

William Henry Orr, history's futurist of communication theory

Adam G. Wynne

Two historic 1878/1879 Second Empire houses at the northeast corner of Dundas Street East and Mutual Street are now surrounded by ongoing redevelopments. A 42-storey condominium tower was just built across the street and Ryerson University has recently proposed a 40-storey mixed-use building immediately next door.

The house at 154 Dundas Street East was first occupied by William Henry Orr (1836-1927) – a fascinating, yet little-known figure in Canadian history. Residing there for a decade, until 1889, Orr was interested in communication theories and wanted to improve written communication, including through language reform, phonetics, and shorthand.

In their research paper, *Steam Writing in the Urli Daiz* (2017), University of Toronto professors Heather Murray and Yannick Portebois describe Orr as a futurist and utopist of communication theory who “believed language was open to innovation as was any other technology” and “dreamt of a day when written communications could be near-instantaneous, approaching the speed of speech” in a pre-digital era.

Born in Oshawa in 1836, William Henry Orr ap-

prenticed with regional newspapers as a teenager. In 1860, he married Ann Marie Pedlar (1835-1918) of Oshawa's prominent Pedlar family.

By the early 1860s, Orr was working in Toronto under George Brown as a journalist at *The Globe*. A few years later, he was sent to report on the Confederation Debates, which resulted in the Confederation of Canada in 1867. Interviews from the 1920s identify Orr as the last living participant and witness of the debates.

Orr's expertise in shorthand was one reason he covered debates, as he could transcribe large volumes of information verbatim at high speeds. (Orr's first-born son – Cyrus Pitman Orr (1858-1937) – was named after Sir Isaac Pitman (1813-1897), inventor of Pitman Shorthand, to whom Orr corresponded regularly.)

Orr often held public lectures open to all on communications theories and published articles, journals, and letters from the 1850s through the 1920s. He observed that students spent significant time slowly transcribing materials, limiting capacity in both individual and group educational pursuits.

Interestingly, Ryerson University's Faculty of Communication and Design and School of Journalism are now located only a block north of Orr's former residence.

By the late 1860s, Orr had taken a job with the Aetna Life Insurance Company in Montreal. He was reportedly the first Canadian businessman to teach women how to type in an office setting, which was controversial in the 19th century. In 1878/1879, he transferred to Aetna's Toronto office and took up residence at 154 Dundas Street East. At the time of his death in 1927, Orr was still associated with Aetna.

Murray and Portebois's article notes that Orr had what appears to be the first residential telephone number in Toronto. His phone number was “3” at the Toronto Main Exchange – with only the operator, telephone company, and police ahead of him.

Orr was also one of the first Torontonians to engage in the sport of bicycling. He abstained from alcohol and smoking, and was a vegetarian for most of his life. Orr was also active in Toronto's coffee house movement, which sought to provide alternatives to bars.

Although they do not presently have heritage status, 152-154 Dundas Street East are excellent candidates for inclusion on the City of Toronto Heritage Register. The Toronto Branch of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario (ACO) says the buildings are “at risk” of demolition because of the intensity and proximity of adjacent redevelopments.

152 Dundas Street East, on the corner, was reportedly for sale recently, according to the ACO. It hosted a medical practice for half a century before World War II and was later home to the Mutual Street Deli for 60 years.

Orr's legacy could also be commemorated, through the installation of a historical marker or plaque near 154 Dundas Street East.

the bridge: Book Review

Glenda MacFarlane, Columnist

All the Rage: A Partial Memoir in Two Acts and a Prologue
Brad Fraser
Penguin Random House, 2021

Brad Fraser's new memoir pulls no punches — but that's not surprising if you're familiar with his plays (or his social media presence). Fraser has always been a fearless and uncompromisingly honest writer, and *All the Rage* is both of those. Fraser's life story, which takes us on a journey through several decades of queer culture and Canadian theatre history, is compelling.

Born in rural Alberta in 1959 to impoverished and abusive parents who moved from town to town, the young Brad sought refuge in reading comic books and cheap paperbacks. As a teenager, Fraser managed to enrol in a drama program at an Edmonton performing arts school, and his path became clear: he threw himself into writing, performing and directing at school, and later at Edmonton's venerable Waltherdale Theatre.

He won the student prize in the Alberta Culture Playwriting Competition, which came with a four-week stay at the Banff Centre for the Arts, where he had his “first truly gay encounter.” Fraser had known from an early age that he was different from heterosexual family members, and credits his queerness for giving him the impetus and strength to get away from the life he was born into.

At 22, his play *Wolfboy* put Fraser in the spotlight, its combination of homoeroticism and lycanthropy a magnet for younger audiences in Toronto,

Saskatoon and Edmonton. But 1989's *Unidentified Human Remains* and the *True Nature of Love*, with its unique fusion of humour, pop culture, sex and violence, cemented Fraser's reputation. The play has been performed across Canada and internationally, and was made into a film.

Fraser traces the trajectory of his first ten plays, cataloguing successes and non-successes, and outlining his often-fraught relationship with the media. Near the end of the narrative he focuses on his play *Poor Super Man*, a frank portrayal of friendships and sexual relationships in the AIDS era.

Along with accounts of his life in the theatre, Fraser writes about the 1980s gay scene with all its excitement and excess. He names names and provides details, candidly revisiting past relationships, (venereal) warts and all. Fraser's coming of age dovetailed with the rise of the AIDS epidemic and the attendant fear and sorrow that ravaged the gay community during the 80s and 90s. So many of the bright and talented men we meet in the early pages of Fraser's memoir fall victim to the disease that the scope of the devastation becomes increasingly clear.

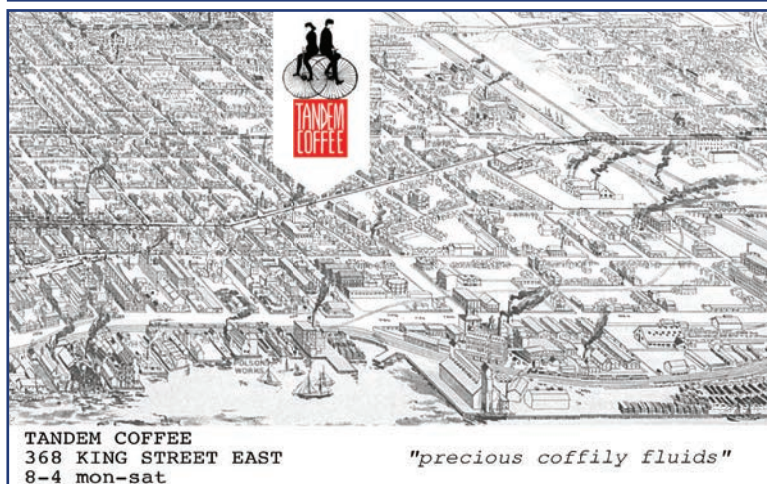
In one of the most moving sections of *All the Rage*, Fraser sits in a nondescript restaurant, and as Cyndi Lauper's “Time After Time” plays in the background, he opens a newspaper to find an obituary for a former lover, friend and theatre colleague, dead of AIDS.

All the Rage ends on New Year's Eve in 1999. I hope that Brad Fraser is hard at work on a sequel, and that it will arrive in bookstores soon.

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