A Family Squabble:
What’s Behind the Quest for Genesis in the Canadian Hockey World?

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Few subjects in Canadian sport arouse as much passion as debating the origins of ice hockey, Canada’s mythical national pastime. Hockey fans, hobbyists, and even a few sports scholars have been known to “mix it up” off the ice when the discussion inevitably returns to the hotly contested matter of Creationism versus Evolution. Ten years ago at the 2001 “Putting It on Ice” Conference, E. Gay Harley, likened the search for the “birthplace of hockey” to the dubious claim of Baseball’s Cooperstown, New York, and made a compelling case for the “evolutionary model,” arguing that hockey evolved, from first Amerindian-European contact onward, and that different aspects of the game developed over time in various places.¹

Evolutionary theories of hockey’s origins continue to be challenged by Canadian hockeyists pressing competing claims for Windsor’s Long Pond, Great Bear Lake, Kingston, Montreal, and Halifax-Dartmouth. Since the 200th anniversary of King’s-Edgehill School in 1988, Windsor, NS, cranked-up its campaign, adopting the town motto “The Birthplace of Hockey,” publishing Garth Vaughan’s 1996 book *The Puck Stops Here*, and capitalizing on CBC-TV’s 2002 Hockey Day in Canada celebration.² In May 2002, the Society for International Hockey Research (SIHR) took the unprecedented step of investigating and discounting the so-called “Windsor Claim.”³ Yet that same year, a Dartmouth lawyer, Martin Jones, entered the fray with a new book, *Hockey’s Home*, and civic leaders in Deline, NWT, have since surfaced with an Aboriginal claim, endorsed by the Government of the North West Territories⁴
Today avid hockey partisans continue to pore over obscure archival records, mine surviving newspapers, date Mi’kmaq hockey sticks, and assess decaying wooden pucks for further clues to hockey’s origins. In the face of mounting evidence of its evolutionary nature, what drives such enthusiasts to continue their quest? A decade after it was supposedly put to rest, this paper will look at the motives and influences behind the continuing search for the Genesis of Canadian hockey.

The raging controversy over the origins of hockey is more of “a family squabble” than an academic, historical debate. Over the past forty years, a small group of hockey enthusiasts known as “hockeyists” have been engaged in a protracted shinny contest of their own over the origins of the game. It is fed by an incurable psychological condition that might be described as “hockey madness.” William (Bill) Fitsell of Kingston, Ontario, the Grand Old Man of Hockeyists, and co-founder of the Society for International Hockey Research (SIHR), has been the leading propagator of the search for hockey’s equivalent of Genesis. “Having spent 25 years trying to shoot down the legend that hockey was ‘born’ in Kingston, Ontario,” he wrote in December 1994,” I don’t relish the task of trying to discourage the ambitious residents of Windsor, Nova Scotia, from believing that the game was first played there. Legends are more popular and lasting than factual evidence and the facts say neither center can claim to be hockey’s nativity center.”

Hockey’s most rabid zealots, the Windsor Creationists, are deadly serious and can put on quite a show. On February 24, 2001, the leading Windsor Hockey zealots were featured on CBC-TV News Saturday Report, hosted by Suhana Meharchand. Windsor’s world famous pumpkin grower, the late Howard Dill, and his collaborator retired doctor Garth Vaughan were both in fine form. “Howard Dill is hockey mad,” said CBC reporter Phonse Jessome. “But it’s not the
photos, pucks, and pennants that bring skate-toting pilgrims to Dill’s Windsor, N.S. farm out back. Long Pond, many believe, is where hockey was born 200 years ago when students put the Irish game of ‘hurley’ on ice....” Some question if it really is the pond. “There’s only one Long Pond,” says a defiant Dill. Dr. Vaughan stood by that claim, presenting the evidence of Windsor’s nativity from his 1996 book, The Puck Starts Here. That compelling message was repeated, once again, on CBC-TV’s 2002 Hockey Day in Canada Special, this time with TV personality Don Cherry of “Coaches Corner” conferring his blessing on Long Pond.

The CBC-TV Saturday Report story on Windsor’s Long Pond drove Canadian hockeyists from other places into near apoplexy. News that the Town of Windsor was twinned with Cooperstown, ‘The Birthplace of Baseball’, only added to the frenzy of debate. The Canadian television network was startled by the response to the news story promoting what came to be known as the “Windsor claim.” Debate raged in coffee shops, arenas, and sports pubs over where hockey actually originated. Old novels, lost letters, paintings, and even wooden pucks have been produced as evidence. The claim supporting Dill’s Long Pond, or another in Windsor, was challenged by the other claims for competing sites across Canada and even in New York State.

Fuelling the controversy was the perplexing question of what actually constitutes the game of hockey. Going as far back as the 1500s or earlier, ball and stick games were played on ice, taking various forms, including hurley, cricket and shinty. The SIHR, spurred on by Fitsell, launched its unprecedented commission to assess the facts of the Windsor claim. In May 2002, the SIHR research team, led by Paul Kitchen of Ottawa, ruled decisively against Windsor and adopted a rather narrow definition of hockey as “a game played on an ice rink in which two opposing teams of skaters, using curved sticks, try to drive a small disc, ball or block into or through the opposite goals.”
The SIHR report raised the ire of Windsorites and did little to settle the matter. The fact-finding mission fixated on a literary passage from Thomas Chandler Haliburton describing King’s College boys playing “hurley on ice” and dismissed it as fiction. It also did a great disservice to the massive body of research amassed by Dr. Garth Vaughan on hockey’s Nova Scotian roots far and beyond Windsor. Although Vaughan has been closely identified with the Windsor claim, as Harley pointed out, his overall thesis was, and is, much broader than that, recognizing that “hockey evolved from a number of disparate influences.”

Searching for Hockey’s Genesis continues to inspire passions that can be likened to chasing a puck on a sheet of ice. The roots of the game can be traced back not only to field hockey in the Ancient World but even into pre-history here in North America. Games that were precursors to modern ice hockey included the Mi’kmaq game known as oocharmunkunt and more is being rediscovered every year about the origin of the original hockey stick, another Mi’kmaq invention. Sportswriter Bruce Dowbiggin’s The Stick (2001) may provide the missing link. Each of the two cultures, Native Mi’kmaq and European–Irish, may have contributed to the origins of the game. Played on an open field with a crooked wooden stick and ball, hurley was not unlike the traditional Mi’kmaq game of oocharmunkunt. “In the winter climate of their new home,” Dowbiggin wrote Europeans adapted their games and equipment for use on ice. Soon the two cultures were playing alchamadijk, as the Mi’kmaq called it. The white men would call the new game hockey. And the best sticks for this new game came from the carvers of the Mi’kmaq.”

The roots of the game of ice hockey in Canada are still most likely to be found in Nova Scotia. “The cultural confluence of the various military outposts and bases, North America’s first private school (King’s College Windsor), and the cultural influence of the Mi’kmaq and the Acadians,” as Harley noted ten years ago, “established the foundation for the playing of the
game of ice hockey in Canada.”¹² More recent claims like that of Deline in the North West Territories, dating from Sir John Franklin’s 1825 expedition and off the shores of Great Bear Lake, are based upon a November 6, 1825 letter, but appear too circumstantial. That observation was also made some twenty years after similar references in and around Windsor, Nova Scotia.¹³

The origins of ice hockey, like American baseball, were evolutionary and so tracing the roots of the game should not about be about “staking claims.” Hockey mad researchers and hobbyists have played their role in unearthing “the facts” and flagging the surviving evidence, what historians refer to as “the first draft of history.” Sports history scholars like Alan Metcalfe, Bruce Kidd, and Colin Howell have challenged us to assess the origins of the game in the context of larger economic, social and cultural forces shaping the advent and development of games that formed the basis for organized sport in Canada.¹⁴ Speaking at the first Putting It on Ice Conference in 2001, E. Gay Harley put it most diplomatically: “We understand cultural growth through our symbols, heroes, and myths, but cultural phenomena (like the game of hockey) grow out of the complex interplay of productive forces, historical circumstances, cultural influences and the exchange of ideas.”¹⁵

The family squabble over hockey’s origins has run its course. Colin Howell’s Blood, Sweat and Cheers: Sport and the Making of Modern Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001) shows us the way by demonstrating the value of taking a more comprehensive approach, encompassing the economic and social forces, rooted in people’s social experiences, and explaining the transition from play to organized sport.¹⁶ Distinctions need to be made between elemental (free form) play and organized games and between the physical recreational activities of indigenous and white European societies. Instead of looking for the missing piece of evidence, it is time to begin the process of socially reconstructing the evolution of ice hockey,
over time, in a series of different places, across Canada. Doing so will allow us to situate the points of origin of critical aspects of the game, first competitive contact and hockey’s rules as well as the advent of sticks, pucks and skates, the tools of the game.

This paper takes up that challenge, building upon the work of Dr. Garth Vaughan, and seeking to trace hockey’s early roots, focusing on Nova Scotia. Pursuing creationism need not devolve into ferreting out facts, validating the evidence, and putting it on display in a museum. It begins with Vaughan’s most significant observation: “Hockey was not invented. Rather, it grew or evolved gradually from hurley-on-ice...If putting the game on ice was stage one of the process, then playing it on skates was the second step.”17

Thinking about the origins of our most popular sport will always remain connected with our sense of national identity. Popular history, written by hockey hobbyists and folklorists, has a place in creating and sustaining national myths and reinforcing belief systems. Pucklore is not, as many in the SIHR recognize, not really history because it reduces the story down to single narratives nicely covering the selected facts. History is not, as Harley reminded us, “static, carved in stone, or definitive” but rather an interpretation grounded in research and subject to change.18 So is the story of the evolution of ice hockey in a place like Windsor, Nova Scotia.

Where might the story of hockey’s evolution in Nova Scotia start? Like the society itself, it, in all likelihood, would begin with the First Nova Scotians, the people known as the Mi’kmaq. Instead of chasing down surviving letters, journals, or papers written in English or French, that search would require a mastery of the Mi’kmaq language, culture, and ways. Since it’s largely an oral tradition, the anthropologists would be more helpful than historians who toil in those dusty old archives. Studying the advent of Mi’kmaw games like oochamkunutk might take years,
piecing together oral descriptions, hunting down references in the Mi’kmaw tradition, and trying to situate the evolution of the game within the native culture. Once that is done, the next task would be to identify points of cultural transmission in the Nova Scotia frontier, exploring in more depth the metamorphosis of the Mi’kmaw game into the emerging hybrid known as alchamadijk, the likely precursor to what we call ice hockey.  

Moving on into early British North American society, Nova Scotia in the late 1790s and early 1800s might well prove to be fertile ground for explaining the evolution of hockey. Dismissing Thomas Chandler Haliburton’s fictional account, in The Attache, or Sam Slick in England, published in London in 1844, would be a missed opportunity. It is clear that Haliburton was reminiscing about his childhood as a student at King’s College School, Canada’s oldest independent school, founded in 1788, long before most other surviving institutions in Nova Scotia or elsewhere. The passage is written in the unique idiom that made Haliburton famous around the English-speaking world. It reads: ‘boys let out racin’, yelpin’, hollerin’ and whoopin’ like mad with pleasure ....hurley on the long pond ice on the ice, or campin’ out a-night at the Chester lakes to fish.”

Games were fundamental to early British Canadian boys’ schools like Kings Academy at Windsor. First known as Kings Collegiate School, the Church of England (Anglican) Academy which Thomas Haliburton attended was founded with a grant of 400 pounds sterling and opened in 1788, under the direction of Archibald Payne Inglis. It was first opened in a house near the Windsor Court House, but when the university preparatory College was built shortly after 1810, classes moved to the larger schoolhouse. The original wooden box-like College building occupied some 75 acres, very close to Long Pond and nearby Devil’s Punch Bowl Pond, and one mile from the village centre.
A clearer picture of Haliburton’s Windsor has now emerged, since the 1996 Thomas Raddall Symposium, marking the bi-centenary of the renowned writer’s birth. Young Thomas, born at Windsor on December 17, 1796, entered Kings’ Academy in the early 1800s. In 1804, eight year-old Haliburton and his friend James C. Cochrane spent much time together, acting as “village escort to the Halifax ladies who came up in the summer to get rosy cheeks, by cantering about our pure Windsor atmosphere.” Letters and journals indicate that, like the other Windsor village children, they skated and played “hurley on the long pond on the ice,” roamed the banks of the Avon River, and the St. Croix, along with another mutual friend, Samuel Cunard, the future steamship mogul. At age 14 in the fall of 1810, Haliburton entered King’s College and enrolment never exceeded 12 during his time (1810-15) as an undergraduate.

Popular images of Windsor as the “Playground of Halifax” emerged after 1816 when the first stagecoach line made the village more accessible to Haligonians. With the opening of that route, the gentry of Halifax began, in increasing numbers, to enrol their sons at King’s Collegiate and the College, where they could come on weekends, enjoy town life, and escape the noise and hustle of city life.

Outdoor games were very much a part of a boy’s daily life at King’s Academy and the College. In the early years, official historian F.W. Vroom reported that students lived a relatively isolated existence and were left to organize their own activities. With no” intercollegiate contests” and “few entertainments to lure men away in the evenings,” students like Thomas made up their own games and activities. “Games of various kinds in their simple and unscientific character,” he wrote, “could afford exercise, if not much excitement. Hockey (or shinny) and all kinds of skating on the ponds and flooded marshes in winter, and snowshoe tramps and toboggan ing were fairly common.”
Windsor’s frozen ponds were favourite spots for King’s collegiate boys playing a rough and tumble brand of “hurley on ice.” In 1876, the *Windsor Mail* ran a series called “Early Sketches of Windsor.” An anonymous writer, described in graphic detail what King’s College student life was like during his time at the college from 1816 to 1818. “The Devil’s Punch Bowl and Long Pond, back of the College,” he recalled, “were favourite resorts, and we used to skate in winter, on moonlight nights, on the ponds.” Then, he recounted a memorable incident: “I recollect John Cunard (Brother of Sir Samuel of steamship fame) having his teeth knocked out with a hurley by Pete Delancey of Annapolis.” That may well be the first reported high sticking incident in the annals of Canadian ice hockey.

Whether the first ice hockey games in British North America were played by King’s College boys or not, the game had clearly entered the popular culture of colonial Nova Scotia in the early 1800s. In January 1927, the *Acadian Magazine*, based in Halifax, published a poem with lines similar to those found in Halliburton’s *The Attaché*. It read: “Now at ricket with hurlies some dozens of boys/chase the ball o’er ice, with a deafening noise.” Two years later, the *Colonial Patriot* of February 4, 1829, carried a fascinating open letter to the editor:

Every idler who felt disposed to profane the Lord’s day, may now secure from any consequences turn out with skates on feet, hurly in hand, and play the delectable game of break-shins without any regard to laws which were made solely for the levity of manners which prevailed in the days of Charles 1st and which are declared by our Judges to be of no validity.

“Hurley on ice” was so prevalent by the 1820s that such ‘hurley-burly’ on the Lord’s Day was disrupting the propriety of early Nova Scotian society.

Early forms of hurley-on-ice evolved into ice hockey and spread throughout Nova Scotia from the 1820s onward. Games such as this did not develop in isolation from larger economic
and social forces affecting colonial society. With the rise of industrialism, small farmers and their sons in pre-industrial Nova Scotia were beginning to leave rural townships, reducing the numbers of young boys, the traditional players of folk games. Just as in Britain, elite boys schools like King’s academy and college, served as what Bruce Kidd described as “a ‘crucible’” for the development of boys through games. Informal, often brawling, outdoor games were the early precursor for ‘manly sports’ aimed at instilling athleticism, masculinity, and military bearing, and class solidarity.  

Boys attending Canada’s oldest school, King’s Collegiate School and College, were central to the diffusion of the game, since many of the students were from nearby Halifax and Dartmouth. The game spread “naturally,” as Dr. Garth Vaughan described, from Windsor to Halifax and Dartmouth, aided and supported by Irish Nova Scotians and the men of the British military garrisons. Competing claims like those of Martin Jones in Hockey’s Home that Halifax-Dartmouth was the point of origin remain largely speculative and apply more to the advent of hockey skates, pioneered by the Starr Manufacturing Company in Dartmouth.

Over a fifty-year period (1800 to 1850), in pre-industrial Nova Scotia, the game evolved from hurley-on-ice and was called ricket, wicket, and, finally, hockey. The early game drew upon the traditional skills of Nova Scotia’s indigenous artisan culture. During that time, Mi’kmaw carvers began to meet the growing demand for the first hand-crafted hockey sticks. By 1859, the Boston Evening Gazette reported that “hockey” was being played on frozen ponds in Nova Scotia and issued a request for a set of so-called “Mic-Mac” sticks.

Canada’s hockey culture has turned the intense debate over “the birthplace of hockey” from a family squabble into an ongoing spat. Since the release of the Society for International
Hockey Research report in May 2002, Howard Dill has passed away and Dr. Garth Vaughan has passed the torch to a new group of Windsorites, best described as “hockey zealots.” Two separate entities, the Windsor Hockey Heritage Centre, headed by David Hunter, and the Long Pond Cradle of Hockey museum, spearheaded by Howard’s fiercely loyal son, Danny Dill, continue to champion Windsor as the “cradle” of Canada’s most popular national sport.

Don Cherry’s pilgrimage to Long Pond on January 5, 2002, during CBC-TV’s Hockey Day in Canada, was hailed as a crowning triumph and now forms part of local legend. Visitors to the tiny Long Pond museum on Dill Farm are presented with a bulging book of news clippings testifying to Windsor’s claim to be hockey’s birthplace. One prized news feature, “Rooting Interest,” from The Boston Globe, October 3, 1991, is readily produced and testifies not only to Howard Dill’s radical passion for hockey, but to his rabid, unbridled loyalty to the Boston Bruins. When the nearby Windsor Hockey Heritage Centre, Garth Vaughan’s pride and joy, was threatened with closure, another “hockey mad” Windsorite, Dave Hunter, stepped forward to rally that floundering venture. A local folk musician, David Parker, demonstrated their spunk by recording a catchy tune, “Hockey was Invented by a Nova Scotian, that got considerable radio airplay in 2011 and early 2012. On February 11, 2012, Hockey Day in Canada, the Windsor hockey enthusiasts held their 1st Annual Long Pond Heritage Classic Game and Dinner, headlined by retired NHLers Syl Apps II and Terry O’Reilly, and featuring a round-robin shinny tournament with six teams, each representing one of the ‘Original Six’ NHL teams.

The family squabble is driven, in the case of the Windsorites, by a fair measure of fanaticism. Hockey has been embraced as Canada’s birthright and the “Windsor claim” cannot be reduced to a clinical, factual, and static assessment of material evidence. Visiting the Long Pond on Dill’s Farm, bordering Canada’s oldest school, King’s-Edgehill, takes on a mystical air,
especially when the pond is frozen over in winter. The Long Pond Hockey Calendar for 2011, headed “CANADA: The Way We Play” is pure Canadiana, extolling traditional Canadian hockey family values in a fashion putting America’s Cooperstown to shame. On these sacred grounds, Berwick hockey collector Mark Pressley, owner of the Moffatt Stick, a “Mic-Mac” original dating from 1835 to 1838, is revered as a hero for salvaging one of Canada’s greatest hockey treasures. At each appearance in Windsor and Halifax, hockey zealots gather around him like little boys seeking, once again, to touch or hold the equivalent of the game’s Holy Grail.

Canadians remain passionate about hockey and that continues to propel the unsettled debate over the origins of the game. Canada’s respected national polling firm, Environics, periodically asks Canadians to rate the importance of national symbols. Eight in 10 Canadians surveyed in March 2011 ranked hockey as an important national symbol, edging out bilingualism, but far ahead of the Queen. Such sentiments run deep among Canadians born in Canada, but hockey’s appeal is not limited to “old Canadians.” Some 49% of Canadians born outside of Canada said they watch hockey at least occasionally, compared with 64% of those born in Canada. Seventy-four per cent of immigrants agreed with 77 per cent of the Canadian born that “hockey is part of what it means to be Canadian.”

Social trends analysts like Michael Adams, President of Environics, read great significance into such public opinion findings. Hockey, in Adams’ view, remains close to our hearts as Canadians, even though fewer experience the exhilaration of playing shinny on the mythical frozen pond. Only 26 per cent of Canadians today report that they played organized hockey at a younger age, but that figure jumps to 42 per cent for men. While only 36 per cent of Canadians have ever chased the puck on a frozen pond, some 49 per cent of Canadians have played road hockey. Why does hockey continue as a national obsession? Adams offers this
assessment: “It’s these neighborhood games -- mythologized in television ads where Dad floods the backyard or Sydney Crosby shows up at the pond – that keep the idea of hockey close to the hearts of Canadians, even as many of us cringe at the excesses of the NHL’s titans.”

Hockey is Canada’s game and it permeates our popular culture. While academics and writers have been perplexed by the question of what it means to be Canadian, as Andrew Holman has aptly observed, ordinary citizens inhabiting the local library, coffee shop, or Legion lounge are decidedly more certain: “Hockey is Canadian.” And, perhaps less adamantly, to be Canadian is to be “not American.” With the 1993 appearance of Richard Gruneau and David Whitson’s *Hockey Night in Canada*, the contested nature of Canadian hockey culture was laid bare, opening up new dimensions to be explored, including hockey’s central place in our national culture, as national icon, as a place of work and entertainment, as a spectator sport, as a business enterprise, and as the source of multiple identities. In spite of these advances, national mythology remains intimately connected with the game and what is termed “Tim Horton’s Nation” breathes new life into familiar hockey tales.

Canada’s hockey creationists, a mixed group of rabid fans, zealous hockeyists, and intrepid collectors, are a fascinating collection of purists, staking claims for their hometowns and reliving a childhood and adolescence deeply affected by hockey culture. Most are steeped in the popular hockey culture espoused in popular books like Ken Dryden’s *The Game* and Roy MacGregor’s *The Home Team: Fathers, Sons & Hockey*. Since the infamous 2002 SIHR Hockey origins inquiry, Bill Fitsell and his band have produced a book of their own, *Pucklore*, implicitly accepting that the society is, in Brian McFarlane’s words, a collection of “curious chroniclers of hockey lore and legend.” With the fortieth anniversary of the 1972 Canada-Russia Super Series, the popular national hockey mythology is being re-invented for a new
generation. Jim Prime’s How Hockey Explains Canada, co-authored by Paul Henderson, soars to new heights, declaring hockey “the sport that defines a country.” Celebrationism is certain to add new fuel to the irrepressible debate over the origins of the game.

A recent book looking at Canada’s hockey obsession, written by Canadian expatriate Brian Kennedy, is entitled My Country is Hockey. It makes a compelling case for hockey as an integral part of our national mythology. “My country is hockey” is one way of looking at the question, but “hockey is my country” fits more comfortably when applied to the Hockey Creationists in Canada. For hockey zealots seeking to find Genesis, hockey is essentially their country and, to a large degree, the source of their identity.

ENDNOTES


Bruce Dowbiggin, *The Stick: A history, a celebration, an elegy.* (Toronto: Macfarlane Walter and Ross, 2001), 11.


A possible model for this challenging task of historical reclamation is Trudy Sable and Bernie Francis, *The Language of this Land, Mi’kma’ki* (Sydney: Cape Breton University Press, 2012)


Henry Roper, “Haliburton and King’s College,” in Davies, 85-86 and Appendix A.


29 West Hants Historical Museum and Long Pond Historical Collection, Windsor, Colonial Patriot, 4 February, 1829. Also cited in Poulton, 36.


33 Vaughan, Ice Hockey in Nova Scotia, 2.


36 “Hockey was Invented by a Nova Scotian,” Words and Music by David Parker, 2011. Lyrics transcribed by Bill Fitsell, 7-8 February 2012.


38 Long Pond Hockey Enterprises, Canada: The Way We Play, 2011 Calendar, Cradle of Hockey, Long Pond, Windsor, NS.


