

The British Collier in British Columbia: Another Archetype Reconsidered

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Article abstract

It is a widely held axiom of British Columbia's labour history that the province's radical tradition originated among immigrant British workers who formed the social bedrock of Vancouver Island's coaltowns in the 19th century. This paper challenges the stereotype of the British BC worker in the last century by balancing the post-immigration experience against the pre-emigration vocabulary of work, class, race, and politics. I conclude that insofar as a British fountainhead is significant for BC's political history it is in the diffusion of class solidarity to competing claimants for political support. The legacy of the British collier on Vancouver Island was not one of monolithic radicalism or even Labourism; instead it was one of conflicting inclinations which were as politically divisive for labour in Britain as they were on Canada's west coast.

ARTICLES

The British Collier in British Columbia: Another Archetype Reconsidered

John Douglas Belshaw

I

THE FIRST COAL MINE on Vancouver Island was opened in 1848 by the Hudson's Bay Company at what is now known as Fort Rupert, near a clutch of Kwagiulth villages.¹ Although this experiment was a short-lived and dismal failure, it ushered in an era of industrial growth in the North Pacific. By 1900 more than 3,000 miners made their homes in the coal towns of Nanaimo, Wellington, Extension and Cumberland. Although there were considerable numbers of Chinese immigrants among the mining population, as well as a smattering of Europeans, Euro- and Afro-Americans, 'Canadians' (which included, of course, Maritimers), some Japanese, and a small contingent of local aboriginal labourers, the largest group represented in the subterranean workforce was from England, Scotland and Wales. As well, British capital played a key role in the development of West Coast coal resources from the 1850s to the end of the century. It is only a slight liberty to describe these as British-owned and operated mines worked by British colliers in British territory. Remarkably, no other North American mining district in the second half of the 19th century was so completely dominated by British elements.

¹There are several accounts of this episode, including Keith Ralston, "Miners and Managers: The Organization of Coal Production on Vancouver Island by the Hudson's Bay Company, 1848-1862," in E. Blanche Norcross, ed., *The Company on the Coast*, (Nanaimo 1983), 42-55; Daisy Sewid Smith, "In Time Immemorial," *BC Studies*, 89 (Spring 1991), 22-5.

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If the composition of the workforce on Vancouver Island was unusual, then so too was the apparent degree of labour militance there from 1850-1900. The rise of a Miners and Mine Labourers Protective Association in the 1870s and its reappearance in the 1890s, the popularity of the Knights of Labor locally, the creation of a 'Workingmens Party' and the successful election of 'Lib-Lab'- and 'Labour'-style candidates provincially marked the coal district off from the rest of the province if not the rest of the country.² This was an area in which labour unrest was relatively commonplace and in which revolutionary and socialist rhetoric resounded from the 1850s on.

To date, these peculiarities of the coalfield — its Britishness and its militant proletariat — have been considered interrelated, the presence of the first element explaining the appearance of the second. It has been the usual practice to maintain that British working-class immigrants in British Columbia (as in New England textile mills, Appalachian mining towns, the hard-rock camps of the American cordillera, or the homesteads of Saskatchewan) were a conduit for radical labour behaviour. Cultural and political baggage — ranging from aggrieved class consciousness to full blown Marxism — have been pointed to as the main contribution of these early arrivals on the West Coast. Thus a local historian attributes a 1913 strike to "the unique character of the miners of British extraction who lived in the valley above the mine."³ One political scientist has described the British worker in British Columbia as "an inveterate unionist"⁴ while a prominent labour historian believed that "Welsh, British and Cornish miners [*sic*]" gave the early provincial working-class movement its political orientation.⁵ Despite these assurances, little evidence has been marshalled to demonstrate a clear link between pre-emigration experiences and post-immigration initiatives. Notwithstanding, the theme of

²The historiography has for the most part characterized the miners' struggles and conflicts as progressive ones. Measured against the miners' endeavours to postpone the introduction of mining machinery if it threatened skill levels and taking into account the ferocity with which the immigrant British colliers found to preserve a kind of family-controlled apprenticeship underground, real care must be taken in defining "progressive." See John Belshaw, "Mining Technique and Social Division on Vancouver Island, 1848-1900," *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, 1, 1 (1986), 45-65.

³Lynne Bowen, *Boss Whistle: The Coal Miners of Vancouver Island Remember* (Victoria 1982), 43.

⁴Martin Robin, *The Rush for Spoils: The Company Province 1871-1933* (Toronto 1972), 24-7. See also, Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour, 1880-1930* (Toronto 1971), 44.

⁵Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1967), 29. Later Phillips referred to "the presence of many British miners with their heritage of more political trade unionism." See "The Underground Economy: The Mining Frontier to 1920," in Rennie Warburton and David Coburn, eds., *Workers, Capital and the State in British Columbia: Selected Papers* (Vancouver 1988), 51.

British labour militance as the fountain-head of British Columbian labour unrest has become axiomatic.

Failure to disengage the immigrant British miners from the experiences of their contemporaries at home has had the effect of distorting British Columbia's labour history. Firstly, in overplaying the hand of 'cultural baggage,' scholars have undervalued the impact of local conditions and developments. It is true that fresh British miners replenished and expanded the expatriate community continuously into the 20th century, but it is also the case that immigrants who arrived from 1850 to 1886 participated directly in little of the rise of the Labour Party and New Unionism in Britain. Secondly, in virtually all of the extant literature, authors have made the critical error of compressing the history of British labour into one or two convenient categories: militant and radical. A prime example can be found in a survey of recent British Columbian political themes, in which it was maintained that:

Socialism has been a visible [*sic*] alternative in provincial politics almost since the first miners from Great Britain reached the Vancouver Island coalfields over one hundred years ago....⁶

Socialism was certainly not a 'visible' option in mid-19th century British Columbia, nor was it necessarily much more so in Britain in the early Victorian era. Still, forging a connection between labour unrest in the former and intellectual developments in the latter implicitly lends legitimacy, pedigree, and pretension to the British Columbian phenomenon.

Another consequence of these perspectives has been to assume that much of the history of the British Columbian working-class was pre-written in England, Scotland and Wales. An assumed cultural predisposition towards radicalism offered a handier explanation than the possibility that local conditions, employers, neighbours and other factors radicalized the miners on the spot. Carlos Schwantes, in his excellent book *Radical Heritage*, perpetuated this fallacy:

... in British Columbia [the Briton] was encouraged to remain a good Briton and, as such, was tacitly encouraged to emulate the trade union activities of fellow workers in Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand....⁷

But the political disposition of many miners' associations in Britain was not to the left of centre. During the upheavals of the 1830s, miners took "surprisingly little

⁶Donald E. Blake, *Two Political Worlds: Parties and Voting in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1985), 6. I am assuming that Professor Blake meant to say that socialism was a viable alternative, though either way it is a nonsense.

⁷Carlos Schwantes, *Radical Heritage: Labor, Socialism, and Reform in Washington and British Columbia, 1885-1917* (Seattle 1979), 14.

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part in the radical and Chartist agitations.”⁸ Later, in the northeast of England, for example, “the Liberal leadership [of the unions] resisted Socialist ideas and regarded Socialists as trouble-makers.”⁹ Likewise in the regions of Britain that produced Vancouver Island’s first miners. As one historian of British labour writes:

The fact of the matter is that both in the Black Country and in the rest of Great Britain those workmen who were entitled to vote tended to support, not groups like the Socialist League or the Independent Labour Party, but the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party. Working-class conservatism was of particular significance.¹⁰

Allowing the growth of the political arm of the Trades Union Congress in 1890s Britain to obscure their view, labour historians have ignored many non-radical influences among British colliers in British Columbia. This has been a critical oversight. If immigrant British miners came out of a culture of working-class Toryism, what then was the context and meaning of pitworkers’ protest on Vancouver Island?

The present study re-examines the archetypal British collier in British Columbia, with an eye to demonstrating the tenacity of alternative imperial working-class traditions as well as the centrality of local considerations. A brief examination of labour recruitment from the British coalfields for Vancouver Island’s rudimentary industrial revolution highlights expectations which were encouraged among the earliest immigrant colliers. The concerns which subsequently dominated the miners’ industrial and political agendas — including anti-Asian sentiment — are considered and measured against the electoral behaviour of the coalfield population. Finally, the skilled, artisanal British coal hewers of Vancouver Island are assessed as a “labour aristocracy.” It is concluded that the archetypal *British* British Columbian worker in the last century was subjected to competing claims for his support and that those ranged from personal aspirations to contending ideologies and workplace traditions. The legacy of the British collier on Vancouver Island was not one of monolithic radicalism nor even Labourism; instead it was one of conflicting inclinations which were as politically divisive for labour on Canada’s West Coast as they were in Britain.¹¹

⁸Eric Hobsbawm, quoted in Raymond Challinor and Brian Ripley, *The Miners’ Association: A Trade Union in the Age of the Chartists* (London 1968), 10-11.

⁹Robert Moore, *Pit-men, Preachers, and Politicians: The Effects of Methodism in a Durham Mining Community* (Cambridge 1974), 40.

¹⁰John Benson, “Black Country History and Labour History,” *Midland History*, xv (1991), 104.

¹¹Labour historians have described the pattern of industrial disputatiousness in British Columbia as evidence of what has been called “western exceptionalism” — a radical, socialistic streak in the Canadian proletariat that was most fully expressed on the Pacific Coast. More recently it has been argued that the political track record of the Cordilleran and West Coast miners was not as extraordinary as was once thought. That is to say, the militance

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DETERMINING THE PRECISE EXPECTATIONS of emigrant British miners as they set sail for Vancouver Island is impossible. Nonetheless, the absence of scrupulously maintained contemporary reflections on personal 'pushes and pulls' need not forbid an assessment of likely considerations.

Miners and labourers in Britain learned about Vancouver Island and British Columbia from four main sources: newspaper accounts, post office recruitment notices, promotional literature, and (probably most important) from letters sent home by family and friends already on the Pacific Coast. Only in personal correspondence could one expect to find relevant and reliable descriptions of the colony, but the likelihood — given the relatively small number of immigrants involved — is that such correspondences were rare. Published information might have been used to augment personal sources but what appeared in Britain throughout the last half of the 19th century was rudimentary. Vancouver Island's profile was not raised by great discoveries of precious metals, nor were any broad agricultural development programmes introduced to stimulate interest in the distant colony. The Island's natural resources were known to be modest to good (if far from markets), its constitution was reassuringly British, its climate was damp but mild and its position on the globe was inconveniently remote.

There were, as well, some very sound reasons to avoid migrating to Vancouver Island in the second half of the century. The simmering border dispute with the United States over the disposition of the Gulf and San Juan Islands would, presumably, have been a worrying factor for potential immigrants to consider, as would the proximity of Russian possessions. Another negative feature was the high cost of travel to the North Pacific: fares to Vancouver Island from Liverpool were as much as seven times higher than to Montréal or New York. Worse still, the cheapest route involved a three- to twelve-month gut-wringing sea voyage. One writer to the London *Times* drew attention to these problems in 1859:

Until a Government emigration to Vancouver [*sic*] is set on foot, a very small proportion of the labouring class could afford to meet the expenses of so long and costly a voyage in a merchant ship round Cape Horn, which is long, tedious, and tempestuous.¹²

of eastern workers has been more fully appreciated, and the alleged radicalism of western labourers has been reconsidered. See, A. Ross McCormack, "The Emergence of the Socialist Movement in British Columbia," *BC Studies*, 21 (Spring 1974), 3-27; David J. Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier, 1897-1919," *Canadian Historical Review*, LVIII, 2 (1976), 154-75; James R. Conley, "Frontier Labourers, Crafts in Crisis and the Western Labour Revolt: The Case of Vancouver, 1900-1919," *Labour/Le Travail*, 23 (Spring 1989), 9-37; Jeremy Mouat, "The Genesis of Western Exceptionalism: British Columbia's Hard-Rock Miners, 1895-1903," *Canadian Historical Review*, LXXI, 3 (1990), 321, 344-5.

¹²J.C. Helmore, *Times* (London), 18 November 1859, 7.

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Not much changed in this respect before the 20th century. No less deleterious to recruitment was awareness in Britain of mining disasters around Nanaimo — especially two in 1887 and 1888 in which the combined death toll was more than 200 men. The extensive use of Chinese labour underground on the West Coast, a practice which was widely publicized in Britain and equally widely opposed by British colliers, would also have been a consideration.¹³

On the attractive side, however, were two factors of signal importance. Wages in the Vancouver Island collieries were high. An emigration poster that appeared around Britain in the 1880s and 1890s advertised wages in the Nova Scotian coalmines as between \$1 and \$2.25 per day; Nanaimo area miners, the same document instructed, were earning from \$3 to \$4 per day.¹⁴ A British Parliamentary Report in 1896, moreover, found that among all the miners in the British Empire, none were so highly paid (at least in nominal terms) as those on Vancouver Island.¹⁵ One study of the coal mines of South Wales pointedly concluded that real wages were irrelevant to the migrant collier; the “mere prospect of handling more money was in itself alluring.”¹⁶ As in Wales, so too on Vancouver Island.

A second consideration in drawing miners to the coastal pit-towns is less easy to measure, but it is so often mentioned in contemporary accounts — however cursorily — that it cannot be entirely dismissed. This was that in British Columbia there was always the possibility of further gold-rushes across the Strait of Georgia. The 1858 Fraser River excitement inflated the size of the local community of miners from Britain and many remained behind in the hope that they would have a head start in the event of a subsequent goldrush. Indeed, there were many colliers who made their way east into the Cariboo, south to Leach River and north to the Klondike when gold fever erupted.¹⁷ In 1864 the *Times* carried descriptions which belied the modest amount of gold to be had on southern Vancouver Island. The prospectors were said to be “leading a jolly sort of life; and no doubt even among those who are the least energetic about actual mining there is a great deal of pleasure derived from the change from city toil to the free and picturesque life in the woods.”¹⁸ More than any other commodity gold was British Columbia’s trade mark in the 19th century. It would be impossible to imagine the emigrant British miner who did not nurse a desire to get rich quick in this time-honoured way.

¹³P. May, “The British Working-Class and the Chinese 1870-1911 with Particular Reference to the Seamen’s Strike of 1911,” MA thesis, University of Warwick, 1973.

¹⁴Scottish Records Office, Department of Agriculture, etc., Emigration Files AF.51/90: Emigration Circular and Poster for October 1888.

¹⁵United Kingdom. House of Commons. “Reports on Hours of Adult Labour (Colonies).” *Parliamentary Papers, 1892*, LVI, 7-16.

¹⁶Brinley Thomas, “The Migration of Labour into the Glamorganshire Coalfield (1891-1911),” *Economica*, x, 30 (November 1930), 291.

¹⁷See Alan Conway, “Welsh Gold-miners in British Columbia during the 1860s,” *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, XXI (1957-8), 52.

¹⁸*Times* (London), 17 October 1864.

Whether they sought higher than average wages for harder than average work, or dreamt of easy wealth won from the river banks of the Fraser, the Thompson or the Stikine, the British miners who emigrated to Vancouver Island in the last century had to pay their own way out to the colony. With few exceptions these miners arrived at Victoria or Nanaimo with little or no financial assistance from governments, unions, or philanthropic agencies. Although private and public assistance put Australia and New Zealand within reach of hundreds, if not thousands, of British mineworkers, Vancouver Island was accessible only to those who personally had the means to move themselves — and very often their families — across the Atlantic and thence to the North Pacific.¹⁹ In short, British colliers on Vancouver Island had typically undertaken a huge financial commitment for which they expected to be repaid in high wages.²⁰ As well, recruitment posters and agents, among others, encouraged them to anticipate positive occupational and social mobility within a generation or two. The extent to which these ambitions were satisfied or dashed tell much of the tale of British labour militance on Vancouver Island.

III

IF INDUSTRIAL HARMONY — or the lack thereof — indicates the degree of immigrant contentment on the Island, then the expatriates' lot was not an happy one. From the time they first arrived on Vancouver Island, British colliers complained of exploitation by the local mine owners. Between 1850 and 1914 more than a dozen noteworthy strikes and lockouts occurred from Extension north to Cumberland. Responding to dangerous working conditions, as well as to wage fluctuations and challenges to their limited control over the workplace, the miners established friendly or benevolent societies, trade unions, and political parties. In this respect they were hardly distinguishable from colliers in Britain, the United States, or Australia. The topography of Vancouver Island, the economic specialization of the colonial settlements, and the concentration of large numbers of mineworkers in a relatively small area ensured that the British miners could exercise a considerable

¹⁹United Kingdom. House of Commons. "Emigration Returns for the Years 1860, 1861, 1862 and the first three months of 1863 showing the number of Emigrants who left the United Kingdom for the United States, British North America, the several Colonies of Australia, South Africa, etc." *Parliamentary Papers, 1863*, XXXVIII, 19-28; *Journals of the Colonial Legislatures of Vancouver Island and British Columbia, 1852-1871*, James E. Hendrickson, ed., 2 (Victoria 1980), 157; William E. Van Vugt, "British Emigration During the Early 1850s, with Special Reference to Emigration to the U.S.A.," PhD thesis, University of London, 1985, 144. See also Jill Wade, "The 'Gigantic Scheme': Crofter Immigration and Deep-Sea Fisheries Development for British Columbia (1887-1893)," *BC Studies*, 53 (Spring 1982), 28-44.

²⁰The issue of anticipated, nominal and real wages is addressed in John Douglas Belshaw, "The Standard of Living of British Miners on Vancouver Island, 1848-1900," *BC Studies*, 84 (Winter 1989-90), 37-64.

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degree of political influence, both locally and in the provincial capital at Victoria. The appearance of "workingmen's" political parties and socialist movements from the 1880s was both an expression of dissatisfaction with the established political and economic order, and an acknowledgement of the political potential of colliery ridings where, from the 1880s on, there was broad male suffrage.²¹ These various manifestations of conflict -- industrial or parliamentary -- did not, however, move unilaterally in the direction of labour radicalism.

Unions began the process of institutionalizing group conflict on the coalfield in the late 1870s, not long after national and near-national miners' organizations in Britain were dusted off following a period of atrophy and inaction.²² In 1877 an embryonic trade union was formed at Nanaimo as the Miners' Mutual Protective Society, an organization that bridged the gap between benevolent association and trade union. The failure of strikes in 1877 and 1881 fragmented the union but it was still able to play a part in the 1883 strike at Wellington.²³ In December of that year the first local assembly of the Knights of Labor on the coalfield was established. Within fewer than seven months the Knights had attracted 241 members and were contemplating the purchase of a hall.²⁴ The organization spread from Nanaimo to Robert Dunsmuir's Wellington mines where it replaced the Miners' Mutual Protective Society. In 1888 colliery employees at North Wellington were also brought into the Order. Unionizing unskilled workers "at a time when the 'new unions' had not yet come into existence in Britain," the Knights of Labor paved the way for the industrial unionism and political activism of the early 20th century.²⁵ Support for the organization began to wane in the 1890s but on Vancouver Island the local assemblies continued to enjoy modest popularity among the miners into the 20th century.

By 1891 the Knights had been largely supplanted as the primary labour body representing the miners by the Miners' and Mine Labourers Protective Association. The MMLPA was probably formed at Nanaimo in 1890.²⁶ Like all other labour movements, the MMLPA met with stiff resistance from the Dunsmuirs who stead-

²¹ Allen Seager, "Socialists and Workers: The Western Canadian Coal Miners, 1900-21," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 16 (1985), 23-59.

²² Challinor and Ripley, *The Miners's Association*, 241, 245-6. See also Royden Harrison, *Before the Socialists: Studies in Labour and Politics, 1861-1881* (London 1965), 9-10.

²³ Phillips, *No Power Greater*, 29.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁵ Henry Pelling, *America and the British Left from Bright to Bevan* (New York 1956), 63. For the experience of the Knights of Labor in Britain during the 1880s see Eric Taylor, "The Working Class Movement in the Black Country, 1863-1914," PhD thesis, University of Keele, 1974, 293-5; Henry Pelling, "The Knights of Labor in Britain, 1880-1901," *Economic History Review* [hereafter *EHR*], 2nd series, IX, 2 (December 1956), 320-1. See also John Saville, "Trade Unions and Free Labour: The Background to the Taff Vale Decision," in Asa Briggs and John Saville, eds., *Essays in Labour History* (London 1967), 317-50.

²⁶ Phillips, *No Power Greater*, 19.

fastly refused to recognize unions. Unbowed, the Association sought to organize all white mineworkers under one banner and it swiftly attained a membership of more than 1,000 — just short of the total number of occidental mineworkers in the area in 1890. By 1900 the MMLPA could declare that all 875 white underground employees at Nanaimo were members. Other mine-related unions in the 1890s included the Coal Trimmers Protective and Benevolent Association and the Engineers Protective Association. In addition, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, the Journeyman Tailors' Union of America, and the Sailors Union of the Pacific had members in Nanaimo and the other colliery towns.²⁷ The heyday of international unionism on the coalfield would have to await the arrival of the Western Federation of Miners and the United Mine Workers of America early in the 20th century, but it would be a mistake to neglect the role played by the earlier, more local organizations.

The changing complexion of the Miners' and Mine Labourers Protective Association points to significant contradictory political objectives within a working-class organization. During the 1880s the Knights of Labor had organized the Island's white working-class into 'mixed' assemblies that included different trades. On the coalfield, however, it was inevitable that hewers would play a special role. Because of the widespread use of Chinese labour in unskilled positions underground and the exclusion of Asians from the Knights, the miners who belonged to the union represented only a fraction of the pit workforce. That is, the white, skilled part.²⁸ Nevertheless, like the Miners' Federation in Britain, the MMLPA attempted to go beyond parochial local assemblies of the kind advocated by the Knights.

This is not to suggest that the Association was necessarily more radical in its outlook, nor did the MMLPA set new benchmarks for industrial militance. The union survived the 1890s by being vital to the VCMLC. As early as 1893 the Association was on the brink of being disbanded by its members; it was preserved only by the intervention of the VCMLC's manager, Samuel Robins, who recognized the MMLPA as the negotiating body for his miners from 1891 and encouraged the Association to engage in what he regarded as more efficient and less costly collective bargaining.²⁹ The VCMLC certainly seems to have benefitted from its support of unionism: Robins claimed he was able to achieve a 20 per cent wage reduction without precipitating an expensive disruption in pitwork because he consulted with the Association's representatives at least twice a year.³⁰ Furthermore, testimony to the

²⁷British Columbia. House of Assembly. "Annual Report of the Minister of Labour." *Sessional Papers [hereafter BCSP], 1894, 1005-10*; "The Coal Mining Industry in Canada," *Labour Gazette*, 1, 3 (November 1900), 124-7.

²⁸British Columbia. "Report on the Wellington Strike." *Journal of the Legislature [hereafter BCJ], 1891 (Victoria 1892), cclviii.*

²⁹Lynne Bowen, *Three Dollar Dreams* (Lanzville 1987), 366-8.

³⁰Canada. "Report of the Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes in the Province of British Columbia." *Sessional Papers [hereafter CSP], 1903, 36A (Ottawa 1904), 296, 300-302, 468, 747.*

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1891 Select Committee and to Royal Commissions in 1900 and 1903 revealed the presence of significant working-class opposition to unionism.³¹ The union executive itself seemed almost embarrassed by its role as advocate for workers against management. When asked about a two-week-long withdrawal of labour over the loss of a 25 cent safety lamp allowance at Nanaimo, union leaders prevaricated: "I don't call that a strike," said one, "it was a misunderstanding."³² William Stocker, the American-born president of the MMLPA at the turn of the century, certainly had little personal enthusiasm for radical programmes; his position was that high wages for white miners would reward local merchants and produce a more settled family community.³³ Income multipliers loomed larger on the organization's checklist than did class solidarity. The situation was entirely consonant with the development of many British miners' organizations.

In the age of socialism and 'new unionism' the MMLPA's leaders sought private and polite negotiations with the VCMLC, and from 1891 they avoided expensive conflicts with the Dunsmuir. Like the Durham unions, which remained for years on the outside of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain and like the Provincial Workers' Association of Nova Scotia, the MMLPA followed an "inoffensive policy" of moral-force industrial relations.³⁴ It could be that conditions were more favourable at Nanaimo than at Wellington for this kind of unionism: miners owned their own homes, they had some choice from whom they purchased their goods and they were not constantly under the eye of single-minded local employers like the Dunsmuir. Regardless, it is clear that in one of the most militant decades in British labour history, the tendency on Vancouver Island was primarily away from class confrontation.

Among Vancouver Island's predominantly British miners, then, one finds not only elements of a radical tradition but also a conservatism which made very stony soil for socialism. Testimony to the 1903 Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes in British Columbia revealed how the issue of the Western Federation of Miners political perspective was approached by members of the rank-and-file:

...before affiliation the question was asked distinctly whether by affiliation we would be adopting the socialist platform [of the WFM], and we were distinctly told no; that although

³¹See, for example, the testimony of George Scarth (an ex-Durham County miner) in "Report on the Wellington Strike," *BCJ*, 1891, cccxxii; "Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes," *CSP*, 1903, 463-4.

³²"Report on the Wellington Strike," *BCSP*, 1891., 305-6.

³³"Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration, 1900," *CSP*, 1902, 54, 305-6.

³⁴See Moore, *Pit-men, Preachers, and Politicians*, 36-7; Ian McKay, "By Wisdom, Wile or War: The Provincial Workmen's Association and the Struggle for Working-Class Independence in Nova Scotia, 1879-1897," *Canadian Historical Association Reports*, xxxv (1985), 1-54.

socialism was recognized to a certain extent in the Federation, we did not necessarily become socialists by joining it.³⁵

James Dunsmuir and the provincial government in 1903 were concerned that workforce affiliation to a foreign union would have unfavourable and uncontrollable ramifications for the coal industry in British Columbia. They feared a succession of sympathy strikes in the coalfield which concessions made north of the border would not mollify.³⁶ Socialism was taken to be a very secondary matter and was largely ignored by both sides in the dispute.³⁷

Any commitment the immigrant British miners might evince for radical strategies was frequently compromised by the manifold extracurricular responsibilities and affiliations taken on by the pitworkers. It has been proposed in studies of British colliery towns that the experience of running a small business would dull a miner's revolutionary fervour.³⁸ What, then, is one to make of the many British miners around Nanaimo who moved out of mining and into some kind of self-employment through the 19th century? Of the Lanarkshire miners who did not flee Fort Rupert and the colony in 1850, one became a mine owner and another opened

³⁵Testimony of Arthur Spencer in "Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes," *CSP, 1903*, 348.

³⁶Following the 1903 Royal Commission enquiry William Lyon Mackenzie King (then Deputy-Minister of Labour) submitted a report which was primarily critical of the miners' international link, uncommitted on the question of socialism, and skeptical of the methods used by James Dunsmuir in his dealings with workers and the state. See Paul Craven, *'An Impartial Umpire': Industrial Relations and the Canadian State, 1900-1911* (Toronto 1980), 132-4, 144-5; Isabelle Davis, "Forty-Ninth Parallel City: An Economic History of Ladysmith," Honours BA essay, 1953; Seager, "Socialists and Workers"; Allan Donald Orr, "The Western Federation of Miners and the Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes in 1903 with Special Reference to the Vancouver Island Coal Miners' Strike," MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1968, 113-94; H.S. Ferns and Bernard Ostry, *Age of Mackenzie-King: The Rise of the Leader* (1955), 56-63; John Saywell, "Labour and Socialism in BC: A Survey of Historical Development Before 1903," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, xv, 3-4 (1951), 129-50. The equanimity shown by Dunsmuir and the Government regarding the ideological bent of the miners' union was shared by the VCMLC's management and even some colliers. Samuel Robins disregarded the WFM "threat," emphasizing instead the good working relations he had enjoyed with the MMLPA. Moreover — and unlike Dunsmuir — Robins dismissed claims that the involvement of an American union would cripple the Island coal industry. "Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes," *CSP, 1903*, 300-2.

³⁷There are a number of studies dealing with this period of unrest but the best is Jeremy Mouat, "The Politics of Coal: A Study of the Wellington Miners' Strike of 1890-91," *BC Studies*, 77 (Spring 1988), 3-29.

³⁸See John Benson, *The Penny Capitalists: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working-Class Entrepreneurs* (Dublin 1983), 136.

a sawmill.³⁹ Of the 324 miners in the Nanaimo area in 1880, more than one-tenth of those who remained until 1899 became (at least temporarily) farmers. In fact, sixty per cent of the 1880 cohort left mining over the next twenty years. They opened shops, ran boardinghouses, purchased and operated boats of various kinds, and so on. These immigrant miners certainly had expectations of self-improvement and even their unions defended this kind of occupational mobility. In their statement to the 1885 Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration, the Nanaimo Lodge of the Knights of Labor contended that the employment of Chinese not only threatened employment prospects of Euro-Americans, but it also thwarted their personal ambitions: "We should have had the chance, at least, of becoming ourselves employers of labour," complained the Knights.⁴⁰ Some miners did have the opportunity to become employers above ground, never more so than after the 1887 and 1888 disasters. Even underground, in the Dunsmuirs' Wellington, Cumberland and Extension pits, white hewers sub-contracted out some of the support work, becoming in essence employers of colliery labour.

But the clearest evidence of working-class conservatism among the colliers can be gleaned from election results. The miners' involvement in colonial parliamentary politics began in the 1870s, when they sent local mine manager John Bryden to the Legislative Assembly. Bryden achieved few positive results for his working-class constituents. When he first ran for office in 1875 Bryden won on a platform that promised mines legislation similar to that already in place in Britain.⁴¹ Draft legislation languished on the Order Paper, but when it looked likely to be enacted in 1877 he moved quickly to have the act emasculated.⁴² Nonetheless, Bryden continued to command considerable political support among the miners.

Unsatisfied demands for mine safety laws and the eight-hour day generated organized political protest among the miners in the 1880s and 1890s. The results were uneven. From 1875 to 1900 candidates of the Workingmen's Party, the Lib-Lab movement and the Labour Party ran in six elections for a possible total of thirteen seats. These campaigns were dominated by a foursome of British immigrants who were either miners or closely associated with the miners: James Hawthornthwaite, Thomas Keith, Ralph Smith and Parker Williams. Only on five

³⁹BCARS, *Michael Muir: Reminiscences*, 2; Daniel T. Gallacher, "John Muir," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, XI (Toronto 1982), 626-7. The example (however flawed) was frequently held out of Robert Dunsmuir, an Ayrshire mineworker who had started out modestly on the Island but had been rewarded for years of loyal service with what was to become the richest seam of coal on the Island. See Eric Newsome, *The Coal Coast: The History of Coal Mining in B.C. — 1835-1900* (Victoria 1989), 61-4.

⁴⁰"Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration," *CSP*, 1885 54a, 157.

⁴¹Tweedy, "The 1880 and 1881 Strikes by the Miners of the Vancouver Island Coal Company," Honours BA Essay, UBC, 1978, 32-4. For an account of the miners' ballot-box politics see Thomas Robert Loosmore, "The British Columbia Labour Movement and Political Action, 1879-1906," MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1954.

⁴²"Petitions of Proprietors of Coal Mines," *BCSP*, 1877, 504.

occasions, however, were any of the labour-left aspirants successful. In the 1886 provincial election two candidates were sponsored by the Knights of Labor, but miners and ex-miners swung *en masse* behind the operators' candidates instead. One historian has argued that the 1890-91 strike at Wellington (which went badly for the miners) "nourished both a heightened sense of class and a radical political tradition."⁴³ Yet just three years later not one of the three left-labour candidates in the provincial election was successful. In North Nanaimo in 1898, where 62 per cent of the names on the provincial voters' list belonged to miners and mine labourers, a miners' candidate failed to defeat Bryden, now the operations manager at the Dunsmuir's Wellington mine.⁴⁴ In the 1896 Dominion election the incomplete fusion of occupation and ideology was demonstrated again when an ex-miner ran as a Conservative in the general election. In the case of Smith — the miners' MP — the federal Liberal Party was his ultimate trajectory.⁴⁵ For their part, Robert and James Dunsmuir recorded undeniable success in election after election as ardently blue Tories; this was possible only with the support of miners. Gerrymandering (often alleged) could only account for a part of these results. It must be accepted that the miners' distinction as the largest single occupational group in the region was not of itself enough to automatically guarantee victory for working-class candidates, let alone socialist candidates.

Certainly the fate of overtly radical organizations on the coalfield does not point to a raging undercurrent of British radicalism. The Socialist Labour Party of British Columbia — an offshoot of the American Socialist Labour Party — was in the vanguard in the late 1890s. Two years into the new century radicals around Nanaimo found a new home in the short-lived Revolutionary Socialist Party of Canada.⁴⁶ Neither body enjoyed great popularity with the rest of the Island's labour movement, nor did they command a large following in the colliery towns. In part, the forward march of labour was stalled before it got started by divisions within the workforce itself, the most important of which was that gaping chasm between occidental and oriental mine employees.

⁴³H. Clare Pentland, "The Canadian Industrial Relations System: Some Formative Factors," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 4 (1979), 10; Archer Martin, *Reports of Mining Cases Decided by the Courts of British Columbia and the Courts of Appeal Therefrom to the 1st of October, 1902; with an Appendix of Mining Statutes from 1853 to 1902; and a Glossary of Mining Terms* (Toronto 1903), 220-2; Des Morton and Terry Copp, *Working People: An Illustrated History of the Canadian Labour Movement* (Ottawa 1980), 25; "Report of the Commissioner Appointed to Inquire Into Grievances of Settlers on Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway Land," *BCSP*, 1901 337-68.

⁴⁴*Canadian Parliamentary Companion, 1886* (Ottawa 1887); "List of Persons Entitled to Vote," *BCSP*, 1899, 315-26.

⁴⁵Smith's liberal views were discussed broadly in "Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes," *CSP*, 1903, 1066-73. See also Craven, 'An Impartial Umpire'.

⁴⁶Robin, *Radical Politics*, 42. See also Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism," 155-7, 174; A.R. McCormack, "Emergence of the Socialist Movement," 7-9.

IV

ASIAN MINE LABOUR was a distinguishing feature of Vancouver Island's 19th century coalmining industry.⁴⁷ It was a response to a twofold problem facing coal operators. Held back by a persistent labour shortage, operators had to take care not to drive away skilled workers with heavy-handed discipline; conversely, no blueprint for restraining production costs would succeed so long as a relatively small number of skilled white colliers monopolized positions underground. An obvious solution would be to procure additional workers, but the remoteness of Vancouver Island made recruitment a far from easy undertaking. In the first twenty years of mining in the colony unskilled labourers could be obtained among the aboriginal population and from the 1860s small numbers of strikebreakers were brought in from San Francisco or Washington Territory.⁴⁸ The few other white settlers in British Columbia were either too settled in agricultural pursuits or, as was thought to be the case among former goldminers, too independently-minded for colliery employment. Although frequently useful in the short-term, none of these groups would satisfy the collieries' greater workforce requirements. Colonial capitalists therefore peered out of "Britain's little window towards the Orient," where they found an ample supply of semi-skilled and unskilled workers with which to invigorate sluggish industrial expansion.⁴⁹

Asian labour — like Coast Salish miners and Californian strikebreakers — had three primary attractions. First, and most simply, it reduced the persistent scarcity of free labour in British Columbia. Second, Asian workers would accept lower pay than any other class of miners, theoretically reducing costs per ton of

⁴⁷For histories of the Chinese in British Columbia see Edgar Wickberg, *et al.*, *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada* (Toronto 1982); David Lai, "The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in Victoria: Its Origins and Functions," *BC Studies* 15 (Autumn 1972), 53-67; W. Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Opinion Towards Orientals in British Columbia* (Montréal 1978); W. Wilmott, "Approaches to the Study of Chinese in British Columbia," *BC Studies*, 4 (Spring 1970), 38-52.

⁴⁸Rolf Knight, *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Indian Labour in British Columbia, 1858-1930* (Vancouver 1978), 138.

⁴⁹F.W. Howay, W.N. Sage, and H.F. Angus, *British Columbia and the United States: The North Pacific Slope from Fur Trade to Aviation* (Toronto 1942), 182. Race was, very clearly, pivotal in determining social attitudes and in directing social conflict along certain channels, but was it more so than class? This has been the subject of a long-running debate among British Columbian historians and sociologists. The mainstays of the discourse are Peter Ward, "Race and Class in the Social Structure of British Columbia, 1870-1914," *BC Studies*, 45 (Spring 1980), 17-35; Rennie Warburton, "Race and Class in British Columbia: A Comment," *BC Studies*, 49 (Spring 1981), 79-85; Peter Ward, "Race and Class in British Columbia: A Reply," *BC Studies*, 50 (Summer 1981), 52. But see also Gillian Creese, "Class, Ethnicity and Conflict: The Case of Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1880-1923," *Workers, Capital and the State in British Columbia*, 55-85.

coal mined. Third, the low-wage adult Asian workforce obviated the need for white youths underground. This, of itself, was not particularly significant to mine operators, but insofar as the displacement of white boys also diminished the hold which white miners' families exercised on jobs in the pits, the introduction of Chinese labour was of critical importance.⁵⁰

The arrival of the first Chinese on the coalfield was announced in the pages of the *Victoria Colonist* in 1867. By the mid-1880s almost half of the Island mines' workforce had come from the peasant population around Toi-san, 150 miles west of Macau.⁵¹ The Toi-sanese had little (if any) experience of mining; the Japanese who arrived in the coalfield in the 1890s were hardly different in this respect.⁵² Asian labour, however, had its own distinctive qualities. The Chinese, for example, were said to be easier to discipline than white or native labourers and their unofficial holidays were fewer than those taken by the Caucasian workforce. According to the VCMLC's operations manager, Samuel Robins, the Chinese were exploited by the company as "a weapon with which to settle" a dispute with British miners at Nanaimo.⁵³ The Middlesbrough *Miners' Advocate* in the 1870s summed up the perceived attributes of Chinese workers which made them so attractive to mine operators, but so threatening to white mineworkers:

The typical Chinaman will bear any amount of oppression without dreaming of retaliation; an absolute despotism at home has thus modelled his mind for the purposes of capitalists abroad; and he will work many hours a day for wretchedly small remuneration.⁵⁴

Tractability (Robins even considered the Chinese "a little too servile") and a willingness to accept half the wages earned by Whites made Asian workers ideal for the purposes of the mineowners.⁵⁵

The deployment of Chinese labour varied from pit to pit according to methods of winning the coal and the disposition of the managers. In the VCMLC's pillar-and-stall mines supervision was not extensive, so Chinese labour could be employed only to a limited degree (and was not used underground at all after 1888). The

⁵⁰A recent approach to this specific set of problems is Gayel A. Horsfall, "Ethnic Conflict in Context: Cumberland, BC, 1880-1940," paper presented at the Sixth BC Studies Conference, November 1990.

⁵¹Wilmott, "Approaches," 38-9; Lai, "Home County and Clan Origins," 3-29. For the state of mining in China during the second half of the nineteenth century see Shannon R. Brown and Tim Wright, "Technology, Economics and Politics in the Modernization of China's Coal-Mining Industry, 1850-1895," *Explorations in Economic History*, 18 (1981), 60-83.

⁵²Yuzo Murayama, "Contractors, Collusion, and Competition: Japanese Immigrant Railroad Laborers in the Pacific Northwest, 1898-1911," *Explorations in Economic History*, 21 (1984), 291.

⁵³"Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration," *CSP*, 1885, xvi.

⁵⁴*Miners' Advocate* (Middlesbrough), 7 March 1874.

⁵⁵"Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration," *CSP*, 1902, 74.

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Dunsmuir's operated mainly longwall mines in which the Chinese could be utilized more generally. At Wellington No. 2 Colliery in 1887, for example, a white overman and two occidental firemen were the only exceptions in an otherwise wholly Chinese mine. Following the 1888 disaster at Wellington, Robert Dunsmuir felt obligated to remove Chinese employees from subterranean work. His son and son-in-law, however, were convinced that the success of the family business hinged on the use of Oriental labour in all parts of the mines. As one of James Dunsmuir's managers commented nicely some years later, "the coal industry would be at a standstill, and many a one would have to go without breakfast if the Chinese were completely excluded from the mines."⁵⁶ James had less success at his Alexandra mine where only white miners were employed (at double the usual wage paid to Chinese). The pit's general-manager contended that Dunsmuir:

... appeared to think he could run as cheaply without [Chinese labourers] as with them; not a very good result financially. [sic] The expense was increased. It cost nearly double in track-laying, pushing and that kind of work generally. I have failed to find a single white man that will do the work of two Chinamen at this class of work, and some Chinamen will do at that work as much as white men.⁵⁷

By contrast, Samuel Robins was an unrelenting opponent of the importation and employment of Chinese labour at Nanaimo during the 1880s and 1890s. At the turn of the century the Nanaimo mine boss continued to claim that he "would rather suffer ruin first" than reintroduce Chinese labour below the surface.⁵⁸ The use of Chinese and Japanese labour underground by the Dunsmuir's therefore became more and more anomalous in the remaining years of the 19th century. Legislative prohibitions of Chinese labour from pitwork were introduced in British Columbia in 1890, but these, like the Dunsmuir's' promises to restrict Asians from minework, were shortlived.⁵⁹

White miners had three main objections to the use of Chinese labour: the assumed unassimilability of the Chinese, the dangers which Asians workers were thought to create underground, and the threat to white incomes represented by a large pool of cheap labour.

Anti-Asian protest in the coalfield had been relatively restrained until about 1883. Around that time the Knights of Labor took up the twin cudgels of exclusion and repatriation, ostensibly anxious that the Chinese could never participate in the British-Canadian culture that was being forged. The Knights complained that Asians were too prone to infectious diseases and moral failings for the good of the white population:

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 107-8.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, testimony of Francis Deans Little, 76.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 74, 81, 83-85; W.A. Carrothers, *Emigration From the British Isles With Special Reference to the Development of the Overseas Dominions* (London 1929), table xiv, 212.

⁵⁹British Columbia, *Royal Statutes, 1890* (Victoria 1891), 115.

[The Chinese] live, generally, in wretched hovels, dark, ill-ventilated, filthy, and unwholesome, and crowded together in such numbers as must utterly preclude all ideas of comfort, morality, or even decency, while from the total absence of all sanitary arrangements, their quarters are an abomination to the eyes and nostrils and a constant source of damage to the health and life of the community. [...] All history proves that a free, manly, intelligent and contented laboring population is the foundation and the source of the prosperity of any and every nation.... No nation has every yet become or remained free and powerful, which degraded its labor or sought to deprive its workers of a just share in the produce of their toil. Now, Chinese labor is confessedly of a low, degraded, and servile type, the inevitable result of whose employment in competition with free white labor is to lower and degrade the latter without any appreciable elevation of the former.⁶⁰

The Knights concluded that the Chinese were "most undesirable" and "a positively dangerous class to any country having free popular institutions."

While evidence of racial intolerance abounds for the 19th century coalfield, it is also true that compromises had to be made within this prejudicial crucible. Asian and white miners lived together under the same roof, they shared their meals, and they had a common interest in raising sufficient coal to buoy up their respective wages. Simultaneously, African-American immigrants occupied positions of respect and credibility in the mining community and British miners found wives among the Coast Salish population. The rhetoric of racism was typically nasty, mean-spirited and blinkered, but the lived experience of racial diversity was not consistently antagonistic.

The second allegation (that Chinese miners, unfamiliar with the techniques of European heavy industry, increased the dangers of underground work) appealed to the interests of mine owners. The prohibition of oriental labour from Island collieries in 1887 and 1888 followed two major explosions which were attributed to Chinese carelessness. Regardless of more likely explanations for the disasters, the view that Chinese labour made mining more hazardous was certainly not dispelled over the twenty years that followed. The fact that the all-Chinese South Wellington pit had one of the best accident records of any Island mine in the 1890s was simply ignored. Samuel Robins was one among many who felt that an inability to communicate in written and spoken English, a perceived tendency to panic, and an apparent disinterest in safety measures made the Chinese unsuitable for work underground.⁶¹ White firemen in the mines complained, moreover, that the Chinese disregarded efforts to reduce mine hazards. One claimed in 1902 that:

⁶⁰"Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration," *CSP, 1885*, 82-4. Because the Knights could not testify as an unregistered secret society, the Commission was issued with a statement along with other evidence. See Wickberg, *From China to Canada*, 53-4, 155-6.

⁶¹"Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration, 1902", 72, 83-4; "Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes," *CSP, 1903*, 298.

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If safety lamps are furnished and kept closed there would be no danger from the lamp alone. I have locked the lamp and given it to a Chinaman and going on shortly afterwards I have found it opened. I would like to see a lamp a Chinaman could not open.⁶²

The Ministry of Mines had, in fact, already given official sanction to the view that the Chinese miners were "an ignorant and therefore a dangerous class of workmen," a prejudice that was shared by large numbers of white colliers on the Island. More so than allegedly insurmountable racial differences, concerns for workplace safety seemed measureable and demonstrable.

Finally, it was argued that the Chinese posed a threat to the incomes of colonial miners. Occidental protest in this respect had two main elements. First, the Chinese were prepared to work for roughly half the wages normally paid to white miners; this drew into question the immediate job security of unskilled white 'oncost' workers and the long-term prospects for skilled hewers, whose talents the Chinese might someday acquire. During industrial disputes the Chinese had been available to act as strikebreakers and this was, of course, seen as antagonistic to the interests of Euro-Canadian labour. Second, Asian males were very often to be found in mine jobs which would otherwise have been the sphere of occidental boys. This was partly due to the insufficient numbers of boys 16 years of age or older in the local workforce.⁶³

The use of Chinese labour had serious implications for British miners' families on Vancouver Island, or at least that was the conviction of the hewers themselves. In 1885 the Knights of Labor complained that as a result of Chinese workers in the pits:

... our boys grow up to near manhood without an opportunity to earn any part of their living such as they might have were there no Chinese, and such as boys have in other parts of the world. Our girls, too, cannot find remunerative employment, from the fact that the Chinese are largely employed as domestics.

It was alleged by white colliers that under these circumstance "a race of practical miners, trained from their childhood to the difficulties and dangers of mining, can hardly even arise..."⁶⁴ By 1900 white opinion had not changed noticeably. One mine employee from England, perhaps musing on the forces which carried him to Pacific Canada, believed that it was "a national weakness to bring about conditions which compel our youth to emigrate" and at the top of his list of local expulsive factors he placed the use of Chinese labour. So, even if skilled adult white miners'

⁶²"Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration, 1902," 84.

⁶³One solution — suggested in 1893 by James Dunsmuir — was to lower the minimum working age from 16 to 14 years. If this request was accommodated Dunsmuir stated that he would replace his Chinese workers with white boys. Wickberg, *From China to Canada*, 50-1.

⁶⁴"Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration, 1885," 158, 88.

positions were never directly threatened, the job security (and job prospects) of their sons seemingly became more precarious.⁶⁵

Economically, then, the Chinese inconvenienced British miners on the Island; in terms of workplace power struggles, however, their presence posed a more serious problem. In most of the Old Country coalfields hewers had customarily been able to influence, if not control, the size and character of the workforce, a capacity which they repeatedly fought to preserve. On Vancouver Island the use of Asian labour compromised that authority. Employers like the Dunsmuirs perceived in the Chinese a means of loosening the grip of colliers' organizations on the labour supply and, implicitly, on the cost of production. When colliery owners increased pressure on white miners' wages, British hewers on Vancouver Island responded with demands for legislation to deal with not only the Chinese issue, but also poor ventilation, the absence of an effective checkweighman system, and a universal eight-hour day. Like physical coercion, evictions from company housing, wage cuts and the arbitrary assignment of places at the coalface, the introduction of Chinese labour underground was another management tactic calculated to stimulate output in Vancouver Island mines. And like other aspects in the mine owners' strategy to instill in a British workforce a sense of industrial discipline on the frontier, the use of Asian labour was protested by white miners through industrial action.

Racial (or at least ethnic) division would have been nothing new to expatriate British miners. In British coalfields in the last century, the crux of conflict was principally the relationship between Irish Catholic immigrants on the one hand and native Scottish or English Protestants on the other. Like the Chinese, the Irish were sometimes obtained to act as strikebreakers and as a means of spurring on the local workforce.⁶⁶ Living in ghettos that cropped up in many British colliery towns, Irish miners and their families were viewed as completely alien by their mainland co-workers and neighbours.⁶⁷ Attention was drawn to physical distinctions while

⁶⁵The direct impact of Chinese labour on white miners' wages should in no way be exaggerated. Even the Knights of Labor were aware that unskilled Chinese mineworkers did not produce the quantity or quality of coal won by skilled white miners who earned a comparable collective wage. Production records maintained by the Ministry of Mines reveal how, year by year, increases in the size of the Chinese workforce failed to generate corresponding improvements in output. In fact, it is only after 1888 — the year of the Wellington explosion and the start of underground exclusion — that output per man-year starts to advance. See, British Columbia, Bureau of Information, *General Review of Mining in British Columbia*, Bulletin No. 19 (Victoria 1904); British Columbia, Economic Council, *Statistics of Industry in British Columbia, 1871-1934* (Victoria 1935); "Minister of Mines Report," BCSP.

⁶⁶Roy Church, *The History of the British Coal Industry* (Oxford 1986), 221-2; John Benson, *British Coalminers in the Nineteenth Century: A Social History* (Dublin 1980), 191.

⁶⁷Alan Campbell, *The Lanarkshire Miners: A Social History of their Trade Unions, 1775-1874* (Edinburgh 1979), 191; E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth 1981), 480.

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religious and moral differences were presented as insurmountable.⁶⁸ "Green labour" — usually Irish — was also seen as the cause of avoidable accidents underground; untutored in the "knacks" of the trade, mineworkers drawn from Ireland's countryside were regarded dimly, as were the employers who delivered them down into the pits.⁶⁹ Ethnic conflict of this kind began early in the 19th century and survived into the 20th: the British miners who emigrated to Vancouver Island would not have been strangers to discrimination, its uses, and some of its limitations.⁷⁰

In fact, ethnic and racial division was virtually endemic to 19th century mining communities. It was a product of capitalism's need to replenish and expand the supply of unskilled labour in a sector where economic growth outstripped the ability of natural population increase to furnish youths in adequate numbers.⁷¹ This was as true in Ayrshire and Illinois as it was on Vancouver Island. Deeper pits and the acquisition of relatively greater skills by faceworkers generated aggressive wage demands; the prospect of rising costs could be partly overcome by importing unskilled workers, characteristically peasants. The flashpoint was, therefore, between a skilled elite and unskilled labour.

⁶⁸M.A.G. Otuathaigh, "The Irish in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Problems in Integration," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 31 (1981), 149-73; J.H. Clapham, "Irish Immigration into Great Britain in the Nineteenth Century," *Bulletin of the International Committee of Historical Sciences*, V, Part III, 20 (July 1933), 596-604.

⁶⁹Royden Harrison, "Introduction," in Royden Harrison, ed., *Independent Collier: The Coal Miner as Archetypal Proletarian Reconsidered* (Sussex 1978), 4-5.

⁷⁰There was also a tradition of British anti-Asian sentiment with which the Vancouver Island miners had a symbiotic connection. At the turn of the century the British Columbian situation was referred to by sinophobic speakers at the 35th Trade Union Congress to galvanize concern over the "Asiatic locust," which they feared was about to descend on Britain itself. May, "The British Working-Class," 7-8, 21-2. For the situation in American mining districts see: Robert D. Parnet, *Labor and Immigration in Industrial America* (Boston 1981), 31, 38; Charles Robert Leinenweber, "Immigration and the Decline of Internationalism in the American Working Class Movement, 1864-1919," PhD thesis, University of California (Berkeley) 1968, 43; Rob Kroes, "The Twain Have Met: Migration From the Far East to the Far West," in Rob Kroes, ed., *American Immigration, Its Variety and Lasting Imprint* (Amsterdam 1979), 202-24; Mark Wyman, *Hard Rock Epic: Western Miners and the Industrial Revolution 1860-1910* (Berkeley 1979), 32-3, 37-40. Nativism in Nova Scotian mining towns is briefly considered in Donald MacLeod, "Colliers, Colliery Safety, and Workplace Control: The Nova Scotian Experience," in Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1983), 226-53.

⁷¹See Michael Flinn, *The History of the British Coal Industry* (Oxford 1984) 2: 339-49; Church, *History of the British Coal Industry*, 215-6.

V

WHEN AND WHERE CHINESE LABOUR began to enter the Vancouver Island pits in large numbers, the conflict that arose was essentially over the relationship between safety and skill. The extent to which colliers were skilled was (and is) contentious, but the most widely recognized benchmark of the white hewers' aptitude was his ability to detect potentially dangerous geological changes.⁷²

The high content of hydrogen and oxygen that made Vancouver Island coal so marketable also made pitwork extremely risky, by both British and North American standards. Even in the second decade of the 20th century — by which time ventilation and safety legislation had been introduced in British Columbia — the death rate per thousand mine employees was more than twice the figure for Cape Breton mines or the average for American mines.⁷³ Few British coalfields of the same period were comparably dangerous. Some areas (like South Staffordshire) were prone to rockfalls while others (the north-east of England and parts of Scotland) were notorious for explosions. Rarely in Britain were these features combined, as they were on Vancouver Island. And nowhere was the fear of flooding greater.⁷⁴ The magnitude of Vancouver Island disasters was also on a similar scale to what one could find in the much larger contemporary British collieries. The Nanaimo explosion of 1887 claimed 157 lives, a total greater than all but three of the largest late-19th century colliery mine accidents in England, Scotland and Wales.⁷⁵ And behind the cataclysmic pit disasters on Vancouver Island, as in Britain, was a constant attrition rate, a demoralizing attribute of work in mines where safety regulations were poorly enforced.⁷⁶

Already (and for good reason) concerned about dangerous conditions underground, British hewers on Vancouver Island were anxious that infusions of large numbers of inexperienced labourers would increase the possibility of a mining accident. The addition of unskilled miners, moreover, would implicitly underrate the craftsmanship of white faceworkers. The primary challenge posed by Asian

⁷²See Joan Wallach Scott, *The Glassworkers of Carmaux: French Craftsmen and Political Action in a Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, MA 1974), 61; Ian McKay, "By Wisdom," 18; Alan Campbell, "Skill, Independence, and Trade Unionism in the Coalfields of Britain with Particular Reference to Scotland," Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1981), 155-74.

⁷³Michael R. Haines, "Fertility, Nuptiality, and Occupation: A Study of Coal Mining Populations and Regions in England and Wales in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, VIII, 2 (Autumn 1977), 266.

⁷⁴P.E.H. Hair, "Mortality from Violence in British Coal Mines, 1800-50," *EHR*, 2nd series, XXI (December 1968), 549. Sub-marine mining also occurred in Nova Scotia. See John Mellor, *The Company Store: James Bryson McLachlan and the Cape Breton Miners 1900-1925* (Toronto 1983), 83-5.

⁷⁵E.J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: From 1750 to the Present Day* (Harmondsworth 1981), 116.

⁷⁶Benson, *British Coalminers*, 38-9.

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labour, in the view of white miners, was that it highlighted the disregard some mine operators held for the life-preserving knowledge of veteran colliers.

The political struggle of white, predominantly British colliers on Vancouver Island, whether at the polls, in their unions and societies or against their employers, was profoundly influenced by this concern over skills. After all, it was initially their knowledge of mining technique and geology that made the British miners attractive to colonial mine owners. The subsequent introduction of less-skilled workers contributed to the bisection of the underground workforce: one group perceived itself as having skills approximating a 'craft,' the other being regarded as a kind of apprentice class at best. Vancouver Island colliers repeatedly raised concerns over loss of status and workplace authority, over what some interpreted as a systematic 'de-skilling' of the mining process, and over a commensurate degradation of workplace safety.

The peculiar division of labour observed in the mines and the ways in which wages were distributed fostered the appearance on Vancouver Island of a senior, experienced class of white hewers who played an important role in the miners' political movements. As a better paid and relatively skilled stratum, these miners constituted a workplace elite. The implications of this subterranean hierarchy are most clearly evident in the experience of the MMLPA. The Association included not only hewers but also less-skilled or unskilled mine labourers; nonetheless, as in Britain, leadership figures came almost exclusively from the ranks of the former.⁷⁷ Underground — on Vancouver Island and in Britain — the hewers held the most coveted positions, their abilities and know-how largely determining how much coal was mined and, consequently, how much pay was earned. Unskilled or 'oncost' workers provided the muscle necessary to deliver the coal to the surface of the mine, or they cleaned the pit roads, worked the ventilation system, or tended to pitponies, but they contributed little else.⁷⁸ After 1888 a growing proportion of the oncost labourers in Island pits were occidentals; subsequently the MMLPA could embrace a larger number of colliery workers than the Knights had been inclined to. The inclusion of oncost labourers in a union with the hewers was necessary, otherwise the faceworkers could be replaced during strikes by practiced, white hauliers and runners. Despite belonging to the same association, distinctions between Caucasian hewers and Caucasian labourers did not disappear and their interests remained somewhat dissimilar. The MMLPA's long-term priorities, for example, were tailored more towards the needs of geographically persistent hewers than to those of the more transient 'labourers.' It was particularly feared that aggressive wage demands from white oncost workers would only hasten the return of Chinese labour underground. To avoid this the hewers more than once stifled

⁷⁷ Alan Campbell and Fred Reid, "The Independent Collier in Scotland," *Independent Collier*, 61-2.

⁷⁸ For greater detail on the organization of work in these mines see Belshaw, "Mining Technique."

protests among the occidental runners.⁷⁹ On balance, the nominal support of white oncost workers led the hewers (who, generally speaking, enjoyed higher wages, relative job security, and better housing) to encourage a less confrontational approach to industrial relations.

The term, 'labour aristocracy,' was devised in the 19th century to describe that part of the working-class which enjoyed increasingly and substantially higher wages than less-skilled workers.⁸⁰ A further refinement of the model takes into account superior living conditions and working conditions, along with better "prospects of future advancement" for the labour aristocrat and his children.⁸¹ The effect of these differentiations within the working class, argues one school, was to distance the labour aristocracy from the proletariat, to encourage *embourgeoisement*, and to broaden the appeal of 'respectability' among workers generally, all in a manner which would weaken working-class unity and resolve in the class struggle.⁸² In mining communities on either side of the globe the hewers were typically the most skilled of the colliery workers and they received much higher wages than did their oncost assistants. The recruitment of hewers directly from British coalfields for Vancouver Island was nothing less than confirmation of the hewers' talents.

Differences between the 'aristocratic' hewers in British mines and those in the Nanaimo area were, nonetheless, substantial. For example, faceworkers in colonial mines were not necessarily the most seasoned members of the workforce, whereas in Britain seniority was one of the hallmarks of the labour aristocracy. Nor was it always possible for "any reasonably strong boy" to graduate into the ranks of the hewers.⁸³ This last distinction is of critical importance: as another writer argues, 'skill' partly involves the workers' ability to control access to their trade and to the knowledge of the art they ply.⁸⁴ Vancouver Island miners' sons were effectively

⁷⁹ "Report on the Wellington Strike," 381-2. A similar conflict arose in British collieries. See David Gilbert, *Class, Community, and Collective Action: Social Change in Two British Coalfields, 1850-1926* (Oxford 1992), 76.

⁸⁰ Henry Pelling, "The Concept of the Labour Aristocracy," *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (London 1968), 47.

⁸¹ E.J. Hobsbawm, "The Labour Aristocracy in Nineteenth-Century Britain," in *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London 1979), 273.

⁸² See R.Q. Gray, "The Labour Aristocracy in the Victorian Class Structure," in F. Parkin, ed., *The Social Analysis of Class Structure*, (London 1974), 25-6; R.Q. Gray, *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh* (Oxford 1976).

⁸³ See for example G. McLellan, "The Labour Aristocracy and 'Incorporation': Notes on Terms in the Social History of the Working Class," *Social History*, vi, 1 (January 1981), 71-81; H.F. Moorhouse, "The Marxist Theory of the Labour Aristocracy," *Social History*, III, 1 (January 1978), 61-82.

⁸⁴ Alan Campbell, "Skill, Independence, and Trade Unionism in the Coalfields of Britain with Particular Reference to Scotland," in Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1981) 156-7.

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excluded from the pits by management's decision to engage Asian labour. As well as disrupting traditions of artisanal inheritance underground, the decision to flood the mines with Chinese labour suggested that the skills of Old Country colliers were, in reality, of little consequence. If experience, knowledge and manual skill were held no more highly than sheer force of numbers, then the British colliers were destined to face a reduction in status, security, and wages. Frustrated by their inability to fully limit entry into their trade, the skilled, British miners on Vancouver Island looked to industrial action and political strategies for solutions.

VI

DURING THE SECOND HALF of the 19th century Vancouver Island miners established for themselves a reputation for militance, for racism, and, eventually, for political radicalism. Like miners almost anywhere in the English-speaking world they seemed pre-disposed to engage their employers in protracted conflicts which sometimes climaxed in violent confrontations between employees, operators, local citizenry, and the armed representatives of the state. By the end of this period the miners had elected sympathetic delegates to the Provincial Legislature and the Dominion House of Commons. Their impact on regional politics was unquestionable.

Nevertheless, trade unionism on Vancouver Island was slow to consolidate its gains. Attempts at organization in the Dunsmuir towns were fruitless throughout the century, and in election after election staunchly 'anti-labour' candidates were returned with huge majorities. It is to go too far to profess, along with Ross McCormack, that "in general" the local working class "agreed on the basic principles of Marxism; they were revolutionaries."⁸⁵ While the case may be conceded that the Island's socialist parties in some instances advocated a revolutionary path, it is impossible to sustain the illusion that the trade union leadership or the miners as a whole were converts.

From the Fort Rupert experiment through a 1901-2 strike at Extension, the causes of conflict were principally the same. The issue of wages was important, but almost always secondary. When Eric Hobsbawm reviewed the debate on the British labour aristocracy, he concluded that industrial artisans or 'tradesmen' were "doing what they had always done" in their movements and protests of the 1880s and 1890s:

... defending their rights, their wages, and their now threatened conditions, stopping management from telling the lads how to do their job, and relying on the democracy of the workplace rank-and-file against the world⁸⁶

⁸⁵ A.R. McCormack, "Emergence of the Socialist Movement," 21.

⁸⁶ E.J. Hobsbawm, "Artisan or Labour Aristocrat?," *EHR*, 2nd Series, xxxvii, 3 (August 1984), 368-9.

It was much the same on Vancouver Island. Miners who had learnt their 'craft' in England or Scotland or Wales travelled to the Pacific Coast colony in order to capitalize on those abilities. Thereafter, they defied mine owners who either refused to recognize the skills of pitmen or who sought to de-skill the workforce by routinizing production on longwall lines, by introducing Asian miners who had practically no experience of colliery work, and by increasing supervision. As one Wellington miner observed in 1891, that year's strike was provoked by:

A man coming into your place and telling you this and that, and directing you how to fix the place. The way those men were trying to use me I had to get into an organization to support myself....⁸⁷

Although the use of Chinese miners reduced opportunities for boys and challenged household incomes, what was more important was management's unambiguous statement of contempt for what the émigré British miners valued most: their hard-earned skills.⁸⁸

It is tempting to regard political and industrial unrest in these years as suggestive of British or American antecedents. Unions grew on the Island only slightly off the pace being set in some — not all — British mining towns; the Knights of Labor and the Western Federation of Miners also brought in American influences. As well, electoral politics in the province certainly shared many similarities with what was being attempted by the English Trades Union Congress and its appendage, the Labour Party. But this is to overlook the strength of working-class conservatism in British colliery towns and the influence those instincts would have had in the colony. While it can be allowed that some British miners arrived on the Coast imbued with the ethos of labourism, socialism or new unionism, many did not. What virtually all of the miners did share was the experience of financial hardship and high wage expectations associated with making the move to Vancouver Island. Their radicalization — to the extent that it took place at all in the 19th century — was due in large measure to a collision between financial and status expectations on the one hand, and the reality of frontier industrialization on the other. The 'pinking' of British Columbian labour entailed more than the imposition onto a new resource setting of pre-tested responses to conflict. Clearly, some of the packaging of regional working-class organization had been borrowed from Britain and the United States, but these qualities were accessible through colonial and provincial newspapers. The history of the local labour movement suggests that, overall, a less derivative origin was more important.

The particular posture eventually adopted by British hewers on Vancouver Island stemmed not so much from an ethnic predisposition for militance as from

⁸⁷"Report on the Wellington Strike," cclxii.

⁸⁸For a comparable situation among Canadian crafts workers in the 19th century see Conley, "Frontier Labourers."

the character of mine work locally. What the miners perceived as needlessly worsened conditions underground, a shrinking ability to control the pace of work, and the loss of opportunities for their sons, nephews and younger brothers dominated the political and industrial agenda. Their disgust with the Dunsmuir, the VCMLC, and various provincial governments reflected the colliers' frustration in seeking secure status in the mines and upward social mobility above ground. Ironically, it may be that West Coast labour militance owes more to working-class conservatism than has hitherto been acknowledged.

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