Exhibition Review

An Infectious Idea: 125 Years of Public Health in Toronto. CITY OF TORONTO ARCHIVES. Mounted at the City of Toronto Archives, October 2008–March 2010.

The current mandate of the Toronto Public Health Division includes such objectives as the improvement of health, the promotion of emergency preparedness, and the development of environmental consciousness. Such topics are well-suited to archival consideration, given the natural ability of an archives to showcase the small triumphs of the commonplace over time. Be prepared. Keep stock. Gradually improve the world around you by examining the mistakes made when everything goes wrong the first time. The theme of incremental progress, rooted in memory and recorded details, seems apt for an archival exhibition. The story of Toronto's Public Health Division is also a narrative of social progress, underscoring the tale of the rise of a bureaucratic institution from a handful of inspectors in the late nineteenth century to a wide-reaching health advocacy infrastructure, serving a diverse modern metropolis.

Mounted on the main floor of the Research Hall of the City of Toronto Archives, the "Infectious Idea" exhibition took the viewer on a tour of fourteen displays, arranged thematically according to public health functions. The original records and reproductions were selected to showcase the last 125 years of official public health service in Toronto, dating from the appointment of the city's first medical officer, Dr. William Canniff, in 1883. The displays testified to a heroic legacy of early pioneers in the development of public health policy against the challenges of poverty, rapid industrial change, and simple ignorance.

The City of Toronto Archives presented the Public Health Division's extraordinary records in a commendable way, especially those regarding often neglected and marginalized communities. The exhibit included photographs of slum housing where many of the city's poorest immigrants lived in crowded and unsanitary conditions, and public works projects, often built by immi-

grant labour. Some of the most compelling photographs were taken between 1911 and 1940 by Arthur Goss, the official city photographer, documenting the slum conditions of some of Toronto's worst housing in the first half of the twentieth century.

Records concerning Dr. Charles Hastings, Toronto's chief medical officer from 1910 to 1929, were prominent throughout the exhibition. Hastings ushered in a new era of public health administration, reforming the bureaucratic structure of the health office according to modern managerial principles. His administration also represented a new era of socialist thinking that has become a cornerstone of Canadian nationalism. Hastings was shown to be a complex figure, with a proclivity for publicly staging the disposal of tainted milk, a public health issue that had become a passion of his during his earlier involvement with the Canadian Medical Association's milk committee.

The exhibition display units were evenly spaced and coherently structured. The material concerning the contributions of public health nurses was personalized by the engaging use of handwritten reports from the 1930s. The units on infectious disease control, in particular, linked past and present, as the curators drew parallels between the influenza and smallpox epidemics of the earlier twentieth century with more recent scares such as the SARS outbreak of 2003, the sub-theme being "every generation has its plague." Likewise, the section entitled "Hospitals and Ambulance Services" covered a wide range of technical innovation in the delivery of health care services.

As with the dreaded miscellaneous file in an administrative record series, however, some of the thematic groupings were over-generalized. For example, the section entitled "Services to Teens, Adults, and Seniors" seemed like a dumping ground for an odd assortment of material on sexual education, birth control, and geriatric care, leading one to ponder what sorts of inferences the curators wanted their audience to make. More unfortunate was the placement, presumably unintentional, of psychiatric reports of mental health patients next to reports on cattle from farm and dairy inspections in the same horizontal display case. As there was little in the way of textual or visual demarcation between the two sections, the juxtaposition could be read as insensitive at best.

More seriously, the lack of critical context throughout the exhibit seemed to downplay the importance of the issues faced by the very people it aimed to champion. Strangely absent from the exhibition was the notion of conflict in the formation of public health policy. It is hard to believe that the City of Toronto Archives does not contain more controversial material related to the history of public health in the city. Heather MacDougall's research into the history of Toronto's Health Department was clearly familiar to the curators as the exhibit's main introduction drew heavily on her published study. In MacDougall's account, however, tensions were readily apparent with the development of a modern health policy, such as when the city created a Social Welfare Division in 1921, which in turn created jurisdictional conflict with the

social reform mandate of the Public Health office.[1] Another surprising omission was how little focus the exhibition gave to the effect of the introduction of socialized medicine upon the delivery of health services in Toronto. The extent to which Arthur Goss's photographs were used to promote a particular social agenda of the Health Department might also have been a worthy avenue for elaborating upon some of the more controversial aspects of photography as historical documentary evidence. For the story of incremental change over time to remain a stirring narrative, our retrospective gaze should not be so rosy that we become guilty of nostalgia.

A corresponding online exhibition was launched on the City of Toronto Archives website in August 2010.[2] The online version of "An Infectious Idea" presents largely the same information found in the physical exhibition and follows the same general outline of thematic units. Unfortunately, the contributing curators were not named in either format. Mounting an exhibition is a massive undertaking, and too often the work of information professionals goes unacknowledged in the production of in-house exhibitions and publications. Such anonymity not only undermines the intellectual contribution of content creators in the archival field, but also obscures the interpretive authority of the archivist in the presentation of historical narrative.

Despite these shortcomings, the City of Toronto Archives' exhibition "An Infectious Idea" illustrated the advantages of focusing on documentary evidence in the presentation of everyday history and the gradual progress of accumulated knowledge, as compared to the broad strokes of history one finds in textbooks.

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1 Heather MacDougall, *Activists and Advocates: Toronto's Health Department 1883–1983* (Toronto, 1990), p. 30.

2 http://www.toronto.ca/archives/public-health/index.htm (accessed 15 August 2010).