

# **Clothing as a Gateway to Understanding Canadian Landscapes**

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## **Abstract:**

Within the dress collection of the City of Toronto Museum & Heritage Services is a group of some one hundred items of clothing associated with the Wadsworth family of Weston, Ontario. In the first half of the nineteenth century the Weston was a small village on the Humber River, to the north-west of Toronto. The Wadsworths were a family who came to Canada from England and purchased a watermill in the village.

The Wadsworths offer a classic tale of emigration and settlement in pre-confederation Canada but how far can this group of clothes help to enrich an understanding of the cultural landscape which they occupied? What does the clothing tell us about clothing cultures in nineteenth-century Upper Canada and about communications between Canada and England? How do these clothes help to construct a picture of life in nineteenth-century Weston? By exploring these questions this article hopes to offer a case study for the use of dress in interpreting an historic landscape.

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## **Wadsworth Clothing Collection**

Among the many hundreds of thousands of objects cared for in the City of Toronto's museum collections is a group of clothing associated with the Wadsworth family of Weston, a village on the banks of the Humber river, now part of the Greater Toronto Area. Among the some hundred items, all of which date from the nineteenth century, there are chemises, undersleeves, collars and children's clothing, along with nine dresses and five men's shirts. Can this group of clothing help to give us any sense of the cultural landscape with which they are associated?

## **The physical landscape of the Humber**

The Humber river is one of two main rivers that flow on either side of Toronto. While the Don River flows down the east side of Toronto into Lake Ontario the Humber flows down the west side. The watershed of the Humber fans out across the top of Toronto, collecting water from about 750 creeks and tributaries.

The Humber River had importance long before the European settlers arrived in North America; Huron and Petun First Nations had established fishing camps in the valley as many as 12,000 years ago. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it became known as the Carrying Place, a portage and canoe route that took traders, explorers and missionaries northwards from Lake Ontario to Lake Simcoe. Etienne Brule, colleague of the Frenchman Samuel de Champlain who founded Quebec city in 1608, was the first explorer to see Lake Ontario and he travelled south down the Humber in 1615.

The first half of the nineteenth century saw a new phase in the history of the Humber. It was now in a territory controlled by the British called Upper Canada, and Upper Canada's First Lieutenant Governor, John Simcoe, established Toronto as an administrative and social

centre for the province. He also renamed Toronto York, after George III's second son Frederick Duke of York, and the Toronto River Humber after the river in his homeland.

Fur trader Alexander Henry wrote about the landscape surrounding the Humber in 1765 "At [Lake Simcoe's] farther end we came to the carrying-place of Toronto. ... The woods and marshes abounded with mosquitoes. ... The whole country was a thick forest, through which our only road was a foot-path." (Carruthers et al. 2002, 48-9) This landscape was soon radically altered by the Europeans who began clearing the land as soon as they arrived.

Upon his arrival in York, Simcoe was keenly aware of the need for a lumber mill and flour mill in the area. He had constructed a sawmill on the west bank of the Humber river in 1793. This mill was followed by a series of mills along the banks of the river, which took advantage of the good water flow and ready supply of trees to turn into lumber. The rapid clearing of the land increased the effects of frequent flooding regularly destroying settlements and the mills built along the banks. By the second half the nineteenth century the land surrounding the Humber had largely been deforested and most of the mills had turned to steam power.

### **The familial landscape**

One of the existing flour mills along the Humber was taken over by the Wadsworths in 1828. The Wadsworths were a pair of brothers who came to North America from Britain. Unusually they had more of a background in milling than many of their counterparts. Charles Wadsworth (1801-1867) had begun an apprenticeship in the grain and milling trades. William Rein (1803-1890) was trained for a business career. As one author said of them "The combination of Charles' knowledge of milling and William's business experience led to rapid development of the mill's potential". (Fisher 1985, 148) For the first year they also worked alongside their men, further expanding their experience and learning about the particular challenges of operation in this new Canadian environment.

The mill that the Wadsworths operated lay up the river from the mill established by Lieutenant Governor Simcoe and by 1841 the name of the settlement surrounding the mill was changed to Weston, after the town of Weston-Super-Mare in England, a measure of the brothers' impact on the area. Their mill business was one of the more successful along the Humber and unlike many of their neighbours they avoided overexpansion, although they were able to enlarge their flour mill, dig a new millrace and add a saw mill and distillery in 1840. Wood from the Wadsworth mill was used in building the grand Dundurn Castle in Hamilton, to the west of Toronto, and William Rein Wadsworth was able to send his oldest son to Upper Canada College, the most prestigious teaching establishment in Toronto.

Although Charles Wadsworth had only one son, William Rein and his wife had seven children, all but one of whom survived well into adulthood. The oldest of the children was a daughter called Elizabeth (1834-1916) and who, as a girl on the cusp of her teenage years was sent to live with her aunt, Elizabeth Richardson, in Essex, south-east England. It seems likely that a beautifully made slender brown silk dress in the collection, with detachable sleeves and matching cape, was worn by the young Elizabeth (fig. 1).



Fig. 1:  
1974.107.14 a-d Brown silk girls dress, with removable sleeves and matching cape, early 1840s.

A number of letters from the Wadsworth family survive, including a group of twenty-three letters from William Rein to his daughter, whom he called Betsy. They offer a valuable insight into his affection and aspirations for his oldest child, although as this quotation demonstrates she was regularly called upon to provide her father with information on grain prices in England, "...I may say I was pleased you thought of giving me the price of wheat at Bury Market, and ask you to reserve a corner in your letters for the same purpose". (10 November 1844. Avigdor and Reed 2007, 34) One imagines that this was not a thrilling task for Betsy!

### **The sartorial landscape**

To consider the sartorial landscape of the Wadsworths I would like to use the example of another dress in the collection. It is a woman's dress of a plain weave green changeable silk, with a woven stripe formed from rows of small joined squares (fig. 2). The dress has a front opening bodice with long sleeves, full at the wrist. The shoulders are covered in small pleated epaulettes and pleats down the front of the bodice are gathered into shirring at the waist level. The armholes and the waist are piped and the full skirt is attached to the bodice by a series of sharp pleats. Both the bodice and skirt are lined, although the skirt has a coarser linen than the bodice. As I will discuss below it is clear that the dress has been altered, significantly affecting the shape of the dress front.



Fig. 2:  
1974.107.531 Changeable silk dress

The bodice style, sleeve shape, the piping and the fullness of the skirt all suggest that the dress might have originally have been made in the second half of the 1840s. A Canadian portrait of Miss Amelia Boddy by John Bell Smith dates from 1845 (Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada Acc. No. 1118) and shows the sitter in a dress with a similar sleeve shape and panel of shirring at the front, although here it is deeper and finishes in a pronounced point. One of the letters from William Rein to his daughter, dated 1844, asks her to ensure "When your uncle returns I wish him to bring for your mother a handsome shawl and silk dress. Your Aunt Richardson will select them". (15 June 1844. Avigdor and Reid 2007, 33) Two shawls from the Wadsworth family now form part of the Royal Ontario Museum collection, and one of them might be the shawl mentioned in this letter. Could the dress also be the one referred to in the letter? The style seems a little later than the date of the letter and while it might have once been a best dress (the word handsome in the letter helps to emphasis that this outfit was not intended for everyday) in reality there is far too little information to know for sure.

It is clear that this green silk dress has been much worn. As well as extensive staining under the arms, and the extreme fragility of the silk in the front sections of the bodice, the hem shows obvious signs of wear and repair, including the water staining and a rather crude repair. This stands in contrast to many of the other dresses in the collection associated with the Wadsworths, including a brown printed wool dress, with elaborate bands of ruched and scalloped decoration (fig. 3).



Fig. 3:  
1963.182.1 Sleeve of printed wool dress, with scalloped decoration.

As well as the wear and tear on the green dress it is clear that it has been altered, to change its appearance. This is most obvious in the area around the front of the waist. There are clear diagonal lines of stitch holes in the skirt suggesting that it had originally been arranged to accommodate a bodice with a prominent point (fig. 4). However there are also a series of stitch holes half way up the skirt (although they end abruptly at seams) suggesting that some applied decoration was removed from the dress.



Fig. 4:  
Detail of the waist of 1974.107.531; a diagonal row of stitch holes in the pleats of the skirt can be seen at the lower left.

How far are such alterations typical of Canadian dress? For new settlers in Canada there was soon the realisation that their new home made practicality a key concept, especially in terms of clothing. In 1860 *The Canadian Settlers' Guide*, advised "The Farmer's wife in Canada has little need of such luxuries [silk stockings and satin shoes], they are out of place". (*Canadian Settlers' Guide* 1860, 9)

While the adaptation, alteration and reuse of clothing was a common practice at this time in many parts of the world it is clear from accounts of Europeans who had moved to Canada that making the most of clothing was perhaps even more pronounced in their new country. Anne Langton, a gentlewoman, whose straitened family finances encouraged her to move with her parents and brother to Canada, captured something of this when she wrote in 1842 "...a better gown here lasts for years..." (Langton 1950, 206) Kathleen Brett, the Royal Ontario Museum curator responsible for the 1967 exhibition of Canadian dress *From Modesty to Mod* caught the same spirit when she wrote of the many altered dresses with which she had had to work 'The Canadian woman's determination to make a dress do for as long as possible is both a delight and a trial to the costume historian'. (Brett 1967, 6) Clearly a curator speaking from bitter experience!

So, how far is such an altered and much worn garment likely to have been worn by a member of the Wadsworth family? The most probable candidate as a wearer seems to be William Rein's wife, Sarah Bird (1812-1879). By the time she might have worn this dress, she would have given birth to most, if not all of her seven children. Its relatively large waist (84cm or 33") seems more appropriate for a mother than her teenage daughter.

While the dress has been markedly altered it clearly began life as a fashionable item, to be much admired. Even if life in their new homeland was strange and more challenging the remarks of those newly settled in Canada frequently demonstrate that fashion and being fashionable were important concepts. Another quotation, again from Anne Langton, suggests the range of people who were able to discern when clothing was less than fashionable; here she is receiving fashion advice from her brother! "from John's observations last Sunday, and my mother's to-day, I find I look somewhat too simply dressed and unfashionable amongst them. I have no objection to improve in the latter respect as I wear out my present stock and get more knowledge of what ought to be". (14 June 1840. Langton 1950, 154) A quotation from Susanna Moodie, well known for her book *Roughing it in the Bush*, which offered an honest though often judgemental picture of the many challenges faced by new settlers, offers an added layer to the importance of fashion in the country, demonstrating plainly its role in the social displays and jealousies which Moodie portrays so unfavourably against her rose-tinted memories of home." There is a very little of the social, friendly visiting among the Canadians which constitutes the great charm of home. Their hospitality is entirely reserved for those monster meetings in which they vie with each other in displaying fine clothes and costly furniture." (Moodie 1871, chapter 9)

A portrait of Johanna Robinson Hazen by the American painter Albert Gallatin Holt (Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, Acc. No. 34981) which dates from the year of her marriage 1852 to the mayor of Saint John, New Brunswick, perhaps offers a sense of what Sarah might have looked like when she wore the green dress in its original state. As the wife of a successful, prosperous merchant miller, Sarah Wadsworth would certainly have possessed and worn silk dresses that followed the fashionable line. It is perhaps not difficult to imagine her however altering the dress so that she could continue to wear and make the most of this garment. As Sarah's social position wouldn't necessitate the high level of wear exhibited by the dress it perhaps suggests that she continued to wear for sentimental reasons, or because it particularly appealed to her, a favourite best dress.

The question of where this dress was made is another interesting contextual layer to consider. William Rein Wadsworth would have made regular journeys from his mill in Weston to Toronto. He would need to purchase items for the store which he ran, as well as selling items brought to him in payment for goods and services. While Toronto was still a relatively young city in the 1840s and 1850s it was growing and changing rapidly. By 1850 the population was some 30,000. The city was fast shedding its largely military roots to become a modern metropolis with a wide range of goods and services for sale.

In 1846 Wadsworth wrote to Betsy "You ask me if we have gas in Toronto. Yes, miles of it and a magnetic telegraph too, enabling us to communicate with New York in a few seconds..." (23 November 1846. Avigdor and Reid 2007, 46)

Mary Holford wrote of the City in the early 1830s, when York reverted to the name of Toronto, that the 1834 directory listed about five times as many tailors as dressmakers and over ten times as many shoemakers. (Holford 1986/87, 4) However, the dry goods stores were now well stocked with dress lengths, dress accessories and trimmings. All of these staples and luxury goods became increasingly available to country merchants and others buying in Toronto for the trade throughout southern and western Ontario. Dressmakers in the expanding city may well have subscribed to *Godey's Lady's book* (although it was

expensive at \$3 a year), a monthly American publication for women which started in 1830 and contained a number of fashion plates in each edition.

Nevertheless Canada relied heavily on imports. This was certainly true for most fabrics. Woollen mills were not really established on the Humber until the middle of the century and the first silk was not produced in Canada until the establishment of Belding Paul and Co in Montreal in 1876. Many writers like Susanna Moodie attest to the importance of packages of clothing from the home country, whether they were welcomed with open arms as a kind and generous gift from family, or seen as hand-me-downs and a necessary evil in reduced circumstances as Moodie viewed many of the parcels from her high-minded sister.

While Wadsworth's letter to his daughter asking her to supervise a dress for her mother demonstrates that these familial connections were important for the Wadsworths too in gaining items of clothing it is not necessarily the case that he was asking Betsy for a finished dress for her mother; this would have resulted in her knowing her mother's size and imparting this information to a dressmaker in England. It seems far more likely that the reference to a dress was for the fabric to make up a dress. Either this could have been done by a dressmaker in Toronto, or it might have been that Sarah Wadsworth made it up at home; the journal of the teenage Sophia Macnab, who lived at Dundurn Castle often makes mention of the garments that she is making up for herself and her family. (for example MacNab 1968, 29, 56)

## **Conclusions**

As we all know the documentary record rarely perfectly matches the material culture record. While there are still many gaps in the tale which this group of Wadsworth clothing has to tell, I feel that it offers a powerful example of the possibility of making connections between a physical landscape, the people who lived there and the objects that filled their lives. I hope that I will have the opportunity to research this wonderful group of clothing further and find avenues for exhibiting them so that members of the public have the chance to appreciate the stories of physical, familial and cultural Canadian landscapes which they have to tell.

## **Acknowledgments**

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