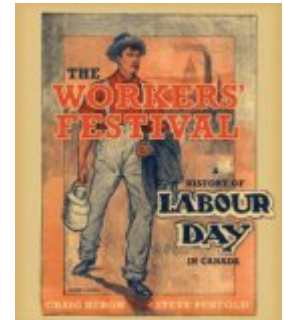


Craig Heron, Steve Penfold. *The Workers' Festival: A History of Labour Day in Canada.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. viii + 340 pp. \$42.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8020-4886-8.



Reviewed by Nolan Reilly

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Labor Day festivities in Winnipeg in September 1899 were held on a grand scale. Labor's newspaper *The Voice* published a 22-page illustrated program schedule of the day's events, reports, and photographs on the participating unions, and greetings from national and international labor leaders. Civic leaders and local businesses congratulated the Trades and Labor Council on its festivities. But the most exciting news was the listing of the entries in the annual Labor Day Parade and the numerous competitions for fun and pride that followed the parade at the local park. There were nine categories of prizes for participants in the parade, including one for the largest union contingent and the best union float. Most prize ribbons came with a small cash prize except that for the largest union group. Its reward was two kegs of beer.

Sporting and other events highlighted afternoon activities at the local park. The ever popular hose reel competition among fire companies from Canada and the United States attracted a large and lively crowd. Other events of the serious and not so serious kind filled the rest of the day. Some

of the more unusual events included the Old Man's Race for competitors over 60 years and the Fat Man's Race (over 200 lbs). A "ladies easy chair" was awarded to the victor of the Married Ladies Race and a five-dollar prize went to the winner of the Single Ladies Race. After an afternoon of fun and games and a delightful picnic dinner, it was off to the grand stand to watch Mr. Magnus Smith, Canada's champion chess player, give an exhibition of "Living Chess" using appropriately costumed players. The Richard Brothers trapeze and revolving ladder performance rounded out the show but not the day's events. That distinction was left to the dance at the Dining Pavilion that continued late into the evening.

Winnipeg's Labor Day festivities were perhaps a little grander but not atypical of how unionized workers and their supporters celebrated their national holiday, as readers will discover in *The Workers' Festival*. The book takes readers on an intriguing and richly illustrated journey across Canada and through time in its examination of workers' zealous and not so zealous marking of Labor Day. In a wonderfully descriptive

chapter on holy days, holidays, and labor days, Craig Heron and Steve Penfold trace the origins of Labor Day to long standing traditions of workers' parades and festivals. These celebrations were often occasions for working-class revelry that carried special significance within nineteenth-century public culture. These events drew community attention to the workers' contributions to town and nation but also represented labor's more political claim to access to public spaces. The first semi-formal celebrations of Labor Day began in 1880 in Cape Breton from where it spread to the country's growing industrial towns, especially in southern Ontario. In some locales Labor Day quickly became a civic holiday, while in others workers simply took it as a self-declared holiday. The day had become so popular among workers by 1894 that the federal government bowed to union pressure and declared Labor Day a statutory holiday. Heron and Penfold consider this an important milestone for labor and argue that Labor Day would come to represent the "most visible, persistent, and widespread form of collectively created working-class cultural production that Canada has ever seen" (p. xv). However, they are quick to point out that the labor movement's and certainly working peoples' attitudes towards their day of community recognition waxed and waned with changing cultural, social, and political conditions.

Festivities like those in Winnipeg in 1899 belonged to the first era of Labor Day celebrations that characterized the period from Labor Day's recognition as a statutory holiday in 1894 until World War I. Craft unions gave energy and direction to these celebrations and their declining power in the workplace after 1900 was reflected in the significant waning of Labor Day celebrations by the beginning of the war. The rising working-class militancy at the end of World War I revived workers' interest in Labor Day, but the meaning of the day had changed from the community festival orientation of the pre-war era. Labor Day events were now more overtly political. Parades and

speeches focused on workers' political and economic grievances. Essentially, from this time forward Labor Day shifted from a community cultural celebration of workers to an occasion for a public airing of workers' grievances and political demands. Many a politician and employer found himself the target of denunciations of one kind or another in Labor Day marches and demonstrations. Heron and Penfold provide an excellent analysis of this shift in the meaning of Labor Day in their survey of the ebb and flow of Labor Day as a celebration of Canadian workers and their families.

The authors carefully locate the changing meaning and significance of Labor Day within a broad cultural and political context. They argue convincingly that, although the labor movement initiated Labor Day, the day never ironically ever "really belonged to workers." Firstly, when Labor Day became a statutory holiday commercial interests quickly began to compete with the labor movement for the attention of workers and their families. Initially, the circus and sporting events strove to draw workers away from union celebrations. However, as the twentieth century advanced these alternatives to Labor Day festivities grew into myriad commercial and leisurely activities. Secondly, May Day celebrations challenged Labor Day's legitimacy as a focal point of working-class cultural and political celebrations by the end of World War I. Left-leaning workers celebrated May Day's emphasis on international working-class solidarity and criticized Labor Day advocates as much too tepid in their politics. Finally, from its inception Labor Day calls for public labor celebrations competed with workers' desire for more private uses of their last paid holiday of the summer. Today there are few cities nationwide in which labor marks Labor Day with public events and even fewer where parades wind through their streets.

The Workers' Festival is a richly detailed and nuanced examination of Labor Day in Canada.

The book's location within the literature of the meaning of cultural celebrations and their significance is informative but rarely intrudes unnecessarily into the narrative. In this respect the book is accessible to both professional and general audiences. The book's design and excellent collection of photographs add to its accessibility. One hopes that it will soon find a place on university course outlines and on the shelves of commercial bookstores.

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