

Workers' History Finds A Home

Recently the *Toronto Star* ran a story about a lavish new lakefront housing development in the eastern suburbs of Toronto owned by one of the Bronfman companies. Under the quaint name of "Port Union Village," the developer is resurrecting the long-forgotten history of a tiny port that had existed on the spot in the nineteenth century in order to sell a myth of rural gentility in the 1990s. What the story failed to explain was that the new houses were rising on the site of the infamous Canadian Johns-Manville Company, where from the 1940s to the 1970s several hundred workers worked with asbestos. By 1980 43 CJM employees were dead of asbestos-related diseases. The company's long suppression of information about these hazards became a national scandal before it collapsed into bankruptcy beneath a flood of lawsuits. The *Star* was thus complicit in suppressing the memory of a significant industrial workplace, of the organized resistance of the men who worked there and the workplace culture that sustained them, and of their life with family and neighbours beyond the factory walls. For the residents of this new suburb, there never was a working-class experience here (they might start asking questions when they find the asbestos in their backyard gardens). The Ontario Worker's Arts and Heritage Centre exists so that this kind of historical white-washing and collective amnesia will not continue to take place. Across the country, but particularly in Ontario, industrial centres are withering away in the vast corporate "restructuring" that has swept through the economy over the past decade. And so often the same story gets repeated. A plant closes. Machinery is sold off. The workers disperse. The union folds. Community organizations die. Records and artifacts of all kinds are sent to the dump. Memories fade.

Most Canadian historians now recognize that the history of Canadian workers is a legitimate field of study and an important part of the larger fabric of national and regional experience. A considerable number of practitioners of public history - museum staff, archivists, librarians, and so on - share this understanding, as do many teachers. Growing numbers of artists, film-makers, and musicians have taken the working-class experience as the subject of their art. Unfortunately, many cultural institutions and agencies have often been much slower to show the same interest. And the media rarely acknowledge this part of Canada's past. The Centre therefore merged in the late 1980s from the convergence of an expanding community of people interested in workers' history and culture and an emerging sense of crisis about preserving that experience. The group that came together as the first formal board of the Centre in 1992 included three appointees from the Ontario Federation of Labour and a variety of labour historians, teachers, artists, archivists, and community activists. A large conference the next year drew many people from all these constituencies. The co-chairs of the board are now D'Arcy Martin of the Communications, Energy, and Paper Workers Union and Craig Heron from York University.

The project has always been broad-based in its conception of "workers" so that all work experience whether paid or unpaid, all racial, ethnic, and minority groups, all aspects of workers' lives would be covered. The vision behind the project was also ambitious. A provincial headquarters with an extensive program of its own would be the hub of activity across the province, as exhibitions and educational programs travelled between cities and local workers' heritage committees undertook their own programming. A feasibility study funded by the federal and provincial governments confirmed the need for and interest in such a centre in 1994. It also recommended that the centre set up shop in Hamilton.

This was an expensive vision in an increasingly cold climate for cultural projects of any kind. The board nonetheless approached all three levels of government for support. Negotiations dragged through 1994 and into 1995, until the former Ontario government finally agreed to provide \$1.3 million to buy and renovate a historic building in Hamilton, and the City of Hamilton kicked in \$650,000 to help with renovations and initial operating expenses. To date, no federal funds have materialized. The Centre now has charitable status and is engaged in a fund-raising campaign. It is also soliciting individual memberships.

The building chosen to house the Centre is one of the oldest in Hamilton - an elegant custom house built in the Italian Renaissance Revival style in 1860. Its history has turned out to be highly appropriate for the project, since many slices of working-class life have been found under its roof over the years. It has been a Customs Department office, a public school, a branch of the YWCA, a shelter for the homeless, a factory producing, at different times, vinegar, woolen yarn, and macaroni, and, most recently a martial arts academy. Renovations are scheduled to be finished by Labour Day 1996.

Early on, the board had to make some hard choices about what its building would be used for. With sound advice from archivists and museologists, the decision was made not to develop an extensive archives or to build up a large permanent collection of artifacts, all of which require massive resources for management and conservation. Instead, the Centre will play an active role in helping to find appropriate homes for collections that are in danger of disappearing and will build up a resource centre that can act as a referral service for sources in workers' history. Otherwise, visitors will find artwork, historical exhibitions and displays, lectures, concerts, educational programs, and much more to interest, inform, and inspire them inside the building.

The Centre will also extend its programming beyond the Custom House walls, to use the existing streets, buildings, and residents of Hamilton as active resources for museum and cultural programming. One of the first major projects in this vein has been a set of walking tours of "The Workers' City." These were developed through the combination of archival research and oral history. In fact, two of the tours include audio tapes with the voices of interviewees telling their stories. The Centre is also working to develop co-operative programming with unions and community groups both in the city and elsewhere in the province. The goal is to bring together professionals in history, museology, and the arts with working people keenly interested in preserving their history and presenting it to a wider audience.

The Centre is currently in a transition phase. Its two staff are working in a temporary office next door to the Custom House, planning the opening programs and building links in the community. Historians will be interested to know that the Centre is co-sponsoring a two-day conference on 28-29 May 1996 (right before the CHA meetings) with the Canadian Committee on Labour History and the McMaster Labour Studies Program to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the postwar labour revolt in the province, entitled "What We Fought For: Ontario Workers' Struggles, 1935-1955."

For further information on the conference and other activities of this unique cultural project, the Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Center can be reached at P.O. Box 83034, Jamesville Postal Stn, Hamilton L8L 8E8; Phone: 1-905-522-3003; FAX: 1-905-522-5424.

Craig Heron, York University

History in the Making: Recent PhDs' Poster Session 18th International Congress of Historical Sciences

At the meeting of the International Congress for the Historical Sciences held in Montreal, August 27 to September 3, 1995, a committee of "new scholar" members of the CHA organized the ICHS' first poster session. Our committee, which first met at the Learned's in 1992, consisted of Colin Coates, Anne Drummond, John Lutz, Marcel Martel, Lorna McLean, and Molly Ungar. Terry Galvin designed and executed our call for posters.

At the Palais du Congrès, we had a room for the poster session for August 28-29, where posters were mounted, two per panel. We received submissions from Scotland, Roumania, Brazil, and Argentina, as well as the United States and Canada.

We thank the ICHS Organizing Committee, specifically Professors Jean-Claude Robert and Brian Young, for the opportunity to participate in the ICHS. We congratulate them on their great success, and thank the Graduate Students' Committee of the CHA and McGill University for their financial support.

L'histoire en devenir: l'exposition d'affiches des nouveaux diplômés au XVIII^e congrès international des sciences historiques

Un comité de nouveaux diplômés membres de la S.H.C. a organisé la première exposition d'affiches du C.I.S.H. lors de la réunion quinquennale tenue à Montréal du 27 août au 3 septembre 1995. Le comité, qui s'est réuni pour la première fois au congrès des sociétés savantes de 1992, est composé de Colin Coates, Anne Drummond, John Lutz, Marcel Martel, Lorna McLean et Molly Ungar. Terry Galvin a conçu la publicité invitant les personnes intéressées à soumettre des affiches.

Les affiches, montées deux par deux sur des panneaux, ont été exposées les 28 et 29 août dans une salle du Palais des congrès. Elles provenaient d'Écosse, de Roumanie, du Brésil, de l'Argentine, des États-Unis et du Canada.

Nous aimerions remercier le comité organisateur du C.I.S.H., et plus spécialement les professeurs Jean-Claude Robert et Brian Young, pour nous avoir offert l'occasion de participer au congrès. Nous les félicitons pour leur succès et remercions le Comité des étudiants diplômés de la S.H.C. ainsi que l'Université McGill de leur appui financier.

Images d'Épinal

Le Musée du Québec nous offrait récemment une exposition sur les Images d'Épinal. Cette exposition, fruit d'un travail de deux années et d'une collaboration entre le Musée du Québec et le Musée départemental d'art ancien et contemporain d'Épinal, s'accompagne d'un ouvrage intitulé Images d'Épinal.

Cet ouvrage de 250 pages n'a pas pour objectif de dresser un bilan de l'histoire de l'imagerie populaire en France, mais plutôt de faire découvrir et apprécier en Amérique du Nord une production et un type d'images qui y est peu connu. Une partie minime de l'ouvrage seulement est donc consacrée à l'histoire et au développement de cette industrie qui prit naissance à Épinal, dans les Vosges (France) au XVII^e siècle et connut un essor considérable avec la fondation de la fabrique de Jean-Charles Pellerin en 1796. Le premier quart de l'ouvrage nous donne de nombreux renseignements sur les débuts de cette industrie, les matériaux utilisés, les techniques d'impression, les méthodes de diffusion des images, l'évolution de l'entreprise Pellerin.

La plupart de l'ouvrage est donc réservée pour l'étude des images elles-mêmes. Le «Livre ouvert de l'imagerie» regroupe un grand nombre d'images traitées par thème; on y retrouve ainsi de nombreux exemples d'images militaires sur Napoléon et sa Grande Armée. Le passage des images sacrées aux images profanes, la naissance du procédé narratif, l'émergence d'une histoire en tableaux qui préfigure la forme actuelle de la bande dessinée constituent une autre partie de cet ouvrage. Une place importante est ensuite accordée à l'imagerie enfantine, genre exploité au maximum par la Fabrique Pellerin.

Un catalogue bien documenté d'images reprend le découpage du «livre ouvert de l'imagerie» et propose de nombreuses illustrations complémentaires accompagnées de fiches techniques précises.

Le tout constitue un ouvrage très agréable à consulter, accessible à un large public. L'exposition qui accompagne cet ouvrage, présentée au Musée du Québec jusqu'au 11 février, doit accomplir une tournée nord-américaine. Elle sera ainsi présentée à Hull de la mi-juin à mi-septembre 1997, à l'University of Michigan of Art à Ann Harbour du 1^{er} novembre 1996 à la fin septembre 1997, et au la Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin, Madison, du 13 décembre 1997 au 8 février 1998. Elle entreprendra ensuite une tournée en France où elle sera accueillie à Épinal dès le printemps 1998.

Isabelle Dornic