

# CANNIFF, William

cont

Dr. Canniff's first report, based on the survey by the six policemen, noted that most city sewage disposal consisted of privies, "many little better than pits in the earth; too many are shallow and often overflowing into the yard or street. In some cases families were found with no such necessary convenience, and the street became the receptacle of the excrement."

Worried about contamination of nearby wells supplying drinking water, Dr. Canniff proposed, as the lesser of two evils, piping sewage out into the lake, even though "it is far from a pleasant contemplation that the sewage of a population of nearly 100,000 should be poured into the Bay to gradually convert it into a cesspool. . ."

Dr. Canniff increasingly found himself battling business interests as he fought for a modern sewerage and water supply system, sought to close down cow byres and pigsties within the city, to clean up filthy slaughter houses and to outlaw bad meat and adulterated milk.

Heather MacDougall's studies show that he became caught between the rising expectations of Torontonians, which led to press criticism of inaction, and "growth-oriented business men and parsimonious aldermen" on whom the health department was dependent for the support that made action possible. This no doubt contributed to his resignation in 1890.

Miss MacDougall says that in his seven-year tenure, Dr. Canniff and his staff "laid the foundations for the advances of their 20th-century successors."

Pollution is still the Toronto public health department's major concern.

Dr. Canniff's solution to sewage disposal was dilution in the lake.

According to Dr. Macpherson, "dilution is still used — every smokestack is removing waste by dilution, chemical industries that pour waste into the Niagara River are using dilution, but we are almost at the stage where we have to say that dilution is not appropriate for the disposal of any form of human waste."

The struggle against pollution goes on, even though the fight won by Dr. Canniff and his immediate successors against outright filth and contaminated drinking water allowed the health department to expand its focus. Today's concerns include aid for teen-age mothers, help for the aged and for the mentally ill, and prevention of "lifestyle diseases" such as cancer and heart disease.

"Spitting in public was acceptable then . . . probably getting the spittoons out of public places was no easier than our battles against smoking (in public places)," Dr. Macpherson said philosophically in an interview.

A soft-spoken, rumped Newfoundlanders with gentle eyes that gleam with quiet humor, Dr. Macpherson, 50, is a psychiatrist whose determination to "humanize" hospital treatment finally led to a desire to move out into the total health needs of the community, causing him to acquire additional public health qualifications. For six years he was in charge of Montreal's public health activities.

Since his appointment as Toronto's medical officer of health in 1981, Dr. Macpherson has carried out decentralization of the health department into four regional areas.



Dr. William Canniff