in sharp contrast to the traditional parade route of the St Jean Baptiste society. In each case, recourse was made to the centre of the city: a symbolic claim to common turf if only for a passing hour. But otherwise the territories of the parades were distinct, one in the east end and the other in the west. The official nature of the McGee funeral gives to the space chosen for it a particular significance, one of inclusion and exclusion. Francophones were encouraged to participate in the occasion through joining the procession as members of their friendly societies or, for a very few, as members of governments or the professions. The streets and public spaces of their own urban turf were not incorporated into this symbolic occasion.[13]

The procession of Hamilton workingmen extended into every quarter of the city, covering a distance of five miles. Two considerations apparently guided the planning of the route: to make the marchers' presence felt in the centre of the city, and to pass by the most important places of work in town, including firms that had granted nine hours and those that had not. Described as a "moment of exhilaration and craft pride," it was the occasion to deliver a

message of strength and solidarity to the whole community.[14] Following the parade, speeches and refreshments completed the day. The event was held on a Wednesday, its selection and all the activities of the day devised as an evocative symbol to express forcefully a collective sentiment.

The supposition behind parades as a form of collective action was, as it had long been, "that social perception and purpose may be generated as much through collective experience of mass public assembly as through the intentions of private individuals."[15] What range of purposes did the enactment of these rituals express in mid-Victorian Canada? Two views have been advanced for the continued popularity of this form of public demonstration in western countries during this period. Both focus on the changing structure of society undergoing industrialization and urbanization. One theory, emphasizing the distinction between non-industrial and industrial societies, highlights the decay of traditional public celebrations and ceremonies. Social disorganization, uncontrolled demonstration, and riot are the expected consequences in industrializing cities. These outcomes expressed the loss of what E.P. Thompson termed the "moral economy" of pre-industrial society where conflict "operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices...."[16] From another perspective, this period is remarkable for the creativity shown in adapting customary forms to meet the challenges and needs of the new urban environment. The "vocabulary of communal ceremony" has been explored by Eric Hobsbawm and his followers whose aim is to understand "the

intensely complex nature of the process of change...; in particular the ways in which older social, economic, political and cultural forms...help to shape the new, and in that process find themselves reshaped."[17] This process, dubbed by Hobsbawm the invention of tradition, interprets traditions as "responses to novel situations which take the form of reference of old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition."[18] The parade was an eminently adaptable form, employed in North America by ethnic, labour, political, and religious groups among others who felt the need to enforce their claims to recognition in the new urban milieu.[19] It offers a good example of the metamorphosis of content within a familiar and well practiced form understandable to participants and onlookers alike.[20]

An examination of parades held in Hamilton in 1872 will hint at the extent to which inherited social devices were being adapted to new purposes in changing circumstances (table 1). The press contains reports of 34 parades in the city during the year.[21] They were more than occasional events. Some reports are brief, but in the majority of cases it is clear that spectators were present and an important part of the occasion; many of the processions involved hundreds marching through the streets. All parades shared a common will to proceed through the centre of the city, as if to command, at least for the instant, the symbolism of authority residing there. Or, as John Berger has written on mass demonstrations, they "interrupt the regular life of the streets they march through...They 'cut off' these areas, and, not yet having the power to occupy them permanently, they transform

them into a temporary stage on which they dramatise the power they lack."[22]

Hamilton's parades were organized to promote many claims. Most numerous were demonstrations on behalf of national-religious organizations--comprising more than one third of the total. The Orange Order staged five of these, the St. Patrick Society three. Next in frequency came military parades, though few details were provided, suggesting that they elicited little public response. Labour accounted for five of the parades, and two of these were among the largest processions of the year. In contrast to military parades, which were an ancient (and fading) component of urban public ritual, the organized procession on behalf of labour was new and did not yet enjoying the sanction of a ritualized calendar. Funerals were an important occasion for large and orderly public demonstrations, and four are described in detail during the year. They involved, variously, parades by military units and national lodges as well as large contingents of individual mourners. In a year of significant labour agitation, it is noteworthy that workingmen not only staged their own giant parade but also that they organized the most spectacular political procession in the city. An evening torchlight parade greeted the Canadian Prime Minister whose party had nominated for the Hamilton constituency its first workingclass candidate for Parliament. This was one of the largest processions in a year of large demonstrations.

The timing of parades was highly significant. The marching season commenced in March and continued through the summer, tailing off in autumn.

There was a distinct weekly rhythm; parades were held at hours and on days when they could command public attention. Fourteen of the 34 were held on holidays and weekends; a further seven took place during non-working evening hours. Organizers avoided working hours: only four of those whose timing is known were held during regular times of work. Other evidence attests to the crowd appeal of several of the parades. Those held on 12 July and for the "Nine Hour" movement attracted the circus to town. Indeed, on 12 July two parades wound through the streets--one celebrating the Battle of the Boyne and the other the curiosities of the circus.

In Hamilton in 1872, parades were occasions to look back more often than to look to the future. The idea of cultural lag is strongly supported in the continuing vitality of public demonstrations honouring social movements inherited from the old world. Labour demonstrations offer the clearest evidence of new social purposes being met by adapting old forms. In both contexts the parade served as a "safety valve" for releasing urban tensions in a generally orderly manner.[23] The parade was part of a well understood and limited repertoire of public demonstration that was peculiarly adapted to its urban setting. Evidence indicates that the procession was a traditional form of public ritual capable of adaptability to meet new social needs over time, whether these were used to assert consensus or to express contested values. At mid-century, what Bakhtin wrote of carnival could appropriately be applied to the important parade: it "does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators...(it) is

not a spectacle seen by the people;...they participate."[24] In this, it was very different from what we know today. Our parades are often choreographed events designed to be witnessed passively by masses of spectators many of whom are not even present, but sitting at home.

### Table 1
### Hamilton Parades, 1872

| Purpose/Sponsorship | |
|---|---|
| Ethnic-religious organization | 12 |
| Military | 8 |
| Labour | 5 |
| Funerals | 4 |
| Recreation | 3 |
| Civic | 1 |
| Political | 1 |
| | |
| Timing | |
| Holidays and weekends | 14 |
| Evenings | 7 |
| During working hours | 4 |
| Unstated | 9 |
| | |
| Total | 34 |

*Figure 1*

*Funeral of Thomas D'Arcy McGee*
*Monday, April 13, 1868*
*Order of the Funeral Procession*

The City Police (Montreal)
The Fire Brigade
The Officers of the Corporation
The City Treasurer
The City Clerk
The Recorder of Montreal
Marshal          The Mayor          Marshal
Corporation of Ottawa (Ottawa)
The Mayor
Corporation of Ottawa
The Mayor
The Committee of Management
Members of the House of Assembly
(Quebec Province)
Legislative Councillors
Members of Local Governments
(Municipalities)
Members of the House of Commons
(Federal Government)
Senators
Foreign Consuls (Foreign Representative)
Officers of Militia in Uniform (Military)
Militia Commandant and Staff
Adjutant General and Staff
Officers of the Army
Major General Russell and Staff
Marshal Mounted Orderlies Marshal
Officers of the Courts of Law (Legal)
Magistrates
Judges
Members of the Privy Council (Executive)
Representative of the Lieut. Gov. of
Ontario
Representative of the Lieut. Gov. of
Quebec
Representative of the Govenor General
Sir Charles Wyndham, K.C.B. and Staff
Horticultural Society

*The Body*
Chief Mourners
Supporter of Chief Mourners
Funeral Carriages
Clergy (Professions)
Bar
The Notaries
Medical Profession
Universities
Professors of University of McGill College
Students of Law
Students of Medicine
Students in Arts (McGill)
St. Jean Baptiste Society (Societies)
St. Patrick's Society
Irish Protestant Benevolent Society
St. Patricks' Benevolent Society
St. Patricks' Temperance Society
Marshal   St. George's Society   Marshal
English Workingmen's Benefit Society
St. Andrew's Society
St. Andrew Society of Ottawa
Caledonian Society
Thistle Society
Other National Societies
German Society
The New England Society
Literary Societies
Marshal     The Literary Club     Marshal
Board of Arts and Manufactures
Benevolent Societies not being National
Societies
St. Ann's Catholic Young Men's Society
Temperance Societies
Howard Division, No.1, Sons of
Temperance
St. Ann's Temperance Society
Workingmen's Societies,
(not being National Societies)
Montreal Typographical Union
United Protestant Workingmen's Benefit
Society
Canada Sugar Refinery Benefit Society
Citizens (Public)
Government Police
A. Perry, Chief Marshal

*Montreal Herald, Tues. 14 April 1868.*

*Figure 2*

*Nine Hours' Parade*
*Wednesday May 15, 1872*

*Order of the Procession*
Pioneers: Members of the Executive
Committee of the Nine-Hour League:
Delegates from the other cities and
towns

*Band*
Great Western Railway men with flags,
including:
-Boiler Shop Banner
-Engine Department Banner-Bolt Makers
Banner
-Car Department Banner
-Blacksmith Shop Banner
-Locomotive Apprentice Banner
-Painters Department Banner

*Band*
Moulders' Union

*Band*
Wilson, Lockman & Co.
Crispins' Union
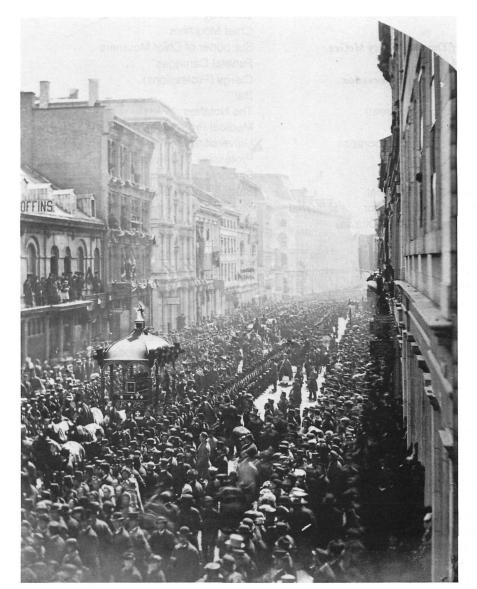Beckett's Machine Shop
Howles's Tin Shop
Marble Cutters

*Band*
Gardner's Sewing Machine Co.
Cabinet Makers
Brush Makers
Tailors

*Band*
Hespeler Sewing Machine Co.
Printers

*Band*
Bricklayers and Stone Masons
Wanzer Sewing Machine

-*Daily Spectator, Hamilton, Wed. 15 May 1872.*



*Funeral procession .*

## Notes

1    *Montreal Herald,* 14 April 1868.

2    *Ontario Workman,* Supplement, undated (16 May 1872).

3    Parades, especially when organized for official occasions, could bear remarkable resemblance to each other. Conzen quotes a German observer remarking that the parade opening the New York Exposition of 1853 differed from Henry Clay's funeral parade only in that "'this time the hearse was replaced by the person of the President!'" Kathleen Conzen, "Ethnicity as Festive Culture: Nineteenth-Century German America on Parade," in *The Invention of Ethnicity,* ed. Werner Sollers (New York, 1989), 52.

4    Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Brooks McNamara, "Processional Performance: An Introduction," *Drama Review,* 29, no. 3 (Fall, 1985), 2.

5    Mary Ryan, "The American Parade: Representations of the Nineteenth-Century Social Order," in *The New Cultural History,* ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley, 1989), 139.

6    Steven Lukes, *Essays in Social Theory* (London, 1977), 54.

7    For example, George Rude, *The Crowd in History, 1730-1848* (New York, 1964); Mark Harrison, "The Ordering of the Urban Environment: Time, Work and the Occurrence of Crowds, 1790-1835," *Past and Present,* no. 110 (Feb. 1986), 134-168; Harrison, *Crowds and History: Mass Phenomena in English Towns, 1790-1835* (Cambridge, 1988); E.J. Hobsbawm, "The Machine Breakers," *Past and Present,* no. 1 (Feb., 1952), 57-70; H. D. Graham and T. R. Gurr, eds., *The History of Violence in America* (New York, 1969); Theodore M. Hammett, "Two Mobs of Jacksonian Boston: Ideology and Interest," *Journal of American History,* 62 (1975-76), 845-68; John Bohstedt, *Riots and Community Politics in England and Wales, 1790-1819* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983).

8    Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914,* (Montreal, 1979), 141.

9    *Daily Spectator* (Hamilton), 15 May 1872.

10   For details of the funeral, see: *Montreal Herald,* 14 April 1868; *Montreal Daily Witness,* 13 April 1868; *La Minerve* (Montreal), 16 avril 1868.

11   *Daily Spectator* (Hamilton), 15 May 1872.

12   William M. Reddy, "The Textile Trade and the Language of the Crowd at Rouen, 1752-1871," *Past and Present,* no. 74 (Feb., 1977), 84.

13   *La Minerve* (Montreal), 26 juin 1868; *Gazette* (Montreal), 25 June 1868; *Montreal Herald,* 25 June 1868.

14   Palmer, 60.

15   Robert J. Holton, "The Crowd in History: Some Problems of Theory and Method," *Social History,* 3 (1978), 21.

16   E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present,* no. 50 (Feb., 1971), 79. For a critique of this thesis, see Frank Munger, "Contentious Gatherings in Lancashire England, 1750-1893," in *Class Conflict and Collective Action,* ed. Louise A. Tilly and Charles Tilly (Beverly Hills, 1981).

17   Pat Thane and Geoffrey Crossick, "Introduction: Capitalism and its Pre-Capitalist Heritage," in *The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm,* ed. Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossick and Roderick Floud (Cambridge, 1984), 2.

18   Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition,* ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, 1983), 2; see also E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (Manchester, 1959).

19   For example, see: Kathleen Conzen, "Ethnicity as Festive Culture," (see note 3); Susan G. Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1986); Sallie A. Marston, "Public Ritual and Community Power: St. Patrick's Day Parades in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1841-1874," *Policital Geography Quarterly,* 8 (1989); Timothy J. Meagher, "'Why Should We Care for a Little Trouble or a Walk Through the Mud': St. Patrick's and Columbus Day Parades in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1845-1915," *New England Quarterly,* 58 (1985); Mary Ryan, "The American Parade," (see note 5); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850,* (New York, 1984).

20   Examples include: Temma Kaplan, "Civic Rituals and Patterns of Resistance in Barcelona, 1890-1930," and Michelle Perrot, "The First of May 1890 in France: The Birth of a Working-Class Ritual," both in *The Power of the Past* (see note 17). The work of David Cannadine and colleagues develops this thesis. Elizabeth Hammerton and David Cannadine, "Conflict and Consensus on a Ceremonial Occasion: The Diamond Jubilee in Cambridge in 1897," *Historical Journal,* 24 (1981), 111-46; Cannadine, "The Transformation of Civic Ritual in Modern Britain: The Colchester Oyster Feast," *Past and Present,* no. 94 (Feb., 1982), 107-30; Cannadine and Simon Price, eds., *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1987).

21   The parade census was compiled from the *Daily Spectator* (Hamilton), for 1872.

22   As quoted from *New Society,* 23 May 1968, in Kaplan (see note 20).

23   According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* Vol. 9 (Oxford, 1933), 30, the first figurative use of the word "safety-valve" appeared in print in 1825 with reference to a rude public demonstration in Kidderminster, England. See William Hone, *The Every-Day Book and Table Book,* Vol. 1 (London, 1830 ed.), 1343-44.

24   Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World,* transl. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, Indiana, 1984), 7. Darnton makes the same point in his discussion of Montpellier in 1768. The author whose "Description" he analyzes "translated onto paper what they [the Montpellierains] acted out in the streets because the procession served as a traditional idiom for urban society." Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1985), 116.