

## INTRODUCTION

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CANADIAN CLASSICAL PIANIST Glenn Gould once said that Toronto was one of the few cities in the world in which he could live because it imposed no “cityness” upon him. This statement may seem somewhat curious, given that at the time of its utterance Toronto was a rapidly growing conurbation of over two million people, with suburbs that radiated out in all directions from a busy central core. Yet perhaps not. Perhaps Gould’s view was, in part, influenced by where he was raised, Toronto’s Beach, where within a short five or ten minute stroll down a hill, or through a leafy ravine, he could reach the limit of the city and stand along the shore of one of North America’s massive inland seas, Lake Ontario.

Though Gould’s favourite place in the Beach was the water’s edge, he also roamed Toronto Bay, tracking the freighters from far-off exotic locales that cruised up the St. Lawrence from the Atlantic Ocean into Lake Ontario, finally arriving at Canada’s great interior maritime city, Toronto. Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe, who visited Toronto Bay in May of 1793, was also attracted to the site but for different reasons: the sandy peninsula in front of the mainland made for a natural sheltering harbour in the event of an anticipated American attack. Toronto also stood at the junction of two ancient aboriginal transportation corridors: the relatively flat Lakeshore Trail and the Toronto Carrying Place, whose two branches, near the mouths of the Rouge and Humber Rivers, served as access points to the Upper Great Lakes and the interior regions of Canada. Attracted by its strategic position, Lieutenant Governor Simcoe named the site York in 1793, though it was later re-named Toronto.



*Glenn Gould out in Lake Ontario, the Beach, 1956*

Jock Carroll, LAC, e011067053

The length of the shoreline of modern Toronto has greatly increased since its inception in 1793, and it now stretches from the Rouge River in the east to Etobicoke Creek in the west. Likewise, as the city has grown, the northern boundary of Toronto has moved farther and farther away from the water's edge, so much so that for many city residents today, the lake may seem somewhere on the periphery and not part of their active awareness. Everywhere and always, beyond the crumbling Gardiner Expressway and the rooflines of the Royal York Hotel, the peaks and crevices of the Scarborough Bluffs, the near shore waters of the Island, and the mouth of the Humber River, stretch the waters of Lake Ontario, within our reach yet perceived by many of us as being almost impossibly remote.

Yet in the early days of settlement, the lake was the source of Toronto's existence. It provided a vital hub for industry, trade, transportation, and the movement of goods, which made pioneer settlements possible, many of which began at or near the shore. Early on in Toronto's development, the lake was also a key destination for leisure, sport, and entertainment, with a series of pleasure grounds, hotels, and amusement parks established at or near the lakefront by the late nineteenth century.

Even the many people who enjoy the waterfront today may take the lake itself for granted, yet the sheer magnitude and breadth of Lake Ontario often astounds the newcomer. We often forget that Lake Ontario is part of a series of lakes that live up to their attribution as great. Unparalleled anywhere in the world, the Great Lakes contain more than eighty per cent of North America's fresh water, or about one-fifth of the world's supply. Only the polar ice caps contain more fresh water than these enormous basins. Lake Ontario — though the smallest of the Great Lakes, with a surface water area of some 7,340 square miles, and more than 700 miles upriver from the Atlantic — remains our gateway to the ocean and all that lies beyond.

I have now lived a significant portion of my life along Toronto's eastern shore. My experience with the lake is personal and remains one of connection, and for many years I have had at least one toe in the water. Yet it took an unanticipated close encounter with the lake about fifteen years ago to cement this relationship and set me on a journey of discovery — a journey that continues to this day.

While running high above the lake on a frigid midwinter afternoon, I slipped on black ice on the first step down to the Scarborough Bluffs, an extremely steep incline known locally as Killer Hill. Below the hill, the Scarborough Bluffs plunge to the water some 250 feet below. As I lay there stranded, my cries were blown away by the gusts of wind that swirled around me. With my right ankle hanging from my leg at an unnatural angle,



I could do nothing but wait to be discovered. Far below me the ice fog swirled along the surface of the lake, weaving its intricate patterns over the grim grey water. Despite being on the outskirts of Canada's most densely populated city, it seemed as though I had tumbled into a wilderness that remained raw and uncivilized. It was a lake I had never known.

*Scarborough Bluffs, 2012*

Keith Ellis

To be sure, I was at last seen and eventually rescued, and then I was promptly delivered into the hands of a marvellous surgeon. But long after my body had fully recovered, the time I had spent on the slope stayed with me. Where had I been? What was that all about? I found quite early in my journey that the questions I was asking related, first and last, to the spirit, the innermost nature of a particular place.

That place is the water's edge, where the city rubs shoulders with the natural world. *Along the Shore* turns our gaze back to the lake and four distinct communities and districts that remain connected to the waterfront and hug its shores, from the Rouge River in the east to Etobicoke Creek in the west: the Scarborough shore, the Beach, the Island, and

the Lakeshore (composed of the communities of Humber Bay, Mimico, New Toronto, and Long Branch). Moving from east to west, I'll examine the unique landscape and geography, history, and people that make up each of these special places. Though each retains a separate identity, collectively they are a place rich in memory and imagination.

*Along the Shore* does *not* cover what we today still think of as the downtown core, nor does it address the communities near the water's edge that at one time were more directly connected to the lake, particularly those communities to the west of downtown that lie east of the Humber River, Parkdale and Swansea, and Leslieville, which is situated east of the Don River. Although the core has its own fascinating history, some 160 years have passed since downtown Toronto could be thought of as simply a waterfront community. With the advent of the railway age in the mid-1850s came a rapid period of industrialization and commercialization that saw the downtown develop into a centre of finance, commerce, government, and public entertainment.

During this period of innovation and change, ambitious landfill projects pushed many sections of the shore farther and farther to the south to make way for industry, shipping, and the railway. The iron horse, while facilitating the industrial age, was also a barrier to the lake. As rail and road transportation advanced into the twentieth century, the Port of Toronto declined in importance, and the Gardiner Expressway, itself a monument to the automobile age, further physically and psychologically separated many Torontonians from the water.

Recently there has been a shift in perspective. Neighbourhoods that were once cut off from the lake are finding their way back to the water. Degraded sections of the shore and near-shore areas are being revitalized and former industrialized sites adjacent to Lake Ontario are being converted into new, exciting multi-use waterfront communities. Only now, with intense pressure everywhere on living space, with the cost and inconvenience of commuting from the more distant suburbs, and with a proliferation of condominium buildings, is the downtown of Toronto beginning to look like a reconfigured waterfront community — but that is a subject for another book.

The experience that set me on the path to writing this book bore no relation to my experience of modern Toronto. On the contrary, I was suddenly faced with the fact that the Toronto shore was once a wilderness governed by nature. So I set about looking for places along the waterfront that, on some level, were still connected with the lake and had kept some memory, some vestige of the past. I found that these waterfront communities and districts I have identified, places that often began as outlying settlements within the former County of York, have retained something of their village character, despite a daily, intimate involvement with Toronto. Such places



never were nor are even now mere offshoots of the centre. And so it was in them that I found something of what, unconsciously, I had been seeking.

Lake Ontario Ice,  
*New Toronto*, c. 1948 George  
Paginton, Courtesy Tony Paginton

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THE FORMATION OF Toronto's shoreline began about 12,500 years ago, as the last period of glaciation came to an end and a layer of ice, half a mile thick, began to melt northwards, releasing its tenacious hold on the region. As the ice retreated, the boulders and debris beneath it carved out the lake basin and an intricate network of rivers, valleys, and ravines. Toronto's present shoreline took shape relatively recently, about 3,000 years ago, though extensive infilling projects in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have pushed the water's edge far to the south of the original shoreline in many sections of the city.

A wild place it must have been, punctuated by verdant ravines, deep river valleys and creeks, sandy beaches, soaring high cliffs, and fecund marshlands, in some sections





*Colleyna Mary Russell Morgan*  
*Painted Lady Pellatt Fishing in*  
*Don River, 1906 TPL, E 5-109f*

fronted by a narrow peninsula of sand. Beyond the shore was a freshwater ocean of seemingly endless proportions. The fusion of water and landscape makes this city unique, as did the carving of the land by the retreating glacier, to which we owe the complex system of valleys and ravines that run from the north down through the city and out to the shore of the Lake. Each of the major valleys contains a substantial watercourse — the Don, the Humber, the Rouge — that empties into the lake at or near one of the waterfront communities and districts that still exist today, most prominent among them the Scarborough shore, the Beach, the Island, and the Lakeshore.

Despite the differences in their land formations, each of these waterfront areas is part of a continuum. Together they retain a memory of the pastoral — a little of the natural world within the urban landscape. There is still a spirit alive in this land, one that wanders through the interconnected network of ravines and woodlands and waterways that lead down to and along the shore.

AS I STARTED MY exploration of Toronto's waterfront communities and districts, I quickly realized "Where am I?" cannot be answered without reference to the dimension of time and the history of these special places. Rather than an end in itself, history became my compass and guide for answering my initial question. Although I approached each region as an entity unto itself, an unexpected pattern emerged as I moved along the shore from east to west. Each region, to some extent, took on certain characteristics that are common to them all.

The successive groups of Aboriginal peoples who moved through the lower Humber River Valley in turn were to be found on the Island and at the mouths of the Rouge River and Etobicoke Creek. As Mohawk traditionalist William Woodworth Raweno:kwas reminds us, there are footprints on this land and on this shore that tell a story of human habitation that begins shortly after the retreat of the last glacier. Ever since, different groups of first peoples have periodically hunted, camped, and fished at the river mouths along the lakefront.

European presence along the present-day Toronto shore occurred sometime in the seventeenth century, with the French in the eighteenth century establishing two successive trading posts near the mouth of the Humber River and Fort Rouillé, near the west end of the present Canadian National Exhibition grounds. With the arrival of Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe in 1793, a garrison, later known as Fort York, was erected and land was cleared at the east end of Toronto Bay for a town, signalling a change from an economy based on hunting, trapping, and the fur trade to one of settled agriculture and industry.

As archaeologist Ronald F. Williamson notes, the first permanent European settlements along the waterfront in the vicinity of Toronto followed the earlier pattern of habitation at the river mouths established by the successive groups of first peoples, the forerunners of the communities and districts on or near the Rouge, Don, and Humber Rivers and Mimico and Etobicoke Creeks. Rather than relying exclusively on York for survival, newcomers who settled in these isolated areas picked up, to varying degrees, the patterns of resource harvesting, agriculture, and water transportation that were in many cases long established. The same rivers that gave the Aboriginal people their hunting and fishing and agriculture made commerce and, in due course, industry possible for the early European settlers, so that an overlapping use of land emerged over time.

Many of these early settlers — the fishermen, the market gunners, the boat builders and captains, the tradesmen, and even some of the pioneer families — moved fluidly along the waterfront during the nineteenth century. The pioneers cleared the land, laid



*Yachts, ferries, and Toronto as seen from the busy lagoon  
near the Queen City Yacht Club on Algonquin Island*

Jane Fairburn

the roads, often along pre-existing aboriginal pathways, and established the sawmills, gristmills, and woollen mills at the river mouths along what was then a waterfront of dispersed districts, villages, and farmland. A system of trade and development took shape, with dairy, produce, grain, and many other farm goods from the hinterlands; milled lumber from the Humber, Don, and Rouge Rivers; vegetables and flowers from Kew Gardens at the Beach; fish from the Island and Mimico Creek; and potash and grain from Scarborough. Gradually, the shoreline became one interconnected whole as the city filled in around the markets and Toronto Harbour.

After the pioneer era, these outlying areas contained within them a series of seasonal resorts, parks, and entertainment areas, which were first accessed by the steamers and schooners that plied the Toronto shore and many other locales farther afield in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Later, many of these places were accessed by an interconnected system of streetcars and radials, which at one time ran along the main arterial east-west routes of the city and outlying areas, from West Hill in the east to Long Branch and beyond in the west. By the early decades of the twentieth century,





each area contained within its boundaries a fully established, year-round residential community or communities. If we were to get into a boat and survey the Toronto shore today, we would see most of them there still, interspersed among the other notable waterfront landmarks along the shore.

Spanning almost eleven miles from the Rouge to the Beach, the gentle river marshes and craggy precipices of the Scarborough Bluffs are home to the largest waterfront district in the Toronto area, the Scarborough shore. At the west end of the Bluffs stands the R.C. Harris Water Treatment Plant (also known as the Waterworks), itself a cultural monument to our connection with the lake and the unofficial dividing line between the Bluffs and the Beach.

Just to the west of the Waterworks, the cliffs give way to a wide strip of sand some two miles long. Here the Beach community stretches from the Kingston Road to the sands of Lake Ontario, with the Boardwalk, a wooden promenade along the lakefront, acting as the community's unofficial main street. Immediately to the west of the Beach's Ashbridge's Bay Marina is the Leslie Street Spit, a man-made peninsula that has evolved

*In this Sunnyside Beach postcard, throngs of Torontonians unwind in the summer sun*

CT/MS, 1996.18.69.258



*Mouth of the Humber River, 2012*

Keith Ellis

into a waterfront park and nature sanctuary, which is now an adjunct of the wider community.

As we continue to move westward we reach the Eastern Gap or, as it is officially known, the East Gap. On the west side of the gap is the Island, which, geographically speaking, is really a series of sandbars, waterways, and ponds off the mainland of downtown Toronto. A full-time residential community thrives there, with about 650 residents on Wards and Algonquin Islands, although the population is greatly diminished from its zenith in the first half of the twentieth century. As we sail around the Island, our course angles inward toward the Canadian National Exhibition grounds and Ontario Place, a waterfront park and entertainment centre now undergoing a period of transition. Just west of here, past the Argonaut Rowing Club, is the tony Boulevard Club, which began as the Parkdale Canoe Club in 1905. Next are the Palais Royale and the Sunnyside Bathing Pavilion, the only remnants of the once wildly popular Sunnyside Beach Amusement Park. Still moving west, we can see the bold arch of the Humber River Pedestrian and Cycling Bridge casting a shadow over the water

at the entrance to the Toronto Carrying Place Trail, which was travelled by Aboriginal people for millennia. To the west of the bridge, past the giant condominiums in Humber Bay, the other Lakeshore communities, Mimico, New Toronto, and Long Branch, still hug the line of the water.

These special communities and districts — the Scarborough shore, the Beach, the Island, and the Lakeshore — fan out over the southern limits of the city at Lake Ontario and form a complex and diverse network of landscapes and people. Though historically connected, each of these places maintains a distinct sensibility and separate identity. Each has its own stories, many known only to the old-time residents of these communities. For us as Torontonians, these stories are the collective yarns of an almost forgotten waterfront culture that is uniquely ours, waiting to be rediscovered.