

# *Through the Looking Glass of Culture: An Essay on the New Labour History and Working-Class Culture in Recent Canadian Historical Writing*

David J. Bercuson

IN THE INTRODUCTION TO *Essays in Canadian Working Class History*, published in 1976, Gregory Kealey and Peter Warrian present a definition of the new labour history in Canada:

The major contribution of the "new" history has been to redefine "labour history" as "working class history." Thus, labour history ceases to be simply a category of political economy, a problem of industrial relations, a canon of saintly working class leaders, a chronicle of union locals or a chronology of militant strike actions.

Kealey and Warrian insist that workers must be studied "in a totality:" almost every aspect of the life and work of workers must be included.<sup>1</sup>

But what has this meant in practice? Some recent work by new labour historians in Canada seems to show a marked resemblance to other variants of labour history. Steven Langdon's "The Emergence of the Canadian Working Class Movement" appears to trace the growth of trade unionism in Canada from 1845 to 1875 not unlike H.A. Logan, Bernard Ostry, and others.<sup>2</sup> He writes about a small group of workers, surely untypical of their time, organized and politically conscious, and very much a skilled élite. Most of the essays in Kealey and Warrian also seem quite conventional. We can find the story of "saintly working class leaders" (E.E. Sheppard and Phillips Thompson in the Hann essay), a "chronology of militant strike actions" (the essays by Jean Morrison and David Frank), even a "chronicle of union locals" (in the Roberts essay).<sup>3</sup> A recent article by Palmer and Heron in the *Canadian Historical Review* is an analysis of the causes and course of industrial conflict in southern Ontario prior to World War I.<sup>4</sup> Palmer's study of skilled workers in Hamilton contains several chapters which discuss trade-union growth and development,

<sup>1</sup> Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto 1976), 7-8.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Langdon, *The Emergence of the Canadian Working Class Movement* (Toronto 1975). Other accounts are in H.A. Logan, *Trade Unions in Canada* (Toronto 1948), 28-47, and Bernard Ostry, "Conservatives, Liberals and Labour in the 1870s," *Canadian Historical Review*, 41 (1960), 93-127.

<sup>3</sup> Kealey and Warrian, *Essays*.

<sup>4</sup> Craig Heron and Bryan D. Palmer, "Through the Prism of the Strike: Industrial Conflict in Southern Ontario, 1902-1914," *Canadian Historical Review*, 8 (1977), 423-58.

David J. Bercuson, "Through the Looking Glass of Culture: An Essay on the New Labour History and Working-Class Culture in Recent Canadian Historical Writing," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (Spring 1981), 95-112.

strikes and lockouts, and the influence of different labour leaders.<sup>5</sup> Kealey's study of Toronto workers contains at least five chapters devoted to working-class and trade-union politics.<sup>6</sup>

What is it, therefore, that sets Kealey's history of the 1872 Toronto printers' strike apart from Ostry's?<sup>7</sup> How is Frank on the Cape Breton coal strikes different from Paul MacEwan?<sup>8</sup> What makes Palmer's analysis of Phillips Thompson's "new" labour history and D.C. Masters' discussion of William Cooper "old?"<sup>9</sup> Is it simply that more contemporary historians have marshalled new evidence?

The new labour history is not new for the "what," but for the "how." Quite simply, the entire conceptual framework differs from other labour or social history. The studies in Kealey and Warrian, the Langdon essay, the Palmer and Kealey books, and other works of this genre are intended to be restricted but intensive studies of workers in different places and at different times which will eventually form a new synthesis of Canadian social history. The method, as Palmer describes it, involves the use of "sharp detail of limited chronology or restricted region to illustrate the human dimensions of the past." In the process, "theory is meant to inform historical inquiry and, in turn, to be informed by historical research." In the words of E.P. Thompson, the historian must "proceed from definitions to evidence and back from evidence to definitions."<sup>10</sup> Thus, presumably, MacEwan's examination of industrial conflict in Cape Breton differs from Frank's in that MacEwan intended only to explain particular actions in a particular time and place so that more light could be thrown on the reasons why the present has taken the form it does. MacEwan uses evidence to draw conclusions and offer explanations regarding the particular time, place, and events under study. This is also true for Ostry, Logan, Masters, Babcock, McCormack, and others. It does not appear to be true of those who follow what Palmer labels "a tradition of empirical Marxism."<sup>11</sup>

The new labour history is usually marked by a concern with "working-class culture." It is always difficult to categorize a group of historians. Regardless of

<sup>5</sup> Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montreal 1979). See especially ch. 4-7.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory S. Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892* (Toronto 1980). See especially ch. 7, 9, 11-13.

<sup>7</sup> Kealey's account is contained in Gregory S. Kealey, "The Honest Workingman and Workers' Control: The Experience of Toronto Skilled Workers, 1860-1892," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 1 (1976), 32-68. Ostry's account is in "Conservatives, Liberals and Labour in the 1870s."

<sup>8</sup> Frank's account is in David Frank, "Class Conflict in the Coal Industry: Cape Breton, 1922," in Kealey and Warrian, *Essays*, 262-84. MacEwan's account is in Paul MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers: Labour in Cape Breton* (Toronto 1976), 79-89.

<sup>9</sup> Palmer's analysis is in *A Culture in Conflict*, 97-122; Masters' is in D.C. Masters, *The Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto 1950), 22-7.

<sup>10</sup> Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, xii-xiv.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

the ideological or conceptual approach they identify themselves with they are, after all, individuals. One may be more concerned with the question of culture, or view culture differently, than the next. One may be more guided by evidence, another by theory. Nevertheless, it is clear that for those in Canada who have styled themselves practitioners of the new labour history, a concern with culture is basic.

In the last two decades much has been written about working-class culture, what it is, what can be learned from and about it, and how it should be used in the approach to history. It was inevitable that the culturalist approach to social history would find its exponents in Canada. These historians follow the thinking of E.P. Thompson in Britain, Herbert Gutman in the United States, and others in applying the culturalist approach to Canadian experience by studying workers to discover the patterns of their culture.<sup>12</sup> This is done to determine the structure of their lives and the methods and practices they used to maintain those structures to control their environment. Some workers, the skilled, were more successful than others in resisting the attacks of industrial capitalism for a longer period because of their culture. Others, the unskilled and semi-skilled, were not capable of exercising such control but were drawn into the struggle and were sometimes led by the skilled. Industrial capitalism challenged that control and conflict resulted. The challenge was accompanied by a further regulation and direction of the unskilled. Palmer calls the skilled the cutting edge of the working class.<sup>13</sup> They could just as easily be labelled the rearguard.

The culturalist approach is based on the belief that the study of working-class culture is essential to an understanding of workers' control and the conflicts that erupted because of the challenge to that control. Palmer, echoing E.P. Thompson, regards culture and conflict as "complementary processes." According to Kealey and Warrian the new social history studies the relationship of class to class, with class being understood as both an economic and a cultural relationship. In the economic sense, class is the exploitive relationship between capitalist and worker. In the cultural sense, it is the beliefs, values, and traditions of the workers. When the new social history studying these relationships is completed, they maintain, a new synthesis of Canadian history will emerge.<sup>14</sup> They do not explain how the process of historical investigation can ever be completed. In this emphasis on culture, control, and conflict as related parts of a whole, as the theory informed by evidence and further informing inquiry, the new labour history is both new and different from the old.

Despite the work of the last two decades, there is still no precise, agreed upon, definition of the new labour history and there is no general agreement

<sup>12</sup> Many examples of Gutman and Thompson can be cited but two of the most important are E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London 1963) and Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York 1976).

<sup>13</sup> Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, xii.

<sup>14</sup> Kealey and Warrian, *Essays*, 8.

among new labour historians as to the proper role to assign to culture in studying social history. In a recent exchange, James O. Morris and David Brody agreed that a distinction between old and new was not particularly accurate or helpful.<sup>15</sup> What, then, does that group of Canadian labour historians who champion the new labour history mean when they talk about the new labour history in Canada? Is it the same as that being written in Britain and the United States? In part, it is. But there are also subtle but important differences that must be emphasized if the term "new labour history" is to be identified in the Canadian context.

The new labour history in Britain tends to be explicitly Marxist and is almost solely concerned with exploring the culture of the British working class. E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* was the pioneer and most important work which synthesized much of what had been written about English workers prior to the 1830s. Thompson's emphasis on culture as a unifying factor for the working class, and as one pole in a dynamic relationship between culture and activity (or culture and not-culture as Thompson puts it)<sup>16</sup> set the pattern for subsequent work in the field. The new labour history in Britain examines working-class experience through the focus of working-class culture and uses culture as explanation as well as resource. It is working-class culture, much more than the working class's economic relationship in the productive process, which concerns Thompson and his colleagues.

This is not particularly true of the new labour history in the United States. There the importance of writing history from "the bottom up" is extolled, as it is in Britain, but there is less concentration on working-class culture as a factor unifying the working class. Perhaps this is because there is some acknowledgement that there is no American working-class culture as such and that the variety of ethnic origins of the American working class make a cultural analysis confusing and essentially meaningless. David Brody, for example, thinks that an economic framework is more helpful to the study of the American worker than a cultural one.<sup>17</sup> He believes that Herbert Gutman's "Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America" represents a backing away from culture.<sup>18</sup>

In Canada, new labour historians stand in the middle but so far tend to lean to the British experience. They study working-class culture for the explanation and definition they believe it offers in the Thompson sense and use it as a focus for studying social history in the Gutman sense. Thus, the "new labour history" in Canada is somewhat unique. Its practitioners tend to produce a history that rests more on culture than the American variety and which is, at the same

<sup>15</sup> David Brody, "The Old Labor History and the New: In Search of An American Working Class," *Labor History*, 20 (1979), 126. Morris also made this point, though from a different perspective, in a letter to the editor in *Labor History*, 20 (1979), 615. Brody agreed in his reply to Morris in the same issue, 630.

<sup>16</sup> Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, xiv.

<sup>17</sup> Brody, "The Old Labor History and the New," 125.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

time, more openly political, more Marxist, and readier to apply the British notion of class and class experience to Canada.

Any critique of the culturalist approach to history must confront the concept of working-class culture as it has been defined and used by the new labour historians. That workers had a culture in the dictionary sense of the term is undeniable. *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* gives the following as one of the definitions of culture: "the concepts, habits, skills, arts, instruments, institutions, etc. of a given people in a given period."<sup>19</sup> Culture here categorizes and describes. It does not explain. To use it as explanation for the actions of workers or any other group — linguistic, national, ethnic, and so on — we must surely prove that it explains something. We can do this by answering questions very much like the following: Was the culture unique to the workers we are concerned with or was it shared with non-workers? Did culture transcend internal divisions — economic, social, ethnic, national, religious — within the group of workers? Did the culture lead Canadian workers to perceive a common interest with their fellow workers? Did the culture unite the workers and guide them in common action and was that unity more than a momentary coming together as in, say, a riot? If we can say yes to these questions, we might well be justified in using culture as explanation in particular instances. If not, culture is not explanatory. If we find that Canadian workers were more divided along ethnic or religious or craft lines, or into any other such categories than they were united by a common culture, working-class culture loses meaning as explanation. All historians approach their subject encumbered by *a priori* assumptions but surely those assumptions should be seriously questioned when they are not supported by evidence. The search for evidence should be directed to discovering the explanation for particular phenomena. Up to this point, what have the new labour historians found?

The first major treatment of working-class culture to appear in Canada was Bryan Palmer's *A Culture in Conflict*. Part 2, "Culture" contains chapters touching on workers' lives in street, sports field, and friendly society, as well as a discussion of struggles for workers' control and the development of what Palmer says is reform thought. The chapter entitled "In Street, Field and Hall" is designed to show what the working-class culture of Hamilton consisted of. Palmer writes:

The culture of the nineteenth-century working man embraced a rich associational life, institutionalized in the friendly society, the mechanics' institute, sporting fraternities, fire companies, and working men's clubs. Complementing these formal relationships were less structured but equally tangible ties of neighborhood, workplace, or kin, manifesting themselves in the intimacy of the shared pail of beer, or the belligerence of the charivari party.<sup>20</sup>

Using Palmer's criteria and evidence, what do we see when we look at Hamilton's working-class culture? Was it unique to the working class?

<sup>19</sup> *Webster's New World Dictionary of The American Language*, College Edition.

<sup>20</sup> Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, 38.

First, we see that workers, merchants, clerks, professionals, and propertied men all belonged to friendly societies such as the Orange Lodge, the Masons, the Foresters, and so on. Although Palmer says that the non-worker members exerted "disproportionate amounts of influence in many friendly society circles . . .," he also says that the workers were "certainly . . . common" and that "their role was far from subservient." Palmer would like to be precise about worker participation but he admits that the "data are extremely rare." The only membership lists he has show that the Masons and the St. George's and St. Andrew's Societies contained "a particularly weak working-class constituency. . . ."<sup>21</sup> His evidence clearly shows that some skilled workers belonged to some friendly societies; it does not show that those societies were exclusively composed of workers or even, in some cases, dominated by them. The picture is one of workers, clerks, merchants, and others rubbing shoulders in these clubs. So too with the volunteer fire companies. Palmer presents convincing evidence to show that a large percentage of the members of such companies were skilled workers, but from 20 to 33 per cent were not.<sup>22</sup> We are not told why workers joined.

Similarly with the Mechanics Institute. It was, according to Palmer, "directed by men far removed from working-class life;" there was "little . . . working-class leadership." In 1861 two officials of the Institute pointed out that "classes of the community other than operatives constitute not infrequently the majority of subscribers and attendants." Palmer presents evidence that some workers were not happy with the way the Institute was being run, but this evidence is not extensive enough to support the claim that "working-class opposition . . . seethed below the surface."<sup>23</sup> Even if it did, it is clear that the Institute was run by non-workers and had worker and non-worker members.

These institutions, as well as sporting events, labour day parades, union dances, suppers, and festivals, and other gatherings constitute what Palmer calls the "collectivist culture."<sup>24</sup> Added to it were associational institutions such as the charivari and whitecapping. Here too the evidence hardly supports the contention that charivaris and whitecapping were in any way an exclusive, or even a worker dominated, activity. On the charivari, Palmer states that identification of the participants is not easy. He says, in fact, that we "would be hard pressed to place Hamilton workers at the scene of any of these boisterous gatherings." Of the 16 incidents he discovered in a 30 year period, only one can be definitely said to have been used by working men and women to achieve a specific working-class purpose.<sup>25</sup> The evidence is also thin to support the view that whitecapping was a significant working-class activity. Palmer tells about only one incident; on one occasion a non-unionist, presumably a strike-

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 41, 42.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 51. Palmer cites six letters to Hamilton newspapers over a six year period.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-6.

breaker, received a threatening letter signed by "White Caps" and, as a result, began to carry a revolver.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, we cannot know if these elements of the working-class culture of Hamilton were unique to the working class or were, in fact, shared by those who were not members of the working class. Working-class culture in Hamilton, on the basis of Palmer's evidence, does not seem to have been that unique.

Gregory S. Kealey's *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892* is the second major, and most recent, "new labour history" of the Canadian working class. Kealey, unlike Palmer, does not use culture as his organizational, analytical, or interpretive framework. His evidence, in fact, consistently shows that "working-class culture" did not unite Toronto skilled workers across religious or political lines and sometimes not even on lines of skill and craft. There is also evidence in this book to show that one important group of workers, strongly imbued with cultural values based on craft pride and rooted in a strong historical tradition, made peace with capitalism by accommodating to the machine age, instead of resisting it.

Kealey's history of Toronto coopers shows that culture and skill did not, of itself, produce craft solidarity. There was such solidarity within the union, but not among all members of the trade, union and non-union. Kealey quotes one cooper: "If the union men had been supported by the nons last fall and the latter had not taken the berths vacated by the union men . . . the machine would not be making barrels now."<sup>27</sup> The nons or "owls," who gave coopers so much trouble in their fight against the machine, were also coopers who must have apprenticed to the craft in the same way as the members of the union. How different were their cultural traditions? Similarly, the "country mice," who broke printers' strikes,<sup>28</sup> were rooted in the same cultural traditions, born of craft, as union members. Kealey is aware of this problem of interpretation because he makes a point of relating the story of the "vermin's strike" of 1889.<sup>29</sup>

Kealey's history of the Toronto printers raises an interesting question. When can it be said that the particular culture of a craft is actually a "counter-culture" directed against what members of the craft may view as affectation? Kealey shows that the printers disdained the tradition of patron saints for their union<sup>30</sup> and opted, instead, for a tradition free of superstition and elaborate ritual. Was this also a revolt against mystical notions of class and the brotherhood of all workers? The printers' traditions stemmed directly from their skills and not from any mystical class notions. It was that rational tradition, based on their own keen awareness of their place in the political, social, and economic

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-9.

<sup>27</sup> Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond*, 62.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

order, that prompted them to make peace with the machine. Kealey calls the printers' agreement with the Mergenthaler Company a triumph over the machine.<sup>31</sup> But in fact it was an old fashioned compromise — a recognition that bending is better than breaking. On one occasion the union even turned on one of its own locals to enforce its agreement with the company.<sup>32</sup> Can it be that printers, the craft with perhaps the most skill and greatest power of all skilled trades in the late nineteenth century, were also the least wedded to working-class culture and the most pragmatic in dealing with industrial capitalism? The experiences of Kealey's moulders must be balanced against those of Kealey's printers.

Both Kealey and Palmer stress workers' shared experiences in shop, union hall, and street. Both are forced to deal with ethnic and religious division among workers. This is only realistic in face of the considerable body of evidence which shows that ethnic and religious division has rent the Canadian working class from its very beginnings. As far back as the 1830s Ottawa Valley Irish Catholic lumber workers clashed violently with French-Canadian workers.<sup>33</sup> Catholic Irish and Protestant Irish battled each other along Canada's canals in the 1840s.<sup>34</sup> Through much of the nineteenth century the Orange Lodges, that Kealey and Palmer point to as representative of working-class culture, fought with Irish Catholic workers in the streets of Hamilton and Toronto.<sup>35</sup> If skilled workers formed part of a common working-class culture in Canada in the 1870s, how do we account for the continued existence of deep religious divisions within that culture and periodic violence directed against other workers of a different religious persuasion? Palmer traces a number of such riots in Hamilton as late as 1887, including an 1878 clash which he characterizes as "a major battle."<sup>36</sup> Kealey notes 22 riots pitting Orange against Green between 1867 and 1892 in Toronto.<sup>37</sup> The Orange Order, Kealey points out, "clearly divide[d] the working-class community in two."<sup>38</sup> Palmer asserts that sectarian violence was not serious in Hamilton.<sup>39</sup> On his evidence we can agree that Protestant-Catholic conflict was rare in that city. But why was this? Palmer offers two explanations. The first is that Hamilton was "most emphat-

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>33</sup> Michael S. Cross, "The Shiners' War: Social Violence in the Ottawa Valley in the 1830s," *Canadian Historical Review*, 54 (1973), 1-26.

<sup>34</sup> See Michael S. Cross, *The Workingman in the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto 1974), 245-53; see also H.C. Pentland, "The Lachine Strike of 1843," *Canadian Historical Review*, 29 (1948), 255-77.

<sup>35</sup> Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, 43-5; Gregory S. Kealey, "The Orange Order in Toronto: Religious Riot and the Working Class," in Kealey and Warrigan, *Essays*, 13-34.

<sup>36</sup> Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, 45.

<sup>37</sup> Kealey, "The Orange Order," 26.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>39</sup> Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, 45.



ically a Protestant city and this hegemony may have gone unquestioned."<sup>40</sup> But if this is true, then religion, not class, was the most important factor mitigating sectarian violence in Hamilton. Perhaps Palmer meant to warn us away from this conclusion with his second explanation — "the strength of the working-class movement, and the solidarity it conditioned."<sup>41</sup> Palmer's evidence is a letter from a Hamilton Knights of Labor official to Terence V. Powderly. Palmer himself warns us that this opinion may have been coloured by the official's desire to make Hamilton sound like a more class-conscious city than Toronto.<sup>42</sup>

That there was ethnic division among Toronto skilled workers is abundantly clear from Kealey's book. They were deeply divided. Kealey's history of the Orange Lodge in Toronto, and his detailed analysis of working-class politics, speak for themselves. Yet, in at least one instance, his analysis may hide more than it reveals. Kealey is aware of the presence of religious division, even strife, but asserts that "no examples of ethnic or religious riot at the workplace have been found."<sup>43</sup> This is not surprising if workplaces were predominantly of one religious and ethnic grouping or another. Kealey does not say. But it seems highly unlikely, for example, that many Irish Catholics could be found in Toronto printshops or were initiated into the Knights of St. Crispin. Kealey is eager, perhaps too eager, to relegate Orange-Catholic violence to the realm of the "ritualistic"<sup>44</sup> and he may be equally too willing to celebrate the lack of such violence at the workplace. In fact, sectarian division among Toronto workers was great. Politically, and to some degree organizationally, Toronto workers were divided into lines that strongly resembled the battle lines of the Orange-Catholic riots with Liberals, Catholics, Irish, and the Knights of Labor on one side and Tories, Protestants, Ulstermen, Englishmen, and craft unionists on the other.<sup>45</sup> There was little class unity based on culture there. Class unity cannot be built on the rioting crowd that supported the striking street car workers in 1886, as Kealey seems to do, without prompting the conclusion that such unity was fleeting indeed.<sup>46</sup>

It is strange that Kealey, like Palmer, virtually ignores the role religion must have played in the daily lives of the skilled workers. Strange, because so much of Kealey's book is the history of sectarian division and so little is devoted to demonstrating how important religion was to individual workers. How can culture be explained, let alone used as an analytical tool, without reference to religion, especially in the late nineteenth-century context? Perhaps Palmer and Kealey have ignored religion because of what its analysis might

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond*, 123.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 121. Kealey uses the phrase "ritualistic violence."

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* See especially, 213, 229-31, 252-3.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 202-4, 210, 215.

reveal about the lack of cultural unity among the working class.

There is another way of examining this problem of ethnicity: what types of institutions did working people belong to that were shared with other workers of different ethnic groups? Available evidence suggests that social and political clubs, and political parties were usually organized along ethnic lines.<sup>47</sup> The near break-up of the Socialist Party of Canada in 1911 and the transfer of many non-English speaking socialists, especially Finns and Ukrainians, to the Social Democratic Party of Canada was at least partially due to the desire of those non-English-speaking workers to build locals based on language and ethnicity.<sup>48</sup> That same desire lived on in the 1920s and is partly responsible for the failure of the Communist Party of Canada to achieve Bolshevization.<sup>49</sup> Here we must pause to emphasize what the evidence shows us: that some of the most class-conscious workers in Canada, who had proven their allegiance to radical thought and action for decades in the face of government witch hunts and popular prejudice, refused to submerge themselves in a Bolshevized Communist Party. Their ethnic identification, their radical ethnicity, was too important. What was it, then, that gave their radicalism its strength; their ethnic identification or their identification as workers? The evidence given by Morrison in her article on violence and ethnicity at the Lakehead suggest it was a combination of both.<sup>50</sup> This is also a theme in Gutman's "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America."<sup>51</sup> One of the many conclusions we can draw from Gutman, for example, is that immigrant workers responded to industrialization differently, according to the values and traditions they brought with them to America. They did not react in the same way. This is also apparent from Morrison.

There are circumstances where workers of one ethnic group combined with those of another in common struggle and for common cause. The Winnipeg General Strike is a good example and certainly not the only one. But even here, both the pro- and anti-strike returned soldiers paraded with signs damning the "enemy aliens."<sup>52</sup> The record of workers of one ethnic group allowing them-

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Donald Avery, *Dangerous Foreigners: European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932* (Toronto 1979), 39-64; also, A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto 1977), 65-7. Much can be learned about the variety of ethnic radical organizations from *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, X (1978).

<sup>48</sup> McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries*, 73-5; Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour, 1880-1930* (Kingston 1968), 104-15.

<sup>49</sup> William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: A History of The Communist Party of Canada, 1919-1929* (Toronto 1968), 81-9.

<sup>50</sup> Jean Morrison, "Ethnicity and Violence: The Lakehead Freight Handlers Before World War I," in Kealey and Warran, *Essays*, 158-60.

<sup>51</sup> Herbert G. Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," *American Historical Review*, 78 (1973), 531-88.

<sup>52</sup> David J. Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations and the General Strike* (Montreal 1974), 147-8.

selves to be used as strikebreakers against workers of another ethnic group is long and sorry in Canada, although here too we can point to cases where strikebreakers brought in under false circumstances united with their brothers and refused to work. It is hard to make any general statements that skilled workers tried to exclude other workers of non-Anglo-Saxon origin from their unions. We know that machinists in Winnipeg tried to keep non-whites out of their union<sup>53</sup> and we are well aware of the outspoken hatred of white workers for Japanese and Chinese,<sup>54</sup> but we do not know much about working-class racism in Canada because labour historians have not paid much attention to it.

Those who study Canadian labour history are well aware that large numbers of French-Canadian workers, skilled and unskilled, did not join the same unions as their English speaking brothers. Thousands of French-Canadian workers were more interested in protecting their French and Catholic culture than they were in making common economic cause with English-Canadian workers. But here too the record is a mixed one because thousands of others never joined the Catholic unions and owed their allegiance instead to the international unions. The division of Quebec workers into Catholic and international unions was not a neat cleavage with English on one side and French on the other.<sup>55</sup> We simply cannot say what role religion played in helping to form a working-class culture, or hindering the development of such a culture, because we do not know.<sup>56</sup> But what we do know, on the basis of available evidence, is that workers divided along ethnic lines at least as much as they united along class lines.

When we examine the question of whether or not culture led workers of one skill or income level to perceive a common interest with workers with other skills and incomes, we also find conflicting evidence. Many examples of working-class solidarity of different trade groups come to mind. But so do examples of groups which continued to stand aloof for long periods. In examining the craft union movement in Calgary at the turn of the century, Taraska concluded that "labour solidarity was retarded because strong unions jealously guarded their chances for economic success at the expense of their weaker

<sup>53</sup> This was told by Robert B. Russell to Lionel Orlikow. See Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Orlikow Interviews, Tape 5, p. 6.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labor in B.C.* (Vancouver 1967), 8-9; Carlos A. Schwantes, *Radical Heritage: Labor, Socialism, and Reform in Washington and British Columbia, 1885-1917* (Seattle 1979), 157-9.

<sup>55</sup> This was true from the start of the century. See Robert H. Babcock, *Gompers in Canada: A Study of American Continentalism Before the First World War* (Toronto 1974), 124-32.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Herbert G. Gutman, "Protestantism and the American Labor Movement: The Christian Spirit in the Gilded Age," *American Historical Review*, 62 (1966), 79-101. The theme is also strong in "Work, Culture, and Society . . ." and in "The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America: The Career and Letters of Richard L. Davis and Something of their Meaning, 1890-1900," in Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society*, 121-208.

brothers."<sup>57</sup> She points to the Bricklayers and Stonemasons International Union to illustrate this. Palmer also points to this group to show much the same thing in Hamilton.<sup>58</sup> The bricklayers and stonemasons in Calgary failed to support union recognition among other trades. During a 1903 carpenters' strike for union recognition, the bricklayers at first refused to support the strike, then reluctantly joined for seven days, then went back to work while the strike dragged on.<sup>59</sup>

The transportation industry and coal mining are two other areas where worker unity was sometimes more honoured in the breach than in the observance; miner battled miner, sometimes violently, in fights between the Provincial Workmen's Association and the United Mine Workers, the United Mine Workers and the One Big Union, the United Mine Workers and the Mine Workers Union of Canada. When the home locals broke away from the UMW in the Alberta coalfields in the 1920s, miners were showing a strong local allegiance forged in the fires of economic necessity if not also a realistic appraisal of the market circumstances of their bosses.<sup>60</sup> On the railways, the independence of the running trades, not only from the shopcrafts but from each other, was a long standing principle.<sup>61</sup> The running trades actively worked against lesser skilled workers who fought to establish the United Brotherhood of Railway Employees in 1902. They betrayed the Metal Trades Council in Winnipeg during the 1919 General Strike.<sup>62</sup> Palmer points to instances in Hamilton where skilled workers also showed no interest in or sympathy with the struggles of unskilled workers, especially of immigrant background.<sup>63</sup>

There were, to be sure, many instances, hard fought and difficult battles, where workers of different religions, ethnic backgrounds, diverse skills and earnings banded together in common cause. But in examining these events, historians have an obligation to study each as a particular and unique case, to explain the circumstance which created that unity and to try to discover how long that unity lasted after the immediate struggle ended. In Winnipeg the unity of the General Strike gave way to a bitter quarrel between advocates of the OBU and the international unions. In that fight, in Winnipeg and elsewhere throughout the west, workers hung their dirty linen in public, snuggled up to their employers, and hopped into bed with local, provincial, and federal govern-

<sup>57</sup> E. Taraska, "The Calgary Craft Union Movement: 1900-1920," unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Calgary, 1972, 49-68.

<sup>58</sup> Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, 240.

<sup>59</sup> Taraska, "Calgary Craft Union Movement," 4.

<sup>60</sup> Frank Karas, "Labour and Coal in the Crownsnest Pass: 1925-1935," unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Calgary, 1972, 49-68.

<sup>61</sup> See Joseph Hugh Tuck, "Canadian Railways and the International Brotherhoods: Labour Organization in the Railway Running Trades in Canada, 1865-1914," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Western Ontario, 1975.

<sup>62</sup> Bercuson, *Confrontation*, 9-11, 159-62.

<sup>63</sup> Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, 231-2.

ments to defeat other workers with whom they had so much in common.<sup>64</sup> In what sense does a common working-class culture explain anything here? The war between the One Big Union on the one hand, and the international unions on the other, cut through class, neighbourhood, political party, church, and community. How did the common culture of the miners in Drumheller or the Crownsnest Pass unite them and guide them in common action? Did it keep the workers in Winnipeg together after the General Strike? The answer in each case is clearly negative.

And what of the culture of working women? Can women be treated simply as female members of the working class? There is mounting evidence that the female working-class experience, their culture, was different from the male experience, though perhaps paralleling it and touching it at points in time. Women not men, lived with the experience of pregnancy, child birth, and abortion, and with the cruel afflictions of pregnancy, child birth, and abortion gone wrong. Birthing could be a fearsome experience for working-class women. In the United States Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger noted "fear and fatalism" surrounding birth in working-class homes. Goldman noted that slum women lived in fear of conception. She described a variety of abortion techniques, such as "jumping off tables, massaging the stomach, drinking nauseating concoctions and using blunt instruments."<sup>65</sup> No man experienced these fears or tortures.

Nor does it seem likely that men concerned themselves with child rearing. In 1929 a South Carolina cotton mill worker described her daily life to Paul Blanshard of *The Nation*. Whereas both she and her husband worked, she alone was responsible for feeding and dressing five children in the morning, bringing the children to the mill nursery, returning home at mid-day to prepare lunch, preparing supper, putting the children to bed, making the family clothes.<sup>66</sup> This experience too set her apart from her husband in that she worked at two full jobs, one at the factory and one at home, and through her efforts maintained a semblance of family life. Is it accurate, therefore, to treat women as part of the same working-class culture as men? Their conditions of employment were often worse, but this alone did not set them apart. The very patterns of much of their life differed. Can it be automatically assumed that class was a more important means of self-identification than gender? More important, did male workers understand and sympathize with the plight of their women counterparts? Did they support them in the shop and on non-work issues? Joan Sangster presents evidence that male union members were not very class conscious towards female workers in southern Ontario just after the turn of the century.

<sup>64</sup> David Jay Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto 1978), 129-70, 189-214.

<sup>65</sup> Mary P. Ryan, *Womanhood in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York 1975), 215-6.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-210; see also Gerda Lerner, *The Female Experience: An American Documentary* (Indianapolis 1977), 290-2.

They did not sympathize with women as workers and did not support the 1907 strike against Bell Telephone.<sup>67</sup> This question needs much greater investigation here and in the United States if the issue of culture is to be confronted more fully.

Historians must prove that Canadian workers, men and women, skilled and unskilled, were bound by a common culture that was primarily the product of their class experience before they can use culture to explain anything. Historians must show that the workers themselves experienced a common bond of culture, or of class, and that they were conscious of that bond. In examining the historical record which Canadian labour historians have so far pieced together, and it is admittedly a very incomplete one, the evidence shows that working-class culture bonded workers together and provided resources on some occasions but did not on others. Workers seem to have responded as much from consciousness of job, place, church, ethnic group, and other factors as from a culture of class. The assumption that Canadian workers experienced an identification and a culture much like that of British workers is only assumption if it is not backed by proof. Even if Thompson is right about England, his concepts do not necessarily apply anywhere else.

There is another way that the new labour historians in Canada view culture; as the sum total of the workers' experiences which determined their reaction to industrialization.<sup>68</sup> It seems reasonable enough to assert that a person's actions are, in part, determined by their life experiences up to the point of action and that historians must understand those life experiences if they are to explain the actions. But how deterministic should we be in making this claim? In his introduction to *Work, Culture, and Society*, Gutman talks about "powerful cultural continuities and adaptations" continuing to shape working-class behaviour. How workers act is "shaped by the interaction between that culture and the particular society into which they enter."<sup>69</sup> It is clearly not enough to know about their culture, according to Gutman, we must also know about their society. Gutman is well aware that workers' culture is acted on by particular circumstances of time and place — the state of industry, family crisis, religious enrapturement, the actions of union leaders and politicians, the wage cut, or the speed-up. But if we study not only culture but the history of unions, industries, churches, fraternal orders, and popular and political culture, where does the history of the people fit? Gutman and his Canadian followers insist that these institutions must be studied from the focus of the workers.<sup>70</sup> In this, culture is not only a bond or a deterministic causal relationship, it is also a focus for the historian. The resource which is culture<sup>71</sup> can only be understood

<sup>67</sup> Joan Sangster, "The 1907 Bell Telephone Strike: Organizing Women Workers," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, (1978), 126-8.

<sup>68</sup> Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, xi.

<sup>69</sup> Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society*, 18.

<sup>70</sup> Kealey and Warrian, *Essays*, 11-2; Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, xvi.

<sup>71</sup> The phrase belongs to Sydney Mintz and is used in Gutman, *Work, Culture, and*

when it is viewed from the perspective of the workers. It is the workers that make social history.

Take, for example, the case of Richard Davis, black coal miner and official of the United Mine Workers of America. In his essay "The Negro and the United Mine Workers," Gutman presents a compelling portrait of the many frustrations and minor triumphs of Richard Davis. It is a minibiography and, within limits, sets Davis firmly in time and place. But Gutman is clearly not satisfied simply to tell Davis' story. The larger question, that which the Davis story is meant to throw light on, concerns the relations between black and white in American unions during the Gompers era. Gutman is sorely tempted to generalize from the Davis experience but he does not. Instead, he calls for more local and community studies that will throw light on how blacks and whites worked, or did not work, beside each other during the Gilded Age. These histories "must be" written from "the bottom up" according to Gutman. When they are completed we will know if the Davis story is typical.<sup>72</sup>

But is that all? It will be very useful to know if the Davis experience was general throughout the UMW and other unions, but is that all we need to know about coal miners? Must we not also examine how the leadership of the UMW conducted drives to organize the coal fields? Should we not also examine their leadership of the 1901 coal strike? Should we not know how and why John L. Lewis dominated coal unionism in North America for half a century? How can social historians afford to ignore those who wield social, economic, and political power in society? Or is it incorrect to think that some people have more power than others — that power is not equally distributed? There is more than a risk of romanticism in the notion that the history of common people merits greater attention than the history of the elites. In some cases, in particular times and places, it may be more important to know the history of the ordinary people than the history of the leaders. But we cannot know this *a priori*. The notion that social history only works and that historical process can only be understood from "the bottom up" is fully as deterministic and every bit as distorting as the idea that it only works from the top down.

The Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 provides a good example of this. That event was pivotal in Canadian social history. It had many interrelated causes and consequences, and each thread of cause and effect must be examined if the strike is to be understood. Some of the historical relationships, events, and personalities that should be investigated include: trade union development in Winnipeg; the structure of the Winnipeg business community; the development of trade-union thought and strategy; T.R. Deacon, the Barret Brothers, R.B. Russell, and F.J. Dixon; conscription; collective bargaining

---

*Society*, 16 and Bryan D. Palmer, "Most Uncommon Common Men: Craft and Culture in Historical Perspective," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 1 (1976), 8.

<sup>72</sup> Gutman, "The Negro and the United Mine Workers," in *Work, Culture, and Society*, 204.

practices in the railway shopcrafts; Arthur Meighen, Robert Borden, Gideon Robertson, T.C. Norris, and Charles F. Gray; the 1918 municipal strike; and so on. Historians should also examine the prejudices and persecutions suffered by Ukrainians, Russians, and others in North Winnipeg during World War I. If in studying the Winnipeg General Strike we ignore political economy, industrial relations, the role of labour leaders (canonized or not), the chronicle of union locals, such as IAM Lodge 457, or the chronology of militant strike actions, such as the 1906, 1917, and 1918 contract shop strikes, if we even consider them of lesser importance in understanding the strike, we will not understand the strike at all.

Surely there is a parallel here with military history. Military history has always been the story of generals, tactics, strategy, supply, and so on. Only recently have works appeared which have presented a view of battle as seen by the ordinary soldier.<sup>73</sup> The contribution which this new military history is making is both interesting and informative. It gives us a view of the large picture from the foxhole or the trenchline. It explains soldiers' fears and frustrations. It even tells us something about why battles were won and empires lost. But by itself it explains little about why the English won at Agincourt or the Germans at Dieppe.

The idea that working-class culture is the basic element of social history is not only misleading because it leads to the generalization that history is basically the story of the common people, how they act and react, it can also lead to a construction of a false hierarchy of evidence. The new labour historians are naturally hindered because the common people left so little evidence in the way of journals, letters, diaries. To compensate they search the popular culture, the membership lists of clubs and societies, the songs and the poetry, to produce evidence, which is claimed to be the true stuff of the common people. But this too is invariably the product of a small minority which was itself an élite, albeit a lesser one on the social scale than princes and politicians. Gutman writes about Richard Davis, but Davis was far from an ordinary American. He was a union leader, an organizer, and most important, a letter writer with talent for recording his ideas and experiences and those of the people around him. This made him different from the thousands of other voiceless and faceless black coal miners who were members of his union. The same is true of many of those who have been written about in Canada. Phillips Thompson and E.E. Sheppard may have used the somewhat unique term "brainworkers,"<sup>74</sup> but calling them brainworkers does not reduce them to the ranks of the common people. Like Davis, they were far from ordinary and were themselves part of an élite. So was Allan Studholme.<sup>75</sup> So was any person, lowly labourer, or lordly industrial baron, who thought to preserve his or her legacy in writing. The problem of the

<sup>73</sup> The best example is John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York 1976).

<sup>74</sup> See Russell Hann, "Brainworkers and the Knights of Labor: E.E. Shepherd, Phillips Thompson, and the Toronto News, 1883-1887," in Kealey and Warrian, *Essays*, 35-57.

<sup>75</sup> Palmer writes about Studholme in *A Culture in Conflict*, 227-30.



selectivity of historical evidence that has plagued historians from the start of recorded history plagues all historians today. This is not to deny the legitimacy of localized, intensive study, or the idea that social history is sometimes better understood from "the bottom up." It is meant to challenge the assumption that it is the only, or even the most important, way to write social history. That assumption, unfortunately, seems to underlie much of the approach of the new labour historians in Canada as elsewhere. For some new labour historians it is also directly linked to the belief that social history can only be the history of class struggle. In summing up his recent bibliographic article in *Acadiensis*, for example, Kealey notes that the "long over-due insertion of class analysis into Canadian historical writing already promises overviews which transcend" the new directions in Canadian historical writing since the 1960s. Kealey says, about the historical notion of class, that "there can be no other useful notion. . . ."<sup>76</sup> Palmer, in *A Culture in Conflict*, echoes these sentiments. He quotes William Morris's criticism that Sidney Webb and the Fabians could not acknowledge "the class war" and adds that Morris could have been "speaking to modern historians" who, Palmer thinks, assume too easily that the workers "painlessly adapted to the social relations of industrial capitalism."<sup>77</sup> These ideas are more fully elaborated in William Preston's *Labor History* review article on the IWW.<sup>78</sup> Preston claims that the IWW and other radical movements can only be understood "if Americans comprehend fully why large segments of the population have been 'born to lose' in an equalitarian-libertarian society with a uniquely affluent material base."<sup>79</sup> Historians must not only understand, they must have "some readiness to act." It is not enough, Preston warns, to explain the IWW "solely as a product of bad conditions [presumably unique ones]."<sup>80</sup> He endorses the view of Paul Brissenden that "the liberal interpretation [of the IWW is] entirely inadequate."<sup>81</sup> It is clear that Preston will not tolerate labour history written by those unwilling to accept the notion that the American working class was engaged in a class war. But if there was a class war, in Canada or the United States — a battle not fought by a radical clique alone, but consciously by the mass of workers — where is the evidence?

Every historian brings experiences, prejudices, and *a priori* assumptions to the examination of the past. Ideological proclivity taints the work of all. Surely it is just as distorting to insist that social history is the history of class struggle as it is to insist that workers were never motivated by revolutionary intentions. The new labour history, in trying to refocus the work of social history and in

<sup>76</sup> Gregory S. Kealey, "The Working Class in Recent Canadian Historical Writing," *Acadiensis*, 8 (1978), 135.

<sup>77</sup> See Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, especially xi-xvi, 241, 242.

<sup>78</sup> William Preston, "Shall This Be All? U.S. Historians versus William D. Haywood, et al.," *Labor History*, 12 (1971), 435-53.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 436.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 437.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 438.

painting a fuller picture of the lives of the common people, is making an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the past. But it does not supplant the so-called old labour history in intrinsic value or in adding to our understanding of history. In the final analysis, the imperfection of human endeavour plagues all historians.

*My thanks to Shel and Elly Silverman for their comments and criticism. Their help as colleagues and friends has been invaluable.*

# **studies in political economy      a socialist review**

**is a new Canadian  
semi-annual periodical designed to  
publish substantial studies in political economy.**

<b>Subscriptions:</b>	<b>annual</b>	<b>\$6.50</b>
	<b>sustaining</b>	<b>\$15.00</b>
	<b>institutions</b>	<b>\$14.00</b>
	<b>single issue</b>	<b>\$4.00</b>
	<b>foreign</b>	<b>add \$3.50</b>

**Box 4729 Station E,      Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.**

**The Editorial Board welcomes manuscripts on subjects  
national and international in political economy.**