

Introduction

Coal mining was the most important industry on Vancouver Island during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From its early beginnings at the isolated settlement of Fort Rupert in 1848, coal production steadily increased, facilitating the colonization of the region by European and Asian immigrants and the industrialization of the Island economy. The coal industry experienced periods of substantial growth in the 1880s and 1900s, with the expansion of the California and domestic markets, although it did not reach its highest levels of production until the 1920s. In 1911, the year before the Great Strike, the Island's collieries employed over 4,600 men and mined a record 1,855,661 gross tons of coal destined for both the domestic and the US market. The three most important mining centres on the Island were the extensive works of the Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company (VCMLC) at Nanaimo, purchased in late 1902 by the Western Fuel Company of San Francisco, and the Dunsmuir family's operations at Cumberland in the Comox Valley and at Wellington and then at Ladysmith/Extension. In addition, there were a number of smaller mines at East Wellington, South Wellington, Jingle Pot, and later at Cassidy.

This book explores the history of the Island's coal industry by focusing on one community, the town of Ladysmith. Europeans first occupied Ladysmith, or Oyster Harbour, as it was originally called, in 1898. The town site had been purchased two years earlier by James Dunsmuir, the coal and railway magnate, who required a port facility for the coal produced at his recently opened colliery at Extension, located twelve miles to the north. Over the next few years, as the coal at Dunsmuir's Wellington operations was worked out and production began to increase at Extension, he forced his employees to move from Wellington and Extension to the newly surveyed company town that was being built above the wharves and coal bunkers that dominated the shoreline.

Like many other British Columbia resource communities, the town of Ladysmith was the product of “instant urbanization.”¹ It was by no means a typical frontier camp town, however. As operations at the Extension mines expanded during the first decade of the twentieth century, Ladysmith prospered and was soon incorporated, becoming an important industrial town and a key transportation hub for Vancouver Island. It was connected to Nanaimo and Victoria by the E&N Railway, which had been completed in 1886, and to Vancouver and the Lower Mainland by the CPR transfer barge. Despite its dependence on the coal industry, the town’s economy gradually diversified, and by 1911 it had been transformed from a small company town – in reality a muddy village with more tree stumps lining the steep streets than houses – into a dynamic, ethnically mixed community with a population of approximately 3,295.²

The history of Ladysmith during the first two decades of its existence is primarily the story of the coal mines and coal miners. As in coalfields elsewhere, workplace dangers, the struggle for economic survival, conflict between labour and management, and the vicissitudes of community formation shaped the experience of Ladysmith’s predominantly working-class population. Independent, tough, and proud, the coal miners of Vancouver Island were reputed to be among the most radical and militant labourers in an extremely polarized province. They formed the backbone of the socialist movement and often engaged in long, bitter strikes. The most violent and protracted labour dispute was the Great Strike of 1912-14, a defining moment for the Island’s coal-mining population, which left communities divided and dashed all hopes of union recognition and economic justice.³

Despite the meagre gains of organized labour in the province at this time, much of British Columbia labour history has been preoccupied with explaining the alleged radicalism and militancy of the province’s industrial working class. According to many accounts, workers on the western Canadian frontier, especially coal miners, accepted “the social relations of capitalism only reluctantly” and were “more inclined to join revolutionary parties and unions than were workers in other regions of the country.”⁴ This theory of “Western Exceptionalism” has a long history. One of the most influential attempts to explain the uniqueness of western Canadian workers – this particular convergence of militant unionism, radical political activism, and violent strike activity that culminated in the labour revolt of 1919 – was put forward by David Bercuson in his provocative

1977 essay “Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier.”⁵ Over the years, this article has generated much critical discussion. Bercuson based his argument on two disparate theories, neither of which is especially applicable to the coal-mining communities of British Columbia but that have similar objectives, namely, the explanation of a supposed historical peculiarity or anomaly.

The first, the “frontier thesis,” was elaborated in the late nineteenth century by the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner.⁶ For Turner, the expanding frontier in the American West and the ready availability of free land for settlers, whose existence depended upon “self-reliance, simplicity, and practicality,” provided the foundations of the United States’ democratic institutions. According to Bercuson, whose vision of the western Canadian industrial frontier is an unambiguous derivative of Turner’s thesis, parallel conditions shaped western Canadian history. The frontier was the “great leveller which broke down class distinctions because men were equal, free and far from the traditional bonds and constraints of civilization,”⁷ producing an independent spirit in western Canadian resource towns and a mistrust of authority and the capitalist system. The mistrust inherent in the free spirit of the settlers and labourers, who were largely single men from a predominantly British immigrant labour force steeped in a radical heritage, was exacerbated by the brutal conditions of the industrial frontier, which, rather than liberating the individual, offered men only hard, dangerous work with “little upward mobility, little opportunity for improvement. They were not free and were not as good as their masters.”⁸

The second theory does not have as long an intellectual pedigree but has greatly influenced coal-mining history. “Isolation theory” was first articulated in the 1950s by Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegal, and holds that certain labourers, such as coal miners, constituted a homogeneous, “isolated mass” that lived “in separate communities, with their own codes, myths, heroes and social standards, and with few ‘neutrals’ to dilute mass antagonism towards absentee employers.”⁹ These communities and work camps were isolated geographically from major urban centres and socially and culturally from mainstream bourgeois social norms, values, and institutions, and hence were radical and militant. Although some historians have argued that the physical isolation of coal-mining communities diminished occupational solidarity and reinforced coal miners’ natural conservatism,¹⁰ Bercuson argues that the isolation of the miners, when

combined with the unique features of the frontier, produced an explosive mixture. Because the “presence of church and other moderating social institutions was weak,” and “there were no teachers, clerks, merchants, priests, salesmen, artisans, doctors, or other professionals” on the isolated western Canadian frontier to mediate class conflict, the resource communities were “closed, polarized societies,” consisting of a discontented working class on the one hand and a hostile management on the other.¹¹

The implications of Western Exceptionalism are far-reaching. It presumes, for instance, that the experience of British Columbia workers was somehow different from that of workers in the rest of Canada and, indeed, elsewhere in the world. While it would be foolhardy to deny the role played by local conditions and events in shaping western Canadian industrialization and the experiences of the working population, it would be equally short-sighted to ignore the similar experiences of workers during this period of profound global economic change. In addition, the theory is based on the assumption that class is not an adequate theoretical category for understanding the peculiarities of the British Columbia resource frontier. Western Exceptionalism seems to have enjoyed currency precisely because it tried to present an alternative to class-based analysis and to divorce economic conflict from the system of economic production, seeking the origins of labour protest instead in external factors. Bercuson, for instance, argues that geography (frontier conditions and isolation), demography (the large proportion of single men employed in the industry), and ethnicity (the radical heritage of British-born coal miners in British Columbia) created conditions conducive to labour unrest. But this reduces workers to the status of passive victims of largely impersonal forces, such as demography or isolation, rather than seeing them as active participants in the daily class struggles that shaped their experience of objective social reality, and effectively displaces class and class struggle, the origins of which are found in the dynamic of capitalist production, as analytical categories and historically determining forces within society. Labour protest is consequently no longer considered within the context of capitalism and capitalist development, but is regarded as anomalous, deviant behaviour. It is a “problem” to be solved rather than a historical phenomenon to be understood, an irrational event rather than a natural feature of modern industrial society, a coherent form of collective behaviour, and a powerful articulation of common aims and interests.¹²

In recent years, scholars have taken exception to this parochial vision of western Canadian labour and working-class history.¹³ To cite just one example, John Douglas Belshaw, in a series of seminal articles on the social history of nineteenth-century Nanaimo, has challenged a number of specific arguments of the Western Exceptionalism thesis. Although Belshaw argues that geographical isolation determined the experience of coal miners on Vancouver Island,¹⁴ he has consistently maintained that the conditions of the frontier did not create a natural predisposition towards radicalism or militancy among Island colliers. He has also demonstrated how the apparent “propensity to strike in BC’s coal towns” cannot be attributed either to the belief that frontier towns were made up of “single transient workers” with nothing to lose,¹⁵ to the radical and militant heritage of the British immigrant coal miner,¹⁶ or to the poor standard of living of colliers on Vancouver Island.¹⁷

By exposing these dominant myths, Belshaw and others have obliged the historian to re-evaluate not only the merits of Western Exceptionalism but more importantly the nature of working-class political and economic mobilization on Vancouver Island. In particular, his work ultimately calls for a fundamental reassessment of the experience of class, the workplace, and the transformation of capitalist production. Seen from this perspective, it becomes increasingly evident that the nature of working-class mobilization in western Canada was by no means unique. The advent of industrial trade unions and the growth of socialist and labour political parties during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were part of a universal process of economic development involving fundamental changes in the nature of capitalist production, the function of the state, and in the structure of the working class.

The vital role played by coal miners in this process has been well documented, if not well understood. A glance at strike statistics for Great Britain, for example, demonstrates that while only one-fifth of all strikes were by coal miners, the sheer number of miners ensured that they made up one-half of all strikers.¹⁸ A similar pattern emerges from Canadian strike data. According to a federal government report analyzing strikes between 1901 and 1912 for the Ministry of Labour, of a total of 1,319 recorded strikes, only 100 involved coal miners, or less than 8 percent of the total. Yet the coal-mining industry involved the most employees at 76,572, the next highest figure being from the building trades (67,292), and by far the greatest number of working days lost: out of approximately nine million

days lost, over 40 percent, or 3,839,447, were lost in the coal-mining industry.¹⁹ In the Maritimes, a region dominated by the coal industry, miners struck 82 times out of a total of 411 strikes but accounted for 74 percent of striker-days. This has led one authority to conclude that “the coal miners were exceptional not because they decided to go on strike more often than other workers but because their strikes were far larger in terms of numbers and duration.”²⁰

Ian McKay argues persuasively that the coal miners’ position in the vanguard of the labour movement and reputation for radicalism and militancy derived from their central position “within the socio-economic formation.” In contrast to other workers, coal miners literally fuelled the industrial revolution. They “were in much the same position as soldiers at the front”; indeed, “they lived on the front lines of the industrial revolution.”²¹ When coal miners struck, their impact on the economy was greater than that of other workers, not just because of the large numbers involved but because the industrial economy depended upon coal to function. This empowered them more than others, reinforcing their indispensability to a society and economy dependent upon coal for its continued growth and prosperity.²²

McKay’s “power/centrality” theory offers a valuable alternative to Western Exceptionalism. Not only does it reinstate miners as active participants in the social and economic process but it also focuses on the miners’ lived experience of economic instability, oppressive employers and management, unsafe working conditions, and unsatisfied expectations, and on their threatened social status and standards of living, and how these factors influenced industrial relations and class conflict. According to McKay, the uniqueness of the coal-mining workplace and the importance of the industry to the economy created a specialized system of production and hence a special work culture that defined the collective outlook or identity of the miners. Their distinctive “mining outlook,” based on tradition and precedence and characterized by collectivism and independence, meant that they were more resistant to the threats to their autonomy posed by employers and the state. As McKay argues, colliers were “governed more by historically-sanctioned tradition, precedent, the ‘common law’ of the pit, than by abstract schemes and formal rules. In both its natural and social aspects, the mine was far more than a mere workplace. It was a dynamic force, even a dynamic tradition, greater than the sum of individuals found within it: a structure dependent upon the integration

of its five key systems, but also on the historical precedents its very longevity encouraged."²³ For McKay, periods of economic and social crisis reveal the dynamism of this structure within the coalfields and in society at large, and help explain how it shaped the behaviour of individuals and groups.

While McKay offers a sophisticated and provocative reinterpretation of the history of coal mining in Nova Scotia, he does not completely debunk isolation theory. McKay argues that the collective identity or work culture of the coal miners formed an autonomous culture, a culture that represented a widespread deviation from the mainstream, dominant culture and ideals of the bourgeoisie. However, an autonomous culture (as opposed to a subculture, i.e., a distinct but integrated element of a common culture based on shared meanings) must necessarily exist in isolation from mainstream culture. As a result, McKay risks perpetuating the stereotype of a cohesive community (due to isolation, historical outlook, and occupational concentration) and of an autonomous coal-mining culture distinct from the rest of society. An autonomous coal-mining culture premised on a sharp distinction between proletarian values and bourgeois cultural codes not only minimizes similarities but also smoothes over an array of strategic differences and divisions within the community of miners and the working class itself, such as race, for instance, or skill level, divisions that had to be overcome if the miners were to achieve even a modicum of success on the picket line or in the political arena.

This was rare indeed, however. If the miners shared a common cultural identity of collectivism and independence that was diametrically opposed to the values of the dominant bourgeois culture, then why was this cultural solidarity not readily translated into unified economic and political action? Granted, this relationship is by no means straightforward, as McKay and others have pointed out. There is no reason to presume that solidarity in industrial disputes should be carried over to the political realm. But it does point to the limitations and constraints of labour militancy and radicalism. Clearly labour solidarity was a mile wide but only an inch deep. The common experience of work in the mines was rarely strong enough to overcome the deep-seated divisions within the working class. This partially explains why coal miners on Vancouver Island, while relatively successful in the political field, failed to achieve their goals in the numerous industrial disputes they fought. Success in the realm of party politics clearly did not translate into economic power for the workers. If any one factor

was to unite the miners, it was the common experience of work. That it did not reveals the extent to which other factors prevented this collective mining outlook from being translated into effective industrial power.

Without undermining the essential validity of a common work culture based on tradition, precedence, and the structured systems of the workplace, the individual and collective experiences of Vancouver Island coal miners demonstrate that many different subcultures based on ethnicity, gender, work experience, class structures, and class expectations, as well as education and mobility, coexisted within the community. This is not to suggest that the community was cohesive and integrated. There was much room for conflict and argument. Community, after all, requires constant negotiation and dialogue, but dialogue derived from a shared set of cultural meanings or values. Rather than being autonomous, and hence isolated, from the dominant culture, the miners' outlook shared distinct features unique to the form of production but that still functioned within the bounds of the common cultural discourse of society at large.



This book explores some of these issues by looking at the evolution of working-class life and mobilization in Ladysmith during the first decades of the twentieth century. Although Ladysmith was not a typical British Columbia town, there are numerous advantages to studying local history. First, the local context permits a closer understanding of the concrete experiences of Ladysmith's coal miners and their families and reinstates their dignity as active participants in the shaping of their collective destiny. Second, it reveals how local conditions influenced labour relations and the emergence of a clearly articulated political and ideological landscape. Third, studying the coal miners' experience of political, economic, and social struggle helps us understand how they attempted to define and redefine their position in society. The experience of everyday life determined the nature of political and economic mobilization, as well as the aspirations and expectations of the coal miners. Finally, a local study should reveal much about the impact of class, class relations, and class struggle on the lives of the people and on the historical process in general. Class emerges as one of many constitutive and interconnected elements of power relations, including race, ethnicity, and gender; while class was an important social determinant, by itself it cannot entirely explain social reality and the cultural conditions of life.

How class relations shaped the early history of Ladysmith is evident in the town's origins as one of Dunsmuir's company towns. After a brief discussion of Ladysmith's founding and its social structures, I attempt to examine the nature of class, community, and culture in Ladysmith. Despite a common work culture and the existence of a rich associational life, community cohesion was by no means a given. Solidarity did exist during times of crisis, such as the explosion at Extension in 1909 or the strike of 1912-14, but it depended upon the formation of a common identity and set of interests. Confronted with severe economic hardship, a hostile and repressive state, and an inflexible company determined to crush the strikers, miners were able to maintain solidarity only if they had the commitment of the community. However, the enormous pressure of the strikes revealed dangerous, built-in fissures that seriously tested this commitment and eroded community identity and solidarity, preventing the miners from emerging victorious.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on workplace experience and the problem of mine safety, respectively. To what extent did changes to the structure of the workplace influence class relations and political mobilization? In the past, historians have argued that technological developments, the ethnic division of labour, and the systematic deskilling of the practical miner eroded the miners' traditional authority and autonomy of the workplace, leading to their inevitable proletarianization. Hence, their commitment to labourist or socialist political ideals was a defensive response to these external pressures. Contrary to this view, I suggest that the very persistence, not the erosion, of the "old regime" in the mining industry provided miners with the strength to embrace a political cause and to agitate for improvements in work conditions and wages. The issue of safety, the subject of Chapter 4, is often minimized or ignored altogether when analyzing working-class mobilization, in part due to the belief that the miners were fatalistic and only too willing to sacrifice safety for production. However, this issue was inextricably connected to disputes over wages and was key to mobilizing not only the miners but also their families. As such, it went to the very heart of the mining culture and community.

The final chapters focus on political and economic mobilization and culminate in a lengthy examination of the Great Strike of 1912-14, the longest and most violent strike in the history of the province. Chapter 5 attempts to demonstrate that working-class political culture in British Columbia was refashioned during the first decade of the twentieth century

through changes in the economic structure, the development of party government, and the realignment of political discourse along sharp class lines. The growing support of working-class parties heralded the beginning of modern politics in BC, as was the case throughout the industrialized world. A new political culture, based on the clear articulation of group interests, produced new politicians, policies, organizations, and conflicts. Through their experience of political, economic, and social struggle, miners actively sought to redefine their positions in society and their relationship to the dominant economic and political power structures. This became increasingly possible after 1903, when political mobilization and participation accelerated. Over the course of the next decade, a new dynamic evolved that challenged the power of traditional authority and political structures. This political culture was expressed in a new political language that, cloaked in the rhetoric of radicalism, should be seen not just as the articulation of an ideological position but also as an instrument of social and political change.

But did this process produce revolutionaries? This is examined in the last two chapters, which discuss the climax of labour activism in the Vancouver Island coalfields – the Great Strike. This strike was characterized by its violence. Rather than being an episode of unfathomable “revolutionary agitation,”²⁴ however, the riots of August 1913 reveal the effective limits of the miners’ radicalization and militancy. The miners’ violence was not an expression of the strikers’ power. On the contrary, the striking miners became violent because they had no authority. Viewing the riots as mindless destruction ignores their objectives and meaning and condescends to the past: whether organized or spontaneous, if the riots were mindless, so too were the rioters. Contemporaries were shocked not simply because of the property damage – which of course offended middle-class sensibilities, although they were less concerned about the damage to Chinese property – but because of the message the violence conveyed. Opponents invested the riots with more radical political significance than they warranted because they felt that symbolic inversion could lead to a real inversion of social reality. The strikers, however, never took this step. They specifically targeted certain individuals and groups – strikebreakers, management, and the Chinese – and showed remarkable restraint given the level of frustration and potential for violence, willingly acquiescing to state authority once it was reintroduced into the community and they had made their point. This was no storming of the Bastille.

The eventual collapse of the Great Strike in August 1914 left a legacy of bitterness and hostility in the divided, shaken communities of Vancouver Island; it also led to the demise of the United Mine Workers of America and severely weakened the miners. This was compounded by the First World War, which did little to improve conditions for the miners. Over the next few years, faced with increased competition from oil, the coal-mining industry on Vancouver Island entered a period of crisis and the coalfields slowly declined. Although deindustrialization was by no means permanent – new industries based on forestry eventually replaced the coal mines – the legacy of class conflict had a negative long-term impact on the development of Ladysmith. The strike, followed so quickly by the horrors of the First World War, left an embittered, crippled working-class population. Mobilization stalled, as did the once burning desire to alter the political and economic status quo in British Columbia.