

Big Lives: Recent Publications in Canadian Labour Biography

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Volume 45, 2000

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt45re01>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

McInnis, P. (2000). Big Lives: Recent Publications in Canadian Labour Biography. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 45, 271–278.

REVIEW ESSAYS / NOTES CRITIQUES

Big Lives: Recent Publications in Canadian Labour Biography

Peter S. McInnis

Doug Smith, *Cold Warrior: C.S. Jackson and the United Electrical Workers* (St. John's: Canadian Committee on Labour History 1997);

Maurice Rush, *We Have a Glowing Dream: Recollections of Working-Class and People's Struggles in B.C. from 1935 to 1996* (Vancouver: Centre for Social Education 1996);

Al King with Kate Braid, *Red Bait!: Struggles of a Mine Mill Local*. (Vancouver: Kingbird Publishing 1998).

LABOUR BIOGRAPHIES and autobiographies present their readers with a vexing challenge. We are aware that this genre offers an all too rare opportunity to peer into the lives of working-class activists denied due appreciation or explication by a culture that celebrates wealth and privilege. At their best, labour biographies provide engrossing accounts of the lives of people who made a difference. Drawn into the unfolding narrative we read on anxiously to see what new travails face our protagonist. Will it be a tense bargaining session with management, a fractious confrontation with an unruly union local, passing a key resolution at the big convention, or a restless night spent in the police lockup. In a modern age largely devoid of authentic leaders we seek instruction from past exemplars. At times,

Peter S. McInnis, "Big Lives: Recent Publications in Canadian Labour Biography," *Labour/Le Travail*, 45 (Spring 2000), 271-77.

personal comparisons between the reader and the subject seem unavoidable. If only we could share some of that unfaltering strength of conviction, that steely determination to serve working people regardless of personal cost, the boundless energy necessary to build the union and keep it strong then we too could reflect on a lifetime of achievement — or at the very least ensure we attend that next departmental meeting.

At the same time we approach these publications with due apprehension lest we take in a caustic blend of political screed and hagiography, a sort of armchair apologia for lives lived. Some chronicles seize opportunity to re-visit past battles and settle old scores. The passage of time alone cannot heal many of these wounds and decades later memories return with all the vividness of contemporary events. While these relatively unexpurgated versions may augment our understanding of historical events they can also obfuscate and confuse. So too, readers of most labour autobiographies must accommodate a certain measure of vainglorious masculinity as these accounts of male figures still dominate numerically those of women.

These flaws may, or may not, be moderated by the choice of a ghostwriter or biographer. For living subjects, negotiating the role of an editor can be a delicate matter as preparing a record for posterity brings with it certain rigidities of interpretation. For this reason posthumous accounts may offer the necessary critical perspective. In all, it is a complicated agenda to fulfill. Several recent publications illustrate these tendencies for good or ill. All of the three books under review are the stories of men who had life-long connections with the Communist Party of Canada and the labour movement. Taken together they represent an opportunity to assay policy directives, review organizing strategies, and re-evaluate the CPC's relationship with Canadian unions.

Doug Smith's *Cold Warrior: C.S. Jackson and the United Electrical Workers* is a fine example of a critical biography. Smith, the author of numerous labour histories, is well suited to the task of interpreting Jackson's story. Based on extensive interviews supplemented with extensive archival research, the result is a detailed yet lucid account of the life and times of C.S. Jackson and the Canadian UE. This is a compelling story that does credit to the work of a singularly dedicated union organizer and steadfast Communist activist. Despite Jackson's determination to control the telling of his life's story it is to the credit of Doug Smith that the final publication remains even-handed and analytical without being sanitized. Reading *Cold Warrior* one comes to admire, if not like, C.S. Jackson. Such an accommodation is no mean feat. Irascible and petulant, Jackson was a unionist who demanded the attention of all who came within range.

This is a complex, and at times, convoluted story of thrust and parry between the United Electrical Workers and its enemies within and without organized labour. UE's tendentious position within the emergent Canadian Congress of Labour, its fight against jurisdictional encroachment from the American UE, and battles with their anti-communist rivals the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE) are

discussed. The biography sustains the ongoing re-evaluation in labour historiography that moves beyond the 1930s to the 1940s-50s as key decades for industrial unions. It was the war years and the transition to a peacetime economy where UE made its most substantive progress in wages, seniority, and working conditions.

From his early years in the northern Ontario woods to his over forty years as an organizer for the United Electrical Workers, C.S. Jackson witnessed many of these critical moments in Canadian labour history. As both a member of the CPC and the director of an aggressive industrial union, clashes with competing unionists are to be expected. So too are repeated conflicts with state authorities as Jackson was variously denounced, ejected, arrested, and interned as much for his strident nonconformist demeanour as for his heretical political doctrines. This part of the story is somewhat familiar to many readers. Left largely undisclosed in the pages of *Cold Warrior* is the contrast between Jackson's problematic private life and the ground-breaking policies supported by UE in terms gender equality. New evidence in published historical studies indicates that UE women were significantly under-represented as both executives and convention delegates. This prompts the question, can a man with the reputation as a bully and philanderer conscientiously lead a union that officially abhorred sexual discrimination and championed a policy of wage equity? Also at issue is the CPC's tendency to subsume gender relations within class analyses in a manner which leaves women activists little room to manoeuvre. These are subjects that Doug Smith should have pursued at greater length, both in his initial interviews with Jackson and in the resulting text.

The story of the Canadian UE has much to say on the day-to-day mechanics of building and maintaining a dynamic union structure. Major manufacturers in the electrical sector from Canadian General Electric, Phillips, Westinghouse, and Northern Electric were organized and sustained throughout the dismal years of the Cold War. Despite UE's impressive track record, CCL leaders Aaron Mosher and Pat Conroy were prepared to sacrifice such gains in the name of political sectarianism. Jackson's refusal to accept CCL jurisdictional rulings that ceded work sites to other unions, especially the despised IUE, frequently left the United Electrical Workers ostracized from the mainstream of Canadian labour. Reviewing these events is to be reminded of just how much energy was squandered in internecine warfare within the Canadian Congress of Labour, energy that had more practical utility when applied to building the movement at the shop floor. We come to accept that men like Mosher and Conroy were, in the trenchant phrase of C. Wright Mills, "managers of discontent," when they should have been leaders for labour's greater cause.

C. S. Jackson makes it clear that it was never easy for the UE to exist as challenges came from both outside the union and from internal struggles with the American headquarters. An ardent nationalist, and early proponent of independent unions, many of Jackson's concerns over foreign capital retain their credibility fifty years later. In a UE brief prepared for the 1955 Royal Commission on Canada's

Economic Prospects Jackson warned that the threat posed by American domination would result in the "control of the [Canadian] economy by the United States in United States' interests, and the loss of Canadian nationhood".(226) While this observation may seem axiomatic from the contemporary vantage-point it should be remembered that it was the CPC-led unions that continually noted the American threat throughout the immediate postwar era.

Readers of *Cold Warrior* are directed to reconsider the typical schema historians have long used to delineate "business" from "social" unionism. In many respects UE blended both elements successfully. While Jackson, and his subordinates, fully understood the necessity of servicing union locals efficiently this attention to the pragmatic side of the job did not prevent the Canadian UE from assuming a prominent voice in the national issues of the day. Whether it was filing routine contract renewals or workers compensation briefs, or petitioning for human rights and world peace, the UE sought to be part of it. In the end, what sort of homage should we accord C.S. Jackson? Brash, sexist, determined, and doctrinaire — he was undoubtedly a man of his era. Surely this type of old-guard labour leader would not find favour in the modern house of labour. Yet one cannot help but feel that Jackson, a man who never forgot which side he was on, might prove just as effective now as he was in the pioneer for Canada's industrial unions.

In *We Have a Glowing Dream*, Maurice Rush traces his eventful life in the Communist Party of Canada. In a career spanning sixty years, Rush worked as an activist with unemployed labourers in Kamloops, with the Young Communist League, as an organizer with the Labour-Progressive Party, a journalist for the *Pacific Tribune*, and later as provincial leader of the BC Communist Party. *We Have a Glowing Dream* sets out an ambitious agenda to discuss a broad range of historical events ranging from the 1935 On-to-Ottawa March to the BC 1983 Solidarity Coalition. One is left, however, with the uneasy feeling that the entire story should be more interesting than was committed to print. In a series of short, episodic chapters we are jostled through the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War era, and towards more recent decades. This ground is traversed quickly and much specific detail is lost in the process.

In large measure the book's weaknesses are due to having the author and editor as the same person. Here we have a problem characteristic of many autobiographies, the failure to speak of one's own life in terms which assert its legitimacy alongside the larger events of world history. While Rush is at liberty to provide his own interpretation of the world history, he usually does so at the cost of sacrificing distinct parts of his own personal experiences. A sort of deviation of aim results when predominance is accorded the formal public persona at the cost of erasing much of one's private life. Often we want to know less of the author's impression of Igor Gouzenko, or of his audience with Ho Chi Minh, and more of what it was to be born to a working-class Jewish family in Toronto's Spadina district. One wonders why Newt Gingrich or Jean Chrétien are allowed to roam the pages when

we would rather learn more of Beckey Buhay and Harold Pritchett. Although the introduction stipulates that this is to be a “political memoir” rather than a standard autobiography, the resulting book is an uneasy hybrid.

Maurice Rush was *born in tumultuous times, coming of age in the Depression*, surviving three years in military service, including a wartime internment as a German PoW, and public life as a communist in the intolerant Cold War era. Rush knows he has a rousing story to tell but flinches when it comes time to reveal intimate thoughts or emotions. Rarely does one have a sense that the author dissented from a CPC policy or took issue with a Committee directive. In place of anything resembling candid revelation we are instead presented with the minutiae of Party affairs as we read of yet another meeting of a subcommittee or plenary session. We search in vain for details of the inner workings of the CPC and find mostly reconstituted policy directives and press releases.

In Canada, engaging in unpopular politics comes at a steep price. Rush and his comrades faced harassment at every turn from a political and judicial system unwilling to accommodate true dissent. Far from having the desired effect of intimidation the experience left the author determined not to abandon his political tenets. While there is little doubt that Maurice Rush exhibited unwavering strength of conviction and courage in his lifelong support of working-class principles, it is a pity that the *resulting memoirs are unlikely to find an audience beyond a now-aging cadre of true believers.*

Red Bait!: Struggles of a Mine Mill Local is the engaging and frank tale of Al King’s life in Trail, BC. King’s no-guff personality and genuine commitment to fellow unionists is evident as he vividly describes starting work as a smelter worker in 1937 and the struggle to charter Local 480 of the International Union of Mine-Mill, and Smelter Workers by 1944. These reminiscences detail the typically appalling working conditions endured by miners and smelter workers in an era with scant legislative protections.

A key element in this story is the pervasive influence of the Consolidated Mining Company (Cominco) in the lives of the residents of Trail, British Columbia. Al King makes it clear that lest anyone forget, company towns in the single-industry resource sector were a powerful opponent for any nascent union movement. This oppressive corporate entity was embodied in Cominco president Selwyn G. Blaylock. Yet the situation would change with the arrival of the union. Blaylock, the man with the authority to hire or fire workers on a whim, was eventually compelled to sign the initial 1946 contract with Mine-Mill representatives. Again, the union presence altered the balance of power. Workers subjected to summary dismissal for any number of company infractions returned for their shift at the smelter. Such tangible evidence of an effective intervention won new converts for Local 480.

Al King’s early conversion to communism and his determination to obtain a fair shake for miners and smelter workers brought him into frequent conflict with employers and politicians alike. Yet he remained a pragmatist when it came to

politics. As King states in a matter-of-fact fashion, "I joined the Communist Party because I believed we needed a union and because I thought the Communist system was better for my kids and for the future of the country." (161) Unlike the cliché that many trade unionists could not distinguish "communism from rheumatism," King surely knew the difference, he just leavened the doctrine with the practicalities of the matter at hand.

Red Bait! presents further evidence to reassess the legislative and bureaucratic legacy commonly referred to as industrial legality. Prior to legislative reforms, codified by PC 1003 and related measures, the task of organizing any effective union structure, let alone a "red" local, was a slow and risky prospect. While the war years helped Local 480 make headway at Cominco, check-off of union dues was not attained until implementation of the Sloan Formula in 1951. Reforms brought a certain measure of workplace security and administrative routine but this added legality threatened to widen the gap between the executive and membership depriving the union of some of its earlier dynamism. If it was tough work to build the union it was tougher still to keep it a viable entity.

Similar to other labour autobiographies *Red Bait!* is replete with detailed lists of individuals who helped build the movement. King effectively dispels any notion that Local 480 owed its success to himself alone. However, one must look carefully for scant references to the union's Ladies Auxiliaries. The memoirs should also be credited with providing a candid reappraisal of long-time Mine Mill organizer Harvey Murphy. From King's memoirs, Murphy emerges as much more than the belligerent, often inebriated, rabble-rouser described in earlier accounts. Rather, King informs us of Harvey Murphy's innate talent for negotiation and strategic manoeuvre that helped support Mine-Mill's place as the preeminent mining union in western Canada. So too, *Red Bait!* recounts the famous 1952-53 concerts in Peace Arch Park at which Paul Robeson let his ringing bass-baritone voice defy attempts to hold him hostage or divide and conquer the labour left. Events like this were more than mere gestures and they provided an important psychological relief for besieged Party members. Mine-Mill was an organization severely affected by the restraints imposed by governments in the immediate postwar. Under the harsh terms of the McCarran and Taft-Hartley Acts, which demanded anti-Communist pledges, many Canadian unionists were effectively barred from crossing the American border, something that only added to the sense of isolation.

Apropos to the book's title, the theme of red baiting recurs constantly during the prime years of King's union activism. Nary a month would pass without King and his cadre being subjected to some form of insult, subterfuge, or legal challenge. The image of Mine-Mill that develops from the pages of *Red Bait!* is a union that was more than the sum of its parts. Local 480 became a way of life, or state of mind, which profoundly altered relations between workers, management, and the larger community. This does much to explain the union's tenacious staying power in the face of concerted attacks from both inside the labour and from without. In 1950,

King now president of Local 480, was faced with a full-fledged raid by the United Steelworkers. Although the union withstood this initial challenge, the Steelworkers proved relentless in their pursuit of their quarry. The sordid affair eventually concluded when King and his fellow members in Trail reluctantly agreed to join the USWA in 1967. This move was, and remains, subject to much controversy and second-guessing. Upon reading Al King's account of the matter one is inclined to agree with the decision as making the best out of a bad situation. This battle, like others, was fought, resolved, and then set aside. To his credit, King realized that the members would not be well served with warmed-over jurisdictional squabbles for there were new causes to rally around. One such focus was occupational health and safety issues and arguing union claims before BC Worker's Compensation Board.

A life as an organizer, let alone one linked to a communist union during the Cold War era, demanded more than individual resolve. Families were inextricably drawn into the fray as unwilling participants. Al King's story acknowledges the role that his wife Lillian and his five children played in support of a hectic public life. In a tale suffused with ample measure of tough talk and masculine bravado, King makes clear that family and friends provided the necessary emotional sustenance. Such candid admissions are atypical of most accounts that tend to justify the sacrifice of family lives to the careerist motivations of male unionists. So too are these concessions from a labour movement that demands such hard choices be a prerequisite for advancement.

Several common themes are evident throughout these three publications. The recent implosion of Canadian communism as an effective political entity strips the national forum of a voice for social justice. Decades of mud-slinging between communists and social democrats may not have produced anything as useful as cold fusion, but it did incite a vigorous discourse on public policy and class politics. We also learn more of what motivated and sustained one faction of the Canadian left throughout much of the 20th century. Finally, once again, we are reminded of the enormity of what was lost with the demise of progressive unions including Mine-Mill, UE, the Canadian Seamen's Union, and the Leather and Fur Workers. To read these books is to appreciate, without undue sentimentality, that this may well be the last generation capable of producing such memoirs. What's left, indeed.

RELATIONS INDUSTRIELLES — INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

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