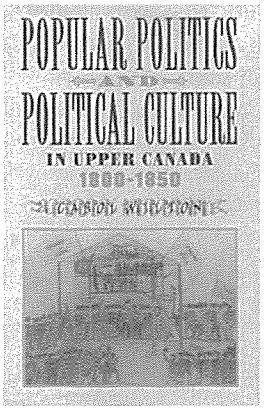
CAROL WILTON'S
Popular Politics and Political Culture in Upper Canada, 1800-1850

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000

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WHEN THE POLITICAL COMMENTATORS AT THE *NATIONAL POST* READ CAROL WILTON'S *POPULAR POLITICS AND POLITICAL CULTURE IN UPPER CANADA, 1800-1850* THEY WILL RETHINK THEIR EASY DISMISSAL OF CANADIAN ANTI-GLOBALIZATION PROTESTERS. WILTON'S FINELY RESEARCHED STUDY OF UPPER CANADIAN POLITICAL LIFE OFFERS THE LEGITIMACY OF LONG TRADITION TO CANADIANS WHO USE EXTRA-PARLIAMENTARY MEANS TO INFLUENCE POLITICAL AUTHORITIES. WILTON'S WORK PRESENTS US WITH PEOPLE WHO ROUTINELY RISKED INCITING OPEN CONFLICT AND EVEN VIOLENCE BECAUSE THEY BELIEVED THAT CITIZENS HELD BOTH THE RIGHT AND THE RESPONSIBILITY TO COMMUNICATE THEIR OPINIONS TO GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, REGARDLESS OF PERSONAL COST.



Wilton debunks a "favoured myth of Upper Canadian history" – that the efforts of most Upper Canadians to achieve economic self sufficiency limited their political interests to local matters until after the rebellion of 1837. Wilton demonstrates, by contrast, that thousands of Upper Canadians across the province participated in the political life of the colony through centrally organized but locally rooted petitioning campaigns.

At town meetings citizens debated the pre-eminence of the Anglican church and the legal status of post-revolutionary war American immigrants, thorny questions which affected the province as a whole. Although the tireless reform activist William Lyon Mackenzie attended a large number of these meeting, the actual town meetings were often called by a local official and advertised in local newspapers. The crowd at these meetings elected a committee to send a petition to the colonial office. The contest between established tradition and popular opinion played itself out at each meeting in the election of a chairperson. Upon failing to secure their own representative to the controlling position the unsuccessful faction usually walked out. Wide attendance and passionate participation shows that not only did Upper Canada possess a "province-wide political culture," but also that this culture was ideologically polarized.

Wilton argues that most historians of Upper Canada missed the diversity of Upper Canadian political culture because they ignored petitioning movements, preferring to study electoral organization and the development of a party system. Such historians were uninterested in the people whom Wilton studies, as the petitioners generally rejected party politics. The popular petitioning movement encompassed two positions, so diametrically opposed as to make the idea of working within a party system an impossibility. Whereas the "oppositionists" on one side thought of themselves as virtuous citizens opposing a corrupt government, government supporters on the other thought of themselves as defenders of the established order against American-influenced rebels. Neither side was ready to admit that the other possessed a different but internally consistent philosophy of politics. Yet such an admission was necessary to the creation of a stable party system.

By turning her gaze toward the petitioning movements Wilton brings to light a story previously submerged by a historical narrative exclusively concerned with the political figures who furthered the formation of Canada's party system. Yet while Wilton convincingly shows that previous scholars underestimated the breadth of Upper Canadian political activity, she omits evidence that could strengthen and extend her argument. Just as British and American settlers in Upper Canada delivered their concerns to the Colonial Office in the form of written letters of complaint, so too did members of the First Nations. Mohawk loyalists and the Anishinaabeg drafted petitions at local councils and sent them to the Colonial Office and the Department of Indian Affairs. Like the settlers, First Nations' concerns extended across the province, as individual groups faced the common problem of negotiating a relationship with the newcomers. As early as 1805 First Nations groups were consulting each other on their common concerns, creating a "province wide political culture" that Canadian political historians have taken little notice of.

Further, while Wilton effectively questions the progressivist assumptions of earlier Canadian historians which led them to focus exclusively on the development of the Canadian party system, her own analysis does not complete the revisionist circle by offering a new interpretation of that old story. What effect did widespread popular political activity in the nineteenth century have on Canada's developing polity? Wilton maintains that many petitioners supported responsible government although few desired the party system. Precisely how the petitioning movement brought about the former and failed to prevent the latter remains unclear. Why did government critics in the early nineteenth century come to accept the party system? Did the new party system freeze out radicals that the petitioning system allowed a voice, those like William Lyon Mackenzie, who would call the government corrupt rather than merely ideologically challenged?

That said, *Popular Politics and Political Culture* presents an important and untold story of unofficial political life in early Upper Canada. For those who will notice, this part of our history challenges a world environment grown hostile to grassroots political criticism by offering a valuable reminder that popular political movements in Canada have a longer pedigree than the political system whose assumptions they protest.