

## ARTICLES

### “By Wisdom, Wile or War:”

#### The Provincial Workmen's Association and the Struggle for Working-Class Independence in Nova Scotia, 1879-97

Ian McKay

##### 1

##### A Victorian Relic?

ON 14 AUGUST 1910, at 4 AM, an excursion train from Pictou County arrived in Sydney, Cape Breton. Throughout 1909 and 1910, trains bringing all sorts of people and equipment — soldiers and strikebreakers, machine guns and barbed wire — had become part of the routine of a massive, unsuccessful strike waged by coal miners for the union of their choice. But this train was different. It carried the members of various lodges of the Provincial Workmen's Association, the union the majority of Nova Scotia's coal miners had rejected in a democratic vote in 1908. The PWA had survived both its defeat at the polls and the direct challenge from the UMW in the long, bitter strikes which followed, primarily because it could rely upon the coal companies to discriminate ruthlessly against supporters of the radical rival union. A few months earlier the leaders of the PWA had paid homage to G.H. Duggan, the general manager of the Dominion Coal Company, telling him that his “affability and condescension were always matters of current comment.” Duggan, for his part, congratulated the PWA for its “loyalty and honour” in standing by the company through its troubles. In August 1910, thanks to this “loyalty between friends,” the PWA had won and was in a position to celebrate. That afternoon, the grand secretary of the PWA, John Moffatt, took the delegates out for a ride in a steamer on Sydney Harbour. The brass band and the choir performed cheerful and uplifting songs, and the music of the union's triumph was carried across the water, even into the weary, defeated communities which had tried so hard to

Ian McKay, “‘By Wisdom, Wile or War:’ The Provincial Workmen's Association and the Struggle for Working-Class Independence in Nova Scotia, 1879-97,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 18 (Fall 1986), 13-62.

defeat this union, and which now had to endure the sounds of its merry-making.<sup>1</sup>

This image of an anachronistic union clinging dishonourably to power gives us a clue to the PWA's strange fate at the hands of labour historians. The 1909-11 strikes seemed to demonstrate that the PWA was a "company union," spineless, endlessly accommodating, contemptibly antiquarian. Between such comfortable members celebrating their ill-gained victory and the radicals who ultimately replaced them as leaders of the coal miners' union there seemed (to the historians) to be an unbridgeable divide, separating the nineteenth from the twentieth century, ineffective from capable trade unionism, unprincipled partyism and patronage from radicalism and socialism. The popular historiography of the coal miners sees the PWA as the UMW's conservative forerunner, succeeding at best in winning mine safety legislation.<sup>2</sup> Institutional labour history, exemplified by Harold Logan, offered an interpretation of this "self-contained conservative organization" that differed from popular appraisals more in tone than in substance, lauding as diplomacy and caution the very traits radical writers condemned as class collaborationism. Logan underlined the PWA's legislative achievements and its intention "of maintaining conditions of output as well as obtaining a fair share of the returns to the workers," which, with the continuity and wisdom of its leadership, accounted for the "comparatively small number of sanctioned strikes and for the large measure of good will existing between operators and employees."<sup>3</sup> Work by "new labour historians," while adding a wealth of information to Logan's account, did not substantially disagree with his interpretation. "The PWA was . . . not a radical organization," argues an important recent thesis, "Its goals for improving the condition of miners placed as much emphasis on enhanced social status as on higher wages or shorter hours of labour. Its strategy for achieving these ends stressed calm negotiation with management and political involvement more than strikes."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Eastern Labor News*, 20, 27 August 1910.

<sup>2</sup> See Paul MacEwan, *Minery and Steelworkers: Labour in Cape Breton* (Toronto 1976), chaps. 2 and 3; John Mellor, *The Company Stores: J.B. McLachlan and the Cape Breton Coal Miners 1900-1925* (Toronto 1983), 9-15; *The People's History of Cape Breton* (n.p., n.d.), 5-8.

<sup>3</sup> Harold Logan, *History of Trade Union Organization in Canada* (Chicago 1928), 81. Eugene Forsey, *Trade Unions in Canada 1812-1902* (Toronto 1982), 64-7, 346-63, contributes a wealth of empirical information on the PWA but essentially confirms Logan's analysis of a cautious union anxious to avoid confrontations with employers. Forsey pioneered the academic study of the miners' movement with his *Economic and Social Aspects of the Nova Scotia Coal Industry* (Montreal 1926). C.B. Wade's unpublished "History of District 26, United Mine Workers of America, 1919-1941," Public Archives of Nova Scotia (hereafter PANS), Micro W116, n.p., praised the PWA's legislative accomplishments but dismissed its conciliatory approach to bargaining with coal companies.

<sup>4</sup> Sharon Reilly, "The Provincial Workmen's Association of Nova Scotia 1879-1898," (M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1979), 178. See also Ron Crawley, "Class Conflict

The PWA's "central doctrine of class co-operation was . . . unsuited to the tumultuous twentieth-century coalfields," concluded another assessment of the union's ideology.<sup>5</sup>

The historians of various theoretical persuasions who looked at the PWA have been in general agreement about the facts to be explained. In brief, the PWA was a conservative union. Its essence was captured in its founding documents, which outlined its central objectives: to improve the condition of workers morally, mentally, socially, and physically; to shorten the hours of labour; to obtain better legislation to make the mines and other works safer and more efficient; to insure the true weight of the miners' output at the pit, and abolish illegal stoppages at pay offices; to recover the prices and wages bargained for by its members as an equivalent for their labour; and, last but not least, "To foster habits of thrift, industry, economy and sobriety among its members."<sup>6</sup> And a conservative vision dominated its initiation rituals. "Our object," a new recruit was to be advised, "is not to wage a war of labour against capital, nor to drive trade, by oppressive measures, from the locality; on the contrary, by mutual concessions between master and man, we seek to have it carried on with advantage to both."<sup>7</sup>

It was also agreed that the leadership of the PWA had a decisive influence on the outlook and activities of its members, moderating rank-and-file activism and confining the union to the mildest forms of trade unionism. Robert Drummond, the PWA's grand secretary, was its ruling spirit, committing the union to compulsory arbitration in preference to strikes and to such moral reforms as temperance and thrift in preference to fighting for higher wages. (After all, new recruits were also warned not to "expect to force our wages above their level.") Under his rule, historians have argued, the Grand Council refused to permit strikes by local lodges on many occasions, expelled lodges guilty of "illicit" strikes, and limited the union to only four serious authorized strikes from 1879 to 1909.<sup>8</sup> In marked contrast with the radicals in the UMW, the

and the Establishment of the Sydney Steel Industry 1899-1904," (M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1980); David Frank and Don Macgillivray, introduction to Dawn Fraser, *Echoes from Labour's War* (Toronto 1975); Joe MacDonald, "The Roots of Radical Politics in Nova Scotia: The Provincial Workmen's Association and Political Activity, 1879-1906," (B.A. honours essay, Carleton University, 1977); and Danny Moore, "The 1909 Strike in the Nova Scotia Coal Field," (unpublished essay, Carleton University, 1977).

<sup>5</sup> Ian McKay, introduction to C. W. Lunn, "From Trapper Boy to General Manager: A Story of Brotherly Love and Perseverance," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 4 (1979), 222.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Labour Library, Ottawa, Provincial Workmen's Association, Proceedings of the Grand Council (hereafter G.C. Minutes), vol. I, n.p.

<sup>7</sup> G.C. Minutes, PWA initiation ceremony.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*; for discussion, see David Frank, "Class Conflict in the Coal Industry: Cape Breton 1922," in Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto 1976), 169.

<sup>9</sup> Logan, *Trade Union Movement*, 98; Reilly, "PWA," 53.

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PWA, we were told, would never countenance a strike in which all the maintenance workers of the mine were called out.<sup>10</sup>

The PWA's starkly undemocratic conduct in 1909, the copious writings of the union's two principal grand secretaries, the PWA's founding documents and minutes: such were the sources for this seemingly solid interpretation of the PWA as a conservative union, from its formation in 1879 to its disappearance in 1917. This interpretation of the PWA is pungent, persuasive, and popular; it is also, on many questions of fact and interpretation, often simply mistaken or mistakenly simple. Old questions asked of new sources, such as the recently uncovered local minutes of various PWA lodges, and new questions asked of old sources, such as the union's newspaper, the *Trades Journal*, bring us to a far different understanding of the union.

In this essay, I shall focus on the history of the PWA from 1879 to 1897, a period coinciding with the leadership of Robert Drummond.<sup>11</sup> I suggest the following reinterpretation of the PWA's nineteenth-century history. The PWA was never a centralized body and was never personified by its grand secretary; it was until 1886 an exceedingly loose federation of craft lodges, from 1886 to 1890 a somewhat more unified political and industrial movement, and from 1891 to 1897 a movement split between Cape Breton and mainland tendencies. This diversity within the union not only meant that highly militant and relatively quiescent lodges coexisted within it, but that there were equally striking ideological tensions, within both the "official philosophy" of the union as enunciated by Drummond, and within the "vernacular philosophy" of the rank and file. An over-emphasis on Drummond's vision of "class harmony" has led historians to slight his zeal for radical democratic change and working-class independence; a corresponding preoccupation with the sources composed by Drummond — virtually all the sources usually cited in studies of the union — has obscured the less articulate, less developed and far more important "vernacular" outlook of the rank-and-file miners, who were quite willing to sacrifice "class harmony" to "working-class independence." Moreover, static appraisals of these tendencies at both the upper and lower levels of the union miss crucial shifts within them over time: a shift from a heavily-qualified paternalism to an explicitly political critique of industrial and political autocracy in the mid-1880s, and a shift to a drastic polarization between progressive militants and Liberal Party traditionalists in the mid-1890s. Except for the period 1895-7, in which the leadership was co-opted by the Liberal Party, the PWA on both its upper and lower levels was serious about its pursuit of working-class political independence, and its lobbying achieved a record of

<sup>10</sup> Robert Drummond, *Recollections and Reflections of a Former Trades Union Leader* (n.p. [Stellarton], n.d. [1926]), 82.

<sup>11</sup> One should note that the history of the twentieth-century Association, whose inter-cine struggles between socialist and conservative lodges culminated in the debacle of the 1909-11 strikes (the work of the conservative rump which took control of the union after the radicals either left or were purged) is equally in need of reappraisal.

political and social reforms unparalleled in nineteenth-century Canada. The union did not shy away from strikes; it participated in some of Canada's largest labour wars in the 1880s, did not expel lodges for going on strike without permission, and fought a total of 72 strikes of various shapes and sizes in the nineteenth century, including two "100 per cent strikes" in which all the workers were pulled from the mine. Nor did the union's support of compulsory arbitration mean it had an outlook of "class harmony;" the adoption of this policy was at least partly an adroit, highly successful, political move, which outflanked hostile employers and gained the PWA support for its militant actions.

These themes are best explored by examining the three distinct periods of the PWA's development from 1879 to 1897. From 1879 to 1885, local lodges struggled within a highly autocratic setting to achieve a measure of working-class independence. After 1885, a decline in the lodges' ability to influence the workplace and counter an employer counteroffensive led the PWA to redefine itself as a political reform movement. Finally, from 1891 to 1897, the union entered into a crisis, partly as a result of its political success, and sharp differences emerged between radicals and more conservative elements which ultimately meant the end of the PWA as it had been known in the nineteenth century.

## II

### The Transformation of the Gift: The PWA and Paternalism, 1879-85

THE PWA WAS FOUNDED in 1879 by the coal miners of Springhill. Although their employer, the Spring Hill Mining Company, had recently paid handsome dividends to its shareholders, in early 1879 it imposed a reduction of 3¢ per box on wages. As Drummond later recalled, the "foolishly elated directors chuckled over the easy success which had attended to their first endeavor to add to their already handsome dividends and unwisely came to the conclusion that the men were as clay in the hands of the potter. . . ." So the directors imposed a further 3¢ reduction in August. The miners responded angrily. A letter in the *Halifax Herald* signed "A Traveller" noted that such wage reductions were unjustified, and cited the unchanged price for coal paid by the Intercolonial Railway, the mine's principal market. Gathering at a rink near the mines, the miners resolved to go on strike, and on 29 August 1879, they decided to form a union, which they called the Provincial Miners' Association. (They changed this name in 1880 in an attempt to appeal to a wider range of workers.) They elected a miner as their "Grand Master Workman," but Robert Drummond, the anonymous writer who lost his official's job with the company after writing the damaging letter on the price of coal to the *Herald*, became the union's grand secretary and its most prominent officer. Attempts by the company to stop the strike were unsuccessful: a ruthless eviction of coal miners from company

housing was foiled by the union's inventive tactic of establishing temporary shelter for its members in barns, shops, and independently-owned houses; an offer to withdraw the second reduction was met with an uncompromising demand for an advance of 3¢ per ton. This new rate was reluctantly accepted by the company's board, and the new union had its first victory.<sup>12</sup>

There was nothing unusual in Nova Scotia coal miners going on strike. Strikes in the coalfields were noted as early as 1830, and a massive coal strike had erupted in Cape Breton in 1876. But in its results the Springhill strike was far different than any other previous coal strike. Not only did the workers win — *an unusual event in the stormy 1870s* — but they built something which would live longer than the strike itself. The birth of the PWA in Nova Scotia was a decisive event in the history of the region's coal mining industry, for it meant that now the mine managers and the provincial politicians, those decisive forces in the industry, were faced with an institution they could not dominate and which sought major structural changes.

Many assessments of the PWA underestimate its achievements by overlooking the harsh terrain on which it was born and the longevity and resilience of the structures of autocracy it tried to change. The PWA's greatest single achievement in its earliest years was that it transformed the "language of class" in the coalfields. This achievement is easily misunderstood. Because the PWA often challenged autocracy from within, participating in many of the paternalist rites by which employers were honoured, and always protested its respectability and moderation, it has been easy to select gestures and actions which seem to provide evidence of the union's "inherent conservatism." But what such analysis misses is the seriousness of the PWA's challenge to a system of autocratic control which had prevailed from the early nineteenth century.

The PWA transformed a long coalfield tradition of mine managers wielding almost absolute power over the isolated coal communities. The diaries of Richard Brown, the leading manager, natural scientist, and historian of Cape Breton coalfields in the nineteenth century, show him arranging repairs to the miners' houses, making a lane, looking after fences, attending meetings of the Board of Health, instructing local clergy to urge workers to work steadily, and unilaterally setting the level of wages.<sup>13</sup> His relations with his workers were hardly conflict-free, but conflicts were generally resolved in Brown's favour. Colliers who disputed his methods of "making them work steadily" would, Brown noted in 1874, "be given the privilege of going away."<sup>14</sup> The power of employers like Brown was symbolized by the contrast between their elaborate houses and the humble cottages of the workers. The managers' mansions became celebrated throughout the province, and the provincial notability

<sup>12</sup> Robert Drummond, "The Beginnings of Trade Unionism in Nova Scotia," *New Glasgow Evening News*, 7 July 1924.

<sup>13</sup> PANS, RG21, Series "A," vol. 38, no. 11, Brown Diaries, entries for October 1879 and March 1880; No. 12, entries for April 1881.

<sup>14</sup> PANS, RG21, Series "A," vol. 38, no. 10, entry for 21 March 1874.

automatically stayed there when visiting the coal areas. J.B. Uniacke, visiting Cape Breton in the 1860s, noted the "striking residence" of one manager, with its projecting eaves, gables, tastefully constructed windows, handsome verandah, and its inside "filled up and furnished with costliness and taste," a contrast with the blocks of miners' tenements, containing several families each.<sup>15</sup> At Albion Mines (later Stellarton), the British-based General Mining Association erected Mount Rundell, where its representatives savoured an atmosphere of vice-regal elegance: there were black servants, spacious grounds, even little watch-houses to shelter men guarding the property. A woman who spent much of her childhood in the house later remembered that "One of the great delights of the Indians of those days was to drift up to the open Windows of the dining room at Mt. Rundell" to gaze upon "the wonders revealed there — a long table lit by Candlelabras, the Shining plate and glass. . . ."<sup>16</sup>

The primacy of the manager was rooted in the ability to control access to the resource through the law and the truck system.<sup>17</sup> Coal was a public resource in Nova Scotia. Although outcrops could easily and profitably be exploited by small investors and independent artisans, such activities generally contravened the law, which restricted mining of the resource to the General Mining Association before 1857 and to it and other legally licenced companies thereafter. Outside unusual areas, such as rural coalfields or the fringes of the major developed ones, access to the resource was controlled by privately-owned and generally externally-controlled companies. Although the smuggling and illegal mining of coal in unlicenced mines ("bootleg mining") bore witness to a continuing popular interest in treating coal as a common property resource, by the time of the PWA the small prospector, independent artisan, or ambitious farmer could no longer aspire to control the larger and most important coalfields.<sup>18</sup> After 1864, for most people, earning a living from coal meant working for a privately-owned but publicly-licenced coal company, either directly for a wage, or indirectly on the basis of a per tonnage contract, but in either case as a proletarian. For most miners, this relationship one of far-reaching dependence. The highly seasonal nature of mercantile coalfields still relying upon the export of coal by sea intensified the dependence of the colliers, who had to be supported through the winter by the company stores. The uncertainties of trade

<sup>15</sup> C.B. Fergusson, ed., *Uniacke's Sketches of Cape Breton and Other Papers Relating to Cape Breton Island* (Halifax 1958), 122.

<sup>16</sup> Public Archives of Canada, MG29, B31, Joseph Smith Papers, Edith M. Wagstaffe Smith to H.B. Jefferson, n.d. (c. 1952).

<sup>17</sup> There are interesting parallels between the isolated fishing communities established by Jersey fish merchants and those equally isolated communities established by the English coal merchants: both (at least in their earliest phases) were dominated by the truck system and marked by rigid stratification. See Rosemary Ommer, "'All the Fish of the Post': Property Resource Rights and Development in a Nineteenth-Century Inshore Fishery," *Acadiensis*, 10 (Spring 1981), 107-23.

<sup>18</sup> For the pervasive smuggling which afflicted the General Mining Association in Cape Breton, see PANS, RG1, vol. 461, no. 30.

meant the creation of a large reserve army of labour to serve at time of high demand and to go hungry and become indebted when demand slackened. A Cape Breton correspondent of the PWA newspaper noted in 1881 the unhappy consequences of the truck system

... there is no public work in the island without its companys [sic] store, — or as our yankee cousins term them “pluck me,” — where the workmen are supplied with all they require. These stores are a fertile source of disease. It is true they keep on hand all articles the men require, but the prices are most exorbitant. Such being the case, when work is slack, the workmen, especially if they have large families, are soon head and ears in debt, hopelessly I might add, and completely under the will of the agent, who uses the men as one uses a football. Under these circumstances if the workman sees a chance of bettering his position and pay, he requires to ask permission of his lord and master, which request is often met with a point blank refusal, or a declaration to the effect that he *may* leave *when* the store debt is paid.<sup>19</sup>

The isolation of coalfields from each other — Cape Breton was not yet connected to the mainland by railroad — also intensified the manager's directly personal power. Owner of the available housing for rent and also employer, resident scientific intellectual and overseer, political advisor and guardian of public morals: the mine manager was the central figure in an anachronistic theatre of power. The archetypal manager marched the miners to the polls, kept them alive in the winter months, and controlled even their houses.<sup>20</sup>

There are many things about class relations in these early, pre-union coalfields that remain obscure, but the potency of the patron/client relationship — the *personal* power of the manager over many aspects of life — seems securely supported by historical evidence. Colliers in this setting were in a complex class position. They saw themselves as highly skilled craft workers, and in Pictou County went so far as to establish apprenticeship restrictions to entry to their craft.<sup>21</sup> They shared many common memories and working-class traditions drawn from the Scottish coalfields from which so many of them had emigrated. On the basis of these strengths and a nascent sense of being members of a distinct class, they fought serious struggles from the 1830s to the 1870s, some of them entailing the occupation of mines and the sending of troops.<sup>22</sup> Such sudden, isolated, sporadic, and frequently violent strikes tes-

<sup>19</sup> *Trades Journal*, Springhill 1879-82; thereafter Stellarton, (hereafter cited as *TJ*), 16 (March 1881).

<sup>20</sup> C. B. Wade caught the twentieth-century glimmers of this intensive personal supervision of the coal communities when he remarked on the “fascinating pettiness” of BESCO officials, who, except at Christmas time, declined to stock candies in the Cape Breton stores, for fear of encouraging wasteful habits. C. B. Wade, “History,” n.p.

<sup>21</sup> J. S. Martell, “Early Coal Mining in Nova Scotia,” In Don Macgillivray and Brian Tennyson, eds., *Cape Breton Historical Essays* (Sydney 1980), 52-3.

<sup>22</sup> For strikes in Cape Breton in the 1830s, see PANS, RG21, Series “A,” vol. 40, no. 8, diary of an unidentified person, Sydney Mines, entry for 1 September 1831; for Pictou County in the 1840s, see C. Bruce Fergusson, *The Labour Movement in Nova Scotia Before Confederation* (Halifax 1964), 18-21, and James M. Cameron, *Pictonian Colliers* (Halifax 1974), 141-3.



tified both to the colliers' spirit and the difficulties of their situation. Strikers could be denied credit, turned out of their homes, crushed by force, and blacklisted. The managers held the high cards in these small coal communities. Resistance to them often took the form of attacks upon their persons or mansions. In Pictou County in 1842-3, a crowd of miners' wives and children smashed the mansion's kitchen windows and verbally abused the manager. In Cape Breton in 1876, angry miners threatened the manager and forcefully intimidated workers who had deserted the ranks of the strike — but, as the employer at Sydney Mines explained revealingly in private correspondence, for all the sympathy generated for the miners, they could not win. "The Board are determined to resist their demands and approve the stand I have made," he remarked confidently, adding, "it is therefore a matter of starving [them] out for which a little more time will be required."<sup>23</sup>

In 1879, for most of the 3,034 men and boys working in the coal mines of Nova Scotia — 88 per cent of whom worked in the old, well-established, highly autocratic coalfields of Pictou County and Cape Breton — nothing had changed this bleak formula for bondage, despite the brave, intermittent efforts of activists over almost five decades. The boom-and-bust cycles of mining swept thousands into the mines in the early 1870s, and then reduced them to unemployment and near-starvation in 1875 and 1876. Dissatisfied coal miners might find it far easier to leave the province altogether than fight the coal companies and the provincial government for structural reforms.<sup>24</sup>

Why, then, did the Springhill coal miners break through in 1879 where so many others had failed? Conventional approaches to coal mining history are not helpful here. According to explanations of coal miners' militancy and trade unionism which focus on the "isolation" of a "homogeneous" coal mining population, the breakthrough should have come in Pictou or Cape Breton, where the largest mass of coal miners lived, where they were most isolated, and where their conditions of life and work most closely approximated a colonial situation: but exactly the reverse was the case.<sup>25</sup> Or according to

<sup>23</sup> Dalhousie University Archives, DAL MS2 235, Rutherford Papers, file A.10, Jno. Rutherford to J.A. Morrow, 14 July 1876.

<sup>24</sup> Walter R. Johnson, *The Coal Trade of British America, with Researches on the Character and Practical Values of American and Foreign Coals* (Washington and Philadelphia 1850), noted: "The [General Mining] Association, I understand, give little encouragement to return, to those who have once left their works for the United States, and decline to employ such, unless in urgent of want of hands. I was several times asked by laboring men, miners, and others, if I thought working people could get a 'chance' now 'in the States,' meaning of course *good wages*." (21)

<sup>25</sup> For the classic statement, see Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegel, "The Interindustry Propensity to Strike — An International Comparison," in Arthur Kornhouser, Robert Dugin, and Arthur M. Ross, eds., *Industrial Conflict* (New York 1954), 189-211; for a parallel interpretation of Canadian miners, see David Jay Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier: 1897-1919," *Canadian Historical Review*, 58 (1977), 154-75.

technological determinism, some rapid change in the labour process eliminating the skilled component of the colliers' work could explain trade unionism as a response to intensified proletarianization; but no such developments can be found, and work in the mines continued to be crucially dependent on the colliers' traditional skills, on loading coal cars by hand, and on juvenile drivers and pit ponies.<sup>26</sup> (Indeed, with its wooden rails and primitive facilities, Springhill was a technical backwater of the Nova Scotia industry in 1879.)

The answer lies in two special features of the Springhill coalfield: its general economic position and its social formation. Springhill was the first industrial and the first independent coalfield in Nova Scotia. The only interior coalfield in the province, its development awaited the coming of the Intercolonial Railway. In a decade of sluggish growth and crisis in the province's coal industry, Springhill was a mecca for unemployed miners from Pictou and Cape Breton, who boosted the town's population from a few farmers and prospectors in 1871, to 900 in 1881, to 4,813 in 1891. In contrast to the "mercantile" coalfields of Pictou and Cape Breton, where managers anxiously eyed the harbours for incoming schooners, the "industrial" coalfield of Springhill had a privileged position on the ICR. Consequently this new Springhill coalfield grew rapidly in the 1870s and 1880s, while growth elsewhere was sluggish.

This economic position had a bearing on the town's peculiar social evolution. Elsewhere one found an acceptance of autocratic domination that had grown up through decades of continuous exploitation; here, a sense of breaking new ground and a company dominated mostly by Saint John commercial interests, in search of a high and immediate return on their investment. (This emphasis on the short term is suggested by their atypical disinterest in controlling the entire community and in their selling out to Montreal interests in 1883 and 1884.) In the absence of seasonal production patterns, but also because the company did not choose to impose the truck system, independent merchants picked up the business that elsewhere went to the company store. Even by 1879, many coal miners owned their own homes. The great difference between the PWA's founding strike and that in Cape Breton three years earlier was not the determination with which the miners fought, nor any flaw in the union formed for a short while in Cape Breton, but the Springhill miners' ability to fight eviction from company housing by taking temporary lodgings elsewhere in the town. Attempted in a coalfield conditioned by long years of autocratic control and with a high percentage of its work force in company housing, such a tactic would fail; in a community that was not also the manager's fiefdom, it could succeed. Contrary, then, to well-worn stereotypes of mining history,

<sup>26</sup> Skilled miners made up 42 per cent of the work force; 26 per cent was accounted for by unskilled labourers and boys underground, and 32 per cent by surface and construction workers. These proportions were similar in each of the major coalfields and did not change radically in the period 1873-97. Nova Scotia, *Report of the Department of Mines, Nova Scotia* (hereafter *Mines Reports*), 1879, (Halifax 1880), 37, and *Mines Reports*, 1873-97, *passim*.

trade unionism in both the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries flourished not where workers were most "isolated" and dependent, but where they were most closely integrated with the railway system and enjoyed a comparatively high level of independence from the coal company. The PWA was created in a highly atypical coalfield representing only 13 per cent of the coal mine employees, and by workers who had already voted with their feet and left the autocratic structures of the older coalfields.<sup>27</sup>

So the union they founded, in this atypical coal community, was like a small explosive charge set alight within a rigid and highly resistant structure of autocracy. Looking northwards to Cape Breton in 1881, and suggesting that mainland miners saw that island almost as a separate province, one Springhill militant remarked,

we were all aware the good the Association had done in N.S., and C.B. needed to be helped as much as ever Nova Scotia required. I know there are good men and true in C.B., men who would stand up morally for their rights, but that [those] men [were] crushed down of late, that they had very little spirit in them. But that spirit is [still] there and asked only to be stirred by this Association to make it burn brightly.<sup>28</sup>

The flame of independence ignited in the peculiarly favourable conditions of Springhill spread more slowly in all the other coalfields, where the mass of the miners lived.

The PWA was born in an atypical coalfield, and it was, from 1879 to 1884, generally limited to the colliers, the workers who actually cut the coal in the mine. It was not a vast general movement like the Knights of Labor, nor, despite the lodges of glassworkers and foundry workers it organized, was it really an industrial union.<sup>29</sup> It was a small, embattled confederation of colliers. They would admit other workers when they knocked on the door, but a serious interest in organizing beyond the ranks of the skilled workers in the mine cannot be found in this early period.<sup>30</sup> Even Drummond, when he talked about organizing outside the coalfields, focused on urban craft workers.<sup>31</sup> Such talk never led to a major campaign outside the coalfields, and even Drummond saw

<sup>27</sup> Of Springhill's coal mine employees in 1881, 44 per cent were of Scottish origin, 28 per cent English, 22 per cent Irish, and 4 per cent French. Springhill's growth was spurred initially by immigration from nearby Pictou County. Both of the PWA's major leaders, Robert Drummond and John Moffatt, were Presbyterian Scots who worked in Springhill after moving from the older coalfields.

<sup>28</sup> G.C. Minutes, April 1881.

<sup>29</sup> For a very different analysis, see Logan, *Trade Unions*, 81-2.

<sup>30</sup> Both the two non-mining lodges outside the ranks of the coal miners were in Pictou County and neither survived the PWA's first six years. Other organized occupational groups, such as coal trimmers and wharf workers, were closely associated with the shipping of coal.

<sup>31</sup> When Drummond discussed changing the name from the Provincial Miners to the Provincial Workmen's Association, he used the shipwrights as an example of workers who might be tempted by the new name. *TJ*, 6 October 1881.

its natural base to be the skilled colliers of the mines.<sup>32</sup> From a base of 222 members in Pioneer Lodge, the union spread to Pictou County, where three additional lodges were formed in Westville, Stellarton, and Thorburn. The union was formally initiated on 17 October 1879, with a membership of 646.<sup>33</sup> In the years from 1879 to 1885 the numbers of members would change, but the concentration on a minority of skilled colliers remained the same. Even after a highly successful campaign in Cape Breton in 1881, reported to have brought 1,292 new members into the union out of a total mine work force on the island of 1,749, the membership in good standing by 1884 constituted only 38 per cent of Cape Breton's mining work force, and only 37 per cent of the mining work force of the province.<sup>34</sup>

Organized by unusually independent colliers, the PWA in this early phase of its history did not resemble a modern trade union. Here there has been a great deal of misunderstanding, partly based on a faulty reading of the available documents.<sup>35</sup> Two areas of confusion are evident. First, it has been thought that the PWA was a tightly centralized body, whose local lodges were under the control of its governing Grand Council, which routinely disciplined lodges for disobeying its orders. Second, the grand secretary is thought to have personified this industrial union, shaping its vision and its day-to-day operations. Both assumptions are questionable. The structure of the Nova Scotia coal industry and the isolation of the coalfields one from another made a tightly centralized body impossible. "Cape Breton" was perceived to be a quite separate entity from "Nova Scotia," and while many of the leaders of the mainland lodges had worked in Cape Breton, this had served to impress them with the distinct problems of autocracy the Cape Breton miners faced. A separate Cape Breton subcouncil performed on the island the same functions as the Grand Council on the mainland; only very rarely did the business handled by this Cape Breton council come to the attention of the mainland body.<sup>36</sup> The "Grand Council minutes" of the 1880s are not the minutes of the union's

<sup>32</sup> In an interesting discussion in his *Recollections*, Drummond compared the numbers of those "in union" with those "not in union" at the various lodges in 1879. His statistics are suggestive not only because they reveal that the PWA organized only 42 per cent of all the workers in the "organized" coal mines, but also because they show that Drummond perceived its potential base to be 950 (out of a total colliery work force of 1,559). What was left unsaid, because it did not need to be said, was that the PWA's potential membership was perceived to be skilled workers of the underground and the surface. Drummond, *Recollections*, 35.

<sup>33</sup> G.C. Minutes, August 1879.

<sup>34</sup> *TJ*, 12 September 1883; *Mines Report* (1881), 45; (1884), 60.

<sup>35</sup> For example, the constitution of the PWA generally described in secondary works is that of the union in 1916; the details of the union's structure — such as the powers of subcouncils — are often misleadingly presented as though these were constant throughout the entire life of the union.

<sup>36</sup> When Copingstone Lodge of Lingan brought a case to the Grand Council in regard to three men who had been dismissed for an unknown cause, "After deliberation the Council concluded that to deal with the matter now would be usurping the authority of

executive body, but of the executive of its mainland ("Nova Scotia") section. Amalgamation of the two sections of the union was held to be desirable (although impracticable) by many PWA activists on the mainland, but was resisted by the Cape Breton lodges. Only after the island was linked to the mainland by the railway did amalgamation occur and Cape Breton delegates take their seats on the Grand Council in 1891.<sup>37</sup>

So little did the PWA resemble a centralized union that the very existence of the Grand Council was held to be a needless luxury by some activists. The demand for the abolition of the Grand Council was put forward aggressively by Cameron Lodge in Pictou, and for meeting after meeting the delegates debated whether they should meet twice a year, once a year, or at all.<sup>38</sup> Colliers resented the Grand Council's right to extract money from members, and delegates to the council remarked ruefully that it was far easier to talk about imposing levies in the Grand Council than it was in the local lodges.<sup>39</sup> When the time did come to support a strike through a general levy, the lodges responded in their own independent fashion to such appeals. The minutes of Springhill's Pioneer Lodge, which give us a rare and detailed look into the PWA of this period, reveal that the coal miners fought their numerous skirmishes with the company with only occasional references to the Grand Council — and this Springhill lodge was considered the "model lodge" of the union and the Grand Council's staunchest defender.<sup>40</sup> It is misleading to judge the PWA as a whole by the evidence from the Grand Council.

It is equally misleading to see the Grand Council as a serious adversary of local strikes. The PWA, Drummond said in his *Recollections*, "came into existence to have strikes dispensed with. Never in the course of its existence did it order a strike."<sup>41</sup> There spoke a man anxious to prettify the past. When local lodges had grievances, they went on strike, with or without the approval of the Grand Council. Such strikes were not conducted surreptitiously. "Pioneer Lodge is seething with strength," we read in the *Trades Journal*. "The short [unsanctioned] suspension acted like a charm in pulling the brothers solidly together."<sup>42</sup> When the miners of Chignecto's Progress Lodge went on a sudden strike in 1883, reports were circulated by the manager that the lodge was now

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the Sub-Council, and instructed the Grand Secy. to notify the lodge accordingly." G.C. Minutes, April 1885.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, October 1891.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, April 1884, October 1884, April 1885, and October 1886.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, April 1883.

<sup>40</sup> Minutes of Pioneer Lodge No. 1, PWA, 1882-6, Angus L. Macdonald Library, St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish (hereafter Pioneer Lodge Minutes). As these local records suggest, Drummond visited the lodge three times in these years. On one of these occasions, he did participate in negotiations with the company, but his role appears to have been that of ratifying what the lodge had already decided to do. See Pioneer Lodge Minutes, 5 March 1885.

<sup>41</sup> Drummond, *Recollections*, 49.

<sup>42</sup> *TJ*, 29 November 1882.

no longer officially connected with the PWA because it had not obtained sanction for the strike. But, said Robert Drummond in an interesting defence of the spontaneous strike:

It is almost needless to say that these reports are without any foundation whatever. "Progress" is a lodge in full connection with the Association and will be recognized as such until it acts contrary to the constitution of the society or refused to obey the behests of the Grand Council. Though the suspension of work may not have come about in the regular form, yet when the circumstances are taken into consideration, it will be seen that there was no other alternative for the work men but to suspend work for a time, until their grievance would receive consideration.<sup>43</sup>

A lodge that went on strike without the permission of the Grand Council was not guaranteed the financial support of the PWA, but neither was a lodge that received its sanction: the local lodges would decide what to give. When Springhill miners went out on local issues for a day or two, Drummond explained, "they went out on their own responsibility; the advice of the Council not being taken on the matter, as, the difference between the manager and the men was a local one."<sup>44</sup> The most that can be said is that the Grand Council was opposed to unsuccessful strikes and sought to prevent local lodges from striking before they had considered their chances of success.<sup>45</sup> There is no recorded case of the Grand Council lifting the charter of a lodge because it went on strike without sanction. In the two frequently cited cases of Brunswick and Visatergo lodges, the charters were lifted after the lodges had been forced into "dishonourable" submission by employers and disintegrated, not because the lodges had "illegally" gone on strike.<sup>46</sup> Had the Grand Council suspended the PWA members who went on strike without prior sanction of the Grand Council, it would have decimated the union's membership base.

This misapprehension stemmed from imposing twentieth-century standards and expectations on a nineteenth-century workers' movement, and the same anachronism haunts discussions of the grand secretary, Robert Drummond. Drummond was not one to minimize his own historical importance. Drummond's *Recollections*, Drummond's minute books, Drummond's newspapers (the *Trades Journal* and the *Journal and Pictou News*) — we can look, if we choose, at the PWA through Drummond's eyes alone, without really looking at his position. It was not that of a twentieth-century labour leader. Drummond lacked authority. He commanded a Grand Council that could not tell local

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 February 1883.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 October 1880.

<sup>45</sup> Drummond could also deflect criticism from himself by blaming all defeats on irresponsible lodge members. This appears the likeliest explanation of his remarks after the collapse of Brunswick Lodge in Joggins, which (contrary to historical accounts) apparently did receive sanction for its unsuccessful strike in 1884 (see *Pioneer Lodge Minutes*, 10 April 1884).

<sup>46</sup> G.C. Minutes, October 1884, October 1885. In the case of Brunswick, the strike of the lodge received very favourable coverage in the *Trades Journal* until its members signed a document giving up their membership in the PWA.

lodges what to do. At the same time as he was grand secretary, he edited the *Trades Journal*, and he was the coal miners' chief lobbyist. He was, in reality, more a "brainworker" with a close relationship to a labour movement, than a modern labour leader.<sup>17</sup> He organized the first lodges in Cape Breton and represented the PWA to the government; he did not oversee the union's daily operations, because these took place in local lodges, and Drummond did not even belong to one. Drummond's primary contribution to the PWA was as its ideologist and lobbyist; he did not direct the union because, in the absence of modern communications and bureaucratic machinery, he could not.

This loose federation of independent craft workers fought three main battles. The first two related directly to the everyday realities of the pit: the struggle for work controls, in which the local lodges fought strenuously for their members on such questions as hiring, discharge, wages, and working conditions; and the campaign for more equitable mine legislation, in which the union battled the mine managers for more equitable and effective mine safety laws. In both these areas, the PWA was successful within its own craft limits. The third main battle, the struggle to reorder class relationships and their symbolic representation, was far more complex, because there were conflicting visions among coal masters and coal miners over what the proper class relationships in the coalfield should be.

The topic of the PWA's nineteenth-century workplace struggles has been subjected to a detailed examination only in the case of Pioneer Lodge in Springhill, which grappled with such crucial questions as hiring, discharge, and mine management. The lodge handled 137 individual cases in the period 1882-6, about 36 per year. With a membership in February 1884 of 317 and in September 1884 of 286, obviously only a minority of colliers in the union brought cases to the local. The lodge played a relatively passive role in the generation of these grievances: a majority of cases were brought up by one worker or one working team. No less than 92.9 per cent of the cases concerned the mining and loading of coal, perhaps the most persuasive indication we have of the domination of the PWA by the colliers. The lodge won one-third of the eighteen cases concerning hiring, two out of eight cases concerning discharge (four of which were concluded indecisively), and 24 out of 72 cases concerning wages (compared to 41 cases ending in compromise or with no classifiable results, and only six outright defeats). An approach to the PWA which emphasizes its preoccupation with moral and legislative reform as opposed to its economic demands is misleading, because local records reveal hard, tenacious bargaining over wage and other economic questions. Pioneer's insistence on negotiating such questions was ruefully noted by the mine manager, who was asked in 1888, "How do you regulate the price [for coal cutting] — just by personal inspection?" After he answered, "Yes," the next question was, "The men have no say in the matter?" And to this he replied, "Yes: they have a great

<sup>17</sup> See Russell Hann, "Brainworkers and the Knights of Labor: E. E. Sheppard, Phillips Thompson, and the *Toronto News*," in Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrigan, eds.,

deal to say in the matter and they do not be long telling you about it either."<sup>48</sup> Pioneer always had a great deal to say about any number of mining matters. Overall, it had a fair bit of success in its workplace struggles. Taking only those cases which were contested by the company, we find the results to be: 4.1 per cent unknown, 28.5 per cent won by the workers, 32.6 per cent by the company, and 34.7 per cent compromises. Such evidence shows the colliers enforcing an unwritten code of controls which both master and worker had to respect.<sup>49</sup>

How typical was Pioneer Lodge? We unfortunately cannot yet compare the results from its records with analogous estimates from other contemporary lodges. However, newspaper evidence establishes that other lodges throughout Nova Scotia were partly successful in establishing the same kinds of controls. Lodges in Pictou County resembled Pioneer's range of interests and craft orientation. One reads of colliers in Pictou fighting inadequate arrangements for double-shifting, alleged unfairness in the allocation of places in the mine, and discrepancies in wage payments; they fought so vigorously, in fact, that Robert Simpson, the agent of the Intercolonial Coal Mining Company in Westville, was moved in 1881 to decry the "dictation of the PWA or its lodges in matters of direct management," which threatened to "subvert colliery discipline" and render the conducting of business on business principles impossible.<sup>50</sup> At one Cape Breton colliery in the same year the managing committee reported very satisfactory negotiations with "our Worthy Manager" on the rates for winter work; at Little Glace Bay in 1883 the PWA reported negotiations with the company concerning its habit of abstracting for its own profit some of the "riddled coal" produced by the miners; the same union requested, as did Pioneer Lodge, that the manager send down the picks into the pit instead of forcing the workers to carry them down; the union at Blockhouse reported negotiations with the management concerning excess steam exhaust from a mine pump; at Sydney Mines in 1885 we read of "some dissatisfaction about a 'cable' and the Man. Com. are earnestly looking for the agent" and of negotiations over the allocation of places in the mine; the defence of mine workers' wages was cited by one correspondent from Little Glace Bay as a major benefit of the union in 1885.<sup>51</sup> Everywhere the PWA seems to have sought these direct controls over the aspects of the workplace, in some places, such as Cape Breton, the path to them was steeper and rougher than it was elsewhere.

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*Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto 1976), 35-57.

<sup>48</sup> *Royal Commission on the Relations of Capital and Labour*, Nova Scotia (Ottawa 1889) (hereafter *RCRCL*), evidence of William Hall, 298.

<sup>49</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Ian McKay, "Industry, Work and Community in the Cumberland Coalfields, 1848-1927," (Ph.D. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1983), 695-745.

<sup>50</sup> *Halifax Herald*, 23 April 1881.

<sup>51</sup> *TJ*, 5 October 1881; 2 May 1883; 30 May 1883; 18 July 1883; 20 May 1885; 2 December 1885.



The PWA's effective campaign for mine safety legislation extended this workplace campaign to a provincial level. The Mines Regulation Act of 1873 and other statutes created a protective framework, but one which, as Donald Macleod observes, was marked by a "subtle class prejudice." Mine managers, for instance, had the right to propose "special rules" for a mine which, if approved by the commissioner of mines, had the force of law; moreover, a conservative interpretation of the act through the 1870s downgraded the role of the commissioner of mines. Disasters at Pictou County's Foord Pit prompted a campaign for more effective mine inspection, through the appointment of deputy mine inspectors. The PWA demanded and won amendments to the Mines Regulation Act that stipulated overmen and underground managers would be licenced through examination of practical safety questions of mining. These and other reforms were won by the PWA through mass petition campaigns, enthusiastic lobbying, and clever propaganda in the *Trades Journal*. Some of the victories were qualified by the subsequent tardiness in enforcing new regulations, but there can be no denying the extent and importance of the safety reforms won by the PWA in the early 1880s, achievements to be savoured all the more for having been won in the face of vigorous opposition from the mine managers. (Richard Brown, for one, denounced the "meddlesome spirit" which had infected the miners.<sup>52</sup>)

The PWA had won dramatic public victories in its campaign for mine safety and equally significant if less reported achievements in its workplace struggles. Yet in many minds these achievements were less significant than the PWA's ideological struggle to win recognition for the miners as a class of independent, skilled, and respectable workers.

As such historians as Alan Campbell, Royden Harrison, and Rolande Trémpé have noted, the concept of skill applied to a mining work force is a problematical one.<sup>53</sup> The skills of the colliers, the independent judgement and caution required for work in the small rooms and bords of the sprawling nineteenth-century mines, the payment of wages according to output — these gave them cause to see themselves as skilled trades workers. The roughness of colliery work and the intangibility of its skills, the conditions of stark dependence in colliery towns, and (most crucially) the fact that the collier's most precious skill, the ability to tell a safe from an unsafe workplace, had no easily measured exchange value, meant their claim to be considered skilled and respectable workers was frequently not honoured in the outside world.

<sup>52</sup> Donald Macleod, "Colliers, Colliery Safety and Workplace Control: The Nova Scotian Experience, 1873 to 1910," Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1983), 226-53; quotation from Brown at 238.

<sup>53</sup> Alan Campbell, "Skill, Independence, and Trade Unionism in the Coalfields of Nineteenth-Century Britain, with Particular Reference to Scotland," Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1981), 155-74; Royden Harrison, introduction to *Independent Collier: The Coal Miner as Archetypal Proletarian Reconsidered* (New York n.d.), 5; Rolande Trémpé, *Les Mineurs de Carmarx* (Paris 1971), 1, 113.

This tension is crucial to any understanding of the PWA's ideology in these years. That ideology was consistently one of independence tempered by paternalism. These two conflicting outlooks, which labour historians have too often seen as mutually exclusive, were combined in the language of the PWA, not just in its formal expression by Drummond, but in the vernacular of the rank and file.

The language of this early craft union was suffused with rituals drawn from fraternal orders. Secret passwords, solemn oaths, imposing titles, regalia: the PWA drank deeply from the bottomless well of Masonic lore. This ritualistic aspect was not confined to the leadership; within rank-and-file lodges we find an insistence on the wearing of proper regalia for parades, and even debate over whether lodge members should routinely wear the regalia at every meeting.<sup>54</sup> Some colliers regarded the PWA as a lodge in the same category as fraternal orders. The expenses of the Grand Council, wrote one member from Pictou County, were excessive when compared with similar councils in other orders — like the Oddfellows, for instance.<sup>55</sup> The first meeting of Pioneer Lodge was held in the Orange Hall in Springhill.<sup>56</sup> The language of honour and self-respect we find in the early documents of the PWA reflects the influence of the secret societies, and recalls earlier colliers' lodges in Scotland.<sup>57</sup> The PWA, like the fraternal orders, stressed the self-respect of its members.

Yet at the same time we find, throughout this early PWA, a very marked development of paternalist gestures. In Springhill, workers held a public meeting eleven months after the strike which founded the union in honour of their general manager, William Hall. He was congratulated for "his changed attitude towards the lodge, and for the gracious manner he now received committees from the lodge, as compared with a year ago." It was, remarks Drummond in his *Recollections*, a roguish reminder of former antipathy.<sup>58</sup> Two years later the colliers presented Hall with a loving cup as a token of their esteem. In Pictou County, regret was expressed that Fidelity Lodge did not receive a notice of the visit of their employer, Sir George Eliot, to whom they wanted to give a

<sup>54</sup> Pioneer Lodge Minutes, 18, 25 October 1883: on 25 November 1884, the lodge resolved "that the Sectory write to G Sectory for a new Set of Rituals as they wear some of them lost and the Remainder wear getting pretty well used up." (All quotations from lodge minutes preserve original spelling and punctuation.)

<sup>55</sup> *TJ*, 28 September 1881. Almost identical comments were made within the Knights of Labor in Ontario: see Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880-1900* (Cambridge 1982), 286.

<sup>56</sup> *G.C. Minutes*, "Formation of Provincial Miners' Association," August 1879.

<sup>57</sup> See Alan Campbell, *The Lanarkshire Miners: A Social History of Their Trade Unions, 1775-1874* (Edinburgh 1979), chap. 11, for a discussion of the "free colliers" movement in Scotland, which combined freemasonry with Scots nationalism. The Scots who dominated the early PWA might well have been directly influenced by this precedent.

<sup>58</sup> Drummond, *Recollections*, 47-8.

presentation.<sup>59</sup> When the daughter of Robert Simpson, manager of the Drummond Colliery, got married, "The Drummond colliers presented a rather animated appearance on Tuesday of last week by a liberal display of bunting and the firing of cannon, the occasion being the celebration of the marriage of one of the amiable and accomplished daughters of the manager to Dr. Linden. . . ."<sup>60</sup> In 1884, the PWA lodges sponsored a contest to pick the most popular Cape Breton and mainland managers. The Cape Breton manager winning the most number of votes was to be presented with "a massive gold-headed cane" at the anniversary celebrations of the PWA. High feelings were aroused by this contest. It was contended that irregularities had marred the voting, and that the winner had corruptly purchased votes — an allegation heatedly denied by Equity Lodge of Caledonia Mines, whose manager had won the contest.<sup>61</sup> The following summer, a similar contest centred on a silver tea service, to be given to the most popular cashier.<sup>62</sup> Although such rituals of gift-giving were most often initiated by the workers, managers and officials also gave gifts to their workers: R.G. Leckie bestowed a reading room on his (the union minutes privately recorded the opinion that he was a "perfect gentleman") and Mr. Robert Simpson was acclaimed in the pages of the *Trades Journal* for his generous donation to the Westville Union Cornet Band.<sup>63</sup> In 1885, the International Coal Company presented its employees with a library containing some 200 volumes.<sup>64</sup>

If, on every one of these occasions of gift-giving between coal miners and coal masters, we open a card marked "conservatism," or a reference under "deference," our collection of citations shall soon be full to overflowing, for such rituals were common, mostly in the period 1879-84. But would we have really explained anything? Would we not have missed the central problem, which is that the same colliers who made these presentations also fought the managers with determination and resilience?

Gifts are not innocent; they suggest not just supplication and subordination but an assertion of reciprocal rights and obligations. And these gifts were less innocent than most, for they were accompanied by a strenuous critique of their recipients. Colliers writing in the *Trades Journal* discussed the miners' ulterior motives in bestowing compliments and gifts upon their managers quite frankly. We read in a report from Pictou:

Our gentlemanly manager is I am afraid losing "caste." The men in the past have been too profuse in their compliments, and it has had a contrary effect to what was anticipated. They were too lenient; they gave him an inch, he now demands all. He told a committee of men who waited on him for driving the new slopes, that he could get

<sup>59</sup> *TJ*, 23 September 1885.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 September, 11 October 1882.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 9 July; 2, 6 August; 10, 24 September 1884.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 August 1885.

<sup>63</sup> Pioneer Lodge Minutes, 1 May 1884; *TJ*, 13 April 1881.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 February 1885.

plenty of men to work them at his offer, and pooh-poohed the idea of the compromise the men had made.<sup>65</sup>

That paternalist gestures were not taken completely at face value was explicitly documented in the *Trades Journal*, where we find this polemic against the proposed wage reduction in Springhill:

In last issue notice was taken of a letter sent by the Managing Director in answer to one sent by the men through the Man[aging] Committee to him, I am not going to make any comment on that note any farther than to remark that the iron under the velvet was clearly shown, and that many were confirmed in their first opinion that the M[anaging] D[irector] was — too sweet to be wholesome. . . . The days of being made to swallow taffy enough to receive a reduction with a hurrah, are past. . . .<sup>66</sup>

Of the boss at Bridgeport, it was said,

Mr. Johnston has a peculiar way with him when asked what the pay is. No one would like to see Bridgeport bosses being roasted in the furnace of the *Journal*. Yet perhaps it will be necessary to give them a taste and not a slight taste either, of the fire. Mr. J. is one of the very finest men, but [except] when he wants you to go down hill 10 to 15 feet, and you working in the solid, and all for nothing. Some of the men feel so kindly to him, that they may present him with a sun dial for surveying in the mine, as they are sure it would do better work than that old Compass, which must have been the kind Noah used in the Ark.<sup>67</sup>

The popularity contest for Cape Breton manager not only rewarded managers who had earned the respect of the men, but was accompanied by a "humorous" critique of the authoritarian masters who were unlikely ever to qualify. This humorous bringing together of admiring words for fine bosses with a telling critique of their management of the mines is wholly typical of the early PWA. It is even found, in rough form, in the wry commentary of the secretary of Pioneer Lodge in 1884: the managing committee, trying to settle a grievance, "went out and after some time returned reporting they could not get a chance to speak to the manager who was engaged in a prayer meeting[.] The Com[mittee] advised the men to stay home tomorrow and let the manager look for the com. awhile. . . ."<sup>68</sup> They did, and he came to terms.

The gift represented the reciprocal rights and duties embodied in a subtle and developed system of paternalism (in which important concessions were made to the rights of workers) rather than the crude, iron-fisted style of autocracy.<sup>69</sup> It made concrete and visible a subtle message about class; its very concreteness euphemized the brutal realities of power. The strategy of deferen-

<sup>65</sup> *TJ*, 16 March 1881. The *Trades Journal* also criticized a Westville "treat" called by the company to celebrate the striking of new coal seams, and concluded: "The sooner the plan of soft soaping the men by a treat is abolished the better. Let the money be added to the men's pay." 20 July 1881.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 August 1884.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 August 1882.

<sup>68</sup> Springhill Minutes, 19 February 1884.

<sup>69</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge 1977 [1979]), 4-12. For explorations of paternalism, see Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics*:

tial gift-giving adopted by lodges within the PWA had at its core an implication that colliers were, in a significant sense, on the same level as the managers. For managers to accept their gift meant acknowledging their workers counted for something, it meant setting in motion cycles of reciprocity whose outcome could embrace far-reaching concessions to working-class rights. To accept a gift means to acknowledge the potential for (or risk of) a reciprocal relationship.<sup>70</sup> Collective gift-giving was qualitatively different than frequent individual attempts to curry favour with managers. (Heated polemics in the *Trades Journal* suggest that some miners went to the managers' churches in order to win their attention, did their utmost to meet them casually on street corners, and above all else, avoided union meetings in the hopes that word of their "loyalty" would win the managers' approval.)<sup>71</sup> Such individual attempts to ingratiate oneself with managers were understandable within coalfields influenced on virtually every level by their power. The PWA unremittingly opposed them. Miners who blindly followed the political lead of their bosses were contemptible; those who curried the manager's favour were described with enough detail to allow their neighbours to know who they were. "A number of men after their days work was over were engaged 'throwing the stone' when the cry of 'manager' was sounded," wrote a Cape Breton correspondent of the *Trades Journal* in 1881. "Like children, startled by the cry of 'the Bobby,' the men dropped the stone, and slunk away as if they had been engaged in something nefarious."<sup>72</sup> And managers who went beyond the perceived limits of their authority were opposed. The suspension of a worker in Springhill merely for being a participant in a prize fight was fought vigorously by the lodge and overturned.<sup>73</sup> Newspapers that slavishly followed the views of the managers were roughly mocked: the *Trades Journal* suggested the *Pictou Colonial Standard* might find itself before the courts for a breach of moral law, for having bowed down and served "the likenesses of certain men styled managers

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*The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England* (Brighton 1980), and Bryan Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800-1980* (Toronto 1983), chap. 1. Paternalism, in my usage, is quite distinct from the mere consolidation of power in the person of the employer, and also from a deeply rooted mentality of deference, acquired at birth and implanting unquestioningly accepted categories of subordination. It entails bargaining with the hegemony of the employer and developing reciprocal relations which permit working-class independence.

<sup>70</sup> As Dostoyevsky made plain when he had one abject character remark to his superior: "Don't be offended at me for making this offer. . . . I am so thoroughly conscious of counting for nothing in your eyes, that you can even take money from me. You can't take offence at a gift from me." *The Gambler/Bobok/A Nasty Story* (Harmondsworth 1966), 44.

<sup>71</sup> *TJ*, 19 December 1883.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 July 1881.

<sup>73</sup> *Amherst Evening Press*, 21 August 1891.

and did after an abject manner worship them. . . ."<sup>74</sup> Collective rituals of paternalism — "honourable," "sportsmanlike" gestures — were the opposite of "unmanly," craven testimonials to untrammelled power. Given the age-old and pervasive grip of the managers upon many coal communities, paternalist rituals may well have helped many miners rethink equally well established traditions of deference and start their difficult transition to independent collective thinking.<sup>75</sup>

The same contradictory unity of submission and independence we find within the paternalism of the early PWA is also lodged at the very heart of the union's ideology, as found in the writings of its only major intellectual figure, Robert Drummond. Seeing Drummond clearly is difficult. His abandonment of trade unionism and his twentieth-century writings in support of the increasingly monopolist coal companies made him an odious figure to socialist and communist miners.<sup>76</sup> His own *Recollections*, which he wrote in his seventies and eighties, took pains to portray his career as one of moderation and sanity, equally opposed to vulgarity and roughness among the miners and headstrong conservatism among the managers. When he died in 1925 the *Halifax Herald* portrayed him as the "industrious Scot" possessed with "the unquenchable ambition of his race."<sup>77</sup> Drummond filled column after column with his thoroughly Victorian views on thrift, sobriety, and getting ahead. One of the great formative books of his life was Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help*, and he was upset that "young men with aspirations" had neglected Smiles' work.<sup>78</sup> His reports to the Grand Council, filled with censorious remarks about the impetuous rank and file, the march of improvement, and the virtues of liberalism, stick in the mind as the long, unrelenting drone of a kirk elder. He was, unsurprisingly, a devout Presbyterian; and as an enthusiastic advocate of temperance and a justice of the peace he had forcefully attacked the rum-sellers of Springhill, continued to carry favourable reports of such vigilantism in his *Trades Jour-*

<sup>74</sup> *TJ*, 22 November 1882.

<sup>75</sup> The revival by the most right-wing faction of the PWA of paternalist rituals during the strikes of 1909-11 was unaccompanied by any critique of the coal companies and came after the emergence of full-scale radicalism within the union: their meaning was consequently far more unambiguously conservative.

<sup>76</sup> See Drummond's *Recollections*, and as well the pamphlet he produced for the coal owners, *Memorandum on Reciprocity in Coal* (n.p., 1910); *Minerals and Mining Nova Scotia* (Stellarton 1918); "The Mine and the Farm," *Transactions of the Mining Society of Nova Scotia*, 19 (1914), 49-58. J.B. McLachlan, who filled his shoes as the miners' chief spokesperson in the radical early twentieth century, described Drummond's *Maritime Mining Record* as "a bi-monthly jaundiced journal, edited by an old, unnatural green-eyed prudence of antiquity, who, with rotten heart and gangrenous brain, can jabber and grimace against all discontent in a fashion that is heartily endorsed by your boss, as evidenced by the amount of advertising he gives this atrabilious freak." *Eastern Labor News*, 12 November 1910.

<sup>77</sup> *Halifax Herald*, 28 December 1925.

<sup>78</sup> *Maritime Mining Record*, 8 August 1900.

nal, and successfully fought for legislation which made liquor-selling within one square mile of a colliery an offence.<sup>79</sup>

Middle-class, priggish, blind to class conflicts, ultimately a sell-out: the indictment of Robert Drummond has been unforgiving. It has also been far too simple. Forgetting the tendency of old repentant radicals to present the enthusiasms of their past in the most respectable light, historians found it only too easy to take Drummond's *Recollections* as a representative statement of a journalistic career of five decades. It comes as a considerable surprise, after meeting Drummond in his *Recollections*, to meet a very different Drummond in the *Trades Journal*, using his salty wit and his easy familiarity with the Scottish intellectual traditions to mount a consistently radical attack on slipshod mine management and undemocratic governments. From 1879 to c. 1895, Drummond was a consistent Scots Radical, whose main inspiration (apart from Robert Burns) was the tradition of the Scottish colliers and their leader, Alexander MacDonald.<sup>80</sup> He knew more of Scotland than he did of Canada, and wrote of returning to the homeland (as he did several times) as the fondest dream of the Nova Scotia colliers.<sup>81</sup> (The *Trades Journal* devoted space to the plight of the Skye crofters and to Gaelic-language journalism.)<sup>82</sup> One senses in his enthusiastic response to Henry George, his contempt for the extravagance of the Royal Jubilee, and his support of women's suffrage, the underlying grid of his Scottish democratic radicalism.<sup>83</sup> He admired the iconoclastic journalism of the *Toronto News*, which he called "a true advocate of 'labor rights' and whose articles on current topics are the production of a master hand, racy, readable and logical. . . ."<sup>84</sup> (Many of Drummond's more vehement editorials could as easily have been written by Phillips Thompson.) For the *Canadian Mining Review* in 1891, Drummond was that "little man" who "legislates without much check or control in the provincial parliament in return for a pledge of the labour vote," — a reminder, perhaps, that much as we may disparage his rhetoric of moral improvement and righteousness, these were effectively employed against employers and politicians to give the PWA an unrivalled record of winning important reforms from the government.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>79</sup> PANS, micro: Places: Springhill, Minutes of the Springhill Temperance Reform Club, records Drummond's leading role in the temperance movement in the late 1870s; *TJ*, 22 June 1881, his smashing of liquor casks.

<sup>80</sup> For glowing accounts of MacDonald, see *ibid.*, 9 November 1881, and 18 January 1882.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 August 1885. Drummond, like his radical nemesis J.B. McLachlan, was also a devout admirer of the poetry of Burns, but their separate critical interpretations reflected two very different minds: Drummond saw a poet of individual advancement and Scots pride, and McLachlan the poet laureate of the social revolution.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 August 1885, 6 June 1883, 9 September 1891.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 August 1887 — in debate with the *Halifax Chronicle*: *ibid.*, 22 June 1887, 27 May 1885, 28 January 1885.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 July 1885.

<sup>85</sup> Cited in Donald MacLeod, "Colliers, Colliery Safety and Workplace Control," 236.

For Drummond, it seemed a simple matter of democratic common sense that managers of coal mines were public officials subject to public scrutiny. "When a person accepts a position in what may be called 'public work,' where there are large numbers of men employed, whose comfort depends on the manner in which he performs his duties, I think that he should place himself in a position, where it is quite allowable that his acts should be criticised," Drummond argued. "The day is passed I think when workmen can be denounced for bringing the acts of their bosses to the notice of the public. The plan of exposing the failings of our bosses is an effective one, and no doubt makes them careful to avoid errors in the future."<sup>86</sup> Drummond did not mean mild criticisms couched in general terms. He meant scathing denunciations of well-known individuals for dishonesty, slipshod work, and autocracy. Some Cape Breton shopkeepers were afraid to carry the *Trades Journal* for fear employers would victimize them; some managers wrote to Drummond to complain about the way he had depicted them. Many of Drummond's commentaries on mine safety would today be considered libellous.<sup>87</sup>

Drummond never developed an alternative economic policy for what he liked to call the "people's coal," and his voluminous economic writings go little beyond an uncritical boosterism. He praised the development of monopolies in the coalfield, which he thought had rescued the miners from the anarchy of competitive production in the 1870s and 1880s. Rethinking an earlier enthusiasm for the National Policy, he embraced reciprocity in coal in the late 1880s, but changed his mind again as he drew closer to the coal companies.<sup>88</sup>

Drummond spoke for, but did not "embody," the PWA. How many trade unionists shared his ardent Presbyterian rationalism is debatable. "Pioneer [sic] Lodge opened in Regular form M[aster] W[orkman] in Chair Readings of Minutes was dispensed with as the Sec[retary] and most of the members were absent having to attend [sic] the performance [sic] of a Card Sharper and patent medicine's hack at rogues Corner:" both the form and content of this 1884 entry in the Pioneer Lodge minutes suggest a divergence between the articulate "improving" secretary and the mass of the union's members.<sup>89</sup> Drummond did speak for many miners when he urged the importance of temperance — drunkenness was rife in the mining towns and posed a threat to mine safety and earnings — but miners' payday continued to be lively despite his warnings.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>86</sup> *TJ*, 10 August 1881.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, 22 December 1880.

<sup>88</sup> *Maritime Mining Record*, 3 August 1898, 17 August 1898; Robert Drummond, "The Coal Trade and Reciprocity," in the Dominion Coal Company, Limited, *et al.*, *Memoranda Respecting Reciprocity in Coal* (n.p. [Halifax], n.d. [1910]), 45-6.

<sup>89</sup> *Springhill Minutes*, 14 August 1884.

<sup>90</sup> There was, however, widespread interest in the ideas of temperance within the lodges. On the question of temperance, perhaps the most explosive political issue of the day, some lodges, such as Gladstone Lodge in Pictou, had long held to the least



Lodge dances and celebrations were rough, uninhibited affairs.<sup>91</sup> Commonly seen as a leader who manipulated the rank-and-file miners for his own ends, Drummond could also be seen as a respectable figure the miners used to put the best possible case for their demand for power in the workplace.

One sees the most dramatic confluence of rank-and-file directness and earnest moral improvement in the discussion of strikes in the PWA. (There were 39 PWA strikes and lockouts in the years from 1879 to 1885.) One of the least successful was that involving Brunswick Lodge in the notoriously backward Joggins coalfield, whose approximately 126 rural members lived in an area untouched by the railway or many other civilizing influences. Interpretations of the union's development here have questionably stressed the unqualified paternalism of the workers.<sup>92</sup> When the Joggins miners tried to negotiate with the company in 1884, the manager "drew off his gloves and said, 'let me have a stump to place my back against, and I will lick the whole crowd of you.' " When the company declared a lockout, threatened to discharge every union officer, and promised to pay \$10.00 to each worker who abandoned the union, events took a violent turn. The manager hurled a piece of iron at a black miner who came to collect his wages; he missed, but the miner hurled it back, hitting the manager on the head and causing blood to flow. Such episodes revealed much about the struggles between independence and autocracy in remote coalfields, but even more revealing was the editorial response of the *Trades Journal*. After covering the manager's initial threats to the lodge, the account noted: "The right man wasn't on the Committee that time, or there would have been a bee on that manager's nose, and a hill on the side of his eye." After relating the episode in which the manager was attacked and bloodied, the newspaper remarked, "Although Mr. B. [the manager] was the aggressor, and set a bad example, it is a pity the miner threw the piece of iron at all. Being a powerful man he could easily have laid the agent across his knee, and given him a proper, and some might say deserved, spanking."<sup>93</sup>

An even more striking glimpse of the "other face of respectability" is provided by the commentary accompanying the battle for Lingan. This struggle was sparked by the effort of the General Mining Association to rid itself of the PWA. This strike affecting about 102 employees endured from 8 March 1882 until 24 April 1883. (It was thought to be one of the longest strikes in

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compromising positions, even demanding the dismissal of workers found to be selling rum. Such strongly-held temperance convictions — which we find at the base as well as the summit of the union — could obviously conflict with the demands of unity, although in the PWA rum-sellers and blacklegs were considered "of the one kidney." *TJ*, 3 August 1881, 2 July 1884, 4 October 1884.

<sup>91</sup> See the description of festivities to mark Pioneer's anniversary in 1891 in the *Amherst Evening Press*, 2 September 1891.

<sup>92</sup> Forsey, *Trade Unions*, 347; Reilly, "PWA," 111. It has been claimed, for example, that the miners actually named their lodge after their manager (on the strength of a report in the *Trades Journal*, 28 February 1883), but this was not in fact the case.

<sup>93</sup> *TJ*, 8 March, 11 June 1884.

nineteenth-century Canada.) The trouble at Lingan can be traced back to the very beginnings of the PWA in Cape Breton in 1881, which prompted the employers in August 1881 to form the anti-union Cape Breton Colliery Association.<sup>94</sup> Part of their strategy, it turned out, was to destroy such PWA lodges as Copingstone in Lingan, whose members were presented with a yellow document in December 1881. Failing to secure the reinstatement of fired union members, Copingstone Lodge declared a strike. The company retaliated by recruiting strikebreakers in Scotland, but Drummond, who happened to be in Scotland when the trouble began, was on the vessel carrying the strikebreakers and converted them to the cause of the union. The strike continued into 1883. The names of members who defected from the ranks were listed as "blacklegs" in the *Trades Journal*, and the union sent pickets to persuade them to stand by the strikers. A riot ensued, during which the homes of strikebreakers were entered. The militia was called. Finally, the company agreed to meet with the PWA, and on 24 April 1883 the strike was called off, with a settlement allowing the union to exist but imposing a wage reduction. In June, one of the Lingan militants was convicted of assault and sentenced to ten months' imprisonment.<sup>95</sup>

The Lingan events suggested just how hard autocratic managers like Richard Brown and Donald Lynk would fight against any dilution of their power, but it also brought to the surface the "other side" of respectability, the genuinely radical aspect of the PWA's ideology in both its rank-and-file and official aspects. Drummond's attack on the management of the GMA was unrestrained. When the *Cape Breton Advocate* praised manager Lynk's "energy and determination" in keeping the mine open with strikebreakers, Drummond wrote,

Yes the manager has shown *wonderful* energy and determination. In ten months he has succeeded in getting 10 nondescripts to go to work, and that by many promises which will never be kept, by resorting to subterfuges which upright men would scorn to employ. . . . He tells a widow that she will receive no more coal unless her son goes to work, and the poor fellow is forced to go.

When the *Advocate* advised Drummond that strikes had never accomplished anything, Drummond indignantly replied,

When the *Advocate* says "strikes" never did good, it goes in the face of all history from the granting of Magna Charta down to the present time. According to our contemporary's idea men should suffer privation, quietly submit to injury, be subject to insult and abuse, do everything that is asked of them, but on no account "strike." Submit to degradation [sic] and misery, have wrong heaped upon them, be made machines of, but never should strike, should never say "no" we won't take that wage, we won't put up with such treatment.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>94</sup> PANS, RG 21, Series "A," vol. 38, no. 12, Brown Diaries, 8 August 1881.

<sup>95</sup> *TJ*, 13 June 1883.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 January 1883.

After PWA militants beat up a crowd of strikebreakers, one of whom had drawn a pistol, Drummond reflected, "Sitting here by our desk we can as readily philosophize as any, and we may say the Union men did wrong even to get angry at a drawn pistol. But had some of our philosophers been in the row they themselves might have thought that it was a very uncivil thing to draw a pistol, and have resented it in an uncivil manner."<sup>97</sup> The court cases involving the Lingan militants were covered in the *Trades Journal* in a way which verged on contempt of court in questioning the fairness of the proceedings. Lync was ridiculed as the "Mighty Pasha," after a mighty potentate in the *Arabian Nights*, who desiring absolute supremacy over his officials, suppressed or slaughtered them at will. His threats against the helpless mothers of boys working in the mine and his use of profanity were mercilessly skewered.<sup>98</sup> And what of Brown, the most respected manager in the province? "He is a knave," remarked the *Trades Journal*. "He says the very cream of the C.B. miners 'see no good in the Association.' The best workmen, the most intelligent and the most thrifty miners on the Island love and cherish the Association, and are loud in its praises."<sup>99</sup> Where, in this commentary and the many others like it, can one draw the line between "middle-class respectability" and "radical working-class independence?"

Two languages of class can be found in the early *Trades Journal* as it developed the idea of working-class independence, a discourse of paternalism and a discourse of defiance. This apparent contradiction stemmed from the PWA's central demand: that the colliers be regarded as independent craft workers. Honour, loving cups, victory in popularity contests would be bestowed upon the manager who acknowledged the claim and the bargaining rights that went with it; ruthless satire, dishonour, and even personal violence upon the manager who did not. Dressed up by Drummond in its Sunday best, or by the colliers in their paternalist rituals, working-class independence seemed as innocuous a creature as a Victorian gentleman might meet on a day's walk; but in the same hands, from Joggins to Lingan, independence also meant a language of resistance and class awakening.

### III

#### The Badge of Citizenship: The PWA and Politics, 1886-90

IN THE MID-1880s the diffuse federation of craft lodges that was the early PWA transformed itself into a political movement. In five years, the PWA won a string of political victories — the most impressive series of reforms wrung by a

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 March 1883.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 February 1883, 1 July 1885.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 April 1882.

<sup>100</sup> The memorandum of agreement of 9 April 1885 is preserved in PANS, RG 21, Series "A," vol. 11, file on the Springhill arbitration of 1889.

Canadian trade union from a nineteenth-century government. The transformation of mine management was commenced by PWA-supported legislation on miners' education and certificates for colliery officials; the franchise was extended to include coal miners; and compulsory arbitration was introduced as an alternative to strikes. Because these reforms brought the PWA into a close alliance with the governing Liberal Party, it might be thought that they provide clear evidence of the political manipulation of the union by Premier W. S. Fielding and its own politically ambitious grand secretary, and a turning away from genuine trade unionism. A closer examination of the "political turn" suggests a more complex pattern of local PWA militants using political connections to shore up their position in the workplace. The most convincing evidence of the value of the political turn ironically came in 1890, with the PWA's most successful strike since its foundation.

The political turn was executed at a time of deep crisis for the union. Despite brave talk, the PWA was weak or non-existent in two important coalfields. In Cape Breton, the union claimed victory in the Lingan strike, but was weakened by the bleak realization that it could not defend its militants from victimization. In the Joggins coalfield, the collapse of Brunswick Lodge made these coal miners the only large group of completely unorganized coal miners in the province. The situation in the larger mainland coalfields was only slightly better. Everywhere the employers pushed for wage reductions — in response to the general slowing of the economy and a drop in the price of coal in the Montreal market. Cape Breton and Pictou County miners were forced to make damaging concessions. Even Springhill's Pioneer Lodge accepted in 1885 a 3¢ per box reduction, although only on condition that it win the first general collective agreement in the history of the PWA.<sup>100</sup> The yearly average wage of the Springhill coal miners dropped from \$572.22 in 1883 to \$508.53 in 1889.<sup>101</sup> It was little wonder that Pioneer Lodge's membership plummeted: from 324 members in the spring of 1883, it went as low as 53 in the two lowest months of 1886, 56 in the worst months of 1888, and 60 in the lowest months of 1889.<sup>102</sup> The Grand Council report of 1886 put Pioneer's average yearly membership at 204, but even this more optimistic estimate meant that the lodge had declined from 64 per cent to 20 per cent of the Springhill work force.<sup>103</sup>

The union was clearly in crisis. While Drummond justified the reductions in the context of the dullness of the coal trade, neither he nor his membership really believed wages should automatically be decreased in a soft market. The *Trades Journal* said in 1888, "At this writing we recall three instances in

<sup>100</sup> *Maritime Mining Record*, 10 December 1902. Yearly average wages were computed by multiplying the daily average by the number of days worked and dividing by the number of colliers.

<sup>102</sup> G.C. Minutes, September 1892 (estimates cited by Robert Drummond). The minutes do not contain general membership estimates for the period 1885-90 — perhaps because these would have been so discouraging.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, October 1886; *Mines Reports* (1883), 49; *ibid.*, (1886), 49.

which the workmen, at mines in this province, voluntarily offered to work at reduced rates, or consented to do so, when it was suggested by the employers that trade was dull, and it would tend to an increase of work to suffer a reduction, but we cannot recall a single instance where the operators voluntarily — without a strong hint from the work men as to the advisability of the step — gave the men an increase."<sup>104</sup> In 1888, one coal cutter from Pictou's Drummond colliery told the Royal Commission on the Relations of Capital and Labour,

It is like this: when times are dull and when men are plenty, then the master absolutely fixes the price; when times are good and the men are not so plenty, and when the men are thoroughly organized, then they generally have something to say, and that is the way it goes; when the men are situated so that they can command a fair price they sometimes get it; and, as you are aware, they sometimes have to come out on strike to get what they think is just, and that is why we have strikes.<sup>105</sup>

As this miner suggested, one response to the wage reductions was industrial unrest. The most dramatic example was provided by the Pictonian colliers. On 31 December 1886, 345 workers at Albion Mines went on strike to protest a proposed 20 per cent wage reduction. ("It is bad to strike and be pinched with hunger," the Grand Council resolved, "but many times worse to submit to be plucked by grasping capitalists."<sup>106</sup>) Four weeks later they were joined by the 280 miners of Acadia and 444 miners at Vale Colliery, swelling the total ranks of the strikers to 1,069. Accounting for a total of 107,075 striker-days, this strike may well have been the largest Canadian strike of the late nineteenth century.<sup>107</sup> It revealed the tight bonds which had emerged between workers in various parts of the province: large donations from Cape Breton lodges such as Banner and Keystone were all the more noteworthy for coming in the dead of winter, when these miners were out of work.<sup>108</sup> For the first time, the *Trades Journal* noted, the union had the support of such newspapers as the *Halifax Herald*.<sup>109</sup> When at last the PWA reached a compromise settlement limiting the size of the reduction, there was a jubilant sense of victory. The miners, claimed one poet, had taught the managers a lesson:

Success to the miners and PWA  
 Who have taught grasping tyrants this lesson to day  
 That a man is a man though long suffering he be,  
 Who will strike to the death ere he lose liberty  
 Who won't be coerced though tyrants combine  
 To bend him the way they would have him incline

<sup>104</sup> *TJ*, 23 May 1888.

<sup>105</sup> *RCRCL*, testimony of Maurice Johnston, 336.

<sup>106</sup> *G.C. Minutes*, April 1887.

<sup>107</sup> The largest strike of the Knights of Labor, the Chaudière strike in Ottawa/Hull, brought 2,000 workers out, but only for about a month. See Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming*, 361-5.

<sup>108</sup> *TJ*, 2 March 1887.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 March 1887.

Three cheers for the Miners, this conquest they've won  
The voice of our country says: Miners! Well done!<sup>110</sup>

A jubilant Robert Drummond wrote to Premier W.S. Fielding, "Well, we beat the big Amalgamation without the aid of the Government, which you will acknowledge is all the more Creditable to the PWA."<sup>111</sup> Such jubilation was premature. In 1888, the union was compelled to accept a wage reduction at Albion Mines, and its Pictou lodges were near collapse.

Rather than meekly submitting to the "laws of supply and demand," the PWA fiercely fought against wage reductions. At best, however, it managed to limit the damage. No wonder militants felt discouraged and inclined to look for less taxing methods of defending the miners' interests. As a federation of self-activating lodges, the PWA had reached a critical impasse. It was in this context of industrial defeat that the political turn of 1886-90 took place.

To the limited extent that the PWA had an identifiable political outlook from 1879-85, that outlook was Conservative. The decisive consideration here was the National Policy, which, as many miners in Springhill said in a petition to Cumberland Tory Charles Tupper, had "added much to the prosperity of the locality and of the Country."<sup>112</sup> In the federal contest of 1882 in Cape Breton, Drummond supported the two Conservative members, and when the provincial Liberals under W.T. Pipes and W.S. Fielding came to power in the same year, he lamented the fact. Although somewhat impressed by British and American political experiments, Drummond and the PWA had little in the way of a coherent political strategy.<sup>113</sup>

The PWA's decision in April 1886 to enter provincial politics was based on a genuine vision of working-class independence in politics. Drummond denounced coal miners who accepted political dictation from the mine manag-

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 May 1887.

<sup>111</sup> PANS, RG7, vol. 104, no. 5290, Robert Drummond to W.S. Fielding, 10 May 1887.

<sup>112</sup> *TJ*, 2 February 1881. Note, as well, Drummond's attacks on the Liberals: *ibid.*, 8 September 1880, his pro-Tory position on the railway; *ibid.*, 2 February 1881; the assault on the *Halifax Chronicle* on the question of free trade, *ibid.*, 17 May 1882; the attack on "the Grits" for fanning the flames of racial prejudice in the Riel affair, *ibid.*, 11 November 1885. For working-class Toryism in the 1870s, see Gregory S. Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892* (Toronto and Buffalo, 1980), chap. 9. There appears to have been a more tenacious Toryism active among Nova Scotia miners than among Toronto workers, perhaps because of the exceptional importance of the tariff to the coal industry.

<sup>113</sup> See Joe MacDonald, "The Roots of Radical Politics in Nova Scotia," part 2 for a helpful guide to this period, and Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan Palmer, *Dreaming*, chap. 6, for the political initiatives of the Knights of Labor. For PWA views of the Knights — generally very enthusiastic — see *TJ*, 4 October 1882, 18 November 1885, 20 April 1887, and 21 November 1888. The PWA probably would have entered local politics in any event, but the example of like-minded movements strengthened the resolve of its leaders.

ers as angrily as he did those who lacked the forcefulness and independence to support the union.<sup>114</sup> As someone who watched the international labour movement closely, he knew that similar movements were afoot in Scotland and the United States.<sup>115</sup> Two approaches were possible: founding a distinct workers' party, or supporting candidates affiliated with the traditional parties but pledged to support labour. Both approaches commanded support in the PWA as it debated strategy in 1885-6, and both were adopted when the PWA decided in April 1886 to run candidates for the House of Assembly. In the June election, James B. Wilson ran as an independent worker's candidate in Cumberland, and Robert Drummond, although selected at a nominating convention of the PWA, ran as an independent Liberal in Pictou. The results were ambiguous. Wilson polled only 341 votes (compared with 2,083 for the leading Tory), but he did carry the mining polls in the constituency (a rather surprising feat in the Nova Scotia of the 1880s). Drummond polled 2,498 votes, within striking distance of the leading Tory's vote of 2,844, but did not carry the mining polls of Pictou. This perhaps tells us something about the differences between Springhill and other mining areas; and it certainly suggested that many miners were reluctant to accept dictation from Drummond. However, at an October 1886 Grand Council meeting, Drummond defended his "brokerage" position. He based it squarely on a class analysis. All legislation in the past, he argued,

has been more favorable to capitalists than workingmen, though the legislators were indebted in part to the latter for seats in parliament; and we have no guarantee, no grounds to expect that legislation in the future will be radically different. Unless workingmen take a decided stand and teach politicians that their votes do count for something, no great improvement in that respect need be looked for.<sup>116</sup>

Independence, in Drummond's mind, did not mean establishing a separate working-class party. "To be independent," he explained in 1889,

... is not to turn back to friend and foe alike. With true independence, there is nothing inconsistent in resolving to remember — to place to their credit with the object of repayment — the favours of friends. An intelligent independence will compel us to grasp the hand of friends, who our early political training may have led us to regard as foes, and to be wary of those who, boasting to be our friends, have yet all along held concert with those indifferent to our advancement.<sup>117</sup>

(Gompers was to say much the same thing and rather more succinctly.) Drummond's political views prevailed, partly, one suspects, because lodges which

<sup>114</sup> For the role of politics in the pit, see PANS, RG21, Series "A," vol. 35, Letterbooks of Henry Swift (hereafter Swift Letterbooks). Swift to J.R. Cowans, 13 January 1890: "[I] saw overmen in the evening except Reese who I hear is away at Political Convention. I was in hope that we were finished with Politics about the work too much of that in the past for any good." Almost all appointees to the official staff at this time were Conservative.

<sup>115</sup> *TJ*, 4 October, 22 November 1882.

<sup>116</sup> G.C. Minutes, October 1886.

<sup>117</sup> G.C. Minutes, April 1889.

might have stirred up a fuss were too busy fighting for survival. His ability to persuade the union to follow a political course was aided as well by the peculiar mix of public and private interests in the coalfields: because the resource was owned by the state, and because provincial finances utterly depended on coal royalties, the line separating business and politics was hard to draw, and coal mining issues were apt to become political ones.

Premier Fielding and Grand Secretary Drummond brought their own objectives to this unusual political situation. Fielding wanted to cut into the Tories' power base in the coalfields, which had so warmly supported Charles Tupper and his son. The emergence of the PWA as a quasi-independent political force early in 1886 must have looked to him like a heaven-sent opportunity to challenge the hegemony of Tory politicians and Tory mine managers.<sup>118</sup> Liberals, by assiduously courting this new constituency, did change the political geography of the province: finally even Cumberland, Tupper's old base and the most staunchly Conservative federal seat in the province, turned to the Liberals in 1896, mostly on the basis of Joggins coal miners. Fielding, as Carman Miller suggests, anticipated Mackenzie King; he "cultivated an interest in industry and humanity which paid high political dividends."<sup>119</sup>

Fielding also had a strong commitment to the rationalization of the Nova Scotia coal industry, royalties from which lay at the heart of any strategy to increase the province's revenues.<sup>120</sup> This unusual fiscal dependence on a labour-intensive industry dominated by independent and unionized workers led Fielding to a unique interest in building stable structures in which organized labour, capital, and the state were all deeply involved. A good example of this precocious tripartism was miners' education. It emerged partly at the behest of the state, which was concerned that the mines be competently staffed; partly at the behest of the employers, anxious for trained workers; and partly at the behest of the workers, who were looking for opportunities for advancement and some assurance that the bosses and engineers in whom they entrusted their lives were up to the job. What was remarkable about miners' education is the extent to which the PWA was consulted, and the extent to which its views on such education prevailed.<sup>121</sup>

It would be misleading to see Fielding as simply the master and the PWA

<sup>118</sup> Fielding's interest in the PWA can be dated from 1885-6. His earlier casual disinterest in the union can be gauged from the off-hand letter he wrote declining Fidelity Lodge's invitation to lecture to them in 1884. See PANS, MG2, vol. 489, Fielding to Drummond, 11 September 1884.

<sup>119</sup> Carman Miller, "Review of C.B. Fergusson, *W.S. Fielding, I: The Mantle of Howe, II: Mr. Minister of Finance*," *Acadiensis*, 1, 2 (1972), 92.

<sup>120</sup> By the turn of the century coal royalties surpassed the federal subsidy as the greatest single source of provincial revenue. J. Murray Beck, *The Government of Nova Scotia* (Toronto 1957), 329.

<sup>121</sup> See Donald Macleod, "Miners, Mining Men and Mining Reform: Changing the Technology of Nova Scotian Gold Mines and Collieries, 1858 to 1910," (Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1981), 503-23.



leader the pawn. Drummond had his own motivations for entering the alliance. Besides greatly enhancing his position at the head of the PWA, it helped him further his business interests as a publisher.<sup>122</sup> Apart from such opportunistic considerations, the "political turn" was consistent with Drummond's emphasis on working-class independence.<sup>123</sup> By granting the franchise to the miners living in company housing in 1889, Fielding fulfilled one of Drummond's oldest objectives.<sup>124</sup> Drummond saw the extension of the franchise — the "badge of citizenship" — as probably the greatest single achievement of the PWA.<sup>125</sup> For Drummond, the alliance with the Liberals was just one more way of fighting for working-class independence. "What if the Fielding government is grit," he remarked with frankness, "Is it not the one government that proved itself friendly to the workingmen? So long as it remains friendly, it should have their warmest support."<sup>126</sup>

The political turn affected the union at its lowest and uppermost levels. Some local lodges turned themselves into local political formations. Concord Lodge in Amherst's boot and shoe industry, the PWA's most important non-mining group — and the first to admit women to the union — formed a Workingmen's Debating Society in 1892 which debated such questions as "Has Incorporation Benefitted the Working Men of Amherst?" The lodge entered more directly into town politics by supporting candidates in local elections in 1894.<sup>127</sup> The PWA's success in creating new positions in the bureaucracy (such as deputy mining inspectors and mining school inspectors) had a marked impact on the local level, since it gave the union a way of rewarding veterans of local lodges. At the top, the leaders of the PWA were directly involved in nominating members to serve on boards examining those who wished to be colliery officials and, later, even colliers. (In 1891, PWA-backed legislation

<sup>122</sup> See his complaint that the Department of Mines was not advertising in the *Trades Journal*, which he thought lent colour "to the rumour that the Manager aided by Some in the department of mines are desirous of bringing the law requiring examination of officials into disrepute." PANS, RG7, vol. 101, no. 4003, Robert Drummond to W. S. Fielding, 23 September 1885. Drummond was one of 24 journalists who founded the Maritime Press Association. He later performed job printing for the Department of Mines. "I enclose the Rules," we read in a letter of his to Edwin Gilpin, "I have made one or two Suggestions. You better allow me to print these and the posters. — I'll have a row with [C.E.] Church if he vents his spleen in refusing to give me a fair share of the odd jobs." PANS, RG21, Series "A," vol. 6, file "Coal Mines 1896. Correspondence," Drummond to Gilpin, 2 February 1896.

<sup>123</sup> See Craig Heron, "Labourism and the Canadian Working Class," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (1984), 45-75 for the general context of working-class Liberalism in Canada.

<sup>124</sup> For Drummond's passion for universal suffrage, see *TJ*, 6 December 1882.

<sup>125</sup> G.C. Minutes, October 1889.

<sup>126</sup> *Journal and Pictou News*, 1 April 1891.

<sup>127</sup> *Amherst Evening Press*, 15, 19 February 1892, and 5 January 1894; for later political activities of Concord, in alliance with the Moulders Union, see *Amherst Daily News*, 8 November 1901.

imposed new restrictions on entry to the collier's craft: only those with one year's experience were to become colliers; only those with two could take charge of a place; and advancement to the position of collier further required passing an oral examination conducted by two examiners.<sup>128</sup>

It all resembled Fielding's other zealous attempts to recruit political "friends," and some letters of Drummond suggest his acute interest in wielding political influence — indeed, he occasionally had to be reminded by Fielding that other "leading friends" of the party in the coalfields deserved to be consulted over patronage appointments.<sup>129</sup> Yet it would be too simple to see Drummond as being co-opted in this period. Drummond still fought hard for the coal miners. He wrote tough letters about the enforcement of mine safety laws, which he felt was poorly carried out by the Department of Mines. "I wrote [the] Hon. Com[missioner] of Mines a week ago in reference to a large body of gas detected in one of the slopes of the Halifax Co[mpany]," wrote Drummond to Fielding in a characteristic letter of 1887.

He replied that as soon as the Inspector returned from C.B. an enquiry would be instituted. I now write to you as the "head of the house," urging as little delay as possible, and trusting you will order a full and free investigation and that there be nothing hole and corner about it. I hope your orders will be so clear, on this point, that there will be a Stiffening of the backbone on the part of those whose duty it shall be to make the enquiry.<sup>130</sup>

He was equally forward with the Mines Department.

Considerable surprise is expressed in C.B. — from which I lately returned — that no investigation has been ordered relative to the late fatal accident at Sydney Mines. The Mines dept is taxed with a lack of impartiality or with a lack of push, and I must say that that [sic] the reasons for the delay in holding an investigation are not clearly discernible. . . . This case is important. Some one has undoubtedly violated the law, and who that one is the Mines dept should hasten to ascertain.<sup>131</sup>

Now Fielding and various mining bureaucrats could enjoy the tart Presbyterian tongue-lashings so long the exclusive privilege of Grand Council members.

The contradictions of the "political turn" of 1886 came to the fore in the struggle for compulsory arbitration in 1887 and 1888. Because it did not lead to an elaborate state mechanism for the settlement of industrial disputes, the *Nova Scotia legislation has been misleadingly written off simply as a dead letter or seen as confirming the union's underlying passivity*. Enthusiasm for "arbitration" (which meant in loose nineteenth-century usage the assistance of third parties in settling industrial disputes) was widespread in Canada in the 1880s,

<sup>128</sup> See, for example, PANS, RG21, Series "A," vol. 6, file "Coal Mines, 1896, Correspondence," Drummond to Edwin Gilpin, 7 May 1896.

<sup>129</sup> PANS, MG2, vol. 491, W.S. Fielding to Robert Drummond, 12 June 1889, and 11 June 70. See also RG21, Series "A," vol. 15, file "Coal Mines 1876-1913, Miscellaneous Mining Examination Papers," Robert Drummond to E. Gilpin, 25, 31 May 1892.

<sup>130</sup> PANS, RG7, vol. 105, Robert Drummond to W.S. Fielding, 18 July 1887.

<sup>131</sup> PANS, RG21, Series "A," vol. 9, Robert Drummond to C.E. Church, 26 July 1889.

certainly within the Knights of Labor, where it seems to have reflected a fundamental ambivalence towards strikes.<sup>132</sup> By contrast, the PWA's support of arbitration cannot be said to reflect a "fundamental ambivalence" so much as a tactical sense of the possible. Although Drummond (initially skeptical about arbitration as a modification of the right to strike — the workers' "Magna Charta") spoke to the Grand Council about arbitration as providing a "less expensive and more christian method than strikes and lock-outs, for arranging differences between employers and employed," the union at that very moment was locked in a bitter strike in Pictou.<sup>133</sup> Arbitration appears to have indicated not so much a fundamental ambivalence about the need for strikes as a reasonable tactical response to the employer counteroffensive that had wiped out so many gains since 1885.

The arbitration question was debated in 1887 and 1888. Fidelity Lodge in Pictou County had offered to submit the issues raised by the strike to arbitration, but the company had declined unless the men first accepted a wage reduction. Fielding, concerned for state revenues and public order, agreed to meet with representatives of the PWA and the coal company; on the refusal of the company to participate, the union urged the government to bring in a compulsory arbitration bill. It did so. Under this first compulsory arbitration legislation in Canada, strikes or lockouts were prohibited before a dispute had been submitted to the commissioner of mines, who would investigate and, if necessary, refer the matter to a board of arbitration. This legislation differed from earlier arbitration acts in the activist role it envisaged for government: one remarkable provision of it was that a non-complying employer ran the risk of losing the mining lease. The bill was passed in the Legislative Assembly, but died in the Legislative Council, partly because of the alarm of such managers as R.H. Brown, under whose guidance the Cape Breton Collier Association telegraphed Fielding to protest that the law had been hurriedly introduced, interfered with the law of contract, was an infringement with trade and commerce, and "instead of preventing labor troubles will increase them by promoting continual contention & putting a premium on agitation."<sup>134</sup> The PWA had

<sup>132</sup> Kealey and Palmer, *Dreaming*, 127-8, 331-3.

<sup>133</sup> *TJ*, 27 April 1887. For Drummond's initial hostility to arbitration, see *ibid.*, 11 October 1882, 24 June 1885: "... it might not be wise to make an unconditional promise that the workmen would not stand for their rights until an arbitration had been held. The evil in some cases, before an arbitration could come off, might be past remedying. Before the men agree to the proposal the management should be required to promise that no change in price, in mode of working etc. etc. will be made until the matter has been considered by the lodge and arbitrators. It would be fair enough for the workmen to promise before, say, striking for an increase of wages, to leave the matter to arbitration, but it would be scarcely fair to ask them not to strike against some high handed act on the part of the management." A prophetic insight into the difficulties of conciliation and arbitration under the UMW!

<sup>134</sup> PANS, RG7, vol. 104, no. 5256, Richard Brown to W.S. Fielding (telegram), 28 April 1887.

meanwhile milked the arbitration issue for its maximum propaganda value in its struggle in Pictou, winning over even some middle-class elements.<sup>135</sup> When the compulsory arbitration bill was defeated in the Legislative Council, Drummond was incensed. In language which made a direct connection between working-class independence and partisan politics, he wrote vehemently to Fielding: "I have been informed from Halifax, though I won't believe it just yet, that the Govt was a party to the defeat of the bill in the Council. Kindly remind Mr. Longley [attorney-general] of what I told him two or three months ago that the managers would extract more from the govt than the workmen, though the former have been inveterate enemies of the liberals, and though the latter were honestly striving to break the fetters which bound them to the managers."<sup>136</sup>

In response to the PWA's continued pressure, the government came back in 1888 with a new arbitration bill. This second effort reflected some of the objections of the managers by adding penalties for strikes or lockouts in violation of the act. Employers could now retain fourteen days' wages from each employee on receipt of notice of a request for arbitration. Workers who went on strike, or employers who locked out their employees, before requesting arbitration, stood to lose the equivalent of fourteen days' pay to the other party. The drastic penalty of cancelling a coal company's lease was dropped. Minor amendments to the bill were made in the Legislative Council slightly modifying the composition of the five-person board of arbitration and other things, and with the speaker's deciding vote the measure passed.<sup>137</sup>

While passage of the arbitration measure demonstrated the PWA's political pull and the Fielding government's willingness to intervene in the coal industry, only implementation would really show the meaning of the law. If one measures the act against its aim of bringing long-term industrial peace to the coalfields, it was an abject failure, and while it is an exaggeration to claim it was never implemented — there were arbitration proceedings in Springhill and Cape Breton in the 1890s — it is fair to say it never became the primary means of resolving important industrial disputes in the coalfields.<sup>138</sup> As with a good deal of nineteenth-century social legislation, the political and social ambitions embodied by the statute far exceeded the grasp of the administrative mechanisms designed to achieve them. But if one looks at arbitration more cynically from the point of view of rank-and-file militants trying to defend themselves at an exceedingly difficult time — more of a bid for public approval than a serious

<sup>135</sup> *TJ*, 19 January 1887; see, for example, the favourable reaction of the middle-class *Halifax Critic*, 21 January 1887.

<sup>136</sup> PANS, RG7, vol. 104, no. 5296, Robert Drummond to W.S. Fielding, 10 May 1887.

<sup>137</sup> *Journals and Proceedings of the House of Assembly* (Nova Scotia), 16 April 1888, 162-7; *Statutes of Nova Scotia, 1888*, 51 Vic., Cap. 3.

<sup>138</sup> See PANS, RG21, Series "A," vol. 13A, file "Coal Mines, 1887-1898, Disputes," for arbitration proceedings.

attempt to abolish strikes — arbitration can be termed a short-term success. Ironically the concept of arbitration, ostensibly designed to curb strikes and lockouts, mainly benefited an ultra-militant lodge, Pioneer Lodge in Springhill, in the most dramatic strike of this period.

Like the coal miners throughout Nova Scotia, the Springhill miners had suffered defeat after defeat from 1886 to 1889. Unlike other coal miners, after 1888 they faced a management intent on a far more intensive supervision of labour and implementing a structure of rewards and punishments to make miners work at maximum intensity. The miners of Springhill were almost at a loss for words as they tried to describe the enormous changes in their pit; they likened the "reform" brought in by their employer to the contemporary "reforms" introduced by Jack the Ripper. In the *Trades Journal*, correspondent after correspondent sounded the alarm: "The battle cry 'To arms' must be sounded. We must throw off the iron yoke of tyranny. It has been demonstrated of late that justice is not a guiding principle with the officials. . . . Disunited the workers are as chaff. United they are a power capable of bringing tyrannous bosses to their senses."<sup>139</sup>

The Springhill miners asked for the Grand Council's permission to wage strikes without prior sanction; the council suggested arbitration instead. Pioneer Lodge attempted to bring its grievances before an arbitration board. A first application signed by Alex McDonald and John Moffatt purporting to be on behalf of the majority of the employees of the mine was questioned by J. W. Longley, who had "some doubt as to what evidence ought to be furnished to the Commissioner as to whether a majority of the Employees Concur in the application."<sup>140</sup> The Cumberland Railway and Coal Company fought the application on just these terms, refusing even to concede that it had ever recognized the union. After the PWA had collected over 700 signatures on a petition attesting to the wishes of the majority of the employees, the company was able to overturn the proceedings on the ground that the commissioner had communicated with the company's Springhill office and not, as required by law, with its registered agent.<sup>141</sup> The company's lawyers effectively strangled the first attempt to apply the arbitration law in a web of legalities.

Pioneer Lodge played its hand in these complex games with considerable acumen. Through the winter of 1889-90 the grievances of Pioneer Lodge continued to mount, but the lodge waited patiently until it had exhausted the possibilities of arbitration. (Shrewdly, it was careful to give the press a full account of the company's obstructionism.) It also developed links with Field-

<sup>139</sup> *TJ*, 6 June 1888.

<sup>140</sup> PANS, RG21, Series "A," vol. 11, file "Springhill Arbitration 1889," J.W. Longley to C.E. Church, 23 May 1889.

<sup>141</sup> RG27, Series "A," vol. 11, file "Springhill Arbitration, 1889," Meagher, Drysdale, and Newcombe to Charles E. Church, 14 June 1889. For Drummond's intense disappointment, see PANS, MG2, vol. 491, Fielding to Drummond, 22 May 1889; vol. 422, Fielding to Drummond, 12 August 1890.

ing, and invited him to address the miners in January. Fielding approached the rally with misgivings. In a letter to Drummond, he insisted that the event not be presented as a labour meeting and warned him not to expect explicit promises about future mining reforms.<sup>142</sup> He also wrote a revealing letter to Superintendent J.R. Cowans warning him of his forthcoming visit:

The brass band part of the programme is somewhat alarming but I suppose it is one of the things which have to be accepted when they spring from good intentions.

I fully appreciate what you say with respect to the men's time. My intention was to leave town on Friday morning but I can see through your letter that this might cause some inconvenience. I should be very sorry to have the operations of the Mines disturbed in the smallest degree or any workman lose an hours pay on account of my visit. I shall therefore act upon your suggestion to arrive on Thursday night notwithstanding the brass band and I accept with pleasure your very kind invitation to become your guest during my short visit.<sup>143</sup>

By poking fun at the fuss the workers were making over his visit and by staying with Cowans, Fielding attempted to mitigate the impression of being a partisan of the PWA. Yet the fact remained that he gave an address largely focused on labour questions to a mass meeting of the union, and contributed to the sense of the union's power.

Although sparked by the question of docking boxes containing stone, the Springhill strike of 1890 became a grand remonstrance against the new "scientific" labour system. More than any other strike in nineteenth-century Nova Scotia it stirred the imagination of workers in many cities and trades. Church officials, trade unionists, the Orange Lodge — all gave financial assistance.<sup>144</sup> One explanation of this outpouring of public sympathy was the skill with which the lodge used the management's unwillingness to submit the case to arbitration. Throughout the strike its general implications — for the self-respect and dignity of workers — were repeatedly stressed. "When some of the workmen were in difficulty regarding their work the manager would not hear what they had to say, treating them as dogs, and not men, thereby causing bickerings and ill-feeling," the lodge protested. "The workmen claim to be honest, respectful and industrious, and demand of the officials common courtesy. . . . Men should not be discharged to satisfy the whim or a disposition to tyrannize, of petty bosses, who know little — nothing — about the position they are set to fill." Filling several columns of detailed and specific grievances, the lodge's letter concluded: "The above by no means exhausts the list of grievances."<sup>145</sup> And yet, the PWA noted, the company refused to discuss them — or submit them to arbitration.

<sup>142</sup> PANS, MG2, vol. 491, Fielding to Drummond, 31 December 1889.

<sup>143</sup> PANS, MG2, vol. 491, W.S. Fielding to J.R. Cowans, 7 January 1890.

<sup>144</sup> *Halifax Chronicle*, 28, 29 July 1890; for support meetings in Moncton, *Amherst Daily News*, 4 July 1890.

<sup>145</sup> *Halifax Chronicle*, 10 July 1890.

<sup>146</sup> PANS, RG 21, Series "A," vol. 35, Letterbooks of Henry Swift, Swift to J.R. Cowans, 25 July 1890.

The strike began on 23 June 1890. At first the workers were divided: construction crews continued to work, although union members visited all of them trying to persuade them to desist from repairing the slope.<sup>146</sup> There were harsher words in Pioneer's language of class: Henry Swift, the manager, reported:

Some of the outside men [were] rather timid going to work this morning owing to a *Picture of a Coffin and Words Death to blacklegs* being inscribed on the flat sheets in East slope bankhead having been put in during the evening or night. . . . My Gates having been removed from there places during the night I feel no ways alarmed but will give them a warm reception who Meddle with Me.<sup>147</sup>

Swift continued to sound this note of defiant optimism in the next few weeks. "I had an application from one of the Strikers there appears to be divisions Coming in amongst them. Many seems very anxious for work," he informed his employer.<sup>148</sup> Then disaster struck. On 12 August 1890, Swift wrote:

Received Committee representing Pumpsman Firemen Enginemem and Repairmen who handed me a written notice. Stating that unless a Settlement was arrived at with the Miners that they would Cease Work tomorrow 13th at 6 P.M. Almost impossible under Circumstances to fill their places.<sup>149</sup>

This was the first time the miners had waged a 100 per cent strike in the history of the PWA, possibly the first time in the province. With no one to operate the pumps or feed the boilers, the mine began to flood. It was an unprecedented collective sabotage of the pit. Even Swift realized that the workers had played a strong card. He wrote to Cowans on 15 August:

Water being now rising in the Mines all pumps being stopped. Nothing alarming can go on safely until Monday when it will become either a question of settlement or flood the lower 1900 ft lift in the East.

Can't be called a square weapon. Stopping pumps shows a weakness in Some Quarter or other and Most Certainly the last Card to be played on their part in this Game.

Stopping pumps is Something unheard of in the Annals of Coal Mine Strikes and this Certainly Cowardly Action. Nothing Manly in it.<sup>150</sup>

And here, as we watch with Swift as his mine fills with water, we think back to the PWA's founding documents. "Our object," they had said, "is not to wage a war of labour against capital. . . ." But wasn't "a war against capital" a plausible metaphor for the crisis enveloping Swift? In this collective sabotage of their pit, the miners of Springhill show us the distance that often separated the PWA's mild image from its militant practice.

There was a public uproar. Fielding rushed to the scene. Faced with the prospect of damaging their mine and with immense political pressure, the

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, Swift to Cowans, 26 July 1890.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, Swift to Cowans, 9 August 1890.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, Swift to Cowans, 12 August 1890.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, Swift to Cowans, 15 August 1890. Spelling and punctuation as in original.

company gave in reluctantly to all the demands of the workers. The PWA had faced down one of the toughest anti-union employers in the region.

For the miners, although not for Fielding, the agreement arrived at through the premier's conciliation had the force of law.<sup>151</sup> Fielding was widely acclaimed. "I have just got back from Springhill where the strike difficulty was settled at no greater cost than that of an attack of rheumatism to myself," he wrote to one correspondent.<sup>152</sup> (According to less personal estimates the strike had cost the company and the strikers \$150,000.<sup>153</sup>) He wrote to A. D. Ferguson, leader of Pioneer Lodge, about the new flag he had promised the PWA in Springhill. Did he want a Nova Scotia flag, a Union Jack, or a Red Ensign? What sort of material did he want?<sup>154</sup> We grasp something of the peculiarities of the Nova Scotia colliers and their political position when we remember Fielding's flag was to be often used during the next decade — to signal strikes.

This victory — the PWA only won three strikes out of the twelve it waged in this five-year period — represented the triumph of the political turn, at least as seen from the vantage point of the rank and file. Fielding's intervention was a gratifying demonstration of the power of the union. It represented the substance, if not the form, of what the PWA had wanted from "compulsory arbitration." Against so strong and bitterly anti-union an employer as the Cumberland Railway and Coal Company, the PWA's victory was remarkable. Drummond's political strategy had paid a high dividend, but not in the way he had intended. The community where arbitration had had its first real test was to go through at least 27 further strikes by the end of 1911. Arbitration settled nothing when an aggressive management was determined to undermine the concessions it had made. As manager, Swift wrote to the boss in Springhill:

While having ended [the strike] by Making Some Concessions I consider preferable rather than having to resort to flooding the 1900 foot Working East Slope which would certainly have wreaked Havoc with the workings Exclusive of time and expense in pumping it out again. The Advantages given I intend to Curtail in Some other form. I dont anticipate having anything of this Sort for some time again.<sup>155</sup>

The advantages given to the PWA through the combined political and economic struggle were to come under sustained attack. The PWA was to be challenged from without, by an intensified conflict at the point of production from employers. But its accomplishments were also to be challenged from within, by a

<sup>151</sup> PANS, MG2, vol. 422, Fielding to Drummond, 8 November 1891: "I quite agree with you that unless some good cause for the change of policy can be shown, the informal agreement made last year between the Company and the Workmen in the presence of Mr. Gilpin and myself should be observed. But of course the agreement has no legal value and could not be enforced in a Court of law." The status of this agreement was still being debated in 1907.

<sup>152</sup> PANS, MG2, vol. 422, Fielding to D.C. Fraser, 21 August 1890.

<sup>153</sup> *Halifax Herald*, 14 August 1890.

<sup>154</sup> PANS, MG2, vol. 422, Fielding to Ferguson, 28 August 1890; 26 September 1890.

<sup>155</sup> Swift Letterbooks, Swift to Cowans, 20 August 1890.



subtle but pervasive process of assimilation which opened a gulf between the leadership and the led.

#### IV

#### "A Bridle on the Head of the Workingmen:" Independence and Industrial Legality, 1891-7

IF SPRINGHILL IN 1890 showed the dividends PWA militants could reap from a combination of direct action and political leverage, it also suggested difficulties and divisions which were now to fragment the union. The usual interpretation of the 1890s stresses the split within the union over the question of company stores in Cape Breton and the rapid emergence of the Knights of Labor. These were certainly crucial aspects of the crisis of 1897-8, during which the union virtually disappeared, and Drummond resigned as grand secretary, but they were more symptoms than causes of the great upheaval in the union, which was primarily caused by the consolidation of the coal industry under the Dominion Coal Company sponsored in the 1890s by the Fielding government.

The essential elements of this massive socio-economic project have been ably analyzed by others and need not be reviewed here.<sup>156</sup> It is directly relevant to a discussion of the PWA to note that new mining technology and enhanced productivity were central to the programme brought in by Fielding in 1893.<sup>157</sup> The coming of the Dominion Coal Company meant a new strategy for coal companies: electrification, the adoption of mining machines, vast new mining complexes, the arrival of thousands of people. The remaining independent companies could not stand apart from this process. Well before they were formally taken over by Dominion Coal they were being squeezed by competition from the giant coal company in markets they had once easily dominated. They had every incentive to maximize productivity by driving down wages. Some were pocket editions of Dominion Coal, absurdly over-capitalized mines designed to make money for mine promoters.

The new corporate organization also entailed a striking change in the social geography of coal mining, concealed by the relative stability of the total number of mine workers (5,746 in 1891; 5,793 in 1895) across the province. In 1891, roughly the same number of workers were employed in the mainland coalfields as were employed in Cape Breton (28 per cent of the work force in Cumberland, 24 per cent in Pictou, 47 per cent in Cape Breton); by 1895, Cape

<sup>156</sup> See Donald Macgillivray, "Henry Melville Whitney Comes to Cape Breton: The Saga of a Gilded Age Entrepreneur," *Acadiensis*, 9, 1 (Autumn 1979), 44-70; David Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation," *Acadiensis*, 7, 1 (Autumn 1977), 3-34.

<sup>157</sup> Fielding called for the adoption of "American ideas and methods in regard to the mining, shipping and handling of coal:" see the *Debates and Proceedings of the House*

Breton was by far the most populous area (with 57 per cent of the coal mining work force, compared to 19 per cent in Cumberland and 23 per cent in Pictou).<sup>158</sup> The new corporation attracted miners from the mainland coalfields and for the first time systematically tapped a vast international labour pool. The transition to monopoly capitalism represented a structural transformation almost as profound as that which had given rise to the PWA in the first place, and it changed the union dramatically.

In 1895, of the union's 1,416 members in good standing, 1,177 (83 per cent) worked in Cape Breton. (Eleven years earlier, in contrast, 51 per cent of PWA members worked in Cape Breton and 49 per cent on the mainland.) The two Cumberland coalfields claimed 11 per cent of the PWA's membership, Amherst claimed 5 per cent, and Pictou County, 1 per cent.<sup>159</sup> The membership in Cape Breton represented 35 per cent of the workers of that island's mines; the only mainland lodge to approach this level was Holdfast Lodge in Joggins, which represented 20 per cent of that colliery's work force.<sup>160</sup> The size of such island lodges as *Victoria*, *Island*, *Equity*, and *Banner* suggests that the old concentration upon colliers had been quietly changed, that the craft orientation of the earlier union was quietly giving way to an industrial perspective. But it also bore witness to a new style of trade unionism. In contrast to the mainland lodges, Cape Breton lodges now enjoyed the privileges of the check-off. This gave the movement in Cape Breton a solidity, but also a conservatism, not found elsewhere. The alliance between the PWA and Dominion Coal began with this de facto recognition of the union through the check-off.<sup>161</sup> Those who were gaining influence in Cape Breton wanted to advance within the mines.<sup>162</sup> The effect was to bind a conservative leadership in Cape Breton closely to the fortunes, and the outlook, of their employer.

The PWA's situation was curious in the 1890s. Most of its strikes were fought in Cumberland County (fifteen out of nineteen); many of these strikes

*of Assembly* (1893), 13-6.

<sup>158</sup> *Mines Reports* (1891), E; (1895), 67.

<sup>159</sup> G.C. Minutes, September 1895.

<sup>160</sup> *Mines Report* (1895), 67.

<sup>161</sup> G.C. Minutes, September 1894, remarks of Drummond: "The steady average maintained by some of the C.B. lodges is due, no doubt, in great part to the fact that the dues are stopped in the office of the company. From this out this will be the rule at the C.B. collieries. The general manager, Mr. McKean, is wise enough to discern that trouble is caused, not by regular attenders, but by those who are members by fits and starts, members only when they have some personal grievance to ventilate." It is very likely that this recognition was an informal codicil to the Whitney Deal.

<sup>162</sup> See, for example, John Moffatt's application to sit examinations as underground manager and the attached letters from his Presbyterian minister and the underground manager at Dominion Colliery, Old Bridgeport: RG21, Series "A," vol. 15, file "Coal Miners 1876-1893, Miscellaneous Mining Examination Papers." After a short interregnum, Moffatt replaced Drummond at the helm of the PWA.

were successful. In the 1880s the leadership had supported such local militancy: now, as Drummond became more and more absorbed with his political career, he seemed to forget the mining conditions which made such activism necessary. He had played almost no role in the 1890 Springhill strike and its significance escaped him. When it was over, Drummond, in an address at Pioneer Hall, told the miners that they might well have avoided the strike if they had only attended the lodge more frequently.<sup>163</sup> He never registered the fact that the lodge's victory came only after the mine started to flood. The ardent militancy of Holdfast Lodge in Joggins he regarded even less favourably. "From a Gd. Council standpoint there is much to regret in the suspension of work which occurred at the Joggins at the beginning of the year," Drummond remarked in his report in 1896. "For this suspension of work, for what occurred during its continuance, or for any of the results, the Gd. Council is in no wise responsible. In disregard, if I may not say defiance, of the opinion of Gd. Council Committee, the majority of the workmen there persisted in resisting a request for a reduction of wages thought necessary in order that the work might be carried on."<sup>164</sup> Confronted with fiercely anti-union employers and organizing not only the established colliers but recent immigrants from England and continental Europe, the mainland lodges took on many of the attributes of militant industrial unionism. Rituals in such unions were far less important than they had once been.<sup>165</sup> Drummond wanted to preside over a movement for political and social reform; rank-and-file militants wanted a full-time organizer willing to settle grievances. The grand secretary's acute impatience with the Joggins miners may have been prompted by their having summoned him no fewer than three times in 1895 alone.<sup>166</sup> However, when he told them to accept a reduction, they flatly refused to do so and fought against him on the Grand Council committee formed to consider their case.<sup>167</sup> When Drummond heard that Pioneer Lodge, like Holdfast, favoured a drastic shortening of the ritual for the subordinate lodges, he exploded: "Now the secret is out. I could not for the life of me understand how the men of Spring Hill have of late years been so unmindful of their obligations. There is no wonder now. If they have not been 'obligated,' or if the obligation has been given in a hurried, careless, wish-it-was-over manner, no wonder the men attached little importance to it."<sup>168</sup>

The union came to mean very different things in different places. In Cape

<sup>163</sup> *Halifax Chronicle*, 23 August 1890.

<sup>164</sup> G.C. Minutes, September 1896.

<sup>165</sup> Dalhousie University Archives, Minutes of Holdfast Lodge No. 27, PWA (microfilm); see especially entries for 16 June and 13 July 1894.

<sup>166</sup> Holdfast Minutes, 13 July, 26 August 1895.

<sup>167</sup> Holdfast Minutes, 9, 11 January 1896. Although Drummond's remarks implied that the Holdfast workers defied the Grand Council, the local minutes suggest that an extraordinary Grand Council meeting ruled in favour of the strike (Holdfast Minutes, 27 February 1896).

<sup>168</sup> G.C. Minutes, September 1896.

Breton the PWA meant a union made reasonably secure through the check-off, and cushioned by somewhat paternalist arrangements with the employer; where the PWA survived on the mainland it enjoyed no such security, but was kept alive through the activism of the rank and file. Drummond was alarmed by the intransigent class struggle on the mainland, but he faced different but equally serious problems in Cape Breton. The PWA's check-off with Dominion Coal and its alliance with the provincial government gave it security in the expanding Cape Breton coalfields, but once it became clear that a road to influence could be found within the PWA, its counsels echoed with partisan quarrelling. Drummond, defending his nominal political "independence" with less and less plausibility, was a natural target for other ambitious Liberals or Tories. The political debates of the 1880s were about issues; those of the 1890s were about the tawdry mechanics of position and patronage.<sup>169</sup> But even the debates which did not descend to such partisan depths brought home how very different the perspectives of many PWA members were from those of Drummond. They proposed far-reaching legislation which would impose limits on the independence of colliers: a legislated eight-hour day, an end to the company stores. Drummond believed in regulating hours, but more as part of the self-restraint of individual craft workers;<sup>170</sup> he had sharply criticized company stores, but opposed any law prohibiting workers from giving orders for supplies in company offices.<sup>171</sup> As the company store question became the focus of an intense and bitter debate, Drummond cried out against any such legislated limit on the independence of colliers:

... I am out and out opposed to a law prohibiting workmen from giving orders. What are we, free men, or are we cowards? Are we men, or are we weaklings? Must we be guarded like imbeciles lest we do ourselves harm? The farmer may give his note, and may give anything he chooses as collateral security; the merchant may give his note, and give another friend having property as security; and yet a working man is not to be allowed to give his note, backed by an order on the office, which is the only security he can offer. Do you imagine I will so disgrace workingmen, in the eyes of the people of the province, as to ask for such a law, and by asking it say: "The men I have fought side by side with for 17 years, are not to be trusted to do with their own as they please; if we do not restrain them by law, they will do injury to themselves." Out on it, I will not so strike a blow at the workingmen. I will not ask that there should be done to them that which I would scorn should be done to myself. . . . Any evils or abuses, to the workingmen, in the store, or in the stoppage system, I will help you all I can to remedy, if a

<sup>169</sup> See, for example, G.C. Minutes, September 1896.

<sup>170</sup> *TJ*, 9 June 1880.

<sup>171</sup> The company store question was not a straightforward struggle between the left opposing the company stores and the right supporting them. Much of the support for the end of company stores came from the small merchants of the area and the campaign's tone was given a patronizing tinge by its middle-class supporters in the Church of England. For a petition against changing the credit system from Gold Rule Lodge No. 28, Old Bridgeport, see RG21, Series "A," vol. 6, B. Wilson and E. Rogers to Edwin Gilpin, 21 July 1896.

reasonable solution is offered, and to that extent, command me. But do not ask me to put a bridle on the heads, and a bit in the mouths, of the workmen, lest they bite themselves.<sup>172</sup>

We see a lot of Drummond in this stormy and eloquent letter. Working-class independence had always been the key to his thought and to his work. At least until the mid-1890s, his ideology had not really changed. What had changed was the world around him. His ideological consistency led him, in this far different world, into contradiction after contradiction: defending the Dominion Coal Company as the worker's friend, or, here, arguing against a reform of the notorious truck system on the grounds of working-class dignity.

Did Drummond simply "sell out" the miners and himself, as labour leaders before and since have done? His appointment to the Legislative Council in 1891 clinches the case against him for many historians. But the Drummond/Fielding correspondence reveals a more complicated, and rather sadder, process of accommodation. Drummond entered the Legislative Council with such enthusiasm and so many progressive mining reforms on his agenda that Fielding remarked, "I judge that you are satisfied that the Legislative Council will be abolished at the end of the next session and therefore it will be necessary for you to do your life work in legislation all at once."<sup>173</sup> The achievements of 1891 — particularly the abolition of powder in gaseous mines — were perhaps the most impressive and directly beneficial ever won by the PWA. But after this vigorous beginning, Drummond slowly succumbed to the pleasures of power. The moment at which Drummond's class allegiance decisively shifted is hard to pinpoint. In the Legislative Council, although he said some progressive things in his first years, he gradually became a run-of-the-mill party warhorse. (The presence of a staunch democrat in a non-elected chamber was rather curious in the first place.) He became acquisitive. (He was interested, for example, in a deal with B.F. Pearson, the archetypal finance capitalist, involving coal deposits near Stellarton.<sup>174</sup>) And he lost stature. Fielding felt free to scold him over not attending to proper bureaucratic procedures concerning miners' night schools: "You seem determined to have the right things done in the wrong way. Please try to get over this custom and adapt yourself a little to those requirements of red tape which in the case of our Government are reduced to the smallest possible limits."<sup>175</sup> Fielding upbraided Drummond for controversial articles in the *Journal* which he feared would reflect badly on the PWA and

<sup>172</sup> Robert Drummond, *To the Officers and Members of Keystone Lodge* (Stellarton 1896).

<sup>173</sup> PANS, MG2, vol. 492, Fielding to Drummond, 22 November 1891. Drummond, like all Liberal appointees to the Legislative Council during this period, signed a letter signifying he would press for the abolition of the council. See PANS, MG2, vol. 503, no. 144, Drummond to Fielding, 11 April 1891.

<sup>174</sup> PANS, RG21, Series "A," vol. 11, file "Coal Mines, Analyses 1866-1904," Drummond to Edwin Gilpin, 25 May 1906.

<sup>175</sup> PANS, MG2, vol. 486, Fielding to Drummond, 2 January 1894.

"lead rash workmen to do things that they would afterwards regret. . . ." <sup>176</sup> When Fielding received "deplorable accounts" from the management at Victoria Mine in Cape Breton, alleging PWA connivance in absenteeism, illegal liquor selling, and disorder, he asked Drummond to "do whatever you could to urge the men to keep to their work and act the part of good citizens." <sup>177</sup> "Do you remember the story of the collier who was asked why he allowed his wife to beat him?" Fielding asked Drummond in 1892, after the grand secretary had pestered him in an attempt to further his material interests in a right of search for iron and copper in Cape Breton. "His reply was, 'Why not? It pleases her and it don't hurt I.' The application of the story you will readily see." <sup>178</sup> Fielding began to see Drummond as a loose gate banging in the wind — and that is more or less what he became.

Drummond made his own choices in the 1890s, but within the tightening constraints of the restructured coal industry. Drummond defended Dominion Coal to his dying day. The complaint that it was a monopoly was "silly and childish," he told the Grand Council. <sup>179</sup> He grasped too late the huge impact the new company would have on the independence of the colliers, that cause to which he had devoted so much of his life. His, and the PWA's, dilemma was captured perfectly by the controversy which erupted over machine mining in 1895.

One of the greatest legislative accomplishments of the PWA was an 1891 act which set up regulations governing who could become a collier. No man having less than one year of experience in one of the province's coal mines was to become a collier, and no man having less than two years of such experience was to be given charge of a place in the mine. Before other workers in the coal mine could become colliers, they now had to go before a board of examiners and be tested for a mining certificate. The union had achieved a system of state licencing of miners that gave official recognition to the colliers' skills and made it more difficult for managers to "dilute" this skilled work force with unskilled immigrants or native strikebreakers. This protective legislation was the realization of the dream that the collier be recognized as a skilled worker. <sup>180</sup>

The legislation of 1891 was difficult to reconcile with the new labour policies of the Dominion Coal Company, and particularly with the greatly extended use of undercutting machines. PWA rank-and-file members were hostile to the machines, yet the Grand Council and Drummond, enchanted by the prospect of vast foreign coal markets, allowed Dominion Coal to circumvent the 1891 legislation, on the understanding that native workers would be gradually trained in the use of the undercutters.

<sup>176</sup> PANS, MG2, vol. 424, Fielding to Drummond, 12 June 1894.

<sup>177</sup> PANS, MG2, vol. 485, Fielding to Drummond, 13 December 1892.

<sup>178</sup> PANS, MG2, vol. 485, Fielding to Drummond, 13 December 1892.

<sup>179</sup> G.C. Minutes, September 1893, report of Robert Drummond.

<sup>180</sup> For discussion of this question, see Macleod, "Colliers, Collier Safety and Workplace Control," 251-3.

By 1895, rank-and-file members and the Grand Council were alarmed at the wholesale dilution of the colliers' craft. As Drummond wrote to Edwin Gilpin:

Is it not time Your department was taking Some action in reference to the Yankee machine men who are working in Some of the Syndicate Mines and have no Certificates? I was willing to wink at what I deem an open violation of law so long as the management Could say the men were working in order to teach native workmen. Now however that we have more than sufficient number of our own men to effectively man the Machines, the law should be enforced.<sup>181</sup>

Drummond also protested to W.S. Fielding. Fielding replied that it would be unjust to prosecute violators without warning.<sup>182</sup> Drummond shot back: "Would you say because a man has for a year illegally sold liquor he should be permitted to continue solely because he was allowed to for that time?" He hinted at the extraordinary powers now being wielded by Dominion Coal. But Fielding not only was unswayed, but mocked Drummond for his passion on the subject.

I note your suggestions respecting the power of a big company. Is it not sad to think that this power seems to have influenced the Secretary of the PWA, who has been content for a long time to wink at the company's alleged violation of law, and is now suddenly seized with a spasm of virtue which leads him to think that instant prosecution is necessary for the good of mankind?

Indeed, since the machine men brought in by the Dominion Coal Company "have been working for some time in the mines, with the full knowledge of everybody concerned, including even the vigilant Secretary of the PWA and all the Lodges of that excellent institution," some colour of authority had been given to the circumvention of the law.<sup>183</sup> Drummond could by all means try the courts — but Fielding would never give way on an issue so centrally bound up with the strategy of Dominion Coal.

This was probably the decisive moment at which Drummond crossed the Rubicon dividing one class from another. He could have resigned from the Legislative Council, summoned the Grand Council, called strikes in protest against so flagrant a violation of the law. Instead he fell into silence. Fielding's response to him revealed that he was impotent. Drummond had protested, but this was the last thing he was ever to do on behalf of the miners. His days of influence were past; his views amounted to nothing compared to the requirements of the mammoth corporation that now dominated the industry. That Drummond made this choice did not wipe out his years as an organizer and democrat, but since he continued to write on coal mining affairs until 1925, and always in a pro-business vein, his early radical record gradually vanished from view, as he probably hoped it would.

<sup>181</sup> PANS, RG21, Series "A," vol. 6, file "Coal Mines, 1895, Correspondence."

<sup>182</sup> PANS, MG2, vol. 487, Fielding to Drummond, 14 August 1895.

<sup>183</sup> PANS, MG2, vol. 487, Fielding to Drummond, 16 August 1885.

In the 1890s many new weaknesses in the PWA were brought to the surface by the transformed structure of the economy. The PWA as a movement was profoundly demoralized, by ferocious attacks from without and paralysis within. The advent of monopoly capitalism had fragmented the union and paralyzed its leadership. A number of lodges continued to struggle militantly, as the PWA had always struggled, for working-class independence. They prepared the way for the explosive growth of the PWA in the early twentieth century, when it became in practice the massive general union it had always been in theory. In the bleak, demoralized 1890s such a revival seemed far away.

What is the place of the PWA within nineteenth-century Canadian working-class history? As Bryan Palmer rightly suggests, there were striking similarities between the *Knights of Labor in Ontario and Quebec* and the PWA in Nova Scotia.<sup>181</sup> Both movements advocated temperance, were saturated with masonic lore, hesitantly moved into independent labour politics, and fought tenaciously for rights within the workplace; both movements deserve to be rescued from the condescension of posterity. The PWA could be considered a Maritime equivalent of the *Knights*. Yet there were important contrasts as well as similarities between the two movements. The breadth of the *Knights* — the number of communities they affected, the different constituencies they mobilized, and the scope of their alternative vision, drawing freely upon a continental labour reform ideology — contrasts vividly with the far more limited horizons of the PWA. On the other hand, the depth of the PWA — the longevity and rootedness of the militant local lodges, the emphatically Scottish tone of its ideology of the independent collier, and the union's unrivalled political influence — meant that rather than peaking fairly abruptly in the mid-1880s, it was a very potent force well before and a long time after, with an active mass base until 1909. This contrast also applies to the PWA strikes. The mass strikes conducted by the *Knights* were often defeats or ambivalent compromises. The PWA suffered few outright defeats, but won several complete victories, and in strikes of a magnitude not in evidence elsewhere. This contrast in the militancy and political influence of the two movements probably reflects more the structural position of the coal miners than it does the PWA's prowess, for few other industrial or craft workers enjoyed the coal miners' rooted capacity to resist their employers. As our knowledge of the 1880s and 1890s deepens, such tentative observations on similarities and differences between the two movements will be transcended by a full-scale comparative analysis which will illuminate the limited class identities of nineteenth-century Canadian workers.

Whatever its ultimate place in Canadian working-class history, the PWA's historical importance in the Maritimes can hardly be questioned. From 1879 to 1908, the PWA was the critical force of dissent in the Maritimes. The 72 strikes associated with PWA lodges from 1879 to 1900 represented the major

<sup>181</sup> Bryan Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*, chap. 3.



nineteenth-century response in the region to the coming of industrial capitalism. The PWA was crucial to the extension of suffrage and the achievement of important mining reforms. In the local lodges, the achievement of workers' control over many significant areas of mining created space for experiments in working-class politics. "Our Rights, by Wisdom, Wile, or War," said the motto of one of the lodges; while counselled to accept the "wisdom" of negotiation and arbitration and often applying the "wile" of paternalism, the lodges rarely hesitated to go to war for their rights. And it was on this tradition of independent working-class activism that twentieth-century militants and radicals could build.<sup>185</sup> Drummond, the movement's secretary, ideologue, and sometime leader, would be left behind.

He had never cared for Holdfast Lodge in Joggins, and he thought it an unreliable and unsteady body. (Ironically, it was the only mainland lodge to survive the deluge of 1898.) Holdfast was the side of the PWA that Drummond always wanted to hide, both when he wrote his memoirs and when he led the union. The lodge had rough manners. When its secretary wrote to the Department of Mines to protest repeated violations of the law by the employer, he could not muster Drummond's elegant rhetoric; he had only the rough language of the semi-literate.<sup>186</sup> These were not, in the 1890s, Drummond's sort of people. After they held a dance, their landlord wrote to complain "about Splitting Panels in the Door."<sup>187</sup> Drummond found them unreasonable. He thought their three strikes in 1895 alone a sign of indiscipline.

But Holdfast Lodge, just as much as Drummond, was "the PWA." When it received a notice of a wage reduction of 12-1/2 per cent in the middle of the winter of 1895-6, it disregarded Drummond's instructions and ordered the 300 Joggins miners out.<sup>188</sup> In an uncanny rehearsal for Cape Breton's labour wars in the 1920s, they fought the wage reductions imposed by a recklessly financed and predatory company, a creature of the age of monopoly. They did not have Drummond's approval, but they had the support of the PWA members in Springhill and Amherst, who contributed generously to their cause.<sup>189</sup> They no less than Drummond, were "the PWA" when they violently waylaid workers returning to work, and when, 200-strong, they resisted arrest by barricading themselves in the PWA hall, together with "27 rifles, besides fowling pieces and small arms," and a quantity of bricks, all of which they intended to use in the

<sup>185</sup> Pioneer Lodge, for instance, turned into the first Nova Scotia local of District 26 of the United Mine Workers of America.

<sup>186</sup> PANS, RG21, Series "A," vol. 6, A.W. McLean to E. Gilpin, 6 February 1896.

<sup>187</sup> Holdfast Lodge Minutes, 27 November 1895.

<sup>188</sup> Holdfast Lodge Minutes, 9 January 1896.

<sup>189</sup> Contrary to the impression conveyed by Drummond, the Joggins miners did win the support of the Grand Council for their strike, which reversed its earlier negative decision at a meeting on 26 February 1896. This was very likely a vote against Drummond as well as a vote for Holdfast.

event of their arrest.<sup>190</sup> We can, of course, view this struggle through the eyes of Drummond, who wrote it off as the first defeat of the PWA, a black eye for the order.<sup>191</sup> But why should we look at this part of the PWA through his eyes? Why not see this defiant lodge, barricaded with its firearms, as a portent of the twentieth century, when the ideal of working-class independence was to be given its explosive, socialist interpretation — partly through the efforts of the numerous socialists of Holdfast Lodge? Drummond was right to despise this small, rebellious lodge, for it symbolized the wars he could no longer fight, the workers he no longer really knew, and the radical future he now opposed with all his might.

<sup>190</sup> *Acadian Recorder*, 16 March 1896; *Amherst Daily News*, 16, 17 March 1896.

<sup>191</sup> G.C. Minutes, September 1896. Drummond overlooked two things: the record of defeated strikes in the 1880s, and the success enjoyed by Holdfast Lodge in limiting the amount of the reduction.

# Telos

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Issue No. 67

*Squaring the Hexagon*

Spring 1986

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