

# HISTORY MATTERS 2011

## Wrap up Report September-November 2011

*History Matters* is a free public lecture series which aims to develop dialogue between active historians and the broader Toronto community by presenting historical subjects in an accessible and engaging manner. The 2011 series was made possible by a grant from The History Education Network (THEN/HiER).

Now in its second year, *History Matters* is a partnership between Lisa Rumiel (SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow, McMaster University), Jay Young (PhD Candidate in York's Department of History and co-editor of ActiveHistory.ca), and Miriam Scribner (Toronto Public Library Senior Services Specialist). It was marketed as part of TPL's Thought Exchange programs and received wide promotion in the history departments of several area universities.

The 2011 series explored environmental and labour history with a focus on the Toronto area (slightly stretched to include Oshawa and Walkerton). Where possible, we placed the talks in areas that had a connection to the subject matter. It was a tremendous success, with the eight talks drawing 335 people. We hope to curate a third series in fall 2012.

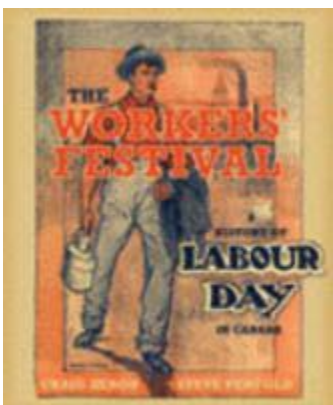
### Highlights and Anticipated Outcomes

The primary goal of *History Matters* is to encourage exchange between academic historians and the broader community in Toronto and beyond. This series touched on vital issues from anti-Semitism, critical labour battles and clashes over urban development, to something as elementary as clean drinking water. As the short synopses below show, the talks spoke to and intersected with the lives of our audiences in important and sometimes moving ways.

**Ruth Frager's** talk on the struggles of Jewish women workers and unions in Toronto's garment industry 100 years ago drew many people whose grandparents had worked in this industry and whose lives had been shaped by these events in important ways. The comments during question period reaffirmed Dr. Frager's emphasis on the poisonous nature of anti-Semitism in Orange Ontario. One woman related that her grandfather had carefully preserved a letter from Eatons refusing him employment because he was of "Hebrew persuasion."



Pickersets, T. Eaton strike, 1919.  
[Listen to podcast of Ruth Frager's talk](#) on Jewish women garment workers.



[The Workers Festival: A History of Labour Day in Canada](#) by Craig Heron and Steve Penfold.



Ashbridge's Marsh looking northeast, circa 1909. City of Toronto Archives, Series 376, File 4, Item 63 (from [Don Valley Historical Mapping Project](#)).



July 2011: Dredging Keating Channel, where the Don enters Lake Ontario. Peter J. Thompson/National Post.

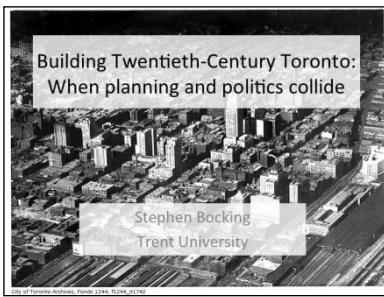
Labour historian **Craig Heron's** presentation was on the history of labour's marching traditions, specifically Labour Day in Toronto. Every year, on the first Monday of September, thousands of unionized workers take part in the Labour Day parade. While it has changed over the years, as Heron noted, there is real continuity with the past, from the union banners to the marching bands and floats, and the march continues to hold a significant place in the local labour movement.

**Lisa Rumiel** made an important local connection with Toronto based-environmental activists in her presentation on the life and work of Rosalie Bertell. Very active in the anti-nuclear movement—as an expert witness in radiation injury cases and doing health studies in communities located in close proximity to nuclear sites, Bertell has lived and worked in Toronto for much of her career. Many of the audience members had participated in the anti-nuclear movement alongside Bertell. This, combined with the saliency of Bertell's anti-nuclear concerns in light of the recent Fukushima nuclear disaster, made for a very lively discussion period.

In "Imagined Futures for the Lower Don," **Jennifer Bonnell** shared some of her extensive research on the Don River's history. At one time the easternmost limit of Toronto, the Don has been a refuge for the city's unemployed and homeless and a dumping ground for its industrial waste. By juxtaposing 19th century plans to reroute the Lower Don against current planning debates over its future, she illustrated how history might be used by urban planners to predict some of the unintended consequences of various proposals. The *Toronto Standard*, a web-based news source, promoted Bonnell's talk and published a fascinating [interview](#) with her.

At **Richard Harris's** talk, "The Making of Dufferin-St. Clair: 1900-1929," the audience peppered him with questions about his research. Almost everyone in the packed room was from the area. They knew its landmarks and history and many contributed their own interesting historical anecdotes. Harris's talk drew on research for his 1996 book, [Unplanned Suburbs: Toronto's American Tragedy, 1900 to 1950](#), which examined the rise and fall of working-class home ownership in Toronto suburbs such as Dufferin/St. Clair.

We were grateful to **Joy Parr**, who travelled from London to discuss her research on Walkerton and the devastating e. coli outbreak that hit in the spring of 2000. The talk was fascinating, and Parr noted that at this talk, as with practically every one she has given, someone from Walkerton attended and joined the discussion. Parr's book [Sensing Changes : Technologies, Environments, and the Everyday, 1953-2003](#) has won two important awards, including the Edelstein Prize (given to the top scholarly book on the history of technology) and the Canada Prize in Social Science.



TPL's Annette Branch in the Junction neighbourhood hosted **Stephen Bocking's** talk on the clashes between politicians and planners over urban development in the city of Toronto. Unsurprisingly, since the city is again consumed by debates over how and by whom Toronto should be developed, Bocking's talk drew a large and diverse crowd, among them an entire class of high school students. Bocking's contention that postwar development in Toronto was driven by private development and individual choice instead of through community consultation inspired lots of discussion and debate among audience members, making this the liveliest discussion period of the series.



The series ended with **Christine McLaughlin's** account of some of the crucial strikes that led to the creation of the United Auto Workers union at General Motors in Oshawa. Her remarks on the ways in which auto baron R. Samuel McLaughlin (no relation) made his mark on the city, using some of the wealth he accrued through the labour of thousands of GM autoworkers, sparked debate. The discussion was greatly enriched by the remarks of the men and women who had worked at GM decades ago, including women now in their late 80s who lived through the landmark 1937 Oshawa strike.

### Other Anticipated Outcomes

By holding the talks at Toronto Public Library, we were able to showcase relevant historical research, and there was real dialogue between historians and the public. Audiences were typically composed of two layers: younger people from area universities, and regular library patrons, some of whom followed the series across the city. The audiences at the talks on Oshawa and on Jewish women workers had large components of people with a direct personal or familial connection to the subject matter.

One part of the project's mandate was to archive the audio files as podcasts so that they will reach larger audiences, including historians and members of the public who could not attend the talks. We were able to do this for five of the eight talks. The podcasts may be found on the [ActiveHistory.ca](http://ActiveHistory.ca) website, which is devoted to helping "connect historians with the public, policy makers and the media." ActiveHistory.ca receives 7,000 independent views per month. If you scroll down to the bottom of this report (page 5), there are direct links to the five podcasts from the series. There are also links to these talks on the [THEN/HiER website](http://THEN/HiER website).

At each talk and in TPL blog postings, we highlighted the podcasts on ActiveHistory.ca, and also pointed to the grant received from THEN/HiER.



April 1937: UAW Local 222 meeting during Oshawa strike. Wayne State Archives.

We know that the series has had a positive impact on our mission to connect the work of academic historians with the public. For example, a group of historians used our model to create [a similar lecture series in Ottawa](#) in early 2011; and Jim Clifford, of the Network in Canadian History and Environment (NiCHE), also organized [a series of talks during Earth Week](#) informed by the *History Matters* model.

While difficult to accurately gauge, we do expect that this series, held in a large public library system with very mixed audiences, will encourage historians to pursue historical writing and communication in ways that are accessible and relevant to non-academic audiences. If ActiveHistory.ca is any type of gauge, there are several young academics who are already engaged in this type of work.

In planning a 2012 series, we need to devote more focused work to the time-consuming work of outreach to high schools. Some was done, but it was only Stephen Bocking's talk at Annette Branch that drew an entire class of high school students. We will also scale back the series to six lectures. Autumn is a very busy time, and this would better suit our capacities.



October 27, Toronto Reference Library: Craig Heron on the history of Labour Day in Toronto.



September 29, Parkdale Branch: Lisa Rumiel on the environmental activism of Rosalie Bertell.

## **Titles, Speakers and Attendance**

Spadina Sweatshops: Jews and Gender in Toronto's Labour Movement, 1900-1939. Ruth Frager (McMaster) Wed. Sept. 14, Lillian Smith 64

[Read about this presentation and listen to podcast.](#)

Three Mile Island to Bhopal: the Life and Work of Environmental Activist Rosalie Bertell. Lisa Rumiel (McMaster) Thurs. Sept. 29, Parkdale 37

[Read about this presentation and listen to the podcast.](#)

Imagined Futures for the Lower Don: A History of Big Ideas for a Small River Jennifer Bonnell (Guelph) Wed. Oct. 12, Riverdale 35  
(no podcast available)

The Making of Dufferin-St. Clair: 1900-1929 Richard Harris (McMaster) Thurs. Oct. 20, 7 pm Dufferin St. Clair 62

[Read about this presentation and listen to the podcast.](#)

Labour on the March: 150 Years of Labour Parades in Toronto Craig Heron (York) Thurs. Oct 27, Toronto Reference Library 24

[Read about this presentation and listen to the podcast.](#)

Learning About e. coli From Walkerton Joy Parr (University of Western Ontario) Wed. Nov. 2, Northern District 18  
(no podcast available)

Building Postwar Toronto: What Roles for Experts and Politicians? Stephen Bocking (Trent) Mon. Nov. 7, Annette 70  
(no podcast available)

Producing History in an Auto Town: Oshawa after World War II Christine McLaughlin (York) Wed. Nov. 16, Pape/Danforth 25

[Read about this presentation and listen to the podcast](#)

**Total attendance 335**

Toronto, 20 December 2011

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Richard Harris at Dufferin/St. Clair Branch.

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