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Of Karl Marx and the Bluenose: Colin Campbell McKay and the Legacy of Maritime Socialism

TO BE A SCHOLAR OF ATLANTIC CANADA is to wrestle, often at the very outset of one's inquiries, with a subtle, pervasive and durable language of disparagement and marginalization. It is a struggle against a powerful conventional discourse on regionality — Atlantic Canada as the “backwater”, “excess”, “supplement” or even “policy error” — that, as many times as it has been defeated on the pages of *Acadiensis*, returns as a structuring common-sense in the Toronto *Globe and Mail* and the *Financial Post*. This discourse speaks both in the injudiciously explicit (but for contemporaries also useful) words of Frank Underhill's famous aphorism, “As for the Maritimes...”¹ and also in the less-polished, perhaps more important, notion of “the region that went wrong”, the region that complains too much, or that merely has the function and capacity to mirror, in a warped and defective way, the “national developments” of a truly “national history” in which it has played little if no part.

To this language of disparagement, regional scholarship has responded very effectively with the evidence of the region's “normality”, “progressivism” and “development”: from E. R. Forbes and T. W. Acheson to Judith Fingard, D. A. Muise, Colin Howell and Suzanne Morton (to name just a few historians of the 20th-century region) we find a continuous strategic emphasis whereby, against the enemy of the regional stereotype, one constructs the region as “normal” in its industrialization, social reform movements, social structure and levels of gender and class consciousness.² Particularly in this latter case, which has also been my own

1 Frank Underhill, *The Image of Confederation* (Toronto, 1964), pp. 62-4. This article was first delivered as the W. S. MacNutt Memorial Lecture, Saint John and Fredericton, October 1996. It has since been revised, in part to reflect changing political circumstances and in part to adapt its tone for an academic journal. My thanks to those who commented on the lecture, to my collaborator and colleague Lewis Jackson, and especially to David Frank, whose work has contributed so much to our historical understanding of the region's socialist movement.

2 See E. R. Forbes, *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes* (Fredericton, 1989). I am drawing a parallel here between Atlantic Canadian regional historiography and that of Québec, where Ronald Rudin has shown a similar tendency to attempt to “normalize” Québec history by treating the province like any other region of North America. Note Ronald Rudin, “Revisionism and the Search for a Normal Society: A Critique of Recent Quebec Historical Writing”, *Canadian Historical Review*, 73, 1 (March 1992), pp. 30-61.

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interest, the “obviousness” of the evidence — the high levels of strike activity, the vibrancy of the early socialist movement, even the partial rooting, uniquely it would seem in Canada, of a non-immigrant based mass Marxism in Cape Breton — did not diminish the sense historians had of saying something new; moreover, struggling against a “western exceptionalism” which often produced, in pseudo-Marxist garb, the most extravagant and offensive versions of the Maritime stereotype, regional working-class historians had a rather clear sense of the continuing presence and durability of the myth of the conservative, backwater East.

To the counter-stereotypical efforts of historians and other scholars, we may now add those of hundreds of thousands of voters in the region. By transforming the region into Canadian social democracy’s federal pillar of strength on 2 June 1997, and by bringing the provincial New Democratic Party within striking distance of government in Nova Scotia on 24 March 1998, many Maritimers undermined what was left of the myth of “immemorial conservatism”. After 1997-98, it will surely be difficult to say, “As for the Maritimes...” Or will it? A Canadian political discourse articulated to euphemize and to justify the realities of an official nationalism built with difficulty on the base of a British dominion must needs be immensely flexible; and even as the recent votes were being counted, one hears how this “turn to the left” could be handled. The breakthroughs of 1997 and 1998 were transformed into (what else?) symptoms of regional conservatism — a “conservatism” focused obsessively on a collapsing welfare state, with its patronage, inefficiency and narrow horizons. Thus, the revised story goes, the region’s recent upheavals suggest Maritimers are voting as they have always voted, with a fearful and childish dependence — and in Acadia, much of urban Nova Scotia, and even in Yarmouth, this meant victories for the social democrats. (Such is the magic of stereotypical thinking that exactly this “explanation” would also cover victories for Liberals and Conservatives). Or they could be transformed into mere unthinking “protest votes” (against hard times) or “personal votes” (for NDP leader Alexa McDonough). Missing in much of the commentary is any developed sense of the upheaval’s historical precondition — the existence within the Maritimes of a social-democratic political bloc, capable of taking advantage of the weakness of traditional parties and of “deconstructing” their neo-liberal ideologies. Subtler, more complex engagements with the question of the “Atlantic Revolution” of the 1990s would mean drawing out the depth and tenacity of Maritime socialism, paying attention to both the continuities and the breaks between the “social evolution” envisaged by NDPers today and the socialist vision advocated in past decades.

This article looks at the life and times of just one regional socialist, Colin McKay,³

3 No relation to the present author. For more biographical detail and a selection of McKay’s writings, see Ian McKay, ed., *For A Working-Class Culture in Canada: A Selection of Colin McKay’s Writings on Sociology and Political Economy, 1897-1939* (St. John’s and Fredericton, 1996), and Lewis Jackson and Ian McKay, eds., *Windjammers and Bluenose Sailors: Stories of the Sea by Colin McKay* (Lockeport, 1993). For articles placing McKay in the context of Canadian sociology and political economy, see Ian McKay, “Changing the Subject(s) of the ‘History of Canadian Sociology’: The Case of Colin McKay and Spencerian Marxism, 1890-1940”, *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, forthcoming, and Ian McKay, “A Third Kind of Marxism: Colin McKay, Socialist Political Economy, and the Analysis of the Great Depression”, *Studies in Political Economy*, 55 (Spring 1998), pp. 127-54.

and at just one collection of texts, drawn from the period 1897-1939. In part, it simply repeats a message working-class historians have been sending for more than 20 years, and which the regional electorate has obligingly confirmed: working-class, socialist and social democratic activism is as “East Coast” as codfish, *Anne of Green Gables* and the schooner *Bluenose*. A “rhetoric of regionality” that says otherwise, and that somehow paints progressive protest and working-class activism as “alien” to the region’s true history is false. Socialists, communists, social democrats, labourites and co-operators have been present in the region for more than a century, and through their writing, speaking and activism they have exerted a profound if often subtle influence over its life. True, they have rarely succeeded in making a powerful statement at the ballot-box; true, one defining feature of the region, even to this day, is the distinction (almost lost in 1998) of never having elected a social democratic or farmer-labour government. Beneath the surface of formal politics, however, a subtler influence was exercised; one of the most common Atlantic Canadian politicians of the 20th century — far more influential, in fact, than the outright reactionary — has been the “left” or “socially conscious” liberal who, preternaturally alert to the potential challenge of socialism, does everything possible to co-opt the challenge from the left. Angus L. Macdonald and Norman McLeod Rogers are two Nova Scotian instances of such “new liberals”, unmistakably influenced by and responsive to the “menace of socialism” in ways which cannot be registered in terms of public opinion polls or voting results. We are well underway in the recovery of the history of regional socialism; what has been less discussed is the region’s 20th century new liberalism, the many Atlantic architects of the Canadian welfare state.⁴

Here I would like to take a somewhat different tack. I am suggesting not only that there were many radicals and socialists in Atlantic Canada’s past, but also that there was in some ways a regionally-accented socialism. That is, I would like to show, by exploring McKay’s writings, not only that the socialist idea had been “imported”, but that to an important extent it had been “adapted” and “indigenized”. If much of our effort has rightly been placed in showing that the region’s working people were “the same” in responding creatively and energetically to their surroundings, I find in the case of McKay a certain element also of subtle regional “difference”, at least in the *tone* of the pivotal arguments. Although by no means advancing an extreme (not to

4 An important step towards the recovery of this legacy (and the first contemporary notice of Colin McKay) can be found in David Frank and Nolan Reilly, “The Emergence of the Socialist Movement in the Maritimes, 1899-1916”, *Labour/Le Travail*, 4 (1979), pp. 85-113, which emphasizes the Socialist Party of Canada; an important biography of a major figure in the Socialist Party of Canada and later the Communist Party is Nicholas Fillmore, *Maritime Radical: The Life and Times of Roscoe Fillmore* (Toronto, 1993). For the region’s most famous Communist and labour radical, see David Frank’s many articles and forthcoming biography of J.B. McLachlan. Cape Breton’s transition from the CP to the CCF is chronicled in Michael Earle and Herb Gamberg, “The United Mine Workers and the Coming of the CCF to Cape Breton”, in Michael Earle, ed., *Workers and the State in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Fredericton, 1989), pp. 85-108. For a brief look at the social democratic tradition, see Ian McKay, “The Maritime CCF: Reflections on a Tradition”, in Ian McKay and Scott Milsom, eds., *Towards a New Maritimes* (Charlottetown, 1992), pp. 67-83. There is ample room for more monographs, theses and articles exploring aspects of the left-wing tradition as well as the socially-conscious “new liberalism” in the region.

say premature) argument for “regional exceptionalism”, I would like tentatively to suggest that there were things about the way Colin McKay talked, and the things he talked about, that do seem to have been adapted to the specificities of his region, and to the particular socio-historical realities with which he came in contact. McKay was neither a typical citizen of the region nor a typical Canadian socialist; but I will argue that, although in many respects idiosyncratic and also unavoidably dated, McKay’s writings and activism are not only indications of the recurrent themes and questions raised by socialists about the region, but that they also have much to tell us today, as we wrestle with the neo-liberal social and economic realities of our own time. They constitute, perhaps, the first sustained attempt to articulate the Maritime ideals of community and regional belonging to the universal ideals of socialism and human progress; and it is in this dialectic of “difference” and “sameness” that their fascination lies.

It is remarkable that Atlantic Canadians have so completely forgotten Colin Campbell McKay. He was one of the most important socialists in Canada from 1900 to 1939: not only was he a founding organizer of the Canadian Socialist League, our very first home-grown general socialist organization, but he was also a major influence on the All-Canadian Congress of Labour, one of the forerunners of today’s Canadian Labour Congress, and he was widely-regarded across the labour movement as a knowledgeable and talented writer on economic questions. Possibly he was himself to blame for his own obscurity: McKay was an obsessively private man, who never married, who never joined a major political party, and who had few close friends; when he died in Ottawa in 1939, the *Ottawa Journal* remarked enigmatically that “Humanity is compounded of strange human beings. Colin McKay was one of the strangest...”.⁵ Yet he was also an obsessively public man, who, after he had finished his eight to ten hours of paid labour for the day — whether as a working seaman in the 1890s or as a parliamentary correspondent in the 1930s — would then wade into the dense theoretical works of the political economists or a study of “social evolution” and attempt to distill what he had learned for a working-class audience. To read McKay is to enter a time when, on the pages of the railway employees’ newspaper or the One Big Union’s *Bulletin*, one could find discussions not only of the economic questions of immediate interest to working people, but discussions of abstract philosophical issues. In the labour press, over almost half a century and in at least 952 articles, McKay wrestled with Karl Marx and John Maynard Keynes, John Stuart Mill and Friedrich List, Karl Kautsky and David Ricardo, even Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel. The lonely passion of Colin McKay was that of bringing to workers the gift of theory; his dream, vividly conveyed in the articles he wrote in Saint John between 1910 and 1914, was that of contributing to a “Working-Class Culture”, an entirely new philosophy for an entirely new social order. And this was a vision that he communicated with a particularly Maritime emphasis.

Yet few Maritimers, even in his native Shelburne, where he was born in 1876, have ever heard of him. He seems to have had a happy childhood: at least that was how McKay later remembered it. Intermittently, when he was expounding on the evils of monopolies or the irrationalities of capitalism, McKay would bring up childhood

5 *Ottawa Journal*, 14 February 1939.

memories of hunting, of familial independence, of neighbourhood solidarity. This seems to have been a characteristic emphasis of much Maritime socialist writing: a deep fascination with community, particularly rural community, as a bench-mark against which capitalist modernity could be measured and (generally) found wanting.⁶ This emphasis obviously reflects regional demographic and occupational realities; it also, more subtly, has given regional socialism a particularly complex stance toward capitalist modernity, which is characteristically seen as an inescapable aspect of social evolution, and yet also unrelentingly contrasted to the rootedness and authenticity of pre-modern life. If there has been more than a touch of anti-modernism among the most “progressive” of regional socialists, it has perhaps been because they, more than their counterparts elsewhere in Canada, have traditionally been able to access “pre-capitalist” memories that nourish “post-capitalist” communitarian ideals. McKay, for his part, knew about the decline of the age of sail, not “abstractly”, but because his own father had had to search for work as far afield as Newfoundland, before he finally amassed sufficient capital to start his own yard.⁷ McKay would return repeatedly to Volume One of Marx’s *Capital*, with its accounts of the dispossession of the peasantry, and find there something of the history of his own region.

In 1891, like many Nova Scotia teenagers, McKay achieved independence from his family by following the sea. By the age of 39, McKay had journeyed to ports throughout the North Atlantic and Caribbean worlds. Wandering, treating cities like temporary winter posts rather than permanent homes, never developing a firm and lasting context — such was McKay’s lifestyle down to the 1930s. It suited him, for he was a self-described “wanderer”. He picked up an enormous fund of knowledge on his travels. By his 50s (when he finally settled down for good in Ottawa) McKay had lived for periods of his life in Montreal, Saint John, Glasgow, Halifax, London, Toronto and Paris — all but the last two selected because of their status as great ports in the North Atlantic world.

“I served my time in sail”, McKay reflected in 1913, “but being rather restless did not follow the sea steadily, and never got beyond mate of a sailing vessel or second mate of a passenger liner. Between times I have worked as a reporter in various cities, and done other odd jobs.... I don’t know that I have had any first-class adventures. I have been shipwrecked, with a fire at sea; in prison; through an able-bodied hurricane; hungry, thirsty, frostbitten, and through the ordinary vicissitudes of life of a sailor and rover”. On another occasion, McKay recalled other experiences as a seaman, serving on American vessels on which “the scuppers ran red” and men had been killed; he also recalled incidents in which men had been “on the verge of cannibalism”.⁸ He apparently never wrote a more detailed account of his seafaring life, but descriptions of its many hardships and occasional pleasures found their way into his sea-stories and

6 Deborah K. Stiles, “Contexts and Identities: Martin Butler, Masculinity, Class and Rural Identity: The Maine-New Brunswick Borderlands, 1857-1915”, Ph.D. thesis, University of Maine, 1998. This study documents the extent to which this important radical and socialist was engaged with rural issues and developed a “rural imaginary”. This was also, of course, a major theme of a variety of many still-underexplored movements, from the Fishermen’s Protective Union of Newfoundland to the Antigonish Movement in Nova Scotia.

7 For more detail, see *For A Working-Class Culture in Canada*, Introduction.

8 *Adventure Magazine*, 6, 2 (June 1913), pp. 216-7; *Montreal Herald*, 2 February 1901.

poems from the late 1890s to 1914. It would be pleasant to agree with a particularly soft-hearted critic of the day, who thought McKay's talent equalled that of Joseph Conrad,⁹ but his stories — often incongruous combinations of earnest social criticism and ripping good yarns — are perhaps more reminiscent of the lesser works of Jack London.

It was at sea that McKay, who never completed high school, began to read "sociology". "Sociology" in much of the North Atlantic world in the 1890s essentially meant Herbert Spencer and his many followers. Herbert Spencer and the many "Spencerians" sought to work out laws of evolution common to both nature and society. Spencer today is commonly remembered for two things. First, he is (somewhat misleadingly) seen as a promoter (if not the founder) of "Social Darwinism", through which the brutal logic of "survival of the fittest" was applied to society. (The origins of Spencer's view of evolution lay more in classical mechanics,¹⁰ and his sociology ultimately came to incorporate both Charles Darwin's "natural selection" and Jean-Baptiste de Monet Lamarck's doctrine of the inheritance of acquired characteristics). Second, and relatedly, he is remembered as an "individualist" and an enemy of the state. Spencer detested the state, on both ethical and "scientific" grounds: ethically, it violated the freedom of the individual; and scientifically, by coddling the poor and the unfit, it impeded humankind's rapid and efficient adaptation to the realities of a new world order. Spencer was so adamant on this point that he even insisted on the individual's right to resign from the state; he opposed public education and even compulsory participation in urban sewage systems, as infringements on the rights of the individual. Thus, although Spencer's arguments have been repeated by many contemporary neo-conservatives, he actually went further than they do in opposition to the state.¹¹

The scholar who in the 1990s thinks that Marxist questions and categories are still interesting runs the risk of dismissal; but to mention Spencer in anything other than a disparaging tone is a far more serious offence against academic good taste. Spencer, the toast of the mid-to-late 19th century, has been utterly disgraced in the 20th. In an intellectual environment that nurtures such a deep suspicion of "master discourses", always excepting those grand narratives discretely underwriting the many "post-" philosophies with which we are now familiar, McKay as a "Spencerian Marxist" can only appear to be doubly cursed, the victim of not one but two wizened Victorian systematizers. No sociologist concerned to make an appropriate intellectual fashion statement today would be caught dead doing his or her intellectual shopping at the drab old Victorian firm of Marx, let alone that of Marx & Spencer.

This reflexive dismissal of Spencer is short-sighted and profoundly ahistorical. Not only is Spencer the unacknowledged prophet of our neo-conservative age, but his writings provide the indispensable key to turn-of-the-century social thought. Of

9 As reported in Henry James Morgan, ed., *The Canadian Men and Women of the Time: A Hand-Book of Canadian Biography of Living Characters* (Toronto, 1912), p. 773.

10 M. W. Taylor, *Men Versus the State: Herbert Spencer and Late Victorian Individualism* (Oxford, 1992), Chapter 2.

11 On Spencer, see especially, Taylor, *Men Versus The State*; David Wiltshire, *The Social and Political Thought of Herbert Spencer* (Oxford, 1978); J. D. Y. Peel, *Herbert Spencer: The Evolution of a Sociologist* (New York, 1971).

course, there is a paradox in the working-class fascination with Spencer, who as an ultra-orthodox individualist opposed the mildest and most beneficial social reforms in education, workplace safety and sanitation. In McKay's case, the ironies are evident: here was a merchant seaman, dependent for his very life on the Plimsoll Line and other intrusive safety measures, and for his livelihood on the state subsidies which so often underwrote the shipping lines which hired him; and here was a sociologist and philosopher who would have cut back, perhaps even eliminated, all such state "meddling". But — much as one might try to avert one's eyes — the Spencerian influence was everywhere in McKay's work, and it would remain powerful to the day he died.

The vogue for Spencer was a phenomenon of the mid-to-late 19th century: from the 1860s to the 1880s in Britain, and well beyond the turn of the century in North America, and down to the Second World War in working-class circles, the name of Spencer resounded as loudly and universally as, say, the name "Foucault" echoes today in our postmodern academy. Why? He spoke directly to the dramatic upheaval in thought initiated by the concept of Evolution; and it was as difficult to avoid Evolution in the late 19th century as it is to avoid Discourse today. (Both of them, revealingly, are all-inclusive words for which it is very difficult to find an adequate synonym). Darwin gave one a sense of contingency: only if wrenched out of its context would "natural selection" provide one with a sense of history's purpose and direction. Spencer, on the other hand, who actually coined the famous phrase "the survival of the fittest", was both more optimistic and more all-inclusive. Spencer's vision of one great process of evolution, at work on the street corner and in the stars, yet directed towards ultimate human goals, could ultimately be both comforting and uplifting. Spencer's key theme — the inevitable adaptation, through processes of functional and structural differentiation and integration, of that social organism called society to its environment — was so sweeping and universal, so "cosmic", that it seemed to provide an explanation for a vast range of phenomena. For the Spencerians, Evolution was a social and natural force that was both the scientific explanation of change, the process of change and the politico-ethical consequences of change. This was not the application to society of "natural science" categories, but the more daring project of elaborating a logic of Evolution that applied to everything in the entire universe.¹² Hence, of course, the biological analogies that were the trade mark of the Spencerians: they signalled their conviction in the oneness of the Cosmos and the penetrable logic of its inner laws of motion. Some of those Spencerian analogies between organisms and social processes — think of such common terms as structure, function, differentiation — would enter the long-term conceptual apparatus of social science, and are in use today. Other Spencerian analogies strike us as being mildly ridiculous. As one student of Spencer puts it, dryly, "The point [in Spencer] of comparing the ruling class, the trading or distributive classes, and the masses, to the mucous, vascular and serous systems of the liver-fluke" was always a little unclear.¹³

Many contemporaries — indeed, some of the greatest minds of the day — found

12 Turner, *Herbert Spencer: A Renewed Appreciation* (Beverly Hills, London and New Delhi, 1985), p. 43.

13 Peel, *Herbert Spencer*, p. 178.

10 *Acadiensis*

this holistic, seemingly scientific and above all logical system compelling. And many of them also found in Spencer, not the musty reactionary of legend, but a firebrand young radical. For in this case, as in that of other intellectuals, it is important to differentiate the young from the mature Spencer. A Chartist sympathizer, an eloquent exponent of the absolute equality of women, not just in the public sphere but in the household, an enemy of the private ownership of land, a critic of all tradition-based inequalities: the young Spencer was more an exponent of anarchism than a reactionary.¹⁴ As is so often the case, he spent the rest of his life backtracking away from, and apologizing for, the outlandishly radical views of his youth: the volume in which they were expounded, *Social Statics*, was subjected to an interminable and cruel process of textual mutilation by its ever-more-reactionary author. But people, especially leftists, have long and unforgiving memories. Socialist feminists hailed Spencer in North America, as did land reformers. The “organic analogy” which Spencer thought underwrote the individualist premises of the “struggle of the fittest to survive” was pressed, by such radicals, to show that Spencer’s individualist premises were outdated in an age of universal and ever-growing interconnections between individuals and peoples. Socialists turned to Spencer, and subtly reconfigured his system, as a way of navigating the stormy intellectual seas of the Age of Evolution. You will find Spencer’s language of “social evolution” everywhere in the Canadian left, and the phrase “co-operative commonwealth”, coined by an American Spencerian, would enjoy a glorious career in Canada, as the name socialist Canadians attached to the influential party, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation they created in 1932, the ancestor of the present-day New Democratic Party.

From the 1890s to the 1930s, Spencer was a major influence on Colin McKay — so much so that he could quote long chunks from *Social Statics* from memory. We can imagine McKay, somewhere off the coast of Nicaragua, perhaps taking the midnight watch after several hours of reading Spencer, watching the phosphorescence dance on the waves, feeling the wind, with the cosmos unfolding all around him, and thinking — “one evolution, proceeding everywhere in the same manner”. Suddenly, everything would seem to fit. McKay in his moment of exaltation would be joining Jack London’s fictional hero Martin Eden,¹⁵ likewise a seaman, likewise a Spencerian, and scores of other turn-of-the-century socialists, whose autobiographical accounts of conversion and salvation so often recalled the decisive significance, not by and large of Marx or Engels, but rather, of Spencer.¹⁶ McKay was unmistakably attracted to Spencerianism’s cosmic vision, its sense of a necessary progress, of a process of rational evolution that was not a chaotic, ethically indifferent, inhuman question of mere survival. At the same time, McKay was unmistakably repulsed by the implications of Spencer’s totalizing and potentially brutal conception of humanity.

Did Spencer make a concrete difference? Yes. He gave McKay both an insight into social interaction and an army of vivid organic metaphors. To McKay, settling in Montreal from c. 1896 to 1904, Spencer seemed to show that human beings were now

14 See especially Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics; Or, The Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of Them Developed* ([1850] New York, 1875).

15 Jack London, *Martin Eden* ([1909] Harmondsworth, 1984).

16 See Mark Pittinger, *American Socialists and Evolutionary Thought, 1870-1920* (Madison, 1993).

interconnected in novel, “organic” ways; consequently, old individualist and liberal prescriptions were no longer “functional”. McKay came to be regarded as “labour’s spokesman” by the city’s English-language press. He wrote a tough-minded analysis of Montreal’s many sweatshops that saw them as functioning within the structure of the city’s labour market: only union shops and the union label would address the problem.¹⁷ The most dramatic moment in this Left Spencerian crusade came in 1899, when McKay took aim at the cigar factory of one J. M. Fortier. Fortier was a textbook example of a successful entrepreneur in a classical liberal order, a vigorous, tough-minded winner in the struggle of the fittest to survive, whose product was favoured by a wide North American public. That he also suffered his employees to be hit over the head with metal implements and punished the misdeeds of his child labourers by imprisoning them in a “black hole” were, in this classical liberal order, private matters, not public issues. That Fortier was aggressively committed to downsizing his enterprise — and, in this regard, especially interested in the specialized flexibility that would result if he paid particular attention to dismissing his unionized workers — was a further sign of the 90s. There was, thankfully, no “nanny state” to interfere with him.¹⁸ There was only the union, and one undersized, morally outraged Nova Scotian with a neatly-trimmed mustache, a South Shore accent and a fund of interesting Spencerian metaphors. In December 1898, Fortier dismissed 39 unionized workers; they fought back through the columns of a short-lived propaganda sheet called *Canada’s Democracy*, edited by McKay.

Putting his command of Christian symbolism and Spencerian organicism to good effect, McKay accused Fortier of “growing rich off the flesh and blood of his employees” and of being an “industrial copperhead”. He went so far — and this was a low blow against an Edwardian industrial *pater familias* — to present a balance-sheet on the Christmas turkeys the factory owner had presented to his employees. When one deducted the money value of the wage cut that had accompanied the turkeys, McKay estimated, each bird had cost the individual workers between \$50 and \$100. Although *Canada’s Democracy* lasted for only two numbers, quite enough had been said, about turkeys and other matters, to persuade Fortier to take the publication, some cigarmakers and Colin McKay himself to court on a charge of defamatory libel.¹⁹

The week-long Fortier-McKay trial which opened on 15 September 1899 in the Court of Queen’s Bench was an illustration of labour’s precarious legal position in a classical liberal age. On 16 November 1899, the venerable Mr. Justice Jonathan Saxton Campbell Wurtele — of fine old Loyalist and seigneurial stock — summed up the case for the jury. Defamatory libel, Wurtele explained, consisted of a statement published without justification or excuse, and “of such a nature to injure someone by

17 See the *Montreal Herald*, 3 July 1899 for McKay’s analysis. William Lyon Mackenzie King’s more famous analysis, written a year later, was predictably much more timid. See *Montreal Herald*, 23 April 1898. King’s analysis, in edited form, was also presented in *Report to the Honourable the Postmaster General of the Methods Adopted in Canada in the Carrying Out of Government Clothing Contracts* (Ottawa, 1899).

18 For Fortier, see G. S. Kealey, ed., *Canada Investigates Industrialism: The Royal Commission on the Relations of Labor and Capital, 1889* (Toronto, 1973), pp. 213-29.

19 *Montreal Herald*, 2, 23 December 1898; *Citizen and Country* (Toronto), 25 March 1899.

12 *Acadiensis*

exposing him to the hatred or ridicule of the public. Thus it was that the peace of the land was endangered by such publications, as men's passions were thereby aroused and crimes were committed". What if a statement happened to be accurate? Wurtele did allow that, sometimes, justification might be pleaded if a statement were true, provided it was both moderately expressed and in the public interest. But, to quote the judge, "public interest should not be confounded with the interest of a few, or a small body of citizens, forming a class. The whole people or society was intended". Workers now doubtless enjoyed the right to combine for better wages, hours, or conditions, but — and here Wurtele reached the classical liberal point — "personal liberty should not be lost sight of". Employees might refuse work, but they had no right to prevent others from working. "If workmen had the right to protect themselves, they had no right to attack capitalists. Neither could any union hinder a man not of their society from working. That would be a great abuse of personal liberty".

Having laid out these tidy arguments, Wurtele then informed the jurors that only if the defence could demonstrate the truth of all the newspaper's allegations, and prove that they had been made in the public interest, would justification be established. It thus became a trial that turned on the question of whether McKay, in calling Fortier a "moral dynamiter", a person who had grown rich on the flesh and blood of his workers, an "industrial copperhead", had been writing both truthfully — in this context, it seemed "truthfully" meant "literally" — and in "the public interest" — meaning not just in the particular interests of the working class, but in the general interests of everybody. The jury was asked to bear in mind that *Canada's Democracy* had been published only twice, and that "not having met with approval, the accused ordered 5,000 copies extra to be distributed in town". Thus the jury was asked to weigh what the intention of the accused had been "in forcing upon the public a paper they would not patronise". With these narrow market criteria of what constituted the public interest ringing in their ears, and without having been alerted by the judge that McKay as a good Spencerian had really only been using biological metaphors, the jury took just ten minutes to find McKay guilty. He received three months in jail. And, despite loud protests from the labour movement, and evidence that imprisonment would harm his health, McKay served them. When he wrote to the socialist magazine *Citizen and Country* in May 1900, he was described as writing "from the confines of a martyr's cell". McKay was in jail, argued *Citizen and Country*, for having "called a spade a spade". The trial helped catapult McKay into leadership of the new Canadian Socialist League and confirmed his reputation as a leading labour radical in Montreal.²⁰

Colin McKay was typical of many Nova Scotians in emigrating from his native region in search of employment, and he was virtually a living regional stereotype in "following the sea" and writing about the experiences, afterwards, as "adventures". Yet he was not, thus far, much of a *regional* socialist. Had he not returned to the Maritimes after 1908, he would be remembered only by those of us who have tried to keep track of the legion of "western" radicals and "American" socialists who learned

²⁰ *Montreal Gazette*, 20 November 1899; *Montreal Herald*, 20 November, 8 December 1899; *Citizen and Country* (Toronto), 4 May 1900.

their first lessons in class and class analysis in the Atlantic region.

But he did return. The Colin McKay who arrived in Saint John in 1910 was not the same young idealist who had defended labour's rights in the language of Spencer's *Social Statics*. Between 1904 and 1910 McKay passed through a rather unfocused period of writing stories, journalism and seafaring. He developed a range of progressive enthusiasms — for industrial training, corporate welfare, urban reform. He seemed to be searching, even in such unlikely places as the sewage treatment facilities of Glasgow, for signs of Evolution towards the Social State. Sometime between 1908 and 1910 McKay added to this diffuse Spencerian progressivism (which he never completely abandoned) the more focused and analytical approaches of Marxism. By the time he reached the Saint John *Standard*, in 1910, McKay seems to have concluded that capitalism was not evolving, like an organism, into ever-more rational and inclusive forms; on the contrary, capitalism itself had become an impediment to social evolution. If McKay's Montreal was "Spencerian", his Saint John was "Spencerian-Marxist", and it would be in Saint John from 1910 to 1914 that he worked out many of his most original ideas about political economy, sociology and working-class culture.

Saint John in this period was an exciting place for a socialist — at least as much a hotbed as Montreal had been ten years earlier. There were no fewer than 144 strikes in Saint John from 1901 to 1914 inclusive; McKay arrived just as the city was entering a major strike wave.²¹ Left politics in the city was on the boil, with Single Taxers, Fabians, suffragists and members of the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC) — which McKay joined — all engaged in a busy round of activities. Close by in Moncton was the *Eastern Labor News*, which would carry a wide diversity of labour opinions, from W. F. Hatheway presenting his curious Tory fables of moral uplift, to members of the SPC arguing the Marxist case for a "working-class revolution".

McKay's position at the *Standard* gave him access to a wide spectrum of New Brunswick society. He was by no means narrow in his pursuit of an audience. Many of McKay's Maritimes-focused articles were published in the mainstream or business press, and he adjusted his tone accordingly. Sometimes this "double vision" led to some odd contrasts between McKay-the-mainstream-writer and McKay-the-Marxian-sociologist. For example, readers of his chapter on "The Province of New Brunswick" in a 1913 book on Canada's commerce were presented with a portrait of a progressive province abounding with opportunity: here was a land making "remarkable progress", infected with a strong spirit of optimism, "bright with promise" and bound to be known in Britain as a land of "happy and contented people", not to mention "great and flourishing industries". Could this possibly be the same province that the same McKay had described in the *Eastern Labor News* as rife with social conflicts, and that he had depicted in his socialist pamphlet on New Brunswick agriculture as populated with downtrodden farmers, barely clinging to existence under the weight of monopoly capitalism?²²

21 Ian McKay, "Strikes in the Maritimes, 1901-14", *Acadiensis*, XIII, 1 (Autumn 1983), pp. 3-46; reprinted in David Frank and Gregory S. Kealey, eds., *Labour and Working-Class History in Atlantic Canada: A Reader* (St. John's, 1995).

22 Colin McKay, "The Province of New Brunswick", in Fred Cook, ed., *Commercial Canada: Its Progress and Opportunities* (Leeds, 1913), p. 145; Colin McKay, *The New Brunswick Farmer: How the Capitalist System levies tribute upon the product of his Labor* (n.p. [Moncton?], n.d. [c. 1913]).

14 *Acadiensis*

It is conventional to dismiss the Marxism of people like McKay — “Second International Marxism” — as a series of crude reductions: human culture, it is alleged, was reduced to an epiphenomenon of the economy, the complexity and contingency of historical processes was reduced to the workings of Evolution, the actual complexity of social structure was reduced to a model of two opposed fundamental classes, the subtlety and sophistication of Marx’s historical method reduced to the boring repetition of a few formulas wrenched from a framework of thought partially grasped and imperfectly understood and applied mechanically to the social world.²³ This is a caricature that falls wide of the mark in the case of McKay’s Spencerian-Marxist regional analyses from 1910-1914, which are, in many respects, the most interesting things he ever wrote.

The Spencerian-Marxists were nothing if not holistic; their “cosmic evolutionary socialism” potentially embraced everything, from “the cell to socialism” in (Lucio Colletti’s caustic phrase).²⁴ Although the drawbacks of buying into such an overpowering “master narrative” have become clearer as the century has progressed, there were some rather surprising advantages to this all-inclusive vision. It meant that subjects not directly connected to “the economic” were deemed worthy of serious attention and studied as interconnected aspects of a much wider social reality. Contrary to the stereotype, McKay did not dismiss social movements that could not be traced back to class, such as the struggle for women’s enfranchisement, which was especially vigorous in Saint John in this period.²⁵ Influenced by the legacy of Spencerian holism, McKay could see such movements as part and parcel of the forward march of “social evolution”. Nor did McKay follow some others in the Canadian socialist movement — including prominent western leaders of his own party — in viewing trade unions as ineffective diversions from the real business of socialism: in fact, he was heavily involved in re-establishing the labour council in Saint John. McKay particularly emphasized the worth of labour councils, which would help workers transcend the sectional and “petty” issues in Saint John, which he memorably described as the “most bourgeois city in the world”.²⁶ Yet it was a city buzzing with dozens of reform movements, and McKay was inclined to be a critical but sympathetic observer of them. A classic McKay piece of this time would take an episode in the city’s life — for example, the St. George’s banquet in Saint John in 1913²⁷ — and “defamiliarize” it, by making it epitomize the unself-conscious self-infatuation of a bourgeois civilization bound for ruin.

These attempts to understand what we might today consider the rather separate and distinct questions of environmentalism, gender politics, trade unionism and civic life were all clearly linked in the mind of a Spencerian Marxist. All “abstract questions” McKay took elaborate care to root in the here-and-now of regional experience. A

23 Out of a vast library of such critiques, perhaps the most intelligent and insightful was that penned by Lucio Colletti (when he was still a Marxist): *From Rousseau to Lenin: Studies in Ideology and Society* (London, 1972).

24 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

25 *Eastern Labor News*, 12 October 1912, 22 February 1913.

26 *Coast-Guard* (Shelburne), 3 November 1910.

27 *Eastern Labor News*, 3 May 1913.

further regionally-accentuated emphasis of his socialism was his acute awareness of the plight of those he termed the “uneasy classes” in the region, those who were caught between the working class and big capital. McKay was acutely aware that a socialist strategy of “industrial concentration”, focused exclusively on the industrial working class, was doomed to remain a minoritarian one in this region. He began to select from the vast corpus of international socialist theory those authors and writings which would help him arrive at a theoretical understanding of the primary producer, the small businessman and the professional. McKay was particularly concerned to establish an important distinction between the self-earned property of the small businessman and artisan and the fully-fledged capitalist property of the factory owner or the stock investor. He was also alert to the emergence of a new degree of separation between ownership and control in capitalist enterprises. The result of this fundamental rethinking was the re-description of the possessor of self-earned property as one of the exploited: “The development of capitalism, while leaving the small traders, the farmers and other classes in legal possession of their means of existence, nevertheless appropriates most of the fruits of their labour and ingenuity. Yet there is little doubt that the small trader is exploited quite as effectively as the farmer and the industrial worker”.²⁸ In the Maritimes, with its many small towns, primary producers and ambivalently placed people, many of whom might be workers one season and “proprietors” the next, this was an especially important conceptual distinction.

McKay’s real claim to originality as a theorist of regional socialism resides in two additional areas. He was the first person to attempt a systematic analysis of Maritime social and economic conditions using the tools of radical political economy. He was also the first Maritime, if not Canadian, socialist to theorize the dynamics of social transformation from the viewpoint of working class activism. Even eight decades later, much of his analysis seems timely.

On the subject of the North Atlantic fishery, which he studied first-hand for many years, McKay thought that capitalist patterns of investment, social fragmentation, political inattention and incompetence, and a chronic pattern of underinvestment in the skills and well-being of the workforce, would all result in a prolonged social and economic crisis. True, as a good Spencerian Marxist, McKay held that the fisheries would conform to the laws of motion of capital that Marx had discovered. Yet this did not translate into a sense of mechanical inevitability. In fact, McKay underlined how completely the fishing economy had been transformed, largely through pressure from below. For example, in 1909 McKay described a Nova Scotia fishing economy that had emerged from the long years of “a patriarchal order” characterized by the truck system to enjoy higher standards of living, the greater flexibility and independence brought about by the adoption of new and faster small craft powered by gasoline engines and by the lucrative lobster markets of New England. In brief, a producers’ “revolution” had already overthrown the older patriarchal system. And notwithstanding the general pattern of capitalist development, McKay was alert to what Marxists would later call the law of uneven and combined development. Capitalism in the Nova Scotia fishing industry entailed a strange combination of

²⁸ *Eastern Labor News*, 8 June 1912. See also R. J. Brym and R. J. Sacouman, eds., *Underdevelopment and Social Movements in Atlantic Canada* (Toronto, 1979).

extremely advanced and archaic forms. Moreover, these seemed to be linked in a symbiotic relationship: “Here we have a phase of full fledged capitalism, cheek by jowl with the old methods of carrying on the fish business and at once the old methods become mere tributaries to the stream of profits of the characteristically capitalist method”.²⁹ McKay, who became a prominent advocate of a federal fisheries college, placed increasing emphasis on the ability and willingness of the Canadian state to plan the fisheries, and its backwardness when contrasted with Europe, where far-sighted states had remodelled fisheries ports, secured the fishermen’s livelihood through market regulation and poured money into technical training. Unless capitalism was restrained by the state, he argued, the fish stocks, fisheries and the fishing communities would all suffer.

As a good Marxist and as a Spencerian student of social evolution, McKay welcomed technological innovations: improvements in the “forces of production” were by definition progressive. Yet, as his Saint John writings and his later analyses of the trawler question of the 1920s suggest, he often approached regional resource questions in a more subtle manner. On the question of whether the Canadian state should restrict the use of trawlers in Canadian waters, one might have expected McKay to take the line of least resistance and support the transformation of the forces of production that trawler technology represented. And this was indeed McKay’s initial position. Drawing on the European precedents he knew so well, he offered a qualified defence of the steam trawlers: the ecological argument against them had not been proven.³⁰ But a darker (and more humanistic) tone gradually entered his writing on this question, as he came to reflect on the tragedy of those who were to be displaced by this new technology — which must have included many of his friends and relatives on the South Shore. What would become of them? The new machines, the use of motor craft and steam trawler, railways and refrigerator cars, all transformed old routines and traditions; the “mentality of the fisherman” was forced to change, some communities were ruined, the fishing industry became more concentrated in a few large ports. In short, there was a high price to be paid for “development”: “Even though the fishing communities are populated by a hardy breed”, he wrote, “there are people everywhere, especially old folks, who just hang on to existence, and a little shock such as may arise from a realization of an upset of their traditional environment, may shake them from the tree of life like ripe fruit”.³¹ It was a telling indication of McKay’s humane socialist vision that he would later cite the regional fishermen’s success in restricting the trawlers as evidence of the power ordinary people could take, even in the face of overwhelming economic pressures.³²

As in fishing, so in forestry: the “scientific direction of the communal consciousness” had become crucial to primary producers and to society as a whole. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of Left Spencerianism, with its propensity to run natural and social evolution together, was its proto-ecological consciousness. One can find this in McKay’s analysis of Nova Scotia’s forests. The forest fires that

29 *Eastern Labor News*, 13 September 1913.

30 *Canadian Fisherman*, November 1918, pp. 1082-3.

31 *Canadian Fisherman*, December 1927, pp. 365-6, 394.

32 Colin McKay, “Rationing Investment”, *Canadian Forum*, July 1932, pp. 372-4.

devastated hundreds of square miles of forest in early 20th century Nova Scotia were nothing if not graphic illustrations of the high costs of the separation of private and public in a liberal capitalist order: they made “glaringly manifest the dangers of trying to divorce public and private interests”.³³ There had been many advocates of forest conservation, but because knowledge was only “potential power”, there was no guarantee that such far-sighted voices would ever be heard. The government had, to be sure, appointed forest rangers and commissioned a survey; but it had done nothing to oblige the owners of woodlands to consider the general interests of the public and the long-term need for fire prevention, reforestation and sound environmental management. Even in such phenomena as the disappearance of salmon and alewives in Nova Scotia’s Roseway River, one could trace the combined and cumulative ecological consequences of the liberal capitalist order, which had allowed private individuals to reap the benefits of the forests without taking steps either to protect or replant them. In burning over the watersheds of the rivers, the short-sighted capitalists had destroyed the habitats of the fish.³⁴ You could not count on the free market, driven by the profit motive, to construct an environmentally rational policy for the region’s forests.

In raising these issues — the development of capitalism, the persistence of older forms of community, the ecological consequences of unfettered enterprise — McKay was truly the unacknowledged pioneer of “Maritime sociology”. When discussing the “uneasy classes”,³⁵ those primary producers and artisans caught in the vice of collapsing prices, unequal bargaining relationships and minimal state support, McKay’s writings are anything but a tired repetition of the labour theory of value or Marx’s legendary (but mainly fictitious) emphasis on a two-class model. When finally we have a full history of the region’s fishing industry — not just as chronicle of treaties and output statistics, but as a complex and contested socio-cultural terrain — McKay’s analyses will be honoured as some of the earliest, and certainly among the subtlest and most compassionate, explorations of this quintessential regional theme.

Finally, McKay in Saint John was apparently among the first Canadian socialists overtly to theorize the ways in which the working class, even as a minority of the population, could hasten the process of social evolution and transform the capitalist order. In this venture, he was really adding a quite distinctive “Maritime Marxist” voice to a question that has always been vital to the Canadian left. These cultural and political writings are among the most suggestive meditations on culture, politics and working-class identity in the Canadian socialist tradition.

Was McKay original in these explorations? No and yes. No, because he was clearly influenced by, and sometimes simply reporting on, the innovations of intellectuals in Europe and North America — the criminologist Enrico Ferri, the philosophers Paul Lafargue and Josef Dietzgen, the botanist Hugo DeVries, and the American sociologists Albion Small and Lester Ward: to trace McKay’s references in these years is to meet a phenomenally wide cast of turn-of-the-century social thinkers. But yes, because of the intensity with which McKay used the insights of European theory

33 *Shelburne Gazette and Coast Guard*, 2 October 1913.

34 *Shelburne Gazette and Coast Guard*, 4 September 1913.

35 *Eastern Labor News*, 8 June 1912.

to illuminate the specific situation he had come to know well in the region; and yes, because he was, in bringing theory to bear on regional problems, also subtly “regionalizing” the theory.

Of the greatest theoretical interest here was McKay’s innovative work on the two related themes of working-class politics and culture. Absolutely central to his concept of working-class politics was the creation of an historically-effective political force transcending the immediate objective interests of workers. McKay wanted to bring into the circle of resistance all the “uneasy classes” affected by capitalist development. Accordingly, a political party “embodying the ideals of labour must represent the general interests of humanity of all classes except the big capitalists”.³⁶ McKay’s formula was precise. Workers, small businessmen, some professionals, farmers and fishermen, among others, would come together on the basis of a shared understanding of the workings of the capitalist system and of their common interests in creating a different political and social order. But this was not just populism, for the interests and ideals of the working class would be at the nucleus of a political formation in which the interests of other subaltern classes were also respected. McKay was thus arguing in a Gramscian vein (but well before Antonio Gramsci’s influential essay on this question)³⁷ for the need to construct an effective “historic bloc” on the basis of the ideals of labour.

A Spencerian Marxist such as McKay believed that human society was (as he said in a later article) “a natural, living organism in which the only thing constant is change”.³⁸ The upshot of this was not fatalism, but an emphasis on the need for the working class to prepare itself to shoulder its social-evolutionary duties. Once you had reconfigured the entire Spencerian system to place the working class (rather than the liberal individual) in this decisive position, you could derive some interesting conclusions about cultural politics. In order to understand and to influence this process of social evolution, the working class needed to develop its own philosophy, economics, politics, literature: in a word, its own culture. This cultural transformation would be assisted by socialist intellectuals, organically linked to the working class and understanding its lived experiences, but also connecting the workers’ interests to the more abstract theories that could help them understand their experiences in a class society.

Workers needed to develop their own culture, morality and sense of history. McKay thought of working-class culture not as something that already existed but as a potential force that workers and socialist intellectuals could in the future bring into being: “The working class must develop a new philosophy of life, a new culture”.³⁹ In this view workers did not as yet have their own culture, but were under the influence of the bourgeoisie. Working-class culture had to be created, and its creation would entail the conscious efforts of workers and the intellectuals who were connected to them. On this reading, a radically oppositional “culture” would likely not emerge

36 *Eastern Labor News*, 11 November 1911.

37 Antonio Gramsci, “Some Aspects of the Southern Question”, in D. Forgacs, ed., *An Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935* (New York, 1988), pp. 422-3.

38 *Canadian Railway Employees Monthly*, April 1937, pp. 85-6.

39 *Eastern Labor News*, 8 November 1913.

spontaneously from workers' leisure or even workplace activities: such a new knowledge could only emerge through conscious political and intellectual activity. One might sum up the goal of McKay's work as the construction of "a working-class Enlightenment".

In Saint John and elsewhere in the region, the workers' sense of powerlessness and deference could be attributed, on a general level, to the omnipresent influence of individualism, perpetuated by mainstream liberalism in politics, conventional Christianity in religion, and bourgeois common-sense views of human nature in daily life. In Saint John, McKay reported, even had workers wanted to vote socialist, they were denied the chance in 1911 through a manipulation of the electoral rule-book. And at the local library — funded, appropriately enough, by the blood-money Andrew Carnegie had gouged from his workers — the authorities declined to take labour newspapers. The civic authorities in Saint John even tried to prevent socialists from meeting in public squares.⁴⁰

Beyond such overtly coercive measures, argued McKay, was the vast, complex realm of bourgeois common sense, sustained by an immense institutional matrix: "The schools, the pulpits, the press, every agency of public education, and public opinion, inculcate ideas favourable to the maintenance of the capitalist system, and the workers unconsciously absorb capitalistic ideas".⁴¹ In the case of the church, Sunday Schools allegedly offered children models of servility and deference by systematically twisting the message of the Bible. In the case of the schools, one had to remember the interests of the State, the guardian of class interest, whose instruction was designed "to train the workers for a position of docile servitude, ...to teach the children to be docile slaves of a class state". One of the key elements in this "chloroforming effect" was the bourgeois abuse of history: "Every thing of importance is represented as the work of some great man, or a special providence, but the mass movements of the working classes are generally described as insurrections or rebellions of the lowest of the low without any definite or decent motive".⁴²

Cultural struggles were then not "peripheral" for socialists; without them, in fact, nothing would change. Not even the most massive strike could be revolutionary if, to some extent at least, it was not conceived as such by the participants. Herein lay the logic of McKay's focus on cultural issues in 1910-1914 and, more generally, the rationale for an adult lifetime devoted to workers' education and labour journalism.

McKay's emphasis in his pivotal Saint John texts on the success of the bourgeoisie in presenting its world-view as "common sense" led him not to fatalism but to an optimistic sense of the number of fronts on which workers could wage a meaningful struggle for their own vision of reality. He urged workers to try to win positions on school boards, for example, to make sure "that their children were taught history and everything else from the view point of their class, were made to realize the position of their class under capitalism, and to understand the methods by which they are exploited out of the bulk of the product of their labour".⁴³ Motivated perhaps by

40 *Eastern Labor News*, 25 November 1911, 28 June 1913.

41 *Eastern Labor News*, 12 October 1912.

42 *Eastern Labor News*, 16 August 1913; see also *B.C. Federationist*, 12 December 1913.

43 *Eastern Labor News*, 18 January 1913.

McKay's article, the Saint John Trades and Labor Council did request a representative on the school board. McKay argued that even in their predictable defeat, the labour activists could learn a positive lesson. The reverse might "induce some workers to reflect on their position in capitalist society; if they do that they will doubtless come to the conclusion that the people who do the work in this world don't really count for much. And they may ask themselves a question: 'Why shouldn't the workers have something to say about the education of their children?'"⁴⁴

A distinctive regional socialism? McKay never saw himself as a "regionalist" in any sense, and he would have disavowed the project. His socialism was clearly part and parcel of vast movement of ideas in the North Atlantic world. He was a committed, though fallible, internationalist, and the ideas he promoted were in circulation very generally in North America and elsewhere. He was no "regional exceptionalist", except when, in his impatient moments, he chastised local workers for so obstinately refusing to join the struggle. On the other hand, it would be hard to deny the regional focus of the articles, and too, the attentiveness with which McKay adapted general theory to meet local circumstances. McKay was a Maritime socialist, not just a socialist in the Maritime Provinces: he took the analysis of the region as one of his leading themes.

And on a rather more intangible level, but one which perhaps had a great deal to do with his connection to his audience, one could also say he captured a certain regional common-sense. McKay wrote with a direct, accessible prose, and his abstractions were almost always connected with some practical problem. McKay had no use for theory-for-its-own-sake. At times, his blunt down-to-earthness can be almost comic: an article on "What Youths with Sea Passion Should Know", for example, was not (as an unsuspecting reader might have guessed) about romantic sunsets, adventures in wild storms and the glowing stars of the Southern Cross but ... the importance of having a good eye examination "All boys and girls who desire to follow the sea as a career should at the outset have their eyes tested for colour blindness and distance vision.... If this precaution is not taken the youngster may, after four years at sea, discover that he is not eligible for an officer's position, and that so far as a career is concerned, he has wasted the best years of his life...".⁴⁵ McKay ranged widely in his intellectual interests, but never so far that he lost touch with day-to-day concerns. He was a practical man, who read theory to illuminate the working world around him.⁴⁶ Never a regionalist as such, McKay was inescapably "regionally focused" in much of his work, drawing on his life, his immediate experiences, his network of regional friends and the information before him to transform the "generic abstractions" of the Spencerian-Marxist framework into the determinate abstractions that might speak to a specific audience.

One more detail to establish McKay's regional credentials. The title of this article — which couples the name of Karl Marx, identified with that "alien" ideology of

44 *Eastern Labor News*, 2 August 1913.

45 "What Youths with Sea Passion Should Know", *Canadian Fisherman*, August 1924, p. 237.

46 McKay was likely the only socialist intellectual of his generation to write on both the pitfalls of Immanuel Kant's epistemology (*Canadian Unionist*, December 1935, pp. 196-8) and the artificial propagation of the lobster (*Coast Guard*, 14 December 1911).

socialism, and that of the *Bluenose*, the icon (at least for many Nova Scotians) of the region's true "conservative" essence — may be regarded as a provocation. This is precisely what is intended. There is, however, a much more direct connection between Marx and the hallowed schooner. After his return from the Great War, in which, notwithstanding his earlier professions of pacifism, he served with distinction (as second officer on the H.M.S. *St. George*) McKay — fascinated as always by fisheries issues — launched in the pages of the *Halifax Herald* a crusade for a fisheries college. He then turned to the question of how one might best modernize schooner design. McKay initiated, in the columns of the *Herald* and later on the pages of the *Canadian Fisherman*, a campaign for the international schooner race that ultimately culminated in the Bluenose phenomenon. In fact, according to fellow journalist Andrew Merkel, it was Colin McKay who "sold [William] Dennis [the publisher of the *Herald*] the idea it would be a good thing to promote a series of races among the Nova Scotia fishermen, at the close of their Summer season on the Banks, as the preliminary to an international contest, between the fleetest fishing schooners of the United States and Canada". On 11 August 1920 Colin McKay published an article entitled "Why Not A Fishermen's Race For Canada and The States?" which appears to have been the *Herald's* first major airing of the idea.⁴⁷

The connection between the fishermen's race and Spencerian Marxism may seem somewhat tenuous, but not if one thinks like a Spencerian Marxist. From this perspective, universal processes of social evolution — a later generation would get at something of the same phenomenon when it used the word "development" — had stalled in the Maritimes; but the stimulus of the race might provide a sort of "jump start". The progressive improvement of the "social forces of production", in this case the fishing fleet, would hasten the coming of a more rational economic system. In McKay's initial conception, the race was more like a laboratory test than a sporting event: it would push fishing schooners to their limits. It was from this point of view that one argued strenuously for the exclusion of vessels not equipped as they would be equipped if they were strictly engaged in fishing. It is a fascinating fact that, zealous as guardians of the *Bluenose* myth have been to exclude this ideological anomaly, the ultimate (indeed licence-plate-worthy) signifier of the "conservative" Nova Scotia essence had at least one Marxist grandparent.

At the same time McKay should not be mythified as some flawless founding figure of regional socialism. He would leave the region more or less for good in the 1920s, returning only occasionally to visit his family in Shelburne. After a noteworthy career as a journalist in Ottawa, and as a leading light in the All-Canadian Congress of Labour, McKay died there in 1939. During these years his sense of regional possibilities seemed to recede. In 1933, for example, McKay wrote what may well have been the first Canadian socialist analysis of the rise of tourism as a moment in a new culture of consumption. McKay glimpsed a future in which workers would have the ability to design their leisure time, and the state would underwrite their standards of living. In such a society, there would be a demand "for small yachts, co-operatively owned by several people, and for small boats for sport, pleasure, and amateur fishing.

⁴⁷ See Andrew Merkel, "Racing Fishermen", draft manuscript, Andrew Merkel Papers, MS.2 326, C.9, Dalhousie University Archives, Halifax; *Herald* (Halifax), 11 August 1920.

To meet this demand the Maritimes have a surplus of skilled workers trained in wooden-shipbuilding yards, whose occupation has practically vanished during the present depression". In this vision, the Maritimes was to function as a kind of therapeutic space for the Dominion. McKay had never been a Maritime Rights man, nor had he exhibited any interest in the issues that movement popularized, such as the fiscal limitations imposed on the region by the Confederation bargain. In his 1930s vision of the Maritimes — the "Playground of a Happier Canada" — he demonstrated how completely the region had become peripheral to his thinking, even as he anticipated some contemporary writings on "social tourism".⁴⁸

There are two concluding points. The first is that radicals and socialists in the region can draw on a much richer, deeper tradition than they may have realized. Colin McKay was unusual, but he was by no means alone. This region has produced radicals and socialists, many of whom made an impact across the country, in unions, in political parties, in cultural life: there have been poets and politicians, political economists and labour leaders. A sceptical response to this claim is the conventional one: compared to the classical liberal tradition which has dominated regional politics, and which in its reinvigorated neo-liberal form seems today so hegemonic, socialism is a side-bar. But influence is not easily measured, and socialist ideas may be influential without being in power. If you glance through the files of even so popular a premier as Angus L. Macdonald, you'll note a marked degree of socialist influence, which may explain why he was inclined to bring in progressive legislation in the late 1930s. Still, let us face the fact that Atlantic Canada is the only region in Canada which has not experimented with a social democratic government.

McKay, the unacknowledged pioneer on so many questions in Maritime studies, had a social-structural explanation for this conservative political pattern, whose roots he traced to the small-town, socially-cohesive, ethnically-divided and demographically-stable nature of the Maritime population.⁴⁹ Subsequent scholarship has also paid attention to the conservative impact of traditional patron/client relationships and to outmigration. One plausible way of reading McKay's general project, which so often returns to the position of the small businessman and to the peculiarities of "self-earned property", is to see it as the articulation of a form of socialism that might have room for people such as his own family, dependent on a Shelburne shipyard for their livelihood and unlikely ever to welcome state ownership and control of every aspect of the "means of production". But McKay did not extend that analysis to the political forms appropriate to this distinctive setting. Having so often asked, in the McKay tradition, "What is wrong with the region, that it has so seldom turned to the left?" one might well turn the question around and wonder, "What is wrong with the left, that it has so seldom spoken effectively to, or organized effectively in, the region?" It is interesting that the two historic moments of general Maritime revolt in our 20th-century history — 1919-1925 and 1943-1947 (perhaps a later generation will add a third: 1997-2001!) — were accompanied by new organizational forms — labour and political forms that, as organisms, seemed rather

48 *Canadian Unionist*, July 1933, pp. 27-9.

49 See McKay, ed., *For a Working-Class Culture*, Part III, for a detailed consideration of McKay's evaluation of the Maritimes as conservative.

well-suited to their complex, occupationally plural, only semi-urbanized environment. Dependent on much larger national and international organizations, these grassroots forms failed to evolve. Structurally, the “peculiarities of the Maritimes” were rarely taken into account by the official left: the region has, at least until the late 1990s, been on the periphery of socialist political vision in Canada. It is fascinating that, in the second quarter of the 20th century, the Communist Party and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, for all their differences, did have at least one thing in common when it came to the Maritimes: they both “downsized” (to the point of writing off) substantial bases of support in the region. The functional integration of the Maritimes into “normal” and “national” patterns of trade unionism and social democratic politics may have limited the influence of the Maritime left to those atypical areas in the region that most closely approximate those of the country’s industrial heartland.

And this is only one instance in which the legacy of Colin McKay does not provide us with ready answers; for all the brilliance of McKay’s cultural and political writings of 1910-1914, they are instructive to us today only in a general sense. Much more could be said in this critical vein. Here it has been important to stress, not the predictable problems of any social theorist of McKay’s time and place, but rather his surprising and interesting strengths. Three strengths in particular stand out. First of all, there is McKay’s close attention to the changing economic order, and in particular his subtle appreciation of the distinction between private and capitalist property. This enabled him to present a model of a future socialist order that would not have entailed the (improbable and undesirable) nationalization of everything, nor the reduction of everything to a homogeneous uniformity, but rather one which would permit a variety of forms of ownership — private, co-operative and social — in a diversified modern economy. Second, there was McKay’s implicit sense, which shines through in his work on the region’s fisheries, of the pivotal importance of the “uneasy classes”, those caught between capital and labour, in any successful social movement in the region. Although at times McKay saw such people, and particularly the men and women of the resource communities, as obstacles to “social evolution”, he more often presented a sympathetic analysis of their predicament. Third, there was McKay’s strategy — a Gramscian strategy some years before Gramsci — of how to construct a “working-class culture” and a “working-class political movement” in which socialists, workers and the members of the “uneasy classes” would, through a process of mutual accommodation and the making of real compromises, construct a “historic bloc” that could replace the existing social order.

Colin McKay’s vision may seem to be jarringly out of tune with our realities, his voice coming from a distant, more optimistic past. No doubt: McKay was an Edwardian figure, and not our cultural contemporary in these bleak years of the “Death of Marx”.⁵⁰ Yet there is a fascinating parallel between his work and the challenges which today must face any thoughtful person confronting the neo-liberal logic of our time. For today Herbert Spencer, that venomous hater of all things

50 I have critically examined the trope of the “Death of Marx” in “The Many Deaths of Mr. Marx; Or, What Left Historians Might Contribute to Debates About the ‘Crisis of Marxism’”, *left history*, 3/4, 1/2 (Fall 1995-Spring 1996), pp. 9-84.

associated with the state, who was derided and denounced for so much of the 20th century, is exacting his revenge. Spencer is the true philosopher of neo-conservative politics and neo-liberal economics. Whenever we are counselled to submit meekly to the inexorable logic of globalization and competition, we are hearing the distant echoes of Spencer's utopian, compelling, all-inclusive vision of a totalitarian liberal future, a future made up of nothing but what we now call SCUs: "self-contained units", the "true individuals" of the liberal imaginary. Spencer's *The Man versus the State*, with its long catalogue of useless and expensive state novelties, is the unacknowledged manifesto of many a Canadian provincial politician today, not a few of them in the Atlantic Region. Not only Spencer's visceral hostility to the very idea of the state, but his vision of cosmic progress is at play in our present world: what Spencer would have called "Evolution", the steady and inexorable advance of humankind through processes of differentiation and functional integration to the "social state", now goes under the name of "globalization", which seems to be no less deterministic, totalizing, sweeping and inhuman a phenomenon.⁵¹ All that is missing today is Spencer's candour about the ultimate purpose, the utopian order, that lies at the end of this long march through the wreckage of the social institutions it took three generations of Canadians and so many years of sacrifice and imagination to construct, and a mere decade for a generation of post-Canadian neo-liberals to demolish.

The first stage in responding to such hegemonic, powerful forces is outraged shock. Confronted with what seemed a seamless, inexorable and scientific discourse, increasingly aligned with extreme right-wing interests, McKay and his generation initially responded with horror at the inhumanity and brutality of the full Spencerian vision. The first defence is the language of moral outrage: "These cuts hurt people", as a placard might say today; "We are members of one another", as McKay — echoing Saint Paul — said when he confronted Spencerian arguments for casting aside the poor and the unemployed in the 1890s.⁵² How could you even contemplate such extremism in the name of an abstract, totalitarian ideal? In this neoliberal time, this extremism — a totalitarian neo-liberalism as ruthlessly confident of the future as any past "total ideology" — is everywhere, as one by one the lights are darkened across Canada, the hospitals close, the schools are turned into industrial training facilities and an entire generation of university graduates are forced into lives of insecurity and ruthless competition. The Spencerians, spouting a Darwinian language of competition and the compulsory elimination of the unfit, have not just arrived at the gates of the institutions; in many cases, they are running them.

But we should remember the second step that McKay and his generation took, in response to the liberal order of their own time: it was to probe the weaknesses of what had become the master discourse, to disorganize it, to rearticulate its elements in an oppositional movement of resistance. Many of Spencer's critics of the 1890s thought that, by arguing on the one hand for a massive, collectivizing, inexorable process of Evolution, and on the other for the need to preserve every aspect of traditional

51 For a compelling critique and discussion of the concept of globalization, see Ray Kiely, "Globalization, Post-Fordism and the Contemporary Context of Development", *International Sociology*, 13, 1 (March 1998), pp. 95-115.

52 *Citizen and Country*, 4 December 1899.

individualist laissez-faire, the Master was grossly and obviously contradicting himself. The Left Spencerians would gradually subvert Spencerianism, appropriating its categories for their own use. They marshalled the intellectual energy to face the new realities of their time unflinchingly, to master the new vocabulary of power and to subvert from within the discourse of inexorable evolution. Often brilliantly and subtly, McKay turned the master discourse of his age against itself. In our day, confronting a liberalism as self-complacent and totalizing as that of his time, shall we do the same?