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Acadiensis

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Volume 42, Number 2, Summer/Autumn 2013

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad42_2art01

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Publisher(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)
1712-7432 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Mackinnon, L. (2013). Labour Landmarks in New Waterford:: Collective Memory in a Cape Breton Coal Town. *Acadiensis*, *42*(2), 3–26.

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Labour Landmarks in New Waterford: Collective Memory in a Cape Breton Coal Town

LACHLAN MACKINNON

Les lieux historiques ouvriers inscrivent le « souvenir public » de travailleurs dans l'ensemble de la mémoire collective d'une communauté. Mais ces manifestations de la conscience ouvrière ne sont pas statiques. Deux monuments situés dans la localité de New Waterford (N-É) – l'un dédié aux victimes d'une explosion survenue dans une mine en 1917 et l'autre érigé à la mémoire de William Davis (tué lors de la grève de 1925) – témoignent des nombreuses couches de la mémoire historique et reflètent l'évolution des conceptualisations de la résistance ouvrière au Cap-Breton pendant le 20e siècle parmi les mineurs, leur syndicat et les citoyens de la ville.

Labour landmarks enshrine workers' "public memories" as part of the larger "collective memory" of a community. But these manifestations of working class consciousness are not static. Two monuments in New Waterford (NS) – one to victims of a 1917 mine explosion and the second to William Davis (killed during the 1925 strike) – reveal many layers of historical memory and reflect changing conceptualizations of 20th century labour resistance in Cape Breton amongst the miners, their union, and the town's citizens.

TANGIBLE REPRESENTATIONS OF WORKERS' CULTURE, such as statues, plaques, mosaics, burial scenes, and industrial sites, allow for a greater public understanding of the history of work. Folklorist and historian Archie Green coined the term "labour landmark" to describe these types of commemorations.[1] Labour landmarks present the role of workers, unions, and community organizations in creating an inclusive vision of the past. They can reaffirm themes of resistance, workplace safety, and workers' rights while rejecting the narratives of teleological social progress or pre-industrial utopias that are often presented through tourist guidebooks or popular culture.[2] These markers allow workers to insert their "public memories" into the "collective memory" of their communities and, in so doing, to functionally rescue the industrial past from what the social historian E.P. Thompson referred to as "the enormous condescension of posterity."[3]

Public memory, using the definition supplied by historian John Bodnar, is "a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand its

1 Archie Green, "Labor Landmarks Past and Present," *Labor's Heritage* 6, no. 4 (Spring 1995): 28.
2 Nova Scotia, *Doers' and Dreamers' Travel Guide, 2011*, 223-89.
3 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 12.

Lachlan MacKinnon, "Labour Landmarks in New Waterford: Collective Memory in a Cape Breton Coal Town," *Acadiensis* XLII, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2013): 3-26.

past, present, and, by implication, its future."[4] Monuments, festivals, pageants, parades, celebrations, and museum exhibits are material manifestations of the past that inform public memory. Songs, stories, and poems are examples of intangible practices that can also present narratives of public memory. Competing interests are instrumental in the formation of collective memory, as each group within society attempts to inform "a singular, 'official' civic past."[5] Collective memory, which is informed by the separate public memories that exist within society, is also defined in terms of group remembrance of a common subject or event.[6] This "communal remembering" provides an important basis for social cohesion and group identity.[7] The destruction of Grand-Pré, for example, has been explored as a defining aspect of Acadian collective memory of the Grand Dérangement.[8] Labour landmarks, as articulations of workers' public memory, make workers' past experiences visible and attempt to inform the broader collective memory of our communities.

Pierre Nora writes that commemorative sites emerge as the result of an immediate disconnection between "memory" and "history." Lieux de mémoire, or sites of memory, crystallise when milieux de mémoire, or real environments of memory, no longer exist.[9] Labour landmarks can be considered lieux de mémoire, as they preserve workers' memory of significant events in perpetuity; these vernacular sites are powerful in their ability to challenge "official" or "hegemonic" narratives of the past.[10] Historians David Frank and Nicole Lang have explored the relationship between labour landmarks, history, and memory in the context of New Brunswick: "Sometimes [labour landmarks] are celebrations of the past and present contributions of workers to the provincial economy. Often they are memorials to those who have lost their lives in the course of their work. Sometimes too, the meanings are less clear . . . and we need to be reminded of the individual stories and larger narratives they represent."[11] In New Waterford, Nova Scotia, a community that has been especially visible in the labour and working class history of Atlantic Canada, two labour landmarks at the centre of town present the opportunity to delve more deeply into the individual and collective meanings of workers' commemorations, explore larger narratives of work and resistance in a post-

4 John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 15.

5 Alan Gordon, *Making Public Pasts: The Contested Terrain of Montreal's Public Memories, 1891-1930* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 6.

6 Edward Casey, "Public Memory in Place and Time," in *Framing Public Memory*, ed. Kendall Phillips (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 24.

7 Nicolas Russell, "Collective Memory before and after Halbwachs," *The French Review* 79, no. 4 (March 2006): 797.

8 See, for example, Ronald Rudin, *Remembering and Forgetting in Acadie: A Historian's Journey Through Public History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 25.

9 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7.

10 James Green writes that the Haymarket Monument in Chicago, as a lieu de mémoire, successfully challenges the notion that the city was justified in executing the Haymarket martyrs in 1887. See James Green, *Taking History to Heart: The Power of the Past in Building Social Movements* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 122-3.

11 David Frank and Nicole Lang, *Labour Landmarks in New Brunswick/Lieux historiques ouvriers au Nouveau-Brunswick* (Edmonton, NB: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 2010), 14.

industrial community, and examine the overarching theme of class struggle that is present in these examples of workers' public memory.[12]

Incorporated in 1913, New Waterford arose out of the Dominion Coal Company's 1907 opening of four new coal mines in the area of the Sydney coalfield between Lingan and New Victoria.[13] These developments fit within the context of regional industrialization that was occurring in Atlantic Canada during the first decade of the 20th century; as David Frank notes: "By the time of the First World War . . . the coal mines [of industrial Cape Breton] supplied more than 44 per cent of Canada's annual coal production."[14] By 1921, New Waterford had a population of 5,615 people and was a centre for the provincial coal industry through the remainder of the century.[15] New Waterford is an especially important location in the local history of industrial Cape Breton, as it was the setting for two major events in the labour history of the region: the 1917 explosion at the Number 12 Colliery and the death of coal miner William Davis during a strike in 1925. These events are described in local histories of New Waterford and popular histories of the coal miners, in academic treatments of the early 20th century Canadian labour struggle, and in numerous oral accounts of miners and their families.[16] Two labour landmarks, which stand in Davis Park at the centre of town, reflect the local importance of these events.

The two markers exist as manifestations of public memory. Unfortunately, the histories behind these particular monuments are not always clearly understood. One book on labour memorials in Canada notes that the 1917 explosion monument in New Waterford contains the phrase "Stand the Gaff."[17] The author is mistaken,

12 Michael Earle, "'Down with Hitler and Silby Barrett': The Cape Breton Miners' Slowdown Strike of 1941," *Acadiensis* XVIII, no. 1 (Autumn 1988): 56-90; M. Earle and H. Gamberg, "The United Mine Workers and the Coming of the CCF to Cape Breton," *Acadiensis* XIX, no. 1 (Fall/Automne 1989): 3-26; John Manley, "Preaching the Red Stuff: J.B. McLachlan, Communism, and the Cape Breton Miners, 1922-1935," *Labour/Le Travail* 30 (Fall 1992): 65-114; Steven Penfold, "'Have You No Manhood in You?': Gender and Class in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1920-1926," *Acadiensis* XXIII, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 21-44.

13 Ted Boutilier, *New Waterford: Three Score & Ten, Seventy Years of Civic History* (Sydney, NS: Publication Committee New Waterford 70th Anniversary, 1983), 2-3.

14 David Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation," *Acadiensis* VII, no. 1 (Autumn 1977): 6.

15 *Sixth Census of Canada, 1921* (Ottawa: F.A. Acland, 1924), Table 27, p. 386.

16 Ted Boutilier, *New Waterford: 3 Generations, 1913-1988* (New Waterford, NS: Town of New Waterford, 1988); David Frank, *J.B. McLachlan: A Biography* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company Ltd., 1999); Rennie MacKenzie, *That Bloody Cape Breton Coal: Stories of Mining Disasters in Everyday Life* (Sydney, NS: Breton Books, 2004); Ron Caplan, "Mine Explosion in New Waterford, 1917," *Cape Breton's Magazine* 21 (1978): 1-11; Ron Caplan, "Edith Pelley, William Davis's Daughter," *Cape Breton's Magazine,* 60 (1992): 45-54.

17 Ed Thomas, *Dead But Not Forgotten: Monuments to Workers/Mort, mais pas oubliés: les monuments aux Travailleurs* (Hamilton, ON: Ed Thomas, 2001), 105. In the fishery industry a "gaff" is either "a type of boat hook with a wooden handle" or "a stout pole 5-8 feet . . . long with an iron hook and spike fastened to one end, used to assist a sealer on the ice and used to kill seals." See *Dictionary of Newfoundland English: Second Edition with Supplement*, ed. G.M. Story, W.J. Kirwin, and J.D.A. Widdowson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 207. Locally, the term has also been used in reference to the metal studs commonly attached to the legs of roosters during cockfighting matches. See Richard MacKinnon, "Cockfighting in Cape Breton: Its Meaning and Function," in *Discovering Cape Breton Folklore*, ed. Richard MacKinnon (Sydney, NS: Cape Breton University Press, 2009), 95-6.

although the nearby monument to Davis does have an inscription that reads "Standing the Gaff." A recent article misidentifies the statue topping the explosion monument as the image of William Davis, when in fact it represents a miner killed in the 1917 disaster – John McKay.[18] These mistakes might seem inconsequential, but misinterpretation of the monuments' imagery distorts their meanings. Each monument in Davis Square contains complex layers of symbolism that can provide evidence for how the community of New Waterford has conceptualized its own history in terms of the industrial past.

The inscriptions, statuary, and imagery of these monuments reveal particular narratives of workers' experience in the New Waterford collieries; they are significant not only in the events that they commemorate, but also as expressions of workers' public memory at the moment of their creation. Each represents the hope that community members will continue to keep workers' experience at the forefront of their historical consciousness, but these sites will also continue to take on new meanings as time passes and the contexts of life in New Waterford shift. This is not to say that the sites are open to just any interpretation; the events that are commemorated, the physical features of these markers, and the history of the community in which they reside all contribute to the themes of workers' struggle, resistance, and hope for the future that are represented. The two case studies that follow reveal several layers of meaning that these sites of public memory hold for the community and reflect the changing face of working class resistance in Cape Breton during the 20th century. The first study details the commemoration of the 1917 explosion, and the second discusses the meanings and symbols visible on the monument memorializing the 1925 death of William Davis.

New Waterford's fatal day: the 1917 mine explosion

Early in the morning of 25 July 1917, Mary Anne Gadd was exhausted. She was employed as a nurse in New Waterford, one of the busy coal towns in industrial Cape Breton, and she had been awake all night tending to a dying patient. The 53-year-old mother took a quick break at 6 am to return home, make breakfast, and pack lunches for her two sons, 31-year-old William and 15-year-old Arthur, who were heading off to work at the Dominion No. 12 Colliery. They were among the 270 men on the morning shift that day. There was only one more patient to visit before she would be able to return home and rest. On the way to her next appointment, Gadd met Murray Andrews, a company policeman. "There's been an explosion in the number 12 pit," Andrews told her. Mary Anne was alarmed. She was all too familiar with stories of disastrous mine explosions, which she remembered from her earlier days in the coal mining districts of Wales. Her first thoughts were of her two sons. Were they hurt? How bad was the explosion? She returned home, grabbed her 13-year-old daughter Frances by the hand, and headed down to the mine to join a growing throng of men, women, and children at the pit mouth.[19]

18 Shauna M. MacDonald, "Out of the Pit: The Culture of Memorializing Miner-Martyrs," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (January 2010): 41-2.

19 Caplan, "Mine Explosion in New Waterford, 1917," 1. This interview does not include the name of Frances Gadd's mother, Mary Anne. This information was found in the Province of Nova Scotia Marriage Registry for 12 April 1923, https://www.novascotiagenealogy.com.

Gadd's experience was not unique in New Waterford that day. At 7:30 am the worst explosion in the history of the Cape Breton coalfield shook levels six and seven of the mine, killing 65 men and boys.[20] The cause of the disaster remains unclear, and in the aftermath of the explosion it was a hotly debated topic. The company suspected that a shotfirer in the mine, John McKay, had caused the disaster by miscalculating the amount of firing powder required to complete his work. McKay had been working on level six, dislodging rock and coal with controlled explosive charges.[21] Many miners later testified that the mine was "gassy" and that not enough "brattices" were used to ensure proper air circulation.[22] John McKay's son Henry, a 14-year-old boy at the time of the explosion, had been driving the horses to bring boxes of coal out of the mine. In a 1978 interview with *Cape Breton's Magazine* he claimed that the offending shot could not have taken place on the level indicated by the company:

> The men who found [the shotfirer] said it was impossible for him to fire a shot because he had his battery cable on his shoulder. . . . When you fire a shot . . . that cable is 150 feet long or 200 feet long . . . . If he had fired that shot – wouldn't have had time to gather up his cable . . . . All he had when they found him was a couple of burns on him . . . all the fellows they found on seven landing had their heads off and their arms off…the explosion must have happened on seven, not six.[23]

In the months following the explosion there was a concerted effort by the miners' union, the Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia (AMW), to establish a memorial for the victims of the explosion. Union members were gathering funds as early as 1 September and were planning the dimensions and features of the memorial by 6 October. AMW Local 19 in New Waterford designed the monument, but associated locals from across the province provided funds.[24] The monument consists of an inscribed shaft bearing the names and ages of the dead, a base inscribed with the words "Miners' Memorial," a floral pattern above the engraved names, and a statue of John McKay standing on the top.[25] The inclusion of McKay's image on the top of the memorial indicates miners' resistance to the official version of the causes of the explosion; they did not blame McKay, but believed that conditions in the mines had deteriorated to a point where a disaster was inevitable. Unveiled on 15 July 1922, the monument was originally established at a location on Ellsworth

20 "Yesterday's Explosion in No. 12 Mine Most Disastrous in Cape Breton Mining Annals," *Sydney Daily Post*, 26 July 1917.

21 Caplan, "Mine Explosion in New Waterford, 1917," 3.

22 "Inquest at Dominion No. 12 Begun Yesterday," *Sydney Daily Post*, 31 July 1917. Brattices were heavy canvas partitions placed in certain areas of the mine to ensure proper ventilation.

23 Caplan, "Mine Explosion in New Waterford, 1917," 4.

24 Minute Book of Local 13, Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, Springhill 41, http://collections.mun.ca.

25 Caplan, "Mine Explosion in New Waterford, 1917," 4, 11; Ron Caplan, "New Waterford's Explosion, 1917 – Two Songs from 'And Now the Fields are Green'," *Cape Breton's Magazine* 63 (1993): 82.

Avenue, near the site of the No. 12 mine. It was later moved to the Miners' Memorial Park on one of New Waterford's main streets – Plummer Avenue.[26] This location was much more central within the town, and provided for easier pedestrian access to the memorial site. The park was re-named "Davis Square" in 1985 to correspond with the erection of the Davis monument.

The AMW was created on 1 July 1917 when the representatives of two rival miners' unions in the province, the Provincial Workmen's Association (PWA) and the United Mineworkers of Nova Scotia (UMWNS), voted to amalgamate. The UMWNS, which was not officially affiliated with the international United Mineworkers of America (UMW), was widely considered a more radical option to the PWA, which had gained a reputation as a "company union."[27] Local labour leader J.B. McLachlan was instrumental in crafting the merger, which the rank and file supported, although there was some opposition from within the PWA leadership. After the unions combined, the AMW established itself as a firm supporter of workers' rights and safety conditions within the mines. Two years later, the AMW received a charter as District 26 of the UMW and the Cape Breton miners organized within the larger union.[28]

The No. 12 explosion, as one of the first major events facing the new union, presented an opportunity for the AMW to prove its value to the community. Following the disaster, the union began collecting money "for the purpose of defraying expenses in making a complete inquiry into the cause of the disaster at No. 12 coalliery."[29] In October, the AMW pressured a New Waterford grand jury to bring forward criminal charges against two mine officials, Angus R. MacDonald and Alexander MacEachern, and one government official, Deputy Inspector of Mines Michael McIntosh. The case was dismissed when it arrived in the Sydney court of Judge Humphrey Mellish, a former coal company lawyer.[30] The union was also instrumental in fighting for compensation for the dependant family members of the explosion victims.[31]

26 Boutilier, *New Waterford: 3 Generations*, 35; "News From New Waterford," *Maritime Labor Herald*, 29 July 1922.

27 Ian McKay argues that the PWA, especially in Cape Breton, was torn between the "official philosophy" of union leadership and the "vernacular" radical philosophy of the rank and file. This calls into question the assessment of the PWA as a fundamentally conservative institution. See Ian McKay, "'By Wisdom, Wile or War:' The Provincial Workmen's Association and the Struggle for Working-Class Independence in Nova Scotia, 1879-97," *Labour/Le Travail* 18 (Fall/Automne 1986): 13-62.

28 The merger was facilitated by a one-day UMWNS strike in the Cape Breton coalfields in April 1917. A royal commission was announced by the federal Minister of Labour T.C. Crothers, which subsequently recommended that wages be increased for Cape Breton miners and that the two rival unions should enter into merger discussions. An agreement was reached, through negotiations, in early July 1917. See Frank, *J.B. McLachlan*, 134-6, 160.

29 Minute Book of Local 13, Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, Springhill, 33.

30 Frank, *J.B. McLachlan*, 141-2.

31 While the Nova Scotia Workmen's Compensation Act had come into effect earlier that year, its contributions to the families of explosion victims were often insufficient. McKay's widow, for example, was only provided with $35 a month to care for seven children. The AMW leadership petitioned the Dominion government to provide further assistance, which resulted in the authorization of an additional one-time, $10,000 payment to be split amongst the victims'

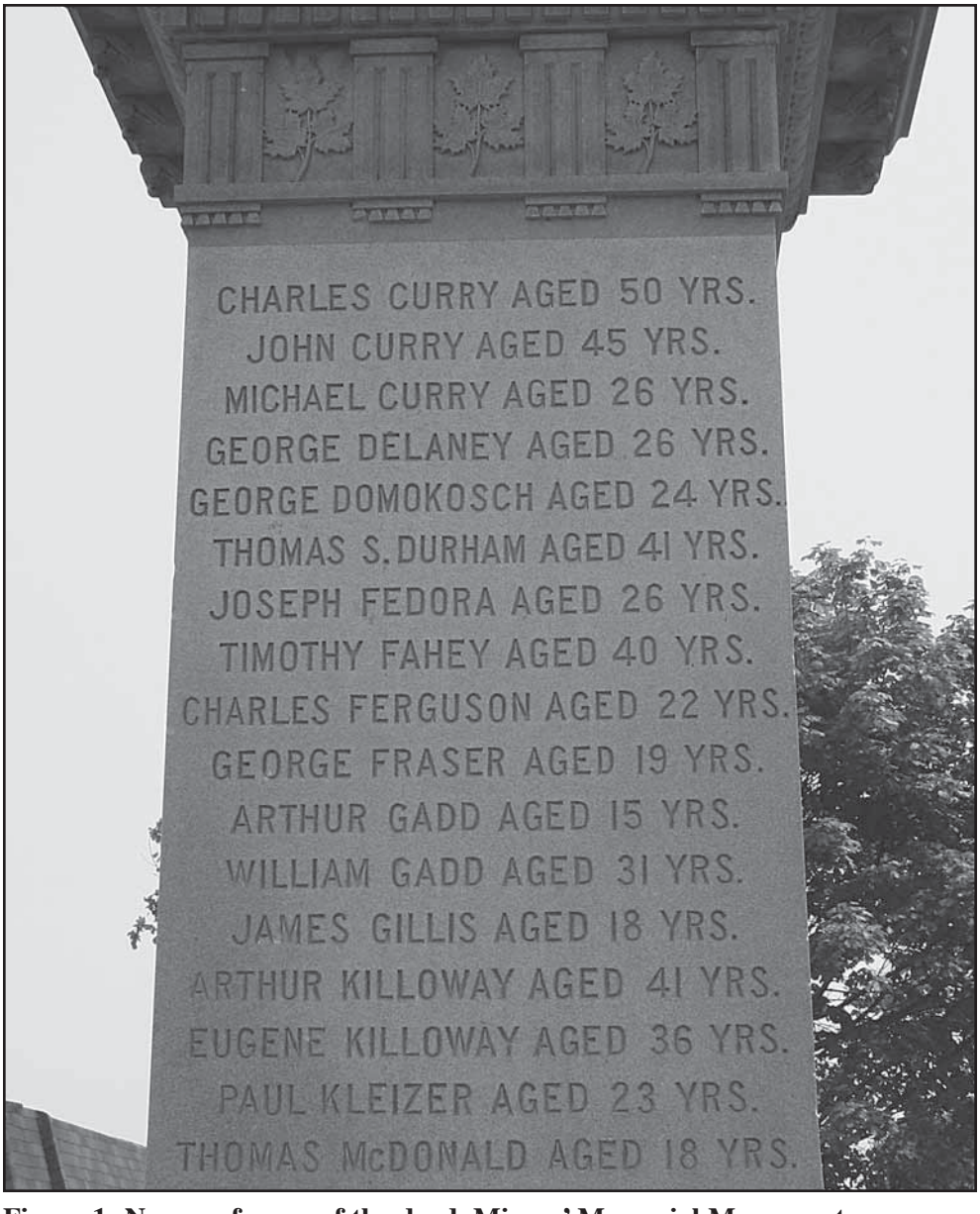

Figure 1: Names of some of the dead, Miners' Memorial Monument.
Source: Photograph by author.

families. This additional payment was decided upon several months after the explosion. See Diane Pothier, "Workers' Compensation: The Historical Compromise Revisited," *Dalhousie Law Journal* 7, no. 2 (April 1983): 212; Frank, *J.B. McLachlan*, 142; and J.B. McLachlan to R.L. Borden, 7 November 1917, Robert L. Borden Papers, vol. 223, Library and Archives Canada (copy provided by David Frank).

A symbolic deconstruction of the Miners' Monument reveals how the union attempted to inform local collective memory with workers' versions of the explosion in the months following the disaster. The inscriptions on the Miners' Monument give evidence of both the scope of the tragedy, made clear in the large number of names, and the social dimensions of work in the coal mines. Shared surnames on the monument illustrate the extent to which colliery work penetrated the fabric of familial and social life in the town. The names also speak to the range of ethnicities that were present in the mine at the time of the explosion: many of the names are Italian, Belgian, Polish, or Ukrainian in origin. These inscriptions serve to both contextualize and provide access to the overarching themes of workers' public memory.

At first glance the inscribed names and ages of those who had died appear to have little significance other than as a funerary memorial, but these names offer a view into the diversity of the coal mining work force in New Waterford. Funeral services, which took place at all of the local parishes in the days following the explosion, also reflected the multicultural nature of work in the New Waterford collieries. Two days after the disaster, the front page of the local newspaper described the mourning ceremonies of the local Italian, Russian, Belgian, and Jewish communities.[32] While nearly 50 per cent of the population of Cape Breton coal mining communities was of Scottish origin in 1921, there were also smaller pockets of Acadian, African-American, African-Caribbean, Belgian, English, Italian, Irish, and eastern European ethnicities.[33] At Saint Alphonse's Church seven "foreigners," coming from several European countries, were interred in a group grave after being killed in the explosion.[34] In an interview in the documentary film *12,000 Men*, Katherine MacKenzie recalled the sad image of the mass grave.[35] It seems that this event, a group of men interred in one grave for lack of nearby families or relations to pay for proper burial, is one that has remained to some degree in the community's narrative of the 1917 explosion. The mass burial, dubbed "pathetic" by the local newspaper, represents the isolation and exploitation of single sojourners in the New Waterford collieries.[36]

The statue that crowns the Miners' Memorial is a representation of a coal miner with a mine lantern in hand, 45-year-old John D. McKay. Aside from being blamed by the company for causing the explosion, McKay was the treasurer of Local 19, a respected community member, and a devoted father.[37] According to the *Maritime*

32 "Cosmopolitan Gatherings Attend Services at Various Churches," *Sydney Daily Post*, 28 July 1917.

33 David Frank, "Tradition and Culture in the Cape Breton Mining Community in the Early Twentieth Century," in *Cape Breton at 200: Historical Essays in Honour of the Island's Bicentennial, 1785-1985*, ed. Ken Donovan (Sydney, NS: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1985), 205.

34 Caplan, "Miners Recall 1917 Explosion," *Sydney Daily Post*, 28 July 1917.

35 *12,000 Men: Labour's War in the Cape Breton Coalfields*, DVD, directed by Martin Duckworth (National Film Board of Canada, 1978).

36 These mass burials also drew attention to the experiences of foreign workers in the New Waterford collieries. The majority of those buried in the mass graves were young, single men who had immigrated to find work in the mines. With no family in the area and nobody to take care of their affairs, the bodies of these men were simply disposed of. See "Cosmopolitan Gatherings Attend Services at Various Churches," *Sydney Daily Post*, 28 July 1917.

37 Caplan, "New Waterford's Explosion, 1917 – Two Songs from 'And Now the Fields are Green'," 82.

Labor Herald in 1922, he was one of the first miners to organize for the UMWNS in New Waterford and was extremely well liked among the miners.[38] McKay's name is also found on the shaft of the monument, as he was killed in the explosion. The inclusion of his image represents the feeling among the miners that McKay was not responsible.[39] It also points to the role of the union in general and its determination to protect miners from similar disasters in the future.[40]

If the miners did not blame John McKay for causing the explosion, then who did they hold responsible? His son Henry placed responsibility for the tragedy with the Dominion Coal Company. He asserted that there had been trouble with gas in the mine previously. The First World War was ongoing and the company was demanding a high level of production. "They weren't looking after the mine," McKay argued. "There was gas. They should have been keeping the air course open." Con Hogan, another coal miner who had experienced the explosion, blamed the mine officials: "It was the fellows that was running [the mine], the officials. As long as they got the pound of coal that's all they gave a damn about."[41] Heightened demand for coal during the First World War prompted the company to push for increased coal tonnage and higher levels of production.

The provincial Department of Mines began an investigation immediately following the explosion that favoured testimony from mine officials over that of the miners, who claimed that the mine had been "gassy." Inspector Michael McIntosh testified that several weeks earlier the No. 12 mine had been free of dangerous gas, although he was unable to complete his inspection due to a personal illness. The investigation also found that although increased ventilation was necessary in the coal mine, blame could not be assigned to the coal company.[42] The shotfirer, John McKay, was found at fault for the explosion. This decision did not tell the whole story; no shotfirer would deliberately set off charges in the presence of dangerous levels of gas. If the miners' powerful and united testimony was valid, then the company was at fault for allowing conditions to deteriorate to the point where a gas explosion was the likely result of regular work in the mine; its officials had placed production above human safety.

McKay's statue atop the Miners' Memorial represents the miners' perceptions of the explosion. This statue not only absolves John McKay of responsibility for the disaster, but also implores the modern viewer to remember the value of workplace safety and the importance of industrial regulation. It also serves as a testament to the value of the union in the aftermath of the disaster, when the AMW had established itself through the fight for compensation and demands for justice. It presents a defiant version of the explosion in which the cause cannot be blamed on the actions of one man, but on the unsafe working conditions and irresponsible officials of the Dominion Coal Company and the inept regulation by the Provincial Department of Mines. The

38 "News from New Waterford," *Maritime Labor Herald*, 29 July 1922.

39 "Steel Workers at Sydney Encouraged by Miners are Forming Another Organization," *Halifax Herald*, 30 October 1917.

40 One of the primary objectives of the AMW after 1917 was to ensure that safety regulations were being properly enforced within Nova Scotia mines. To this end, the union appointed its own committee to carry out colliery inspections. See Frank, *J.B. McLachlan*, 143.

41 Caplan, "Mine Explosion in New Waterford, 1917," 3-5.

42 Caplan, "Mine Explosion in New Waterford, 1917," 9.

statue rejects the "official" findings of the provincial investigation and instead presents the miners' conclusions. The Miners' Memorial can thus be seen as an assertion of miners' perceptions of the explosion, as well as a memorial to its victims. In creating a marker to this event, the miners and their union attempted to influence collective memory of the 1917 explosion from the perspective of workers at the No. 12 Colliery.

Aside from the physical characteristics of the Miners' Memorial, the current location on Plummer Avenue holds symbolic meaning. Davis Square also contains a war memorial, which adds to the location's centrality in community memory. Although the war memorial does not feature a list of names, as it memorializes all of New Waterford's war dead, there is no doubt that many of these soldiers were themselves coal miners. Similarly, those who left New Waterford to fight in the wars of the 20th century often left behind family and friends who continued to work in the coal mines.[43] In addition, there are some physical similarities between these two memorials. The engraved maple leaves on the Miners' Memorial share some significance with the war memorial in Davis Square in that the imagery of these leaves is also present on the war memorial. On the Miners' Memorial, these maple leaves represent patriotism but also miners' sacrifices on behalf of their country. Cape Breton labour poet Dawn Fraser used the symbolism of maple leaves in his post-war poem "The Applicant" to illustrate cognitive dissonance in a young soldier returning from the First World War. In the poem, the patriotic and nationalist symbolism of the maple leaves is juxtaposed with the horrors that the boy experienced in war-torn Europe.[44] The miners who lost their lives in the 1917 explosion can also be considered to be among Canada's war dead. Although their efforts took place far from the battlefields of Europe, the wartime production drive resulted in conditions where such a disaster was likely. War memorials are significant for collective identity in many communities, but in New Waterford these same meanings are coupled with the local experience of industrial disaster and loss.

The explosion at the Dominion No. 12 coal mine devastated the community of New Waterford. By mid-afternoon on 25 July 1917, Mary Anne Gadd was suffering the effects of severe exhaustion. She had stayed to watch the rescue in hopes that her sons would emerge alive from the pit. She was feeling increasingly unwell and her clergyman asked her to return home, telling her that he would send any information. After arriving home, Gadd was visited by a Salvation Army officer who delivered bad news. He informed her that one of her sons, Arthur, had perished, but that the other, William, was safe. It was not until later that she learned that both sons had died. Arthur, her younger son, worked as a "trapper" in the mine, opening trap doors to facilitate airflow and the movement of coal boxes. He was killed immediately in the explosion. William, the older son, had apparently ventured further into the mine

43 E.R. Forbes writes that skilled miners in Cape Breton responded enthusiastically to calls for enlistment during the Second World War. These men continued to enlist until 1943, when coal mining was declared to be critical to the war effort and further enlistment by miners was disallowed. See E.R. Forbes, "Consolidating Disparity: The Maritimes and the Industrialization of Industrialization of Canada during the Second World War," *Acadiensis* XV, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 16.

44 Dawn Fraser, "The Applicant," in *Echoes from Labor's War: The Expanded Edition* (Sydney, NS: Breton Books, 1992), 14.

after the accident in an attempt to find his brother; he was overcome by the "afterdamp," dangerous levels of carbon monoxide gas, and he too succumbed.[45] Mary Anne's despair and sorrow upon hearing of the death of her children, while deeply personal, was in some ways also communal. Dozens of other families had received the news that one or more of their own had passed away. The day's tragedy has remained deeply carved in the memory of those who experienced it, and its place in the collective memory of New Waterford has also been assured.[46] While some of the original meanings of the Miners' Memorial Monument might be misinterpreted – for example, when the image of John McKay is mistaken for William Davis – the overarching narrative remains focused on workers and working-class life in New Waterford. This message, regardless of alternative readings of the monument's features, is unmistakable.

Remember the miner: the death of William Davis, 1925

Eight years after the explosion at the No. 12 mine, on 11 June 1925, New Waterford was once again thrown into turmoil. That afternoon on Plummer Avenue, just alongside what is now Davis Square, nearly 30 men were frogmarched up the street towards the town jail. Some of the prisoners had been tarred and feathered, and as they marched they all suffered the jeers and catcalls of the men and women – miners and their wives – who had gathered to watch the procession.[47] These men were not ordinary prisoners. They were members of the British Empire Steel Corporation (BESCO) police force who had been captured by striking miners earlier in the day. Although they were on their way to the local jail, where the striking miners would imprison them for the night, these men were in some ways lucky.[48] Earlier that morning, 30 company police officers had been beaten so badly that they had required hospitalization, and only the intervention of the clergy had saved their lives.[49]

45 Caplan, "Mine Explosion in New Waterford, 1917," 2; Nova Scotia Department of Mines, "Fatal Accidents in Coal Mines, 1866-1988," in Nova Scotia Department of Labour Fonds, RG 19, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 18, Nova Scotia Archives and Record Management (NSARM), http://www.gov.ns.ca/nsarm/virtual/meninmines/.

46 Aside from the oral accounts detailing the explosion and the creation of the memorial monument, there were also several songs written about the disaster. Angus Timmons, a former miner, wrote "New Waterford's Fatal Day" in the months following the explosion. Another New Waterford native, Marie MacMillan, wrote "The Omen" in 1966. This song describes supposed supernatural occurrences that corresponded with the 1917 disaster. See John C. O'Donnell, *And Now the Fields are Green: A Collection of Coal Mining Songs in Canada* (Sydney, NS: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1992), 149, 179-80.

47 Frank, *J.B. McLachlan*, 383; Jimmy P. MacNeil, interview by Richard MacKinnon, 15 September 1995, New Waterford, NS, tape (copy provided by Richard MacKinnon).

48 The company police were placed in the New Waterford town jail for the night. The following day, local authorities arranged for these men to be removed to Sydney by train. One officer was charged with murder in October 1925, but was not convicted. See Ron Caplan, "The 'Pluck Me': Life and Death of a Company Store," *Cape Breton's Magazine* 3 (1973): 5, and Donald MacGillivray, "William Davis," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, http://www.biographi.ca/.

49 Donald MacGillivray, "Industrial Unrest in Cape Breton, 1919-1925" (MA thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1971), 203-4; Donald MacGillivray, "Military Aid to the Civil Power: The Cape Breton Experience in the 1920s," *Acadiensis* III, no. 2 (Spring 1974): 45-64.

The trouble had started that day when striking miners were forced out of the company-owned power plant at Waterford Lake. The miners had occupied the plant, which was only a few miles outside of town, since 4 June. This occurred in the fourth month of a miners' strike that had been called as the result of proposed wage cuts and the company's suspension of credit at company stores. The union had allowed maintenance staff to remain in some support positions during the strike to protect the mines from damages and flooding. In early June, a "100 per cent strike" was called; this necessitated the removal of all support staff, including those at the Waterford Lake power station. On 4 June, striking miners shut down the operations at the power station through occupation.[50] On 11 June, company police were dispatched to take back control of the plant.

After the company regained control of the power station, a few of the officers returned to the town and were overheard boasting of their success. Incensed, a larger group of coal miners, estimated to number anywhere from 700 to 3,000 men, gathered at a local baseball field and decided to re-take the plant. When they arrived at Waterford Lake, mounted company police met the miners and a violent confrontation ensued. The police charged into the miners' ranks with nightsticks and revolvers and in the melee a number of policemen were unhorsed. Although several men were injured during the fight, William Davis, a 38-year-old coal miner and union man, was killed. Davis, the son of a miner, was no stranger to the dangers of coal mining; his brother had been killed in the 1891 mine explosion at Springhill.[51] After Davis was shot, the miners overpowered the remaining company police officers and brought many of them back into town to jail while others escaped into the woods. William Davis's daughter later recalled witnessing several miners beating one of these other policemen who had initially escaped from the scene of the battle at Waterford Lake.[52] A group of miners swarmed into the power station, destroying equipment and shutting off pumps and generators. That night, striking miners raided and set ablaze the company stores in several Cape Breton mining communities.[53]

The images and inscriptions on the Davis monument, erected by the New Waterford Town Council on Labour Day in 1985, present the depth of meaning that the events of the 1925 strike held for the community. Davis's death had long been an important event for the town; oral history, songs, the local "Davis Day" tradition, and union parades had all been used to commemorate the events of 1925 before the monument's erection in 1985. Similarly, for several years following his death, Davis's grave was an important site of local memory for the community. In 1985, the decision to create a more permanent memorial to William Davis corresponded with the end of coal mining in New Waterford and the uncertain future of the coal industry in the entire region. The theme of resistance that had long been associated with the story of William Davis was once again necessary for the community in the face of industrial decline.

50 David Frank, "Contested Terrain: Workers' Control in the Cape Breton Coal Mines in the 1920s," in *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada*, ed. Craig Heron and Robert Storey (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986), 113-14.

51 MacGillivray, "William Davis."

52 Caplan, "Edith Pelley, William Davis's Daughter," 47.

53 Frank, *J.B. McLachlan*, 382-3.

The monument is made of rectangular black granite, positioned between the Miners' Memorial and the war memorial in Davis Square, and the top of the structure is sloped downwards to symbolize the entrance of a mine. There are a number of images engraved on the front. At the centre of the monument reads the phrase "Standing the Gaff," and below that "Erected by New Waterford Town Council, Labour Day, 1985." At the top of the monument an inscription reads "William Davis, 1888-1925" alongside an image of Davis's face. The final image on the Davis monument is of the scene at Waterford Lake on 11 June 1925. Terry MacDonald, a local artist, designed this image while working for the New Waterford Public Works Department. The design began as a sketch, based upon the events of 11 June 1925, and was chosen to be included on the monument by Director of Development and Public Works Simon White.[54] It depicts six men on horseback swinging truncheons at the striking miners. One of the company policemen in the background appears to be holding a revolver in his right hand. A horse in the foreground rears on its hind legs while William Davis struggles to pull a baton-wielding company man to the ground. An injured miner is pictured being helped to his feet by a fellow worker. The Waterford Lake power plant, silhouetted in the background, has two smokestacks jutting into the sky, contrasted against the silhouette of the forest on the left.

The monument is surrounded by six panels, which rise about three feet from the ground and are angled so that they are visible to viewers of the monument. The bases of these panels are concrete, while each face contains an image and descriptive text. Five of the panels describe the story of the 1925 coal miners' strike, while the final panel is an image of the front page of the *Sydney Daily Post* of 12 June 1925. "Riot and Death at Waterford . . . Collier Shot Through Heart at Waterford," reads the headline. The image describes the events of 11 June, as well as the "pillaging" of company stores by striking miners. Each feature of this monument speaks to workers' public memory of 11 June 1925: the heroic imagery presents William Davis as a central figure at a decisive moment of workers' resistance to coal company power. William Davis's death, however, was an important event in New Waterford's collective memory of the 1925 strike long before the monument's erection in 1985.[55] The Davis monument exists as a physical representation of historical consciousness in the community, one that has been shaped through oral history, songs, and "Davis Day."

Although the story of 11 June 1925 is well-known in New Waterford, there are several different accounts of the specific circumstances surrounding Davis's death. In a 1978 interview, Jim Davis, the son of William Davis, describes his own experience at Waterford Lake the day his father was killed:

> I had seen this goon falling from his horse and my father went over to him. I'm sure he only meant to stop him from falling, but the guy

54 Simon White, interview by author, 19 July 2011, New Waterford, NS, digital audio.

55 Davis's daughter remembers the local "celebrity" status that surrounded her family in the years following the event. See Caplan, "Edith Pelley, William Davis's Daughter," 52. Musician Leon Dubinsky has also memorialized Davis's death in the song "Remember the Miner." See O'Donnell, *And Now the Fields are Green*, 76-7.

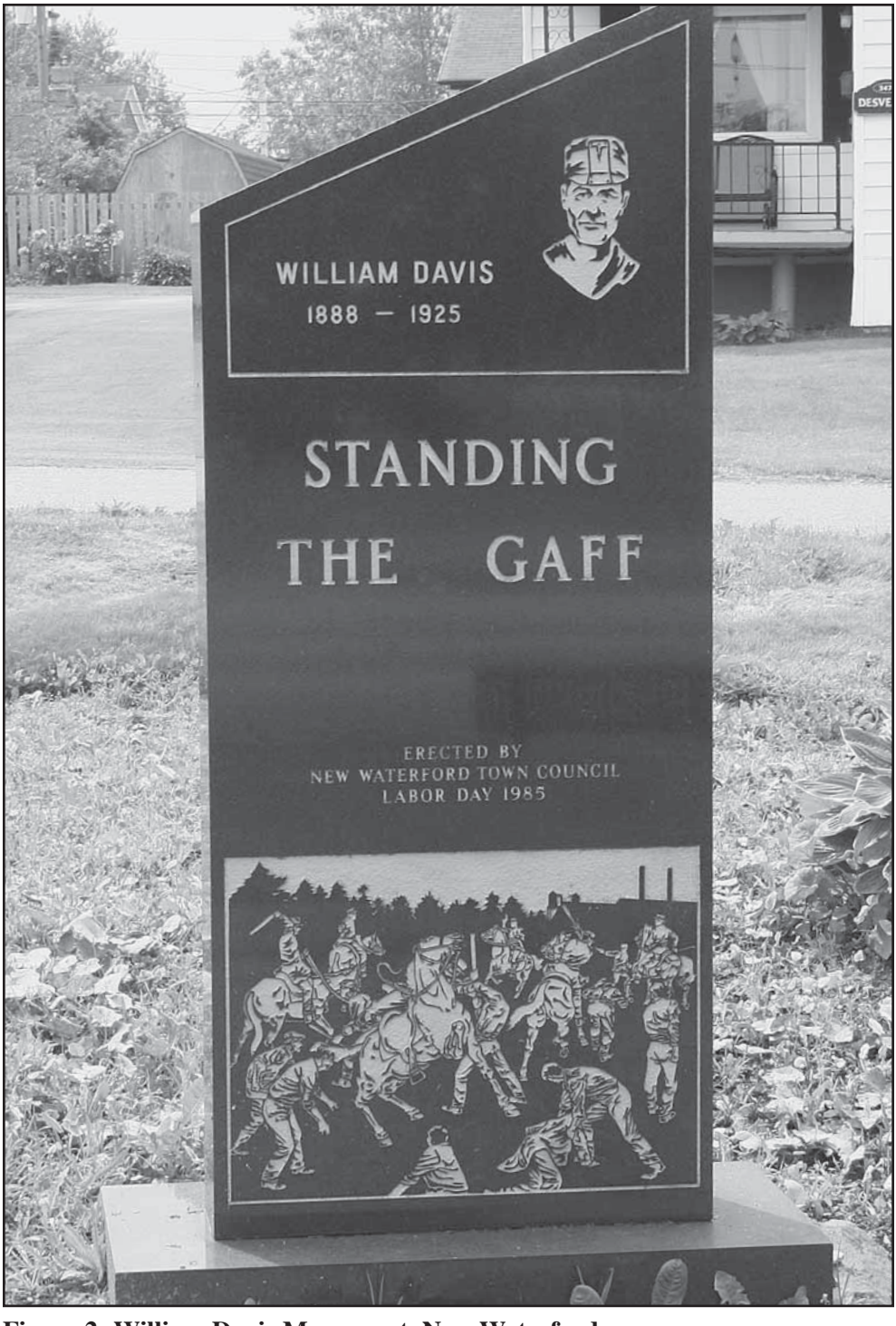

Figure 2: William Davis Monument, New Waterford.
Source: Photograph by author.

Figure 3: William Davis Monument and historical panels.
Source: Photograph by author.

> just panicked and shot . . . . The bullet went right through Dad's heart, but I didn't know it at the time . . . . When it was over one man said "Somebody's been shot and I think he's dead." I asked who it was, and he looked away and said "I think it's your father."[56]

Historian John Mellor claims that Davis had "been making his way home with the bottle of milk, donated by a kindly neighbour, and had only wandered over to the scene of the disturbance out of curiosity."[57] David Frank writes that Davis was "holding the reins of a horse and helping to unsaddle a policeman."[58] Similarly, Donald MacGillivray states that during the police charge, Davis attempted to re-direct a saddled horse and was shot through the chest by another mounted officer.[59] The *Sydney Daily Post* version of the account does not describe the specific events surrounding Davis's death, but does mention that it came as the result of "1,000-1,200 miners advancing" on the company power plant. Another article describes the "looting" and "pillaging" of the company stores, which occurred after news of Davis's death had reached the surrounding coal communities.[60]

56 John Mellor, *The Company Store: James Bryson McLachlan and the Cape Breton Coal Miners 1900-1925* (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1983), 299, quoting *Sunday Star* (Toronto), 11 June 1978 interview with Jim Davis.
57 Mellor, *The Company Store*, 300.
58 Frank, *J.B. McLachlan*, 383.
59 MacGillivray, "William Davis."
60 "Riot and Death at Waterford: Troops Will Arrive Here Today," *Sydney Daily Post*, 12 June 1925.

The chaos at Waterford Lake that day prevents us from knowing for certain which version of Davis's death is the closest to the truth. Each narrative offers insight into the historical meanings that this event has generated within the town. In these versions Davis runs the gamut from loving family man, tragically killed by a bullet on the way home with nourishment for a hungry child, to active participant in the strike, unsaddling a representative of the oppressive company; in each, a specific narrative regarding the 1925 strike is revealed. The stories that present Davis as an active participant in the Waterford Lake battle offer a vision of the past in which workers were able to fight back against coal company exploitation. Davis's death represents the costs associated with this larger struggle. Mellor's version presents Davis as a hapless worker, stumbling upon the confrontation by accident and murdered by company police. Although this version illustrates the unfairness of Davis's death, it also downplays the themes of resistance and struggle that are found in the other narratives. Secondly, Mellor's version places emphasis on BESCO's policy of starving the miners back to work by denying access to the company stores.

Frank's and MacGillivray's accounts of Davis's death indicate that this story is important for the collective memory of industrial struggle in New Waterford. Each account reveals another aspect of historical memory. Whether Davis is presented as an heroic agent of change or as the victim of coal company tyranny, the versions of this story reveal the layers of public memory that contribute to the construction of collective memory. In another context, historian Alessandro Portelli explores oral accounts of a worker's death to illustrate how these types of stories are often used to present important issues within a community. Portelli argues that these events provide the foundation upon which a working-class community might build its collective memory.[61] Oral accounts of 11 June 1925 often recount the "success" of the miners in having defeated the company police at the power station. For example, one of the women interviewed in *12,000 Men* recalls how the community "conquered" the company police that day.[62]

Thematically, these stories link the events of 11 June with the eventual successes of the labour struggle. One reason that Davis's death has become so important to the historical memory of New Waterford is because it took place during a major turning point in the labour wars in industrial Cape Breton. While the senseless killing was the spark that ignited the full force of the miners' anger, pressure had been building since the company had announced wage cuts and closed the company stores earlier in the year.[63] The provincial election, just two weeks after the confrontation at Waterford Lake, saw the Liberals swept out of power and the Conservative government of E.N. Rhodes elected.[64] Rhodes soon intervened to broker a settlement. Although BESCO did implement some wage cuts, the struggle was not without its successes; the union, at least, had been able to survive. As David Frank states: "Indeed, from a longer historical perspective, the historian of District 26, C.B. Wade, has described the 1925 strike as a successful struggle to confirm union recognition: 'The strike was lost, in

61 Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 1.
62 *12,000 Men*.
63 MacGillivray, "Industrial Unrest in Cape Breton," 176.
64 MacGillivray, "Military Aid to the Civil Power," 63.

terms of the immediate issue; it was won, in terms of establishing the union: after 1925 all serious efforts to destroy the union were abandoned'."[65]

Stories of the miners' reactions to the shooting, the forced march of the company police up Plummer Avenue, and the clergy's intervention to prevent further violence are all contextualized within a wider narrative of moderately successful class struggle. These motifs indicate the ways that Davis's death, and the events of 11 June 1925, were interpreted by coal miners in New Waterford. They also allow an understanding of the reasons why William Davis has become such an important figure in collective memory. Danny "Dancer" MacDonald, a former coal miner, later recounted the scene at Waterford Lake immediately following Davis's death:

> They rushed these fellows on horseback. All them fellows had was a chamber full of bullets. They wasted them. They backed them up to the plant where the men were working. They yelled they were out of ammunition. Well, Jesus, that was an admission, and the crowd got next to them and they got the god-damndest hammering they ever got. But Waterford is a Catholic district, and a priest there had a wonderful influence. He jumped up and pleaded with them not to hurt these men. They took them and put them all in jail, for protection.[66]

The anger of the miners is also reflected in the testimony of Angus F. MacDonald, another man who had worked in the mines and who had also acted as a local union leader and town councillor:

> [The miners] got [to the plant] about eleven o' clock in the morning, and when they started to enter into the premises they were met by those armed troops and everybody started shooting, everybody with a gun. And, mind you, those guns were coal company guns approved by the government . . . they did start shooting. And they killed one man, Billy Davis, they wounded another man, Gilbert Watson, badly wounded. But that just riled the men up and they went after [the company police] and they hauled them off their horses, they bet [*sic*] them, they tore their clothes off.[67]

Each of these accounts contains similar themes. Both highlight the numerical disparity between the few, albeit armed, company men and the mass of striking workers. Each narrative hinges on the reversal of fortune that occurs between the miners and company men on 11 June and presents a vision of the entire labour struggle. The physical power that the miners were able to exert over the company police in this specific instance becomes representative of the symbolic power that was later achieved through the defence of their union. Although some wage cuts were implemented, the wider context of a relatively successful labour action on the part of the miners is communicated through this story of triumph at the Waterford

65 Frank, *J.B. McLachlan*, 386.
66 Caplan, "The 'Pluck Me': Life and Death of a Company Store," 5.
67 Angus F. MacDonald, interview by Kay MacDonald, digital audio file T-346, Beaton Institute Archives, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.

Lake power plant. This was not, however, triumph without cost; although the story is framed as a narrative of successful struggle, the death of William Davis remains the preceding condition for that success. In these stories, Davis is used as a symbol for the full measure of opposition that workers faced in the fight for their rights.

One major event commemorating Davis's death occurred the following year, when local miners refused to attend work on the first anniversary of the battle at Waterford Lake. This was the first instance of the "Davis Day" holiday in the coal communities of Cape Breton.[68] The holiday was originally intended as a memorial celebration for William Davis, and the first few years witnessed poor attendance due to labour disputes and, according to historian Christina Lamey, "union tensions between left-wing radicals and moderates."[69] In these early celebrations of Davis Day, the miners would parade two kilometres from the ecumenical services in the morning to Davis's grave in Scotchtown. Michel de Certeau argues that the act of moving through a city or space is, in itself, an assertion of place identity.[70] In New Waterford, the practice of marching from the memorial service to Davis's grave on Davis Day represented the creation of an "urban text"; these parades served to memorialize the events of 11 June 1925 while expressing the strength and solidarity of the local labour movement as workers moved through the townscape. Although Davis Day continues to be celebrated in the Cape Breton coal towns, the parades no longer take place.

Parades in Canada have long been used to express the public memories of marginalized groups. In 1898, a Saint Jean Baptiste parade in Quebec was planned to correspond with the unveiling of a monument to Champlain. While many French Canadians felt that they had been left out of the monument's symbolism, the parade offered the opportunity to insert their experiences into the public celebration of the ceremony.[71] Craig Heron and Steven Penfold write that Labour Day parades in Canada presented two fundamental messages: they allowed for public recognition of labour organizations and they represented the importance of expanded leisure time for workers.[72] The Davis Day parades performed these functions as well, with the additional benefit of memorializing William Davis and linking the union to the history of local struggle in the town. The terminus of the parade, Davis's grave, underscored this localized meaning.

The grave is a white granite marker and includes the inscription "In memory of William Davis, shot in riot at New Waterford power plant, June 11, 1925, Aged 37 years, Asleep in Jesus."[73] According to Davis's daughter, her mother paid for the

68 "Anniversary of Riot," *Sydney Daily Post*, 12 June 1926. Davis's daughter, Edith Pelley, mentions that the schools were closed for these early Davis Day commemorations as well. See Caplan, "Edith Pelley, William Davis's Daughter," 50.

69 Christina M. Lamey, "Davis Day through the Years: A Cape Breton Coalmining Tradition," *Nova Scotia Historical Review* 16, no. 2 (1996): 26.

70 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 92-3.

71 Ronald Rudin, *Founding Fathers: The Celebration of Champlain and Laval in the Streets of Quebec, 1878-1908* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 100-1.

72 Craig Heron and Steven Penfold, "The Craftsmen's Spectacle: Labour Day Parades in Canada, The Early Years," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 29, no. 58 (November 1996): 359.

73 The age of Davis at the time of his death is incorrect on the gravestone. Davis had just turned 38 when he was killed. See MacGillivray, "William Davis."

headstone herself – "$30 a month for that headstone. Every month till it was paid for. It cost $130. And she bought it from John D. Steele in North Sydney."[74] The grave marker indicates a more personal relationship to William Davis than the labour landmark at Davis Square. The "riot" at Waterford Lake is mentioned, but there is no reference to the labour movement. In the years immediately following his death, the events of Davis Day were strongly tied to the specific memory of William Davis and the conflict at Waterford Lake. The grave also held significance for the social memory of work in the New Waterford collieries, as it represented an integral part of miners' occupational history. Davis's grave held layers of individual meaning for family and friends who knew him directly, as well as social meaning for local miners who contextualized his death in terms of the broader labour struggle.

In 1938 Davis Day was renamed District Memorial Day by the UMW, although it was also commonly referred to as Miners' Memorial Day.[75] This change expanded the meaning of the day to include the memory of all miners killed in Cape Breton's collieries. The decline in attendance numbers at the Davis Day celebrations was one reason for this decision.[76] Although the Miners' Memorial Day services in 1940 were impressively attended, there was no mention of William Davis in newspaper coverage of the events. The headline of the *Sydney Post Record* the next day read, "Princess Local Members Attend Memorial Day Gathering to Honor Industry's Dead."[77] Nearly 1,000 people attended the memorial service in New Waterford, but there was no march to Davis's grave that year. Instead, a wreath was placed at the site of the Miners' Memorial Monument. The ceremony was specifically dedicated to the memory of all miners who had been killed in work-related incidents. This change of itinerary is telling. The earlier celebrations of Davis Day were associated primarily with the memory of William Davis and the eruption of violence in the struggle at Waterford Lake; the march to a site of personal memory – his grave – was appropriate in this context. After Davis Day was changed to Miners' Memorial Day, which generalized the purpose of the holiday, the Miners' Memorial Monument became more central to the day's ceremony.[78] This reflects an attempt to expand the memory of the conflict in favour of a more generalized tribute to the death of coal miners, drawing upon the existing themes of collective memorialization that are present on the Miners' Memorial. This generalization might also have made sense from a union-building perspective, considering that it occurred at a time when the relationship between management and workers' organizations was becoming less adversarial.[79]

74 Pelley also mentions that the family received $100 each month, taken from an account funded by the miners' union. See "Edith Pelley, William Davis's Daughter," 50. John D. Steele and Sons Ltd. also created the 1985 Davis monument. See "Work Begins on William Davis Labor Monument," *Cape Breton Post*, 25 July 1985.

75 Lamey, "Davis Day through the Years," 27-8.

76 Davis's daughter Edith remarked on the declining attendance numbers in a 1992 interview. She said, "They started slackening off. There was hardly anybody. My sister said to them one time, 'Could shoot youse all with one bullet'." See "Edith Pelley, William Davis's Daughter," 51.

77 This describes the attendance of union members from the Princess Colliery in Sydney Mines. See "Princess Local Members Attend Memorial Day Gathering to Honor Industry's Dead," *Sydney Post Record*, 12 June 1940.

78 Lamey, "Davis Day Through the Years," 29.

79 The Nova Scotia Trade Union Act of 1937 represented a "foundation . . . upon which a more legalized regime of industrial relations could be built." See Judy Fudge and Eric Tucker, *Labour*

Figure 4: William Davis grave, Scotchtown.
Source: Photograph by author.

In expanding the meanings of this day beyond the local context of New Waterford, the miners' union may have been attempting to build solidarity around issues of workers' struggles and workplace safety. Portelli offers several "modes" of experience that are often present in popular narratives: the political sphere, community life, and personal experience. "Vertical shifts," Portelli writes, occur when events are contextualized through these different modes.[80] William Davis's death, for example, was initially rooted directly in the personal and community experiences of the New Waterford colliers. The transition from Davis Day to Miners' Memorial Day corresponded with the de-emphasis of themes of resistance and oppression in favour of memorializing miners' experiences more broadly. The traditions of Davis Day and the narratives surrounding Davis's death, then, underwent a vertical shift; they took on political meanings that coincided with the institutionalization of the labour movement. Collective memory, in this sense, looks both backwards and forwards; UMW leadership sought to utilize the existing memory of Davis's death to underpin a broader project of institutional achievement.

Miners' Memorial Day was re-named Davis Day in 1974, as union members believed that the day had moved too far away from its original intent of memorializing William Davis and the 1925 struggle.[81] Interestingly, this occurred at a time when the future of the Cape Breton coal industry was once more in doubt. The release of the 1966 report of the Donald Commission, which recommended the slow shutdown of Cape Breton coal mines, had shaken the community. A new Crown corporation, the Cape Breton Development Corporation (Devco), was created to replace the existing private ownership of the industry. On Miners' Memorial Day, 1966, UMW President Bill Marsh lambasted the findings of the report and called for the modernization of existing mines and the opening of a new mine at Lingan.[82] Themes of struggle also began creeping back into local newspaper coverage of Miners' Memorial Day in the decade before the 1974 re-naming of the holiday. One editorial from 1969 begins with a direct mention of Davis: "It's many years since the baseball bats came swinging from the sidings, since the angry roar went up on Plummer Avenue, and since they buried William Davis."[83] At a Miners' Memorial Day ceremony in 1972, Rev. Dr. C.M. Nicholson, who was born in Cape Breton before becoming a leader in the United Church of Canada and an outspoken proponent of the social gospel, remarked that the coal communities of Cape Breton "have been the victims of big business and corporations . . . [which used them] to help lay foundations for their empires in larger centres and even outside of the country."[84]

The transition back to Davis Day came at a time when workers in Cape Breton required a unifying narrative of struggle. This shift re-asserted the story of William

Before the Law: The Regulation of Workers' Collective Action in Canada, 1900-1948 (Toronto: Oxford University Press Canada, 2001), 218.

80 Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 22.

81 Lamey, "Davis Day through the Years," 33; MacGillivray, "William Davis."

82 "Merchants of Gloom Despair; Miners Honoured," *Cape Breton Post*, 13 June 1966.

83 "Men of the Mines," *Cape Breton Post*, 11 June 1969.

84 Charles Anderson, Garfield Bryce, John B. Corston et al., *Clarence MacKinnon Nicholson: An Intimate Profile of his Achievement, Thought and Spiritual Leadership* (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot Press, 1981), 76; "Miners' Museum," *Cape Breton Post*, 13 June 1972.

Davis and placed workers' struggles back at the forefront of collective memory in New Waterford and the other coal communities in Cape Breton. At the same time, labour history and the experiences of working people in Cape Breton were gaining popular and academic attention. A museum dedicated to the local history of coal mining and the experiences of miners was constructed in Glace Bay.[85] A number of historians began to explore the island's labour history from an academic perspective; this was reflective of the wider "social history turn" in the discipline.[86] It was also at this time that workers in Cape Breton began reflecting upon their own history and decided that it was worth commemorating; the majority of labour landmarks in industrial Cape Breton were erected after 1970.[87] This theme of struggle, tied specifically to the narrative of Davis's death by the image of his face and the dates of his birth and death, is the dominant narrative of the 1985 Davis monument. The features of the memorial, as well as the six panels surrounding the monument, provide access to an interpretation of Davis's death that is centred upon working class resistance to the exploitative practices of the coal company.

At the centre of the Davis monument is the inscribed phrase "Standing the Gaff." This phrase is a direct reference to the early days of the 1925 strike, when BESCO vice-president J.E. McLurg taunted the striking miners in an interview: "Let them stay out two months or six months, it matters not; eventually they will have to come to us . . . . They can't stand the gaff."[88] This comment became a rallying cry for the miners involved in the 1925 strike, and Frank argues that it "became one of the most memorable statements in Cape Breton labour history."[89] Although it is unclear exactly what context McLurg was referring to when he made his infamous statement, his intention was to threaten that BESCO would make life so difficult for the striking workers that they would be unable to remain on strike. In positioning this phrase at the centre of the Davis monument, its creators indicate that the memory of William Davis now exists as a symbol of labour solidarity and working class struggle. "Standing the Gaff" might also offer different meanings to the viewer depending on the temporal context in which it is viewed. In the 1980s and 1990s, for example, there was much apprehension on the part of Cape Breton workers over what would become of the coal mines. Mining in Cape Breton was being phased out, and hundreds of people feared being left without work.[90] For these men and women, "Standing the Gaff" might have indicated hope that a compromise could be reached and served as a reminder that workers in Cape Breton had overcome adversity in the past. Today, with no major coal industry in Cape Breton, a viewer of the Davis

85 Meaghan Beaton, "'I sold it as an industry as much as anything else': Nina Cohen, the Cape Breton Miners' Museum, and Canada's 1967 Centennial Celebrations," *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 13 (2010): 41-62.

86 MacGillivray, "Industrial Unrest in Cape Breton, 1919-1925"; David Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Miners, 1917-1926" (PhD diss., Dalhousie University, 1979).

87 Lachlan MacKinnon, "Labour Landmarks in Industrial Cape Breton, 1922-2012" (MA thesis, University of New Brunswick, 2012).

88 David Frank, "The 1920s: Class and Region, Resistance and Accommodation," in *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, ed. E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise (Fredericton and Toronto: Acadiensis Press and University of Toronto Press, 1993), 247.

89 Frank, *J.B. McLachlan*, 374.

90 "Support needed for Devco workers," *Canadian Union of Public Employees*, 8 February 1999, http://cupe.ca/news/568.

monument might perceive a message of economic hope for the entire island.

The engraved scene of the battle at Waterford Lake contains a number of important themes. The mounted company police represent company oppression and BESCO's refusal to give ground to their workers. The oppressive presence of the horsemen, however, does not consign the striking miners to victim status. The central image of William Davis is one of resistance. His attempt to unsaddle the company policeman represents the working class attempt to fight back against BESCO and the company's wage cuts. The two miners in the bottom-right corner, one of whom is helping the other to his feet, represent solidarity. Without the support of the community and workers, the union would have been broken by the strike of 1925 and the miners would have been at an even greater disadvantage. The Waterford power station, silhouetted in the background of the battle, provides the image with a context for the class struggle. The plant represents the Cape Breton coal industry. This is the final prize of the battle that is taking place in the foreground. The protruding smokestacks are indicative of the means of production, seizing control of which was the main goal for radical workers' struggle. Since the early 1920s, David Frank argues, miners had been calling for "the democratic organization and management of the industry by workers."[91] The workers' fight for control over the Waterford Lake power station represented their rejection of the established power dynamics to which they had been subservient. The symbolism of that rejection, implied by the imagery and inscriptions on the Davis monument, indicates that the narrative of class struggle still existed in New Waterford as late as 1985.

The creation of the monument by the Town of New Waterford affirms the importance of Davis's death and the events of 11 June 1925. Local unions did not contribute significant design elements to the monument, nor did they provide the majority of funding. This underscores the importance of the monument's themes for the town's citizens, and implies that the messages of this memorial move well beyond the scope of unionism or the experience of industrial work. Each of the images on the Davis monument incorporates an aspect of the collective memory of 11 June 1925. The image of Davis's face on the monument evokes the memory of the individual; Davis was a union man who had close networks of family and friends in New Waterford and his death affected the community on a deep and personal level. "Standing the Gaff" represents a positive message for the future, reveals the changing meanings of labour resistance in Cape Breton, and directs the viewer's attention to the hardships faced by workers in the past. Finally, the scene at Waterford Lake depicts the events surrounding Davis's death and the spirit of resistance that has been fostered among Cape Breton miners throughout the 20th century. In its entirety, the Davis monument serves as a physical reminder of the different facets that have combined in New Waterford to form a collective understanding of the confrontation at Waterford Lake and the 1925 strike.

Conclusion

Labour landmarks have been instrumental in presenting workers' public memory in New Waterford. Each marker relates a specific narrative associated with the town's industrial past, and presents those narratives as they existed for local coal miners and working class families. As lieux de mémoire, these sites "freeze" the memory of

91 Frank, "Contested Terrain," 115.

particular historical moments as they existed at one point in the town's history; the Miners' Memorial presents, in perpetuity, narratives associated with the 1917 explosion that otherwise would have remained ephemeral. Nora refers to the dual nature of lieux de mémoire: "[They are] closed upon [themselves] . . . but also forever open to the full range of . . . possible significations."[92] In this way, labour landmarks are *not* static; they look backwards in commemoration, but they also look ahead in the hopes that their messages will be taken into account by future generations. The coal industry in New Waterford is now dead, but the public memories of coal miners, unionists, and other members of the working class remain visible in these labour landmarks. Their inclusion in the urban landscape reveals the continued importance of the industrial past in the community identity of New Waterford, but also implores citizens to recall workers' experiences when they "collectively remember" the history of mining in their community. This message remains important in many areas of industrial Cape Breton, which now struggle with many of the economic and social problems associated with post-industrialism.

The Miners' Memorial Monument in New Waterford, erected in 1922, is the earliest labour landmark that has been identified in industrial Cape Breton.[93] It offers a version of the 1917 explosion that, while important to workers and the union, was still very much contested at the time of its erection. Although the particular symbols of this monument are sometimes misidentified, the broader themes of danger in the New Waterford collieries, the diversity of the early workforce, and workers' struggle against unsafe conditions remain clear. More than 60 years later, when several other labour landmarks were erected in New Waterford, workers' public memories of the coal mining past were once again placed at the centre of historical consciousness in the town.[94] Simon White describes the intended significance of the Davis monument:

> You're reading [the monument] and some people are not going to believe it . . . . 'That's some union member that's wanting to show how horrible the coal company was,' [they'll say]. Sometimes people don't believe the things that the working people talk about . . . . It actually happened . . . . And that's the story of the Davis monument.[95]

These labour landmarks, the reinstatement of the Davis Day holiday and celebrations, and the tradition of working class stories, songs, and poetry all indicate that collective memory of the industrial past in New Waterford has been influenced by the experiences of the town's workers. The subversive nature of these narratives, including those revealed by the Davis monument erected by the town council, reveals the existing collective memory of class struggle in the development of New Waterford during the 20th century.

92 Nora, "Between Memory and History," 24.

93 MacKinnon, "Labour Landmarks in Industrial Cape Breton," 23.

94 A major memorial, the Miners' Fatality Monument, was erected in 1985 at Colliery Lands Park in New Waterford. A memorial to another coal miner, Earl Leadbeater, was also erected in 1985 in Colliery Lands Park. Leadbeater had been killed in a fire at the No. 12 Colliery in 1973. And in 2009, a smaller monument to William Davis was erected in Colliery Lands Park on Davis Day.

95 White interview.