

The Closure of the Ferrona Iron Works, 1904

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INTRODUCTION

IN 1892, A LITTLE COMPANY TOWN in Pictou County, christened Ferrona, was given its lifeblood by the establishment of a local iron works. The iron works was part of the rapid expansion of what was later to become the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company (Scotia). The works were located strategically on the intersection of the Intercolonial Railway and a local rail spur which connected the iron plant with iron mines at Bridgeville and Springville. The pig iron produced at the plant was exported to Central Canada as well as used in the production of local steel in nearby Trenton. Twelve years after its construction the blast furnace, along with the primary steel facilities in Trenton, was closed permanently. Deficiencies in the local coal and iron supplies had prompted the relocation of local iron and steel production to Scotia's works at Sydney Mines on Cape Breton Island.¹

The objective here is not to elaborate on the economic factors behind the decline of the Ferrona plant but to present and comment on the content of a poem, commemorating the men who worked at the plant.² Written by E.R. Fraser, "Ferrona Iron Works" indicates the attachment which existed between the community and the industry and describes the friendly relations which apparently prevailed between Scotia and their workers. The beginning words of the poem give a vivid sense of loss after the closure of the plant: "No smoke doth issue from the chimney stacks,/...No roar is heard from out the bluder's mouth, /...All, all is quiet around the works today". The writer even writes sentimentally of the little shunter engine that flew through the yard: "Yes, all who knew it, will its praises tell". The poem also pays tribute to imported skilled workers, "who hailed from England's shore" (and Scotland's), the manager, "old Mr. Aitkens, a real canny Scot", and many of the local men. Of the latter, one finds "the moral strong", "these hardy sons of toil", "Who held their places, faithful to the last". These comments, coming from somebody who was undoubtedly very familiar with the iron works, confirm a picture of cooperation and harmony described by Scotia's local historian, James Cameron, and stressed by Peter Neary in the case of Scotia's iron mines on Bell Island, Newfoundland.³ These

1 James Cameron, *The Industrial History of the New Glasgow District* (New Glasgow, 1960) and L.D. McCann, "The Mercantile-Industrial Transition in the Metals Towns of Pictou County, 1857-1931", *Acadiensis*, X, 2 (Spring 1981), pp. 29-64.

2 *Free Lance* (Westville), 26 January 1906.

3 Cameron, *Industrial History* and Peter Neary, "Bell Island Ballads", R. Fraser *et al.*, eds., *East of Canada* (St. John's, 1976), pp. 186-193.

observers play down the role of confrontation and dissent in describing the working climate of Scotia. Similarly, from the men described in the poem, one could probably expect dissent from one group only, namely those "moral weaklings, prone to stray away/From duty's path".

There is obviously some truth in this harmonious picture. But the interests of the town of Ferrona and its iron workers were also, on occasion, in conflict with those of the company. In 1897, for example, Scotia implemented a ten per cent wage cut for all its employees, owing to, it was stated, the depression in the steel trade. At the same time, however, Scotia received an increase in the bounty, a federal subsidy, on pig iron production. The combined effect of the wage cut and the increase in the bounty angered the community. The Ferrona correspondent to the *Pictou Advocate* wrote: "It is well-known that many of the employees were almost on starvation wages before, and to cut them 10% is one of the most contemptible acts ever perpetrated by the company. Would they please let the employees know how much they received from the government each month, and year, and compare it to the starvation wages they intend offering said employees".⁴ It was at this stage that the iron workers, along with Scotia's Trenton employees, joined the Provincial Workmen's Association. As many as 250 men in Trenton, New Glasgow and Ferrona joined the union ranks. Scotia responded harshly by demanding that the workers abandon the union or face dismissal. This ultimatum caused considerable friction among the workers, but in the end the union was broken. One local newspaper commented that the union men and "the men who have been the means of breaking it (the union) up have not acted very honourably".⁵ After the dispute many workers "had to go West" on account of what the *Pictou Advocate* called a "misunderstanding about wages".⁶

A much more substantial point of frustration was the uncertainty of the future for the community. The blast furnace closed permanently in 1904 but already in 1898 there were rumours of a closure circulating in the community.⁷ The move to Sydney Mines had probably been contemplated even earlier, for despite the high productivity of the plant (its furnace was made for a capacity of 80 tons of pig iron per day but produced 160 tons per day), no improvements were made.⁸ The lack of improvements seemed to suggest a stage of "winding down", but the local community was assured, by the premier of the province, "that the company had no intention of abandoning the works in Pictou County".⁹ In 1903 the population of Ferrona again began to suspect that a closure was forthcoming.¹⁰

4 *Pictou Advocate*, (Pictou), 18 June 1897.

5 *Eastern Chronicle* (New Glasgow), 29 July 1897.

6 *Pictou Advocate*, 20 August 1897.

7 *Pictou Advocate*, 7 January 1898.

8 *Pictou Advocate*, 7 July 1899.

9 *Pictou Advocate*, 9 March 1900.

10 *Pictou Advocate*, 2 January 1903.

At this stage the construction of a blast furnace at Sydney Mines was in full progress and it was believed, that, once this was finished, Ferrona "will once again become a country village".¹¹ By this time, the population had begun to decline, and in May 1903 it was reported that many of the men had gone to Sydney and Londonderry in the hope of finding alternative employment.¹²

Later on in the year, however, an exceptionally high demand for pig iron gave the Ferrona plant a new lease on life. One of Scotia's directors even reported that "we may yet decide to keep the blast furnaces [sic] at Ferrona in operation".¹³ It was during this stage that dissent, rather than harmony, prevailed at the plant. In August 1903 the workers struck for higher wages. Scotia countered by recruiting men from the iron mines at Bridgeville, "but on hearing the grievances of their Ferrona friends, they refused to strike a blow".¹⁴ After two days a settlement was reached.

There was another reason, in addition to the great demand for pig iron, behind the continued operations of the Ferrona blast furnace. In 1903, an extreme labour scarcity prevailed which affected the progress of construction at Sydney Mines. In the winter of 1903-04 the construction was even suspended "owing to the difficulty in procuring material and the high price of labour...".¹⁵ After the resumption and completion of the blast furnace at Sydney Mines in the summer of 1904, however, the end was imminent for Ferrona. The plant closed and the statements of Scotia's directors suddenly lacked the optimism that had existed only a year earlier. One director stated: "it had all along been the intention to close down the blast furnace at Ferrona when the 200 ton furnace at Sydney Mines was completed".¹⁶

What happened to the iron workers in Ferrona after the closure? Some, as the poem tells us, had already in 1906 "crossed the great divide of time". Some probably found employment in nearby Trenton and New Glasgow. Many others followed Scotia to Sydney Mines. In 1905, one newspaper reported: "It has become an almost daily occurrence to note the arrival of from 1-20 families from New Glasgow and Trenton, old employees of the company, the greater part whom are expert mechanics skilled in the art of producing iron, so that in the course of time the rival town up country (Ferrona) will have become depopulated of its first class men, who have treked it to Sydney Mines where

11 *Ibid.* McCann, "The Mercantile-Industrial Transition in Pictou County", reports that the workforce at the iron works in 1901 was about 250 men. Nearly all these men, with their families, left Ferrona during a period of only three years.

12 *Pictou Advocate*, 15 May 1903.

13 *Pictou Advocate*, 22 May 1903.

14 *Eastern Chronicle*, 13 August 1903.

15 *Report of Directors of the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company* (New Glasgow, 1904), pp. vi-vii.

16 *Eastern Chronicle*, 16 August 1904.

better inducements are held out".¹⁷ In Sydney Mines these men, with their families, worked and lived for almost 20 years, only to experience another closure. In 1921, the iron and steel works at Sydney Mines closed and the men who had come from New Glasgow and "built homes for themselves by years of hard work" were reported to have been "naturally discouraged" and feeling that "all their labour had been blasted".¹⁸ They were not, however, alone in their plight but part of the thousands of other Nova Scotians, before and after them, who have suffered from a process of industrial dislocation. Despite the vision of social harmony contained in the following verses, this commemorative poem serves also as a sad reminder of the process of industrial decline and its high social costs.

L. ANDERS SANDBERG

FERRONA IRON WORKS

All, all is quiet around the works today.
A picture desolate, cold, dark and bare
Now lies before us, destitute of life:
Where industry so great a part did share.

Here, where the noise and bustle sounded forth,
Far, far beyond the sphere of this small place;
Its radiant light illuminating far and near,
Without regard for distance or for space.

No smoke doth issue from the chimney stacks,
nor through the flues and pipes does gas now flow;
No roar is heard from out the bluder's mouth,
nor from the furnace, or the stoves below.

And see yon stockhouse falling to the ground,
Which marks the spot where wondrous work was wrought,
The dumping of the ore and lime and of
The coke, where, from the ovens it was brought.

The little shunter that was so widely known,
Its mighty power, did manifest so well
As it went flying swiftly through the yard;
Yes, all who knew it, will its praises tell.

¹⁷ *Pictou Advocate*, 27 June 1905.

¹⁸ *Workers' Weekly* (Stellarton), 6 May 1921.

The smelting furnace, with its roaring blast,
So much good work has done for many years;
Converting into pig, the raw, rough stuff;
The dross first drawn, the pure mass then appears.

The Iron yard and blacksmith shop, where stood,
the smith before the hot and glowing fire;
With strong, tough arms, and sinewy callous hands,
performed his duty as an honest hire.

The boiler house, the source from whence there came
The power, that governed all the rest combined;
Is tumbling down, and now, indeed presents
A sad, sad picture to the observer's mind.

These things, awaken thoughts of other days,
When men, so bravely bore the heat of day;
The brunt and hardships of their tasks they felt.
These sturdy men are mostly all away.

Where are they now, these hardy sons of toil,
Who labored hard a livelihood to gain?
Whose faces we have known for many years;
Some of them we shall never see again.

For they have crossed the great divide of time,
To the unknown and boundless land, beyond;
The dust returned to dust, the spirit to its God,
Each one to stand acquitted or condemned.

Some of those men were wild and rough, forsooth,
But had a large and open heart for all;
Each one in his different sphere did share
The many trials, which to his lot did fall.

Perhaps it would not be amiss to note
The names of some that figured here, so long;
Some moral weaklings, prone to stray away
From duty's path. But some were moral strong.

McFarlane was the man that had command
O'er all the men, and he evoked much fun;
It was indeed amusing for the boys

To see him chasing cows upon the run.

Then Charles Holmes, the foreman on night-shift,
A big, fat man, was always at his post,
Through winter's bitter storms, and summer heat;
A very quiet man, who did not boast.

John Peter Fraser, foreman in the yard,
A strong, rough man, but liked well as a boss;
Tho' under provocation which would test
The most of men, he would get very cross.

Arthur Couziner, Badger and Hiscox;
they hailed from England's shores, far, far away;
Bill Neilson, Peter Grainger, on the stoves,
Scotchmen, who labored here for many a day.

John Elliott, McKenzie and McKay,
And Joe Chisholm, who attended to the bell
That fed the furnace, with lime, ore, and coke;
In danger's face, performed their duty well.

Ben Whidden on the beds, and "Jack the Pole,"
Jim Clarke, Herb Marshall and John McKay;
Arthur Mitchell, the veteran of the track,
He knew a thing or two, but had too much to say.

Tom Cumming and his son, McDougall too,
Ned Tattrie, engineer, a jovial lad;
Matt Richardson, machinist boss, was hard
To understand; when known, was not too bad.

Albert Hudson, who from the first, did share
The trials of the boilerhouse, which were
Sometimes so hard and trying to the nerves,
And made life's burden harder for to bear.

Captain Gilmore, Frank Leslie, steady men,
Who held their places, faithful to the last,
Within the blowing engine-house, which was
The fountain of the power that made the blast.

Sanford Phillips also was an engineer

Earned for himself a reckless name;
The way that he would travel through the yard,
Was most surprising - with the shunting train.

Fred Williams, a hero of the battlefield,
Who faced the burly Boer on Africa's strand,
Crossed sandy Veldts, and climbed the Kopes' heights
For England's crown and for his native land.

Bill Anderson, Steve Reynolds and MacGee,
Who shovelled coke for many and many a year;
Joe Kennedy and the McLellan boys,
They were among the first who started here.

But those that come in last, are best of all,
The Frasers who did rank second to none;
Some yet remain to tell this little tale,
While others of them from our midst are gone.

And last of all, but not the last indeed, -
The man who 'managed' with so great success,
Old Mr. Aitkens, a real canny Scot,
A humble man, and simple in his dress.

But many whom we did not mention here,
And just as worthy of some note, as they
Who are from us gone. They yet remain,
And in their several spheres, pursue their way.

And some are missing from this imperfect list,
But not forgotten in memory's hall;
The season's greeting, we do now extend,
And wish a happy prosperous year to all.