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Miners on the Margins: Characterising South Wales and Cape Breton as an Industrial Frontier, 1880 – 1939.

In his important work on South Wales' reaction to the Spanish Civil War, Hywel Francis suggested that the South Wales miners lay 'beyond the mainstream of British labour history'.[1] A statement that has been criticised by those seeking a wider, comparative approach to British responses to the Spanish crisis, as Buchanan records 'this mystification of the Welsh miner is unhelpful for understanding labour responses in other, less militant, areas of the country'.[2] Yet, the apparent uniqueness of the South Wales coalfield, its miners, and mining families is extremely helpful in recovering transatlantic working-class responses to industrial capitalism. On the island of Cape Breton on Canada's East Coast, the reaction of the mining community is remarkably similar in almost all respects and, as Marc Bloch wrote ninety years ago, comparisons historical in nature are at their very best when the similarities are greatest since this enables us to see the differences with greater clarity.[3] It is from this belief that the comparison explored below begins.

Cape Breton Island was not simply an extension of Canada's Scottish inheritance but was also part of the francophone Acadian world and fundamentally part of the Mi'kmaq First Nations. Such historical traditions are important to recognise given the tartanism – that romantic flirtation with the kilts and bagpipes of Northern Scotland – that surrounds official identities in the province of Nova Scotia. The flag of the province, for example, bears the inverse colours of the Scottish saltire; along its main shopping street - Spring Garden Road - opposite the Victorian public gardens, visitors can admire statues of the doyens of Scottish romantic nationalism Robert Burns and Walter Scott, and at the Citadel in the summer they can hear the drone of the bagpipes with re-enactors clad in the red coats and kilts of the 78th Highland Regiment. All of this gives a sense of history, of course, but it is nevertheless an invented tradition in the quirkiest sense. 'Nova Scotia "became Scottish"', writes Canadian historian Ian McKay, 'in the second quarter of the 20th century. Before then, no single vocabulary of "Nova Scotianness" was in use'[4] As in Wales, the construction of official identities grounded in elements of other cultures displaced other forms of identities and ensured that where those other identities arose they were essentially illegitimate or marginal to the 'official'

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[1] Hywel Francis, *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1984), p. 29.

[2] Tom Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 6.

[3] Marc Bloch, 'Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes', *Revue de Synthèse Historique*, 46 (1928), 15 – 50. Available online from the online archive of the *Biblithèque Nationale de France*. For a sense of the demands and a guide to the theoretical literature on comparative history see: Stefan Berger, 'Comparative History', in Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner, and Kevin Passmore (eds.), *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, London, Edward Arnold, 2003, 161 – 179.

[4] Ian McKay, 'Tartanism Triumphant: The Construction of Scottishness in Nova Scotia, 1933 – 1954', *Acadiensis* XXI. No.2 (Spring, 1992), p. 8.

history.[5]

Indeed, in the Nova Scotian context, this has led one historian to question the use of diaspora to refer to the Scottish [as distinct from Highland Gaelic] communities in the province. 'The popular Romantic account of Scottish emigration is', records Mike Vance, 'either consciously or unconsciously, connected with the victim perception of diaspora', which merely serves to reinforce the Scottish imagery in contemporary Nova Scotia.[6] It is hardly a giant leap to place Wales (and *the* language) into that equation and get the same answer. Needless to say, such Romantic, victimist imagery obscures the emergence of a self-conscious working class as a result of the 'Labour Wars' - notably the Amherst General Strike and Winnipeg General Strike of 1919.[7]

The conflict between labour and capital serves as but one of the comparative voices in what follows and for the purposes of clarity it is worth laying out in full here the programme of what follows. In order to do justice to the comparative mode, the argument set out below is explored from a number of different angles, from the perspective of union organisation and growing class consciousness, to the interplay between British, Canadian, Nova Scotian, and Cape Breton identities, and the place of cultural pursuits such as sport in the making and re-making of those regional, local, and indeed transatlantic identities. It is argued that Cape Breton and South Wales share a great deal in common and that those commonalities derive from their working-class culture that was made and re-made in the context of on-going conflicts between the forces of capital and labour.

Each section brings to bear, as I have suggested, a different view point and one which reflects the complexity of identity. Union organisation, perhaps, needs little explanation given its frequency in the historical writing however I do wish to provide a little bit more justification for the inclusion of sport. Sport deserves to be included in the canon of labour history as much as trade unionism and for a fairly simple reason: it not only provides nuance to the broader theme of working-class identity but allows us to see labour relations in a wholly different light. Sports teams were a crucial part of a network of relations on both sides of the Atlantic that brought workers into contact with the richer citizens of large towns and, perhaps more crucially, helped to steel a unified camaraderie across the coalfield. Sport, as much as the Fed, gave a sense of being all in

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[5] See: Prys Morgan, 'From a Death to a View: The Hunt for the Welsh Past in the Romantic Period', in Eric Hobsbawm & Terrance Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, 43 – 100.

[6] Michael Vance, 'Powerful Pathos. The Triumph of Scottishness in Nova Scotia', in Celeste Ray (ed.), *Transatlantic Scots* (Tuscaloosa, The University of Alabama Press, 2005), p. 175.

[7] On this theme see: Craig Heron (ed.), *The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917 - 1925* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1997). On the Amherst General Strike see: Nolan Reilly, 'The General Strike in Amherst, Nova Scotia, 1919', in *Acadiensis*, vol. IX: 2 (Spring, 1980), pp. 56 - 77. On the Winnipeg Strike see: Ian McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People's Enlightenment in Canada, 1890 - 1920* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2008), ch. 7.

it together. I hope, in what follows below, to make a case for the labour movement being something other than a political expression of a people trapped in the darkness of work underground.[8]

It is, of course, also worth explaining how Cape Breton fits into the broader framework of Canadian industrial geography. Nova Scotia is one of Canada's smaller provinces and has never reached the size of Glamorgan's population. In 1901, for example, the total population of Nova Scotia totalled 459,474 whereas, of course, Glamorgan's population one and a quarter million by that year.[9] The corresponding size of the coalfields – Cape Breton was roughly one-tenth of the size of the South Wales coalfield – whilst pedantically different in figurative terms was as dominating of the local economy in Cape Breton as it was in South Wales. There were other coalfields in Canada such as the important one at Nanaimo in British Columbia but none of them were quite as dominant as the Cape Breton coalfield. With much of Cape Breton still rural, industrial Cape Breton seemed to be the proverbial industrial island in a sea of ruralism. Much of the population of the Island's industrial communities were Scottish in origin but as with Wales, Cape Breton was home to a number of linguistic communities: French Acadians, Mi'kmaq natives, Scots Gaelic, as well as Anglophones from the British Isles and Central Canada. The rural communities of southern Cape Breton did, as in mid Wales for example, have small-scale heavy industry but for many of these rural workers this localised industry offered employment only during the winter when farming was not possible.[10] In a relatively contained coalfield relationships were built through community, through sports clubs, and through trade unions.

In revisiting, then, the construction of class consciousness and labour identities on both sides of the Atlantic, it is, likewise, my intention to suggest that the experiences of South Wales might be better understood in the context of the Atlantic World – as Gwyn Alf Williams argued many years ago – rather than a British Isles paradigm. Of course, South Wales is not just part of an Atlantic World either; John Douglas Belshaw has argued – with reference to the Nanaimo Coalfield of British Columbia – that there is a 'British working class' diaspora that can be observed in the same way as the Highland Gael in Cape Breton can be observed.[11] The contribution of British working class

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[8] I have, in this sense, been influenced by Dai Smith's lecture to the Welsh Political Archive in 2000. Dai Smith, *Out of the People: A Century of Labour* (Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales, 2000).

[9] Population figures for Canada in this period are available online from Statistics Canada. http://www65.statcan.gc.ca/acyb02/1927/acyb02_19270133032a-eng.htm [accessed 7 August 2009].

[10] This theme is explored, in the Nova Scotian context, by Danny Samson. See: Danny Samson, *The Spirit of Industry: Liberal Government and Rural-Industrial Society in Nineteenth-Century Rural Nova Scotia* (Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008); idem, (ed.), *Contested Countryside: Rural Workers and Modern Society in Atlantic Canada, 1800 - 1950* (Fredericton, New Brunswick, Acadiensis Press, 1994).

[11] John Douglas Belshaw, *Colonization and Community: The Vancouver Island Coalfield and the Making of the British Columbian Working Class* (Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), pp. 3 – 20 *passim*.

migrants to radical movements across North America is a consistent theme of recent years and it is on the basis of this connection that this paper will compare Cape Breton's experiences with those of Glamorgan.[12]

The Industrial Frontier: Framing Class Consciousness

The construction of identities – particularly class consciousness – on the coalfields of Glamorgan and Cape Breton took place in the context of what I understand to be 'the Industrial Frontier'. The Frontier has enjoyed a long pedigree in American historiography with the central, 1893 essay by Frederick Jackson Turner '*The Frontier in American History*'.[13] For Turner the frontier was the realm in which American exceptionalism was forged; in breaking with the European geographical conceptualisation of the frontier as a barrier Turner instead argued that the conquest of the savage and untamed landscape by American civilisation and the democratic frontier communities that sustain that conquest were at the heat of the American ideal.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Canadian historian J. M. S. Careless adapted Turner's model to the Canadian context. For Careless the frontier was not a rural zone of democratic conquest but rather a subservient hinterland fully dependent upon the metropolitan centre. The influence of the metropolis, Careless argued, can be felt in all spheres. 'They might be displayed not only in economic structures, political fabrics, or social networks, but also in attitudes of regard, modes of opinion, or popular images and traditions – all, in turn, to affect identity'.[14] It is a model that has been extremely influential in several fields of scholarship in North America – notably in sport history where historians seems comfortable arguing that it was in the cities that culture was forged and diffused from that metropolitan centre.[15] Metropolitan analyses of cultural production are entirely wrong for both Cape Breton and South Wales for neither possessed a metropolitan 'core'. In order to not fall victim to this *metropolitan fallacy*,

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[12]   Besides Belshaw's monograph, other examples of this sort of work include: Roger Fagge, *Power, Culture and Conflict in the Coalfields: West Virginia and South Wales, 1900-1922* (Manchester University Press, 1996); idem, 'Political Identities in the West Virginia and South Wales Coalfields', in John Belchem and Neville Kirk (eds.), *Languages of Labour* (Ashgate, 1997), pp. 186-212; idem, 'A Comparison of the Miners of South Wales and West Virginia, 1900-1922', in Klaus Tenfelde (ed.), *Sozialgeschichte des Bergbaus im 19 und 20 Jahrhundert/Towards a Social History of Mining in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Verlag CH Beck, Munich, 1992), pp.105-122; John H M Laslett, *Colliers Across the Sea: A Comparative Study of Class Formation in Scotland and the American Mid-West, 1830 – 1924* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2000); Daniel T. Rogers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1998); Deian R. Hopkin, and Gregory S. Kealey (eds.), *Class, Community and the Labour Movement: Wales & Canada, 1850 – 1930* (Aberystwyth, *Llafur & CCLH*, 1989); Peter E. Rider & Heather McNabb (eds.), *A Kingdom of the Mind: How the Scots Helped Make Canada* (Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006).

[13]   Frederick Jackson Turner, *Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920).

[14]   J.M.S. Careless, *Frontiers and Metropolis: Regions, Cities, and Identities in Canada before 1914* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1989), p. 7.

[15]   Steven A. Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1989); Melvin L. Adelman, *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820 – 70* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1986).

historians ought to recognise that there are alternative centres for cultural production and these sources of culture are not marginal to the (anglicised) metropolitan experience. A mode of history, to be sure, appreciated by historians of Wales!

The industrial frontier, then, defies both of these characterisations of the frontier for it is neither a rural haven nor is it a subservient realm. The townships of the frontier, as we have noted, did not perceive of their lot in relation to the towns and cities, the metropolitan centres, but rather in relation to each other. Local identities and local rivalries were the key and for this we need to depart from Turner and Careless and see a new frontier.[16]

Simply defined, the Industrial Frontier is a region – most prominently a coalfield – which is removed from the influences of a metropolitan centre and which therefore *constructs* its own identity, its own cultural forms, and its own institutions. The industrial frontier, though, is semi-autonomous because it is subjected to external demands namely the industrial capitalist system which many on the industrial frontier fought against. In that sense then, the industrial frontier is also an identity to which the people of the frontier made and remake generation after generation. It is a source for anti-hegemonic culture but which is dependent on external markets in order for it to survive as an industrial region. Thus, the imprint of industrial capitalism and the relationship of the working class to it provide for similar experiences on both sides of the Atlantic. It is to this that we now turn.

Conflict and Migration: Building the Industrial Frontier, 1880 - 1914

The half-century prior to the Second World War was pockmarked by conflict and desperation. Whether it is the trade union conflicts during the Great War or the Spanish Civil War or the Labour Wars of the mid-1920s, the period seems to mark a watershed of labour consciousness.[17] Seen through the lives of Big Jim and Len Roberts, the years after Tonypandy are harrowing to my generation who have lived in absolute luxury compared to the lives of my grandparents. Growing up in the 1990s with coal a part of the past it is through novels, history books, family stories and museums that I and others of my age can grow to understand the reign of King Coal. Of course, as Lewis Jones' novels record, bittersweetly, it is the old couple, Len's father and mother, Big Jim and Siân who survive the 1930s.[18]

The reality that haunts that age, as Dai Smith argues, was that the heroics of an ideologically motivated, class-conscious youth pale in the shadows of the past from

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[16] Peter Stead (among others) has shown the importance of local rivalries in South Wales. Peter Stead. 'Working-Class Leadership in South Wales, 1900 – 1922', *Welsh History Review* 6:3 (1973), pp. 329 – 53.
[17] On trade union action during the Great War see: Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008).
[18] Lewis Jones, *We Live: The Story of a Welsh Mining Valley* (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1978). The work has recently, along with its partner novel, *Cwmardy*, been reissued as part of the Library of Wales series with an introduction by Hywel Francis.

which they couldn't escape.[19] I doubt that we have escaped from those shadows 70 years later. And so the ultimate conclusion of the 1930s cannot be removed from the expectant society of the immediate aftermath of the First World War nor can it be detached from the social developments of the pre-war Edwardian era. Indeed the past that Big Jim and Siân represented was not the world of Tonypandy and the syndicalist enthusiasm of *The Miners' Next Step* but rather the late-Victorian class-consciousness that emerged in the wake of the failure of 1898 and the founding of the South Wales Miners' Federation. But even before that into the 1880s can we see the roots of the militant South Wales coalfield of the 1920s and 1930s. For it was in the 1880s that the workers began to slip away from the bastions of the liberal order, the chapels. It was in the 1880s that the seeds of autonomy and Labourism were sown.

In searching for the crucial decade in the development of the industrial frontier in South Wales it is the 1880s rather than the 1930s that historians should turn their attention to. The 1880s would have been the decade that Big Jim – the father in *Cwmardy* - first went down the pit and so if Lewis Jones's reflection is correct then the social developments of this epoch-making decade merit closer incorporation into our understandings of the history of the South Wales coalfield.[20] Thusly, rather than the watershed of Welsh labour history being in around 1900 or perhaps more logically 1910 with the Cambrian Combine Dispute, it seems to me that Lewis Jones' novelised suggestion that the older generations remained, alas, in the ascendancy into the Second World War, negates that sort of split.

The foundation of the Miners Federation after the six-month strike of 1898 deserves to be seen as part of a growing consciousness and development of class awareness. As Raymond Williams argued, culture is produced through a call and response. For, if hegemony embodies a sense of reality for most people - which is its strength - then awareness of an alternative is fundamental to the construction of separate cultures and identities. On the Industrial Frontier, it seems to me, this continuing production of identity and culture undermines the separation of working class history into 'watersheds'. 1898, 1910, 1925 -26, 1984 – 85, are all 'watersheds' but are all part and parcel of the continual production and renewal of identity and class consciousness. This is a key element in the work of Ian McKay, who would argue for a greater continuity on the basis of the Gramscian concept of hegemony.[21]

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[19] Dai Smith, *Aneurin Bevan and the World of South Wales* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1993), p. 125.

[20] Kenneth Morgan began his influential survey of modern Wales in 1880 but as tends to be common with historians makes a break in 1914 that glosses over the social continuities that derived from the industrial frontier. Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: A History of Modern Wales* (Oxford, Oxford University Press – University of Wales Press, 1981).

[21] Ian McKay, 'The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History,' *Canadian Historical Review* 81:4 (2000): 617-645; idem, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada's Left History* (Toronto, Between the Lines Press, 2005).

Likewise in Atlantic Canada, breaking down the continual process of cultural production into watershed periodisation is not in the least helpful.[22] There are the obvious dates as well, 1879 and the formation of the Provincial Workmen's Association – Canada first successful miners' trade union – the Springhill strike of 1909 – 1911, the Amherst strike of 1919, the massive 1925 strike, or even the 1981 Cape Breton Coal Strike. Yet as with Glamorgan these dates are part of an on-going process of class-consciousness because as E P Thompson noted class is a relationship rather than a thing. One's class-consciousness depends very much upon the broader social context. Thus the strikes of the mid-1920s might seem to be a watershed if one understands class-consciousness as a thing to be gained rather than developed.[23]

Comparatively the two regions share much more than the Ruhr and South Wales and it would be difficult to argue that Cape Breton displays a greater social heterogeneity compared to South Wales. Moreover, whereas Stefan Berger showed that South Wales was the more homogenous in his comparative study published in this journal a few years ago this study will demonstrate the importance of immigration to Glamorgan from across the UK and the heterogeneous nature of that immigration.[24] Indeed to provide some sense of the situation in Cape Breton it is worth outlining a few details of its (perhaps unfamiliar) history. Following the calamity at Culloden and the retreat of the Highland Clans in 1746 the clampdown on traditional Highland culture prompted the beginning of over a century of migration from the Highlands to the New World, especially Canada. In Nova Scotia, the arrival of the *Hector* at Pictou in 1773 marks the genesis of a remarkable transformation of the northern parts of the province into a fully-fledged Gaelic enclave complete with a Gaelic College, bag piping, and in the late twentieth century Gaelic road signs.[25]

The nineteenth century marks the zenith of Highland emigration to the Canada particularly following the Highland Clearances and provided the Scottish-Gaelic core of the industrial population of Cape Breton and Pictou County. Yet the networks upon which the world of emigration rested upon remained strong right through the nineteenth century. As Errington notes, 'the world of emigration rested on and helped

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[22] For an extreme example of periodisation see: E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise (eds.), *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (University of Toronto Press, 1993).

[23] The classic statement of this idea is E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, Victor Gollancz, 1963; in Wales the work of Gwyn Alf Williams is, needless to say, the departure point especially, Gwyn Alf Williams, *When Was Wales? A History of the Welsh* (London, Penguin, 1985). See also the essays of Raymond Williams, usefully collected by Daniel Williams. Raymond Williams (Daniel Williams ed.), *Who Speaks for Wales? Nation, Culture, Identity* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2003).

[24] Stefan Berger, 'Working-Class Culture and the Labour Movement in the South Wales and the Ruhr Coalfields, 1850 –2000: A Comparison', *Llafur* 8:2 (2001), pp 5 –40.

[25] On the Hector see, Lucille H. Campey, *After the Hector: The Scottish Pioneers of Nova Scotia and Cape Breton, 1773 – 1852* (Toronto, Natural Heritage Books, 2004). More generally on Gaelic migration to Nova Scotia and Canada as a whole in the eighteenth century see: J. M. Bumsted, *The People's Clearance: Highland Emigration to British North America, 1770 – 1815* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1982); Helen Cowan, *British Emigration to British North America: The First Hundred Years* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1961).

to sustain … familial and community networks. It also created vital transatlantic communities, ones that both new arrivals and well-established settlers were determined to maintain'.[26] In the case of the Cape Breton settlers, these networks reflected the clan structure and the rural attitudes that were associated with it. The Highlanders, as is evident through their poetry, wanted to settle with their own kin. The consequences of not doing so, as this poem demonstrates, were heavy:

I left my homeland, I left my heritage /my joy was left behind.
I left the friendly, hospitable land, /And my beloved kinsmen there.
I left comfort and the place where it can be found, /The land of valleys and cairns.
I am now distressed because I did not choose, /To remain there forever.
[SONG FOR AMERICA, Iain Sealgair, 1795 – 1853][27]

The psychological shock of the harsh Canadian winter and the hollow promises of wealth and opportunities in North America fed a widespread disillusionment with the new surroundings. 'I soon discovered that far-away fields / are not so green as reported', sang John MacLean; 'Cape Breton is so cold / that one's very ears will freeze' lamented Kenneth MacDonald.[28] The trauma of emigration is a fundamental aspect of the Gaelic 'identity' in Cape Breton and is one that bears heavily upon the construction of industrial, class identities in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The memory of the Clearances and the distrust of absentee landlords and their unforgiving agents fed into a distrust of colliery managers and absent big-time capitalists. 'A plague on the landlords / with their greed for money'[29] reverberated in the poetry of Dawn Fraser and the oratory of Jim McLachlan. The emigrant experience and historical memory, justifiably criticised in modern historiography as being romantic and playing up the trauma in spite of the fact that Scots displaced other peoples in Nova Scotia, nevertheless has to be recognised as crucial in the construction of later identities.

The emigrants who found their way to Glamorgan faced entirely different conditions but they were nonetheless building a new society, a society that was alien to that which had existed in the valleys of *Morgannwg* for centuries. Through the writings of William Thomas (Glanffrwd) we are able to gauge native reactions to the process of Anglicisation that occurred as a result of industrialisation in the valleys. 'Let us leave hear [the Taff] and return to Ynysybwl – as she was in the days of her former peace and

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[26] Elizabeth Jane Errington, *Emigrant Worlds and Transatlantic Communities: Migration to Upper Canada in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), p. 135.

[27] Margaret MacDonell (trans.), *The Emigrant Experience: Songs of Highland Emigrants in North America* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1982), p. 81.

[28] Ibid., p. 73,

[29] Ibid., p. 63. Dawn Fraser's poetry is now available online hosted by the Socialist History Project: http://www.socialisthistory.ca/Docs/History/DF/Echo00.htm [accessed, 22 June 2008]. The irony of coincidence is revealed in his poem: Out of My House, No Child of Mine will be a Boy Scout: 'Somewhere far away, he said / There was a little town / Where he had seen the soldiers come / and shoot the workers down'. This is not Tonypandy, of course, but Homestead, Pennsylvania where steel workers stuck in 1892 only to be beaten down by the state militia.

the silence of nature, not as she is now, awakened by the steam engine, sneered at, defiled and robbed of her glory, destroyed, her poetic nature swallowed up without conscience and her fair beauty stripped of bloom,' he wrote (albeit he would baulk at seeing his poetry written in the language of the invader).[30] Moreover, the mushrooming of the population resulted in Ynysybwl becoming 'an anthill'.[31] Evidently the process of renewal and reinvention was traumatic for those involved but it seems fitting for us to turn now to the impact of this trauma upon the development of class and class consciousness.

Union Men: Liberalism, Consensus, and Self-Help

The primary miners' trade union in Nova Scotia in the half century covered by this paper was the Provincial Workmen's Association [PWA]. Founded by a lowland Scot, Robert Drummond, in 1879, the PWA stood for consensus trade unionism and was a bastion of liberalism of the Gladstonian sort. It promoted respectability and sought to improve the lot of the workers by working within the system for gradual change. Unlike, therefore, the South Wales Miners' Federation [SWMF] in this regard - though very much in the manner of more consensual trade unionism that existed in South Wales prior to 1898 - the PWA resembled a more cautious union and in time resembled something of a relic of those mid-Victorian trade union principles of self-help and the preservation of the status quo.[32] McKay, on the other hand, has argued that the PWA in its first twenty years was not a homogenised union and ought to be seen in three stages.[33] McKay's neglect, however, of Drummond's Scottishness and his evident engagement with post-Chartist trade union philosophy undermine McKay's position. Drummond's *liberalism* is revealed in his later writings and his unpublished memoirs. 'The Provincial Workmen's Association came into existence to have strikes dispensed with', wrote Drummond in his *Recollections*, a statement that is particularly suggestive of his unionist roots.[34] Similarly, he wanted 'mutual concession between employers and employed to seek to have the work carried on to the advantage of both'.[35]

As the first successful miners' Trade Union in Canada it is notable the extent to which the miners desired to be taken seriously as a skilled labour class; an important difference between the artisans and ordinary labouring men in Britain was unionism. As

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[30]   William Thomas (Thomas Evans trans.), *Glanffrwd's History of Llanwonno* (Merthyr Tydfil, H W Southey & Sons, 1950), pp. 28 – 29.

[31]   Ibid., p. 22.

[32]   Sharon Reilly, *The Provincial Workmen's Association of Nova Scotia, 1879 – 1898* (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Dalhousie University, 1979), p. 178.

[33]   Ian McKay, ' " By Wisdom, Wile or War:" The Provincial Workmen's Association and the Struggle for Working-Class Independence in Nova Scotia, 1879 – 97', *Labour / Le Travail* 18 (Autumn 1986), pp. 13 –62. The stages being: 1879 – 1886 a loose federation of lodges, 1886 – 1890 a more unified movement, 1891 – 1897 divergence between Cape Breton and mainland attitudes, p. 16.

[34]   Robert Drummond, *Recollections and Reflections of a Former Trade Union Leader* (Stellarton, Nova Scotia, 1926), p. 49.

[35]   Ibid. p. 31.

Foster and Hobsbawm (among others) have noted, 'the boundaries of the [labour] aristocracy and of trade unionism were normally … believed to coincide'.[36] Drummond argued that the colliers of Cape Breton were indeed respectable. 'Bring a thousand miners together', he suggested to the *Royal Commission on the Relations of Capital and Labour*, 'and a thousand other men of no other trade will beat them as far as sobriety and good behaviour are concerned'.[37] The Trade Unions ultimately espoused the ideology and attitudes of the segment of society they served: namely, the labour aristocracy since 'that segment of the working-class [was] most closely attuned to consensus values'.*[38]* As Hobsbawm put it, these men were more receptive to middle-class values or respectability and self-help because they were 'better paid, better treated, and generally regarded as more respectable than the mass of the proletariat'.[39] Indeed, Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* could be found on Drummond's bookshelves, though this was by no means unusual. Viewed from the perspective of younger workers in the mines the respect for the status quo inherent in Drummond's leadership of the PWA and the movement as a whole becomes more apparent.[40]

Boys underground worked in a hierarchical system that placed them at the bottom of the ladder. Whilst the paternalistic environment did afford boys priorities in certain situations, such as during times of emergency there was a clear antagonism between the generations, an editorial in the *Trades Journal*, a labour newspaper, lamented on the boys' lack of respect for their elders and their disregard for the social mores of the day. 'Men working by night', complained one miner, 'are left to the mercy of a few boys'.[41] This disregard for adult methods earned the scorn of Drummond who insisted that, 'boys should be taught to respect their bosses, and leave the saucing [verbal abuse] to their parents or to the [*Trades*] *Journal*.'[42] The absence of work done on child labour in South Wales coal mines means that a meaningful comparison cannot be undertaken here but if the novels of the period are indicative of life in the mines at that time then it would seem that the relationship between older and younger workers in South Wales collieries has a certain similarity.[43] Len Roberts' political education, for example, results in Siân complaining, 'I don't know what the world be coming to …

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[36] Eric J Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1964).

[37] *Report of the Royal Commission on the Relations of Capital and Labour in Canada, Evidence – Nova Scotia* (Ottawa, HM Stationers, 1889), p. 367.

[38] Trygve R. Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism in Mid-Victorian England* (London, Croom Helm Ltd., 1976), p. 269.

[39] Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men. Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1964), p. 272.

[40] Robert McIntosh, *Boys in the Pits: Child Labour in Coal Mines* (Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000); see also his article, Robert McIntosh, 'The Boys in the Nova Scotia Coal Mines, 1873 – 1923', *Acadiensis* XVI:2 (Spring, 1987), pp. 35 –50; as well as, Ian McKay, 'The Realm of Uncertainty: The Experience of Work in the Cumberland Coal Mines, 1873 – 1927', *Acadiensis*, XVI:1 (Autumn 1986), pp. 3 – 57.

[41] *Trades Journal*, 11 August 1880.

[42] *Trades Journal*, 11 August 1880.

[43] The exception is an article by Martin Daunton. See: Martin Daunton, 'Down the Pit: Work in the Great Northern and South Wales Coalfields, 1870 – 1914', *Economic History Review*, 34 (1981), 578 – 597.

Children don't know longer trust their mothers to know what be best for them'.[44] The comparison is uneven, of course, because Len Roberts' entry to the world of work underground is a generation later than Drummond's reaction to boys' radicalisation in the 1880s. It is an area of research that needs to be attended to.

The boys of Nova Scotia's coalmines formed lodges of their own; a development that the PWA believed would help moderate the attitudes of the youngsters but instead allowed for separate strikes and a new sphere of industrial relations based upon age. As the *Trades Journal* noted of one juvenile lodge that, 'the boys in a sense, were at present in a 'Union'; that if a supposed injury was done any boy then the boys without due deliberation might strike'.[45]The PWA's discrimination against boys under the age of 17 serves to remind historians of its attitudes to the social order; the United Mine Workers of America [UMWA] the successor to the PWA, which has generally been seen as more left-wing than its predecessor, did not discriminate against pit boys. In comparison to South Wales this level of unionisation is remarkable given the failure of the South Wales miners to unionise until 1898. It is a question that has been addressed numerous times and this is not the place to argue further.[46]

Historians often point to the geographic isolation of the valley communities and the rapidly expanding population that made organisation difficult; though it seems much more appropriate to point to the sheer failure of the 1898 strike and its impact upon miners' attitudes. 'After the resumption of work at the end of '98', recorded John E. Morgan, of the Lady Windsor Lodge, 'a new spirit became evident among the men'.[47] A key difference between the PWA in its heyday and the SWMF before the First World War, was the engagement of the local lodges in the life of the community. As Chris Williams notes of the Lady Windsor Lodge:

[it] was involved in building and controlling the workmen's institute, in running a successful cinema, in providing a hospital and convalescence-homes fund and ambulance service, in opening a people's park and a welfare ground, and in securing Labour representation on local governing bodies.[48]

Of the Provincial Workmen's Association it would be difficult to claim such a level of community action. Indeed it was not until the emigration of a more radical trade unionism and radical ideas in the shape of James Bryson McLachlan that Nova Scotia's trade union movement considered colliery libraries and other organic institutions at all, as Drummond himself noted: 'some wise men from the east, in other words some recently arrived Scotsmen, have taken possession of the PWA lodge at Sydney Mines,

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[44] Lewis Jones, *Cwmardy* (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1986), p. 128.

[45] *Trades Journal*, 27 February 1885.

[46] See for example, John Williams 'The Strike of 1898', in Idem, *Was Wales Industrialised? Essays in Modern Welsh History* (Llandysul, Gomer Press, 1995), pp. 192 – 213; Hywel Francis & David Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1980).

[47] John E. Morgan, *A Village Workers' Council: A Short History of the Lady Windsor Lodge (S.W.M.F.)* (Pontypridd, Celtic Press, 1950), p. 17.

[48] Chris Williams, *Capitalism, Community and Conflict: The South Wales Coalfield, 1898-1947* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), p. 46; Morgan, *Village Workers' Council*, p. 70.

and are trying to introduce some old, new fangled notions'.[49] For all of South Wales' tardiness in organising itself, once it was achieved the benefits were remarkable. The obvious answer as to why Nova Scotia's union failed to do this lies in its concern with individual moral and social improvement and its fascination with Smilesian self-help schemes, the union's motto 'None Cease to Rise but Those Who Cease to Climb' underscores this point. For a new generation of radicals, the consensual nature of the PWA had ceased to climb; for them socialism seemed to be the answer.

The Wise Men From the East: Socialism and New Trade Unionism, 1900 - 1920.

The first decade of the twentieth century marks the emergence of a fiery brand of Labourism directly inherited from Scotland. Men such as McLachlan were disciples of Keir Hardie the independently minded Scottish MP for West Ham and then Merthyr Tydfil (from 1900). The Lib-Lab pact which had served to elect working-class members of parliament since the 1870s, Hardie argued, merely increased the stranglehold of society over the workers: 'mind your own business, men: no one can have so much interest in your affairs as you should have yourselves.'[50] McLachlan, to be sure, represents an entirely different episode in the history of the Nova Scotian Labour movement,[51] but he was also influenced by a new scientific realism which saw poverty as an environmental rather than a moral problem, 'I wonder what he [Drummond] thinks cause the deformed legs, the drawn-up shoulders, the fallen-in chest and the 'clanny blinks' on the workers of such a town … it is not steady work that causes such results, but oppressive work, filthy and abominable surrounding vitiated air'.[52]

McLachlan, having seen the benefits of colliery libraries and worker's self-education, singled out works by Carlyle, Ruskin, Marx, and Adam Smith as part of a common drive amongst miners for improvement, 'the lack of independence of thought and action is, to my mind, the towering calamity of workingmen' he argued.[53] The *Halifax Herald* picked up this theme, 'The *Herald* is now pointing out how the workers of today may help to bring about a more rational mode of action in their trade unions – get a library and use it!'[54] The Miners' Libraries were an underground university.[55] Part of the reason Nova Scotia lagged behind South Wales and other British coalfields lies, it seems to me, in the lack of organic social institutions that weakened independent action

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[49] *Halifax Herald*, 26 July 1906.
[50] *Halifax Herald*, 18 July 1906.
[51] McLachlan's life is considered in the context of his society in David Frank's recent biography. David Frank, *J.B. McLachlan: A Biography*. *The Story of a Legendary Labour Leader and the Cape Breton Coal Miners* (Toronto, James Lorimer, 1999).
[52] *Halifax Herald* 22 August 1906.
[53] *Halifax Herald*, 29 October 1906.
[54] *Halifax Herald*, 6 October 1906.
[55] W. H. Davies, *The Right Place, The Right Time, Memories of Boyhood Days in a Welsh Mining Community* (Swansea, C. Davies Publishers Ltd., 1972) p. 104 – 105.

and the development of an alternative to hegemonic society. The impact of colliery libraries and the like awoke Nova Scotia's colliers to the potential of an alternative and by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century they were fighting labour wars as bitter as any faced on the South Wales coalfield.[56]

By the end of the Great War, Nova Scotia's colliers and those of South Wales had reached the same point in development. But how far can this development be considered 'modern'? If class is a relationship not a thing, then surely modernity is as well. Yet, our approaches to modernity and modernism are perfect reminders of the metropolitan fallacy and of historians' general reliance upon the culture of cities to define that of non-metropolitan regions such as South Wales and Cape Breton. To be sure, there are features such as organised sport, political institutions, and economic structures which are reflective of industrial capitalism and its social, economic, and political relations but if we see the culture of the coalfield as being of its own making but not necessarily in conditions of its own choosing – that old Marxist understanding of *history* – then can we at the same time accept 'modernity' as relevant?

Personally, I find the concept of modernity and modernism unhelpful particularly when seeking to understand societies such as those found in Glamorgan and in Cape Breton. Modernity, after all, represents a hegemonic force, a status quo, a thing that is achieved rather than constructed and reconstructed generation after generation. This is also the problem with post-modernity and post-modernism for the acceptance of modernity and modernism as things rather than relationships (and relationships of power at that) neglects one's agency and ability to also reject modernity and modernism yet at the same time embrace certain elements. I think this is inherent in the labour wars of the twentieth century but also in the realm of sporting activity. It is to the latter that I now wish to turn to illustrate this point.

The One Great Pastime of the People: Rugby, Class, and Identity

Rugby Football was introduced to Cape Breton Island in the first years of the twentieth century by a group of McGill University graduates employed to work at the Dominion Iron and Steel Corporation, amongst them 'a man from the old country name Jones'.[57] Whether or not he is of Welsh blood or not is largely irrelevant but the possibility is all the more exciting! The first full season of rugby football was played in 1901 and by 1902 the Cape Breton Rugby Association was formed through a coalition of teams from Sydney, Port Morien, Louisbourg, and Glace Bay.[58] By 1906 the game had been transformed from a middle class sport for university graduates into a working-class sport that revealed – as in South Wales – the immense aptitude for the game amongst

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[56] For more on the nature of strikes in Atlantic Canada in the period before the Great War see: Ian McKay, 'Strikes in the Maritimes, 1901 – 1914', *Acadiensis* XIII:1 (Autumn 1983), pp. 3 – 46.

[57] Ralph M. Davies,, *A History of Rugby in Nova Scotia* (unpublished M.Sc. Thesis, Dalhousie University, 1979), p. 40.

[58] *Sydney Post*, 11 October 1902

coal miners. Indeed the working-class teams from Caledonia, Reserve, Sydney Mines, and Dominion No.6 shared the championship between them in the years prior to 1914. Only the strike years of 1909 and 1910 prevented a more total dominance of the game. That the game became working-class so quickly is not entirely surprising given the demographic dominance of miners and their families on the Island; more important however was the position of rugby football in relation to 'native' sports such as American and Canadian Football. The local newspaper, *The Daily Record* defended what it called 'English Rugby' on the basis of it being less violent and deadly than North American football codes; even, it seems remarkable to note, to the extent of urging Cape Breton residents to 'Play the English Game and Avoid Fatal Accidents'.[59]

Historians in Canada, if they bothered with the sport at all, viewed the predilection of Cape Breton for Old World sports such as rugby as evidence of Nova Scotia's perceived conservative and 'backward' position in Canadian society. Indeed Nova Scotia – along with the rest of the Maritime Provinces – was seen as not being as 'modern' as Ontario or British Columbia. What is evident from the discussion above, of course, is that Cape Breton was anything but conservative in the early years of the twentieth century and had had a liberal tradition before that. Imagine the same being said of the South Wales Valleys! The question we have to ask, as Nancy Bouchier has noted, is 'what is to be made of non-dominant modes of sport' and secondly, 'what do they tell us of Canadian culture'.[60]

Well, primarily we ought to concern ourselves with the question of hegemony and keep in the back of our mind the metropolitan fallacy. The appropriation of British sport in Cape Breton can indeed be related to a lingering historical memory of the 'Old (perhaps Auld) Country' and the self-conscious diaspora in Nova Scotia. After all the interwar period marked the beginning of 'official Scottishness' in the province. Yet, this vision of history plays too much on the stick-in-the-mud approach of traditional Halifax families and a top-down vision of sporting development.[61] Failing to receive American and Canadian Football with open arms revealed their anti-progressive tendencies, which is, needless to say, an understanding of history that has tended to go hand-in-hand with the conservative stereotyping of the province. Alternatively, we can see the appropriation simply of a sport by the working class which (in a similar vein to its growth in South Wales) was then invested with particular visions of identity and reflected a separate development of culture that reveals working class agency. A similar process can be seen in a sport that is inherently American: namely, baseball. 'This history of Baseball in the Atlantic Provinces and New England' wrote Colin Howell in 1995, 'approaches sport as an aspect of cultural production, investigating the patterns of authority and resistance that derive from an unequal system of power relations'.[62] In

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[59] *The Daily Record,* 28 October 1902.
[60] Nancy Bouchier, 'Canadian Sport History', *Acadiensis* XXXVIII: II (Autumn, 1998), pp. 98 – 102.
[61] Ralph Davies, *Rugby in Nova Scotia*, p. 5.
[62] Colin D. Howell, *Northern Sandlots: A Social History of Maritime Baseball* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1995), p.5.

other words, then, working class appropriation of rugby football in Wales and Cape Breton is both reflective of power relations and helps to shape them.[63]

Rugby football in Nova Scotia was not considered to be modern because of who played it; miners and their families were not modern because they lived outside of the metropolis. Likewise in South Wales, as readers of Dai Smith and Gareth Williams' magisterial *Fields of Praise* will be aware, the attitude of the English Rugby Union to the WRU's acquiescence to round-about payment of players and the donation of £50 to Arthur Gould's testimonial fund seemed to be all about a clash of wills. The failure of the WRU to stand its ground earned the scorn of commentators, 'Professionalism existed to a large degree in South Wales and whilst it would be regarded as semi-professionalism the decision of the WRU to adopt the English position on the matter was considered to be pussy-footing' argued *The Welsh Athlete* in October 1891. The following January the paper took a stronger tone, 'it is no use for our football legislators to pretend to be good-goody people …We all know that hotel bills can be made to prove anything, and no sane person would question what appeared to him to be even slightly extravagant did he know that some of the players had been compensated for the loss of a day's work'.[64] The metropolitan vision of the RFU of rugby as a dogmatically amateur (middle-class) sport clashed with Valleys (and North of England working-class) realism; thus did Yorkshire and Lancashire go their own way and the South Wales teams simply carry on ignoring the stipulations.[65] Those clashes brutally reveal the attitude of middle class amateur administrators to the working class players of the game and the vulgarisation of the sport. This was Raymond Williams's vision of hegemony in action. The shaping and reshaping of values to ensure the dominance of a particular grouping – often a social class – over other groups in society.[66]

What the battle over sport essentially reveals is the commodification of sport. That is to say, the emergence of sport as a product to be bought and sold rather than a leisure activity for the sake of it. In those terms the players are workers who sell their labour. Seeking to strengthen this materialist argument, there is potentially another perspective, which although closely allied to the classic historical materialist vision of the commodification of sport nevertheless instils in the working-class patrons of sport, agency; and a recognition of the differing boundaries of social practise. 'In working-class culture' writes Thomas Dunk, 'common sense and anti-intellectualism are inextricably bound up with "the politico-ideological division between mental and manual labour" which is a dominant feature of contemporary capitalist societies. The working class's

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[63]   For gender relations in sport see: Catriona M. Parratt, *"More Than Mere Amusement": Working-Class Women's Leisure in England, 1750 – 1914* (Boston, Northeastern University Press, 2001); on race C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1993).

[64]   *The Welsh Athlete*, 5 October 1981; 4 January 1892,

[65]   Tony Collins, *Rugby's Great Split: Class, Culture and the Origins of Rugby League Football* (London, Routledge, 2006), pp. 90 – 97; 115 – 121; & 181 – 188 *passim*; see also, Dai Smith & Gareth Williams, *Fields of Praise: The Official History of the Welsh Rugby Union, 1881 – 1981* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1980), pp. 208 – 09.

[66]   Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 115

preferred form of thought is both an expression of its place on the manual side of this distinction, and a reversal of the status that the two sides have in society as a whole. Occupations on the mental side generally carry higher prestige, status and wages than those on the manual side, yet in working-class culture the manual side is more highly valued'.[67] There is no sense that the working class does not think but that its championing of sport as a legitimate expression of national, regional, and community identities can be related to the value placed on manual activity. After all, it is working with one's hands that marked the miner out as being of a different class to the journalist, teacher or shopkeeper.

Seen from this perspective, the trend in South Wales and a little later in Cape Breton towards colliery libraries and the magnificent Miners Institutes with their great libraries is a fundamental rewriting of social relations. After all the prizing of knowledge and mental achievement was an inherently middle class value set. For workers to appropriate mental prowess and turn into their own realm demonstrates the fallacy of the metropolitan perspective and underlines the value of seeing culture from the perspective of the industrial frontier. These Miners Institutes with their libraries and the working-class rugby clubs were not aspects of modernity but rather a working-class sphere of culture, an organic development that was fuelled by the dynamism of the coalfield and its people. It also offered the workers of the South Wales Coalfield the reading material they could use to play their part in the reconstruction of society. The decidedly a-typical firebrand Aneurin Bevan underlined the shaping influence of the Tredegar Library on his development in his *In Place of Fear*.[68] Likewise the volunteers who travelled to Spain to fight against Fascism later acknowledged the formative role of the Institute.[69] The marked contrast with the Canadian volunteers in Spain is obvious, whilst a number of the Canadians did have more than elementary education the lack of self-education institutions such as found in South Wales reveals the necessity of drawing back from over-generalisation of the Cape Breton experience.[70] However similar it appears, it was not the same.

Yet, the determination of the working class should not be forgotten. The Nanaimo Mechanics' Literary Institute on the Vancouver Island coalfield of British Columbia was initially set up with funds from the Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company and built on land donated by the company.[71] The library always remained under the direction of the company directors but the artistic realm of the Institute was

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[67] Thomas W. Dunk, *It's a Working Man's Town: Male Working-Class Culture* (McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal & Kingston, 2003), p. 136.
[68] Aneurin Bevan, *In Place of Fear* (London, Heinemann, 1952), pp. 17 – 19.
[69] Francis, *Miners Against Fascism*, pp. 194 – 195; Idem, 'The origins of the South Wales Miners' Library', *History Workshop*, 2 (1976), pp. 183-205; Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2001).
[70] Michael Petrou, *Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2008), p. 17.
[71] This is not terrifically different from what occurred in Wales and as such it is possible to chart the shift in control of the institutes. See, for example, John E. Morgan, *Village Workers Council*, pp. 54 – 56.

appropriated by the local miners who developed shows, concerts, and all-night balls.[72] The appearance of the Nanaimo Institute in 1862 did not immediately spur the Nova Scotian mine companies to imitation, indeed it was not until 1882 that a proposal came to set up reading room in Springhill, Nova Scotia, which was finally achieved three years later in 1885.[73] That of Sydney Mines had more to do with diverting attention away from drink than providing for education.[74] By contrast with the vibrancy of the workers' education movement in South Wales that in Canada was particularly weak even compared to the other Dominion, Australia. 'The Canadian WEA, during the first decade of its existence', record Friesen and Taksa, 'was a frail reed by comparison to its Australian sibling'.[75] What of course this means is Canadian workers found alternative means to express their growing class consciousness, as we have seen.

Conclusion

If, in conclusion, we move away from culture and look at politics – the usual barometer of labour consciousness – it will become clear that the centrality of community so apparent in South Wales also underlines much that is similar about the Cape Breton coalfield and is therefore at the heart of the industrial frontier. The particular aspect I wish to draw out here, which I feel has not been fully explored properly elsewhere is the relationship between workers and the police.[76] If there is a weak point in Dai Smith's article on Tonypandy it is that he does not draw out fully the nature of the conflict between the police and the striking mine workers. Protests and marches in the valleys tended to remain peaceful unless the police intervened something that would to seem to emphasise their role as keepers of the capitalist order rather than 'the thin blue line' of popular imagination. On the 8th of November 1910 a miners' demonstration in Tonypandy was forcefully dispersed by the police with constables using their truncheons freely the frustration of the workers resulted in damage to shops and houses in central Tonypandy.[77] The sending in of troops prompted vehement protests from local Labour MPs Keir Hardie and William Abraham who stated in the Commons that 'the whole of the police at this time, with the exception of a few, were at the colliery guarding the owners' property'.[78] The heavy-handed use of the police to control miners frustrated in their social conditions made strikes appear more violent than they otherwise ought to

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[72] Belshaw, *Colonization and Community,* p. 182.

[73] *Trades Journal*, 13 December 1882; 11 November 1885.

[74] *Trades Journal*, 7 January 1885.

[75] Gerald Friesen & Lucy Taksa, 'Workers' Education in Australia and Canada: A Comparative Approach to Labour's Cultural History', *Labour / Le Travail* 71 (November 1996), p.182; For South Wales see: Richard Lewis, *Leaders & Teachers: Adult Education and the Challenge of Labour in South Wales, 1906 – 1940* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1993).

[76] For most other matters reference to Dai Smith or Gwyn Alf Williams will usually suffice.

[77] For an eloquent examination of the Tonypandy riots and the 'myth' of Tonypandy see Dai Smith, 'Tonypandy 1910: Definitions of a Community', *Past & Present* 87 (May, 1980); cf. E. D. Lewis, *The Rhondda Valleys* (Cardiff, University College Cardiff Press, 1984 / Originally 1959), pp. 175 – 179. Lewis Jones explored the legend in his novel *Cwmardy*.

[78] *Hansard*, 28 November 1910.

have been.

In Atlantic Canada, the police were equally heavy handed. A strike amongst Italian workers in Sydney in March 1903 on the grounds of ethnic discrimination was met with stiff police intervention. The Italian strikers may well have been carrying clubs, picks, shovels, and iron bars as potential weapons but it was the police who attacked the workers at the first sign of threatening behaviour. Rather than waiting for the strikers to make their move, 'the police waited no longer and started to disperse them by force: after the police did considerable clubbing and arrested one or two the succeeded in quelling the crowd'.[79]As Ian McKay summarises, 'the labour movement advocated non-violent and passive strikes. But both the state and capital championed far more aggressive and forceful approaches … It was difficult to tell where the public police stopped and capital's private army began.'[80]

More worryingly on both sides of the Atlantic was the use of troops to respond to the striking workers. By July 1909 a quarter of Canada's fighting men were in Cape Breton; troops were sent to quell the strikers in Tonypandy in 1910. The appearance of troops really does emphasise both in the popular consciousness and in the historiography that these were labour *wars*. This returns us to Jackson Turner's vision of the frontier, for him the conflict between native Americans and the pioneer-citizens of the United States drove forward American democracy and fostered American modernity. The frontier in America was violent and bloody. In 1921 Sir Alfred Zimmern described the Wales of the coalfield as American Wales.[81] The violence and clash between the forces of 'modernity' (more properly the state) and the local population perhaps leads us to question the wholesale rejection of Turner's concept. Turner was correct to conceptualise the frontier as a dynamic zone and one of conflict. I believe, however, that the industrial frontier was more about the frontier between two cultural spheres, that of the coalfield – working class and organically autonomous – and the metropolis. The unequal power relations of these two spheres manifested themselves in the sorts of realms that have been discussed above. That they manifested themselves on multiple fronts merely shows the active and heroic resistance to industrial capitalism was not solely limited to the South Wales Valleys though it sometimes must have felt like it!

Dai Smith once described entering the coalfield as entering 'a world as abruptly different as any Dr Who discovers'.[82] Ian McKay once described the Nova Scotian coalfield as 'an atypical coalfield'.[83] In a sense both are correct, to the casual observer

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[79] *Daily Post* (Sydney), 3 March 1903; *Amherst Daily News*, 3 March 1903; *Halifax Chronicle* 3 March 1903, *Halifax Herald*, 5 March 1903.

[80] Ian McKay, 'Strikes in the Maritimes, 1901 – 1914', in David Frank & Gregory S. Kealey (eds.), *Labour & Working-Class History in Atlantic Canada, A Reader* (St John's, Institute of Social & Economic Research, 1995), pp. 224 – 5 (reprinted from *Acadiensis* XIII:I (Autumn, 1983), pp. 3 – 46).

[81] Dai Smith, *Aneurin Bevan* , preface.

[82] Dai Smith, *Aneurin Bevan*, p.46.

[83] Ian McKay, *By Wisdom, Wile or War*, p. 23.

Eastern Canada and South Wales have little in common; yet in the way that both have become self-conscious and the manner in which they express themselves through the written arts of history and literature they are blood brothers. In the twenty first century they also share many of the same social problems – alcohol, drugs, teenage disaffection – that mark those areas of the western world that have adjusted to the post-industrial least well. South Wales and Cape Breton are still coming to terms with the fact that coalmining no longer exists and are beginning the painful integration into mainstream 'metropolitan' culture. The near-total hegemony of metropolitan influences in the twenty first century means that it is more pressing than ever to recover a sense of the past and to remind ourselves that here in the Valleys or in the coal townships of Cape Breton Island our ancestors once made a dynamic culture for themselves and constructed what Dai Smith has called the mindscape of South Wales.[84]

If the comparative mode of history serves any purpose it is to break down a belief in uniqueness. Concluding his comparative essay published in the pages of this journal nearly a decade ago, Stefan Berger highlighted the culturally homogenous nature of the South Wales coalfield as compared with that of the Ruhr.[85] In doing so he notes the homogeneity of South Wales and the heterogeneity of the Ruhr 'sustained significantly different Labour movements'.[86] In exploring the Cape Breton coalfield and offering it as a comparative venture for historians, I have noted the rich vein of similarities that not only strengthen Berger's conclusion regarding the labour movement but also to punch a few more holes in the fallacy of South Wales's uniqueness. The continuation of 'British' sports such as rugby football in Cape Breton, the migration of trade union ideas across the Atlantic - and in some cases back again[87] - and the singular dominance of communities by King Coal all served to forge a common culture that deserves greater attention. The labour movement in Cape Breton and South Wales was not a political expression alone, it was a cultural expression born from the experiences of life for the worker on the industrial frontier. The future of both regions does not lie in the past, of course, but the spirit of an ongoing struggle against adversity might well be something we need to recapture for the twenty-first century inhabitants of the coalfield.

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[84]   Dai Smith, *Aneurin Bevan*, p. 92 f.

[85]   Berger, 'Working-Class Culture', *passim*.

[86]   Ibid, p. 40.

[87]   Towards the end of its existence, Victor Gollancz's Left Book Club published M. J. Coldwell's, *Left Turn, Canada* which sought to bring to wider attention the ideas of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation party, which at the time was Canada's principal left-wing party. The CCF was the forerunner of the New Democratic Party, which is now Canada's only social democratic party (in the European sense of the term) and in June 2009 was voted in as the governing party in Nova Scotia. M. J. Coldwell, *Left Turn, Canada* (London, Victor Gollancz, 1945).