In Street and Field and Hall:  
The Culture of Hamilton Workingmen, 1860–1914*

The workingmen once held in dis-esteem – looked upon as unhonored and unhonorable – as a serf, a thrall, fit only for merest drudgery – now comes to be recognized in his true claims. Labor being so fundamental and necessary, all ingenuous, noble minds feel that the workingman is worthy of double respect. He is worthy because he is a man – and because he promotes that which is fundamental to the advancement of society. Nor can anyone doubt the importance of self-culture to that class. It may be that the workingman is undistinguished – obscured by his position and must always remain so. That all men are to be distinguished – and great, no one can reasonably imagine, and yet wherever you find human nature, that which makes a man, you find elements of greatness. The workingman has intellect, judgement, conscience; is capable of affection, sympathy, love, can exercise fancy, imagination, perceive the grand, the beautiful, as well as the statesman, the philosopher or student; what he wants is inward culture – development – and he will be prepared to put forth outward influence of the highest character ... Men and especially workingmen are so absorbed in small details that they sometimes grow unstable; are like children who turn from one thing to another. What they want is something broad, permanent, something established, fixed, that alone is found only by culture.

that had been of importance during the mechanic’s lifetime. Numerous friends and relatives gathered to pay their last respects, but it was perhaps a closer, final, proximity to Briggs that tells us something of the loyalties that dominated his life in Hamilton. For carrying him to his grave were two members of the Ancient Order of Foresters, two members of the Sons of England, and two of his former workmates at the Grand Trunk yards. 1

The response to the death of Thomas Canary in 1885 typifies the skilled workers’ reaction to the loss of a fellow craftsman. As an active member of Hamilton’s Cigar Makers’ International Union, a delegate to the 1885 Cincinnati convention, and prominent in the Emerald Beneficial Association, Canary’s funeral was attended by scores of the city’s workers. Eulogised by his union as an ‘earnest, intelligent, and foremost worker in our struggles’, Canary was the recipient of a solemn tribute: after his burial the Cigar Makers would drape their charter in mourning for a period of 30 days, a mark of respect for a man of substance and worth. 2

These men were not atypical, and in Hamilton, as well as in other Canadian communities, the funeral procession was one of many persistent continuities in the culture of the skilled workingman. 3 It was a moment of appreciation of the accomplishments of ordinary men, as well as a chance to celebrate the ties that had meant so much over the course of a lifetime. Funerals, in fact, were often regarded as the touchstone of solidarity. ‘Men who fail to show respect to the dead’, argued the Palladium of Labor in 1884, ‘seldom or ever respect anything outside of their own precious selves’. 4 Fire companies, 5 baseball teams, 6 fraternal lodges and friendly societies, 7 and reform clubs 8 all

1 Hamilton Spectator, 7 April 1904.
2 Palladium of Labor, 5 December 1885; Cigar Makers’ Official Journal, October 1885.
3 Note the vivid accounts of funeral processions in London and Ottawa in Ontario Workman, 11 December 1873; 24 April 1873.
4 Palladium of Labor, 15 November 1884.
5 On funerals of Hamilton fire company officials and members, many of whom were skilled workingmen, see Hamilton Times, 20 April 1863; Hamilton Spectator, 18 November 1865; 19 November 1865; 25 March 1867; 29 April 1872.
6 James Shuttleworth, a shoemaker and co-founder of the Maple Leaf Base Ball Club, was followed to his grave by his working-class teammates. See Hamilton Spectator, 27 August 1869.
7 See Hamilton Spectator, 15 October 1873; 26 May 1882; 19 February 1883; 11 October 1890; 29 June 1906; Typographical Journal, November 1911.
8 A deceased Hamilton glass worker, Ephraim McHenry, received a resolution of condolence from his union and from his American currency reform club, the National League. See Labor Union, 27 January 1883.