



Tracing the Social and Environmental History of the Don River

D.C. Grose, Taylor Brothers Paper Mill, c.1860. Toronto Public Library, TRL, Historical Picture Collection, B 3-27c.

“the destroying cancer of the port”

“The whole of the marsh to the East, once deep and clear water, is the work of the Don, and in the Bay of York, where now its destructive mouths are turned, vegetation shews [sic] itself in almost every direction, prognosticating the approaching conversion of this beautiful sheet of water into another marshy delta of the Don.”

-Capt. Hugh Richardson, c.1834.

I'd like to begin with a couple of quotations which I think capture the degree of irritation which many 19th century Torontonians felt for the Don River. Here Captain Hugh Richardson has, as historian Henry Scadding noted in 1873, “some hard things [to say] of the river Don.” In his words, the Don was “the destroying cancer of the Port.” His rage was directed towards the Don’s “destructive industry” in carrying great quantities of silt into the harbour and interfering with navigation.



Toronto Port Authority Archives, PC 14/6845

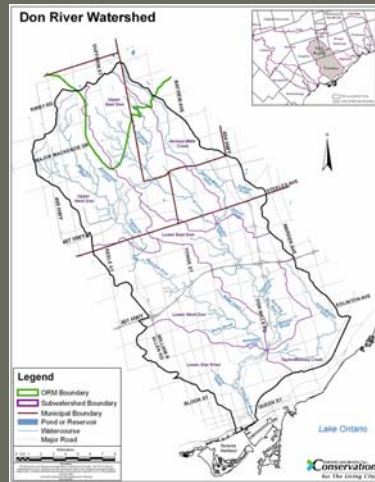
Silt from the Don River entering the harbour through the eastern gap, September 1962.

This image—taken over 100 years later—illustrates the amount of silt carried into the harbour by the Don.



Reflecting on Richardson's words, Scadding concluded that the Don's "true value and capabilities," would not be revealed until "the right men appeared, possessed of the intelligence, the vigour and the wealth equal to the task of bettering nature by art on a considerable scale...." (Henry Scadding, *Toronto of Old*, 1873, pp.559-60). One would never guess that the river, looking at it today, would be the subject of such invective (and such pomp)—but it has been the subject of great expectations, and great disappointment, over the last two hundred years.

The Don Watershed



Courtesy of the Toronto & Region Conservation Authority

- 38 km long, from headwaters in Oak Ridges Moraine to Lake Ontario
- East and west branch of Don meet at “Forks” about 7km north of Lake Ontario;
- a third branch, Taylor-Massey Creek, joins main branches of river at the Forks

My dissertation research is tentatively titled “Imagining the Don: A Social and Environmental History of an Urban River.” By “social and environmental history” I mean: a history of environmental change over time—of the forces at work in shaping and continuing to shape the valley and the life it sustains; and an exploration of the ways people have experienced the river valley over time, and the interventions they have made to shape it to their needs; and finally a history of the river’s responses to those interventions—expected or otherwise (nature as a historical actor). These interventions and responses form a cycle: from the effects that the environment has had on people, to the ways that people in turn have affected their environment, and the responses of that environment to human alterations. The project spans a very broad time frame, from “deep geological time” to the present. My main focus, however, will be on changes made to the river valley in the 19th and 20th centuries.

There are many stories one could tell about the Don. This project will tell only some of them, and likely in different ways. It does not aim to be, for example, a chronological history of the Don, a history of settlement, of industry, or of conservation. All of these endeavours will be present and will inform the story that I tell, but as instruments of change on the river system, rather than subjects in themselves. So, for example: rather than writing a history of settlement, I’m asking how settlement affected the river system.

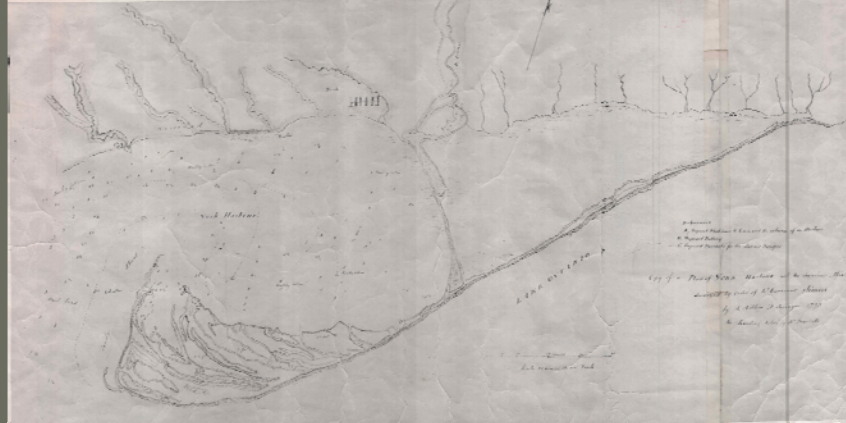
Imagined Futures

- Simcoe and Aitkin, 1793
- McAlpine and Tully, water supply plan, 1887
- Don Improvement Plan, 1880s
- Don Valley Conservation Report, 1950
- Gardiner's superhighway, 1953

The Don has an important place in the collective consciousness of city: as an urban blight and source of shame, but also as place of considerable redemptive power, and, as current plans to naturalize the mouth of the Don demonstrate, a place of “imagined futures”—this has been the case, I shall argue, for 150 years.

Current restoration plans are situated within longer history of “improvements” to the river and its delta; as I shall show, they signal different perspectives of the river and its relationship to the city. We've seen the Toronto Waterfront Plan of 1912 described in these terms in a previous presentation in this series. I'd like to draw attention to some other visions surrounding the Don.

Alexander Aitkin, 1793



Courtesy of University of Toronto Map Library

The “big dreams” for the Don really begin in 1793, when Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe and his surveyor Alexander Aitkin identify an area close to mouth of Don (near Taddle Creek) as the location for the original town of York. Simcoe remarks on the fine oaks in area, and notes that the large white pines further up the Don would make excellent masts for shipbuilding in case of war. As the city develops, however, it “leans away” from the Don and the “pestilential swamp” of Ashbridges Bay, centering west of Taddle Creek. The polluted mouth of the Don encouraged distance, and the steep ravines of the valley posed a significant barrier to development.

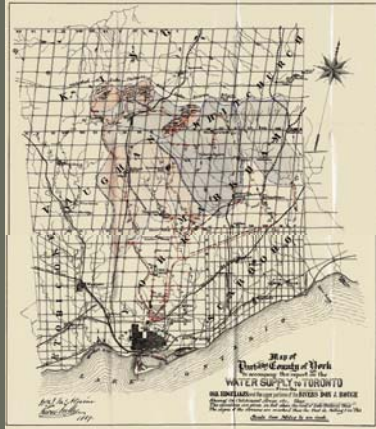
Castle Frank, 1796



Archives of Ontario, F 47-11-1-0-228

For the Simcoe's, their dreams for the Don also lay closer to home. They took a grant of 200 acres along the Don in 1793 and began construction of a summer home, which they name in honour of their 5 year old son Francis. Francis was to inherit the property but died in battle in Spain in 1812. The Simcoes left York in 1796, never to return.

McAlpine and Tully, 1887



- Plan to bring water from Oak Ridges lakes to city via Don and Rouge Rivers
- One of several water supply plans involving Don
- Never adopted

From William J. McAlpine and Kivas Tully, *Report to the City of Toronto Council on the Proposed Water Supply by Gravitation, from the Oak Ridge Lakes and the Rivers Don and Rouge* (Toronto: E.F. Clarke, 1887).

The Don was also subject to a series of plans through the 19th century to use the river as a source or a conduit for drinking water. Most famous of these was McAlpine and Tully's 1887 plan to bring water by gravitation from the Oak Ridges lakes via the Don and Rouge rivers. None of these plans were ever adopted, and the water intake for the city was eventually moved further east (away from wastewater outfalls).

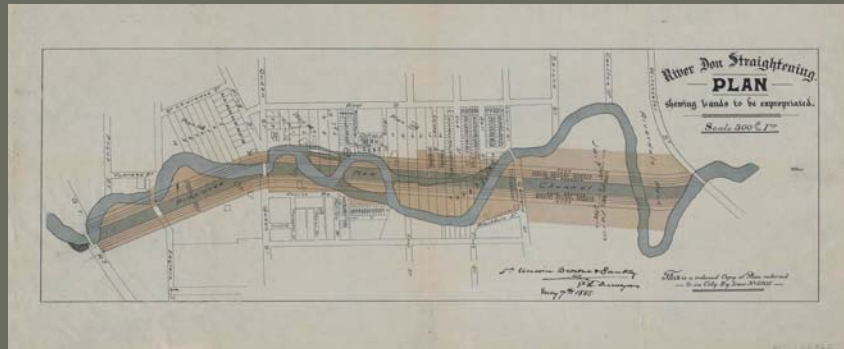
Ashbridge's Bay Marsh, 1909



City of Toronto Archives, Series 376, File 4, Item 63

From the mid-nineteenth century on, the Don is frequently described as an “objectionable stream” and a fitting object for “improvements”—with little recognition, it would seem, of the human role in defiling it in the first place. The river flooded frequently, and the lower river and marsh it fed became heavily polluted with sewage, animal wastes, and industrial effluents. Toronto residents became fearful of the area due to the theory of “miasmas” (which saw “swamp gases” or rotting material as sources of disease). Undoubtedly the stench of the place was reason enough to stay away. While “swamp gases” may not have been making people sick, polluted water certainly was: frequent cholera and diphtheria outbreaks through the last decades of the nineteenth century signalled a very real public health threat.

Don Improvement Plan, 1880s



City of Toronto Archives, Series 725, File 12.

In 1886 a public referendum gave approval to the City to borrow funds to initiate the “Don Improvement Plan.” The Plan saw the river straightened and channelized south of Winchester Street. MacDonald and Manning were contracted to conduct the improvements, promising to complete the work by November 1888. While the improvements were presented to the public as a means of addressing concerns about public health and property damage (through frequent flooding), straightening the Lower River created the prospect for significant economic gain—for the City, through leases of new industrial land, and for rail interests, through the creation of a new eastern access route to the city. The improvement became embroiled in a lengthy dispute between the GTR and CPR rail companies: both claimed right-of-way along the river. The dispute was eventually settled by the Privy Council, which awarded the CPR right-of-way along the east bank of the river, and the GTR along the west bank. By the early 1890s the lower valley had been significantly altered: the meandering river had been redirected into a straight corridor, and the steep hills of the Lower Valley reduced through excavations to fill the former river channel.

Keating Channel was finally completed in 1922. British American Oil refused to surrender the land required to complete the channel on its proposed course, so the channel was forced to make a sharp right turn before spilling into the lake. Reclamation of Ashbridge’s Bay began in the 1890s; most of the draining and filling of the marsh, however, occurred after the Waterfront Plan of 1912 proposed the conversion of the area into industrial lands.

Don Valley Conservation Report, 1950



Courtesy of East York Foundation Collection, Todmorden Mills Museum, City of Toronto

Skipping ahead to the mid-twentieth century, the Don Valley Conservation Report, prepared by the Ontario Department of Planning and Development in 1950, produced a very different vision for the valley. The report's authors saw the Don as a key component of an urban parks system. They proposed a comprehensive clean-up of valley lands, and the creation of a green belt along length of river. This corridor of natural land through the heart of the city, they felt, would provide an important refuge for wildlife and a needed place of respite and recreation for urban dwellers. Parts of their vision were realized. In the years after Hurricane Hazel struck the city in 1954, large stretches of valley lands were acquired by the newly created Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (MTRCA) for recreation and flood control. The Metro government installed a new trunk sewer system in the 1960s that removed from the river system a series of aging and ineffective sewage treatment plants--effectively removing the stench of sewage and increasing the value of the newly created ravine parklands. Much would remain to be done, however, to rehabilitate the lower reaches of the river.

Gardiner's superhighway, 1953



Archives of Ontario, C 30-1, ES14-1-4

“The engineers were saying you couldn't put a six-lane highway in [the narrow valley]. So we'd...say: We'll move the railway over a piece. We'll tear down the hill. We'll shift the river over a piece, then we can have the highway through there.”--Metro Chair F.G. Gardiner, 1961.

According to Timothy Colton's 1980 biography, *Big Daddy: Frederick G. Gardiner and the Building of Metropolitan Toronto*, Metro Chair F.G. Gardiner often spent hours on weekends tramping over prospective road sites, determined to find a way to do what his engineers said was impossible. In a 1961 interview with the *Toronto Star*, Gardiner recalled his determination to see a highway built through the Don Valley: “We'd go into people's back yards and crawl down the hills.... by 5 o'clock we'd begin to know what the engineers knew and what they didn't know. The problem was that there were two big hills and a narrow-gutted valley. There were railways in it and a river. The engineers were saying you couldn't put a six-lane highway in it. So we'd have a look at [it and] say: We'll move the railway over a piece. We'll tear down the hill. We'll shift the river over a piece, then we can have the highway through there. That's what was done years later.” (Colten, 62) The Don Valley Parkway was approved in 1956; work began in 1958, and by 1964 the Parkway had been constructed from the Gardiner Expressway to Bloor Street (it reached Highway 401 in 1967). This image shows the Don Valley Parkway under construction near the Prince Edward Viaduct in July 1960.

Behind these imagined futures—some realized, others not—lie different ways of perceiving the river valley and its role in the city's development. Such conflicting perspectives run in tension throughout history of valley. One such conflict is the difference of perceiving valley as *corridor* (for wastes, rail, highways, etc) versus as a *place* (for recreation, reflection, restoration, etc.). Another key tension emerging from my research that has also informed the physical development of the valley is the tendency to view the river and its valley as a receptacle for urban wastes (what I'm calling a “repository for undesirables”), versus the tendency to perceive the valley as a “beauty spot” and place for moral regeneration. I'll discuss these conflicting perspectives in the slides that follow.

Ravines as barriers and sinks

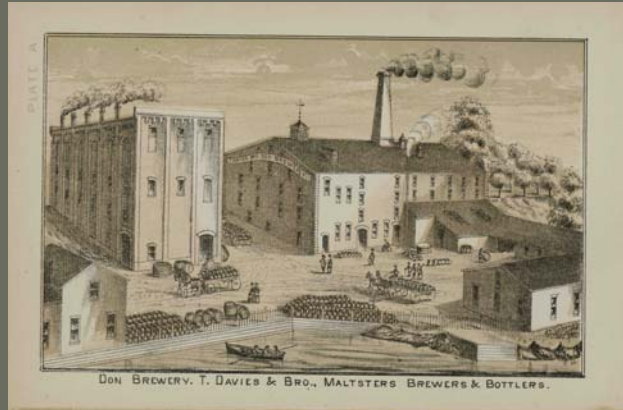


City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1231, Item 28.

Don River embankment parallel to Pape Avenue looking north to the Taylor residence. December 30, 1931.

Like other ravines around the world, the Don Valley has long been used as a dumping ground for urban refuse—a convenient “repository” for urban wastes. Its topography has created a natural “sink”—a convenient space to fill. Filling also removed barriers to development. (Ravines were used as “levelling up places” until Toronto’s first sanitary landfill sites were created in the 1950s). Topography played a role, but also *location*. The Lower Don until the 1880s formed the eastern boundary of city; as such, it became (like the waterfront) a “space on the margins”—a space to put things out of the public eye, and to receive undesirables from the centre.

Don Brewery, 1877



City of Toronto Archives, Series 496, Sub-series 4, File 3

The river valley was used as a dumping place for wastes from the early days of settlement. Early mills, breweries, tanneries located along river for water and power; the river's ability to carry away wastes was also a significant benefit. This image shows the Don Brewery, established in 1834 immediately west of Lower Don on River Street north of Queen. The brewery was purchased by the Davies family in 1849, and operated until 1901.



Toronto Public Library, TRL, Historical Picture Collection, 916-2-1

Detail from “City of Toronto, 1893”. Note industry along Lower Don: oil refinery east of bend, Gooderham & Worts cattle sheds on NW bank near mouth.

From the 1830s on, wastes from the Gooderham and Worts’ cattle sheds near the mouth of the Don contaminated the area around mouth of Don and Ashbridge’s Bay Marsh. The cattle sheds are visible on this image of the City in 1893, on the northwest bank of the river near its mouth. Street sewers constructed in the city largely in the 1870s and 80s carried raw sewage east into the Don and south into the lake, adding to an already dangerous cocktail of contaminants. In addition, increasingly noxious industry came to locate (often relocating from other areas) around the Lower Don in late 19th and early 20th centuries. Examples include oil refineries (among them British American Oil, which established near the mouth of the Don in 1908); abattoirs (such as William Davies Co. Pork Packing Plant, which relocated to Front Street at the Don River in 1879); rendering plants and tanneries. Nuisance and (by the early twentieth century) zoning by-laws played a role here: noxious industries and “hazardous materials” storage were pushed to edges of settlement (e.g. lumber, coal, oil, etc that posed a fire hazard). The area around the lower Don had long used for hazardous materials storage: in the early 1800s a powder magazine on the peninsula near the mouth of Don kept flammable material away from the homes of early Toronto residents.



Pollution on
surface of Don
River near
Pottery Road,
June 1962.

PC 13/1, vol. 14, p.12, Toronto Port Authority Archives

Pollution from industrial effluents remained a serious problem well into the twentieth century. This image shows phosphate pollution on the surface of the Don River in the 1960s.



Photo: Boris Spremo, 2008

Dumping waste snow in valley, March 2008.

The Don Valley continues to be used as a repository for urban wastes. This image shows waste from 2008's record snowfalls being dumped in the valley south of the viaduct. Laced with salt from the city's roads and driveways, snow dumps contribute to high salinity in the Lower River--a significant source of stress for aquatic life.

Joseph Tyler

“His abode on the Don was an excavation in the side of the steep hill, a little way above the level of the river bank. The flue of his winter fire-place was a tubular channel, bored up through the clay of the hill-side.... To the south of his cave he cultivated a large garden, and raised among other things, the white sweet edible Indian corn, a novelty here at the time; and very excellent tobacco” (Scadding, *Toronto of Old*, 228-9).

Another pattern emerging from my research is the nature of river valley as a repository for *human* undesirables. Today’s homeless encampments along the Lower River reflect a very long history of homelessness in valley. Evidence exists of squatters living along the Don as early as the 1830s. Here Henry Scadding talks about Joseph Tyler, a veteran of the American Revolutionary War who lived in a cave in the Lower Don Valley in the mid-nineteenth century.

House of Refuge, 1860



Toronto Public Library, Historical Picture Collection, B 4-66b

- Provided shelter for the "vagrant, the dissolute, and for idiots"
- Also used as isolation hospital after 1870s; building demolished 1894
- Institution renamed Riverdale Hospital in 1957

The valley also housed "institutionalized undesirables." Examples include the House of Refuge, established in 1860; the Don Jail (1864), and the Swiss Cottage Hospital--an isolation hospital for smallpox victims that operated on Winchester Street in the 1920s.

Roma families, 1910s-20s



Roma woman
carrying water,
Humber River,
September 1918

City of Toronto Archives Fonds 1548, Series 393, Item 15386.

This photo shows a Roma woman carrying water near the Humber River in 1918. While I haven't been able to find any similar images for the Don, local sources suggest that Roma families also camped in the Don Valley in the same period.

Cave & Shack Dwellers, 1930s



Images courtesy of the East York Foundation Collection, Todmorden Mills Museum, City of Toronto.

During the Depression, unemployed men formed a “jungle” of shanties on the Don flats; some took shelter within the Don Valley Brick Works. These images are from the East York Foundation Collection at the City of Toronto’s Todmorden Mills Museum.

Todmorden POW Camp, 1940s



Images courtesy of the East York Foundation Collection, Todmorden Mills Museum, City of Toronto.

Other “undesirables” in the valley included German prisoners-of-war, interned in a labour camp at Todmorden Mills during WWII. Mostly merchant seamen, the prisoners worked at the nearby Toronto Brick Company. Few images exist to document the camp’s existence. In the image on the left, the tents of the camp are barely visible at the top of the image. The image on the right is a “mental map” of the Todmorden area, sketched by a local resident in the 1990s. The map notes the location of the internment camp (top right).

Throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, the valley also had a certain reputation for crime and lawlessness. The murder of MPP John Sheridan Hogan in December 1859 is illustrative. Hogan was apparently murdered on the Queen Street bridge and thrown into the river. His body was found many months later, and the Brooks Bush Gang, a group of criminals known to frequent the Don woods, was blamed for his murder. Gang member James Brown was hanged in 1862.

Valley Bucolic



Archives of Ontario C 127-2-0-5-6

Don Valley
Bridge and
teamster,
early 1900s

In direct tension with notions of the valley as a “place for undesirables” is the perception of the valley as a vital pocket of wilderness in the city—from bucolic rural setting and “beauty spot” in the language of the mid-20th century to vital ecological corridor in the late 20th century. The following images illustrate this view of the valley as a bucolic retreat and place of recreation.

Elizabeth Simcoe: Playter's bridge, 1796



Archives of Ontario, F 47-11-1-0-233

Recognition of the river's beauty began with its earliest recorded observers. Above is Elizabeth Simcoe's painting of the first bridge over the Don--a fallen butternut tree on the Playter property.



City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 7339

Boys swimming
at the Sandy
Banks
swimming hole,
1912.

Ernest Thompson Seton saw the valley as a place for healthy recreation and moral regeneration for urban dwellers; he based the location of “Glenyan” in his *Two Little Savages* (1903) on a wooded site along Mud Creek in the Lower Don Valley.



City of Toronto Archives, Series 80, File 8, Item 1

Charles Sauriol relaxing in front of his cottage at the Forks of the Don, July 1935.

Finally, the work of Charles Sauriol (1904-1995) and the conservation movement surrounding the Don from the 1940s on saw the transformation in perception of urban ravines from dumping spaces and barriers to development into valuable urban green spaces.

River as agent



City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 1280

Don River
flood north of
Bloor Street,
1918

Moving throughout these different perceptions is the story of the river itself. The Don has a (very) long history of floods, ice jams, siltation, and other events that have hampered human industries along the river. The shifts in planning and policy that result from these events illustrate the feedback loop from human adjustments to river responses and back to human adjustments. Such adaptations have taken many forms over the years. In the early nineteenth century, they materialized in efforts to build bridges higher and stronger; as the century progressed, greater attention was given to flood planning and diversion strategies (such as the Don Improvement Plan); after 1954, the damage caused by Hurricane Hazel resulted in a complete halt to development (residential and otherwise) in the valley and the acquisition of valley lands as “drainage corridors” and recreation spaces, together with more intensive flood control measures (the construction of G. Ross Lord Dam on West Don, etc). Those who have been attentive to these responses over time (and whose lives or livelihoods had any dependence on the river’s condition) have seen the river as a “force of nature” not entirely containable by human actions, and in later years, as a living demonstration of the principles of ecology—a constant reminder for people living around it that upstream activities have downstream effects.



City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 5028

Clearing ice from railroad tracks, Don Valley, ca.1910.



City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1231, Item 1189

Don River flood south of Wilton Avenue. March 12, 1920

In conclusion, this project aims to provide a sense of the river's past over a broader time frame, and bring to people's awareness the fact that the river wasn't always as it appears today. It also aims to highlight the larger themes and patterns at work in the river's present: the legacy of "imagined futures" for the river valley; and the competing perceptions of the valley as a "space for undesirables" and a space for regeneration, reflection and recreation.