

# CANADIAN LABOUR HISTORY

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*Selected Readings*



David J. Bercuson

New Canadian Readings

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SELECTED READINGS

Edited by  
David J. Bercuson

  
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For Barrie

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# CANADIAN LABOUR HISTORY

# FOREWORD

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*New Canadian Readings* is an on-going series of inexpensive books intended to bring some of the best recent work by this country's scholars to the attention of students of Canada. Each volume consists of ten or more articles or book sections, carefully selected to present a fully-formed thesis about some critical aspect of Canadian development. Where useful, public documents or even private letters and statistical materials may be used as well to convey a different and fresh perspective.

The authors of the readings selected for inclusion in this volume (and all the others in the series) are all first-rank scholars, those who are doing the hard research that is rapidly changing our understanding of this country. Quite deliberately, the references for each selection have been retained, thus making additional research as easy as possible.

Like the authors of the individual articles, the editors of each volume are also scholars of note, completely up-to-date in their areas of specialization and, as the introductions demonstrate, fully aware of the changing nature of the debates within their professions and genres of research. The list of additional readings provided by the editor of each volume will steer readers to materials that could not be included because of space limitations.

This series will continue into the foreseeable future, and the General Editor is pleased to invite suggestions for additional topics.

J.L. Granatstein  
General Editor

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# INTRODUCTION

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## Labour History and the Labour Historians

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What is labour history? That question was once easily answered. Labour history was the history of the labour movement — the development of trade unions, collective bargaining, labour legislation and, to a lesser degree, labour's involvement in politics. There are still labour historians in Canada who think that these concerns are the only legitimate pursuits of those who call themselves labour historians but, for the most part, it is now recognized that labour history is much broader than that.

In Canadian historical writing "labour" is now usually combined with "working class" or "working classes" (depending on one's political views) and, as such, a whole new range of subjects has become linked to the more traditional study of trade unions. In the mid-1980s there are labour historians who study a wide range of social history, use tools such as quantitative analysis and who continually broaden our knowledge of working-class life at home or in the factory, and other once unknown aspects of Canada's past. And there are still labour historians who pursue the no less important work of tracing the growth and development of the labour movement, which is, after all, the greatest single monument to the self-emancipation of working people.

Labour history has undergone a series of sharp changes over the past decade. It has, of course, grown as a field of importance and as an area of practice. It can no longer be said that Canadian labour history is in its infancy, as it was when the Committee on Canadian Labour History was founded in 1971, or that it has yet to achieve a broad representation within the ranks of the Canadian historical profession, as was true when the journal *Labour/Le Travailleur* was founded in 1976. Today there are two recent textbooks that chronicle the history of labour in Canada, and hundreds of monographs, readers, and articles testify to the prolific production of labour historians. Labour history has truly come of age.

At the same time, labour history has undergone a shift in emphasis that will be apparent to the readers of this collection. The revival of labour history in the late 1960s and early 1970s can largely be traced to those who participated not in the student revolution of the late 1960s, but in the first stirrings of the New Democratic Party in the early 1960s. Their world was one of democratic socialism, mixed economies, welfare state liberalism, and the easy assumption that good will, good work, and the breaking of old barriers in the historical profession would somehow save them from the reinterpretive process that is so vital to the writing of history. In this, they were both naive and mistaken. And they found this out, abruptly, in the mid-1970s when their basic assumptions, and the bases

of their work, were suddenly challenged by an active, vigorous, and prolific "second generation," products of the student revolt of the late 1960s, who followed closely on their heels. This group raised the flag of Marxism and proceeded to analyse Canadian history in terms of the development of class and working-class culture, emphases pioneered abroad by historians such as E. P. Thompson in Britain and Herbert Gutman and David Montgomery in the United States.

The emergence of the second generation was marked by an increase in the politicization of labour history. This was probably inevitable, given the nature of the field and the basic disagreements between Marxists and non-Marxists about the way history works. The second generation proclaimed their political views and made clear, in a variety of ways, that they intended to transform the writing of Canadian history "from the bottom up." They maintained that they would not focus on the traditional concerns of labour historians (unions, strikes, union leaders, etc.), but on the common people and their daily lives. They also attacked the practitioners of the more traditional labour history because their foci and their interpretations were not informed by Marxian analysis. In the end, this second generation too largely wrote about unions, strikes, and labour leaders because, alas, all historians must use the sediment that history leaves, and most people, in the past and now, leave very little behind that historians can use. Prime ministers tend to keep diaries; carpenters are usually too busy.

Although the Marxists ended up concentrating on the same subjects as the non-Marxists, their interpretations were very different. The clash of interpretations was, in some ways, a good thing for Canadian history. When non-Marxists, for example, claimed that workers in western Canada in the period 1890 to 1920 were more politically radical than workers elsewhere in Canada, Marxists took strong exception. If it was true, region was more important than class as the major determinant of worker unrest. Marxist labour historians, therefore, embarked on a series of studies to show that radicalism motivated workers everywhere in Canada and at all times due to the inherent nature of class conflict. Much valuable work was done in uncovering the history of Canadian working people as a result of that search. And this was good. But at the same time, the contemptuous dismissal of good historical work simply because it was based on a different political world-view led to a deep division between the two groups. And in a historical profession as small as the one in Canada, that was bad.

Today, the clash is but an echo. Labour historians of all political views are producing more work than ever and there is not nearly as much self-conscious preaching as there once was. It may be that a certain dynamism has been lost, but an examination of recent writing in labour history does not bear this out. There is as much, if not more, reinterpretation going on today as ever and much of it, especially that being done by the quantifiers and those interested in the history of the family and women workers, is proving to be extremely valuable.

## The Selections in this Book

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It is not easy, in a book of this size, to do justice to the varieties of labour history that have been produced in Canada in the recent past. A number of criteria were used to determine the selections in this collection. First, everything here is of relatively recent vintage, having been published in the years since 1976. The appearance in that year of the labour history journal *Labour/Le Travailleur* (now *Labour/Le Travail*) marked a new beginning for Canadian labour history and was a measure of the coming of age of labour history as a legitimate part of the Canadian historical discipline. That year, therefore, seemed an appropriate starting point. Second, the broad range of work being done in labour history today is represented here from the more traditional to the more radical. Third, labour history from the beginning of industrialization to the present day is represented. Finally, articles that presented new interpretations or re-interpretations were favoured as were articles that dealt with important turning points in labour history. Yet, with such limited space, many excellent recent articles that satisfied the above criteria could not be included here.

Although there are many ideological differences separating labour historians in Canada, as elsewhere, all would agree that they are also social historians. Labour history is an important component of social history and has played a key role in its triumph — the emergence of social history in Canadian historical writing since the late 1960s as *the* dominant area of specialization. The methods, techniques, and concerns of social and labour historians now inform almost all Canadian history. No one, for example, can hope to write serious Canadian political or diplomatic history today who treats politics or policy makers as separate and distinct from society at large. Most historians now recognize that the history of workers is a part of the history of employers and political leaders, and vice versa. In this sense there is probably greater agreement about how historians ought to approach history today than there ever was, even though Canadian history is, in other ways, more fragmented and ideologically diverse than ever.

# SECTION 1

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THE ERA OF  
INDUSTRIALIZATION

It is not easy to measure exactly when industrialization began in Canada because it started in different places and at different times. Relatively sophisticated industrial concerns were operating in places such as Hamilton and Montreal even before Confederation. Most historians, however, agree that Canada began to industrialize sometime in the 1870s and that the process was well on its way by the 1880s. This is a period, naturally enough, that is attracting increased attention from labour historians who used to concentrate mainly on the twentieth century.

Industrialization brought dramatic changes to the productive process and to the relationship between workers and their employers. In the constant search for more profit, employers sought to introduce more efficient ways of producing goods in their factories. The assembly line was introduced along with so-called labour-saving machinery and new methods of organization inside the factory (these were referred to as “scientific management”). Workers who, because of their skills, had once played important roles in the productive process resisted these changes. They knew that their control over production was at stake and realized that if employers reduced that control the workers would become little more than cogs in the wheels of production with little power over their lives. At the same time other workers who had never been employed in industry began to move to the cities from the country or came to Canada from rural areas in Europe and were forced to change their lives drastically to conform to the steam whistle and the time clock — the new rhythm of the industrial revolution. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, workers started to rely more and more on unions to increase their strength in the factory and turned increasingly to politics to enhance their strength in society.

The five selections in this section are broadly representative of the work being done in the labour history of this era. A. Gordon Darroch and Michael Ornstein have published several articles based on their quantitative analyses of manuscript census data and their work has somewhat undermined traditional notions about the period. The piece included here supports the conclusion of Donald H. Akenson\* that Irish Catholics did not form some great *lumpenproletariat* after immigrating to Canada — a major component of the explanation offered by H. C. Pentland for the timing and causes of the development of the capitalist labour market. Bettina Bradbury, also using manuscript census data, has done valuable work in relating the process of industrialization in Montreal to gender roles in working-class families and to the structure of the family economy. A recent example of her work is included here. Joan Sangster's piece remains one of the best chronicling the obstacles to the organization of women into unions, while the Cole Harris article is one of the few recent essays on the life and working conditions of western resource extraction workers.

The piece by Craig Heron and Bryan Palmer is another good example of the approach taken by practitioners of the “new” labour history. Heron and Palmer attempt to analyse both working conditions and, more important, the concerns of industrial workers, especially those who were skilled, in southern Ontario at

\**The Irish in Ontario, A Study in Rural History* (Montreal, 1985).

the turn of the century. They conclude that the era saw massive industrial conflict as workers resisted the attempt of the bosses to impose new work rules and shop floor organization to break the control of skilled craftsmen over the work process. There is room here to argue with their conclusion that shop-floor control issues were more important than wage disputes as the cause of strikes, and even their own evidence shows that in many cases the two were directly connected in the minds of the workers.

# ETHNICITY AND CLASS, TRANSITIONS OVER A DECADE: ONTARIO, 1861–1871†

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A. GORDON DARROCH AND MICHAEL ORNSTEIN

Writing about Ontario in the mid-nineteenth century, Pentland<sup>1</sup> and Johnson<sup>2</sup> emphasized the significance of the creation of a class of wage labourers for capitalist industrialization. In their view, proletarianization was well on its course by the 1870s, both in the cities and countryside. The class transformation was articulated with ethnic divisions within and between social classes. Irish Catholics, in particular, were seen as central to the formation of a nascent working class. In recent years, this view of industrialization has come under some criticism. This paper begins with a discussion of current perspectives on Ontario's industrial development, then addresses these perspectives by presenting the results of an examination of the Ontario census records of 1861 and 1871.

The essential features of Pentland's account of industrialization were set out with unusual clarity and bear repeating.<sup>3</sup> His work is still rightly considered the most incisive account of the conditions surrounding Canada's industrial revolution.<sup>4</sup> According to Pentland, a profound reorganization of its labour force was a prerequisite of the transition from a commercial to an industrial, capitalist economy. The growth of the labour market was fueled by a supply of workers who chose to become wage labourers or who had no other options.<sup>5</sup> Pentland dates the emergence of this labour market near the middle of the nineteenth century; by 1870, he thought, the conditions creating a reserve army of labour had intensified.

The creation of the labour reserve involved a fundamental transformation in the economy. Settlers in Canada West could no longer satisfy their widespread aspirations to become farm proprietors.<sup>6</sup> Pentland argued that the best land in Southern Ontario was filled up by 1850.<sup>7</sup> Subsequent research has refined, but not fundamentally altered, Pentland's view. For example, Johnson emphasized that Wakefield's and Gourlay's theories led to the adoption of land policies that purposely restricted the availability of affordable land; labourers with little capital would thus be encouraged to assume their "rightful" place in the working class.<sup>8</sup> Examining the history of Peel County, Gagan has argued that efforts by established farmers to expand their holdings served to further reduce the opportunities of would-be farmers.<sup>9</sup>

A second requirement of the creation of the labour reserve was an additional inflow of both unskilled workers, who became a highly mobile workforce able to take up the heavy, casual work of building the infrastructure required for

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†From *Historical Papers/Communications Historiques* 1984: 114–137. The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for preparation of the data from the nineteenth century census and for provision of release time to Professor Darroch. The data were prepared by the Institute for Social Research of York University. The authors thank Pierre Angers and William Bruce for supervising the data collection and Michael Murray, Mirka Ondrack, and John Tibert for programming required for the record linkage. Paul Lachance provided valuable comments on an earlier draft.

industrialization, and of skilled workers, who were required in the embryonic, urban factories. Pentland reasoned that between 1840 and 1870 Irish-Catholic immigrants met the requirement for unskilled labour, while English and Scottish artisans became the first skilled wage workers.

Implicit in Pentland's account is the presence of what has been labelled, in recent scholarship, a split labour market. A combination of cultural inclinations, differences in training and skills, and mechanisms of ethnic exclusion restricted Irish-Catholic immigrants to unskilled jobs and provided English and Scottish immigrants with relatively privileged jobs. These ethnic divisions served to increase the accumulation of capital, even if capitalists did not create but opportunistically exploited preexisting differences among ethnic groups. On the one hand, ethnic antagonism contributed to the subordination of workers in the large pool of unskilled labour. On the other hand, skilled labourers, some with experience in factory discipline, became available. Their industrial experience and relatively high wages may have undermined skilled workers' radicalism, while ethnic barriers discouraged them from allying with labourers. Thus, Canadian capitalists were largely able to escape the radicalism of a first generation of industrial workers, just displaced from the land,<sup>10</sup> and capital did not have to bear the costs of training a largely immigrant body of skilled workers.

Katz<sup>11</sup> and his colleagues<sup>12</sup> have lent support to Pentland's view of Irish Catholics. For Hamilton at midcentury, they regard Irish-Catholic heritage as virtually synonymous with membership in the urban proletariat. However, their argument is qualified by the results of our research on the occupational structure of Canada as a whole in 1871. Distinguishing the four provinces (at the time) and urban from rural areas, we found that the Irish Catholics were more likely than other groups to have labouring occupations, but not markedly so. More important, Irish Catholics were engaged in many other occupational pursuits. We concluded that in 1871 the divisions among national groups were not large enough to suggest the presence of a single, national, split labour market.<sup>13</sup> Akenson's study of the Ontario Irish demonstrates deep flaws in Pentland's treatment of the sources of immigrants, in his interpretation of Irish cultural heritage, and in his view that Irish Catholics were mired, by their conditions and will, in urban labouring.<sup>14</sup> By 1871, like the English and other immigrant groups, a majority of the Catholic and Protestant Irish had established themselves in farming.<sup>15</sup>

With respect to the sources of skilled labour, the role of English and Scottish artisans in Canadian industrialization has received little attention. According to Palmer,<sup>16</sup> the emergence of the nineteenth-century worker's movement in Hamilton was not marked by a significant division between the skilled and unskilled working class culture, much less by deep ethnic differences. Further exploration of this issue is clearly in order.

There is even wider diversity of opinion regarding land policy and accessibility. For example, Russell's study of 15 Ontario townships before 1850 shows that immigrants who did not have their own capital and whose families included few working members required a lifetime of work to clear enough land for a substantial farm.<sup>17</sup> Russell also shows that many immigrants had the required financial or family resources, or could earn sufficient wages, to clear and improve

their land in a few years. In southern Ontario, until at least 1840, there was apparently some basis in experience for the strongly individualist belief that "all men have the same/That owns an axe! an' has a strong right arm!"<sup>18</sup>

The findings of Gagan's detailed study of Peel County are somewhat contradictory.<sup>19</sup> In the 1860s efforts by a minority of better-off farmers to ensure landed, family patrimony left the majority of farmers with an acute shortage of good land. This helps to account for the trend to rural depopulation in Peel and a number of other Ontario counties. Yet, Gagan also provides unmistakable evidence that mobility *into* farming was the most common occupational transition for those who remained in Peel County.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, Leo Johnson's most recent work has added a note of uncertainty to his earlier emphasis on the impact of Colonial Office land policies in stemming the tide to the land and ensuring the places of "those who would naturally remain labourers."<sup>21</sup> A decade later, Johnson argued that the position of independent commodity producers, both farmers and traditional craftsmen, was actually reinforced and sustained by the balance of class forces at the time.<sup>22</sup> Johnson's latter view corresponds to the cogent argument of Craven and Traves, that there were three major classes in the political arena by 1870 and long thereafter: the business and industrial class, the working class, and farmers.<sup>23</sup>

The results of the analysis presented in this paper address a number of problems in the historical accounts just presented. First, we seek to identify the main transformations in the class structure of Ontario in the decade between 1861 and 1871. An assessment of the extent of changes in the relative size of class categories (without regard to the histories of the individuals involved), particularly of farmers and of labourers, has an immediate bearing on the issue of whether there was widespread proletarianization in the decade. Changes in class structure also affect the character of individual experience; for example, a finding that farmers and artisans often became labourers would serve as support for a strong version of a proletarianization thesis. If, instead, labourers frequently succeeded in becoming farmers, we would be forced to reconsider major themes in current interpretations of industrialization in Ontario.

Secondly, we address the question of whether class structure and individual experience conformed to ethnic and religious lines. Of course, the central roles of immigration and ethnicity have been recurrent themes in Canadian historical and sociological writing. More generally, religious and ethnic conflict has historically been an expression of conflicts over access to labour markets and the conditions of work.<sup>24</sup> Ethnic and religious diversity and the strength of ethnic communities have been seen as militating against the development of common class experience and consciousness.<sup>25</sup>

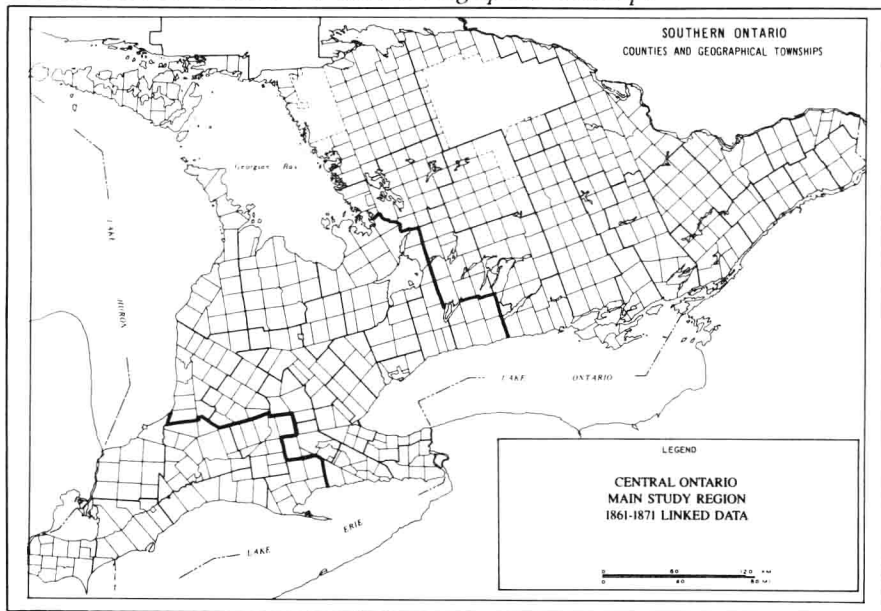
In formulating this research, we have drawn mainly on historical accounts of Ontario. The questions we investigate, however, fall squarely within the extensive literature on patterns of social mobility in the nineteenth century. We are aware of the criticisms of mobility studies and of the theoretical underpinnings of much of this research. In particular, mobility studies have often been viewed as a distraction from structural analysis of social classes. Urban historians' initial research on mobility drew on a body of sociological literature that was more

concerned with the extent of social mobility and what this implied about the distribution of occupational chances. In our view, mobility issues are a significant element in the discussion of class structure and experience, provided they are set in an appropriate context.

## Data

The analysis in this paper is based on samples of records drawn from the 1861 and 1871 censuses for Ontario. As figure 1 shows, the study covered somewhat over half of Ontario; budgetary constraints prevented the inclusion of the areas to the west of London and much of Eastern Ontario. The sample design was intended to maximize the proportion of individuals for whom records from both the 1861 and 1871 census listings would be available. The first step in the design involved randomly selecting a sample of Soundex codes from the universe of all Soundex phonetic codes; of course, the Soundex procedure assigns a code to every surname.<sup>26</sup> In both 1861 and 1871, all the personal census records (in the designated region of Ontario) were scanned. When a household that included anyone whose surname had a Soundex code among those randomly selected was encountered in the census manuscript, all the information listed *for every member of that household* was transcribed into machine-readable form. The transcription procedure provided for the exact preservation of all the original data, including full names and occupations. Even though the scanning and entry of data from the 1861 and 1871 census microfilms took place separately, the sampling procedure permitted linking the records of individuals present in both censuses.

FIGURE 1 *Southern Ontario Counties and Geographical Townships.*



Two records from 1861 and 1871 could be assumed to refer to the same person only if a number of conditions were met:

- a. he or she must have been living in the part of Ontario designated for the study in both 1861 and 1871;
- b. he or she must be enumerated by the census takers in both years;
- c. his or her name must not have changed completely in the decade (so women who married could not be traced in this study);
- d. the recording of the person's name and age in the two census manuscripts must have been sufficiently accurate and legible to permit them to be linked;
- e. our coders must have identified the individuals as having a surname that fell among those selected; and
- f. the two records must be identified as referring to the same person, despite the numerous small inconsistencies in ages and the spelling of names.

An error at any stage would result in the failure to create a linked record. Since fewer than 10 percent of the women in each year had any occupation listed in the census manuscript, our analysis is restricted to men located in the 1861 and/or 1871 censuses.

The linkage between the 1861 and 1871 census records was carried out manually on the basis of surnames, first names, ages, birthplaces, and the composition of the household in which each person lived (including the names, ages, and birthplaces of every household member). Because occupational change was a central focus of this study, occupations were not employed in establishing links between the 1861 and 1871 records. To have used occupations for linkage would have increased the accuracy of the linkage, but at the cost of biasing the sample by preferentially selecting individuals whose occupations did not change during the decade (since the "use" of occupations could only amount to increasing the likelihood of a match when the 1861 and 1871 occupations coincided).

The data management and initial sorting of the personal records were carried out by computer. Of the approximately 100,000 individual records transcribed about 65,000 were eligible for linkage; the remaining 35,000 records pertain to people whose own surnames did not qualify them for inclusion in the sample, but who lived in households including at least one person with an eligible surname. Because of our interest in the study of household composition and because data on other household members would prove valuable in the record linkage procedure the database included information about every person in a household containing at least one person with a selected surname.

Our analysis employs a classification of occupations designed to measure social class. This is not entirely satisfactory and in future analysis we intend to supplement the results in this paper with data from the agricultural censuses for 1861 and 1871 and the manufacturing census of 1871, which have also been coded for this project. The occupational classes employed here were developed in the course of our earlier work with the 1871 census.<sup>27</sup> The classification explicitly avoids ranking occupations in terms of prestige or status.

An important difference between the 1861 and 1871 censuses created some difficulty in comparisons between the two years. In 1861 the instructions to the enumerators required that the sons of farmers who worked on their fathers' farms be listed as "labourers," whereas in 1871 the sons of farmers were listed as