



Travelling in Time to Cape Breton Island in the 1920s: Protest Songs, Murals and Island Identity

Richard MacKinnon and Lachlan MacKinnon

Abstract

Islands are places that foster a unique sense of place-attachment and community identity among their populations. Scholarship focusing on the distinctive values, attitudes and perspectives of 'island people' from around the world reveals the layers of meaning that are attached to island life. Lowenthal writes: 'Islands are fantasized as antitheses of the all-engrossing gargantuan mainstream-small, quiet, untroubled, remote from the busy, crowded, turbulent everyday scene. In reality, most of them are nothing like that. ...'¹ Islands, for many people, are 'imagined places' in our increasingly globalised world; the perceptions of island culture and reality often differ. Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, in eastern North America, a locale with a rich history of class struggle surrounding its former coal and steel industries, provides an excellent case study for the ways that local history, collective memory and cultural expression might combine to combat the 'untroubled fantasy' that Lowenthal describes.

History and methodology

Coal mining has been an essential part of Cape Breton Island's landscape since the early-eighteenth century. A steel mill was constructed in Sydney, the island's largest city, in 1899; this steel plant provided employment for many of the island's inhabitants throughout the twentieth century. Grid-patterned streets, dotted with company-owned homes, formed around the industrial workplaces in many Cape Breton communities. It was in these communities, from the people employed in the coal mines and steel mill, that distinctive traditions of work and leisure began to emerge. The 1920s witnessed several conflicts erupt between industrial workers and the coal and steel companies in Cape Breton. The coal miners were able to force the company to recognise trade unionism after a bitter strike in 1925, while the steelworkers were unable to achieve such recognition of their union until the Nova Scotia Trade Union Act in 1937. Although ethnic and religious divisions existed, by the 1920s a close-knit working-class consciousness had taken root in Cape Breton's



Figure 1. Map of Cape Breton Island

industrial communities. Music and song played a significant role in this process. Many protest songs and poems of local composition were sung and recited throughout the industrial communities; some were published in the *Maritime Labour Herald* throughout the 1920s.² These compositions focus on local events, personalities and places, tragedies such as mine accidents, the industrial conflicts of the 1920s, and the attitudes of workers toward management. These songs are often tinged with satire and witty analysis of working-class life. Some have entered oral tradition and others did not; however, they provide us with a snapshot of the attitudes and values of the Cape Breton workers during the early twentieth century.³

Cape Breton's industrial communities have developed distinctive local identities. The struggle for survival and the intensely-fought labour conflicts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have inextricably shaped identity formation in these communities. Although the coal mines and steel plant were shut down in the early-2000s, some aspects of these working-class identities remain visible. MacKinnon recently invited young Cape Breton songwriters, many of whom had relatives who had worked in the coal mines or steel mill, to take part in the 'Protest Song Project' at Cape Breton University. This project includes a form of conscious cultural intervention; MacKinnon introduced Cape Breton songs from the 1920s to contemporary musicians. He worked collaboratively with local singer/songwriter Victor Tomiczek to select eighteen song texts from the 150-song corpus originally identified and asked local musicians to compose music for the lyrics. They brought the musicians to Cape Breton University's Rotary Music Performance Room to record their songs and released them on a CD with an accompanying web site providing more historical context.⁴ Some of these Cape Breton musicians, many of whom tour nationally and internationally, now play these songs regularly in their own sets, bringing new audiences to these older songs of protest. The musicians learned much about Cape Breton's labour past through writing

the music for these songs. In this essay we examine some of these protest and labour songs along with locally produced artistic murals in one post-coal mining community to try to understand identity formation in the Cape Breton Island post-industrial context.

Frisch argues that for an industrial heritage project to successfully re-attach the past to the present in post-industrial areas, it must recognise the ways in which the 'industrial character' of an area has been transformed into the realm of 'memory', as well as how this memory is mobilised to affect the present and future.⁵ The Protest Song project accomplishes these goals by re-orienting young, local musicians towards the same themes of resistance and class-conflict that marked the 1920s, themes that remain relevant in a region marred by industrial flight, high unemployment and a shrinking population. This type of project links the modern 'post-industrial' experience of Cape Bretoners to pre-existing, communally-located narratives of working-class consciousness, and challenges members of the community to both internalise and reflect the memory of the industrial past through the creation of new narratives and modes of discourse.

A number of methodological approaches have been influential in this exploration of post-industrial 'island identity' in Cape Breton. The ethnographic approach, comprised of interviews and fieldwork, can be applied directly to the study of traditions. Extending the scope of research beyond the library or the archive allows for a more nuanced understanding of the ways that historical memory of the industrial past affects perceptions of the present in Cape Breton, as well as how those memories are reflected in the commemorative murals, songs, and workers' memorials that exist in the island's communities. Folklorist Henry Glassie, who has explored architecture, material culture, oral tradition, and landscape in areas as diverse as Ireland, Afghanistan and Turkey, has influenced the scope of this research immensely. He has demonstrated that it is important to examine both tangible and intangible culture in order to understand the personality of distinctive places.⁶ One of the few Atlantic Canadian studies to explore traditional culture in a similar way is Pocius's book, *A Place to Belong*. Pocius has recorded and analysed the buildings, spaces and traditions of a Newfoundland fishing outport prior to the demise of the East Coast fishery. The cultural landscape patterns, usage and structures that he records represent at least a 400-year-old history that has ceased to exist with the demise of the regional fishery. Unique vernacular building types distinctive to Newfoundland, such as fishing stages and flakes, that are no longer extant in the landscape and much local traditional environmental knowledge that has disappeared can be found in Pocius's book. However, he clearly points out that the people of this community live in two worlds, the modern world with satellite dishes and contemporary popular culture and in the world of the past that is continually being re-enacted through stories, songs and oral history of the community. When people are asked, 'where are you from?' they

respond by saying, 'I belong to Calvert'. The book explores the myriad ways people belong to this place and provides a clear understanding of how people in rural communities develop a sense of place.⁷

Allied disciplines have also provided leadership in exploring the spatial landscape. Geographers such as Yi Fu Tuan, Donald Meinig, Edward Relph and J.B. Jackson, for example, have eloquently discussed how human beings transform spaces into meaningful places.⁸ These explorations of cultural landscape include under their purview: nature, the forest and the various ways human beings transform land and waterscapes, the naming of landscape features and the spiritual nature of land and seascapes. The built environment, with its corresponding spatial relationships, is also a major component of their gaze. Massey has expanded upon the traditional definition of 'place identity', as constructions based upon the articulation of local and global social relations, by indicating that a key aspect of these identities is the sense of 'disruption' between the past, present, and possible future.⁹ This sense of disruption has been keenly felt in Cape Breton, where massive deindustrialisation has displaced many existing forms of identity that were based upon landscapes that no longer exist, such as the coal mines and steel mill. Despite the disappearances of these physical landscapes, working-class experience has remained anchored in the collective memory of the island through other modes of tangible and intangible culture, such as songs, stories and commemorations. In this way, keeping with Massey's argument that place-identity is constantly evolving, Cape Breton Island's collective memory has shifted from the experience of an industrial centre to an identity based around past experiences of workers, their families and struggles for working-class rights and social justice. Each of these methodological and theoretical approaches, along with a large corpus of protest songs from the 1920s and a group of murals in one former coal mining town, have informed our exploration of Cape Breton Island's post-industrial identity.

The dynamics of class-relations have also shaped the growth of communal identity in Cape Breton. E.P. Thompson articulates his definition of class in his seminal work, *The Making of the English Working Class*: 'I emphasise that it is a historical phenomenon. I do not see class as a "structure", nor even as a "category", but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships.'¹⁰ In this sense, class is a historical relationship that develops over a wide period of time and it is inextricably tied to cultural identity. Thompson writes: 'class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared) feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs'¹¹ Thompson eloquently demonstrates that a class-consciousness developed in England as the eighteenth and nineteenth century Industrial Revolution irrevocably transformed the human relationships between workers and employers throughout

British towns and villages. The English working class with its distinctive values, attitudes, traditions and behaviours resulted from this major industrial transformation.

As with the British Isles, Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia was heavily influenced by the Industrial Revolution that began here as early in the eighteenth century and continued throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹² The first commercial coal mine in North America began production in Cape Breton Island at Baie de Mordienne-Port Morien as early as 1720. Known locally as ‘the French Mine’, this primitive drift mine supplied coal by boat to the burgeoning Fortress of Louisbourg along the coast. Geographer Stephen Hornsby notes, ‘Between 1786 and 1827, the Colonial Government and local entrepreneurs alternated in operating a small coal mine at Sydney Mines on the north side of Sydney Harbour.’¹³ Throughout the eighteenth century coal mining was in its infancy, mining technology was simple and the Sydney mines only employed ‘about 50 seasonal workers’ who produced no more than 13,000 tons of coal each year.¹⁴

As the nineteenth century unfolded, mines expanded throughout Nova Scotia and, as McKay notes, ‘There was nothing unusual in Nova Scotia coal miners going on strike. Strikes in the coalfields were noted as early as 1830, and a massive coal strike had erupted in Cape Breton in 1876.’¹⁵ Strikes, labour unrest and struggles for better pay and working conditions became common. Richard Brown, a nineteenth century Sydney Mines coal master, lived in an ornate mansion on the Sydney Mines waterfront while workers lived in poorly-constructed brick-and-wood row housing in close proximity to the coal mine. A class structure was clearly defined in the industrial landscape; this was true in the majority of Nova Scotia’s coal communities during the nineteenth century. The Thompsonian conceptualisation of class, an ongoing process that develops over a historical period and remains connected to the ways in which humans relate to each other in mining towns, was well developed in Nova Scotia by the end of the nineteenth century.

Hornsby explains that at one of the Cape Breton Island General Mining Association pits, ‘it took a sixteen-month strike in 1882–83 – the longest strike to that date in Canada – before the union was recognized ...’¹⁶ A form of class-consciousness was well developed in many of Nova Scotia’s industrial communities by the 1920s.¹⁷ In Cape Breton Island, worker and union interactions with the foreign-owned mining company, BESCO (British Empire Steel Corporation), were hostile throughout the decade.¹⁸ Historian Donald MacGillivray has argued that these conflicts composed a localised ‘class war’.¹⁹ Industrial strikes during this period were bitterly fought, and collusion between government and private industry sought to break workers’ attempts at unionisation (see Figure 2). Canadian soldiers were brought into the region, a provincial police force established encampments at Cape Breton’s coal mines and the steel mill, and machine-gun nests were erected at the gates



Figure 2. *Soldiers at Steel Plant, 1923 (Source: Beaton Institute)*

of these industrial workplaces to support the company and intimidate striking workers.²⁰

The antagonistic atmosphere of the labour wars in the 1920s, as well as the hard-fought battles for unionisation, has influenced the communities of Cape Breton Island to develop a seemingly community-based mistrust of authority. This sentiment was compounded by the experience of deindustrialisation in Sydney, which occurred in the second half of the twentieth century as the result of private and governmental mismanagement of the Sydney steel plant.²¹ The operations of the mines, and later the steel mill, were usually outsiders, ‘come-from-aways’, as the term is used in local parlance. These figures had little interest in long-term benefits for the island and its people, instead managing from a market-based perspective that favoured capital flight and accumulation in the larger metropolises. Many of these managerial authorities left for other opportunities after only a short time on the island. Henry Melville Whitney, a Boston-based financier, was instrumental in the creation of the Sydney steel plant in 1901 but withdrew from his Cape Breton interests by 1909. One reform-minded colliery doctor, A.S. Kendall summarised two other officers of the island’s industries by saying: ‘J.H. Plummer – an Englishman stubborn and cruel and out of place in Canada even at that date. James Ross was a rich Savage who arrived in Canada well equipped as an engineer but insensitive to needs of humanity.’²²

Protest and labour songs

These themes of managerial mistrust are reflected in many of the protest and labour songs from the 1920s that have been compiled through the Protest Song Project. One song, ‘They Cannot Stand the Gaff’ from 1925, requires

some explanation. A famous saying in Cape Breton, ‘They Can’t Stand the Gaff’ was first uttered during the infamous strike of 1925 that is still remembered and memorialised in Cape Breton Island communities.²³ The strike began in March and shortly thereafter Andrew Merkel, a reporter with the Canadian Press interviewed J.E. McLurg, then Vice-President of the British Empire Steel and Coal Corporation. In describing the strike, McLurg boasted to Merkel, ‘Poker game, nothing, we hold all the cards. Things are getting better every day they stay out. Let them stay out two months or six months, it matters not, eventually they will have to come to us. They can’t stand the gaff.’²⁴

A ‘gaff’ is used in a number of contexts in Atlantic Canada. In the fishery, it is a large iron hook attached to a pole or handle and used to land large fish. It is also defined as a boat hook or a ‘stout pole, 5–8 feet [1.5–2.4 metres] long with an iron hook and spike fastened to one end, used to assist a sealer on the ice and to kill seals’.²⁵ It can also refer to a sharp metal spur or spike fastened to the leg of a rooster for use in cockfighting matches.²⁶ It is also a tool used to capture floating logs during river drives in the lumber world of work. We will never know for certain what definition of gaff McLurg had in mind, but there is no doubt about the meaning behind his words. His company, BESCO, will figuratively stick the striking miners with a sharp object until the miners cannot stand the pressure. The company will break them, causing their strike to fold. Frank writes that this colloquial insult ‘became one of the most memorable statements in Cape Breton labour history ... McLurg’s remark was regarded as an offensive slur on the character of the long-suffering people of the coalfields. The phrase “standing the gaff” became a rallying cry of the strike.’²⁷ According to former local politician Jeremy Akerman, “‘Stand the gaff’ was to become a household phrase in Cape Breton for generations to come, a challenge to the stubborn spirit of our people’.²⁸

Even today, during strikes on Cape Breton Island, the phrase ‘Stand the Gaff’ can still be heard on picket lines as a rallying cry that allows striking workers to withstand whatever dirty tactics or pressure an employer may choose to use in a labour dispute. ‘Stand the Gaff’ has maintained its place as a linguistic anchor for the cultural identity of Cape Breton Island’s industrial communities and it has been used in a number of work-actions throughout the twentieth century. Media reports of a recent long, bitter strike at the former Stora Enso pulp and paper mill in Port Hawkesbury used this phrase in headlines and in stories about the strikers in 2006.²⁹ The Faculty Association of Cape Breton University used the phrase ‘Standing the Gaff’ as their motto during a five week strike in the winter of 2001.

The song ‘They Cannot Stand the Gaff’ appeared in the *Maritime Labour Herald*³⁰ in April 1925 and is attributed to ‘E.E.R.’ – composers of protest and labour songs often used abbreviations or pseudonyms as a way to avoid being identified. The song is set in Hell and describes the Devil’s workers

(imps) taking pleasure in all of the hates and harms that they have committed against the people on Earth. The 'Prince of Darkness' is not pleased with what he hears from his minions, until 'from the land of ice and snow' he receives 'a good report' that outlines the work of the Canadian company BESCO. The song describes as the company cuts wages, treats workers like slaves and tries to starve, crush and break striking workers. Toward the end of the song, the chief official of BESCO utters the infamous phrase, 'They Cannot Stand the Gaff'. Without mentioning his name, there is no doubt that the satirical song is about J.E. McLurg, who uttered this phrase just a month before the song first appeared in print.

Cannot Stand the Gaff

*Seated round the table in the Council room of Hell
Sat the secret service agents of the Pit.*

*'Twas the regular weekly meeting when they gathered there to tell
Of the things of Earth that with them made a "hit."
They told of wars and strife and hate in every land and clime,
Of pestilence and murder and despair,
They told of orgies gluttonous in palaces sublime,
And of slums where children lived on scanty fare.*

*They reported on the grafter and the gambler and the sneak,
Of birds of prey who feast on human kind.
They told of slimy hypocrites with countenance so meek,
And of moral perverts tainting children's minds
But the Prince of Darkness answered that their tales were small and boring,
There was nothing new in wickedness to hear;
And he showed his grave displeasure by their indolence deploring,
Till each imp began to shrink with timid fear.*

*Then spoke a lively demon from a land of ice and snow,
And said, "I think I have a good report,
For in Canada I've BESCO, Sir, to help me as you know,
And to them oft in sin I must resort.
Their work has been most excellent in many years gone by,
They've bee (sic) loyal to Your Majesty, I know;
They've made little children suffer and afflicted mother's cry,
And o'er the land have scattered pain and woe.*

*They've starved and crushed and broken the lives of many men,
They're as merciless as Hell could have them be;
And though their slaves are starving they cut their wage again,
And laughed aloud their agony to see."*

*Then spoke their chief official (who would grace our service here)
As he mocked the suffering children with a laugh;
“From these angry, cursing miners we have nothing now to fear,
For I’m positive they cannot stand the gaff.”
Then Satan’s brow grew gribhter (sic) and loud he laughed and long;
“That’s a joke,” he said, “at which all hell can laugh!
And my blessing rests eternal on the man so brave and strong,
Who mocks at pain and anguish with, “They cannot stand the gaff”.
(Maritime Labour Herald, 14 April 1925, p. 4)*

A satirical song, such as ‘They Cannot Stand the Gaff’ is one way that the Cape Breton working class was able to establish a resistance-oriented narrative from the bottom-up. BESCO was an international company, backed by provincial government officials, which had the power to send in soldiers to suppress any resistance to its demands. Songs were not the only form of resistance against the company, however; resistance occurred through work slowdowns, women’s participation in strikes and various community-based commemorative efforts.³¹ Songs from the 1920s reflect many of these same themes.

While resistance against the company is prevalent in many of the songs, another common theme is that of solidarity. Miners’ families and fellow community members were encouraged to support each other at times of strife and strike. These songs of solidarity often included references to the importance of respecting picket lines, community attendance at workers’ rallies, the necessity of workers’ rights and the benefits of unionism. One song, ‘Stand Up For Justice’, derived from the well-known hymn, ‘Stand Up for Jesus’, was written by a local student after a major coal strike in 1925 and reveals many of these same themes. The borrowing of tunes from hymns or from other popular songs was a common practice in the protest song tradition.

Stand Up For Justice

*Stand up, stand up for Justice!
Ye slaves of Besco, stand.
Put forth you every effort
And break the tyrant’s hand.
Lift high the scarlet banner
It must not suffer loss.
Throw off your chains, oh workers.
Stamp out that cursed word, ‘boss’.
Stand up, stand up for Justice!
This strike will not last long.
One day, the noise of battle*

*The next the victor's song.
The great emancipation
Of labour now is here.
The grand annihilation
Of capitalists now appear.
Stand up, stand up for Justice!
And break the prisoner's chain.
For in the coming future
O'er Besco we shall reign.
Crush all our great oppressors
Each coronet and crown
Let crash before its master
Till labour wins renown
(GO TO IT, BOYS!)
(*Maritime Labour Herald*, 24 April 1926, p. 2)*

Denisoff refers to these as propaganda or persuasion songs, whose function is 'to create solidarity or a "we" feeling in a group or movement to which the song is verbally directed'.³² 'Stand Up For Justice' calls for solidarity and rallies people to fight against the callous company for social justice during times of struggle. Strikes were common as workers struggled to form unions in the late nineteenth century mining towns and continued as steel workers unionised in the twentieth century.

MacDonald writes that the result of early twentieth-century struggles in Cape Breton industries 'has been a calloused, battle-hardened, yet dynamic industrial labour force: Sydney's steel makers often demonstrated a rank-and-file militancy that transcended international union bureaucracy; their union brass, made up of unpaid local workers, often offered support that went beyond the steel yard to embrace civic organizations'.³³ In other words, the sentiments of militancy and the necessity of solidarity at the work site became important for other members of these communities also. These themes have entered into the 'historical memory' of Cape Breton Island, informed collective consciousness and remain a cornerstone of local experience in many of Cape Breton's 'post-industrial' communities.

The song 'Stand Up for Justice' entreats the listener to 'lift high the scarlet banner', an activity that was common during May Day parades when the red flag was often paraded through the streets as a form of workers' solidarity. Frank writes, 'First celebrated as an international day of working class solidarity in 1890, May Day was the historic proof that the workers of the world were to unite in a common cause'.³⁴ The roots of the May Day event to celebrate labour lie in the many nineteenth-century parading traditions that existed in cities and towns throughout Canada. As Heron and Penfold note, 'in 1906 Montreal socialists became the first to take to the streets on May

Day. Some three hundred members of local socialist organizations and the garment workers' union formed up behind a huge red flag and the city's most prominent socialist, Albert Saint-Martin, as marshal.³⁵ It was not until the 1920s that the first May Day parades were held in the coal mining towns of Cape Breton Island. J.B. McLachlan, a well-known local labour leader during the early twentieth century, describes the first Cape Breton May Day Parade in 1923:

May Day was held in Glace Bay this year for the first time. Four thousand workers, clear eyed and triumphant, marched with flag and banner in that parade. All day there was a steady downpour of icy rain but it was neither wet enough nor cold enough to dampen the fine spirit of these working men and women marchers ... With song and speech, with comradely greetings these four thousand men and women spent one gloriously free eight hours away from the eye of the boss and his heart-breaking job which barely provides them and their children with bread. A glorious day which made one's blood run warmer and faster with the hopeful thrill of the new life when all of the days of the year shall belong to labour and when the accursed words 'master and boss' shall be banished from the earth along with the thing which these represent. On May Day we forgot the barriers of nationalism erected by the masters of bread and sent words of fraternal greetings to the struggling workers of every land. The workers of this land are our comrades and brothers, the capitalists of this land our robber enemies. The complete solidarity of the former is our hope, the complete extermination of the latter our aim. Long live May Day! Long live the solidarity of the World's workers.³⁶

'The Grand and Glorious Day', another protest song from Cape Breton in the 1920s, refers to the importance of these May Day parades. The composer is only identified as 'G.C.C.' but the references to 'our dear beloved Jim' (J.B. McLachlan) and 'BESCO' indicate that the author was most likely a local Cape Breton composer. The use of abbreviations and pseudonyms was common for some songs that appeared in the *Maritime Labour Herald*; fear of company reprisal prevented composers from revealing their full names. This song reveals themes of workers' solidarity, resistance and the importance of marching in these parades.

Grand and Glorious Day

*In our humble home we sit,
Are we broken-hearted? NIT.
We are happy and cheerful as can be,
For we know that every Red
Will be up and out of bed,
On that Grand and Glorious Day
The First of May.*

*Tramp, tramp, tramp,
the boys are marching,
Cheer up, comrades, and be gay,
For you know we're out to fight,
To fight, with all our might,
On that Grand and Glorious Day
The First of May.
From dawn till dark at night,
We will carry on the fight,
The fight for our freedom and our cause,
Though it may be hard and long,
We will sing the same old song,
On the Grand and Glorious Day
The First of May.*

*Tramp, tramp, tramp, the boys are marching,
Cheer up, comrades, and be gay,
We are in this fight to win,
We will never sink but swim
On that Grand and Glorious Day
The First of May
Now that we have BESCO scared,
And the miners are prepared,
We will raise the Scarlet Banner to the sky
And we'll sing the same old hymn,
To our dear beloved Jim,
On that Grand and Glorious Day,
The First of May.*

*Tramp, tramp, tramp
the boys are marching,
Marching on to victory
We have BESCO up a tree
And forever there they'll be
On that Grand and Glorious Day
The First of May.
We had BESCO on the bank
But our district officers sank,
When one might (sic) push
would our Greatest victory win.
But their hearts were far too small.
When they heard BESCO call,
For God's sake come to work,
Or we will fail.
Tramp, tramp, tramp,*

*the boys are marching,
Cheer up, children, and be gay,
For soon will come the day,
When your dad will draw a pay,
On the Grand and Glorious Day
The First of May.³⁷*

In many of the songs, satire and wit are used against those in authority; thus, there is extensive use of derogatory nicknames in many of the songs. For example, Roy Wolvin, the President of BESCO, is referred to as ‘Roy the Wolf’ and a company policeman is known as ‘Dirty Danny’. The song ‘Dirty Danny’ appeared in the *Maritime Labour Herald* on 13 December 1924, and was composed in a ‘Come All Ye’ ballad format. This form of broadside ballad developed after the advent of the printing press and circulated widely throughout the British Isles and North America. Some of its characteristics include a formulaic opening (‘Come All You Honest Workers and Listen to Me’), a quatrain stanza format, rhyming couplets, a narrative told in the first person, repetition of phrases, dialogue and a closing formulae. The composer offers only an abbreviation for his/her name as ‘P.E.P.’ to help disguise his/her identity. P.E.P. is Phillip Penny from Sydney Street, Glace Bay. In correspondence, Penny’s grandson mentioned that, ‘Philip composed many songs at the time and would sell them at the pit head to miners finishing their shift, unfortunately the family did not save these songs’. The song ‘Dirty Danny’ tells of a miner who steals kindling on coal company property and gets arrested by ‘Dirty Danny’, a company policeman from East Bay. The judge in the song, who eventually sentences the miner, is referred to as ‘A.B.’ This refers to A.B. McGillivray, a colourful, local liberal magistrate in Glace Bay, a major coal town on Cape Breton Island. ‘Dirty Danny’ was Danny McGillivray from East Bay who, it is said, left Glace Bay after this song was composed, a testament to the power of folksong in the coal mining towns of the 1920s.

Dirty Danny

*Come All You honest workers and listen to me,
When you hear my story with me you’ll agree
Arrested for nothing, and glad to admit,
One evening last week when coming from the pit.
Now a Company policeman, a man I know well,
And for to expose him the truth I must tell,
Wherever you see him you hear people say:
‘There goes Dirty Danny – belongs to East Bay.’
One evening of late, coming home from the mine,
As I walked along, some wood I did find,*

*It being my intention – the truth I must say,
To use it to kindle a fire the next day.
I had not gone far when I heard someone shout:
‘You’re taking great chances, you better look out.
I will have you arrested and a fine make you pay.’
Remarked Dirty Danny – belongs to East Bay.
Without hesitation I threw the wood down,
And quickly departing for home I was bound,
But two evenings later I’ll have you to know,
McAuley came afreer [sic] me and I had to go.
Now when I did appear, His Honor did say:
‘Now you’re charged with stealing, what have you to say?’
I pleaded not guilty, but this was no good –
Dirty Danny, he swore I was caught with the wood.
I tried to explain, but I saw it was no use
His honor remarked, ‘Sir I want no excuse,
You will pay C\$7.50 or else put up bail,
Or the rest of this night you will spend in the jail.’
Now, times being hard and my dollars but few,
I had to consider just what I could do:
To pay C\$7.50 was sure hard on me –
I will never forgive him, His Honor, A.B.
Now Dirty Danny, your friends are but few,
And what I hear men say if you only knew,
You’d be so ashamed you’d decide on a cruise
And go back to East Bay and hide in the spruce.
Now one thing I’ll mention, I almost forgot,
I hope, Dirty Danny, hard luck is your lot,
And everyone slight you wherever you be
Just to remind you of what you did to me.
Now to conclude, and to finish my song;
The truth I have stated, you’ll find it’s not wrong
I hope to get even – if I live some day
With my friend’ Dirty Danny belongs to East Bay.’³⁸*

In Cape Breton, the ‘Rise and Follies’ comedy productions in the 1970s tapped into this satirical tradition by poking fun at regional authorities through sketches and songs. In 1986, the Cape Breton Summertime Revue continued this format of performance comedy. The Summertime Revue ran for fourteen years and in that time had several Canada-wide tours. In 2010 the Summertime Revue was revived and 11 shows were performed in Glace Bay that raised more than C\$200,000 for the local Savoy Theatre.³⁹

Murals in New Waterford

While expressions of identity can be found in the intangible culture of protest and labour songs, post-industrial community identity can also be found in a group of murals in the former coal mining community of New Waterford. In 1987, Enterprise Cape Breton Corporation, a Crown corporation, was established to broaden the base of the local economy outside of the mining sector. When the last coal mine closed in 2001, an adjustment fund was established by the federal crown corporation, Enterprise Cape Breton Corporation (ECBC) to try and help local communities make the transfer to a 'post-coal' economy. Part of the fund was allocated to improve the image and appearance of the downtown core and to instill a sense of pride in community. In New Waterford, C\$157,000 was allocated to the community to place large murals depicting the town's mining culture throughout the downtown core. The objective was also to encourage citizens to use their downtown and to patronise the local businesses that remained in the town after the demise of coal. The grid-patterned streets and the coal company housing indicate that this area was once a coal mining town, but there are few buildings or structures surrounding the former mine sites that remain. A painter and local resident, Terry MacDonald, was hired to do the work on the murals. MacDonald had previously studied with historical illustrator, Lewis Parker, and was excited about the idea of constructing murals devoted to his hometown's labour past. He used photographs and illustrations, which were available in the local historical society museum/archives, to find images of the former mine sites so that he would be able to accurately portray these locations. MacDonald's selection criteria for inclusion in the murals is interesting; he included images of each mine that was once located in the confines of the one-square-mile town. This indicates that no single mine, or their associated life-stories, was more important than another.

The Number 12 Colliery, a productive mine that operated from 1907 until 1973 when a fire forced its closure, was one of the first murals to be painted (see Figure 3). One man, Earl Leadbeater, was left in the mine after it was sealed to halt the progress of an underground fire (see Figure 4). Another miner, Joe Burke, describes the circumstances surrounding Leadbeater's death:

He was right behind [the other miners], and they were getting kind of weak and overcome from the noxious gasses and stuff from the fire. They were coming up the Third Deep ... they figured Earl had went out through the trench to get his coat. That would be the worst place ever to go, because the smoke would be coming in. I guess he got overcome by smoke, and God love him, he's still there.⁴⁰

Another pit, the Number 14 colliery, was closed in 1932 but is still represented on the community murals (see Figure 5). The 'No. 14' even has a



Figure 3. *Number 12 colliery*



Figure 4. *Leadbeater gravestone*

neighbourhood named after it, called '14 yard', which surrounds the former mine site. It was here in '14 yard' that the majority of New Waterford's immigrant community made their homes during the early twentieth century. The Number 15 Colliery, which was closed in the 1920s (see Figure 6), the Number 16 Colliery, an older room and pillar mine that closed in the 1960s (see Figure 7) and the Number 18 Colliery in the nearby area of New Victoria are also depicted in the murals. Likewise, the two modern mines, Lingan and Lingan Phalen, which were developed in the 1970s after the OPEC oil crisis boosted coal production for a short period, are also included (see Figure 8).

One particularly striking example, the Mine Fatality Mural, is located in the middle of a local park (see Figure 9). The park, dedicated to community members who have lost their lives in the local collieries, was created in 1985 as part of community revitalisation efforts. The mural stands centrally within the Miners Fatality Monument, which is a series of eight granite slabs bearing the names of local miners. The central image of the mural depicts a number of men 'riding the rake' into the underground at the Number 12 Colliery. This provides a focal point for each of the other images depicted on the mural, and symbolically represents the centrality of mining for the community of New Waterford. The boundaries of the mural depict a 'day in the life' of miners in the New Waterford collieries; on the bottom left, a man and his dog are depicted walking towards a group of men outside the Number 12 mine. The lighting, coloured with blue and orange, indicates the early morning, but smoke already belches from the smokestacks of the mine buildings in the background. This image reveals the beginning of the day for the



Figure 5. Number 14 colliery



Figure 6. Number 15 colliery



Figure 7. Number 16 colliery



Figure 8. *Number 17 colliery*

New Waterford miner. As the viewer ‘reads’ the mural, examining the images placed clockwise from the bottom-left, a story unfolds; we see miners loading coal boxes – an ordinary day, this is followed by a collapse in the tunnel that pins a miner to the floor. Finally, in the bottom-right corner of the mural, the miners’ wake is depicted; family and friends carry a casket to the front door of a company house. The bereaved family, including a toddler wearing a mining helmet, looks on in the foreground.

The symbolism of these images is clear; the importance of mining in the town, which provided the economic bedrock for the community, came at great cost to many working families. The sense of community is palpable; throughout the scenes depicted in the mural ‘solidarity’ among the miners is highlighted. In the first scene, the miner meets his friends at the entrance of the plant. The images of the rock fall show miners scrambling to free the injured worker. Even the funerary scene in the bottom-right of the mural illustrates community strength and solidarity in the face of tragedy. There is a tension in these images, one that is particularly palpable now that mining has disappeared from the community. The tension exists between the necessity of work in the modern economy, work that provides the basis for community and local identities, and the ecological and bodily consequences of industrial work in New Waterford. The boy wearing his father’s mining helmet in the



Figure 9. *The Mine Fatality Mural*

bottom-right speaks to a reality that no longer exists; while many sons followed their fathers into the mines in the early twentieth century, by 1985, when the mural was created, local industry was already in crisis. Today, these images prompt questions for New Waterford's future: what happens to a 'mining town' when the mines no longer exist? How will the experiences of industry and post-industry be framed? Most importantly, what comes next for a community that has been economically de-centred by the end of the coal industry?

Other themes in the murals placed around the town include references to a major disaster in the Number 12 mine, when 65 men and boys were killed in an explosion in 1917, the 'pit ponies' that were commonly used to move coal-boxes within the mines, early cars of the town, sports figures and the post-industrial reality of abandoned mine sites. Each of these representations offer a bottom-up narrative that presents the meanings of the industrial past as it exists for the citizens of New Waterford. These murals, as well as the protest songs mentioned above, reveal the linkages between past and present that currently exist in an island that has lost much of its industrial base. It is from these examples of material and intangible cultural heritage that we might better understand the ways in which community identity has shifted from a direct experiential relationship with local industry to a historical memory of those experiences that, nonetheless, provides a resistance-oriented anchor for modern community identity. Although the 'places of memory' embedded in the local coal mines and the Sydney steel mill have disappeared, the stories, song, language and rituals associated with these worksites are still evident in the community. These practices continue to play an important role for the

people who remain in these communities. This is clearly observed by viewing the murals and commemorations, as well as listening to the songs, in these post-industrial towns. Each provides a unique insight into the ways in which working people conceived of their social reality in the past, as well as the ways that those social realities are perceived in the present.

This discussion also raises issues of connectivity between place and meaning. These murals are a simulacrum; they are, in a sense, removed from the everyday experiences of miners and their families. It is only with the knowledge of the accompanying intangible heritage does one begin to understand the 'meaning' and the 'voice' of these artifacts. A visitor, upon viewing the mural of the No. 12 colliery, would not have the same experiential ties to the memories that are presented in the imagery. This is similar to the local protest songs, although they would at least resonate within the broader spectrum of working-class tradition. To the viewer who is not included in the collective memory of New Waterford, the distance from lived experience would lessen the meanings of these songs and murals. They would not remember family members working in the local industries, nor hold the collective sense of trauma that occurs after the many accidents or disasters that mark the experience of industrial towns. The murals can, then, be multi-vocal; they can be shallow or deep in meaning, depending on the viewer's understanding of the intangible cultural heritage and historical memory of the area.

An interesting observation of the murals is that there is an absence of the female voice in the visual presentation of culture. This supports Lowenthal's contention that 'heritage is traditionally a man's world, inheritance largely a matter of fathers and sons'.⁴¹ Yet, in the intangible heritage, we know that women were the financiers of mining towns; they kept the bills paid and enacted domestic economic strategies to maintain family solvency during hard times.⁴² During strikes, women also played significant roles on and off the picket lines. Cape Breton folklorist Marie MacSween has completed a Masters thesis on the role of women in the mining communities during the late 1990s when the mines were being closed down.⁴³ MacSween notes that women played significant roles in the organisation of protest efforts against the mine closures, as well as in planning a future for themselves and their families in a post-industrial community.

Conclusion

We have shown in this essay that in Cape Breton Island's post-industrial communities, the industrial past remains linked to notions of collective and historical memory. The articulations of class-relations that are present in the protest songs of the 1920s have continued to find purchase with modern audiences through the efforts of local musicians and the Protest Song Project at Cape Breton University. Just as these songs and verses once helped to

promote solidarity amongst miners and their families in their struggle against mine managers and companies during the various strikes and work stoppages of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, now they provide new audiences with a future-oriented sense of resistance against economic decline by tapping into the pre-existing culture of working-class consciousness and solidarity. Even though coal mining and steel making no longer exist in Cape Breton Island, some of the attitudes of class-consciousness, developed over a long period, are still evident in the physical geography of local communities. Communities and individuals are proud of the industrial past and express this in a multitude of ways including singing songs of protest and erecting murals.

The acrimonious relationship between industrial workers and company officials that has existed in Cape Breton has inextricably shaped the identity of the island's former industrial communities. As Robertson argues in his study of American mining towns: 'In the popular imagination mining landscapes – mineral extraction and processing areas and the adjacent settlements for mine workers – have become icons for dereliction and decay. For those who live in these places, however, these landscapes may function as meaningful communities and homes.'⁴⁴ Robertson closely examines three American post-coal mining communities and tries to understand how residents remain attached to these places. He concludes that even though the mines are now closed in each community, the rich mining past and traditions remain central to the maintenance of a local sense of place.⁴⁵ Robertson argues that the attitudes developed in mining towns continue long after the physical work of mining disappears. For example, he says that when older residents die, direct connections to the mining past are lost; however, 'residents remain aware that they follow in the footsteps of those who endured the ordeals of a mining existence. They are conscious that generations before them overcame considerable hardship to build their communities and to create meaningful lives in these places.'⁴⁶ Our study of songs of protest and murals on Cape Breton Island has drawn similar conclusions to those that Robertson has found in Appalachia. Part of identity formation is, as Wick argues, 'to create a sense of group membership in which belongingness can be established, and to which value can be attached.'⁴⁷ Through artistic murals, residents of former mining towns express their identity and community spirit by highlighting the turbulent past and the difficulties and challenges faced by forebears who helped develop the towns. Further, the public art depicts the former mine sites that no longer exist complete with buildings, rakes, coal cars and workers. Contemporary younger musicians still find resonance in the songs composed by their forefathers and mothers even though they have never had to work underground or to fight for the right to form unions. Nevertheless, these cultural items still have relevance in the globalised, conservative post-colonial, post-industrial world we now live in by allowing younger people to connect to their forebears who did work

the mines and mills and struggled for union formation and recognition in the early years of the twentieth century.

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