

The Working Class in Northern Ontario

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REVIEW ESSAYS/NOTES CRITIQUES

The Working Class in Northern Ontario

by Jean Morrison

Francis M. Heath, C.D. Martin, Gail E. Tessier and Livo Ducin (pseud.), *50 Years of Labour in Algoma: Essays on Aspects of Algoma's Working-Class History* (Sault Ste. Marie: Algoma University College 1978).

Brian F. Hogan, *Cobalt: Year of the Strike, 1919* (Cobalt: Highway Book Shop 1978).

Joan Kurisko, *Interlude: The Story of Elliot Lake* (Cobalt: Highway Book Shop 1977).

John Patrick Murphy, *Yankee Takeover at Cobalt!* (Cobalt: Highway Book Shop 1977).

Albert Tucker, *Steam Into Wilderness: Ontario Northland Railway, 1902-1962* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside 1978).

BOARDING THE OVERNIGHT train for Toronto, passengers left Cobalt's grey slag heaps behind to awake next morning amidst tall skyscrapers and solid public edifices. That the splendours of Toronto's financial district seen from Union Station could be explained, in part, by northern Ontario's scarred landscape was something a child could not grasp. Somehow impressed upon me while touring Niagara Falls, however, was the connection between the grand-urs of Sir Harry Oakes' Ornamental Gardens and the paucity of municipal services at Kirkland Lake.

Now, thanks to a number of recent publications on northern Ontario, the reasons behind these manifestations of uneven development in Ontario are being clarified. According to Albert Tucker's *Steam Into Wilderness*, Harry Oakes' Lake Shore Mine at Kirkland Lake produced some \$265,000,000 worth of gold in 50 years. George Cassidy's *Arrow North* (Cobalt 1976) reveals that while the Ontario Government received several millions in royalties from Cobalt in 1908, its total grant to the town's schools that year came to the munificent sum of \$500.

The drain of Northern Ontario's immense wealth to southern Ontario and beyond through the exploitation of its natural resources is a theme common to all five books under review, though stated more overtly in some than in others. Despite their diversity in format, content, and quality, each also has something to say about the producers of all that wealth and about their experiences as workers in the mines and mills, on the railways, and in the bushcamps of northern Ontario.

Jean Morrison, "The Working Class in Northern Ontario," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (Spring 1981), 151-155.

The fabled discovery of silver as the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway was being pushed through the Cobalt region in 1903 is an episode of almost legendary dimensions in the annals of Canadian history. In time, the T&NO itself became a living legend from James Bay to North Bay as northeastern Ontario's life-line to the country's transcontinental railway systems. In his *Politics of Development* (Toronto 1974), H.V. Nelles disclosed the intimate inter-relationship between politicians, government, and business in the early development of hydro, mineral, and forest resources throughout Ontario, the creation of the provincially-owned T&NO being but one example. Adopting this thesis, Albert Tucker's *Steam Into Wilderness* probes how this three-way collaboration founded the railway as a government subsidy for "entrepreneurs intent upon the exploitation of mineral and timber resources in the North." Also examined is the railway's subsequent role in the discovery and development of northern Ontario's silver and gold mines, as well as its continued operations as the Ontario Northland Railway from 1946 to 1962.

As official history, *Steam Into Wilderness* painstakingly chronicles the political decisions of successive governments and the administrative policies of the commission empowered to run the railway. This aspect of the book, along with its statistical appendices, makes it an invaluable reference work on the institutional history of the railway. Tucker is at his best, however, when he deserts archival minutiae for descriptions of the communities created by the railway and the people whose lives it touched. Among the highlights are contrasts between Haileybury's "millionaires' row" and Cobalt's barren and rocky townsite, reminiscences of death and destruction during the terrible bush fires along the line, and accounts of "hoboes" riding the rails during the depression.

Tucker perhaps assumes too much knowledge from his readers for individuals

and organizations sometimes appear without adequate introduction or indication of their significance. References to labour's role in the construction and running of the railway are tantalizing but brief. The relationship between the commission and the CCF, which held most northern Ontario seats after the 1943 provincial election, is relegated to a footnote because evidently the CCF had "little concern" for commission affairs. Yet the significance of this attitude of a pro-public ownership party surely deserves commentary in the text. Other examples include Premier Drury's name being dropped without reference to the coalition he headed. Also not named is the president of the Cobalt Miners Union who gave a forceful address at a 1906 rally protesting the use of the government railway for private gain.

The remarkable thing about this officially commissioned history, however, is that it neither flatters nor apologizes for the railway. As its author emphasizes, collusion between business and politics is a natural fact of life in the history of Canadian railways, sanctified by British precedent. *Steam Into Wilderness* is a good, and timely, reminder that socialism and public ownership do not necessarily coincide.

No publication discussing Cobalt's boom years can avoid reciting staggering statistics on millions of ounces of silver produced and hundreds of millions of dollars made. Brian Hogan's *Cobalt: Year of the Strike, 1919* repeats this data while offering figures of another order — hundreds of thousands of working days lost and millions of ounces in silver production dropped. The result of the 1919 Cobalt Miners Union strike against 14 silver mines united in the Temiskaming Mine Managers Association, these figures are presented to show the national significance of this hitherto generally unknown and ignored labour dispute. Yet the Cobalt strike, Hogan argues cogently, deserves study not only because of its profound repercussions on the Canadian economy and the very future of Canada's leading silver

producing centre, but because of its many parallels with the Winnipeg General Strike of the same year.

Similarities between the Winnipeg and Cobalt Strikes indeed abound. Besides wages and working conditions, the key issue for both was union recognition. Other common factors included management intransigence, a citizens' coalition, the Red scare, the intervention of Senator Gideon Robertson, the Great War Veterans Association and "enemy aliens," the defeat of the strike and the union followed by a brief flurry of One Big Union activity.

Admittedly a study in labour relations, Hogan's report belongs to the category of labour history in which the main actors are organizational entities: Local 146, of the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (from 1906 to 1916, of the Western Federation of Miners); the Temiskaming Mine Managers Association; the Mathers Commission, and so on. Barely mentioned are the very people for whom the author is sympathetic, the miners themselves. To understand the strike, apart from its economic issues, we need to know more about the level of the miners' class consciousness after 15 years' association with radical unionism. (Despite its affiliation with the AFL, Mine, Mill was not a typical international union, after all.) It might help if we knew the ideology of the union president, James P. McGuire (the unidentified union leader in Tucker, referred to as Jimmy Maguire by Hogan). What influence did left-wing ethnic groups like the Finns have on their members in the mines? And, although the union followed "legitimate trade union practices," why does this prove that its leaders were not radical?

Apart from some unanswered questions and unsupported conclusions, however, Hogan's work deserves commendation on many counts. By rescuing this strike from obscurity, it adds reality to the Cobalt story, so often glamorized by its colourful prospectors and instant millionaires. Demonstrating that Winnipeg was not the only centre to experience class

strife in 1919, Hogan is correct in his insistence that a re-examination of that year's labour unrest throughout Canada is long overdue.

The Tucker and Hogan monographs were respectively written by a history professor and a graduate student. *Yankee Take-Over at Cobalt!* by the late John Patrick Murphy is not an academic work. Its style is anecdotal, uneven, at times awkward. Yet, more than any other I know, this book captures that special Cobalt spirit born in the excitement of spectacular discoveries and sudden riches. Here also is a vivid portrayal of miners and their experiences, whether they be underground, on strike, or at their games. At last we get a picture of that leader of the miner's union, James P. McGuire, born in the Eastern Townships and raised in Temiskaming; miner, orator, student of the literature of the labour movement; champion wrestler, boxer, and hand-driller. Murphy's gift of story-telling brings to life not only the famous prospectors and millionaires but those often ignored by history, including McGuire who contributed in no small way to Cobalt's destiny.

As its title suggests, however, this book is more than a collection of colourful stories, for Murphy places the Cobalt phenomenon within its continental context. The justification for the title comes through in many ways, including his examination of the reasons for Cobalt's first mines being American-owned and of the T&NO's role as carrier of Cobalt ore to New Jersey refineries. But Cobalt is shown as partly an extension, not only of the boardrooms of New York, but also of the mines of the American west through the managers and the miners who brought to Cobalt their technology, their culture, and their attitudes — formed in the bitter labour struggles of Butte, Spokane, and Denver.

All these fragments of information and insight fascinate and frustrate, frustrate that is until the fly-leaf is read. In 1939, Murphy lost the use of arms, legs, and voice through a paralytic stroke which con-

fined him to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Eventually recovering the use of his arms, he learned to type with one finger, and managed to research and write this manuscript from his wheelchair. A life-work for its author, this work becomes a splendid primary document of the Cobalt spirit and its past.

Fifty years after the beginning of silver mining at Cobalt came another northern Ontario mining boom, equally as sensational. Joan Kurisko could have told the story of uranium mining at Elliot Lake through a historical narrative or personal memoir. Instead, she chose to integrate the town's early history with the lives of fictional characters representative of its diverse social strata. Primarily a love story (and a good one) between a transient development miner and a university-educated product of North Toronto's middle class, this historical novel deftly deals with such themes as the interaction of Canadian politics with foreign ownership, the technology and work process in the mining of uranium, and the sociology of this planned but isolated mining community.

Kurisko's careful research and powerful language results in such clear descriptions of mining that even the most obtuse non-mechanical mind can visualize what takes place in both technical and human terms. Compassionately recorded are the horrors of rock falls and radioactive contamination, the seemingly empty lives of labourers and "packsackers," the personal tragedies of uprooted men and women striving to save their community from destruction when American uranium contracts are terminated.

Through the interaction of its characters, the town's social structure is neatly set within the context of the late 1950s. Kurisko is particularly strong on women of that era, contrasting the struggle of middle class women for identity in their on-going roles as wives, mothers, daughters, and lovers with that of miners' wives facing impending economic disaster.

Those who have learned from E.P.

Thompson not to be disappointed when workers do not attain that level of class consciousness sometimes expected of them should not be disturbed by the novel's conclusion. The hero's escape from the uncertainties of mining for the uncertainties of owning a resort may be symbolic of present reality when many workers are becoming owner-operators of equipment and other small businesses (and not always willingly, as the Boise Cascade strike revealed). Or perhaps the lovers' retreat to Wawa posits the Walden-in-the-wilderness solution to confronting the problems of the world. Still, I worry about Sandra once the honeymoon is over as she faces isolation and economic realities few can escape, even in the hinterland.

Perhaps Kurisko's mixture of fiction and social commentary at times seems contrived; perhaps her characters discourse more than real people would. But these trifling flaws undoubtedly could have been overcome under the editorial guidance of a reputable national publisher. That none accepted the manuscript only confirms the conviction of many Northern Ontarians that myopia still prevails in the southern part of the province.

While slights like this are a perennial grievance, they are being countered by northern Ontario's decreasing dependence on metropolitan centres for promotion of its cultural wares. Without the Highway Book Shop of Cobalt, for example, the books by Hogan, Murphy, and Kurisko may never have appeared. Because of the reluctance of national publishers to gamble with unknown authors or localized topics, the Highway Book Shop performs a valuable service for writers and readers alike through its prodigious list of titles relating to northern Ontario, particularly its eastern portion. Too often, however, this service is marred by inadequate editing, proof-reading, and marketing. Once these difficulties are removed, the Highway Book Shop can only further its considerable contribution to making northern Ontario and its place in Canadian development better

known and understood across the country.

One publication on northern Ontario deserving wider distribution is *50 Years of Labour in Algoma: Essays on Aspects of Algoma's Working-Class History*. Funded by Canada Works, this collection of seven essays is the result of an unusual but successful collaboration. The former president of United Steel Workers Local 2251, John Ferris initiated and directed the project; Algoma College sponsored it; Professor Ian W. Brown guided and obviously inspired the contributors; and four project workers selected by Canada Manpower did the research and writing.

Wisely accepting the limits imposed by time, funds, and in some cases, lack of academic experience, the project set modest objectives, confining itself to "aspects" and tentative hypotheses. The essay arrangement, however, forms a chronological and topical pattern ranging from the era of Francis H. Clergue's industrial empire at Sault Ste. Marie based on the exploitation of Algoma's forest, mineral, and water resources to that of its successor, owned by Sir James Dunn. Whether the result is "working-class history" as announced is perhaps a moot point

as the focus is primarily on the activities of trade unions and labour parties, though related to their social milieu and the individuals who took part in them. As their titles indicate, the essays cover a broad spectrum: Labour's Emergent Years and the 1903 Riots; Industrial Accidents and Working Conditions, 1900-1920; Labour, The Community, and the Pre-World War I Immigration Issue; Algoma Labour Becomes Politically Active, 1914-1922; Unrest in the Algoma Lumbercamps: the Bushworkers' Strikes of 1933-34; The 1946 Steel Strike; The Post War Drive for Improved Benefits.

Both local and labour history often trivialize their data by endless recitation of names and facts divorced from theory or historical context. By avoiding this pitfall, *50 Years* should interest and instruct readers both in and outside the District of Algoma. The kind of collaboration which produced these essays might well be emulated by other institutions of higher learning in northern Ontario, for among their aims are not only investigation of their region's past and present, but stemming the drain of the north's most valuable resource, its young people.