

## Read and Hann, *The Great War and Canadian Society*

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Volume 4, 1979

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt4rv02>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

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Citer cet article

Knight, R. (1979). Read and Hann, *The Great War and Canadian Society*. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 4, 255–260.

demned in their own lives, as casualties."<sup>3</sup>

Bercuson makes a case, for example, that the OBU was mistaken and misguided in its espousal of the one big union. If only it had plumped for industrial unionism. But, surely, this is to ask the OBU to abandon its very principles. From its perspective, industrial unionism was simply another way to fragment the working class. To push for bringing all workers in one area into one union may have been utopian but, given the OBU/SPC analysis of Canadian society as divided into possessors and producers, it had its own logic. Similarly, to ask the OBU leaders to reflect more truly the needs and desires of western workers is, in effect, to ask them to abandon their fundamental social analysis. The distinction between trade-union consciousness and political consciousness is an old one on the left. The OBU can hardly be blamed for wishing to transmute one into the other. Where most workers were is poignantly testified by the upsurge of the OBU, financially at least, when it went into the football pools business.

To argue about what the OBU should have done, or even could have done, is to flirt with counter-factual history, which Eric Hobsbawm has nastily summarized as "if my grandmother had wheels she'd be a greyhound bus." As he goes on to say, "History is what happened, not what might have happened."<sup>4</sup>

Editorializing, however, is not typical of the book. It is, in fact, a credit to Bercuson's full account that one is able to argue with his analysis. As his descriptive sections clearly show, the OBU consistently faced the combined opposition of the state, business and the traditional unions. Indeed, it may be that one of the effects of OBU activity was to incorporate TLC unionism ever more closely into the capitalist order. Against this combined opposition, given the conditions of the period, failure was certain. The OBU was

necessarily condemned to fight a losing battle, as the communists argued through the 1920s. This was especially so when its ideals and actions opened it to the charges of dual unionism. As Bercuson shows, not all union opponents of the OBU were political conservatives.

To put it at its simplest, the conditions necessary for success were not present. Kautsky once said of the German Social-Democrats, "We are a revolutionary not a revolution-making party." Bercuson gets his title from a similar comment of William Pritchard's, "Only fools try to make revolutions. Wise men conform to them." There was the OBU's dilemma: the revolution never came.

One can quarrel with the analysis, but Bercuson has given us a first-rate book, well-written and, to the publishers' credit, well-produced. In 1976 Kealey and Warrian predicted "a new distinctive synthesis of Canadian history."<sup>5</sup> This is the kind of book which will help to make it possible.

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<sup>3</sup> G.S. Kealey and P. Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto 1976), 9.

Daphne Read and Russell Hann, eds., *The Great War and Canadian Society, An Oral History* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1978).

TO START with, anyone interested in Canadian history of the twentieth century, oral or other, for academic or broader interests, should read *Great War and Canadian Society*. It should serve as an answer to those critics who believe that oral history tends to be skewed by progressive ideology. In part, *Great War and Canadian Society* documents the cultural bases of working and lower middle-class Toryism in this country — important 60 years ago and a cogent topic today.

<sup>4</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making*.

<sup>5</sup> E. Hobsbawm, "Labour History and Ideology," *Journal of Social History*, 7 (1974), 376.

The *Great War and Canadian Society* collection is strengthened if we dismiss the claims that it represents Canadian society as a whole during the period. The body the text is drawn from interviews with some 85 Torontonians who, with some exceptions, basically represent an Anglo-Canadian component of southern Ontario. (Some 40 are Anglo-Ontarians by birth while another six migrated from elsewhere in Canada. Another 26 are British immigrants to southern Ontario and there are seven or eight accounts by Jewish and Ukrainian immigrants. But almost no others.) Only a half dozen extracts briefly touch upon life outside that region. BC is covered by a one paragraph reminiscence of a British Salvation Army lassie whose family was briefly stationed in darkest Fernie. While the accounts are drawn from individuals of most classes there *seems* to be a disproportion from those stationed on the various rungs of the middle class. Intended or not, the message is clear — *these* Anglo-Ontarians were the Real Canadians. Just like the schoolbooks always said.

In the chapter "A Rural Way of Life" we hear that Edwardian proprieties, church and religion, maxims from *Boys Own Annual*, temperance societies, and accepted social order were the boundaries of people's lives. This sounds rather unlike some "farming" regions on the Prairies during that period, with their mixture of booze, red lights, fights, cooperative dreams and raucous populism. The implied commonality of values based upon common blood, soil and traditions, if it ever existed, was elsewhere undergoing considerable change by the 1900s. While *Great War and Canadian Society* provides passing allusions to rural workers and their families, there are no accounts of loggers, miners or other resource workers. In other regions of Canada (as in BC, northern Ontario and elsewhere) such resource workers and stump ranchers were more typical of the rural scene than the farm yeomanry celebrated here.

"City Streets" suggests that class,

ethnic and cultural differences were greater in Canadian cities (i.e. Toronto) than in the countryside and were, in a sense, a foretaste of the disharmonies to come. Some, like Les Beauchamp's account of childhood in a "poor" area of Toronto in 1913, are especially evocative. Yet with few exceptions even these urban accounts transmit a picture of remarkable rusticity. The kings were still in their counting houses, the domestics were downstairs, God was in his heaven and almost all was right with the world. The recollections provide a rich store of the subjectively important, finely drawn status distinctions, and the clear implication is that Real Canadians were nothing if not conscious of being a cut or two above the "lower orders."

"Newcomers" deals with the immigrant experience in Toronto; over three-quarters of them were from Great Britain. They had to adjust to Canada as well, and the majority were working people, not squires. Yet it is almost as if they had stepped out of Robert Tressell's descriptions of his fellow workers in *Muggsborough of the time*. You would never know that there were Sam Scarletts, George Hardys, Ernie Winches, Tim What's-his-name, British miners and other working-class-conscious immigrants among them.

Scattered through the various chapters are accounts by a half dozen Ukrainian and Jewish immigrants to Canada. Almost all the passing references to strike participation or radical viewpoints come from their accounts. For instance, take one Sam Beckman (all names are pseudonyms). Raised in Tsarist Lithuania in the last decades of the nineteenth century, a member of the Jewish Arbyter Bund, a participant in the 1905 revolution before coming to Canada, a socialist street corner speaker in Toronto, and later a member of the Communist Party. And yet his brief account as presented might leave you with the feeling that his views and politics were mainly a colourful variant of Jewish subculture in Toronto. Incredible as it may seem, Canada was not necessarily a

strangely modern world to some immigrants, but rather a colonial, relatively stagnant, if tranquil, society.

"Joining Up," "Orders," and "At the Front" deal with Canadian volunteers, conscripts, and Red Cross ladies at home and abroad during the Great War. Extracts capture the initial flag waving and the patriotic hysteria which became endemic on the homeguard front. They also document nicely the war weariness which gradually set in among soldiers. Few soldiers subscribed to *Dulce Et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori*, nor was there much in the way of A Terrible Beauty to be seen. Actually, there are only two accounts of the fighting up front (total, three pages) and the mutual, senseless butchery of that conflict seems almost tangential to the collection. That these men generally played down the official hatreds manufactured for the war effort and selectively toned down the horrors of that conflict strikes me as among the more human and moving facets of the collection.

The chapter "At Home" deals mainly with men and womenfolk keeping the home fires burning and mounting watch on the Humber against subversion and slackers. It rings true and is part of a tradition which we see being dusted off and retailed for use in the current cold war. Interwoven in this chapter are moving reminiscences of the official telegrams announcing a death in the family and recollections of the quiet bravery which most maintained in the face of that anxiety. They too did their duty — but who were the pipers and who paid the price?

"At Work" intends to document life on the job during the industrialization of that period. It deals mainly with the war industries, focusing on the new role which women temporarily acquired as wage workers. It is strange that the fullest description of the work scene given is that by an upper-class woman who interrupted her singing career to do a one year stint of war work in a Toronto munitions factory. (Presumably she represents those mythic

"munitions girls" blissfully singing *Land of Hope and Glory* during their 10 and 12 hour shifts in the defence plants.) It is a valuable account by a basically decent person but it does not escape patronizing class snobbery. Factory work for her was an adventure quite removed from the practicalities of working for a living, of trying to wrest some joy and build some future on the wages and insecurities of factory labour. She comments on the supposed spendthrift character of one ex-domestic working on the factory floor. "But she thought that if you were rich, you waste, and rich people don't waste. The reason they're rich is because they have never wasted" (158). Really? And that's what Ontario working women during World War I thought?

In "The World Transformed" we move from the armistice to those changes experienced as having been wrought by the Great War on Canadian society of the 1920s. Supposedly, Canadians had passed from the innocence of a rustic world into the modern era, with all of the "social problems" of the jazz age. These might be summed up in the immortal words of the bard as, "How Ya Gonna Keep 'm Down on the Farm, Afta Dey've Seen Patee?". The "less stable types" couldn't easily fit back into their previous lives. Some girls began smoking, drinking and even worse, respect for religion and that old time tradition was sort of shot to hell. Surely the changes were greater than that. Or was the Great War and the decade which followed really a period of mounting reaction in Canada?

To me, the most telling account of the "aftermath" are the reminiscences of Richard Mills (172-175) — a remarkable commentary on nativistic reaction which must be read. Mills' account contains a passage which may be taken as a maxim by those who believe working class history has to be demythologized. Says he, "You don't go through life how you *should* think, you deal with people the way they *do* think, and work from there" (172).

Ironically, Mills' maxim is the conclusion to an account where he describes how he facilitated the lay-off of a number of Bell plant workers without antagonizing their union, a nugget of anti-labour history.

Undoubtedly the accounts documented in *Great War and Canadian Society* could be duplicated in most parts of Canada, including BC. But consider a handful of events during the same period which provide a somewhat different picture of Great Canadian society. *Item*: In the fall of 1912 the mainly British and Anglo-Canadian miners of the Vancouver Island coal fields, following a *then* 40 year history of militancy, launched into what became known as the Great Coal Strike. A few of the more dramatic highlights of that strike include a body of Nanaimo miners who disarmed and sent packing a gang of special deputies sent in to police the mines. At the Extension pithead a sustained gun battle broke out between miners and scabs. Fifty miles north, on the Cumberland fields, striking miners and their families marched through the centre of town singing the Workers' Marseillaise — and so forth. The mining areas were once again occupied in a military operation which included detachments from every regular and militia unit on the unPacific coast. Some two hundred miners were arrested and some two dozen ultimately convicted, tried, and jailed by the noted anti-labour justice, F.W. Howay (a much respected provincial historian). The region was still occupied by troops, the mines were run by scabs and the strike-lockout was still on in August 1914. Nor was the Great Coal Strike divorced from other similar developments in BC during the last decade of that not-so-belle epoch. Such struggles involved ultimately tens of thousands of men, whose lives were neither as harmonious, Victorian nor docile as the *Great War and Canadian Society* collection suggests.

*Item*: BC did witness a rallying to the colours which may have been as enthusiastic as in Orangeville. However, substantial numbers of working people here came to

recognize the war for what it was and were neither ready to volunteer, nor supported conscription, nor were ready to submerge their interests to the call of King and Capital. During the war some of the previously unorganized resource industries were finally unionized.

*Item*: One particularly well known case of 'draft resistance' may be instructive since it involved something more than the actions of a single individual. Albert Goodwin was an English immigrant who became a coal miner, participated in the Great Coal Strike, and became regional secretary of the International Mine, Mill and Smelterworkers Union. Ill with TB, he was reclassified fit for military service after attempting to organize the Cominco company camps and smelters. Goodwin went into hiding in the bush near Cumberland, where he was tracked down and killed by a Dominion Police constable on 27 July, 1918. The response of many thousands of working people in BC was quite different from the patriotic whitefeathering recounted from Toronto.

The population of much of Cumberland turned out in a cortege which carried Ginger Goodwin's casket through the centre of town to a martyr's grave. News of Goodwin's assassination brought out mass meetings in Vancouver and resulted in the first near "general strike" in BC history. While only a minority of BC workers participated, the port of Vancouver was brought to a standstill, sawmill and lumber workers shut down many plants, and supportive actions were scattered throughout the province. True enough, mobs of returned soldiers, homeguards, and others were soon formed to wreck the Vancouver Labour Temple, beat up the leaders of the strike and threaten others with prison, deportation, or worse. Temporarily suppressed, labour militancy in BC surged ahead a year later in the form of the One Big Union. While soon broken organizationally, these responses did not grow out of nothing nor did they disappear so completely as some may believe.

Nor was this merely the radical flamboyance of a few atypical labour agitators whose views were countered by the ordinary everyday conservatism of honest workmen as documented in *Great War and Canadian Society*. The one socialist commentary in that book is a single paragraph (in the "Aftermath") which implies that the view of WWI as a purely imperialist war was limited to small left-wing sects and only had somewhat greater currency in the 1920s and 1930s. That may have been so for southern Ontario, but it is definitely not true in some other regions in Canada.

Russell Hann's introduction to *Great War and Canadian Society* is neither an overview of the period nor a synopsis of the collected accounts. It is a review and critical commentary of how oral accounts have been used (or dismissed) in history and other disciplines. It is written with considerable verve and in my estimation is essentially correct in the ground it covers. The notes serve as an excellent select bibliography and the body is only occasionally marred by the inevitable settling of scores in scholarly feuds. It is impossible to do justice to the points raised in less than a separate review; therefore a few unsystematic comments will have to suffice here.

The two most recurrent themes are that (a) ordinary people themselves are the richest repositories of what can be known about everyday life and attitudes but their accounts have rarely been given the prominence due them, and that (b) oral history is in various ways distinct from and even juxtaposed to history drawn from manuscript and other documentary sources. Hann criticizes those strategies which lead

... to the notion that history happens to the bulk of the population and drastically underestimates the contributions of the ordinary members of the community. Those in the ranks who became history's victims were rarely formless putty in the hands of the powerful. Even when the protests from the powerless failed most completely, they constantly forced the dominant to modify their most cherished schemes. Most of the time

they led a highly autonomous existence and the best evidence as to the independent nature of their lived experience is undoubtedly their own testimony (10).

Now that is well said. But, it is *not* the picture which comes across in *most* accounts in *Great War and Canadian Society*. Hann also provides a useful passionate defence of the accuracy of people's memory of *their own experiences* long into old age and he excoriates those who dismiss such accounts as mere tissues of fabrication or self-deception.

Increasingly it strikes me that most historians' view that oral accounts are inherently distinct from other documentary sources is misdirected. Means of interpretation, measures of reliability, and some manner of summation are required, whether we use oral or other sources. All sources are grist for the mill, whether oral reminiscences, diaries, government statistics, company pay records, even accounts from hostile observers — as some of the compilers of *Great War and Canadian Society* have eloquently stated elsewhere. All are ultimately based upon the events, experiences, and responses of people involved.

Anthropology, almost from its inception, based its findings upon both oral accounts and direct observation. For some generations it generally excluded study of formal historical materials — very much to its detriment, as we now know. Anthropologists have gathered life histories of ordinary people in non-industrial societies for well over 50 years. They were partly intended to make the lives of individuals from other societies humanly comprehensible to distant readers. Life histories were also intended to chart the ways in which cultural patterns were incorporated, utilized, adapted, or selectively dismissed by individuals. Such life histories stand in conjunction with and are only fully understandable when related to more comprehensive overviews of the societies. For instance, two anthropologists recognized as having produced among the finest life his-

tories available — Sidney Mintz and Oscar Lewis — also compiled astute and detailed formal histories and socioeconomic studies of the communities from which those individual accounts sprang.

*The Great War and Canadian Society* is an important reminder of both past and continuing facets of Canadian society. The accounts do ring true and are valuable for what they represent. I trust that the compilers have edited them so as to retain the literal and thematic veracity of the originals. However, in my experience, many Canadians of 60 years ago were less gullible and docile, and had traditions which were more cosmopolitan and forward-looking than the general picture which emerges from *Great War and Canadian Society*.

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*Come Hell or High Water: Songs of the Buchans Miners* (Breakwater Recording 1001, Breakwater Books, St. John's Newfoundland).

In 1973 the miners of Buchans, Newfoundland fought a successful five and a half month strike against the American Smelting and Refining Company (ASARCO). One prominent feature of the strike was a daily mass picket line, in which 200-300 people, including strikers, wives, children and supporters, marched to the company gate every morning and noon singing their own locally composed songs. Following the strike, Local 5457 of the United Steel Workers produced a booklet of the strike songs. With the cooperation of the Memorial University Folklore Department, Breakwater Books has now released a recorded collection of these contemporary industrial folk songs.

Many of the strike songs were written by Angus Lane, "a unionist and well known local poet." Lane was already famous in Buchans as the writer of a satirical verse, "Christmas of '49," also

included on the album, which told the story of the miners' attempts to travel home for Christmas in the days when ASARCO controlled the only transportation route out of the town. As the strike balladeer in 1973, Angus Lane supplied appropriate songs at each stage of the strike. In his first song, "All Because of ASARCO," he effectively set forth the origins of the strike:

The company makes millions on concentrate  
tons

While miners end up with lead on their lungs  
Mining makes old men out of our young sons  
Producing ore for ASARCO.

Chorus: Our plea, our plea, is for you and me  
To demand what we want from this  
company  
No one here will go down on their  
knees  
To beg or plead from ASARCO.

And in time for the victory banquet at the end of the strike Lane composed a rousing review of the main events of the strike, set to the tune of "Kelligrew's Soiree."

Another fine contribution to the album is a song originally written in 1971, during an earlier and less successful strike. "The Buchans Strike" was written by two daughters of a union member, Hazel and Fronie Flight, and is a reminder that the industrial conflict was also a struggle for the survival of the community. The song lamented the departure of men from the town in 1971 — "And some have left to settle down, But quite against their will!" — and described the community's determination to survive — "Our town won't become a ghost town, But will still remain alive."

The album was recorded in Buchans in 1975 and 1976 by Peter Narvaez of Memorial University, who has included a useful set of liner notes and copies of the original songbook. Most of the songs are performed by Sandy Ivany, recording secretary of Local 5457, and by local musicians on accordion, guitars and mandolin. When accordionist Don Bursey contributes a lively "Cock of the North," or Harold Skanes, "the musical impresario of