

# NOTEBOOK / CARNET

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THIS SECTION welcomes commentaries on any issue related to labour and the working class. Submissions should be about 1000 words in length and sent to: Andrew Parnaby, Notebook/Carnet, *Labour/Le Travail*, Faculty of Arts Publications, FM2005, Memorial University, St. John's, NL, A1C 5S7; e-mail: <parnabya@hotmail.com>

## Steel-ing Cape Breton's Labour History

Dan MacDonald

LITTLE NEEDS TO BE SAID about the Sydney tar ponds that has not already been said. When one hears of the tar ponds these days there is usually a silent environmental caveat that trumps the steel plant's working-class history: Yes, to speak of environmental sludge these days is to compel your listener to gaze wistfully upon one hundred years of steel-making in Cape Breton as a tragedy. Indeed, when viewed this way, the steel plant, which operated for more than a century, is decontextualized and placed in a narrow environmental compartment while its multi-vocal history of class conflict, consensus, and culture is made to gag and mummify. It is, therefore, ridiculous to imply that the only legacy of steel production in Sydney is a toxic waste site without recognizing the larger working-class experience that has been the island's inheritance. In his doctoral dissertation Ron Crawley found that one "important fact about Sydney steel workers that makes them an especially interest-

ing case study is that they worked in an industry which has been marked by recurring crises.”<sup>1</sup> This has not been the case for other cities, like Hamilton, dominated by steel-making. The result in Cape Breton has been a calloused, battle-hardened, yet dynamic industrial labour force: Sydney’s steel makers often demonstrated a rank-and-file militancy that transcended international union bureaucracy; their union brass, made up of unpaid local workers, often offered support that went beyond the steel yard to embrace civic organizations.<sup>2</sup> The making of steel is more than a story of sludge. It is a story of working-class experience — a story, though, in danger of being erased from our historical memory.

What, then, of the ten-ton fiddle that now sits at Sydney’s harbour? Well, besides being the world’s largest illuminated fiddle, it was built from steel plating by Cyril Hearn of Sydney at the local steel yard. The fiddle highlighted the official opening of Sydney’s new Marine Terminal which is to be buoyed by tourists from the cruise ship “industry.”<sup>3</sup> The grand opening of the terminal featured a host of local entertainers such as Gordie Sampson, Beolach, Howie MacDonald, MacMorin, and others; Cape Breton University economics professor and Sydney Ports Corporation Chairman Steve Kavanagh suggested the fiddle was a fine example of “what can be done when a community works together.”<sup>4</sup> The fiddle was the crowning jewel in the eight-million-dollar facelift that the Terminal had undergone. Sydney/Victoria Member of Parliament Mark Eyking said the project will “be important for the entire island.”<sup>5</sup>

At first glance the fiddle produces a gamut of emotions from pride to embarrassment. Certainly it is a monument to working-class craftsmanship and thus represents a golden opportunity to celebrate the city’s steel-making past, but this was not the case. Instead, it emblemizes the unhealthy hegemony of celtic culture and music in an area that is both multicultural and rich in blues, jazz, country, punk, and Acadian music. The fiddle, or in this case *Fidheal Mhor A’Ceilidh* (Big Ceilidh Fiddle) as it is named in Gaelic, is a symbol expropriated from Cape Breton’s agrarian working class and used to characterize a new post-industrial urban tourist industry. Oddly, the phallic fiddle faces toward neither the harbour nor land and yet it is there to welcome those from cruise ships as if it were Sydney’s own Statue of Liberty. The keepers of official culture have wished to capitalize on the compressed symbolism of the fiddle and offer it to the thousands of tourists who visit Cape Breton by disembarking at the island’s major port. Instead of working-class inge-

<sup>1</sup>Ron Crawley, “Conflict Within Unions: Struggles Among Steelworkers, 1936-1972,” PhD thesis, Carleton University, 1995, 56.

<sup>2</sup>Crawley, 74.

<sup>3</sup>Ross A. Klein, *Cruising — Out of Control: The Cruise Industry, The Environment, Workers, and the Maritimes* (Halifax 2003). Published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, this report is available on line at [www.policyalternatives.ca](http://www.policyalternatives.ca).

<sup>4</sup>*Cape Breton Post*, 27 January 2005.

<sup>5</sup>*Cape Breton Post*, 29 January 2005.

nity that accompanies the steel-making heritage, the fiddle symbolizes the quaint, docile, and sluggish nature of the locals, a post-industrial folk.

Where does one go to get a sense of Sydney's industrial working-class history these days? The Cape Breton Centre for Heritage and Science, which is located away from the city's growing tourist stroll, is currently presenting an exhibit entitled "The Steel Plant in the Home" that will run until the end of the year. All artifacts in the exhibit were constructed by Sydney steel workers during down-times between different stages of the steel-making process and used domestically. Each phase of that process proceeded at different times, creating windows of time for steel workers to construct the objects, all of which were made from excess materials found on the job.<sup>6</sup>

The theme of the exhibit, as its title suggests, is domestic manifestations of the industrial world. Peyton Chisolm, exhibit curator, has suggested that the items were not made for resale. Some were made for fellow workers while others were for management. The artifacts can loosely be described as functional and fanciful. For instance, grave markers, wrenches, pokers, pipes, shovels, and firewood baskets served immediate purposes within the household. Both poker and shovel had an interwoven, almost serpentine, design on the handle. The firewood basket is constructed in the shape of a black trotting horse. Such designs were artistic autographs, while other signatures were more overt. For instance a leather ammunition belt used for hunting was made from a used leather pulley belt. The waistband is richly designed with the craftsman's name emblazoned across it. A sheath for a hunting knife is made from dark leather with the maker's initials found on it. Such designs reflected the individual's skill and the pride with which he worked.

Other designs mirrored a less utilitarian style. There is a red-oxide Christmas tree strung with holiday lights. Accompanying this object are several Christmas tree stands which have found their way into local households as evidenced by the residual spruce needles which are still inside the stand. One is red while the other is decorated with snowflakes. Other artifacts include lobster crackers, a slightly rusty lawn ornament hand-crafted in the shape of a rooster, several bare-faced men's rings, and a pedestal table base used for lawn furniture. The most interesting artifacts are the steel toy soldiers. They are several inches high and some are gold coloured while others are silver. The combatants are in one of three militaristic positions. They are either blowing a trumpet, carrying a rifle, or shooting. In the exhibit, they are facing off in a mock battle. Interestingly, the origins of these creations remain speculative as the maker of these soldiers did not want to be identified. What is known, however, is that the maker must have had his own moulds for creating the soldiers. Again it is unknown where these moulds have

<sup>6</sup>Briefly, stage one is making pig iron from raw materials such as iron ore, coal, and limestone. Stage two is combining the pig iron with scrap metal, limestone, and other materials to make ingots which are turned into blooms or slabs. Stage three is when the primary steel is sent to rolling mills to be made into everything from rails to nail. See Crawley, 376.

come from, although Chisholm speculates that they may have been cultural baggage brought by steel workers from Britain.

As impressive as the battle scenes are, however, they illustrate one of the limitations of the exhibit. The exhibit is about men only: their creations and their skill. The reciprocal and changing relationship between work and home, public and private spheres, which made these creations possible is not mentioned in any of the written material that accompanied the exhibit; the overtly masculine character of it all is left unexamined. To be fair, the Cape Breton Centre for Heritage and Science relied on solicited exhibit material found through newsprint, radio requests, and word of mouth. As a conduit for historical information, however, the Centre has a responsibility to present the articles in an accurate fashion and in a context. The exhibit is masculine in nature which reveals an important gender dimension of the steel-making legacy. All artifacts were made by men, primarily for men. The museum's exhibit title — "The Steel Plant in the Home" — should have been a springboard to examine that very relationship; without further discussion, though, it merely hints that the industrial sphere was somehow gender-democratized by domesticity.

So what of the makers, keepers, and mediators of Sydney's public steel history? The environmentalists, the tourist promoters, and the museum curators all compete for ownership of symbols worthy of advancing their cause. The consequences of such a contest affect how steel workers are remembered. For the *green* makers of steel history, a lesson in lateral thinking would be beneficial to understanding that the complexity of Sydney steel surpasses that of current environmental concerns. Local business leaders and lower governmental bureaucrats who lobbied for the giant fiddle need to be relentlessly taken to task for their use and abuse of historical symbols. For museum curators and employees, economic concerns, as well as the feasibility and fashionability of a given exhibit, often dictate the nature of displays. Irrespective of its gender concerns, however, the steel exhibit offers a unique glimpse into the complexity of Sydney's working-class past: it is a good place to start. Tragically Sydney's tar ponds and great fiddle, crafted from steel, are something of a permanent feature of the city's urban landscape, while the steel exhibit is only temporarily on display.

## Report from the Archives: Records of the Joint Action Group to Clean Up the Sydney Tar Ponds

Wendy G. Robicheau

IN SEPTEMBER 2003, an important part of Industrial Cape Breton's economic, political, social, and environmental history arrived without ceremony at the Beaton Institute: over 100 banker boxes, or 90 linear metres, of unprocessed records from the Joint Action Group [JAG], a community-based organization dedicated to cleaning up Sydney's infamous tar ponds.<sup>1</sup> This is one of the largest accessions ever received by the Institute. Contained in the records are paper and electronic documents, published and unpublished reports, video and sound recordings, photographs, books, posters, banners, and community surveys. This rich and diverse collection will be of interest to readers of *Labour/Le Travail* for it documents a working-class community's struggle to rehabilitate the local environment after more than a century of steel making on Cape Breton Island.

JAG was formed in 1996. Federal government ministers of Health and Environment met with community leaders of various affiliations to design an organization committed to finding a community-based solution to the tar ponds problem. All three levels of government signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 1998; it allowed JAG to carry out its mandate to "educate, involve and empower the community, through partnerships, to determine and implement acceptable solutions for Canada's worst hazardous waste site and to assess and address the impact on human health."<sup>2</sup> For the following seven years, JAG studied soil and water contaminants in the Muggah Creek area, dealt with re-directing sewage to the Sydney Harbour, appointed working groups to address interconnected aspects of the tar ponds situation,<sup>3</sup> and collected community opinion on clean-up options.

<sup>1</sup>The Beaton Institute began in 1957. The collection focuses on all aspects of Cape Breton's past and present. For more information, refer to [beaton.ca/pebretonu.ca](http://beaton.ca/pebretonu.ca).

<sup>2</sup>"JAG Policies and Procedures Manual" (Sydney 2000), Policy 101.

<sup>3</sup>JAG created working groups on Health Studies, Site Security, Environmental Data Gathering, Remedial Options, Public Education and Participation, and Governance.

In mid-2003, JAG's Memorandum of Understanding expired and most of the organization's records were prepared for transport to the Beaton Institute at Cape Breton University; a portion of the records are being stored on the Sydney Steel Corporation [SYSCO] site. Soon after, the Sydney Tar Ponds Agency [STPA], an agency of the Nova Scotia Government, indicated its desire to have access to the JAG records as part of its involvement with the remediation process. In response, the Beaton Institute inventoried, organized, and partially digitized the records as quickly as possible, a process that also involved archival training, primary research, and classroom instruction. That work began on 15 November 2004 and continued until 31 March 2005. The "Joint Action Group for the Environmental Clean-Up of the Muggah Creek Watershed fonds" is now open to researchers, with some restrictions.<sup>4</sup>

Largely untapped by academics, this collection will provide labour historians and other scholars with a multi-sided view of the impact of steel making on human health and the natural environment, and the politics of de-industrialization that emerged once the blast furnaces were finally idled in 1989. JAG's many publications, reports, and photographs detail the environmental hazards of the tar ponds site and its impact on the surrounding working-class communities such as Whitney Pier and Sydney's North End; maps and plans show the ways in which the physical landscape changed during the steel plant's operation. Minute books, policy documents, surveys, and other material reveal the complexities of JAG's administrative structure and the politics of the consultation process; the perspectives of provincial and federal governments are documented here too.

With this collection, the Beaton Institute has preserved an important part of Cape Breton Island's recent history. The efforts of JAG to find a community-based solution to the Sydney tar ponds have produced a wealth of interesting documents. Researchers in labour and working-class history will find this material both valuable and stimulating for a variety of issues. The depth of the "evidence" of the community's fight to clean up the Sydney tar ponds is only now being understood. To view these records, please contact the Beaton Institute.

<sup>4</sup>In total, the collection includes 43 boxes or 35.45 linear metres of records (3.84 m of textual records, 1931 sound recordings, 72 video recordings, 64 CDs, 1004 photographs/slides, 117 posters/banners) and 540 monographs. Published materials were sent to the Cape Breton University Library and can be accessed through the NovaNet database. Records marked "Confidential" are restricted until 1 January 2014. Written permission is required to view these records prior to the aforementioned date.