

PRECONCEPTION AND PREJUDICE IN “BANDMASTER WHEELER AND BOY’S BAND, COMMUNITY MOVEMENT, PEMBROKE”

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(see images after text)

If you look carefully at the face of the bandmaster in the center of picture, you will notice the smooth cleanliness of his cheeks. Shaven to perfection, his face was probably scraped over by a large, unprotected blade we now fearfully call “cut-throat razor,” but which has been called for centuries nothing else but “razor” until American entrepreneur King Camp Gillette (1855–1932) succeeded in convincing men to switch to a safer disposable blade implement during the First World War. By the time this photograph of the Pembroke Boys’ Band was taken (1913), Gillette’s product had yet to take the world market by storm.²

Though believable, and perhaps even truthful, the above historical knowledge is mostly unsatisfactory. The historian marveling at his ability for such context-aware deductions might receive appreciative nods from the collectors of barbershop paraphernalia, but the rest of the audience will be pressing him to answer a more urgent question about this picture. What this question is, and why it matters, will determine in large part the inquiry that the scholar will endeavour to complete, and also why an audience will want to listen to it. At the same time, this inquiry will put aside a large collection of data that would otherwise find its place in a different narrative by a different historian. The following essay on the picture “Bandmaster Wheeler and Boy’s Band, Community Movement, Pembroke” from Library and Archives Canada tries to follow the current by offering an explanation of this picture’s striking racial content, while swimming upriver to assess with the help of German philosopher Hans-

Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) why this question interests us more than the razor used to shave Wheeler.

Framed according to the necessity of laying out a wide rectangle of nineteen people in three rows within the more square area of 8 x 10 inch film contact printed on silver gelatin paper, the photograph presents us with the group portrait of a small-town Ontario brass band, its leader surrounded by the young players of various brass and percussion instruments. Ample space is left at the top due to the conflicting ratios of subject and medium, and is filled with a vague evocation of theatre decoration by the studio backdrop. Inscriptions of the band's name, its leader, year, and photographic studio are laid out at the bottom using stenciled impressions.³ The faces are alternately serious, confident, welcoming or uncertain. Sartorial uniformity is subtly broken by the tilted bandmaster's hat. Mounted in heavy, decorated cardboard, this is a keepsake from a youth club that was most likely given to all members of the band, as the inscription "Geo Doering" at the back attests—the latter pointing to George Doering, recorded as cornet player and president of the club.⁴ The photograph's private circulation, attested by the fingerprints at the back of the picture, rendered unnecessary a list of the band members' names, until the picture became a commodity at trade shows. It was acquired by a Carleton University professor, and then donated to the Portrait Gallery of Canada.⁵ This is a band looking like so many in North America at the time, one administered by religious and community authorities for the purpose of encouraging "youths at risk," as we say today, to do the right thing.⁶ However, despite the predominance of such bands at that time, few of them are pictured in Library and Archives Canada, where most brass bands are instead military corps.⁷ The inclusion of this picture in the national archive rests instead on the following mystery: Why is there a Black man in the middle of so many White children in 1913?

Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical project centers on a criticism of methodology in the human

sciences. Against the pretension to objectivity held by those who want to rigorously evacuate subjective biases in their analysis of the human fact, he reaffirms the importance of taste, judgments, and preconceptions in the creation of knowledge.⁸ Far from arguing an “anything goes” perspective of subjectivism, his criticism of the ways in which we construct our understanding proposes to render visible the motivations of our research instead of hiding them behind the veil of objectivity. In essence, when we try to understand, we are trying to grasp something that has grasped us first, and this is nowhere else more evident than in the case of artworks.⁹ To understand works of art is therefore a self-encounter.¹⁰ In the present case, achieving such understanding involves looking at the preconceptions, both mine and those I assume to be Library and Archives Canada’s, that inform the search for an answer to the question: Why is this Black man there? The preconceptions could be summed up as: “Canada is today a multicultural country that prides itself on its peaceful ethnic diversity, but because we understand the current situation as the result of social progress, it follows that the earlier we go back in time, the less tolerance we should find.” I do not mean by this that I believe outright the idea that previous generations were intolerant, whereas mine is. Nor do I believe that the archivist who acquired this picture bought wholesale into this narration. Rather, I propose that this is a story that functions as a reference point for why such a picture is striking today, and that gives meaning to its acquisition, regardless of one’s agreement with its tenor: as Gadamer argues, we are more subjected by history than we can subject it.¹¹

Despite all my research, I do not know who this man was, where he came from, what else he did in Pembroke, whether he was the only Black in town, whether he left descendants (he left none in Pembroke), and whether he ever suffered from racial prejudice.¹² However, the information I found along the way leads me to believe that if we should ever achieve some understanding of this photograph, it will be through making sense of the motives for our inquiries into the past, and why they

failed, rather than the discovery of an objective answer to our question.¹³ In the alternative story I want to weave here of this picture, race slips out of focus to the profit of community life.

The city of Pembroke began as a lumbering settlement in 1828 near the junction of the Muskrat River and the Ottawa River. Successive settlements on either side of the Muskrat were eventually incorporated in 1856 for the purpose of maintaining a stable police force, the new entity later achieving town status in 1877 and city status in 1971.¹⁴ It is therefore both symbolic and practical that its City Hall be located near a bridge over the Muskrat. In 1900, the nearby Petawawa military base was created, and Pembroke has been home to many service men and women ever since. In 1912 the growing population led to the creation of its Public Library, funded in part by the Carnegie trust.¹⁵ Despite being a lumbering site, Pembroke and the surrounding Renfrew County also saw a fair amount of agricultural development, proportional to its importance in supporting the people involved in the timber-based economy of the region. As Irish, Scottish, French, English, German, Polish, or Ukrainian immigrants coming to Canada in the mid-19th century were unable to occupy the better soils of southern Ontario, already allotted to Loyalists and their descendants, they made do with the thinner acidic soils of the Ottawa Valley.¹⁶

As historian Robin Winks notes, despite all the various cases, there is no clear pattern of racial relationships in Canada: in one city, the mayor would rise to the defense of an accused Black man, while fifty miles away it would be illegal for him to share a meal with the other race.¹⁷ In those days, Winks reminds us, “niggering” was still part of the lexicon of lumbering, but in a lumbering city like Pembroke, Blacks were not the only “niggers.”¹⁸ We must look elsewhere for a way to anchor this picture: in the Community Movement itself.

The *Pembroke Standard* daily newspaper recurrently featured reports of the activities of the Community Movement, which organized activities of all sorts for boys and girls, including music, sports, fairs, the Barriefield Camp Cadets, and the Boys' Band. The purpose behind all of these activities is neatly summed up in their use of the money for the first concert of the Boys' Band: to "make boys and girls happier, healthier and better able to take their own part in the battle for life."¹⁹ In other words, they were dealing with the less fortunate kids who may see their opportunities in life thwarted by the upheavals of the world around them.²⁰ The story of the Boys' Band, established in 1912 with a Mr. Alcorn as leader, truly begins with their initial concert of August 14, 1913 at the Cadets sporting event "to the entire and lasting confusion of those skeptics who have said that it has no existence except in the imagination of some confiding and simple persons."²¹ Subsequently, after at least another recorded concert on August 19, the election of September 3 confirmed Alex F. Wheeler as Band Instructor, and George Doering, cornet player, as President and Band Leader.²² Finally, their September 5 Casino Matinee earned them a good reputation and \$20 that would go towards the acquisition of their uniforms.²³ A plain-clothes picture of the band, also dated from 1913, would therefore represent the band at an earlier, less complete stage of its existence as it was playing to raise money. Luckily for us, this picture was also issued as a postcard, and someone took care of recording the names of the band member on its back. And so we learn from someone who was more intimate with him that the band knew Alex F. Wheeler as Frank, and what George Doering looked like.

This writer has looked for the story of racial prejudice in Pembroke, and found nothing to answer the enigma of Alex(ander) Francis (Frank) Wheeler, bandmaster of the Doerings and Hamiltons, Schultzes and McGaugheys, Smithes and Kossatzes.²⁴ It is perhaps because he was equally displaced from the norm as the immigrant sons he led to the parade on Pembroke's main street near City Hall, and because in that town being Black was perhaps not so odd for its population, so that he could fit well enough into

the city's fabric to remain unrecorded.²⁵ As Gadamer reminds us, preconceptions are fundamental to initiate understanding, but as we progress, we must revise it, and the racial content that has justified this picture's entry into the national archive is representative of our own current biases rather than of the picture.

Although the meaning of an artwork is not bound by its author's intention, the 1913 context of signification helps us understand in what ways the meaning of this picture has changed until now, and this shift in meaning must be constitutive of how we now understand it, rather than be eclipsed to the profit of an imagined conflict between Us and the Other on the basis of skin colour.



Bandmaster Wheeler and Boy's Band Community Movement, 1913

Neapole & Harding (Canadians)

Silver gelatin, 19.0 x 24.4 cm on support 30.0 x 35.0 cm

Library and Archives Canada / MIKAN 3915837

<http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3915837>.



Boy's Brass Band, Community Movement, 1913

Neapole & Harding (Canadians)

Silver gelatin, 18.0 x 22.8 cm on support 30.0 x 35.0 cm.

Library and Archives Canada / MIKAN 3915867

<http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3915867>.

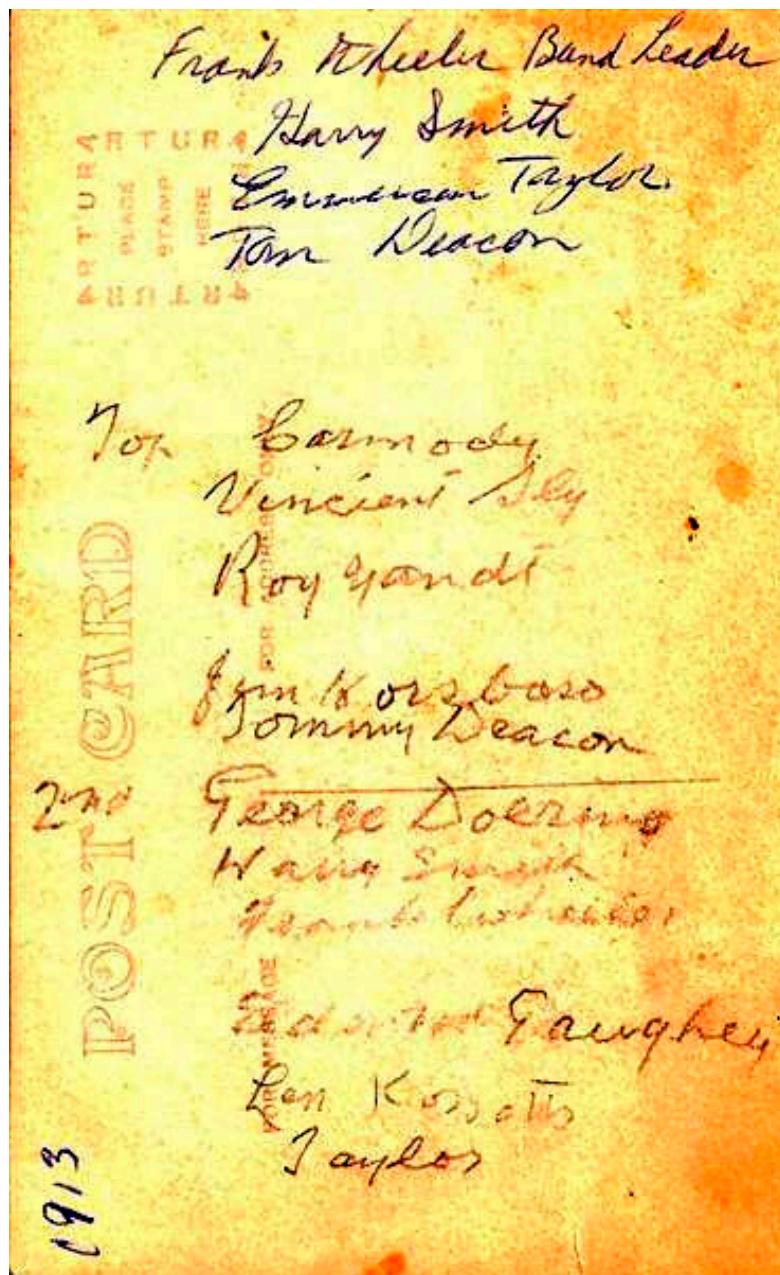


Pembroke Boy's Brass Band, Community Movement, 1913

Artist unknown, after a picture by Neapole & Harding

Postcard, dimensions unrecorded

Champlain Trail Museum



Rear of Pembroke Boy's Brass Band, Community Movement, 1913

Artist unknown, after a picture by Neapole & Harding

Postcard, dimensions unrecorded

Champlain Trail Museum



Boy's Band, Community Movement, Pembroke Ont., undated

Artist unknown

Postcard, dimensions unrecorded

Champlain Trail Museum

NOTES

¹ I would like to credit Lioutsia Schizkoske from the Pembroke Public Library for her invaluable assistance with research in the newspapers of the era.

² On the pictures and in some newspaper articles, the grammatically incorrect mention “boy’s band” is used, and this usage is reflected by Library and Archives Canada’s records, but when reference is made in the text to the actual band, the correct formulation “boys’ band” is used instead.

³ A transparent sheet of film or glass on which are inscribed in India ink the text to be printed is overlaid atop the sandwich of light-sensitive paper and developed negative. After exposure by light and processing, the text will print white on the image area, having blocked the light that would normally reach the negative and form the image on the photographic paper.

⁴ George Doering was elected President on September 3, 1913 (“Boys’ Band Elect Officers”), and is recorded to have held this position at least until 1915 (Morris 29).

⁵ From an email conversation with Irwin Reichstein, Carleton University professor in Computer Science, who donated the photographs (figs. 1 & 2) and other materials to Library and Archives Canada, September 25, 2011:

I acquired the photographs many years ago at an antique fair in Ottawa. Indeed what caught my eye was the obvious primary element but also for me that they were excellent examples of this kind of group photograph with the musical instruments, i.e. they worked as good photographs. Also the excellent condition of the photographs was a factor and the low price. When the portrait gallery was set up with the philosophy of including portraiture of “ordinary Canadians,” I thought the photographs should be in the portrait gallery if they wanted them, particularly since the band and bandmaster were so clearly identified. The portrait gallery wanted to have them. (Reichstein)

⁶ From an email conversation with Michael Brubaker, collector of antique photographs of musicians, November 30, 2011:

I was quite startled to learn of the second photo of the band in uniform. My interest and no doubt yours too, is the band leader, as it is very unusual to see a boy's band of this period with a black man as the band leader. On the back of my photo are also the names of the boys and the leader—Frank Wheeler. I have found records on the boys but unfortunately nothing on Wheeler.

The uniforms are very similar to those of many bands of this time, showing lots of fancy embroidery and hats with badges. These are pretty conservative, i.e. inexpensive. I don't believe that they have much connection to a military band, though there may be some attempt by the Pembroke Community Movement to imitate a “cadet band” from a military school. Real military band uniforms conformed to army regulations and are generally consistent to regimental styles. I wrote a little about uniforms in this post from my blog.
<http://temposenzatempo.blogspot.com/2011/08/blakes-cornet-band.html>

There seems to have been a huge movement at the turn of the 19th century for using boys bands as way of reforming wayward youths. I have quite a few photos of such bands and they are fascinating for showing how society at that time wanted to solve a problem. The clues in the article you sent me suggests that Pembroke's citizens were worried over similar issues: lack of employment for young men; increased criminal activities; decline in educational opportunities, etc. The Community Movement may have been like the YMCA or other evangelical missionary groups. Though the boys in the Pembroke Boys Band seem to have all had parents and homes, many organizations were formed in the late 19th century to deal with the rising number of orphans in the big cities. I have two posts on orphans bands from the same period as the: <http://temposenzatempo.blogspot.com/2011/01/orphans-home-band-of-mason-city-iowa.html>. <http://temposenzatempo.blogspot.com/2011/06/new-york-orphan-boys-band.html>.

There is also a possibility that the Community Movement was imitating the Chautauqua movement. They may have wanted to participate in the circuit of lecturers, musicians, bands, theatrical groups that were performing all around the US and Canada too I believe.

The number of community bands that existed at this time around the US, as well as Canada, the UK, and the rest of Europe is astounding.

I believe that it was a rare American town that did NOT have a band. Often there were separate groups for boys, ladies, and men as well as additional ensembles for the many fraternal organizations. I suspect that Canada had just as many too. Probably most of the influence there came from the British music traditions, but there was certainly just as many immigrants from Germany, France, Austro-Hungary who brought their own heritage. Here is a blog that provides a map showing the distribution of bands in the US just based on old photographs. <http://ibewbrass.wordpress.com/2011/04/11/cornet-bands-of-the-usa/>.

The IBEW <http://www.ibew.co.uk/> has a lot of information if you have not found it before. The photo image collection is found under Resources Vintage Brass Band Pictures. The reference page has many more links that are very useful. (Brubaker)

⁷ Cf. for example the photos identified by MIKAN 3196927, 3396901, 3396923, 3396966 as exemplary of the brass band images in Library and Archives Canada.

⁸ In the words of Gadamer's principal translator and commentator:

Our historicity is not a restriction but the very principle of understanding. We understand and strive for truth because we are led on by expectations of meaning....Historicism's delusion consisted in trying to displace our prejudices with methods in order to make something like certainty and objectivity possible in the human sciences. (Grondin 111)

⁹ From Gadamer's essay "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics":

The artwork's permanence depends on the approval of taste or sense of quality of later generation (not a mere presentation like a document). We cannot understand without wanting to understand, that is, without wanting to let something be said. It would be an inadmissible

abstraction to contend that we must first achieve a contemporaneousness with the author or the original reader by means of a reconstruction of his historical horizon before we could begin to grasp the meaning of what is said. This, is being struck by the meaning of what is said. The experience of art does not only understand a recognizable meaning, as historical hermeneutics does in its handling of texts. The work of art that says something confronts us with ourselves. ... To understand what the work of art says to us is therefore a self-encounter. But as an encounter with the authentic, as a familiarity that includes surprise, the experience of art is experience in a real sense and must master ever anew the task that experience involves: the task of integrating it into the whole of one's own orientation to the world and one's own self-understanding. (Gadamer 129)

¹⁰ See note 8.

¹¹ By arguing "the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being" (Grondin 114), Gadamer underlines the fact that what is unquestioned by the individual (i.e. his historicity) is more revelatory of his understanding than the self-conscious judgements he poses. In the present case, the insertion of fig. 1 in Library and Archives Canada reveals a concern for racial difference that may not necessarily be shared by the particular individuals involved, yet this is a prejudice in Gadamer's sense since it rests on the preconception that the racial content of the picture is important. It is also important to distinguish "prejudice" in the common sense, indicating one's reactionary feelings, from "prejudice" in Gadamer's sense, which is more neutral, and points instead to beliefs anterior to judgement.

¹² From a phone conversation with Diane Burnett, Library Coordinator of the Upper Ottawa Valley Genealogical Group, October 12, 2011.

¹³ "Understanding involves something like applying a meaning to our situation, to the question we want answered. It is not the case that there is first a pure, objective understanding of meaning to our situation, to the question we want answered" (Grondin 115).

¹⁴ <<http://www.pembrokeontario.com/city-hall/history-of-pembroke/>>.

¹⁵ <<http://www.pembrokeontario.com/city-hall/history-of-pembroke/>>.

¹⁶ (McIntyre).

¹⁷ "[I]n London the mayor supported Negroes in bringing suit against a restaurant that refused to serve them; in Dresden, fifty miles away, they could not eat with whites....In many small towns, Negro musicians were welcomed into the life of the community; in Owen Sound they had to establish their own orchestra" (Winks 325).

"Many small Ontario towns could boast of their pet blacks, who would regale youngsters with tales of slavery down on the old plantation, sing Negro spirituals, and play the fiddle" (Winks 294).

¹⁸ "In Ontario, 'niggering' continued to be used as a verb in lumbering" (Winks 293).

¹⁹ ("A Big Programme of Coming Events").

²⁰ See note 5.

²¹ (Morris 29) and (“A Big Programme of Coming Events”).

²² (“Boys’ Band Elect Officials”).

²³ (“Fall Fair Making Progress”).

²⁴ (Morris 29) and Figure 4.

²⁵ From an email conversation with Michael Brubaker (see note 5):

Mr. Wheeler stands at the back of the band, probably because it was easier to control the music, since his cornet would be heard best from the back. He could also control the direction of the march by watching his young bandsmen and giving orders rather than being at the front and having them not follow him. Only a few bands invested in a drum major to lead the band with a mace, most were too small to afford a non-musician and the expense of the fancy uniform, often with the tall bearskin hat.

Marching was also very unsophisticated compared to modern styles, and may not have involved any playing while marching. Most bands and especially brass bands performed outdoors by standing in a circle, sometimes with the leader in the center.

<<http://temposenzatempo.blogspot.com/2011/01/mystery-band.html>>. (Brubaker)

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