

Wage Labour and the Transition to Capitalism A Critique of Pentland

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ARTICLES

Wage Labour and the Transition to Capitalism:

A Critique of Pentland

Allan Greer

THE GROWTH OF Canadian labour history in the last decade has been truly phenomenal. Researchers have uncovered a great deal about the experiences and struggles of working women and men in the factory, at home, in the political arena, and on the baseball diamond. Most of this work has naturally focused on the period since about the middle of the nineteenth century when Canada entered the capitalist age and waged labour came to dominate society. When turning to earlier times however, labour historians have been ill-served by a historiography preoccupied with politics, conquests, and agricultural crises, and that seemed to have little to say about the predecessors of the industrial proletariat. Perhaps this is why they have shown so much interest in the work of the late H. Clare Pentland, an economic historian who placed the man with the axe and the shovel squarely in the centre of his account of Canadian development from the seventeenth century down to the dawn of industrialization.

Writing in the 1940s and 1950s, Pentland was certainly a pioneer in historical labour studies. His archival research focused mainly on Upper Canada in the 1840s, particularly on the Irish canal workers, but he also delved deeply into the secondary literature on New France and on other periods and regions. In a series of articles and in his 1960 doctoral dissertation, published posthumously as *Labour and Capital in Canada 1650-1860*,¹ Pentland swept boldly

¹ (Toronto, 1981). See also, H.C. Pentland, "The Lachine Strike of 1843," *Canadian Historical Review* 29 (1948) 255-77; H.C. Pentland, "The Role of Capital in Canadian Economic Development before 1875," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 16 (1950), 457-74; and H.C. Pentland, "The Development of a Capitalistic

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across two centuries of history, calling forth the voyageur of the northwest, the navy of Lachine, and the ironworker of St. Maurice. His primary interest was in what he called the "labour market" and, more particularly, in the emergence of a "capitalistic labour market" around the middle of the nineteenth century. This historic transformation, coincidental with early industrialization, occurred, according to Pentland, thanks to the rapid influx of British capital and British immigrants (mainly Irish) at the time of the great canal and railway construction booms. There is much more to Pentland's argument than this bare summary and indeed the ambitious scope of *Labour and Capital* is one of its most attractive features. The international perspective behind this work is also impressive. Pentland's erudition enabled him to compare Canadian developments with conditions south of the border and to describe the Old-World origins of Scottish and Irish immigrants; moreover, he drew inspiration from such prominent British writers as Clapham, Dobb, Habakkuk, and the Webbs.

Although Pentland deserves high marks for posing the important questions and for assembling valuable information, the results of his efforts are nevertheless disappointing. The author himself may have been well aware of the flaws in his thesis and, at any rate, he had the wisdom to leave unpublished an imperfect exercise in historical writing. Later readers have been much more charitable and, in fact, published comments on *Labour and Capital* are uniformly positive.² A reassessment of Pentland therefore seems all the more warranted in view of the pre-history of the authority his thesis commands as a model for the study of the Canadian working class. In discussing a 25-year-old book like *Labour and Capital*, one could easily devote dozens of pages to showing how subsequent research has revised or advanced beyond its conclu-

Labour Market in Canada." *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 25 (1959), 450-61. All page references in the text that follows are to *Labour and Capital* unless otherwise noted.

² See the "Introduction" by Paul Phillips to Pentland's *Labour and Capital*, as well as, Gregory S. Kealey, "H.C. Pentland and Working Class History," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 3 (1979), 79-94; Bryan D. Palmer, "Town, Port and Country: Speculations on the Capitalist Transformation of Canada," *Acadiensis*, 12 (1983), 131-9; Bryan D. Palmer, review of *Labour and Capital* in *Canadian Historical Review*, 63 (1982), 227-30. Palmer's attitude towards Pentland's work is rather complicated. On the one hand, he shows a greater recognition than Kealey or Phillips of the book's shortcomings, mentioning, among other things, the "conceptual eclecticism" that forms the focus of much of my own critique. Elsewhere, however, Palmer shows himself to be Pentland's most enthusiastic supporter and he draws very heavily on *Labour and Capital* in the opening chapter of his otherwise excellent synthesis, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800-1980* (Toronto 1983), 7-35. Pentland has indeed been criticized on specific points. Donald Akenson, for example, does a good job of demonstrating his many errors and misconceptions concerning the Irish migration to Upper Canada. "Ontario: Whatever Happened to the Irish?" *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, 3 (1982), 222-5.

sions, but this is not the purpose of my review, although I will mention a few points on which the author's assumptions are no longer tenable today. Instead, I intend, as far as possible, to take Pentland's work on its own terms. I should point out that the subject of this piece is *Labour and Capital*, not Clare Pentland, pioneer labour historian. Thus the fact, endlessly repeated by his current champions, that Pentland worked on an unfashionable topic and flirted with dangerous ideas at a time of Cold War repression is irrelevant. We might well admire Pentland's courage and sympathize with his indecision and hesitations, but we must nevertheless come to terms with his work as it now stands.

In evaluating Pentland's work, I shall argue first of all that it is weakened by eclecticism, by a fundamental failure to choose between incompatible pre-suppositions, making this a fundamentally incoherent book. My second criticism is more substantive; it concerns Pentland's treatment of the "transition to capitalism." Although central to the author's preoccupations, this historical process continually eludes him, essentially because he focuses too narrowly on "labour and capital" and neglects the broader context needed to grasp this general transformation.

Pentland's eclecticism is probably at the root of debates among recent commentators over whether this scholar was an "Innisian" or a "Marxist." It seems to me that one could make a case for either contention. There are places, for example, where Pentland appears to ground his work in the "staples thesis" approach to economic history.

The Canada that existed until 1820 needs to be described, and has been very well described, in terms of staple production — a language that is still appropriate to the dependent outposts of the economic world. (130)

Later in the nineteenth century, Pentland continues, the country experienced industrialization and emerged around 1870 as a "metropolitan" economy, no longer dependent on staple exports. His insistence on the eventual importance of industry may be *empirically* at odds with Harold Innis, who dwells on the continuing centrality of staple trades, but *conceptually* this formulation rests firmly on an Innisian foundation. It accepts a trade-centred classification scheme that categorizes national economies according to what sort of products they send to the rest of the world. Pentland generally follows the lead of his Toronto mentors in conflating the Canadian economy and its overseas trade. He seems aware that subsistence agriculture was an important element in the colony's early economic life, but he still concentrates on those activities, such as the fur and timber trades, as well as canal- and railway-building, that were oriented towards export. While Innis, Creighton, and their contemporary disciples confine their attention to relations of exchange, however, Pentland at least focuses on the "social relations of production," between voyageur and bourgeois, canal labourer and contractor. And yet, his conceptions of the nature of the Canadian economy are essentially similar to those of earlier political economists and, to that extent, it seems fair to regard him as the labour historian of the staples school.

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On the other hand, there is a Marxist flavour to Pentland's writings and a recent article by Greg Kealey suggests that Pentland's inspiration was essentially Marxist, though Cold War conditions kept him from avowing his commitment openly.³ Pentland was indeed familiar, as Kealey notes, with the "English Marxist tradition of historical writing;" moreover, he cites *Capital* on more than one occasion. Furthermore, *Labour and Capital in Canada* opens with a socio-economic morphology of human development from primitive communism, through slavery and feudalism, up to capitalism that might, had it not ended with capitalism, have been taken from a Marxist textbook of the 1940s. Pentland's discussion of Canadian economic history in this book and in other writings is organized around just such a succession of slavery, "feudalism" (or "personal labour relations" as he calls it in his thesis), and capitalism; the author gave rather short shrift to native people and so "primitive communism" as well as socialism are left out of the discussion.

For Marx, of course, these were "modes of production," each characterized by peculiar class relations shaped by differential access to the means of producing wealth. He and Engels also mention an "Asiatic mode of production," but they never claim to have uncovered an invariable sequence of steps through which all societies must pass. They in fact only discuss this conception of human evolution by stages in a few brief and schematic passages in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, *The German Ideology*, and the *Communist Manifesto*. They could afford to be rather offhand about this because the idea that world history was divided into distinct epochs enjoyed wide acceptance in their day. The originality of Marx and Engels in this respect lay in their claim that each historical stage was rooted in and conditioned by a particular configuration of ownership of the "means of production." Later writers elaborated on their outline and fashioned out of it a rather rigid ladder of civilization. More recently, however, western Marxists have rejected as overly simple and excessively Europocentric such models of rung-by-rung advance. This is an intellectual development that, for the most part, postdates Pentland's major work. His tendency to postulate a simple schematic model then is in tune with much of the Marxian historical thought current in his day. But are his "stages" modes of production?

In a word: no. In focusing almost exclusively on relations between "capital" and "labour," Pentland confines himself to a relatively narrow range of class relations (narrow at least in comparison to Marx's and Engels' extremely broad perspective) that does not permit him to distinguish different modes of production. For Marxists, the crucial question to ask of modern societies is whether they are based primarily on the work of "free" labourers working for wages. Pentland's research, however, was almost exclusively concerned with waged labour through the ages and, consequently, this author has little to say about whether the "wage nexus" was central or marginal to the socio-economic structures of any given era.

³ Kealey, "H.C. Pentland and Working Class History," 81.

Slavery is the exception to this pattern, the one form of exploitation and subordination discussed in *Labour and Capital in Canada* that is not a matter of wage labour. Neglected in so many historical accounts, the realities of Canadian slavery definitely deserve attention but, as Pentland notes, slavery was scarcely common enough to put its stamp on any period in this country's history. To pad out his brief chapter on the subject therefore, the author adds sections on indentured labour and convict labour, hinting that these should be considered tantamount to slave labour. This certainly confuses the issue for, beyond the common absence of personal liberty for the workers, there are too many differences dividing these three phenomena. To begin with, indentured servants were always paid, and thus they too were wage labourers of a sort. Moreover, they were protected by various laws that gave recognition to their humanity and citizenship whereas slaves were legally property.⁴ Neither *engagés* nor prisoners could actually be sold, although their services could be rented out to a third party. The "slavery" stage therefore turns out to be a grab-bag of various forms of unfree labour, all of them marginal institutions, found in widely separated periods and in different parts of Canada.

The chapter on "Personal Labour Relations," or "Feudal Labour Relations" as Pentland calls them in an earlier article, is really about waged labour at a time when it was still marginal; in Marxian terms, he is talking about capitalist relations in a pre-capitalist society.⁵ This of course has nothing to do with "feudalism" in any of the hundreds of senses in which that thorny term has been employed by generations of historians.⁶ Leaving semantic quarrels aside however, just what does Pentland see as the distinguishing features of the stage of personal labour relations? His principal examples of "feudal" enterprises are the St. Maurice Forges, the fur-trade companies, and the D.D. Calvin timber company, and the accent in his account is on the paternalism of these employers; they offered steady work, personal leadership, and "non-

⁴ The basic works on slavery and indentured servants are Marcel Trudel, *L'esclavage au Canada français: Histoire et conditions de l'esclavage* (Quebec 1960); and Louise Dechêne, *Habitants et marchands de Montréal au XVII^e siècle* (Paris 1974), 50-77. The latter work, by the way, contains by far the best discussion of the labour history of the fur trade. Strangely, neither of these two books appears in the bibliography of recent works published with Pentland's thesis in 1981.

⁵ Greg Kealey makes this point, charitably referring to Pentland's use of the term feudal as "unique." "Thus it is a name he uses for a pre-industrial *but* capitalist form of labour organization and should not be confused with classic European feudalism." Kealey, "H.C. Pentland and Working Class History," 92.

⁶ See, for example, Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, 2 vols. (Chicago 1961); Ernesto Laclau, "Feudalism and Capitalism in Latin America," *New Left Review* 67 (1971); Centre d'Études et de Recherche Marxistes, *Sur le féodalisme* (Paris 1974); Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London 1974); Witold Kula, *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System: Towards a model of the Polish Economy 1500-1800* (London 1974); Paul Sweezy et al., *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London 1976); Alain Guerreau, *Le féodalisme: un horizon théorique* (Paris 1980).

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monetary rewards" and their workers reciprocated with steady and loyal service. It appears then that this historical stage is characterized, not by a particular mode of production, but by a certain style of management.

We might note in passing that Pentland's idyllic conception of "personal labour relations" is based on a rather naive reading of the historical sources. His work is peopled by stout voyageurs cheerfully paddling through the wilderness under the benign gaze of respected bourgeois, and so on. Could this romantic image have anything to do with the fact that Pentland's information, his point of view, and often his very words come straight from the pens of the employers and other people of their class? His description of the Calvin Company of Garden Island, for example, is based entirely on a book called *A Saga of the St. Lawrence* by, of all people, D.D. Calvin. Certainly there is such a thing as paternalism and it is more than simply a hoax — as Eugene Genovese has demonstrated so brilliantly in his work on the slave South — but Pentland unfortunately tends to be all too ready to accept the ideological perceptions of employers as literal representations of reality.

As for "capitalism," it is difficult to discern what Pentland understands by this term. He, in fact, seldom allows the word to stand alone. Instead, we read of "industrial capitalism," a phrase that seems to place us in the realm of technology, although Pentland discusses it in much broader terms as something emerging through the formation of a national economy. There is also the "capitalistic labour market," that is, "one in which the actions of workers and employers are governed and linked by impersonal considerations of immediate pecuniary advantage."⁷ Here the accent is on the outlook of the parties in an employment relationship and the implication seems to be that only in a capitalist labour market are employers and employees concerned about money! Elsewhere Pentland describes the capitalistic labour market as one that is well stocked with workers and with an abundant supply of jobs. In this sense it differs *quantitatively* from earlier labour markets where well-disposed workers were less numerous and the demand for their services more sporadic. Nowhere in Pentland does one find the Marxist conception of capitalism *tout court*, that is, a system based on the centrality of wage labour.

For all its superficial similarities with a certain "Marxist" model of the stages of historical development then, Pentland's morphology has little or nothing to do with modes of production. The criteria of classification shift constantly as we move from the servitude of a loosely-defined "slavery" into various forms of capitalist wage labour: "personal labour relations" characterized by the paternalist ideologies of employers and a "capitalist labour market" featuring a well-stocked reserve of workers. Echoes of the concept of mode of production are faint and garbled indeed. What then of the "class struggle" that, for Marx and Engels, provides the fundamental impulse to historical development?

Certainly class is a basic variable in Pentland's history and, on the whole,

⁷ Pentland, "The Development of a Capitalistic Labour Market in Canada," 450.

he seems to conceive of class in essentially Marxian terms as a function of access or lack of it to the "means of production." Furthermore, class contentions are highlighted in the last chapter of *Labour and Capital in Canada*. Here, and in his pioneering article on the Lachine strikes of 1843, Pentland dwells on strikes, riots, and other confrontations between workers and employers. And yet these outbreaks are generally portrayed as accidental or as due to temporary disequilibrium, not as manifestations of deeply-rooted tensions. Thus, Pentland sees the labour strife of the 1840s and 1850s as symptomatic of the painful adjustment to the ways of the modern labour market. The bourgeoisie eventually learned to bargain with workers as a body, and the wild Irish learned to moderate their demands and negotiate within the limits imposed by the new system. There is some ambiguity towards the end of his thesis where Pentland stresses the repeated and continuing use of the armed power of the state to settle labour disputes, implying continuing social tensions under capitalism. Nevertheless, his emphasis is on the "stability" that accompanied the establishment of what he calls "a rationalized labour market." (185)

Class conflict has virtually no place at all in Pentland's account of pre-capitalist Canada. Taking to heart the self-image of paternalist employers, he generally stresses the harmony of interests of servant and master. Both benefit equally, he suggests. In the fur trade, the habitant-voyageur found seasonal employment that "provided for his annual overhead costs;" (29) in this way, the poor peasant gets a little extra income and the Northwest Company gets additional hands when they need them in the summer. One could just as easily reverse this formulation, as more recent, less rosy studies have done, and contend that, through subsistence agriculture, the part-time voyageur underwrote overhead costs for the trader.* Insofar as he pays any attention to agrarian topics, Pentland also stresses harmonious class relations, for example between seigneurs and censitaires. Seigneurialism, he maintains, following the line of middle-class nationalist historiography, "was based on the mutual needs of its parties:"

With each side dependent on the other, a balanced and equitable system developed, in which the seigneurs gave much, lived close to their people and were well-regarded by them. (56)

This is certainly how the seigneurs saw the "system" and their role in it; the habitants may have felt differently, however.

Pentland certainly absorbed much from Marx and from various Marxist historians, but his could scarcely be called a Marxist approach to labour history, given his rejection of such fundamental concepts as the mode of production and class struggle. Even the materialism that underlies Marx's understanding of society and politics has little place in the Canadian's work. In fact, Pentland tends to lean more towards the opposite extreme of idealism: Max

* Allan Greer, "Fur-Trade Labour and Lower Canadian Agrarian Structures," Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1981), 197-214.

Weber seems to have been a more important figure in his intellectual ancestry than either Karl Marx or Harold Innis.

In discussing the agrarian malaise of Quebec in the early nineteenth century (something historians would later label the "agricultural crisis"), Pentland lays the blame primarily on the *attitudes* of the peasantry. "The habitant turned his back on profit-oriented agriculture," he writes, "and became incapable of responding to price stimuli." Moreover, he asserts, French Canada generally suffered from the "fatal delusion . . . that it could persist as a seventeenth-century feudal island in a nineteenth-century capitalistic sea." (67, 69) Such a formulation essentially takes a very complex socio-economic reality, shaped by the interplay of peasants, priests, seigneurs, merchants, cultural traditions, western competition, and overseas demand, and reduces it to a matter of habitant attitudes. The implication is that a variety of options were open to "French Canada" or "the habitant" and the effect is to explain impoverishment and misery as a result of their stubborn refusal to think and act sensibly. There is nothing original about Pentland's treatment of the subject, of course; this is the standard fare in discussions of the Lower Canadian economy from Lord Durham down to the present, but it does reflect an approach followed fairly consistently in *Labour and Capital in Canada*.

Pentland also discusses immigration and immigrants mainly in idealist terms, attributing their experiences in this country primarily to the various "goals," "motives," and "outlooks" they brought from their homelands. In all this there is more than a hint of the ideology of "blaming the victim;" when poverty, distress, and inequality are analyzed primarily in the light of the attitudes and supposed choices of "winners" and "losers," the conclusion usually follows that both were largely responsible for their respective fates. The idealist approach lends itself nicely to such an enterprise.

Thus, one finds Innisian, Marxian, and Weberian elements in Pentland's work. These are not stages in the author's intellectual development, but rather lines of thought that appear simultaneously in the same work. Pentland drew from three highly respectable intellectual traditions but, since they are based on incompatible assumptions, the result of trying to combine them is dissonance and confusion. Materialism vies with idealism and class analysis faces off against ethnic analysis; though the liberal approach usually seems strongest in *Labour and Capital*, contradiction is the real winner.

A second major problem with Pentland's work concerns a matter of substance, the transition to capitalism, and here too, his treatment is marred by ambivalence and indecision. Pentland does appear to consider the mid-nineteenth century a time of significant change in Canada and he devotes more than half his thesis to this period. He discusses immigration, the formation of a national market, the construction of transportation facilities, capital accumulation; he even has some marvellously original observations about the role of educational and social reform movements in shaping workers' attitudes to suit the needs of the new order. All this implies powerful transformations and a

fundamental break with the past. And yet Pentland also tends to stress continuity and purely quantitative developments leading to the establishment of a "capitalistic labour market." This is a consequence of the author's unshakable belief that there was always a "labour market" of some sort since the earliest European settlements in this country. Hence the advent of capitalism means essentially a bigger and more efficient version of "the" labour market: more workers, more capital to employ them, better discipline, and so on. Although Pentland cautions readers that the emergence of a capitalistic labour market was not simply a matter of "mere numbers," (61) he himself stresses numerical growth — the growth of population through the immigration of poor Irish and of jobs through the construction of public works — as central to the transformation. Rather than a revolutionary mutation, Pentland describes a rapid expansion of something already in existence.

What was the basic impulse that spurred on this important quantitative change? Working within the limitations implied by the title "Labour and Capital," Pentland seems undecided as to whether the expansion of the labour supply fostered capital growth or the reverse. In an article published in 1950, he argues forcefully that "It was capital that set the pace;" British capital imported to finance canal and railroad building aided the accumulation of capital in the colony and fostered industrialization, beginning as early as the 1840s.⁹ In his thesis and elsewhere, however, Pentland — like Gibbon Wakefield before him — devotes most of his attention to the formation of a work force, a process he sees as being impeded, not so much by the limited demand for labour, as by the agrarian independence of the population and its irrational aversion to waged labour. If capital truly "set the pace," these last factors could hardly have been significant. Pentland seems to want it both ways: growing demand for labour called forth supply, and the supply of workers encouraged investment.

When discussing the emergence of a "capitalistic" labour force, Pentland generally leaves aside questions about the demand for workers and concentrates instead on the characteristics of the various nationalities that made up the ethnic mosaic of early nineteenth-century Canada, evaluating them on the basis of their suitability as recruits for the armies of industry. From this point of view, the ethnic groups who came as immigrants — or, as with the Indians and the French Canadians, those who appeared as inscrutable aborigines — fell into two basic categories, the desirable and the undesirable. In the first camp are the Lowland Scots, the Protestant Irish, and the Americans, while the unsatisfactory grouping includes Irish Catholics, French Canadians, and Scottish Highlanders. The distinction between them has to do both with land inheritance practices and with more general cultural traits.

At various points in his writings, Pentland pursues an interesting line of argument suggesting that the partible inheritance practices of the French Canadians (and of what he calls "Celtic" immigrants as well) tended to keep Lower

⁹ Pentland, "The role of Capital," 458.

Canadian peasants out of the labour market by providing them with miserable little holdings through the subdivision of family farms. "Teutonic" peoples, by contrast, followed a single-heir system, thereby preserving farms intact, but also throwing disinherited offspring off the land and forcing them to accept paid employment. This theory, apparently inspired by an article published by H.J. Habakkuk in 1955, demonstrates that Pentland was close to the forefront of the economic history of his day. Since that time however, research has shown that the distinction between partible and single-heir systems is not so simple, and neither is their effect on proletarianization. It appears, for example, that the partible bias in early French-Canadian law did not necessarily lead to the subdivision of farms. In fact, through much of Quebec, habitant holdings remained roughly the same size over the course of two centuries.¹⁰ Sometimes lands would be divided up, but precisely the same thing happened in English, and theoretically single-heir, Ontario.¹¹ Whereas Pentland and his contemporaries viewed inheritance practices as an ancient, virtually innate, characteristic of a peasantry, we now find that these could in fact be shaped by the incursions of capital into the countryside. Thus, in many cases the subdivision of holdings resulted from the introduction of domestic industry or of seasonal waged work in the fur or timber trades.¹² The connection between agrarian inheritance patterns and the emergence of capitalism turns out then to be a complex matter, one that we are only beginning to understand when we discard Pentland's simple dichotomy of partible and single-heir customs.

Whatever the merits and faults of his theories about the role of inheritance schemes, Pentland never really followed them to a conclusion. Instead, his discussion of ethnic groups tends to wander off into the more murky territory of general cultural traits and "national character." This approach in fact ends up dominating his treatment of native and immigrant responses to the labour market. Among those who adapted well to the new order, Pentland's favourites are clearly the Loyalists and other settlers of American origin: "They were mobile, adaptable and mechanically ingenious." (142) They had the good sense to shun low-paid work on the Rideau Canal, leaving this to the foolish Irish. Human for all this, the Americans did have their faults: "Though active and sagacious, they were litigious and unscrupulous;" moreover, they tended to be "vulgar." (80) However, these defects, just as much as the virtues, bore the mark of American greatness: all reflected the acquisitive, individualistic

¹⁰ Dechêne, *Habitants et marchands*, 267-8, 294-8; Pauline Desjardins, "La Coutume de Paris et la transmission des terres — le rang de la Beauce à Calixa-Lavallée de 1730 à 1975," *Revue d'histoire de l'amérique française*, 34 (1980), 331-9; Greer, "Fur-Trade Labour," 210.

¹¹ David Gagan, *Hopeful Travellers: Families, Land, and Social Change in Mid-Victorian Peel County, Canada West* (Toronto 1981), 50-2.

¹² Franklin F. Mendels, "Agriculture and Peasant Industry in Eighteenth-Century Flanders," in William N. Parker and Eric L. Jones, eds., *European Peasants and their Markets* (Princeton 1975), 179-204; Greer, "Fur-Trade Labour."

spirit — in Pentland's words, the "full acceptance of economic rationality," (78) — that made this country great. American political philosophies were in tune with this economic outlook and, accordingly, the Loyalists who sought refuge in Upper Canada brought "the political conception of an equalitarian lower-middle-class democracy," (78) something Pentland clearly admired.

Among the "undesirable" ethnic groups the Irish Catholics were dirty, violent, "primitive," "superstitious," (105) and so on; anyone who has read the nineteenth-century press will be acquainted with the animalistic portrait. The Highland Scots, for their part, were "unhardy and uncooperative;" to make matters worse, they had an "unwarranted pride and vanity." (93-4) The Lower-Canadian French were also largely useless to the labour market. One of their problems, according to Pentland, was physical weakness. (66) Our author apparently never heard of Louis Cyr or Jos. Montferrand, who battled Shiners a dozen at a time, and his views on the French-Canadian physique are eccentric to say the least. His second point about the francophones is more representative of English views current in his day and is more central to his argument. The French Canadians, Pentland avers, were kept out of the labour market by their "peasant attitudes," handicapped as they were since the seventeenth century by "an aversion for regular work and an immature appetite for profit-seeking in a Sombartian sense," and tethered even into the twentieth century by "an awkward burden of traditional restraints." (77-8) Those who did finally enter the industrial labour force, on the other hand, did offer employers "nimble fingers . . . docility and a willingness to work for small wages." (77)

In all this there is more than a little special pleading. For example, according to Pentland, the population of American origin and that of French descent "stood at opposite extremes," (78) one accepting and the other rejecting the logic of the market. Neither of these polar opposites contributed substantially to the early labour market however, the French because their peasant attitudes made them cling to agrarian life and the Americans because they were so enterprising that most of them became successful small farmers. (80) In other words, leaving aside the obfuscating mumbo-jumbo, both groups were composed mainly of independent agricultural producers who had no reason in the early nineteenth century to offer their services on the "labour market" except occasionally. In Pentland's idealist world however, people sharing similar material circumstances and acting in much the same way nevertheless represent polar opposites since they were apparently actuated by different motives.

Pentland's weakness for ethnic stereotyping has already been noted by others who tend to excuse it merely as a matter of tactless verbal excess.¹³ It is too easy, however, to write this off simply as the result of too much contact with Donald Creighton. Nor is it due merely to a graduate student's failure to

¹³ In his introduction to *Labour and Capital in Canada*. Paul Phillips acknowledges some "apparent stereotyping" (my emphasis) in Pentland's patronizing treatment of Indians and French Canadians, but almost seems to suggest that the author is guilty only of using excessively crude formulations to express fundamentally sound ideas. xxvi.

attain enough detachment from the bigotry expressed in the primary sources, although Pentland does seem to have been led astray in this way. The problem is not that Pentland was too severe with the Highlanders or too kind to the Ulstermen; the problem is with the ethnic approach itself which shapes about one third of Pentland's thesis, the central section of the work. This line of argument is inextricably tied to the bourgeois assumption that the pace at which a capitalist labour market takes shape is determined primarily by the disposition and cultural traditions of potential proletarians and employers. The supposition is that waged work represents an "opportunity" that "rational" workers accept for the same reason capitalists pursue profits: members of both classes are engaged in an essentially similar campaign to "get ahead." Thus ethnic groups rather than classes are the fundamental categories of analysis: Americans are spiritually attuned to "the marketplace" — whether they rise to its challenge as employers or employees is of little importance — whereas French Canadians tend to resist the inevitable and they suffer the consequences.

To criticize Pentland's assumptions in this regard is not to suggest that ethnic cultural traditions are never important; obviously, the peculiar experiences of different immigrant nationalities played a role in shaping their response to Canadian conditions. Nor is it to accept the Pentlandist position that the author's ethnic prejudices are surface blemishes that can be abstracted from an otherwise sound body of doctrine. Instead, they must be recognized as part and parcel of an ambivalent but, in the end, predominantly liberal, view of the advent of capitalism.

The problem with Pentland's treatment of the coming of capitalism to Canada is that he never really recognizes the prior existence of any pre-capitalist social configuration. He certainly could have, without going far beyond the published research available to him. For purposes of illustration, it might be valuable to review some of the socio-economic patterns to be found in British North America around, say, the turn of the nineteenth century, keeping in mind, of course, that no simple labels or schematic diagrams can do full justice to the complexity to be found even within a given region. The fishing communities of Newfoundland and parts of the Maritimes were made up mainly of what we might call "independent commodity producers" since they sold the largest portion of their catches and purchased their supplies. In the North and the West, hunting-gathering peoples supplied many of their material needs directly from nature and, with varying degrees of intensity, traded pelts and pemmican for European imports.

The Canadas proper, as well as large parts of the Maritimes, were home to people engaged in various pursuits but, above all, in agriculture. The question of whether the habitants of Lower Canada and the settlers of Upper Canada were "independent commodity producers" like the Newfoundland fishing people or whether they concentrated mainly on production for use continues to be the subject of heated debate. As far as Lower Canada is concerned, my own

view is that agriculture was organized primarily around the satisfaction of family subsistence needs through family production. There were surpluses and a portion of these were sold, but a significant proportion was diverted to priests and seigneurs through feudal exactions.¹⁴ Upper Canada lacked seigneurial institutions but, according to some, it too was populated mainly by subsistence-oriented cultivators.¹⁵ Many specialists would argue, to the contrary, that agriculture in both provinces was "commercial" and that Lower Canadian rural society was in no sense feudal.¹⁶ Feudal peasants or market-conscious farmers? No doubt the debates will continue. Meanwhile, beyond the controversies, one point seems irrefutable: none of these social formations were dominated by the capitalist mode of production. The deployment by owners of capital of "free" workers selling their labour power played little part in Newfoundland, the Maritimes, the Canadas, or the West, particularly in the countryside where the vast majority of colonists lived around 1800.

Most people, it seems clear, worked most of the time within a household framework. Hierarchic and patriarchal, the pre-capitalist family was nevertheless communal in its allocation of tasks and of material goods. Division of labour was normally by sex and by age and the contributions of men, women, and children were equally vital to the family's welfare. It was also "independent" in the sense that the producers themselves managed their day-to-day affairs, even if they were ultimately subject to the authority of seigneurs, creditors, or magistrates. Like small property holders in other parts of the world, Canadian agriculturalists generally preferred to maintain such autonomy as the possession of the "means of production" afforded them. Hence, when Governor Murray remarked, shortly after the Conquest, that "The Canadians will not work for anyone but themselves,"¹⁷ he was not identifying a peculiar French-Canadian attitude, for aversion to waged labour is almost universal among those who are able to avoid it; rather, he was perceiving the effects of a situation of unusually widespread land ownership.

Of course, there were always instances of work-for-wages in all parts of early Canada and they include the activities that preoccupy Clare Pentland. Even in the agricultural sector, there were a certain number of hired hands. To a large extent, the hiring of agricultural labourers seems to have been a matter of temporarily redistributing the work forces of rural households. People,

¹⁴ Allan Greer, *Peasant, Lord and Merchant: Rural Society in Three Quebec Parishes, 1740-1840* (Toronto forthcoming).

¹⁵ Leo Johnson, "Independent Commodity Production: Mode of Production or Capitalist Class Formation?" *Studies in Political Economy*, 6 (1981), 93-112.

¹⁶ See, for example, Gilles Paquet and Jean-Pierre Wallot, "Crise agricole et tensions socio-ethniques dans le Bas-Canada, 1802-1812: éléments pour une ré-interprétation," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, 26 (1972), 185-237; and V.C. Fowke, "The Myth of the Self-Sufficient Canadian Pioneer," *Royal Society of Canada, Proceedings and Transactions*, 56, ser. III (1962), sec. II, 23-37.

¹⁷ Quoted in Hilda Neatby, *Quebec: the Revolutionary Age, 1760-1790* (Toronto 1966), 78.

usually young and destined to have their own farms in the future, lived with their employers with a status similar to that of a relative or a guest. More research is needed on this subject, but it does seem clear that the wage relationship in agriculture was generally subordinate to, and embedded in, a resolutely pre-capitalist social formation in which the independent family household was central. Other varieties of waged labour were similarly shaped to fit into the pre-capitalist milieu. In the fur trade, for example, the salaried work force of voyageurs was made up in large measure of land-holding peasants who inserted seasonal earnings into a family economy of subsistence agriculture.¹⁸ Today, family farms in the "advanced" nations are subordinated to a capitalist system to which they must adapt; in the early nineteenth century it was the other way round: capitalist enterprise had to adapt itself to the prevailing non-capitalist environment.

Pentland never really came to terms with the pre-capitalist realities of early Canada, because his tendency to equate "labour" with wage labour prevented him from taking account of the household economy of family production for family use. One incidental by-product of this blind spot is a pronounced sexual bias. The capitalist sector that monopolized Pentland's attention when he studied pre-capitalist Canada happened to rely on an almost exclusively male labour force. Certainly, as Sylvia Van Kirk has shown us, women played a crucial role in the fur trade, though seldom as salaried workers.¹⁹ Wage labour in the fur trade, the timber trade, and the iron industry was man's work. Women were nevertheless vitally important productive workers but, even more than the men of pre-industrial Upper and Lower Canada, they made their contributions within the household subsistence economy. Thus, Pentland's neglect of this crucial component of the early Canadian social formation inevitably leads him to write women out of his history.

Not only was the pre-capitalist subsistence sector predominant in terms of the number of men and women involved, it also dominated the early Canadian economy. No one has yet made a serious attempt to measure the value of the colony's annual production of all goods, including the grain, meat, poultry, garden produce, homespun cloth, etc. that was consumed by the families that produced it.²⁰ If they did, I have no doubt that the aggregate agricultural output would embody vastly more labour than all the furs and squared timbers and other "staple products" shipped from British North America. Just as the main

¹⁸ Greer, "Fur-Trade Labour."

¹⁹ Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada* (Winnipeg 1980).

²⁰ In *Les Cent-Associés et le peuplement de la Nouvelle-France (1633-1663)* (Montreal 1974), 142-3, Lucien Campeau attempted an estimate for the 1650s and, although his figures are anything but precise, he concluded that agriculture accounted for twenty times the value of Canada's fur production. This was a period when the fur trade dominated the Canadian economy to a greater extent than it ever would in the future. After the mid-seventeenth century, agriculture grew much more rapidly than the staple trade though, of course, it remained basically a subsistence activity for two centuries.

body of the population used its labour power instead of selling it, leaving the "labour market" a limited and marginal arena, so the bulk of productive activity — subsistence-oriented agriculture — operated outside any market system. These people and their productive efforts made little or no contribution to the accumulation of capital and they were therefore scarcely of interest to bourgeois theorists from Adam Smith to Harold Innis and Clare Pentland. For these last two, "the colonial economy" meant the meagre flow of commodities — meagre, that is, compared to the flow of goods that were not commodities because they were not produced for sale — that constituted the "staple trades." Subsistence cultivators, by the same token, appeared to them as unproductive and useless, precisely because they did not "work for anyone but themselves."

If most producers in early Canada worked "for themselves," how and when did the practice of "working for anyone but themselves" come to be the norm? This, it seems to me, is the fundamental problem facing anyone interested in the "transition to capitalism" in this country. At the moment, no satisfactory answer to this question is likely to emerge. Obviously, there was no general expropriation of peasant lands such as occurred in Britain and large parts of Europe. But how, when, and to what degree did agrarian smallholders become subordinated to the emergent capitalist order? Immigration was clearly important to the creation of a labour force; or, put another way, the dispossession of the British peasantry formed a proletariat some of which could be deployed in the colonies. And yet we know that many immigrants — even the Irish²¹ — obtained their own farms and found a place in the pre-capitalist order. When and why did significant numbers join the capitalist labour force instead? Left-wing historians often cite restrictive colonial land policies as the major mechanism forcing immigrants into the labour market in the first half of the nineteenth century. In fact, ruling elites were divided and inconsistent in their approach to land-granting and it is a great exaggeration of the potency of nineteenth-century state policies to suppose, as visionaries like Gibbon Wakefield did, that land policies by themselves could transform the social order. Marx was sensible enough to realize this and to seize on Wakefield's schemes, not as a practicable programme, but as a rare instance, useful for polemics, of a bourgeois thinker admitting that capitalism required the dispossession of the masses.²² Immigration and land policies then do not explain very much by themselves.

In order to understand fully Canada's transition, we will need to know much more about its demographic, legal, cultural, political, and economic aspects. We will have to consider such questions as the importance of the liquidation of seigneurial tenure in Quebec and the impact of the Tory victory of 1837-8. All the developments that Clare Pentland chronicles — the immigra-

²¹ Akenson, "Ontario: Whatever Happened to the Irish?" 231-2.

²² Karl Marx, *Capital: a Critique of Political Economy*, 3 vols. (Moscow 1954), vol. 1, ch. 33, "The Modern Theory of Colonization."

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tion, the canal-building, the early industrialization — surely played a role as well. All this makes little sense, however, unless it is seen as so many factors contributing to the destruction of the independence of petty producers and the construction, under the leadership of the owners of capital, of a new social formation where the wage nexus reigned supreme. In suggesting such an approach, I am not advocating any reductionist conception of a simple or a mechanical process. I am simply arguing for the necessity of recognizing clearly what it is that is being explained and described in discussions of the coming of capitalism.

Clare Pentland knew many things about the transition to capitalism, but he never grasped its essence. He was unable to see the emergence of a society based on waged labour for what it was, a fundamental restructuring of the social order. This central fact eluded him, of course, because he failed to come to terms with the thoroughly pre-capitalist nature of early Canadian social formations. It was pre-capitalist Canada — in all its diversity and complexity — that gave birth to capitalism and was in turn destroyed by its own creation.

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Group on Toronto Island, ca. 1920. Front row, second from left, is Tim Buck with son Ted; second row, third from left, is his wife, Alice. Public Archives of Canada/PA-124410.