

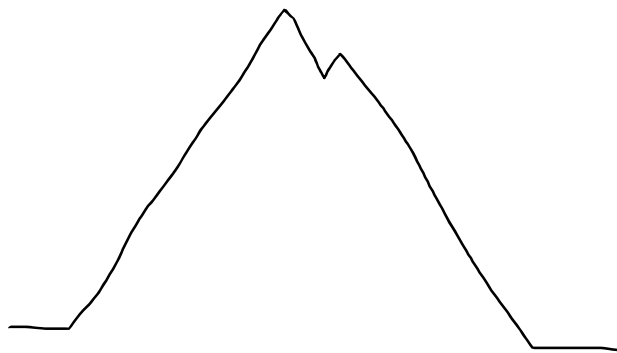
THE MOUNTAIN

Jennifer Kaye, 2020

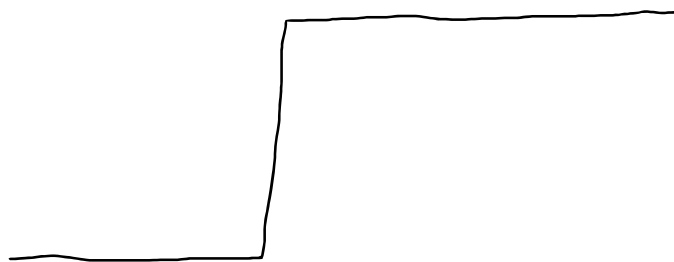
I have lived most of my life within sight of The Mountain. Despite what you might reasonably expect, it's not actually a mountain. According to Dictionary.com, a mountain is:

a natural elevation of the earth's surface rising more or less abruptly to a summit, and attaining an altitude greater than that of a hill, usually greater than 2000 feet (610 meters).

Based on this definition, you would expect a mountain to look something like this:



But The Mountain looks like this:



The Mountain is lacking in mountainousness – which isn't a criticism, since it's actually an escarpment. In fact, it is the Niagara Escarpment, most famous as the cliff over which Niagara Falls falls, but also a designated UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve. The section of it that slices through Hamilton, Ontario is known locally as The Mountain. And I have lived most of my life within sight of it.

Hamilton's official nickname is "The Ambitious City", which might explain why The Mountain was so called. The term was originally coined, in 1847, as an insult to the young upstart city from its more established counterpart down the road – Toronto – marking the beginning of a rivalry that exists to this day. In response to *The Globe's* attempt to put Hamilton in its place, Robert Smiley, the editor of the *Hamilton Spectator*, embraced the term.

We hope our neighbour is not becoming jealous of the manner in which we are going ahead ... or envious of the spirit displayed by our public men ... in all that betokens enterprise, public spirit and future greatness Hamilton will hold its own with any city in the province. The ambitious little city threatens speedily to become a prosperous large one. (*The Hamilton Spectator*, Sept. 29, 1847)

The ambitious little city did indeed become a prosperous large one, largely by embracing heavy industry as an economic driver. Its large natural harbour on Lake Ontario and proximity to major markets and transportation routes made it a great place for emerging industries to set up shop. Hamilton became the home of the Canadian steel industry, which earned it some unofficial nicknames:

- the obvious "Steeltown";
- the more self-important "Steel Capital of Canada";
- the folksy "Lunch-Bucket Town", which acknowledges the tens of thousands of Hamiltonians (including my father) who actually made the steel, and;
- the sadly accurate "Armpit of Ontario".

In less than 100 years, ambitious Hamiltonians managed to despoil what they took from Indigenous residents, turning an area noted for its natural beauty into a hot polluted mess. Hamilton Harbour exemplified this environmental degradation, described by *The Hamilton Spectator* in 1969 as "a stinking, rotten quagmire of filth and poisonous waste." The Harbour was identified as one of 43 Areas of Concern by the International Joint Commission for the Great Lakes in 1987, and remains on the list, as there is much remediation still to be done.

Hamiltonians knew the Harbour was bad, but on a daily basis, their experience of the polluted state of the city was primarily through air quality and odours. "Hamilton smell" was a well-known scent that permeated the city, especially on hot, smoggy days. It's hard to describe – swampy, with metallic overtones that linger on the palate.

Throughout this sad period in Hamilton's natural history, The Mountain has stood its ground, almost in defiance, providing a lush green backdrop for the blacks and grays and reds that dominate the industrial bayfront landscape. The Mountain has been quarried, detonated, breached, contained, paved, funicularized, built upon, climbed up, skied down, hiked through, and driven along. But it has not been ruined.

The Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC) was created in the 1970s to "provide for the maintenance of the Niagara Escarpment and land in its vicinity substantially as a continuous natural environment and to ensure only such development occurs as is compatible with that natural environment." Consequently, there has been little change to The Mountain over the past 50 years (with one really big exception), sparing it from some of the worst of what our municipal government has allowed in the name of progress.

Stewardship of natural resources has improved in Hamilton since the collapse of the steel industry in the 1990s and the rise of ecological awareness and activism, although progress has often been of the “two steps forward, one step back” type. Hamiltonians have started to take pride again in the city’s natural assets. And thanks to The Mountain, Hamilton has a new unofficial nickname that would have been laughable even 20 years ago, but now seems to be gaining currency in Hamilton and beyond – “The City of Waterfalls”.

I was born on the Mountain in 1964. This doesn’t mean that I was birthed somewhere on the near-vertical slope of the Escarpment; the term “the Mountain” refers to an urban area of Hamilton that sits atop The Mountain.

Henderson Hospital, where I was born, is located on The Mountain Brow, with spectacular views of the lower city, Lake Ontario, and, on a clear day, the Toronto skyline. It was located there in 1917 to take advantage of the fresh and revitalizing air. Then, it was called the Mount Hamilton Hospital, and now it’s called the Juravinsky Hospital. But when I was born, it was the Henderson.

I don’t know where I spent the first few weeks of my life; I was in foster care, my 18-year-old birth mother having left the hospital without me. But when my adoptive parents took me home, they took me to their apartment on Upper Gage Avenue on the Mountain, within a few blocks of The Mountain Brow. (And in case you are wondering, yes, there is a Gage Avenue in the lower city. Many of the city’s primary north/south streets have “Upper” versions on the Mountain. My favourite is Upper Paradise Rd.)

Six months later, my parents rented half of a duplex in a rural area on the Mountain in Stoney Creek, one of the communities that comprises Hamilton. We lived there for about 5 years, and I distinctly remember car rides along Ridge Road and up and down New Mountain Road and Highway 20 to get from home to the lower city and back. Even though you couldn’t see The Mountain from our house, it still contributed to my sense of place. I had an awareness of being geographically “above”, with open skies and unfolding vistas that were reinforced by our rural setting. The open rock face of the Escarpment was a familiar sight, including a small waterfall, visible from the car on Highway 20, that I apparently called “Nanga Nanga”, unable to pronounce Niagara Falls but knowing they shared something in common.

Cultural geographers and environmental psychologists have done a lot of research into “sense of place”, which is generally defined as the relationship between people and places. The relationship is complex, and can be positive or negative depending on many different factors. Some of the research has focused on children and how they develop a sense of place, yielding the concept of a “primal landscape” – an early experience with place that stays with a person all their life, influencing their landscape preferences and choices.

As I think about my own choices and preferences, I can see the influence that The Mountain has had, both as a landscape feature and as a kind of platform from which to view the world.

It's hard to live in Hamilton and not feel the abiding presence of The Mountain. Hamilton is clustered around the west end of Lake Ontario, where the Niagara Escarpment echoes the sideways-V-shape of the Lake before veering northward.

There are 6 communities that comprise Hamilton, all of which were independent cities and towns before being amalgamated in 2000. The original City of Hamilton is divided by The Mountain into lower and upper parts, as is Stoney Creek. Dundas is entirely below the Escarpment; Ancaster and Flamborough are above. Glanbrook is the only one of the original communities that lacks a direct physical connection to The Mountain.

Most of Hamilton's important civic institutions are in the lower city, but not all – Mohawk College, Limeridge Mall, the Juravinsky Hospital and Cancer Centre, and the airport, to name a few, are on the Mountain. It seems like most of the city's car dealerships are also up there. And so Hamiltonians regularly traverse The Mountain via Mountain Access Roads, of which there are many. They range from narrow, winding two-lane roads to six-lane highways. Residents without cars can take buses from the downtown bus terminal to the furthest reaches of the Mountain. Bike lanes are few and forbidding, but a recently implemented program allows cyclists to go up and down The Mountain on city buses at no cost. Pedestrians use specially designed stairs that hug the face of The Mountain, as do the many people who have figured out that gravity is cheaper than a gym membership.

Yes, The Mountain is a geographic obstacle to be overcome. But it is also a geographic feature to be explored. The Bruce Trail passes through Hamilton as part of its 900-km trip along the length of the Niagara Escarpment in Southern Ontario, from Niagara Falls to Tobermory. It's the oldest and longest marked hiking trail in Canada, providing easy access to the Escarpment and its diversity of flora, fauna, terrain, and views.

Hamilton is the largest city on the Niagara Escarpment, and so its section of the Bruce Trail has a unique mix of natural and urban spaces. But the emphasis is on the natural, and so a walk along the Bruce Trail reminds you that there are still many areas of incredible natural beauty in Hamilton, despite the years of environmental abuse. Walking the Trail removes you from your everyday experience of the city and gives you time and space to contemplate your surroundings anew.

In the over-40-years that I have lived in Hamilton, I have yet to walk the entire Bruce Trail through the city. But I have been slowly chipping away at it, and look forward to completing it, so that I can better know the landscape that I have lived most of my life within sight of. As is so often the case, T.S. Eliot said it best:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.