

History of canadian labour



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History of Canadian labour In his article, Bitterman addresses the myth of the independent yeoman diffused through Maritime literature. In these works the abundance of land is said to provide the possibility for economic security and independence. Bitterman recognizes that to a certain extent this myth is true and such possibilities were undoubtedly greater than in the Old World.

However he maintains that this is only partially and that the reality for many was, in fact, very different. Bitterman therefore sets out to explore the ‘the importance of wage labour to farm folk in the Northeastern Maritimes in the first half of the 19th century’. (Bitterman 4)

Bitterman argues that many farmers began life in the Maritimes as employees, citing Jones’ three-tier system of those with capital who could hire other people, those who could support themselves and those who needed to off-farm work while undergoing the process of farm-making. He argues that thousands of people fell into this third category, thereby not having independence. Bitterman uses many primary sources to support this claim from document of the landlord John Cambridge to Lord Selkirk and the accounts of Kavanaugh. While these sources provide strong evidence for the initial dependence of early settlers on wages, they do not truly explode the myth of independence, since it is clear that often these dependencies were only true for as long as it took to establish the farm. Indeed Bitterman refers to wage work ‘in the early stages of farm-making’. (Bitterman 5). It is also necessary to consider the fact that these sources, while useful, are limited in scope and Bitterman expands this limited evidence to account for thousands of immigrants in this period.

Bitterman also argues that independence varied depending on the yield and weather conditions and a family that one year was independent could be

forced to seek paid work the next. He takes as evidence the observations of Baddeck who noted that even 30 years after settlement occupants of hundreds of farms in the area were not truly independent. Bitterman also traces the variety of labour opportunities available and the way in which the settlers moved between paid work and labour on their farms, using as evidence documents relating to the MacNutt farm among others. From ship building to textiles, the possibilities for paid employment are varied and Bitterman's account is compelling in its completeness and usage of primary sources.

However Bitterman accepts that the calculations of the degree of dependency of farmers on wages are only estimates stating 'the analysis of farm deficits ultimately rests on a series of assumptions concerning patterns of production and consumption' (Bitterman 17). He also notes that information regarding workforce participation is fragmentary. While therefore risking generalising too broadly with limited evidence, Bitterman ultimately reigns in his analysis and acknowledges the limits to understanding the extent of the dependence of early settlers.

Bleasdale deals with the stereotype of the Irish settlers in Canada as unstable and aggressive. She explores this phenomenon, going beyond the acceptance of this as an Anglo-Saxon social norm and examining the economic basis for this behaviour. She argues that the reason for outbreaks of violence was primarily class conflict in the form of 'a bitter resistance to the position which [the Irish] were forced to assume in the society of British North America'. (Bleasdale 28).

Irish immigrants were largely unskilled poor labourers who were unable to invest in land. Many therefore found temporary work in construction and

Bleasdale cites the construction of canals in Canada as a major source of employment for these unskilled men. However even these extensive engineering works did not provide enough employment for the vast numbers of immigrants. Lacking the money to travel, the unemployed immigrants therefore set up shanty towns near construction sites. They survived by stealing and Bleasdale reports observers who stated that their extreme poverty forced them to such measures to survive. These extremes of poverty are also reported in newspapers and official letters to the extent that Bleasdale concludes that this state of affairs was not exaggerated. For those that did find work, the wage levels were too low to adequately support themselves and their families. Bleasdale supports this claim with government statistics of 1842.

Bleasdale then examines some of the measures brought in to try to ease this situation, such as the contract introduced by the Board of Works which stated wages must be paid in cash rather than tickets. However she demonstrates that this measure was not well implemented and in many cases ignored. In facing these hardships the immigrants formed into close-knit working class communities united by their suffering and their common Irish roots. This fuelled a sense of fraternity and communal organization augmented by a compelling commitment to Catholicism. Much of her evidence for this is based on secondary literature rather than a re-examination of primary sources which in part weakens her argument. This unity also took on a political flavour with Irish canal workers marching against Orangemen in Toronto and supporting the repeal of the legislative union between England and Ireland. This political dedication often led the Irish immigrants to clash with the Protestant culture in Canada. Immigrant

Canalliers were also divided into two large and very hostile groups which would often clash with one another, the Cork and Connaught. This division of factions dominated all aspects of life, from living conditions to working arrangements. Employers recognised that setting men of the same faction to work together made working conditions much more peaceful. Here again she relies on secondary literature

The strength of Bleasdale's article, however, lies in her discussion of the one situation under which the factions united – strikes. Often the need to demand higher wages overcame the hostility between groups, reinforcing Bleasdale's theory that it was class conflict rather than factionism which was the main reason for Irish violence. Bleasdale underlines that information on strike action is patchy but she concludes that workers succeeded in pushing wages up. She makes the interesting assertion that the 19th century secret societies were well adapted to the new Irish position and that they allowed the factions to unite, knowing that they had a set of moral codes beyond those prescribed by law. The majority of evidence that Bleasdale cites is from official records which is a difficulty in her research since it does not necessarily reflect the true picture.

Sources cited

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