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Brodie, Ian and Paul MacKinnon. 2015. *Old Trout Funnies: The Comic Origins of the Cape Breton Liberation Army*. Sydney, NS: Cape Breton University Press.

Deindustrialization— the collapse of employment in resource extraction, heavy manufacturing, and value-added production within a compressed time frame and in a defined location or region—is hard on people, communities, and the environment. Workplaces and unions disappear; demographic patterns shift; politics converge on questions of revival; landscapes, streetscapes, and soundscapes change. It is traumatic, on every level. Deindustrialization struck Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, in earnest in the early 1960s, when coal mining and steel making—the region's largest employers—buckled under the heavy pressures of intense foreign competition, deficient public policy, and predatory corporate practices. Industrial fish processing, which was subject to different forces, joined the downward spiral in the next decade. Community resistance was occasionally sharp in these years—slowing, but not reversing, the overall decline. Artistic expression, especially among young adults, was particularly vibrant too.

Old Trout Funnies, a comic book series inked by Paul MacKinnon between 1975 and 1978, emerged in this context of economic ruination and expanding cultural production. And like closely aligned experiments in theatre, music, and literature, it embodied the creative impulse and critical edge with which a younger generation of Cape Bretoners sought to understand the island's history and the demonstrably different present— and future—unfolding around them. Long out of print, *Old Trout Funnies* has been re-issued by Cape Breton University Press, itself a product of the artistic effervescence of the era. With an introduction and detailed appendices by folklorist Ian Brodie, the book also includes MacKinnon's popular Cape Breton Liberation Army (CBLA) illustrated calendars, which featured characters from the original comic books. They were sold locally from 1979 to 2000. The product of a close collaboration between artist, academic, and archives, *Old Trout Funnies* is visually impressive, often very funny, and evokes a pivotal moment in the island's 20th-century history. It is a splendid publication.

Born and raised in industrial Cape Breton, MacKinnon attended the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax for a brief period. After a short stint in Ontario, he returned to Cape Breton and began taking shifts at the local steel plant. As Brodie recounts, once back on the island, MacKinnon found himself immersed in a vibrant culture of young people, many of whom were students at the local junior college and patrons of the steel city's many taverns. Generational dissent and talk of the island's future was in the air; jokes about liberation armies at home and abroad were told. MacKinnon continued to draw and sketch. Additional formal training soon followed for him at Holland College on Prince Edward Island. And it was there in the early 1970s that *Old Trout Funnies* was created. It started as a class project and ended as a small-run publication ready for sale in 1975. Two additional issues soon followed; then came the illustrated calendars. "We've got the Cape Breton Liberation Army, now what do we do with it?" MacKinnon recalled years later in conversation with Brodie. (9)

What MacKinnon did was let the CBLA loose on a series of absurd, sometimes surreal, missions in which a rag-tag bunch of long-haired soldiers defend the island from all manner of enemies – and drink a lot of beer in the process! Although characters and storylines changed, *Old Trout Funnies* tended to circle back to several important themes. As Brodie notes, the island's antagonistic relationship to the Nova Scotia mainland is represented throughout MacKinnon's oeuvre. So too is the ambivalence of the young generation towards the island's history: Cape Breton's industrial heritage is lampooned consistently, while its "traditional" rural culture of Gaelic, fiddles, and ceilidhs is almost completely ignored. Visually, MacKinnon's style is indebted to mainstream comic traditions of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Conventional artistic elements such as sequential panels, clear gutters, speech bubbles, captions, and

superhero-like plots—including action sequences in which the protagonists "crack," "kick," "smash," and "boom" their way to victory—are evident. Yet countercultural sensibilities are prominent too. Like other underground strips, *Old Trout Funnies* was created by a young adult for a like-minded audience. It emphasizes the hedonistic pleasures of young people—sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll in urban Cape Breton—while some of the artwork is suggestive of R. Crumb, minus the raunch. A trippy, hallucinogenic feeling emanates from the entire project. "Old toke funnies," says one character in issue #3 before sparking a rather large joint: "far out man!"(96)

Readers who enjoyed *Old Trout Funnies* back in the day understood, intuitively, what it was all about. They were in on the joke; it was their zeitgeist. But for contemporary readers without ties to the island, the strips may prove difficult to understand, let alone enjoy. Thankfully, Brodie acts as an insightful cultural translator for this new publication. His scholarly introduction and comprehensive, explanatory endnotes provide an indispensable, nuanced guide to the distinctive vernacular culture that gave the comic books their form, content, and meaning. Occasionally the need for additional historical context and sensitivity is evident, however. An explanation for the travails of the Cape Breton industrial economy—especially the pivotal and negative role of federal policy during the Second World War—might better prepare the reader for the author's blunt assessment that the industrial economy "was ... a failure"(2).

The art of regional protest also possesses a long history in the province. Single panel political cartoons on the subject circulated in mainstream newspapers beginning in the early 1900s. It may be useful to see MacKinnon as part of this graphic tradition too. Many of the recurring themes in *Old Trout Funnies* are evident in these earlier images. "Where's my boy" asks a mother in a cartoon from 1925, lamenting the ongoing outmigration of young people from Nova Scotia; "Go to Alberta and get yourself a job," says a "goddess of great beauty" to "Rev. Snoots" in *OTF* volume 3 (87).

The CBLA illustrated calendars are unexpectedly poignant. They register the passage of time and with it the aging of the young, urban Cape Bretoners who inspired and read the original comics in the first place. Much of the funny in *Old Trout Funnies* flowed from generational differences. The young CBLA soldiers looked uncomfortably and ironically at the world they inhabited and took action: Boom! Pow! Whomp! Yet as Brodie notes, with each passing year, as both MacKinnon and the original cast of characters aged, that generational dissonance began to dissolve. And thus by the 20th anniversary edition of the calendar, which was released in 1998, comedy had shaded into nostalgia, even elegy. Interestingly, in these later pieces of art, cultural icons of the older industrial and rural generations appear more frequently. Satirized or ignored in *Old Trout Funnies*, MacKinnon depicts them mixing amicably with the "groovy old fat hippies." He's paying homage; it would seem, to all Cape Bretoners and their island home, which has rarely made living easy or comfortable for anyone at any time. An attachment to place, in other words, runs extremely deep for MacKinnon and his subjects.

It's an unintentionally serious conclusion to a very funny book—one that reveals the unique ability of visual art to reflect and refract the cultural impact of deindustrialization.