

# The Labour Stamp: The Image of the Worker on Canadian Postage Stamps

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[See table of contents](#)

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# The Labour Stamp: The Image of the Worker on Canadian Postage Stamps

David Frank

IT IS OFTEN SAID that you can learn much about a country's history and culture from its postage stamps. Pierre Berton, for instance, has written that on postage stamps "the great milestones of the past" in Canadian history "have all been recorded in miniature."<sup>1</sup> A closer examination demonstrates that postage stamps have usually presented a selective reading of the public identity and that some narratives are privileged and others are neglected. In a recent study of the politics of commemoration, John R. Gillis has pointed out that public memories and identities are socially constructed and are embedded in complex class, gender, and power relations that determine what is remembered or forgotten. Several groups, including workers, minorities, young people, and women, have been relatively slow to gain admission to the public memory.<sup>2</sup>

As a rule postage stamps have rated low in the hierarchy of modern cultural taste, and historians have devoted surprisingly little attention to this widely circulated form of public iconography.<sup>3</sup> As early as 1947, however, the Canadian artist

<sup>1</sup>Pierre Berton, "Foreword," in Gordon Donaldson, *Images of Canada: A Nation in Postage Stamps* (Toronto 1990), 7.

<sup>2</sup>John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton 1994), 3-24.

<sup>3</sup>There is extensive writing on Canadian postage stamps and postal systems, much of it contained in popular publications such as the bi-weekly *Canadian Stamp News* and its predecessors. A characteristic older work, still considered authoritative in its specialized approach to the field, is Winthrop S. Boggs, *The Postage Stamps and Postal History of Canada* (1945/46: Lawrence, MA 1975). For a bibliographic guide, see Cimon Morin, ed., *Canadian Philately: Bibliography and Index, 1864-1973* (Ottawa 1979) and *Supplement* (Ottawa 1983). Although it has little to say about philately as such, the most useful

David Frank, "The Labour Stamp: The Image of the Worker on Canadian Postage Stamps," *Labour/Le Travail*, 39 (Spring 1997), 179-94.

Charles Comfort argued that the postage stamp was "a valuable instrument of discreet national publicity": "The stamp carries its message far afield. A well-designed stamp does more than show that the sender has paid the prescribed rate of postage. It brings to the recipient, whether at home or abroad, something of the character, the national dignity, the contemporary awareness of the state in which it had its origin."<sup>4</sup> Indeed if we understand stamps as a source of "government messages" about a country, social historians have suggested, then we need to consider "what kind of knowledge is produced" by the experience of contact with and collection of stamps by millions of people both at home and around the world.<sup>5</sup>

This discussion offers a modest case study in the politics of Canadian identity. It is prompted by a larger concern about the representation of the worker in Canadian history in general and in public culture in particular.<sup>6</sup> It also contributes to the emerging work on images of labour in Canadian visual culture. Researchers such as Rosemary Donegan have pointed to the existence of an iconography of labour embedded in the specific cultural artefacts produced by workers' organizations and in the general body of work produced by Canadian artists.<sup>7</sup> In this case, however, we are looking at a form of official culture produced by the state, often through the use of staff artists employed in the graphic arts industry, though by the 1950s the designs were opened to the talents of a number of artists of stature such as Emanuel Hahn, Charles Comfort, and A.J. Casson.<sup>8</sup>

Historically, the selection of subject matter and designs for Canadian stamps has been the prerogative of the minister responsible for the Post Office. Since 1969 a more formal structure has prevailed in the form of an appointed Stamp Advisory

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introduction to the history of postal services in Canada is Robert M. Campbell, *The Politics of the Post: Canada's Postal Service from Public Service to Privatization* (Peterborough 1994). My thanks to John Willis, Historian, National Postal Museum, for his encouragement of this research.

<sup>4</sup>See Charles Comfort and Donald W. Buchanan, "Wanted! Better Designs for Canadian Postage Stamps," *Canadian Art*, 5 (October-November 1947), 24.

<sup>5</sup>See R.S. Newman, "Orientalism for Kids: Postage Stamps and 'Creating' South Asia," *Journal of Developing Societies*, 5, 1 (January-April 1989), 70-82, and Donald M. Reid, "The Symbolism of Postage Stamps: A Source for the Historian," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 19, 2 (April 1984), 223-49. Reid proposes that the agenda for studying postage stamps should include the following multiple question: "Who/says what/in what channels/by means of what symbols/to whom/with what effect?"

<sup>6</sup>For a review of the limited working-class presence in school textbooks at the end of the 1970s, see Kenneth W. Osborne, "Hardworking, Temperate and Peaceable" — *The Portrayal of Workers in Canadian History Textbooks* (Winnipeg 1980).

<sup>7</sup>See Rosemary Donegan, "The Iconography of Labour: An Overview of Canadian Materials," *Archivaria*, 27 (Winter 1988-89), 35-56. For an important attempt to recover elements of the labour landscape in the United States, see Archie Green, "Labor Landmarks Past and Present," *Labor's Heritage*, 6, 4 (Spring 1995), 28-53.

<sup>8</sup>See Comfort and Buchanan, "Wanted!" 24-9, and Laurence Hyde, "New Stamps for Old," *Canadian Art*, 11, 4 (Summer 1954), 133-6, 161.

Committee representing interest groups in the visual arts, philatelic and, occasionally, historical community. It considers proposals from various sources, including the public, and its annual recommendations are submitted for approval by the Board of Directors of Canada Post. The policy guidelines are of a very general nature and suggest that stamps should "instil pride in their country in the minds and hearts of all Canadians" and "have popular appeal to broad segments of the Canadian population." Stamps should also "evoke Canadian history, traditions, accomplishments or natural heritage," commemorate "deceased persons generally recognized as having made outstanding contributions to Canada" and "illustrate the social, cultural or economic life of Canada."<sup>9</sup>

This discussion was also provoked in part by the first page of Greg Kealey's chapter on labour history in the useful handbook *Writing About Canada* that was published in 1990 by Prentice-Hall Canada Inc.<sup>10</sup> In this book the designer used a Canadian postage stamp to illustrate the first page of each chapter. Accordingly, the Fathers of Confederation (1917) (#135) appear at the beginning of Reg Whitaker's chapter on politics. For the chapter on labour, however, the designer chose a 1957 stamp (#372) celebrating the Universal Postal Union, an international agency that held its meetings in Ottawa that year.<sup>11</sup>

But if this was not the right stamp for the occasion, what were the alternatives? How many, among the more than 1,500 postage stamps issued by the Canadian post office since the 19th century, recognize the contributions of working people to Canadian history? In short, what can we learn from postage stamps about the place of workers in Canadian history?

This survey reveals the presence of working people on a large and varied number of postage stamps. At the same time it is also apparent that the presence of workers is in most cases incidental to the main purpose of representation. Accordingly, the discussion begins with the gaze of exclusion. It then proceeds to an examination of what may be called the gaze of inclusion, which may also, we find, be a gaze of subordination or marginalization. We then examine a more limited category, the gaze of assertion, in which the working class presence is more directly represented. Here we find that few if any of these stamps are commemorations of labour organizations, labour leaders, or labour history. There is also a brief effort to place the Canadian evidence in perspective by reference to the labour stamps

<sup>9</sup>"Corporate Policy on the Selection of Postage Stamp Subjects and Designs" (Canada Post, 13 August 1987). See also *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2nd edition (Edmonton 1988), 3, 1728.

<sup>10</sup>See John Schulz, ed., *Writing About Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History* (Scarborough 1990), 145-74.

<sup>11</sup>The bracketed numbers refer to the commonly accepted Scott Catalogue Numbering System. Sources for this study included the *Unitrade Specialized Catalogue of Canadian Stamps, 1993* (Toronto 1992) and the *1997 Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue, Vol. 1A* [Scott Catalogue] (Sidney, OH 1996).

issued in Britain, Australia, France, and the United States. The discussion concludes with some suggestions for an agenda in this realm of cultural politics.

For the first half-century of Confederation the presence of workers in Canadian history was virtually a state secret. All of the stamps issued by the Dominion of Canada in the first three decades of Confederation featured portraits of Queen Victoria, culminating in the double portrait of the Diamond Jubilee issue in 1897 (#52).<sup>12</sup> The following year Canada's first pictorial stamps, the famous "map" stamps (#85-86), confirmed Canadian participation in the ideology of British imperialism. Portraits of royalty continued to dominate the stamp issue well into the 20th century, although there was occasional recourse to the "colonial-picturesque" motif on occasions such as the 300th anniversary of the founding of Québec City in 1908.<sup>13</sup>

There is an interesting exception to this gaze of exclusion, and it is to be found in several stamps issued by the independent Dominion of Newfoundland. In 1897, to celebrate both the Diamond Jubilee and the 400th anniversary of John Cabot's North Atlantic voyage of exploration, Newfoundland issued a group of 14 stamps which included, among other themes, illustrations of the country's principal contemporary industries — fishing (#67), logging (#66), and mining (#65). In their small boats the fishermen are hauling in their catch; in the woods men are hauling logs with a team of oxen; in the underground scene, most likely at the newly-opened iron mines of Bell Island, the men are hard at work with pick and shovel, their backs to the visitors' gaze. The mining stamp is also of wider interest as it is said to be the first stamp with a mining theme issued by any postal authority in the world. The designs were selected by the Colonial Secretary Robert Bond, a strong Newfoundland nationalist; at this time Newfoundland clearly wanted to present itself as a country with varied resources and a dynamic economy, and workers were considered to occupy a legitimate space in that narrative.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>In this analysis we are excluding the stamps issued by the various colonies of British North America prior to Confederation. Interestingly, the Scott numbering system accepts the assumptions of Central Canadian precedence and begins the numbering of Canadian stamps with those of the Province of Canada, starting with the threepenny beaver of 1851. Nova Scotia and New Brunswick also issued stamps in 1851. The first stamp authorized by the Dominion of Canada was issued in 1868 (#21).

<sup>13</sup>The "colonial-picturesque" has been identified as characteristic of postage stamps in the British Empire: see Newman, "Orientalism for Kids," 74, in reference to India: "The message, similar to the one carried by postage stamps of all British colonies up to about the same time, was only of power and Britain's control over India."

<sup>14</sup>*Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, 4 (St. John's 1993), 414; Winthrop S. Boggs, *The Postage Stamps and Postal History of Newfoundland* (Lawrence, MA 1975 [1942]), 69-73; J.P. Drolet, "Oldest Mining Motif on Stamp," *The Canadian Stamp News*, 4, 14 (10-23 December 1979), N6, N14. The logging theme was amplified with a further scene in 1910 and 1911 (#94, #100). My thanks to Dr. Jeff Webb for advice on this matter.

As a rule, however, the gaze of exclusion prevailed in the 19th century and workers were not visible on stamps issued by the Dominion of Canada during this period. The first sightings of workers on Canadian stamps can be dated from 1929 and 1930, when we can identify several workers who are engaged in bringing in the annual harvest of wheat. In the first of these (#157) we observe the preindustrial methods of harvesting that for several decades attracted thousands of hired hands from across the country to the wheatfields at harvest time; in the second image (#175) we are witnessing the arrival of mechanized harvest methods. Thus the two stamps stand at an important divide in the history of farm labour.<sup>15</sup> No hint here of course, or later, of the collapse of agriculture or its human consequences during the 1930s. The most important observation is that in both cases the workers are subordinated to the main theme of the image, which is the harvest itself and, in part, the mechanization of production. The workers appear to be incidental to the larger story in these images. In at least two later stamps the gaze of inclusion is more direct, as agricultural labour is in the foreground. But in these cases the intentionality is not markedly different, for the official subject matter of the stamps is not the experience of work but the production of culture. The 1969 stamp (#492), reproduces a handsome early-20th-century portrait of farm labour that emphasizes the equal labours of men and women; the occasion was a tribute to the Québécois painter Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Côté. Similarly, a powerful 1979 stamp (#817) shows a pioneer farmer ploughing a field; this stamp was issued in honour of Frederick Philip Grove's novel *Fruits of the Earth* (1933).

The gaze of subordination is also apparent in the *Bluenose* stamp of 1929 (#158), which is a tribute to the famous fishing schooner that symbolized the maritime legacy of the east coast. The fishermen who sailed this vessel are barely visible in this image. However, by 1988 (#1228) the skipper at least had emerged from below and overshadowed the vessel; interestingly Angus Walters occupies a modest, and admittedly somewhat ambiguous, place in labour history for his part in helping to lead a campaign by fishermen and fishhandlers for higher prices in 1938; but this story remains relatively unknown to admirers of the *Bluenose*.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, the gaze of inclusion had extended by 1951 to introduce the generic east coast fisherman (#302), here shown in romantic form on a rather rich one dollar stamp in his oilskins hauling in his nets. No evidence here of the new production methods and difficult choices facing the fishing communities at this stage in their history. The whole image is garlanded by the harvests of the sea, suggesting the inexhaustible bounty of the fishing resources, which are themselves the intended subject matter of the stamp.

<sup>15</sup>The same succession of "traditional" and "modern" farm images appears in the two farm scenes (#286, #271) of the "Peace" issue of 1946.

<sup>16</sup>See Michael Lynk and Sue Calhoun, *The Lockeport Lockout: An Untold Story in Nova Scotia's Labour History* (Halifax 1983), 6-7.

In the narrative of resource exploitation and economic development, therefore, workers are often present but are usually subordinated to their work or to their machines. The contemporary fur trade is represented in a 1950 stamp (#301), showing a work scene at a snowbound encampment in the north woods; there was some objection at the time that the scene was not entirely realistic due to the enormous size of the skins.<sup>17</sup> Wheat and oil, represented respectively by profiles of female and male figures, are featured in a 1955 stamp (#355), which was issued to mark the anniversaries of Saskatchewan and Alberta. A more naturalistic group of workers appear as members of a survey crew in a 1961 stamp (#391) promoting northern development. There is a tribute to the pulp and paper industry in 1956 (#362); here the worker is almost crowded out by the powerful image of the mill machinery. In the case of the textile industry, a 1953 stamp (#334) reveals no signs at all of human presence in the production process.

Workers in another major staple trade appear in a 1946 stamp (#272) promoting the modern lumber industry. Again, mechanization of production is a central theme. Here we see two workers, equipped with the "power-saws" or "chain-saws" of the 1940s, engaged in the new mechanized method of felling trees. Notice that both men seem to be working with their backs to a falling tree. In light of the hazardous scene depicted here, this stamp provoked some controversy when it was issued and has sometimes been called "the reckless lumberman" stamp. Apparently the stamp design was based on two separate photographs from the British Columbia woods, combined here for artistic effect in what might be considered an early instance of magic realism. "In actual practice two 'sets' of fallers would not work so close together," observed one commentator, "and the inclusion of the two sets in the design has been done to make a more pleasing oblong-shaped stamp."<sup>18</sup> A more heroic depiction of a lumber worker appeared in Henry Holgate's portrait, "The Lumberjack"; this was included among the stamps issued in 1995 (#1561c) in honour of the Group of Seven; the stamp, like Holgate's paintings themselves, can be considered as part of an effort to compensate for the lack of human figures in the landscapes of that school.<sup>19</sup>

The first Canadian stamp to make reference to the miners was issued in 1957 (#373). It shows an underground worker operating a cutting machine at the face. This is a severe black and white image that underlines the stark setting of

<sup>17</sup>*Saturday Night*, 26 December 1950, 17: "Issued to honor Canada's fur trade, this recent stamp has been the object of criticism in philatelic circles. Objection is taken to the tepee and size of the skins."

<sup>18</sup>"Notes on Subject Matter of New 50-Cent Stamp," *Popular Stamps* (October 1946), 16. See also "Reckless Lumberman on Canada's New Stamp," *Philatelic Magazine*, 54, 17 (1946), 395-6; although it is listed in Morin, ed., *Canadian Philately*, I have not been able to locate a copy of this item.

<sup>19</sup>See Barry Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada: Toward a People's Art* (Toronto 1974), 183.

underground work. Although the stamp was issued on the occasion of a Commonwealth Mining and Metallurgical Congress, many Canadians may well have taken it as a tribute to the miners at Springhill, Nova Scotia, where 39 men had been killed a year earlier and 75 more would be killed the following year. There is an evocation of an earlier mining industry in 1958, on the 100th anniversary of British Columbia, in the image of a miner panning for gold (#377). A later stamp in 1978 (#765) showed men at work at a Cobalt silver mine. The gold mining operations at Yellowknife are represented in a 1984 stamp (#1009) that excludes any reference to work process or labour relations. There have been no stamps commemorating mine disasters or other catastrophes such as the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger*; such themes appear to contradict the official narrative of Canadian development.<sup>20</sup>

Workers are not totally excluded from depictions of various stages in Canadian history, but again they do not rate high on the scale of intentionality. As early as 1534, for instance, we can discern that the explorer Jacques Cartier was accompanied by other seafarers, here shown on a 1934 stamp (#208) that contains an image both of the hierarchy and the collective effort of seafaring labour. The participants in Henry Hudson's fateful expedition of 1610 are depicted on a somewhat gloomy 1986 stamp (#1107); there is no specific indication that his discontented sailors were the organizers of what was arguably the first labour revolt in Canadian history. An early scene in the growth of industry in New France is represented in a 1988 stamp (#1216) that focuses on the iron workers and apprentices who worked at the Forges du Saint Maurice. By contrast, the businessman John Molson dominates the foreground of a 1986 stamp (#1117) and the presence of workers is firmly subordinated to the image of the entrepreneur. The cowboys of the western ranching industry are in action on a stamp for the city of Calgary in 1975 (#667). The immigrant experience is depicted several times, including the arrival of the Hector (#619), the Loyalists (#209), the Mennonites (#643), and the Ukrainians (#1326) — interestingly, all of these are shown in family groupings.

The transportation theme looms large in the narrative of Canadian history contained in postage stamps, and again the presence of workers is indispensable if rarely central to the intentionality of the stamps. The *voyageurs* who powered the great fur trading canoes into the northwest can certainly be seen in action, first of all in Frances Ann Hopkins' painting (#1227), issued in honour of the artist, and secondly in the fantasy of the *chasse-galerie* or bewitched canoe (#1334), which flew by night and forms part of a series on Canadian folklore. The construction of the canals in the 19th century may be deduced from an examination of a 1974 stamp paying tribute to William Merritt (#655); although the navvies themselves are not shown, we can see in the background workers engaged in a variety of labouring

<sup>20</sup>Consider, for instance, the 1929 pictorial stamp celebrating the Quebec Bridge (#156): it might also be taken as a memorial to the 70 men killed in the collapse of the first bridge in 1907 and the additional 14 men killed during the construction of the second bridge in 1916. See Boggs, *The Postage Stamps*, 801.



tasks on the canal. The successors to the canal labourers were the construction workers who built the railways, and their absence is perhaps the most surprising omission in the entire canon of Canadian postage stamps.<sup>21</sup> Again, their presence may be deduced from the appearance of workers in a photograph of the construction of the Victoria Bridge, the first railway link across the St. Lawrence at Montréal; this stamp was issued in tribute to the photographer William Notman (#1237). The workers who built the 20th-century highways are represented more directly in a 1992 stamp commemorating the completion of the Alaska Highway (#1413). A more ambiguous comment on changes in transportation technology in the north at midcentury appeared in 1955 in the image of an Inuk at rest in his kayak while an airplane wings by overhead (#351).

The images of native people are not overlooked on Canadian stamps; indeed their relatively frequent appearance can be considered one of the special privileges of Canadian philately. Representations of the labour of native people appear less often. In 1972 there was a scene depicting the Plains buffalo hunt (#562). Hunters, sealers, fishermen, and archers appear among depictions of the Inuit in 1977 (#748-751). Paul Kane's painting, "Indian Encampment on Lake Huron," reproduced on a stamp in 1971 (#553), implies the significance of native labour in 19th-century transportation and also shows a woman preparing food for the day's meal. In 1976 another woman is tending the fire at an Iroquois encampment (#579).

The representation of women workers on Canadian stamps has been limited. Probably the earliest is the nurse (#380), who appeared in connection with a 1958 public health issue; again this is a generic image taking precedence over the particular. The following year there was also a tribute to the Associated Country Women of the World (#385), again a symbolic figure rather than a specific scene. Marguerite Bourgeoys, founder of the teaching order the *Congrégation de Notre-Dame*, was depicted on a 1975 stamp (#660) for her role as an educational pioneer in 17th-century New France. There is also the fine Robert Harris painting, "Meeting of the School Trustees" (#849); this stamp was intended to celebrate the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts but serves as well as a tribute to the generations of women teachers in rural Canada. Henrietta Edwards, an advocate of the rights of working women and founder of the Working Girls' Association in 1875, was included among a group of early feminists commemorated on stamps in 1981 (#882). Women are also visible among the unpaid volunteer workers represented on a 1987 stamp (#1132). Mary Travers, also known as "La Bolduc," a singer popular in the 1930s for her satirical songs of working-class life in Québec, is shown on a 1994 stamp (#1526).

Women appear prominently on several stamps issued in connection with the 50th anniversary commemorations of the six years of World War II. Several of

<sup>21</sup>The only specific allusion to the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, for instance, is a 1970 stamp (#531) marking the 150th anniversary of the birth of Donald Smith (Lord Strathcona), the financier who drove the "last spike" in 1885.

these paid tribute to wartime occupations, including work on the home front (#1298-1301), featuring the contributions of women to the war effort. This series also includes depictions of war industry (#1346), war reporting (#1448), and the return of the veterans (#1541).

One group of workers who consistently attract the attention of post offices, both in Canada and elsewhere, are the postal workers themselves. They can be found on stamps as early as 1953, when the post riders of 18th-century Québec were commemorated (#413). The post is also the subject of a series of six stamps from 1974 documenting various phases of contemporary postal operations (#634-639). Here perhaps we are beginning to see the more general gaze of inclusion give way to a more direct gaze of assertion. In some respects the intentionality may be indirectly related to the unhappy labour relations climate of the 1970s at the post office, where large battles were being fought over technological change and labour rights. Although this was a time of considerable conflict over technological change in the post office, the image of the postal worker presented seems to be thoroughly unaffected by such matters. We are forcefully reminded of this situation by one of two unique stamps issued by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers in 1975. During the course of that year's labour conflict, the postal workers undertook to provide some limited service for which they issued alternate stamps under the title "Worker-Controlled Messenger Service."

Another group of workers are honoured on four stamps issued in 1991. These stamps paid tribute to a number of "Dangerous Occupations" (#1330-1333), including ski patrols, police, fire fighting, and search and rescue. Again, this must be considered a limited assertion of the working-class presence. Certainly experts on workplace health and safety will ask whether these are thought to be the only or even the most dangerous of occupations for Canadian workers.

In a category of their own are a group of near-legendary individuals who have achieved larger than life reputations. In 1992 the group included, besides Laura Secord who has a somewhat different status, the Ottawa Valley lumberman Joseph Montferrand, the Newfoundland seafarer William Jackman, and the Prairie guide Jerry Potts (#1432-1435). All of these are actual historical figures, ratified as such by the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, but they are smuggled into the postal issue under the formal classification of Canadian folklore. The same smuggling takes place also in 1993 (#1491-1494) where several workers, including the men who sang "Les Raftsmen" on the timber drives and the fishermen who sang "I's the B'y" in the outports, are represented under the classification of folk song. And if hockey players can be considered part of labour history, they too can be found on stamps celebrating the 75th anniversary of the National Hockey League in 1992 (#1443-1445); certainly we now know that hockey players in the 1950s and after have been engaged in some difficult off-ice struggles against the league owners.

We may also pause here to consider the presence of individuals whose lives can be read, at least in part, as chapters in the larger working-class experience. We

might consider including here such figures as Alexander Mackenzie (#319), the apprentice stonemason, or David Thompson (#370), the Hudson's Bay Company apprentice, both of whom went on to larger prominence in Canadian history. We might also make claims for individuals who gained world reputations through their work, such as the champion oarsman Ned Hanlan (#862) and the renowned soprano Emma Albani (#860).

Consider as well the cases of those who were connected to various causes of popular democracy and the left in Canadian history. The gaze of assertion here includes individuals such as Louis Joseph Papineau (#539), Louis Riel (#515), Josiah Henson (#997), and Gabriel Dumont (#1049) — but not William Lyon Mackenzie. It also includes Norman Bethune (#1254-1255)<sup>22</sup> and Agnes Macphail (#1293) —but not J.S. Woodsworth.

In the end the gaze of assertion rests on two stamps that might be accepted under a narrow construction of the term "labour stamp." The first of these marked the 50th anniversary of the International Labour Organization in 1969 (#493), a commemoration that was also undertaken by other member countries. Here the symbolic takes precedence over the specific, for the stamp design shows a globe constructed of tools. At the very least the stamp can be read as an assertion of the importance Canada attributes to its participation in this international body which, in its limited way, has proposed labour standards suited to the global economy.

Secondly, the gaze of assertion includes the stamp issued in 1981 in honour of A.R. Mosher (#899), the only union leader ever to be depicted on a Canadian postage stamp. Mosher was of course a founder of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees in 1908, and the stamp shows the figures of two railway workers flanking the portrait. Mosher was also a founder of the All-Canadian Congress of Labour in 1927 and the Canadian Congress of Labour in 1940. He was a seasoned veteran of union battles over nationalism, communism, and industrial unionism, and when the Canadian Labour Congress was formed in 1956, he was named honorary president. The stamp itself was issued in the centennial year of Mosher's birth, but also on the 25th anniversary of the Canadian Labour Congress; moreover, it was officially released on Labour Day. It is as near as we come to a stamp paying tribute to organized labour in Canada.

This somewhat underwhelming result can be placed in some perspective by undertaking a brief comparative analysis of the image of labour on British, Australian, French, and American postage stamps. In each case the gaze of assertion confirms the presence of organized labour to a greater extent than in the Canadian case.

<sup>22</sup>The two Bethune stamps were issued in 1990, accompanied by a parallel issue in China; the scenes depict Bethune in Canada and in China but do not refer to his part in the defence of the Spanish Republic. Nor has the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion received recognition on Canadian stamps.

In Britain the presence of organized labour was confirmed in May 1968, with the issue of a stamp to mark the centenary of the Trades Union Congress; this one features the faces of early union leaders (#564). The gaze of history was also directed at organized labour in 1976, at the time of the 50th anniversary of the General Strike, when a series of four stamps paid tribute to 19th-century industrial and social reformers. The most notable here is the recognition of an early northern coal miners' leader, Thomas Hepburn, who is represented by the working hands of a miner holding a pick. The others in this group included Robert Owen, Lord Shaftesbury, and Elizabeth Fry, represented in turn by a child's hands working in a textile mill, a boy's hands sweeping a chimney, a woman's hands holding prison bars (#781-784). As in Canada, the ILO was celebrated in 1969 (#586). Beyond this British workers have appeared on a variety of other occasions, most notably in a 1981 series devoted to the fishing industry (#956-959).<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, Australia acknowledged the 50th anniversary of the Australian Council of Trades Unions (#668) in 1977. In 1947 there were scenes of workers pouring steel and loading coal (#208-209). The ILO (#461) received recognition in 1969. In 1986, on the centennial of the Amalgamated Shearers' Union, the work of rural workers was shown in a strip of five stamps entitled "Click Go the Shears" (#987a). More recently (1993) a handsome set of stamps based on union banners has shown images of 19th-century trades and labour under the title "Working Life in the 1890s" (#1320-1323).<sup>24</sup>

In France we find unambiguous representations of the working class presence, and the following examples refer to only a few instances of representation. The coal miners appeared, on the march, as early as 1938 (#343). As elsewhere, the ILO was commemorated in 1969 (#1247). The legalization of unions in 1884 was marked a century later on a stamp honouring Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau (#1907). The 100th anniversary of the international workers' holiday, May Day, was celebrated in 1990 (#2221). Other stamps paid tribute to a variety of workers' crafts and occupations and to political figures such as Louise Michel and Jean Jaurès.<sup>25</sup>

Somewhat surprisingly, it is in the United States that the gaze of history has been most extended in focusing on the presence of organized labour. It begins, perhaps, with a 1933 stamp (#732) marking the National Recovery Act and the "common determination" to get the country back to work under the New Deal. Certainly it is visible on a 1950 stamp issued on the centenary of the birth of Samuel Gompers, the founder and long-time president of the American Federation of Labor (#988). In 1956 a Labor Day stamp (#1082) featured a detail from the mosaic at

<sup>23</sup> 1996 *Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue* [Scott], Vol. 1B (Sidney, OH 1995). In the British comparison it is also the case that the less demanding category of inclusion favours the Canadian post office, which in general has issued substantially more commemorative stamps than has Britain.

<sup>24</sup> 1996 *Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue*, Vol. 1B.

<sup>25</sup> 1996 *Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue*, Vol. 3.

the headquarters of the newly established AFL-CIO. Workmen's compensation was given special recognition in 1961, on the 50th anniversary of the enactment of compensation laws in Wisconsin; this stamp (#1186) showed the scales of justice balancing factory, worker, and family. The inauguration of industrial legality in the form of statutory protection for collective bargaining was commemorated most specifically in 1975, on the 40th anniversary of the Wagner Act (#1558); the stated theme was one of reconciliation — "out of conflict accord." In 1989 a second labour leader was honoured on a stamp, again on the centenary of his birth, in the person of A. Phillip Randolph (#2402), America's most important black labour leader. He was followed in 1994 by a third labour leader, George Meany (#2848). Other representations of workers on American stamps can also be noted, ranging from the post horse and rider of 1869 (#113) to celebrations of various occupational groups and industries, postal employees again, as in most countries, being over-represented. Two interesting bicentennial series, one in 1972 (#1456-1459) and another in 1977 (#1717-1720), featured "Colonial Craftsmen" (glassmaker, silversmith, wigmaker, and hatter) and "Skilled Hands for Independence" (seamstress, blacksmith, wheelwright, and leatherworker).<sup>26</sup>

This comparison suggests that, despite the variety of evidence that workers can be found in incidental and subordinate positions in a good deal of the Canadian postal issue, Canadian labour has been relatively slow to gain admission to the public imagery contained in postage stamps. Unlike several of the capitalist democracies, Canada has no stamps marking the establishment of unions, the enactment of labour laws, or the celebration of labour days, and only one stamp commemorating an individual union leader.

In the report of the Citizens' Forum on Canada's Future (1991), Keith Spicer suggested that the symbols of Canada are in need of some renovation.<sup>27</sup> In this connection, it is worth pointing out that one of the general conclusions of recent work in Canadian labour and working-class history is that the working-class experience forms one of the unacknowledged sources of achievement and solidarity in Canadian history. It is one of the unifying identities that has the potential to counteract the enormous pressures towards the privatization of public life in this country.<sup>28</sup> Certainly greater attention to the history of workers and the role of labour falls within the present terms of reference and guidelines of the Canada Post stamp

<sup>26</sup> 1996 *Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue*, Vol. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Citizens' Forum on Canada's Future, *Report to the People and Government of Canada* (Ottawa 1991), 122.

<sup>28</sup> An argument made partly in response to the concerns of Michael Bliss about "non-national connections" and the "privatization" of Canadian history, in David Frank, "Teaching Labour History," *Labour/Le Travail*, 31 (Spring 1993), 293-9. See Michael Bliss, "Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 26, 4 (Winter 1991-92), 5-19, and the responses in *Ibid.*, 27, 2 (Summer 1992).

programme and should be considered a legitimate subject for the attention of the Stamp Advisory Committee.

A more theoretical observation can also be advanced from the perspective of a cultural history which attaches some strategic significance to the accumulation of cultural capital of the kind embodied in the public imagery and symbols of a society. The investment in cultural capital, it is argued by theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu (who is being paraphrased here), produces returns that bear directly on the balance of forces in the class struggles of the late 20th century. Because the structure of class relations itself is defined by the distribution of capital of various kinds, including cultural capital, working people have a continuing stake in the struggle over the appropriation of cultural goods and practices.<sup>29</sup>

An agenda for the more prominent inclusion of workers within a renovated Canadian identity will not lack suggestions. Obvious subjects might include highlights in labour history such as the Trade Union Act (1872), Labour Day (1894), the Winnipeg General Strike (1919),<sup>30</sup> the On-to-Ottawa Trek (1935), the Ford Strike (1945), and the Asbestos Strike (1949). There are big themes such as railway construction, the industrial revolution and child labour, reforms such as workers' compensation, minimum wage, and equal pay laws, organizations such as the Knights of Labour and the Fishermen's Protective Union — and more. And there are appropriate individuals connected to working-class causes such as Katie McVicar, Phillips Thompson, Ginger Goodwin, J.S. Woodsworth, and J.B. McLachlan. An interesting proposition for Canada Post, and one that might be of some interest to philatelic specialists, would be to reproduce one of the proposed postage stamps for the Canadian Republic prepared (but never issued) by the Provisional Government of the Red River in 1870.<sup>31</sup>

Such efforts would certainly need the support not simply of the Canadian Committee on Labour History, which at its 1996 meeting passed an appropriate resolution encouraging Canada Post to direct more attention to workers and unions in the selection and design of stamps. They would also need the support of union members, their unions, labour councils, federations, and congresses. Certainly there are signs that organized labour is aware of the opportunity to assert the working-class presence in the form of messages on metered postage. In 1995 the postage meter at the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour was conveying its own

<sup>29</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge 1984), 246-9.

<sup>30</sup>Professor James Naylor, Brandon University, reports that the Manitoba Federation of Labour had proposed some years ago, without success, that a stamp be issued to commemorate the Winnipeg Strike.

<sup>31</sup>For the background to this item in alternative Canadian philatelic history, see Peter Charlebois, *The Life of Louis Riel* (Toronto 1975), 60.

customized message: “Labour is the Great Producer of Wealth — It Moves All Other Causes.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup>Note also the non-postal stamps, called “cinderellas” in philatelic circles, produced by the Council of Canadians in 1995 with the theme “Standing on Guard for Canada’s Social Programs.”

*The Labour Stamp  
List of Illustrations*

Figure 1: Newfoundland Miners, 1897 (#65)



Figure 2: Harvesting Wheat, 1929 (#157)



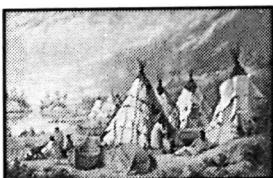
Figure 3: Jacques Cartier (and crew), 1934 (#208)



Figure 4: The Reckless Lumberman, 1946 (#272)



Figure 5: Paul Kane, Indian Encampment on Lake Huron, 1976 (#553)



Paul Kane painter peintre **Canada 7**

Figure 6: Willaim H. Merritt (and Welland Canal), 1974 (#655)



Figure 7: Henrietta Edwards (and Working Girls Association), 1981 (#882)



Figure 8: A.R. Mosher (and railway workers), 1981 (#899)

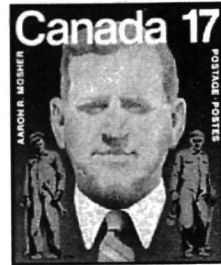


Figure 9: Les Forges du Saint-Maurice, 1988 (#1216)

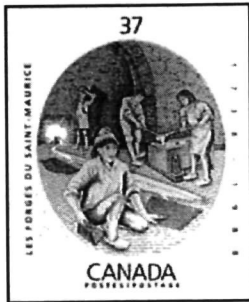


Figure 10: William Notman (and Victoria Bridge), 1989 (#1237)

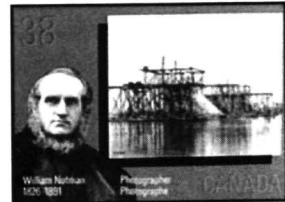


Figure 11: République Canadienne/Canadian Republic, 1870 (uncatalogued)



Figure 12: A Union Stamp, 1975 (uncatalogued)





Figure 13: Thomas Hepburn, Britain, 1976 (#781)



Figure 14: Working Life in the 1890s: Stevedores and Seamstresses, Australia, 1993 (#1321)



Figure 15: Mineurs, France, 1938 (#343)



Figure 16: Labor Day, United States, 1956 (#1082)

