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Palmer, Bryan D. *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario 1860-1914*.  
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population of urban Upper Canada in the 1860s.

These few examples must suffice to convey some nagging reservations about the analytical content of Graff's treatment of illiteracy. My grandfather's case raises a more fundamental methodological dilemma. On none of the historical documents reviewed by Graff as potential tests of literacy (the census, wills, deeds, etc.) would this man ever have surfaced as an illiterate. Graff's test for literacy - individual testimony, under the threat of a fine, to the ability to read and/or write as reported on the manuscript census returns - is carefully defended in an appendix and elsewhere (see, for example, the exchange between Graff, Mays and Manzl in *Histoire sociale*). Graff has confronted his critics who demand an explicit test for literacy. One nevertheless wonders how close the true rate of illiteracy in Upper Canada at mid-century approximated the 10 percent accepted by Graff.

In spite of these reservations, readers will find Harvey Graff's analysis innovative, iconoclastic, rich in its theoretical perceptions, and solidly rooted in the burgeoning corpus of research on the subject. Further studies of this sort, taking the account backward in time, forward, and into other aspects of the literacy "myth," for example the relationship between literacy and power, are clearly required.

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Palmer, Bryan D. *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979. Pp. xviii, 331. Illustrations. \$23.50 and \$10.95 (paperback).

Before publication of this book, Bryan Palmer had established himself as a resourceful researcher, a skilled writer, and an agent of debate in Canadian social history. Confident and seizing upon methodological issues, he asserted the importance of conventional documentation (newspapers, memoirs, government documents) and the Marxism of Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson at a time when unconventional sources (the manuscript census, assessment rolls, other routinely generated material), quantification, and social science theory had made their bid as the basis for social history in North America. What made Palmer's perspective interesting, aside from his expression of some broadly shared concerns about the lack of human interest in the writings of "numbersmiths," was that his writing assumed a literary character both in prose and in topic selection. He took memorable characters and colourful incidents and wove these into generalized statements. Of course, the significance of his articles and reviews depended upon more than a skilled pen, for he practiced "empirical Marxism" and delineated where this school stood in relation to traditional labour history, the social sciences, and other branches of Marxist analysis. The result was commendable controversy. *Culture in Conflict* follows these achievements.

Many readers will be tempted to criticize this study in terms of a book that Palmer should have written. It is a plausible reading of human nature and the very meat of historiography to expect this from historians who have an interest in Hamilton. It is a certainty, for the same reasons, to anticipate a critical approach taken by those labour historians whom Palmer had characterized as "lusting after the episodic and explicitly political" (p. 58). It would be unfair to ask Palmer why he did not write a work different from the one before us unless first making a sincere effort to understand his message, for this most assuredly is a book with an argument that can be appreciated best with a grasp of recent controversies in Marxism and labour history. It still can be read profitably without a grounding in these fields of study, for Palmer is able to clarify some historiographic matters rather well, but he is writing primarily for an informed readership.

Three fundamental concerns - the concept of class, the meaning of "labour artistocracy," and a passion for culture in obscure settings of the past - bind interpretative essays into a whole work. Class for Palmer is to be understood through a tradition of empirical Marxism that applies theory to evidence and then returns to reconstruct theory. When he holds to this ideal and when he has evidence, he is able to work a variety of experiences into an hypothesis without being procrustian. He achieves this, for example, in a fine sketch about the place that the Mechanic's Institute had in the lives of Hamilton's skilled workers.

The tendency is to view the

institute as a vehicle...to inculcate a submissive respect for authority and an appropriate attitude toward work, offering courses and lectures designed for clerks and accountants, rather than working men and women.... In fact, however, such a generalization distorts as much as it clarifies. For mechanic's institutes cannot be divorced from their local context, in which the strength of the working-class movement would contribute to the vibrancy of the working-class presence in these early buildings of adult education (pp. 49-50).

The passage is drawn from one of the more important chapters, an essay on selected expressions of working-class culture: funerals, fraternal orders, parades, certain sports, picnics, and the charivari. On a few occasions thin evidence will not permit the nuances evident in the section on the mechanic's institute, and empirical Marxism slips into familiar phrasings permitted all historians who push evidence to address their central concerns but who are wary of categorical statements. After describing a parade of the Kalithumpian Klan, a variation of the charivari, we are told that "*it was not likely* to be a meeting ground for men of property and standing" (p. 61). Actually, the rich costumes representing the many countries of the world and the fact that the Klan paraded on horseback run contrary to Palmer's assumption. This episode and a few others are too good to let slip because of the unfortunate fact that the participants and their classes remain unknown. In further opposition to Palmer's claim about the likely exclusion of men of

property from forms of rowdy dissent, there is the following incident recorded by a Hamilton lawyer and land agent in 1860.

Last night we had Councillor McDowell burned in effigy; he has been turned off of every committee in the Council, and the reception committee have done the same thing on account of a brutal order which he as chairman of the Police Committee sent to McCracken in reference to the burial of an unfortunate man named Jopplin who lately committed suicide. The words of the order were "Send the Negro who buried the dogs to put Jopplin in the coffin." All classes of community felt disgusted with the brute for this cold blooded expression and people long waiting for an opportunity to express their indignation for this monster at last found it..... This thing [the effigy] was carried by torch light through King Street.

Informal justice, it seems, was part of a cultural set that was more than class based. On balance, the journey that Palmer took from theory to evidence to theory, traced in rich footnotes, is more substantial than his rash assessment of the Klan and my critique suggests. Non-Marxists should read the book to experience for themselves the challenge of disputing an argument that slots (sometimes skilfully and sometimes casually) numerous cultural expressions into a class context. They surely will take issue and argue that events and institutions cited by Palmer could have cut across class lines; the debate is only beginning and Canadian historians can thank *A Culture in*

*Conflict* for opening a field of study.

On the other hand, some Marxists are likely to draw quite a different bead on this work. A structuralist Marxism, maintaining that class is to be understood theoretically by examining "relations of production," is surfacing in current statements that find E.P. Thompson's empirical Marxism to be semantically sloppy. The assault is best argued by G.A. Cohen in *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. Thompson and Palmer make an emphatic point that the connection between production relations on the one hand and consciousness, politics, and culture on the other is not simple. From this they imply that class cannot be defined purely in terms of productive relations. Cohen replies, "But what is the set of men bound by similar production relations when it is not (yet) conscious of itself? Marx called it a 'class-in-itself.'... If Thompson were right, the French peasantry of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* could not be considered a class. This is a curious result." (*Karl Marx's Theory of History*, p. 76). A digression into Marxist theory is essential in order to come to terms with the position of *A Culture in Conflict*. Palmer's Marxism is not of the kind that yields a sustained exploration of "productive forces" and "productive relations." A quick over-view with elements of this approach does appear in the first chapter, "Disciplines and Development," but it is prone to error and to turns-of-phrase which border on the superficial. In light of the work of Raphael Samuel, the British labour historian, it is a bit rash to write about "the *full-blown* emergence of large-scale, mechanized production in the early

1870s" (p. 9), particularly in the Canadian context. And what is meant by "the rise of the iron and steel industry?" There are too many stages and too many distinct components to the evolution of iron industries in Hamilton to refer imprecisely to a rise. The absence of excursions into economic history, business cycles, and the history of technology is a deliberate choice which can be frustrating for a reader who wants to know what transpired between strikes and during the bulk of the skilled labourers' daily activity. The material life of the skilled labourers is neglected. It is also frustrating to read truncated versions of labour disputes. "Iron workers objected to changes in the method of work, changes which reduced earnings severely and forced men to work with poor quality scrap iron" (p. 84). What changes? Why the objection to working with poor quality scrap? Did it have to do with the fact that moulders were paid on a piece work basis? A more rigorous editing of narrative passages about cultural incidents with their admittedly colourful flourishes and a less prolix style of analysis might have cleared space for exact discussion of what occurred on shop floors at several points in time. This only could have enhanced claims that "the practice of nineteenth-century workers' control was far from revolutionary" (p. 243). Indeed, it has been alleged elsewhere that workers' control in the wrought iron trades helped to persuade British manufacturers to shift to steel technology.

Aside from linking class and culture, the book is another contribution to the labour history debate about "the aristocracy of labour." The position taken here is that in the sense that a labour

aristocracy is meant to describe a stratum of workers integrated into the structure of authority, "there was no labour aristocracy in Hamilton" (p. 240). *A Culture in Conflict* contends that skilled workers drew upon a cultural reserve to pull them through the many confrontations with an evolving industrial capitalism. Their alleged recreational solidarity and "populist critique of the new industrial order based on a labour theory of wealth" (p. 100) not only prevented them from yielding, but it inspired other labourers. How far can such an argument be pushed? Quite far by Palmer! Hamilton craftsmen were drawn into "contact with petty shopkeepers, clerks, professionals, merchants, and subcontracting masters in the friendly society hall, the mechanics' institute, or the engine house [but] there is little evidence to indicate that this experience cultivated accommodation with the emerging bourgeois order" (p. 241). Everything hinges on the meaning of "accommodation." Many skilled labourers certainly drew from the same cultural well as other classes in the late-nineteenth century; outdoor display, banners, ritual, Imperial patriotism, and even political allegiances point toward contact. Religion is another realm of merging beliefs and sympathies, but it is dismissed too quickly with a suspicious claim that there is "abundant evidence to sustain the argument that Hamilton workers avoided the established churches" (p. 239). If skilled labourers are given the benefit of doubt as actual participants in the hijinx of affairs like the Kalithumpian Klan, why not give them credit as church goers; churches met more frequently than the charivari or Klan parades. In the laymen's bodies of various churches, there

may have been a forum for a reciprocity of views which helped to account for some community support during particular strikes. Even if church attendance were poor, it is probable that religious beliefs and ritual suffused working-class culture. The culture of the Knights of Labor with its "crusade for the purity of life generally" (p. 153) could stand more examination from this perspective as Palmer himself seems to recognize (p. 172). Another aspect of urban life, the neighbourhood, which might have provided incidents of class solidarity - and, contrary-wise, broad accommodation - was not examined and neither was the milieu of main party politics. It was erroneous, I think, for Palmer to have dismissed politics with a muddled excuse, loading the dice in this regard by "introducing working-class politics only if it drew close to the processes of culture and conflict" (p. 238). No one reading that passage can come away feeling that the notion of accommodation has been given an empirical trial.

The final aim of this work is not as obvious as the others, but it has been expressed in prior articles and reviews - most caustically in Palmer's review of Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West*.<sup>1</sup> The aim involves more than a single concept; rather it is a bundle of notions about how to conduct social history. Palmer preaches and practices the importance of the community study. By means of local studies, he

believes it is easiest to develop an appreciation for the cultural lives of men and women "in the obscure and obscured settings of the past."<sup>2</sup> Local studies have persuaded him to be distrustful of claims made about sudden transitions. This perspective is evident throughout the book, but he states it directly when he notes that "the new unionism was a *blend of past and present* trade union practices, a complex mixture of group advantage and social idealism" (p. 199). Likewise, he is contemptuous of transitions portrayed in the abstract for they are bloodless and suggest an unquestioned acceptance of modernization. The views of obscure people in obscured settings deserve full exposition precisely because they indicate that passions and alternatives confronted the changes from craft mastery to science as a basis for technology and the changes from commercial to industrial capitalism as the basis for economic life. In forcing all serious labour, social, and urban historians to think about culture from the bottom up, Palmer makes his most stimulating contribution.

As a Hamilton study, the book is most reliable when covering certain years. Although it claims the years from 1860 to 1914, it is the 1870s and 1880s which are most thoroughly researched. The first

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1 "Modernizing History," *Bulletin of the Committee on Canadian Labour History* (Autumn, 1976).

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2 "Most Uncommon Common Men: Craft and Culture in Historical Perspective," *Labour / Le Travailleur*, 1 (1976). Also, see Palmer's review of Gurr, Grabosky and Hula, *The Politics of Crime and Conflict in Urban History Review*, No. 3-78 (February 1979).

chapter overview of the Hamilton economy is strongest when treating that period. It is prone to error elsewhere, for example, quoting Adam Hope's 1837 prediction of financial disaster and stating "the debacle...was two long decades away" (p. 9). In fact, the collapse came within months. Once more, I suspect the want of grounding in economic history derives from a brilliant acquaintance with one school of Marxism and a secondary interest in economics that is evident in that school. That, not Marxism *per se*, constitutes a flaw. At the other end of the chronology, Palmer asserts in the important chapter on "Reform Thought and the Producer Ideology" that tariff protection had been "abandoned in favour of class interests" (p. 122) by Hamilton's skilled workers toward the-end-of-the-century. To quote Palmer out of context, "it was never quite that simple." Several instances testify to an enduring support for a protective tariff by significant numbers of Hamilton working men. Thousands appeared at a rally for Macdonald and the National Policy in 1891. "The Rolling Mill, Nail Works, and Glass Factory Men turned out in a body with banners." In the 1911 federal election, a Liberal Labour candidate ran against a Conservative protectionist in a straight two candidate contest in Hamilton's working-class east end. The "Lib-Lab" lost his deposit.

This is a bold book set in a particular Marxist tradition. The author frequently evades the empiricism that he claims for his work, but I think that he also runs into difficulty because the Marxist tradition that he embraces is one which downplays important features of working-class experience in

favour of culture alone.

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James, Williams, and James, Evelyn M. *A Sufficient Quantity of Pure and Wholesome Water. The Story of Hamilton's Old Pumphouse.* London: Phelps Publishing Company, 87 Bruce Street, London, Ontario, 1978. Pp. viii, 151 and 40 unnumbered pages of illustrations. \$15.00.

The Hamilton Pumping Station, born 1860, semi-retired 1910, fully retired 1928, but nonetheless still very much alive and radiating and awesome beauty, is both a work of art and a stunning example of Canadian urban engineering achievement. Regrettably it is virtually unknown and unheralded by all but a relatively small number of people. When William and Evelyn James came to Canada and settled in Hamilton, they met the Pumping Station and noticed that something was missing.

There is no monument to T.C. Keefer, no memorial to John Gartshore, Adam Brown or James McFarlane, nothing to tell our generation of the standards and achievements of early Canadian civil and mechanical engineering.

That is why we made the effort to write the book (p. 112).

*A Sufficient Quantity of Pure and Wholesome Water* chronicles the way in which a rapidly growing city met the need for a safe, reliable water supply. Dust, fires, and outbreaks of disease