

Liberalism in (and beyond) the Coal Mine: Revisiting the Springhill Miners Movement, 1879–1890

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In 1984, Craig Heron published the seminal “Labourism and the Canadian Working Class.”¹ My contribution to this *estschrift* in his honour may be considered an extended meditation upon—and applied empirical application of—some of the important ideas in this important article. In it, Heron undertakes to explain “how, where, and when labourism strode onto the political stage, and to scrutinize its ideological complexion more carefully.” Labourism, he argues,

was a distinct ideological form in Canadian politics, resembling but differing from agrarian populism, contemporary liberalism, and socialism, and the brand of social democracy which emerged after 1930. It was, moreover, the main ideological current in independent working-class politics east of the Rockies before 1920.²

Labourism was the “political expression of a distinct layer of the working class”—i.e., skilled workers in manufacturing, construction and mining—and its ideological hues reflected “the worldview of the skilled worker.”³ A “growing disillusionment and cynicism with electoral politics” made it possible for this ideology to flourish, and it often came to prominence at times of acute industrial conflict, as skilled workers carried their workplace organizing traditions “outward to social and political relationships in the wider community.”⁴

Labourism was, to a significant degree, liberalism—albeit a liberalism taken into, and modified by, a milieu of skilled workers. In Britain, one might trace its ancestry to Tom Paine, the English Jacobins, the Chartists, and “by the 1860s, into the Radical wing of that dynamic Victorian reform coalition, the Gladstonian Liberal Party.”⁵ In Canada, it could be traced to kindred movements and, after the 1890s, to the Liberal Party, which made “a recognized place for organized workers alongside the francophones, farmers, Catholics, and corporate capitalists in the Liberal alliance.”⁶ This Liberal coalition held together through much of the period from the 1880s to the 1920s, displacing an older paternalism predicated on the “producers’ alliance.”

The liberal regimes that exercised hegemony in Canada—some called “Liberal Conservative,” others “Reform,” and others just “Liberal”—often made friendly gestures towards a working-class constituency, “most assiduously in the Maritimes and Quebec, and on the Prairies.” Yet at regular intervals these regimes had to absorb the “seismic shock waves of industrial conflict.” And, largely thanks

to such shocks, the “first quasi-independent organizing on the edge of official Liberalism, a phenomenon known as Liberal-Labourism,” morphed into Labourism, as Radicalism moved “outside the Liberal Party to become labourism.”⁷ Yet Labourists “seldom strayed far from their Radical roots”—i.e., their roots in such liberal ideals as the “brotherhood of man” and “community of interest among citizens,” which, they typically suggested, meant “that all citizens should have full access to a neutral apparatus which could serve an undefined common good. Here was the purest legacy of Jacobin democracy.”⁸ Such working-class liberals—or labourists—argued for “equal rights for individuals,” which would assure “equal rights for classes.”⁹ They targeted “the monopolists and the middlemen—the evil forces of economic ‘privilege’”—who “interfered with the productive life of the country and threatened working-class living standards.”¹⁰

Although in agreement on many issues, labourists could be distinguished from liberals. Specifically, labourists distrusted mainstream liberals’ worship of professional expertise and resented middle-class enthusiasm for meddling with the “child-rearing practices or leisure pursuits of the working class.”¹¹ Nor, in fact, did they share the middle-class liberals’ full-throated individualism: “Despite the individualistic thrust of the liberal heritage, they wanted to raise the whole working class to full equality.”¹² Here was a movement that “reasserted a faith in radical democracy in the face of political corruption and manipulation and, perhaps more importantly, in the face of new elitist theories of the state which were modelled on the private corporation.”¹³

It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of Heron’s article, which has held up well after more than three decades. It certainly fits much of the electoral experience of the coal miners of Nova Scotia’s mainland Cumberland County from the 1880s to the 1930s. Turning against the Conservative Party of native son and National Policy booster Charles Tupper, voters elected Hance Logan as their Member of Parliament (MP) in 1896—in large measure because Logan had defended Joggins coal miners who had taken up arms against their employer. In the 1920s and 1930s, Springhill miners elected fellow miner Archie Terris as their provincial Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA)—first as a Labour and then as a “Conservative-Labour” member. While electoral politics demonstrates the strengths of Heron’s thesis and a gradual transition from Liberal Conservatism in the 1870s to labour-oriented Liberalism in the 1890s, and then to Labourism in the 1910s and 1920s, this paper traces working-class liberalism at another, more “molecular” level: in the coal mines of Springhill from 1879 to 1890, when the miners nourished Pioneer Lodge of the Provincial Workmen’s Association (PWA). This lodge was the PWA’s first major local and initially the home—and long the supporter—of its intrepid organic intellectual, Robert Drummond. Drummond went from being an underground boss to a newspaper editor, and thence to the Legislative Council—one of the first labour men to attain such prominent public office in Canada.

Springhill, located near the western boundary of mainland Nova Scotia, is now remembered for the terrible mine disasters of 1956 and 1958, and as the hometown of singer Anne Murray. It was a nineteenth-century boomtown that grew from a tiny hamlet in the 1870s to a bustling community of more than 5,000 in the early twentieth century. Nova Scotia's first stable and significant coal miners' union, the Provincial Miners' Association—shortly renamed the Provincial Workmen's Association—was born there in 1879. From 1879 to 1890, the miners existed within, and were strongly influenced by, a workplace structured according to the competitive dictates of classical property-oriented liberalism. These coal miners admirably filled Heron's model of liberal labourites—Lib-Labs—and because of their particular stances with respect to property, equality, and freedom, also offered fascinating local divergences from it. To put that in grander terms, I would add to Heron's pantheon of significant figures such as Tom Paine and William Gladstone the names of John Locke and Jeremy Bentham.

Coal miners responded to and, to a point, absorbed the logic of possessive individualism, which made self-ownership and command of property a core criterion of full membership in a liberal order. In their case, the possessive individualist ethos was sometimes resisted and sometimes internalized, and it played a key role in the rise and subsequent crisis of this form of classical liberal trade unionism in the 1890s. The radical democracy to which Craig so invaluably called our attention, and which is found like a bright red thread through the history of Pioneer Lodge, was always tempered by a Lockean preoccupation with property and a Benthamite enthusiasm for the mine as a well-governed, scientific, and orderly machine. Miners were embedded within a complex order of property that only slowly and partially succumbed to a rival logic of collective working-class solidarity.

Property is always political and always a nexus of complicated relationships. The coalfield bears out this maxim in spades. Just to ask, "who owned the coal?" suggests some of these political complexities. Thanks to the British monarch's unusual exercise of the royal prerogative in the eighteenth century, coal in the ground, along with other specified treasures, was the property of the provincial state, which grew increasingly dependent upon the royalties it generated throughout the nineteenth century. Yet once the coal was secured by a coal company—of which there were dozens from the 1860s to the 1880s—it became property of that company, on the condition that the government receive requisite royalties. In the Springhill case, the mine grew increasingly dependent upon the secure and profitable market afforded by the state-owned Intercolonial Railway (ICR), which also "owned" the coal once it bought it. However, from the coal miner's point of view, he also owned the coal he dug and placed within a coal car, to which he affixed his own tag—he certainly cried blue murder when it seemed the company or fellow workers had improperly appropriated it.

Springhill's mines almost invariably worked on the bord-and-pillar system, which entailed miners working, with a partner and often a loader, in their own

“places.” They managed the day-to-day running of such places—maintaining timbering to support the roof, laying rails to facilitate moving the coal, and in the 1880s and 1890s, superintending the work of loaders. Miners often named particular places after the men who worked in them, and such “proprietors” often expected to be able to return to their places after recovering from an accident or illness. A good many coal miners had recently been farmers, accustomed to freehold tenure. From their perspective, one way of thinking about the coal mine was as a large set of relatively independent workplaces, each producing a similar product, but in some cases charging dissimilar prices. These “archetypal proletarians” were also, in their own minds, property-holders in the mine, as per political theorist C.B. Macpherson’s definition of property as “an enforceable claim to some use or benefit of something,” rather than an “exclusive, alienable, ‘absolute’ individual or corporate right in things”—an absolutism that could never work, or at least never work smoothly, in this complicated context.¹⁴ Unless a manager were willing to respect the coal miners’ judgment and rule through indirect suggestion, he stood to lose a great deal of time and energy in quarrels with them.

Thus, three parties enjoyed property rights over the coal—albeit rights very different in character and exercised with varying degrees of effectiveness. As Marx and Engels urged in 1848, and many times afterwards, proletarians are such because they are propertyless—generating surplus value for capitalists who own the means of production. Yet, were the miners, strictly speaking, propertyless with respect to the mine? Yes, but only to a point. They directly owned very significant “forces of production,” i.e., the gunpowder that played an indispensable role in mining until 1891, and the picks with which the coal was extracted. They also employed other workers: in the nineteenth century, loaders were employed by the coal cutters, who could get in serious trouble if they enticed an excellent loader to work by paying him beyond the rate agreed upon by the union. And indirectly, in their own minds at least, they “owned” the coal they produced.

If we may take it for granted that no coal miner would have prevailed in court, had he insisted upon his “enforceable claim” to the coal mine as a means of production and to his “own” coal, we should also remind ourselves of the abundant evidence that coal miners asserted, with some success, their own “enforceable claims” to property—i.e., their rights to a particular place, to their own picks, and to the proceeds from *their* coal. In particular, coal miners exerted themselves not to be *excluded* from such property rights; that is, not to be given inferior places in the mine, to be undersold by unscrupulously recruited new employees, or to have “their” coal stolen from them at the bank-head through dishonest weighing procedures. They often defended themselves with the impeccably Lockean argument that, having mixed their labour with the coal, it—along with the place in the mine from whence it came—rightfully belonged more to them than to the company or to the state.

Of course, the company enjoyed vast privileges as the monopolistic buyer

of the miners' coal, and its managers exercised the legal right to govern this realm—for instance, to decide which miners worked in which places. However, from the miners' perspective, the top brass had to play within the rules. By and large, the men themselves had the right to select the partners with whom they worked. Moreover, places could not be allocated inequitably. Indeed, the miners themselves exercised the property right to close a "place" that was unrewarding, or to charge extra for working under conditions that diminished their capacity to make a fair return or generate a decent living. Deficient places, particularly those that were wet or "stony"—i.e., with lots of stone that was not coal—were contested fiercely by the union and denounced passionately in the workers' press. The union fought often and hard on such questions, and enjoyed a good measure of success.

Pioneer Lodge fought 72 cases with the company from 1882 to 1886, and of these, just under a third (32 per cent) involved a charge that a place was deficient and the miners were not able to "make a wage." Some of the places in Springhill were so wet, wrote a correspondent with pardonable exaggeration, that miners would be well-advised to bring their "diving suits."¹⁵ The physical conditions of the mine tended to discourage common standards. A delegate to the Grand Council of the PWA described the highly individualistic state of bargaining in the mine in 1889:

Bro. P. McKay was puzzled as to what opinion to express in reference to Spring Hill. He had worked in many coal mines but a stranger place than Spring Hill to work in he had never entered. It would be a difficult matter to get all the men in Spring Hill on an equal footing. There were too many subdivisions both as to rates and to places. No two pair of men were on the same footing as two other pairs.¹⁶

There was no overall framework governing the remuneration of contract labour in the mine, although some underground maintenance workers and surface workers seemingly did work according to an explicit and standard rate of wages. But not the miners—i.e., the men who actually dug the coal. In the classical liberal mine of the 1880s, there was no collective agreement by which miners regulated the price of their labour, nor even a list of prices for certain tasks. Even the concept of paying all workers on the same basis could be questioned in this setting.¹⁷ In 1888, some miners, apparently eager to get work in an overcrowded mine, agreed to work a balance at a lower rate than in the adjoining balance.¹⁸ In other words, different wage scales, for the same work, could be found in the same section of the same mine.

Even an ostensible victory—such as an 1888 promise by management to increase wages by five per cent—could be a defeat in disguise, since it was not applied to other jobs (such as timbering) the miners had to undertake. In the heterogeneous conditions of the mine, an apparent wage increase could actually entail a

wage reduction. The miners persistently complained that the pit was “overcrowded,” with too many miners overwhelming the haulage system and forcing some of them to double up in places. The overall workforce increased more than two-fold in the late 1880s. Some interpreted the policy of overcrowding as a Machiavellian strategy to dilute the workers’ power. The very term “overcrowding” suggested a widely-shared consensus that made it possible to distinguish a mine with a proper hiring policy from one that was infringing an unwritten rule. As one miner complained,

If a manager induces another to go into a business which will not give him sufficient to maintain his family, and when his going into that business impoverishes others, I think he has committed a heinous crime, especially when his only object is to keep his other employes so poor that they cannot be else than slaves.¹⁹

Note that in this miner’s mind, individuals entering the mine were analogous to individuals engaging in a business.

Considering their inability to safeguard their property rights by limiting access to employment, these miners were not in the same position as urban craft workers, who, in many cases, could restrict entry to their trades through customary hiring practices, i.e., closed shops and apprenticeship regulations. Yet, like such craft workers, miners believed strongly that they were practitioners of very valuable skill-sets. If each of these skills was in a sense easily acquired, the overall knack of mining, upon which one’s very life might depend, was not. “Some people think that a miner just goes down there and works away,” one Springhill miner told me indignantly in 1978:

But mining is a profession—or some word to that effect. Mining is like anything else—it’s like carpentry work. You’ve got to know what to do, you’ve got to know how to do it ... There *is* a skill in it. A lot of people think, ‘A dirty old miner, a dirty old miner,’ you see? But it’s a skillful job.²⁰

A profession, a trade, or a craft? Whatever it was, the knack of coal mining was not easily fit into a rigid model of the “skilled” or the “unskilled.”

While coal miners faced real limitations to their capacity to act as property-holders in the mine in the 1880s, their skill sets nonetheless also gave them a considerable degree of prestige and power. Largely because of their privileged access and control over property—i.e., their places with their revenues—coal miners were an elite group within a variegated workforce. They made about 80 percent more in wages than ordinary labourers. Although the activists of the PWA did make a feeble effort to sign up everybody in the mine, they soon gave up. There were some angry moments in the Lodge when miners, loading their own coal, were con-

demned for stealing the loaders' work. Pioneer Lodge ruled on such cases as a working-class court of law. Members were "tried" for their failure to maintain certain standards, particularly those relating to the price of coal. It handled 137 cases from 1882–86: about 36 cases a year.²¹ A total of 92.9 per cent of the cases concerned the mining and loading of coal; the only other categories of work worth mentioning were those of timbering and tracklaying (1.8 per cent), and shift work (1.8 per cent). The miner's domination of this union was far out of proportion to his presence in the workforce. By far most cases (68.6 per cent) were settled within seven days.

The mining environment multiplied the grievances of the workers, and gave these grievances a peculiarly intractable character. At the same time, it created a proletarian public sphere, one in which these grievances could be systematically and stubbornly addressed. In the absence of a far-ranging technological revolution in mining, the miners knew as much about their workplaces as their bosses. The coal miners became renowned for their insistence upon their own knowledge and their "capacity to judge" conditions of the mine: they constituted a forum in which almost every aspect of the mine could come up for debate. They implicitly broke with orthodox liberalism, by asserting a working-class "capacity to judge" a question that most nineteenth-century liberals would have consigned to the private concerns of a particular enterprise.²² They demanded, in essence, a form of responsible government in the pit.

If this is enough to make Marxists wring their hands, we Marxists nonetheless can take solace in the insight that these hardened individualists functioned as human parts of a vast machine. Their individualism was founded upon a functional egalitarianism. Every moving part of this giant coal-producing machine, both human and non-human, had to be harmonized for the thing to work at all. Withdraw the men who kept the fans working, or the trapper boys who manned the doors—some of them as young as nine years old—and the mine perforce shut down. The imperatives of functional integration worked against the formation of any cohesive, exclusive body of self-interested individualists, no matter how materially privileged they were. Coal miners who were unpleasant to drivers might find themselves without their fair share of coal cars. And because many mining families had members employed at various jobs in the pit, the economic interest of the coal miner was often identical with those of his elder son, the cage-runner: all contributed to the family income. A collier might have been tempted to look down his nose at a mere trapper boy responsible for "trapping door" and keeping the air currents in order—the very acme of the tedious menial job—but that trapper boy might well be his twelve-year-old offspring.

Perhaps the most vivid examples of the miners placing solidarity ahead of their own interests crop up in the various boys' strikes. Management delighted in throwing these strikes in the miners' faces as a sign of their indiscipline and defective parenthood. In many other Canadian contexts, strikes by such juvenile workers were usually broken without much ado. In this one, the boys could shut down

a large workplace of over 1,000 workers because they wanted a day off to go to the circus or a baseball game, and in one case because a boy had allegedly been caught in a sexual situation with a pit pony.²³ Yet even in such cases, the miners rarely succumbed to the temptation to leave the pit boys high and dry—partly because the boys were kin, and partly because the miners depended on them to operate the mine upon which they all depended. They were, in that sense, apostles of the doctrine of practical utilitarianism: of Jeremy Bentham as well as John Locke. In contradistinction to the argument that labourism was somewhat allergic to progressive reform, many articulate coal miners were avid proponents of modernizing the mine. If by scientific management we mean the attempt to heighten productivity by more precisely measuring and integrating diverse tasks, many coal miners sincerely proclaimed their passion for the cause.

Over and above this imperfectly integrated structure was the management. In law, the general manager of the mine was responsible for his employees and his mines, and all the day-to-day decisions fell upon his shoulders. Legally, there was no equality here. The manager stood in the same relation to the mine as did the captain to his ship, with his various subalterns as second mates. He was responsible for the integration of the various systems making up the mine, and it was a heavy responsibility.

Despite some alluring but deceptive instances of managerial paternalism, the coal miners actually adhered more closely to Heron's Jacobin script. For example, they even gave their underground manager a loving cup at one point—purportedly a symbol of their high esteem for him—and recorded in their own minute book that the general manager was “a true gentleman,” because he wanted to set up a reading room for his workers.²⁴ Yet, the miners' radical tone was nowhere more in evidence than in their egalitarian commentaries on these very same managers, whom they sometimes described as little more than unnecessary middlemen. Even the “true gentleman” manager—who was simultaneously ridiculed in the workers' press as “too sweet to be wholesome”—was placed under enormous pressure by the coal miners.²⁵ He responded angrily to the almost intolerable pressure exerted by the lodge in the short strike waged in 1885, by throwing a union committee out of his office. He later apologized, explaining that “he would lit [let] this pass as he was cross and tired last night.”²⁶ One is interested both in the evidence of conflict and the language in which the manager's apology was expressed—suggesting a perception that his relations with his men could not profitably be allowed to worsen beyond recall.

Subaltern officials in the mine—many of them drawn from the miners' ranks—occupied a highly ambiguous position. They were answerable to the mine manager and superintendent; to the state (which might investigate any violations against the Coal Mines Regulation Act); to the miners with whom they came into day-to-day contact; and to the implacably harsh demands of nature itself, which constantly challenged them with floods, fires, and roof collapses.²⁷ Responsible to

both the company and the state, the subaltern officials' position was further complicated by the near impossibility of controlling the geographical space of the mine.²⁸ On one side of the "frontier of control," encompassing the bank-head, office, shops, and the main slope, the management faced oversight problems little more severe than those faced in industrial establishments generally. But on the other side, the management faced truly intractable difficulties in enforcing its will, and it was on this side—where the balance of control was most sharply contested—that its most crucial struggles for productivity and efficiency had to be won. It was a measure of the management's desperation, if also of the deteriorating relationship between employer and employee, that it started systematically spying on its most vocal workers in 1888.

When R.G. Leckie, the "gentleman" manager praised a few years earlier, fell from power in 1888, his role as leader of the mine was taken up by Henry Swift. Swift's letters reveal a whole-hearted attempt to bring the Springhill mines under disciplined and unified control. They are also a constant record of disappointed hopes and acute anxiety, as he was facing a near-impossible task. In one of Springhill's most significant slopes in 1891, there were only three officials, overseeing the work of 155 contract miners, spread out over a great distance. Swift's mine was in a perpetual state of emergency.²⁹

Since we have already dealt with property and equality, we should also spend at least some time on the ideal that gives liberalism its name: liberty. The most obvious indication of liberalism in the coal mines was the defence of freedom of speech, typified by the union organ, the *Trades Journal*, which was an unprecedented and consistent source of critical commentary. Yet such free commentary was hardly restricted to the newspaper. The meetings of Pioneer Lodge were characterized by intense debates—what its long-suffering secretary once called "the usual long discussion."³⁰ Henry Swift lamented that the mine echoed with ill-recorded and self-serving commentaries: "This I told you and you told me and I told somebody else," he wrote sarcastically, "and when anything happens everyone is looking around for a loop hole to Crawl in..."³¹ In one pungent testimonial to the miners' all-too-free speech, Swift discussed their response to a new-style coal car:

The box reffered [referred] to had what they call patent Wheels in but loose in the axle [...] [E]very one seems loud in denouncing the Wheels [...] ... [O]ne says he wished they were all in Siberia another says he wished they were all in Purgatory. [F]or my part I think them first rate ... [A]nything new always meets with a certain amount of prejudice when first introduced.³²

From the miners' perspective, innovations in the mine were often introduced without taking workers' interests into account. Patently unscientific systems of ventilation were critiqued in unforgiving detail:

An attempt some time since, was made to make of this 'slope' a model mine, laid out in the latest, most improved, scientific methods. The conception was grand, but the result was disappointing. The planners had it in their head to do a much more impracticable thing than making water run up hill. They tried to induce two opposing currents of air to meet, say good day to each other, and then pass on their respected missions. But they wouldn't. There was not a particle of harmony between them. As surely as they met so surely did they chaff, and wrestle and baffle one another. In the battle for supremacy all consideration for the workmen was cast aside.³³

When one manager appeared before the Labour Commission in 1888, he was asked how he went about regulating how much miners got for their coal:

Q. How do you regulate the price—just by personal inspection?

A. Yes.

Q. The men have no say in the matter?

A. Yes; they have a great deal to say in the matter and they do not be long telling about it either.³⁴

On the long-standing question of what was called the "Stoney Balance"—where many places were so riddled with stone that miners believed they could not make a decent living at the prevailing rates—the secretary (once again expressing impatience with the loquacity of lodge members) noted a "Lenthey [lengthy] discussion over the matter which it would puzzle [puzzle] a lawyer to write down the Pros and con's."³⁵

The most fundamental freedom of all was freedom of the workers to associate in an effective and enduring organization. The traditional approach to the PWA, which understandably emphasizes its preoccupation with moral and legislative reform, has not paid due attention to the tenacity with which lodges defended the miners' wages. The reason for this is probably that the hard bargaining over the price of the miners' coal often took place on a very local, place-by-place and balance-by-balance level. Pioneer Lodge went on strike four times from 1882 to 1886, and threatened to strike on twenty-three other occasions: an actual or impending strike was a factor in just under a fifth of the cases handled by the Lodge. These strikes were sometimes thought of as an egalitarian exercise in cutting preening officials down to size. As the minutes of February 19, 1884 record, the Committee

“went out and after some time returned reporting they could not get a chance to speak to the manager who was engaged in a prayer meeting the Com[mittee] advised the men to stay home tomorrow and let the manager look for the com. awhile...”³⁶ The manager came to terms after a two-day strike.

In these and other respects, then, the liberal order in the mine entailed, to a point, the freedom of speech and freedom of association. Yet it is important not to idealize it. It is likely the union made the mine somewhat safer in the 1880s, by keeping both coal miners and the company on their toes—there were only fourteen fatalities in Springhill from 1879 to 1890, a very low level when compared to mines in nearby Pictou County. However, the explosion of 1891—by some measures one of the worst in North America to date, and one resulting from problems lodge activists had diagnosed but could not resolve—was a stark reminder of the high price that might be demanded of anyone entering this liberal terrain.

Indeed, liberal individualism made it difficult for both union and management to grasp the mine as a structured and structuring reality, transcending in its effects any individual, and ultimately moved by the supra-individual and transnational forces of a capitalist economy. Although one finds ardent working-class debates about the physical causes of explosions, one searches the labour records in vain for a general appraisal of safety conditions. Rather, one often finds cutting critiques of particular managers, specific innovations, and isolated incidents. Liberalism in the mine had epistemological consequences: it made it difficult to go beyond the individual case to the underlying structure—logical, physical, political—without which that case could not exist.

But what of liberalism beyond the mine? Surely, the admirer of Emile Zola might hope, the coal miners lived up to our grim expectations—eking out impoverished lives dependent upon price-gouging company stores and company housing, and existing as mere alienated beasts of burden living lives of quiet desperation? Well, not so much. By most standards, Springhill coal miners were well-paid workers. Neither company stores nor company housing really caught on in Springhill. The company store faded out in the 1880s and the town boasted many merchants. Out of 818 houses in the town in 1891, only 70 were company-owned dwellings, providing accommodation for about 120 families. This housing pattern resulted directly from the class struggle. In the union’s founding strike in 1879, the management had resorted to the tried-and-true method of evicting union men and their families from their company housing. It backfired: the miners found alternative accommodation among local farmers, merchants, and in the woods. After that, the company started to sell off its land and houses to generate cash. From the 1880s, miners were eager purchasers of such properties, and an unprecedented housing boom followed. PWA leader Robert Drummond, who invested in this development, hailed the drive for working-class housing as a confirmation of the PWA’s social philosophy: “The property ‘boom’ still continues,” he wrote in 1881. He went on, “There has been more purchases of lots during the past week. It is a pleasing feature of the present time,

that the working men are striving to possess little households of their own. The exhortations to thrift repeated weekly in the Union lodge meetings, are producing a satisfactory effect." It was, he noted, an indication of the virtues of the union's doctrine of "wise economy."³⁷

Yet home ownership, for all the bourgeois virtues Drummond emphasized, had three contradictory consequences. As would become glaringly obvious in the twentieth century, it gave the men independence from the company in times of industrial conflict. The threat of eviction no longer applied. If striking miners could often find jobs in other coalfields, even in the West, they (and more particularly their wives, who kept their families together in their absence) could hold out for a long time. Secondly, and ironically, for all the individual autonomy and respectability Drummond hoped would result from such home ownership, it tied the miners and their families ever closer to the mine. To finance home ownership, workers had to keep working, and often so did their sons—even the very young ones. And third, increased home ownership also meant the Town of Springhill's fiscal health depended on taxing workingmen's cottages, with the result that Springhillers faced a higher rate of municipal taxation than was normal in Nova Scotia. But the flip side of those high taxes was a high degree of miners' involvement in the affairs of the town.

Miners who had learned a labourist version of liberalism in their workplace carried their workplace organizing traditions "outward to social and political relationships in the wider community," as Craig Heron pointed out in 1984.³⁸ Indeed, working-class liberalism—or lib-labism—affected all of Springhill, not just the coal mine. There was a middle class in that wider community—people who made their living in ways different than working for wages or directly exploiting those who did—and they were numerous in the town government. Yet such middle-class people were reminded countless times of their acute dependence upon the miners, without whom the town would not exist. If a merchant wanted to collect monies owed him by an impecunious miner, even in cases that might seem an indictment of fecklessness and self-indulgence, he must brace himself against a barrage of public criticism, followed by the threat of a withdrawal of custom. Most merchants, it seems, played along. In 1887, Pioneer Lodge thanked the merchants of Springhill for their generous contributions to the strike relief fund set up for miners at the time of the Pictou coalfields general strike.³⁹ That these merchants had contributed to the relief of striking coal miners in a distant coalfield suggested how much they wanted to stay in the miners' good books.

The town government often placed town interests ahead of those of the company, on such questions as water provision and civic order. The town's mayor usually inclined to the labour side, not the company side. As ratepayers and citizens, miners expected to be listened to. They could then become (as Heron reminds us) allies of middle-class reformers, and they held the upper hand in any such coalition. Even doctors, paid for by the miners, were hardly in a position of "middle-class in-

dependence” in Springhill. Some found themselves criticized in public for unethical practices, such as attempting to prevent patients transferring from one doctor to another.

Such local labourism had dramatic political consequences. Working-class liberalism was hardly a matter of windy rhetoric about the dignity of labour, nor of gullible workers succumbing to the wiles of self-interested politicians. In Springhill, working-class liberalism won practical results. Premier W.S. Fielding, later to be Laurier’s Minister of Finance and a warm friend of the Canadian business class, came to Springhill to mediate the big strike in 1890. This was the first of almost two dozen strikes in this coalfield, with the last persisting almost twenty-two months, from 1909 to 1911. Fielding’s intervention secured the workers a more comprehensive written contract and a promising system of mediation. Motivated in part by his long-term ambition to liberate the coal miners from the grip of the protectionist Tories, so that they might be incorporated into his own rival Liberal universe, Fielding was also driven by the consideration that the provincial government directly depended upon coal royalties. The miners achieved real victories, as new legislation requiring a two-year process of training and certification of mines was introduced in 1891. This was officially promoted as a safety measure; it also responded to the coal miners’ perennial complaint about overcrowding and, in the absence of an apprenticeship system, imposed some state-sanctioned limitations on importing unseasoned newcomers. The workers’ defence of their property rights—the most fundamental of which was their right of secure access to the means of labour—could be brought into powerful alignment with the state’s interest in safeguarding its own property rights. These included the right to collect royalties on the mining industry, which presupposed mines that were relatively stable, safe, and predictable.

Liberalism was evident in other ways as well. The great moral reform movement gripping nineteenth-century Springhill, as well as much of Canada, was temperance. From the days of William Gladstone—whose name adorned another PWA lodge—this had been favoured by many liberals, keen to protect the autonomy and dignity of the individual from the perils of drink. Drummond, an activist in the Springhill Temperance Reform Club, demolished the casks of a liquor-seller and sent their contents into the gutter in his capacity as a J.P. Under Drummond, the PWA secured provincial legislation forbidding the sale of liquor within one mile of a coal mine, and the union all but overtly urged vigilantism against drink-sellers. It also sometimes winked at direct action against overbearing bosses. Some wives of coal miners were thought to be strong supporters of the union’s policy—one letter from a miner’s wife argued:

I am afraid that most of your members look upon the union as just an institution to secure better wages for them ... But Mr. Editor, could I not point you out a large number of wives in S. Hill

who would rather have their husbands earning one dollar per day, and sober all the time, than two dollars and them drunk half the time.⁴⁰

In many miners' minds, including those of the most left-wing activists, temperance was a necessary element of creating a disciplined workforce. Although temperance was a cross-class issue, which drew support from many churches, middle-class professionals, and employers, it would be a mistake to underestimate its deep roots in the workplace itself. Great emphasis was placed on securing the discharge of drunken workmen, on the practical argument that they might blow up many of their fellow workers, and some went so far as to call for the discharge of men for being drunk on Sunday. The coal company discharged employees for drunkenness without possibility of appeal, as fourteen men discovered in December 1890. The PWA was not on their side.

Of course, not all miners were persuaded, and the weekends after payday were notoriously noisy. "Rogue's Corner" was "the most vicious place in S. Hill. A person can go on any Sunday and get a shave, or his hair dressed, or his picture taken, or get drunk."⁴¹ Pay-day crowds gathered at the Corner for drinking, carousals, and fights. That such disreputable pleasures could impinge upon Pioneer Lodge's functioning was revealed in its acting secretary's weary comment in 1884 (all the errors are his own):

Pioneer Lodge upened in Regular form M[aster] W[orkman] in Chair Readings of Minutes was dispensed with as the Secy and most of the members were absent, having to atend the performance of a Card Sharper and patent medcs hack at rogues Corner.⁴²

Rogue's Corner also acquired a reputation for prostitution, as we learn from its designation "red curtain corner" in January 1885—a problem "solved," with the *Trades Journal's* implicit approval, by vigilante violence:

Between four and five o'clock on Sunday morning a crowd raided a disreputable house at 'Rogue's corner,' cleared out the proprietor, smashed the windows, removed the inmates, and horsewhipped a temporary lodger out the house and up the street to his boarding house. The inmates were given, on Monday, a few hours to clear out of Springhill.⁴³

In short, this "labour town" could, in its zealous pursuit of respectability and order, sometimes be mistaken for a middle-class community. But it could never be called a "company town," as that term has been conventionally used in Canada. No description of Springhill was complete without a passage extolling its handsome

public buildings, including its magnificent churches, tidy homes, opera house, and schools. Working-class liberalism, taken as a Lockean program of workers asserting at least a qualified ownership over that with which their labour had been mixed, with all a radical might read into that situation from an egalitarian perspective, had seemingly worked. Here was a sort of “poster-community” for working-class liberalism.

It also became the “poster-community” of unbridled class conflict. From June 1890 to December 1911, there were 28 strikes in the town of Springhill—the last of which endured for nearly two years. There was no comparison between these strikes and the short stoppages under the classical liberal regime. The strikes of 1890, 1897, 1899, 1903, 1905, and 1907, culminating in the great twenty-two-month strike of 1909–11, bore to the strikes of 1880–1888 the same relationship of a war to a minor skirmish. No other community in the Maritime provinces, and surely few in Canada, matched this record. Classical liberalism—this order we have defined with reference to shared understandings governing property, freedom and equality—had plainly entered a crisis in Springhill at the turn of the century.

This crisis resulted from a bold and integrated attempt to revolutionize the social relations of mining; to replace the informal common law of the pit with written regulations; to transcend the on-the-spot decision-making of miners and managers with a comprehensive plan; to destroy the individualism of the miner by making him over into a subservient employee; and thus, one might say, to replace classical liberalism with corporate liberalism. This program was aggressively pushed by an entrepreneur who had acquired his ABCs of labour relations in a very different context—Montreal—and who conducted himself like a palace-inhabiting potentate; or, to remember Heron’s article, like an “evil [force] of economic privilege.”⁴⁴

From the 1890s to the 1920s, the local liberal order that the miners had so successfully turned to their own interest entered a profound crisis, one consciously created by a capitalist with a completely different agenda. It shook the miners from their accustomed ways and attachments, disrupted their age-old individualistic patterns of negotiating settlements in the mine, and opened possibilities for socialists and industrial unionists with different ways of conceptualizing the realities of mining. In Springhill, we see the emergence of a new ideological pattern: a fundamental radicalization of working-class liberalism that inherited its emphasis on liberty and equality, but substantially critiqued its traditional attachment to possessive individualism.

More than thirty years on, Craig Heron’s pathbreaking work on labourism stands up remarkably well. In this case, one might supplement it by emphasizing the shifting realities and ideals of property, which on my reading of this evidence, played a highly significant role in both the rise of working-class liberalism, and its severe turn-of-the-century crisis. An implication of situating this ideological pattern in a liberal order framework is the suggestion that, rather than mere epiphenomenal

elements of the “superstructure,” liberal conceptions of freedom, equality, and above all property were actively and contradictorily at work in the “base” itself.

Talk of a big strike started in June 1888, as workers awakened to the aggressive imposition of a system of top-down control by a new management. The quasi-Jacobin rhetoric was memorable:

The battle cry ‘To arms’ must be sounded. We must throw off the iron yoke of tyranny. It has been demonstrated of late that justice is not a guiding principle with the officials . . . Disunited the workers are as chaff. United they are a power capable of bringing tyrannous bosses to their senses.⁴⁵

It was as if the miners were confronting some monstrous and hideous challenge to everything they believed in. One miner walking through Springhill heard a newspaper vendor crying out the exploits of Jack the Ripper in London. He read the headlines: “All London in a state of terror. Two other victims added to the Whitechapel mystery.” But then he thought of a Springhill miner, dismissed after sixteen years of service to the company. “Now Sir,” he proclaimed,

how is so much horror expressed at a crime, that happened four thousand miles away, when we see, if not as bad, nearly so, passing in our very midst . . . I claim that when a man is deprived of the means of earning a livelihood, merely to satisfy the tyrannical mania which has infused itself into the nature of certain officials in this locality, that only in name does it fail to be as heinous as the Whitechapel mystery.⁴⁶

By the time of the great strike of 1909–1911, observers would be surprised by the proliferation of red flags in Springhill on May Day—some of them affixed to the front porches of the tidy houses the miners themselves owned. What one might call a heartland of nineteenth-century labourism—this distinctive variant of Canadian liberalism—had by some estimates become the reddest town in the entire Dominion. To defend the liberal freedoms they had nurtured and cherished, many miners grasped that such freedoms could only survive in a post-capitalist order. Perhaps their hard-earned lesson is one we need to re-learn in the twenty-first century.

NOTES

¹ Craig Heron, "Labourism and the Canadian Working Class," *Labour/Le Travail* 13 (Spring, 1984): 45–76.

² *Ibid.*, 45.

³ *Ibid.*, 46–47.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 47, 51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 52–53.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 54–55, 57.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹² *Ibid.*, 74.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁴ Royden Harrison, ed., *Independent Collier: The Coal Miner as Archetypal Proletarian Reconsidered* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1978); C.B. Macpherson, "The Meaning of Property," in *Property: Mainstream and Critical Positions*, ed. C.B. Macpherson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 202, 10.

¹⁵ *Trades Journal* (Stellarton), July 11, 1883.

¹⁶ Labour Canada Library, Gatineau, Provincial Workmen's Association, Grand Council Minutes [hereafter Grand Council Minutes], April 1889, 196; For much fuller documentation of the primary sources mentioned in this article, see Ian McKay, "Industry, Work, and Community in the Cumberland Coalfields, 1848–1927," PhD Thesis, Dalhousie University, 1983.

¹⁷ Grand Council Minutes, April 1889, 195.

¹⁸ Grand Council Minutes, April 1888, 174.

¹⁹ *Trades Journal*, March 9, 1887.

²⁰ Dalhousie University Archives, Halifax, McKay Oral History Fonds, Transcripts, Springhill Interviews, 92–93. The tapes themselves are located in the Dalhousie University Archives.

²¹ Cases are defined as all attempts by any persons to solve particular problems through appeal to the lodge. They do not include general wage demands, collective political action, or the routine administration of relief. Cases might be 'disputed' by management, or represent no dispute with management—as in disputes with other members of the lodge, or suggestions for changes adopted without argument by the company. These data are generated from the Lodge's minutes: see Angus L.

Macdonald Library, St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Minutes of Pioneer Lodge No. 1 of the Provincial Workmen's Association, 1882–1886 [hereafter Springhill Minutes],

²² See Jeffrey McNairn, *The Capacity To Judge: Public Opinion and Deliberative Democracy in Upper Canada, 1791–1854* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000). He draws upon the work of Jürgen Habermas.

²³ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), December 2, 1890, December 4, 1890.

²⁴ Springhill Minutes, May 1, 1884.

²⁵ *Trades Journal*, August 6, 1884.

²⁶ Springhill Minutes, June 16, 1884.

²⁷ For the official regime, see Nova Scotia, “Of the regulation of coal mines,” *Revised Statutes of Nova Scotia*, 4th series, 1873; “An Act to amend Chapter 8, *Revised Statutes*, ‘Of the Regulation of Coal Mines,’” 54 Vic., cap. 9, *Statutes of Nova Scotia*, 1891.

²⁸ A telephone made its appearance in Springhill in 1879, and was judged “very serviceable.” But beyond the main slope there were only the most primitive means of communication. Men would bring word of problems to the deputy in the pit, and messages would pass through the lamp-cabin or be exchanged by men during the breaks. Nova Scotia, House of Assembly, “Report on Mines,” *Journals and Proceedings of the House of Assembly of the Province of Nova Scotia* (Halifax: Queen's Printer, 1879), 3.

²⁹ For a description, see Ian McKay, “The Realm of Uncertainty: The Experience of Work in the Cumberland Coal Mines, 1873–1927,” *Acadiensis* 16, no. 1 (Autumn 1986): 3–57.

³⁰ Springhill Minutes, January 12, 1884.

³¹ Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Halifax, RG21, Mines and Mining in Nova Scotia, Henry Swift Letterbooks [hereafter Swift Letterbooks], Swift to J.R. Cowans, January 20, 1890.

³² Swift Letterbooks, Swift to Cowans, March 29, 1890.

³³ *Trades Journal*, September 25, 1889.

³⁴ *Royal Commission on the Relations of Labour and Capital, Evidence-Nova Scotia*, Evidence of William Hall, (Ottawa, 1889), 298.

³⁵ Springhill Minutes, February 4, 1885.

³⁶ Springhill Minutes, February 19, 1884.

³⁷ Robert Drummond, Editorial Comments, *Trades Journal*, May 11, 1891, August 3, 1891.

³⁸ Heron, “Labourism,” 51.

³⁹ *Trades Journal*, February 23, 1887.

⁴⁰ *Trades Journal*, October 31, 1883.

⁴¹ *Trades Journal*, November 8, 1882.

⁴² Springhill Minutes, August 14, 1884.

⁴³ *Trades Journal*, August 12, 1885.

⁴⁴ Heron, "Labourism," 58.

⁴⁵ *Trades Journal*, June 6, 1888.

⁴⁶ *Trades Journal*, October 24, 1888.