

Seeing Home from Abroad:

The World along the Detroit River, 1670 to Present

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I had to put a lot of time and distance between myself and Essex County before I could appreciate it in any sense of the term. The landscape is almost completely flat, with monotonous farmland bisected by county roads laid out on a near-perfect grid. The stretch of the main highway passing through it, the 401, is sometimes called “Carnage Alley” because of the horrific multivehicle pileups that tend to occur along it. Barring snow and fog, the most common explanation for these accidents is that the road is so straight and the landscape so boring that people zone out and stop paying attention—until they’re on top of someone’s bumper.

So how did I come to appreciate a place that, as some would have it, literally bores people to death? I spent years fleeing home and the farm, looking for somewhere bigger, more cultured, more diverse: in a word, somewhere more important. In spite of my success in escaping the land where I was born and raised—to Ottawa, Baltimore, and Paris—homesickness eventually got the better of me. It all started with Google street-view tours along the back roads I could hardly trouble myself to look at when sitting in the back seat of my parents’ truck. During these digital Sunday afternoon drives, clicking my way up and down the roads, my attention was drawn to churches, historic plaques, and the old Victorian farmhouses that add flavour to the otherwise dull landscape. I found blogs written by in-the-flesh fellow explorers, who trespassed in abandoned factories and run-down farmhouses. I found online forums populated by genealogists and tombstone tourists; massive image libraries dedicated to finding old photographs and postcards of what streets and roads looked like a century ago; and railway timetables for all the old train lines that pass through the area. Slowly but surely, I came to appreciate the local history,

not just of Essex County but also of the neighbouring municipality of Chatham-Kent, and most importantly, the sister cities of Windsor and Detroit.

I learned that this little corner of the Great Lakes region, split though it is by an international border, has a shared history. I started trawling abebooks.com for titles I had seen mentioned online. Before long I had a handful of books on local history; then a whole shelf below to my academic books; and now three full shelves.

It slowly dawned on me that the local history of the region centered on the Detroit River was a microcosm of North American history more generally. The first documented act of Europeans on the Detroit River was the destruction of a Native American “idol” by two French Sulpician explorers, Dollier de Casson and Bréhant de Galinée, who came down from Montreal in the spring of 1670. Detroit itself was founded as Fort Pontchartrain du Détroit in 1701, and before the eighteenth century was up, the town and fort saw the flag of three successive regimes: that of the French, the British, and the United States. The diverse cast of settlers and fur traders who inhabited the banks of the Detroit River toward the end of the eighteenth century were Catholic and Protestant, European and Native American, French and English speaking, American citizens and British subjects—with all of these categories overlapping in unexpected ways. The region was the site of the two most extensive and well-organized Native American uprisings against Anglo-American encroachment east of the Mississippi, led by Pontiac and Tecumseh. The latter aligned himself with Britain and worked with Isaac Brock to capture Detroit during the War of 1812, and died heroically in the Battle of the Thames, half an hour from where I grew up. The counties of Essex and Kent, safely within the border of British-ruled Upper Canada, were also crucial destinations for escaped slaves coming north on the Underground Railroad. The area is the site of some of Canada’s earliest black communities, including the Dawn Settlement, led by

Josiah Henson, born a slave in Maryland and later the inspiration behind Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

In the twentieth century, the region was transformed by Henry Ford's Model T, and the accompanying rise and fall of the industrial system called "Fordism," another piece of history shared on both sides of the border in the twin "Automotive capitals" of Windsor and Detroit. The emblem of progress in the first half of the century, Detroit came to suffer the legacy of racial segregation and deindustrialization in the second half. On both sides of the border, factories are still closing: my own father, a tool and die maker, lost his job when his plant finally closed in 2008. These sometimes disorienting breaks with the past are moderated by long-standing continuities: the French language for instance can still be heard in households, schools, and churches (including those of my own family), much as it was in the eighteenth century. The uncertainty of an overturned industrial order now mixes with signs of revival: a new light rail line up Woodward Avenue in Detroit, and the gargantuan wind turbines that now dot the flat horizon of Essex County. History is still in the making.

Growing up, I had thought history was something to be found elsewhere (probably in Europe), and that we had little to none where I came from. Now I was learning that, in many ways, the area where I grew up stood at the crossroads of history, from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first. I carried this newfound realization with me during a year researching abroad in Paris, the farthest from home I'd ever been. I was there for archival research for my dissertation in the history of medicine in seventeenth-century France, but on weekends I would go back to the same archive and pull out letters and reports written by the founder of Detroit, Antoine de Le Mothe Cadillac. Even in Paris, home was still nearby.

Bibliography

The list below reflects my own interest in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century history of the region: my scholarly work, like my hobby, tends to gravitate to this earlier period, rather than the twentieth century, particularly when it comes to primary sources (although I would like to add some twentieth century items; see below). It is also stronger in some subjects (Native American history, black history, Francophone history) than others, and while it acknowledges the ties that bind both sides of the border together historically, it necessarily reflects my own provenance from the Canadian side. Finally, the collection also reflects my interest in biography: more than institutions, towns, cities, or even events, it tends to focus on the lives of people, ordinary and extraordinary, famous (Cadillac, Tecumseh, Ford) to the less-well known (the Indian department officer Alexander McKee, the fur trader Sally Ainese, the female black printer Mary-Ann Shadd). The bibliography follows a roughly chronological order based on subject treated.

1. Lajeunesse, Ernest J., ed. *The Windsor Border Region, Canada's Southernmost Frontier: A Collection of Documents*. Toronto: Champlain Society, 1960.

The first book I purchased and still the most important in the collection. Lajeunesse, a Basilian Father, assembled together nearly two hundred documents and excerpts, focusing particularly on what is now the Canadian side of the Detroit River. For the French regime, Lajeunesse's judicious selections extend from Galinée's narrative of the destruction of the stone "idol" along the Detroit River in the 1670s through to the execution of Cadillac's plan to build a fort on the north bank of the river in 1701, the earliest settlements on the south (now Canadian) shore in 1749, and the establishment of the Huron Mission (see next entry). The documents continue to cover the British occupation of Fort Detroit, the temporary disarmament of the local French-Canadian militia, the resistance to British occupation mounted by Pontiac, following all the way to the minutes of the British Land Board and lists of the settlers of given concessions at the end of the eighteenth century. Lajeunesse carefully documents his sources and provides the French and Latin originals in an appendix.

2. Potier, Pierre. *Les écrits de Pierre Potier*. Edited by Robert Toupin. Ottawa: Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1996.

From 1744 through to his death in 1781, Pierre Potier ministered to the Huron (Wyandot) and the French settlers living on the south bank of the Detroit River. He is without a doubt the single largest source of written material produced in the Detroit River under the French regime. His writings show that he cultivated active intellectual interests in a variety of subjects, including philosophy, the sciences, theology, and the history of religion, and the Huron language. He diligently produced censuses of the population to which he ministered, church records, and recorded ethnographic information on both the Huron and the local French. He also recorded the particularities of French Canadian colloquial speech around the time of the Conquest. This volume includes over 1300 pages of his writings, lovingly assembled and carefully transcribed by Robert Toupin SJ.

3. Steckley, John. *The Eighteenth-Century Wyandot: A Clan-Based Study*, 2014.

The Wyandot were descendants of the original “Huron” (Wendat) people from the Penetanguishene region along Lake Huron, who were dispersed by the Iroquois in the mid-seventeenth century. John Steckley, an expert on the Wyandot language, draws on the records kept by the Potier (see above) to provide a social history of the Wyandot living along the Detroit River in the eighteenth century. This book is the most recent addition to my collection.

4. Teasdale, Guillaume. “The French of Orchard Country: Territory, Landscape, and Ethnicity in the Detroit River Region, 1680s-1810s,” PhD diss., York University, 2010.

A printed comb-bound copy of Guillaume Teasdale’s dissertation, serving as a placeholder until he publishes his work as a monograph. Teasdale’s work is the most extensive study of the history of the French population of the Detroit River in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most importantly, his dissertation establishes that the initial French population of the area was significant and that it grew substantially even after the British Conquest, going from 500 to around 7,000. Teasdale also establishes the extent to which the French transformed the landscape, most notably by planting fruit tree orchards, and questions the longstanding historiographic assumption that there was significant French-Indian intermarriage in the region, suggesting that the “métissage” or mixing was more cultural in nature.

5. Englebert, Robert, and Guillaume Teasdale, eds. *French and Indians in the Heart of North America, 1630-1815*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013.

A useful volume for contextualizing Detroit among other inland French settlements further south along the Mississippi and further north at Michilimackinac. Most interesting is an excellent piece by Richard Weyhing on the scheming that allowed Cadillac to sell French authorities on establishing a colony at Detroit.

6. [Navarre, Robert?]. *Journal of Pontiac’s Conspiracy, 1763*. Edited by Clarence Monroe Burton and M. Agnes Burton. Translated by R. Clyde Ford. Detroit: Speaker-Hines, 1912.

A bilingual parallel edition of the “Journal ou dictation d’une conspiration,” the main French narrative of the events of Pontiac’s War in Detroit. The editor, Clarence Burton,

argues the text was likely written by Robert Navarre, former Detroit subdelegate to the intendant of New France and local notary. Pontiac seized most of the British forts in the upper country (the Ohio valley and Great Lakes region) and hoped his initiative would prompt the French to send an army to reclaim the continental interior after the loss of Canada in the Seven Years War.

7. Richardson, John. *Wacousta: A Tale of the Pontiac Conspiracy*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1906.

A historical novel of Pontiac's War written in 1832 by an Upper Canadian veteran of the War of 1812 who had served near Detroit. Sometimes touted as the first Canadian novel, the plot centers on the actions of an English nobleman who takes on the name of Wacousta and fights alongside Pontiac.

8. Parkman, Francis. *The Conspiracy of Pontiac and the Indian War after the Conquest of Canada*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1912.

Probably the most famous history of Pontiac's War. Parkman (1823-1893), who wrote a whole series of books on the decline of the French regime in North America, was convinced of the superiority of Anglo-American civilization and its destiny to dominate the continent but felt a romantic affection for the "lost cause" of Indians and the French. In this volume he paints Pontiac almost as an evil genius who deviously organizes a clever plot against this inevitable forward march. For all his prejudices and whimsical notions, however, Parkman was still a historian who gathered primary sources rather than leaving everything to his imagination, as some of his contemporaries did.

9. Peckham, Howard H. *Pontiac and the Indian Uprising*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947.

A more recent account of Pontiac's War, but like Parkman's, still a product of the prejudices of its time. Peckham does however have the virtue of reproducing Pontiac's dictated letters and speeches.

10. *Canada. Indian Treaties and Surrenders. From 1680 to 1890*. Reprint of 1891 ed. Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1992.

Includes the full text of Treaty No. 2 (1790), wherein the British crown purchased most of present-day southwestern Ontario (including Kent and Essex counties) for the pittance of £1,200 in goods.

11. Nelson, Larry L. *A Man of Distinction among Them: Alexander McKee and the Ohio Country Frontier, 1754-1799*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1999.

A biography of Alexander McKee, son of an American trader and a Shawnee mother who aligned himself with the British in the American Revolutionary War. After the war, McKee served as an agent with the British Indian Department stationed on the Detroit

border in Amherstburg. He was responsible for negotiating Treaty No. 2 (see above) and supported Indian resistance against American settlement in the Ohio country.

12. Hamil, Fred Coyne. *Sally Ainse, Fur Trader*. Detroit: Algonquin Club, 1939.

This rare 27-page typescript is one of the gems of my collection. It assembles together all of the documentation on Sally Ainse (ca. 1728-1823), a female Oneida fur trader and slave owner who settled in Upper Canada in the 1780s. Ainse personally bought land from local Indians, but the crown argued such personal purchases were null and superseded by treaties, and white land speculators succeeded in convincing the province to dispossess her of all of her land.

13. Sabathy-Judd, Linda, ed. *Moravians in Upper Canada: The Diary of the Indian Mission of Fairfield on the Thames, 1792-1813*. Toronto: Champlain Society, 1999.

In 1782 a hundred peaceful Christian Delaware were killed by American colonial militia, prompting local German Moravian missionaries to move their flocks to seek refuge under the British crown in Upper Canada. Sabathy-Judd provides the German original and English translation of the mission diary of the site of their eventual settlement, Fairfield, commonly known as Moraviantown. Though the town was destroyed by American troops during the War of 1812, it was later rebuilt and still exists today as a First Nations Reservation.

14. Clarke, John. *The Ordinary People of Essex: Environment, Culture, and Economy on the Frontier of Upper Canada*. Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010.

An extremely detailed study of land clearance, drainage, and agricultural use in nineteenth-century Essex County, Upper Canada. Clarke is a geographer and provides detailed statistics on land speculation and tenure, charting how the swampy, low-lying landscape of Essex was transformed into one of Canada's breadbaskets.

15. Dunnigan, Brian Leigh. *Frontier Metropolis: Picturing Early Detroit, 1701-1838*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001.

A beautiful large-format compilation of pre-photographic plans and views of Detroit. This book is easily the most visually appealing item in my collection, and an instrumental tool for imagining what Detroit was like. My favourite view is figure 6.6 (p. 113), which depicts Detroit from the Canadian side of the river, along the approach to where the Ambassador Bridge now stands. In the foreground it depicts the church of the oldest Catholic parish in Ontario, Our Lady of the Assumption, originally a Huron mission established in 1728. This watercolour, drawn by the British military surgeon Edward Walsh, is the last image of Detroit known to exist before the fort and village were totally destroyed by fire in 1805, erasing much of Detroit's eighteenth-century heritage.

16. Douglas, R. Alan. *Uppermost Canada: The Western District and the Detroit Frontier, 1800-1850*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001.

A narrative history of what is now southwestern Ontario, from the beginning of the nineteenth century up to the arrival of the railroads and the “closing” of the frontier period in the region’s history.

17. Saint-Pierre, Téléphore. *Histoire des Canadiens du Michigan et du comté d’Essex, Ontario*. Montréal: Typ. de la “Gazette,” 1895.

The first history of the Francophone population of the Detroit River region on both sides of the border, written by a Quebecois who emigrated to the region in the 1870s.

18. Sugden, John. *Tecumseh: A Life*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1998.

The definitive modern biography of Tecumseh, the Shawnee leader who worked to build a pan-Indian confederation and fought alongside the British in the War of 1812. His death at the Battle of the Thames and later British military reversals at the end of the war ended much effective Indian resistance against American settlement and quashed hopes for a settlement that would create an Indian buffer zone between British and American territories in what are today the states of Ohio and Michigan.

19. St-Denis, Guy. *Tecumseh’s Bones*. Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005.

A fascinating cultural history of the afterlife of Tecumseh, focusing on the different political valences over time associated to finding his remains and on the many failed efforts to erect a monument in his honour, akin to that erected for Isaac Brock, the main British hero of the war.

20. Bibb, Henry, and Charles J. Heglar. *The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb an American Slave*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001.

The autobiography of Henry Bibb, who escaped from slavery in Kentucky to settle in Detroit, only to move to Sandwich (today part of Windsor) for greater safety following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. There he became the publisher of the first black newspaper in Canada, *The Voice of the Fugitive*.

21. Henson, Josiah. *Uncle Tom’s Story of His Life: An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson (Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “Uncle Tom”), from 1789 to 1876*. Edited by John Lobb. London: Christian Age Office, 1876.

A nicely bound edition of the autobiography of Josiah Henson, the main inspiration for Harriet Beecher Stowe’s title character in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Although most people know Henson sought refuge somewhere in Canada, the specific locale of Dresden in Chatham-Kent is less well-known, as is the real-life history of the community for fugitive slaves he founded, the Dawn Settlement. The site of his home is now the Uncle Tom’s Cabin Historic Site.

22. Rhodes, Jane. *Mary Ann Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.

A biography of Mary Ann Shadd Cary, the first female black newspaper editor, who published *The Provincial Freeman* out of Chatham.

23. Hepburn, Sharon A. Roger. *Crossing the Border: A Free Black Community in Canada*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007.

William King, born in Ireland, travelled to the United States to earn his fortune, settled in Louisiana, married the daughter of a wealthy plantation owner, and became a slaveholder. Eventually disillusioned with slavery, King became a Presbyterian minister and collaborated with British authorities to found a freed slave colony in Kent County, Upper Canada called the Elgin Settlement (modern day Buxton, ON). Prior to the American Civil War, its population peaked at 700 residents; Hepburn argues that it was the most successful of the freed slave colonies in southwestern Ontario.

24. Gardiner, Maxine and Scott R. Duquette. *The Tilbury Story: Celebration of a Century 1887-1987*. Tilbury, Ont.: Town of Tilbury, 1987.

This amply-illustrated volume is the history of my own home town, written by my great aunt, the town librarian.

25. Brode, Patrick. *The River and the Land: A History of Windsor to 1900*. Windsor, Ontario: Biblioasis, 2014.

A history of the city of Windsor, focusing particularly on late-nineteenth century developments, including interesting material on railways, Windsor's early electric tramway system, and the growth of Walkerville, the industry town built by the American whiskey baron Hiram Walker later incorporated into Windsor.

26. Cecillon, Jack D. *Prayers, Petitions, and Protests: The Catholic Church and the Ontario Schools Crisis in the Windsor Border Region, 1910-1928*. Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013.

A history of local efforts in Essex County to fight the imposition of Regulation 17, which sought to restrict French-language education in Ontario, focusing particularly on conflicts within the Catholic diocese between Irish and French Catholics which were only managed through papal intervention. One of the products of this conflict were the publicly funded separate-board French-language schools where I received my own education.

27. Abella, Irving M. *On Strike: Six Key Labour Struggles in Canada, 1919-1949*. Toronto: James Lewis & Samuel Publishers, 1974.

This volume in Canadian labour history includes an extensive chapter on the Windsor Ford Strike of 1945, where workers gridlocked the city with car barricades until their demands were met. The strike was eventually resolved and helped produce the Rand Formula which established fairly elected unions collecting dues from all employees as the main partners with employers in Canadian labour relations.

28. Clemens, Paul. *Punching out: One Year in a Closing Auto Plant*. New York: Doubleday, 2011.

An angry and moving account of deindustrialization at the shop-floor level, focusing on the events following the closing of the Budd Plant in Detroit. Clemens, a Detroit native, documents the effect of the closure on workers and the disassembly of the plant for shipping of its equipment to factories in countries where workers can be paid less. The book stands as a poignant document of the current plight of both the American and Canadian working classes, including that of many members of my own family.

Wish list

My hopes for the future growth of the collection involve filling two key lacunae for the twentieth century, probably the weakest period of coverage at present, and also adding a new title to its existing strengths in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Ford, Henry, and Samuel Crowther. *My Life and Work*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1922.

The main autobiography of Henry Ford, together with his opinions on questions ranging from business to unions, charity, and democracy. Ford was a vehement anti-Semite and an adamant adversary of trade unionism but also the founder of “Fordism,” the production of standardized products along assembly lines that can then be purchased by the well-paid workers that manufacture them. This book is in part propaganda but would nonetheless be an inescapable part of my collection: perhaps more than any other single figure in the twentieth century, Ford shaped the destiny of the whole region on both sides of the border.

Sugrue, Thomas J. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Widely accepted as the best account of the decline of Detroit in the postwar period, focusing on racial discrimination in employment, housing segregation, and deindustrialization.

Askin, John. *The John Askin Papers*. Edited by Milo Quaife. 2 vols. Detroit: Detroit Library Commission, 1928.

The papers of the fur trader and land speculator John Askin, often cited in secondary sources to provide portraits of everyday life in the Detroit River region in the decades around 1800.