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Article abstract

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This paper examines the life of Robert Raglan Gosden, 1882-1961. Gosden was an unskilled worker who joined the Industrial Workers of the World and advocated violent revolution. He took part in the Vancouver Island mining strikes of 1912-1914, and was a key player in the 1916 provincial election scandal. By 1919, however, he was an informant for the RCMP. The paper outlines Gosden's career and analyzes the complex way his class experience shaped his construction of masculinity as well as his radical politics and his later activity as a labour spy.

# Portrait of a Labour Spy: The Case of Robert Raglan Gosden, 1882-1961

Mark Leier

WE DO NOT KNOW much about labour spies, especially those who were paid informers rather than undercover police agents. Their reports are frequently used by historians, who rarely are able to explore their motives and the conditions that led them to their actions. This paper will examine the case of Robert Raglan Gosden and his life as an unskilled worker, revolutionary, mystic, and labour spy. He was an atypical member of the working class: relatively few workers became Wobblies and few Wobblies became spies. But his story reveals a class experience and consciousness that has not been much explored by labour historians. For Gosden inhabited a world very different from that of the artisans, unionists, socialists, and politicians that are more often studied. It was the world of the blanket stiff, the migrant worker, the rough, not the respectable, and it proved a fertile ground for radicalism, intrigue, and sometimes, treachery.

Robert Raglan Gosden was born in Surrey, England in 1882 and left England around 1896. He travelled throughout Canada and the United States, and lived "intermittently" in British Columbia from about 1906, where he claimed to have met Jack London and Robert Service. He worked at a variety of jobs: he was a miner, logger, painter, seaman, janitor, garbage man, and labourer from his arrival in the province until 1916. This diversity was typical of the transient male worker with few specialized skills. In 1910 he was in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, and observed first-hand the labour strife in the district, though Gosden apparently played no part in the coal mining strikes there.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Gosden's death certificate from the Division of Vital Statistics, Victoria, BC, gives his birthdate as 6 July 1882. During testimony during his trial for perjury in June 1916, however, Gosden gave his age as 35, making his birth year 1881. This is the date given by his stepson,

He then travelled back across Canada to Prince Rupert. By December 1910, Gosden was involved with the Prince Rupert Industrial Association (PRIA), a local organization of construction labourers affiliated with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). In March 1911, the PRIA demanded that private contractors engaged in municipal works pay their employees the same rate that the city workers were paid for the same work. When the private contractors refused, the union went on strike. The employers responded by importing scabs, and the PRIA widened the strike to include those workers who were hired directly by the city. But the employers remained adamant, and several unionists were arrested, including the local's secretary. Gosden was then appointed to take his place, and as the secretary *pro tem*, he wrote to the Wobbly newspaper the *Industrial Worker* to let other workers know about the strike and to warn them away from Prince Rupert. In scathing words, he outlined conditions in the city:

The cost of living is so high here that a man cannot live on three dollars a day [the rate paid by the private contractors] and it rains every day. There was 155 inches here last year, and the rest of the time it was bitter cold, so you can guess that it is something fierce. This jerk-water city is composed of tar-paper shacks filled with wages slaves, and the owners of this rock and muskeg are waiting to realize a little hard cash on the patch if they can boom it up and get suckers to come here and buy it up. At the present time it is just a dumping place on this desolate coast for freight and wage slaves being sent up to build railroads for the masters, and let me assure you the conditions in the camps up the line are hell ... Yours for the IWW and the whole world.<sup>2</sup>

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Captain John Bunyan, interview with author, 16 August 1989. Captain Bunyan also believed that Gosden fought in the British Army during the Boer War, as did Gosden's friends, the Arthurs. Interview with Mr. and Mrs. L.G. Arthur, 29 January 1989. I have not been able to check this. During this same testimony, Gosden denied under oath playing any role in events at Glace Bay, stating that while there he "was only studying labour conditions." See *Daily Colonist*, 7 June 1916. Historians David Frank of the University of New Brunswick and Ian Mackay of Queen's University, who have studied the Glace Bay events in detail, have no information on Gosden, letters to the author, undated. The *Victoria Daily Times*, 9 November 1916, records Gosden as saying that he was born in Surrey and had "first left twenty years ago and for the last time twelve years ago. He has been living in British Columbia intermittently for about nine years." The *Times*, 6 June 1916, reports that Gosden had been in Canada for twelve years, and that "he has been all over Canada practically and in the United States." See the *Vancouver Daily Times*, 9 November 1916, *Vancouver Daily News-Advertiser*, 10 November 1916, for occupations. Gosden told the Arthurs that he had met Jack London and Robert Service, and in a letter to Aneurin Bevan claimed to have met Jack London. His letter to Bevan has not been found, but Bevan's short reply mentions Gosden's reminiscences about Jack London and his "struggle for our movement." Letter in author's possession, 8 February 1957.

<sup>2</sup>The strike is outlined in *Sound Heritage*, Volume Four, Patricia Wejr and Howie Smith, eds., *Fighting for Labour: Four Decades of Work in British Columbia, 1910-1950* (Victoria 1978), 8-11. Gosden's letter and other details of the PRIA are from the *Industrial Worker*, 6 April 1911.

On 6 April, the angry strikers held a march through the city streets. Several hundred strong, the marchers urged others to down tools and join the strike. When they reached a section of roadway known as Kelly's Cut, a fight broke out between the strikers, scabs, and police. Several on both sides were injured, and a number of unionists were arrested on charges ranging from attempted murder to rioting to assault. Bob Gosden was among the arrested. Charged with counselling assault, he spent three months in prison.<sup>3</sup>

Conditions in the prison served to strengthen Gosden's belief that capitalism was a cruel and exploitative system. Many of the arrested were kept in a hastily-built bullpen until their trials, and the trials themselves were denounced as an attempt to "railroad some of the agitators." Prison fare was two servings of "shadow soup" a day until local supporters brought food for the strikers. The prison itself would "make a dog blush with shame," according to one IWW member. In a letter to the *Industrial Worker*, this Wobbly pointed out the desperate irony of a country that had a law "whereby you must not abuse animals but the capitalists and hired thugs can massacre men and women by the thousands and there is nothing done to them." So frightful was the jail, Gosden wrote, one prisoner went insane.<sup>4</sup>

His experience in Prince Rupert also soured Gosden on the conservative business unionism of the American Federation of Labor. During the PRIA strike, craft union carpenters had no qualms about building the bullpens that held the arrested strikers. One PRIA member remarked bitterly, "we cannot expect anything else from the old craft form of disorganization. If it was a gallows to hang those innocent men, it would be all the same." Gosden himself reported with scorn on the efforts of an AFL organizer to bring local unions into the American federation. Gosden deplored the organizer's closed meetings, his "secret craft dope," and his refusal to make public the proceedings of the meetings with local unionists. Gosden sarcastically suggested that such tactics could work, if only the AFL man "was the omnipotent ruler he thinks he is." Ridiculing the closed meetings as the "secret confines of the holy of the holies," Gosden ended his report with the optimistic observation that despite the AFL's fulminations, "the knowledge and sentiment of the ONE BIG UNION is growing apace."<sup>5</sup>

After his release from prison in Prince Rupert, Gosden made his way down to San Diego by the end of October 1911. Though direct evidence is lacking, it is possible that he was in Mexico and that he took part in the revolutionary struggle there. In later years, he claimed to have ridden with Pancho Villa, and to have "expropriated" horses from William Hearst's San Simeon ranch to aid the revolutionaries. Certainly some IWW members were active participants in different events in the Mexican revolution. However, the only evidence that Gosden was among its

<sup>3</sup>*Fighting for Labour*, 8-11; *Industrial Worker*, 27 April 1911; *Victoria Colonist*, 7 June 1916; *Vancouver Province*, 6 June 1916.

<sup>4</sup>*Industrial Worker*, 27 April, 12 October 1911.

<sup>5</sup>*Industrial Worker*, 27 April, 12 October 1911.

numbers are the stories that he told friends years later and a short autobiographical sketch written in the 1950s. In it, Gosden claims to have stayed with IWW martyr Frank Little in Taft, California, "after completing a mission in Mexico for the 'insurrecto' fleeing before the new 'presidente,' Huerta."<sup>6</sup>

In California, perhaps not surprisingly, he encountered a group of spiritualists. In good materialist fashion, he denounced the mystics in harsh language in a letter to the *Industrial Worker*:

Whether it is the climatic conditions or not I cannot say, but their metaphysical dope especially appeals to some emasculated persons who have been so degenerated by this system that they are preaching the doctrine of absolute non-resistance and the curious phase of it is that they are deluding themselves that they are evolutionists and that they have got such an enormous individual WILL POWER that whatever they will they can do and that the individual creates his own environment, etc., instead of the usual course of procedure. I am deeply interested in this curious human phenomenon and I purpose [sic] to study it a little deeper so that when the species are sent to the museum we can describe their habits and customs before they become extinct.<sup>7</sup>

Although he would later become fascinated with mysticism, at this time in his life Gosden preferred what he defined as a more materialist and more masculine direct action in the here and now. In 1912, he took part in the IWW's San Diego free speech fight. In several cities throughout North America, including Vancouver and Victoria, city officials banned the union from holding meetings and speaking in the streets. Since these meetings were a crucial tactic for organizing, the IWW fought back, usually by calling upon its members to flock to the city and get arrested for defying the ban. The resulting publicity, unruly demonstrations, and strain on the

<sup>6</sup>Captain Bunyan and the Arthurs were told by Gosden that he had ridden with Villa, and that he had been arrested and imprisoned for running guns to the rebels. It has not been possible to determine if horses were stolen from the Hearst ranch in this period. Police records for San Luis Obispo County have not been retained, and according to Detective Sergeant Gary L. Hoving of the Sheriff-Coroner's office of the county, "even if the incident had been documented, it would have probably been seen only as a journal entry." Letter to author, 6 September 1989. The autobiographical sketch is in the possession of the author. Its reliability is not enhanced by a fact of error — Huerta assumed the presidency in 1913, not 1912, by its construction as a story "heard round the coffee tables in the White Lunch [a café in Vancouver's skid road district] at midnight," and by the central point of the story, which is that the author later spoke with Frank Little at a seance some years after Little's death. For IWW involvement in the Mexican revolution see Lowell L. Blaisdell, *The Desert Revolution: Baja California, 1911* (Madison 1962); John M. Hart, *Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class, 1860-1931* (Austin 1974), 157-60. Historian Gibbs M. Smith has concluded that though Joe Hill denied taking part in the Baja revolution, it is likely that he in fact was among the Wobblies who fought for the cause there. Smith, *Joe Hill* (Salt Lake City 1984), 53-5.

<sup>7</sup>*Industrial Worker*, 2 November 1911.

city's jails and coffers were designed to force the municipal authorities to relax their assault on the right to free speech and to allow the union to continue its organizing drives. This at least was the theory. In San Diego, however, it was proved tragically wrong.<sup>8</sup>

In December 1911 the city council voted to ban street meetings from the entire downtown core, ostensibly to avoid the blocking of traffic. The IWW joined with socialists, civil libertarians, religious groups, and trade unions to maintain the right to free speech. When the ordinance went into effect in February 1912, police swooped down and arrested forty-one people who had gathered in the city centre. The following weeks saw more arrests, and the IWW called upon its members to come to the city to fight back. The authorities continued to arrest speakers, and in short time nearly three hundred were imprisoned in the city jail. Fire hoses were turned on crowds, and vigilante groups were organized to purge the city of the activists. Often with the connivance of police and officials the vigilantes kidnapped and beat free speech fighters. At least two IWW members were killed by mobs during the several months of the free speech struggle.<sup>9</sup>

One of the Wobblies picked up by police in the February dragnets was Bob Gosden. Arrested and charged with violating the city ordinance forbidding gatherings, Gosden was held in county jail without trial for nine months. From his cell, he wrote to the *Industrial Worker*. In June 1912, he insisted that a proletarian revolution was necessary, and that the most effective tools for revolutionaries were direct action and sabotage. In a long article, Gosden urged the IWW to "act in more direct and aggressive ways. ..." While the IWW talked a revolutionary line, in practice, he argued, its tactics were little different from parliamentary socialists or traditional labour unions. So far, Wobblies were "only advocating revolution, we are not living it." Worse, the strikes and free speeches of the IWW usually resulted in its members being jailed, and the resources that could be used to organize went instead into legal fees. In Gosden's view, this was both unproductive and hypocritical, for "from every street corner we are telling the workers what a farce the courts are (and we prove it too) and still we play their game." Without revolutionary action, he wrote, "we are just a set of philosophers. Philosophy may do for recreation, but it is a damn poor thing to fight the capitalist with." Gosden pointed out that though the IWW had been around for eight years, it had only about one hundred thousand members, and these were diffused across North America. With so few numbers, a

<sup>8</sup>For IWW free speech fights see Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago 1969), 173-98. For the Vancouver and Victoria fights, see Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows: The IWW in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1990), Chapter 3; Philip Foner, ed., *"Fellow Workers and Friends": IWW Free Speech Fights as Told by Participants* (Westport 1981), is a fascinating collection of articles, letters, and diaries written by people who took part in a number of these struggles.

<sup>9</sup>See Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 189-96, and Foner, *The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905-1917* (New York 1965), 194-206, for the events of the San Diego free speech fight.

general strike was obviously impossible; indeed, "in no industry have we enough men to call for and enforce a stoppage of work merely by striking." The only way to be a revolutionary union, the only possible hope for success for a "militant minority," was "for every member of the IWW to sabotage at every conceivable opportunity." Through sabotage, he wrote, "we are forcing the slaves to go the way we want them to, instead of persuading and pleading and getting clubbed trying to get them to act." By destroying capitalist machinery and factories, the IWW would remove itself from its untenable position of sitting "on the fence and advocating radical action and excusing cowardice by saying that the workers won't organize. We have," Gosden concluded, "enough members in America to tie up every industry at any time if we use sabotage, and by such action alone will we have the liberty to organize in the industries so that we can feed and clothe the world's workers when the class war has ceased."<sup>10</sup>

The advocacy of sabotage grated on the ears of many contemporary unionists and could in itself raise the suspicion that the speaker was an *agent-provocateur*. But in the 1910s, IWW members were fiercely debating the merits of sabotage and direct action as tactics in the class war. In 1913, the *Industrial Worker* under the editorship of Walker C. Smith came out unreservedly in favour of sabotage. In a series of editorials Smith called upon Wobblies to counter the violence of the capitalists with violence "not against their person but against their profits." The editor asked rhetorically, "Is the machine more than its producer? Sabotage says 'No!' Is the product great than its producer? Sabotage says 'No!' Sabotage places human life — and especially the life of the only useful class — as higher than all else in the universe." The paper even went so far as to print tips on how to destroy machinery. In advocating sabotage, Gosden was not advancing a new strategy or suggesting ideas that were beyond the pale for the IWW. He was simply presenting one, admittedly provocative, side in an ongoing and serious debate. Sabotage, not unlike millenarianism and some forms of mysticism, had a great deal of appeal to men and women who stood outside the existing order and had little ability as individuals to shape their world in their day to day affairs. Each of these creeds suggested that a new society was possible and gave adherents at least the illusion of autonomy and effective power. If in his calls for sabotage Gosden was acting as an *agent-provocateur*, he was still expressing a sentiment and tactic that was widely accepted by the IWW.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup>*Industrial Worker*, 19 June 1912.

<sup>11</sup>These excerpts are from the *Industrial Worker*, 3 July 1913. The IWW itself split on the issue of sabotage, and Walker Smith was removed from the editorial board of the *Industrial Worker* late in 1913 by Wobblies opposed to sabotage, or at least to the open advocacy of it in the union's official press. By 1914, however, sabotage was an officially sanctioned tactic, and Smith's editorials were published by the IWW in pamphlet form. So too was a speech on the subject by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. The famous IWW leader, Big Bill Haywood, was purged from the executive board of the Socialist Party of America in 1913

Gosden also commented acerbically on fellow prisoner "Shorty" O'Donnell, a cowboy and prison guard turned stool pigeon during the free speech fight. Given Gosden's own later career, his remarks are ironic:

Alas, how are "the mighty" fallen! Shorty now occupies a bunk in our ward and lice spring from our shirts and bite him (in a playful way, of course) just as impartially as they do the humans of coarser clay. ... Oh, the irony of fate! To think that this notorious gun man should be forced to wallow with the agitators. ... Stripped of his glory, deserted by those whose dirty work he so willingly did, his cheeks sunken by starvation, despised by the rest of his class, he is a pitiful picture of abject slavery and degradation.

Shorty learned a hard lesson, Gosden concluded, when he discovered for himself "how well the boss treats his 'gunmen' when they have done his dirty work." But redemption was possible even for Shorty, who would have "long months ahead" to "develop his thinking powers, and if he can manage it, he may yet emerge from this depravity, stand on his legs AND BE A MAN."<sup>12</sup>

In November 1912, Gosden and sixteen other defendants finally went to trial on charges of violating the street speaking ordinance and assault with a deadly weapon. He was found guilty but was released on probation and deported to Vancouver.<sup>13</sup> The *Industrial Worker* noted his deportation, complaining that the immigration officials were "working in harmony with the vigilante-loving town of San Diego." The paper went on to comment on the futility of removing Gosden from the United States, for "as the IWW is not particularly patriotic and there is a class struggle in Canada, we fail to see how a system based on theft has gained by making the change."<sup>14</sup>

Certainly his stay in jail had not dampened Gosden's enthusiasm for class war. On his return to British Columbia, he continued to agitate for the IWW and to advocate sabotage. At Steveston, a fishing village outside of Vancouver, Gosden addressed audiences of native Indian and Chinese cannery workers. Dressed in a black shirt bare at the arms and open at the neck, he outlined the principles of the IWW, and while careful not to actually advocate violence, he asked the workers

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in part for his refusal to renounce sabotage. See Foner, *The Industrial Workers of the World*, 160-5, and Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 162-5, for the union's debates over sabotage.

<sup>12</sup>*Industrial Worker*, 31 October 1912.

<sup>13</sup>*Vancouver Times*, 9 November 1912, dateline San Diego, reports that Gosden was arrested and convicted but does not specify the charges. The *Times*, 6 June 1916, reports Gosden as stating that he spent nine months in county jail in San Diego awaiting trial for violating the ordinance against speaking in the street. A Robert Gausden is noted as being charged with assault with a deadly weapon as well as blocking the street, and received either a suspended sentence or a discharge in *The History of the San Diego Free Speech Fight* (San Diego 1973), 187.

<sup>14</sup>*Industrial Worker*, 21 November 1912.



"what it mattered to them if the machinery was to fall to pieces or the roofs of the cannery were to fall in."<sup>15</sup>

He took a stronger line among the striking miners of Vancouver Island's coal fields. In September 1912, the miners at Canadian Collieries, formerly Dunsmuir and Sons, began a strike and lock-out that lasted two years. Led by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), the strike centred on the demand for collective bargaining and union recognition. It was a fierce strike that saw miners thrown out of company housing and brought the bayonets and machine guns of the militia to bear on strikers. The Conservative government, headed by Sir Richard McBride, sided with the company. Beatings, sabotage, and charivaris were common; riots broke out to protest the use of troops to escort scabs, and miners and police exchanged gunfire in pitched battles at the mineheads. Over two hundred miners were arrested and charged with unlawful assembly and given harsh sentences of one to two years in prison. Though the IWW was involved only peripherally in the UMWA strike, Robert Gosden strode boldly into the fray.<sup>16</sup> He headed to the island and travelled up and down the strike region, giving speeches and counselling radical action. Asked later if he approved of the looting and burning that had taken place, Gosden side-stepped the issue, saying that he had not done any of it, and if in charge would have urged the strikers to take "possession of the mines." Did he approve of violence? "Under circumstances as they existed there. ... when all peaceful protests fail, I am a man and if I am satisfied my cause is just I will fight."<sup>17</sup>

But Gosden's chief contribution to the strike and to class antagonism came some months later. In October or November 1913, BC unionists and socialists formed the Miners' Liberation League (MLL) to work for the release of the more than two hundred miners arrested for taking part in demonstrations and riots during the strike. Gosden, representing the IWW, spoke at a mass meeting of the MLL on 10 November along with prominent socialist leaders E.T. Kingsley and Jack Kavanagh, and Vancouver Trades and Labour Council President J.W. Wilkinson. There he made what the labour newspaper the *BC Federationist* called "a fighting speech." Gosden warned the crowd that the bosses "were putting you to the test. ... You must have the might. The workers can do no wrong. The capitalists have called your bluff, make good or lie down." His speech was greeted with applause, and Gosden was made executive chairman of the MLL.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup>*Province*, 5 August 1913. I am grateful to Allen Seager for bringing this reference to my attention. The black shirt, the colour of the anarchist flag, was often worn by IWW militants. See James H. Walsh, "IWW 'Red Special' Overalls Brigade," cited in Joyce Kornbluh, ed., *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology* (Ann Arbor 1972), 48.

<sup>16</sup>The most in-depth analysis of the 1912-14 strike is Alan J. Wargo, "The Great Coal Strike: The Vancouver Island Coal Miners' Strike, 1912-1914," unpublished BA graduation essay, University of British Columbia, 1962. For a popular account, see Lynne Bowen, *Boss Whistle: The Coal Miners of Vancouver Island Remember* (Lantzville, BC 1982), 131-98.

<sup>17</sup>*Vancouver Times*, 7 June, 10 November 1916; *Province*, 6 June, 10 November 1916.

<sup>18</sup>*BC Federationist*, 7 November, 14 November, 5 December 1913.

His success evidently emboldened him. At the next open meeting of the MLL, held at the horse show building at Vancouver's fair grounds, Gosden went further. The last speaker at the meeting, his words were calculated to leave the crowd in a charged mood:

By the end of this month every last peaceful appeal which is necessary or possible for us to make as citizens of this Dominion for the release of our brothers in prison will have been made. By the end of this year all peaceful measures will have been exhausted. If they are not released by the time the New Year is ushered in, if [Conservative provincial premier] Sir Richard McBride, Attorney-General Bowser, or any of the minions and politicians go hunting, they will be very foolish, for they will be shot dead. These men will also be well advised to employ some sucker to taste their coffee in the morning before drinking it if they value their lives. In addition, it will cost them one million dollars a week for every week that our brothers remain in jail after the New Year.<sup>19</sup>

His speech, given to a crowd of at least one thousand, was greeted with "tremendous cheering" and the *BC Federationist* later printed a letter supporting both Gosden and his call for industrial sabotage. More significantly, Gosden was elected president of the Miners' Liberation League sometime after the rousing speech. Other commentators were less impressed. Local newspapers railed against the threats of violence and moderate labour leaders of the province distanced themselves from Gosden's fiery call to arms. Robert Foster, president of District 28, Vancouver Island, of the UMWA, denounced the speech as "extremely foolish utterances" that "in no way expresses any of the views or aims of the United Mine Workers Union." Most of the executive of the Miners' Liberation League repudiated Gosden in the hope that the miners would be freed if the MLL disassociated itself from the radical faction. Gosden himself jumped before he was pushed and tendered his resignation from the presidency on 23 January, citing the MLL's refusal to move beyond protest and its rejection of direct action as his reason. "If they do not consider their own comrades' liberty of enough importance to take some more decisive action," he wrote, "I consider that the league will be wasting its energies." Nonetheless, despite, or perhaps because of, his militancy, Gosden was elected to the vice-presidency and to the press committee of the MLL.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Vancouver *Sun*, 9 December 1913. The *BC Federationist*, 12 December 1913, gave an abbreviated version of the speech that did not include direct reference to shooting. It did however contain the coffee warning. It may be that the *Sun* report put words in Gosden's mouth, for later accounts of the speech focused on the coffee remark.

<sup>20</sup>*Sun*, 9 December 1913, observed the crowd size and response. The letter supporting Gosden was printed in the *BC Federationist*, 19 December 1913. It has not been possible to determine where or when Gosden was made president of the MLL. As noted, he was executive chair before the speech, and resigned from the presidency on 23 January 1914. *Sun*, 9 December 1913 for the editorial. *Times*, 10 December 1913 for its editorial. Robert Foster is quoted in the *BC Federationist*, 19 December 1913. Gosden's resignation and election to the vice-presidency is in the *BC Federationist*, 30 January 1914.

His work with the MLL marked the highpoint of Gosden's career as a labour organizer and IWW militant. A man with no real trade, he was now sharing platforms with Vancouver's leading socialists and labour leaders and commanded the attention of the daily press. Better yet, he had a chance to put the IWW's tenets of direct action, sabotage, and radicalism on the province's political agenda. Gosden may have been an extremist, but his views represented those of a significant number of North American workers.

Or did they? Later, labour leaders and socialists would suggest that Gosden was acting as a spy for the Conservative government in 1913 and that his radicalism was that of an *agent-provocateur*. At the 1915 convention of the UMWA, Robert Foster spoke on the history of the big strike. He attacked the IWW for advocating violence and made reference to an unnamed agitator "supposedly working on our side ... but now working as a janitor for the Government." Foster said that he had accused him earlier of being a spy, but the charge had been denied. Foster's chief evidence that the man had been in the employ of the government was that while others who spoke out in favour of the strike were summarily arrested, this man travelled without hindrance throughout the region. In 1916, Socialist Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) Parker Williams picked up the theme and labelled Gosden as the man Foster had accused. Williams was questioning Gosden during a government commission on the election scandal discussed later. Pointing out that Gosden had worked as a janitor at the provincial parliament buildings in 1915, he insinuated that the job had been a reward for spying. He noted that Gosden had made several speeches throughout the strike area, and asked him if the police had made it difficult for him to travel around. Gosden replied, "Not so you would notice it." Williams then suggested that there was something suspicious in Gosden's ease of travel at a time when "people living in the district were not able to pass."<sup>21</sup>

In his autobiography *Those Stormy Years*, British communist George Hardy devotes several pages to his activities as a labour organizer and radical in British Columbia. Reflecting on his role during the coal strike of 1912-1914, Hardy writes of an IWW member who had achieved some notoriety at a public meeting by suggesting that the premier should hire someone to taste his coffee: obviously a reference to Gosden. According to Hardy, the Wobbly later asked him, "How would you like a Government job?" Amazed, Hardy asked, "Why do you ask me that?" Gosden replied that he was working as a janitor in the "Government building" and had been requested to inform Hardy that there was "a job waiting for you if you care to apply to Mr. ..." Hardy encouraged Gosden to talk, and was told that "You know, to obtain a good job it's not always necessary to be a good booster. They can be got by being a good knocker." Hardy then told Gosden to go back and tell

<sup>21</sup> Verbatim Report, Twelfth Annual Convention of District Number Eighteen of the United Mine Workers of America, 15-24 February 1915. Glenbow Archives, UMWA Papers, File 23. I am grateful to Roger Stonebanks for this reference. *Province*, 11 May 1916, *Times*, 12 May 1916.

his masters that "I was not for sale." To bolster his accusation, he then adds that "when the police failed to take action against him [Gosden], suspicion deepened." On the face of it, it seems unlikely that a spy would admit his role so readily. Furthermore, Hardy's account, written more than forty years after the incident, is marred by several errors. Most significant perhaps is the fact that Gosden worked as a janitor at the parliament buildings in 1915, not 1914, as Hardy implies. Hardy's book appears to borrow heavily from a column written by Communist author William Bennett in the *BC Workers' News* in 1936. Like Bennett, Hardy is polemical to a degree that casts doubt on the author's credibility. Both men were at pains to discredit the IWW, which had repudiated Bolshevism and the Soviet Union. The charges of Foster and Williams were also in large part politically inspired. Foster represented the "respectable" labour union movement and sought to distance himself from the more radical politics of the IWW. Certainly he had distorted the IWW's position on violence and sabotage to discredit the organization. He might well have desired to paint radicals as class traitors; such mudslinging is an old tactic of labour bureaucrats. Williams represented a very moderate wing of the SPC and by 1916 was moving towards the Liberals. During the commission investigation he worked to shield the Liberal party from political damage, and may have simply borrowed from Foster's earlier accusations to throw doubt on Gosden's testimony. Their insinuations were typical of many labourists and socialists when faced with the more extreme radicalism of the IWW and were at least in part politically motivated. Nonetheless, the case against Gosden is plausible.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup>George Hardy, *Those Stormy Years: Memories of the Fight for Freedom on Five Continents* (London 1956), 54-5. Are the charges of Foster, Williams and Hardy accurate? Certainly Foster and Williams offered no hard evidence. If Williams suspected Gosden was a spy, the suspicion was apparently not shared by other socialists who raised his bail and provided him with room and board during his perjury trials. See *Province*, 7 June 1916. Is Hardy's recollection enough to brand Gosden a spy in 1913? It may be significant that Hardy does not mention Gosden by name. Nor does he mention that Gosden was president of the MLL at a time when Hardy was secretary of its Victoria branch. Hardy seems not to have mentioned to anyone that Gosden was a spy, and no one made a similar public charge in 1913-14, despite considerable anger at Gosden's poison remark. Presumably Hardy's revelation would have been extremely useful to his faction of the labour movement and would have had an appreciative audience had it been publicized. Finally, there is no evidence that Gosden was in fact a janitor at the Parliament buildings in 1914. He was so employed in 1915 for a few weeks. It is plausible that Hardy created a kind of composite figure as a polemical and literary device. For these reasons, the charges of Hardy, Foster, and Williams must be considered carefully. They are certainly possible, perhaps probable, but cannot be considered definitely proved. Bennett's article on Gosden appeared in *BC Workers News*, 2 October 1936. His take on the IWW is indicated by his comment that the IWW was "one of the most anarchistic of the conglomerate of religious enthusiasts and political confusionists." His dislike of the Wobblies was further indicated in *Builders of British Columbia* (Vancouver 1937), where Bennett maintained that "in the attitude the IWW took to the Soviet Union they

Gosden next surfaces during the First World War in a very different set of circumstances. By 1916, McBride's Tories had been in power for thirteen years. His government was tired, plagued by scandals and its hostility to labour, and McBride himself was ill and preparing to retire from active politics. The opposition Liberals, led by Harlan C. Brewster, were poised to win the upcoming election and were positioning themselves as a reform party keen to enact a number of progressive measures. Before the September general election, Liberal candidates M.A. Macdonald and Brewster won by-elections in February and March. After the by-elections, in a letter addressed to "Mr. Brewster and other members of the opposition," Gosden apparently augmented his radicalism with reformism. He offered several suggestions that he claimed represented "the views of a large number of men and women affiliated with various organizations to which I owe allegiance and upon whose support you can absolutely rely once you have demonstrated your sincerity. ..." The measures, he continued, "will enable us all to make progress," while the proffered support was "capable of being used in any way which may be considered expedient." The point of introducing the "practical and progressive" bills, Gosden said, was to "place your party in a commanding position, against all those Socialist candidates, so called, INDEPENDENTS, LABOR PARTY MEN, etc., and others of that ilk who will be financed for the purpose of splitting your vote, and who will adopt various measures, along these lines to attract votes." Beating them to the punch would "forestall them in their tactics" and would place the Conservatives "on record as opposed to those things ... which rightly handled will make your party the real power in BC after the general election." Gosden then outlined several proposals for legislative bills. The first of these was women's suffrage, a crucial issue that the Conservatives had opposed for years. Next, he called for direct legislation, that is, initiative, referendum, and recall. Several bills were aimed at labour. These included the abolition of employment agencies and their replacement by a government bureau; the eight hour day, with time and a half for overtime; a minimum wage; an end to deductions from wages to pay for hospital care; and restrictions on child labour. Finally, Gosden wrote, it would be necessary to look after returning veterans by appropriating or purchasing suitable land throughout the province to provide homesteads for able soldiers and homes for the incapable. This last was "a vital measure," he underlined. Such measures, he concluded, would allow the party pledged to them to sweep the province. Could the Liberal party "read the march of events accurately" and give the "awakening conscience of the people ... intelligent and progressive legal expression"? "We shall see," wrote Gosden, "and seeing, act accordingly."

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showed that they were utterly bankrupt of any revolutionary tendencies," 42. Given the fierce polemics Bennett and Hardy were engaged in, their labelling of Gosden must be treated with caution. Perhaps the question of Gosden being a spy in 1913 is one on which reasonable minds may differ.

The letter is significant for its allusions to non-existent organizations, Gosden's alleged ability to lead an underground mass movement, and his empty offer of support. These themes echo his earlier belief, expressed in the sabotage article in the *Industrial Worker*, that a militant minority acting in secret could exercise far greater influence than their numbers warranted. It is also significant for its plan to undercut the left with a program of reform, as we shall see.<sup>23</sup>

In his letter, Gosden reminded the Liberals that he had "done my little bit" for them during the by-elections. His "little bit" would soon come back to haunt them all. Shortly after Macdonald's victory in Vancouver, rumours started to circulate, alleging that the Liberals had rigged his by-election. The allegations, fuelled by Conservatives eager to discredit their opponents, continued to grow until the government formed a commission to investigate the charges. The commission was made up of sitting MLAs, a majority from the ruling Conservative party, two Liberals, including Harlan Brewster, and the Socialist Parker Williams. The investigation unravelled a complex story, complete with disappearing witnesses and suspects, bribery, private detectives, and perjury. Numerous men, some from as far away as Seattle, had been paid to come to Vancouver to "plug," that is, cast illegal ballots for Macdonald. The illegal voters were paid as much as ten dollars — nearly a week's wages for an unskilled labourer — and supplied with identification cards that listed their new names, addresses, occupations, and polling stations and instructed them how to vote. In an effort at disinformation, some Liberal "pluggers" were even given sample ballots with the Conservative candidate's name Xed in to make it appear that the Tories were trying to steal the election.<sup>24</sup>

Robert Gosden played a pivotal role in the scandal. In May 1916, he was called before the commission and shocked the province with his revelations. Gosden testified that prior to the election he had been looking for work and had approached Macdonald's campaign staff before the election with a "business proposition." He was directed to John T. Scott, an Alberta newspaperman hired to run Macdonald's campaign. According to Gosden, Scott hired him at twenty dollars a week plus expenses to compile lists of men who were not entitled to vote, who were absent, or even dead, so their identities could be assumed by the pluggers. He also passed out money to prospective voters and made it clear that he would appreciate a vote for Macdonald.<sup>25</sup>

Much more damaging, however, was Gosden's claim Macdonald himself had paid him money for his deeds. This allegation rocked the province, for it was the only direct link from Macdonald to the illegal plugging. Macdonald immediately

<sup>23</sup> Attorney-General's Correspondence, BC Archives and Records Services, [BCARS] GR 429, Reel 2520.

<sup>24</sup> BC Commission on the 1916 By-Election in Vancouver, BCARS, GR 811, Box 3, File 6.

<sup>25</sup> *Province*, 11 May, 12 May 1916; *Victoria Daily Times*, 11 May, 12 May 1916; *Colonist*, 12 May 1916.

denied the charge and had Gosden arrested for perjury. Gosden stuck to his story and summoned a number of witnesses who corroborated parts of it.<sup>26</sup>

Because the election scandal was fiercely partisan and hotly contested, the press followed every twist and development with zeal. Indeed, at times Gosden pushed the First World War off the front page of the daily newspapers. His trial resulted in a hung jury; dissatisfied with the result, the crown prosecutor immediately re-tried him. Again the jury could not agree, and this time the case was dropped. Meanwhile, the commission continued its work, and finally concluded that "an elaborate, and expensive, scheme of personation" had been adopted on behalf of M.A. Macdonald, but that Macdonald himself had no knowledge or connection with any illegal practices. Instead, the blame was placed on unscrupulous and over-eager assistants and campaign managers. Macdonald won his seat in the 1916 general election, but was forced to resign over another political scandal. He continued to be an important figure in BC politics and some years later was appointed to the province's court of appeal.<sup>27</sup>

Gosden's testimony presents some tantalizing clues to his politics and character, and possibly to his later actions as a labour spy. Clearly one motivation for his involvement in the plugging scandal was money. Gosden stated that he had earlier prevailed upon the premier for the janitorial job because his parents, both in their eighties, needed \$100 to prevent the foreclosure of their mortgage. The money from the six-week job, as well as some of that from the plugging work, went to save the family home, he claimed. Since his arrival in Canada, he had worked at a variety of unskilled labouring jobs; in the winter of 1915, he worked as a scavenger, a snow remover, and a sewer excavator; in January 1916, he was hired to dig a well in the miserable wet and snow of the Victoria area. Engaging in the illegalities of the plugging scandal gave him the chance to make better money, in better conditions. As Gosden put it, "the end justifies the means in two ways. It was necessity for me as there was no other legitimate work in view."<sup>28</sup> The work also gave Gosden a chance to apply talents unused in his labouring jobs. Compiling the lists, cross-checking them, helping organize voting, all required a certain intelligence and personality. Gosden was proud of the quality and completeness of his work, if not of the purposes to which they were put.<sup>29</sup>

But there was more to it. The second way the end justified the means was political: "I wanted to see the Government in power have some new blood in it,"

<sup>26</sup>*Province*, 11 May, 12 May 1916; *Victoria Daily Times*, 11 May, 12 May 1916; *Colonist*, 12 May 1916.

<sup>27</sup>*Province*, 6 June 1916, 18 November 1916 for the hung juries. See BC Commission on the 1916 By-Election in Vancouver, BCARS, GR 811, Box 3, File 6 for the commission's report. Macdonald's son, Alex Macdonald, was a long-time MLA for BC's New Democratic Party, and served as Attorney-General when the NDP formed the government, 1972-75.

<sup>28</sup>*Times*, 7 June, 9 November 1916, *Colonist*, 7 June 1916.

<sup>29</sup>*Times*, 9 May, 7 June 1916.

he averred. "I may say there was some satisfaction in seeing the Liberals get in to beat the Conservatives for once. Do you think I don't remember the troubles up on the Island?"<sup>30</sup> No longer a member of the IWW, but still claiming to "endorse the principles which are contained in its preamble," he denied belonging to the Conservative or Liberal parties, and "was certainly not a Socialist." He was "against the government" on "general principles" and thus had "no moral conceptions on the question of party politics," especially since "politics is based on a rotten structure." Asked if he would still advocate assassination as he had during the coal strike, he replied, "If any man found the circumstances were justifiable, yes. Tyrants should be handled a tyrannical way, the same as they handle others," Gosden said. Those "who tyrannized the poor should be removed," he continued. "If the Kaiser had been dealt with in that way thousands of men would have been saved from slaughter —slaughter caused by his insatiable thirst for power and desire for tyranny."<sup>31</sup>

The exchanges between Gosden and Parker Williams, the Socialist and later Liberal MLA, were particularly heated and personal. Their fencing reflected the political differences between the IWW and the SPC. It also revealed the gulf in culture and experience between the politician and the angry revolutionary. Just as he had denounced mystics and the stool-pigeon Shorty O'Donnell for their lack of manhood, so Gosden chose to confront Williams on the battleground of masculinity. There was no doubt in his mind as to who was found wanting and who had remained true to his class. When Williams brought up Gosden's coffee speech in an attempt to discredit him, Gosden readily admitted making the comment, and added that "you can call it a threat or a statement, and I have no apology to make, understand that, Parker." Williams then complained that Gosden's speech had not helped the imprisoned miners, and that he had had to backpedal and "straighten out" the matter in an effort at public relations and damage control. Gosden rejected Williams's argument and defended direct action. He shot, "Had you the same courage I had there would be a different story to tell." Williams repeated his point that the speech "did not help us any." "Help us any!" Gosden scoffed, "You were not on trial." Perhaps feeling the *touché*, Williams quickly dropped that line of questioning. Instead, he asked if Gosden had suggested to miners "it would be a good night to make trouble." Gosden snapped back, "I exposed your cowardliness, Parker, and your own son was there and I think he had the manliness to be ashamed of you." He then turned tables on Williams and reminded him that they had shared a public platform on one occasion, scoring a laugh at the socialist's expense.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *Colonist*, 7 June 1916; *Times*, 11 May 1916.

<sup>31</sup> *Times*, 11 May 1916, for his denial of membership in political parties; *Times*, 6 June, 7 June 1916, *Province*, 11 May 1916 for his politics. *Vancouver Times*, 7 June, 10 November 1916; *Province*, 6 June, 10 November 1916 for his attitude towards violence.

<sup>32</sup> *Province*, 12 September 1916; *Times*, 12 May 1916, *Province*, 11 May 1916.



It is not surprising that Gosden would choose to shape the debate around masculinity given the associations he made between power and manhood. References to physical and moral courage were a common theme in IWW rhetoric, poetry, and pictures. These men who occupied the lower ranks of society, who worked at ill-paid, hard jobs, who had little legitimate means of protest, often made a virtue of necessity and saw in their harsh conditions a nobility of toil.<sup>33</sup> Just as he had in his letter to Brewster, Gosden again hinted that he was far more powerful than he might appear. He claimed he had "helped kill" the IWW in BC and in its place, he was preparing a new organization that "would arise Phoenix-like from the ashes." This movement would represent "every man who is on the bum, who has been blacklisted by this rotten order of things." To heighten the sense of conspiracy, Gosden hinted that he was in touch with a shadowy organization of men who had been "driven out of the country by capital," and that an "SOS signal would bring them back one thousand strong within the week."<sup>34</sup>

In a similar fashion, his inflammatory remarks and actions achieved for him a degree of publicity and notoriety, and helped exaggerate his own importance. The plugging scandal put him on the front pages of the daily press, and powerful politicians were hanging on his every word. His performances at the commission hearings and his perjury trials even won him compliments of sorts: the prosecutor was forced to "give him this credit, that he is one of the most skilful witnesses I ever saw. He was the greatest fencer in the witness box I have come in contact with." The judge opined that Gosden was a "picturesque character," "a man of strong convictions and with lots of courage." Representatives of a rotten system they might be, but they at least recognized his qualities in ways that employers had not. Such recognition may well have whetted his appetite for official approval.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup>I am grateful to Todd McCallum for the insights regarding masculinity and radicalism. See his "'A Modern Weapon for Modern Man': Marxist Masculinity and the Social Practices of the One Big Union, 1920-1924," MA Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1995. See also Francis Shor, "Masculine Power and Virile Syndicalism: A Gendered Analysis of the IWW in Australia," *Labour History*, 63 (1992), 83-99.

<sup>34</sup>*Province*, 11 May 1916; *Colonist*, 12 May 1916; *Times*, 11 May 1916. The classic example of revolutionaries inflating their importance is that of the Russian revolutionaries Nechaev and Bakunin, each of whom won over the other by implying he headed large secret societies. Gosden's reference to killing the IWW is odd. The statement was made by Williams, and Gosden merely agreed with it. Was it another ill-founded boast? Sarcasm? A passing remark? A judgement on the decline of the IWW in BC after 1914? A tacit admission that Gosden had been a spy? A confusing way to indicate that he rejected the organization? It may also have been a reference to the divisive role many Vancouver Wobblies had played some years earlier, when they refused to pay dues to the general executive board, charging that it was too centralized and powerful. Gosden's friend Matt Fraser had been one of the dissident Wobblies.

<sup>35</sup>*Times*, 8 June, 11 November 1916; *Province*, 13 November 1916.

Gosden next appears in Calgary, Alberta, in 1918. In April of that year, Gosden and his colleague Owen H. Paulson were ordered to leave town by the chief of police. Gosden had been a leader of the Federated Workers' Union, a quasi-industrial union of labourers chartered by the Dominion Trades and Labour Congress. He and Paulson were run out of town on the grounds that "their presence was not exactly desirable here."<sup>36</sup> He may have been involved in other radical activities in Alberta. According to Gosden's friends, he claimed to have aided workers who sought to avoid conscription during the First World War. This is possible, as many did take to the bush rather than fight in what they saw as an unjust and imperialist war. No other evidence for this has been found, however.<sup>37</sup>

What is known with certainty is that by early 1919, Gosden had become a secret agent for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, or the Royal North-West Mounted Police (RNWMP), as it was known until 1920. In December 1918, the federal police forces had been reorganized, with the role of the RNWMP expanded considerably to include secret service activities for western Canada. By January 1919, the force had targeted labour and radical groups and begun recruiting informants.<sup>38</sup> These were not undercover police officers; rather, they were hired as casual employees, paid according to the amount and quality of their information. The maximum rate of pay was \$5.00 per day — still an excellent wage for someone such as Gosden, perhaps double what he might receive for manual labour. Few records or files were kept on them, and often their identities were known only to the local officers who were their "handlers."<sup>39</sup> Gosden's name appears in a number of letters and reports, usually mentioned briefly as being sent somewhere to report on conditions. Interestingly enough, his name also appears on the personal files of subversives, listed on one as an "Agitator." It is likely that his penchant for radical rhetoric combined with RNWMP secrecy to have him reported as a radical by other spies and officers who did not know of his secret work. Gosden was in Blairmore, Alberta in January 1919,

<sup>36</sup>Calgary *Herald*, 16 April 1918. I am grateful to David Bright for this reference. Paulson appears on the RCMP Personal File Register, 1919-1929, reprinted in Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., *RCMP Security Bulletins: The Early Years, 1919-1929* (St. John's 1994), 383. Gosden also appears on the list.

<sup>37</sup>Interview with the Arthurs, 29 January, 1989.

<sup>38</sup>For the role and structure of the RNWMP, see S.W. Horrall, "The Royal North-West Mounted Police and Labour Unrest in Western Canada, 1919," *Canadian Historical Review*, 61 (1980), 169-90, and Gregory S. Kealey, "The Surveillance State: The Origins of Domestic Intelligence and Counter-Subversion in Canada, 1914-21," *Intelligence and National Security*, 7, 3 (1992), 179-210, and "The Early Years of State Surveillance of Labour and the Left in Canada: The Institutional Framework of the RCMP Security and Intelligence Apparatus, 1918-1926," *Intelligence and National Security*, 8, 3 (1993), 129-48.

<sup>39</sup>I am grateful to S.W. Horrall, former head of the Historical Section of the RCMP for this information, undated letter to author, 1989.

then in Fernie, BC in February, and in Macleod, Alberta at the end of February, working for the police in each town.<sup>40</sup>

Probably his most significant work was his infiltration of the Western Labor Conference at Calgary in March 1919. This was the convention that launched the One Big Union (OBU), a new industrial union rather like the IWW in organization, though more moderate and committed to electoral action in its politics. Sporting a new moustache, Gosden had joined the miners' union at Hillcrest and had been elected as a delegate to the conference. But his disguise was to no avail. David Rees of the UMWA rose on a question of privilege. He warned the delegates that Gosden had recently been in Fernie, using the name of Smith, and at Hillcrest, using the name Brown. Another delegate, formerly a coalminer on Vancouver Island, accused Gosden of trying to "stir up trouble" during the strike and of giving "certain persons the formula of a composition designed to be spread on the floor of buildings with the result that they would take fire." With typical bravado, Gosden stood up "in full view of all present" and asked to take the floor to explain himself. He was refused and a motion was made to eject him. The motion failed, however, as several speakers maintained that since they had nothing to hide and their actions were legal, the spy might as well stay.<sup>41</sup>

There were at least two spies at the OBU convention. Along with Gosden was Frank Zaneth, an RNWMP undercover operator who was referred to as Secret Agent

<sup>40</sup>National Archives of Canada [NAC], RG 18, v.829, 181; letter, S.W. Horrall; RG 18 v.2170. Greg Kealey has kindly provided me with the primary material. See also his "The Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, the National Archives of Canada, and Access to Information: A Curious Tale," *Labour/Le Travail*, 21 (1988), 215-6, for reports mentioning Gosden. John Bunyan confirmed that Gosden lived with Owen Paulson in Pincher Creek, Alberta, in 1919. Gosden appears in *RCMP Security Bulletins: The Early Years, 1919-1929*, 383, "RCMP Personal Files Register" and 455, "RCMP Subject Files Register, 1919-1929." Efforts to find personal or personnel files on Gosden under Access to Information have turned up nothing.

<sup>41</sup>The denunciation of Gosden is in the transcripts of the conference and is reported in the *Nanaimo Free Press*, 15 March 1919. My colleague Allen Seager has concluded from this evidence that Gosden was either directly or indirectly responsible for the explosion at the Ladysmith Extension colliery in August 1913. See his "Socialists and Workers: The Western Canadian Coal Miners, 1900-21," *Labour/Le Travail*, 16 (Fall 1985), 43-4. My own view is that while Gosden may well have talked about violence and even handed out recipes, there is no direct evidence linking him to the explosion. The Vancouver Island miners certainly had reason enough and skill enough to dynamite the mine without Gosden's help. He may well have helped inspire the actual perpetrators. But Head's accusation, made some six years after the event, is not backed by any evidence, and no mention of Gosden as an arsonist or advocate of dynamite was made during his legal battles of 1916, explored above, when such allegations would have been extremely useful to Williams and the Liberal party. For a history of the OBU, see David Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto 1978).

No. 7 in official reports. Gosden was Secret Agent No. 10, and he was more harmful than the OBU delegates imagined.<sup>42</sup> For Secret Agent No. 10 did more than report on the convention. He warned the police that the OBU was not just an industrial union. With SPC stalwarts at its head, the OBU was being used to "stampede organised labor in the direction of mass action, with the idea that it shall terminate in social revolution of the Bolsheviki type." The SPC leaders, he continued, were boring into the One Big Union, securing "prominent and official positions" where they would have the greatest effect on the masses. Infiltrating the OBU would give the socialists a chance to infiltrate the rest of the labour movement as well, giving the SPC "a standing in the working class communities which they have never had before — both from the standpoint of finances and from the standpoint of safety from the authorities." The socialists would flood the country with their propaganda and "every official capacity in the organised ranks of labour will be in their hands. ..." At that point, he concluded, it would be extremely difficult for the authorities to prevent revolution.

As Greg Kealey has noted, the report was perceptive and made keen commentary on the SPC cadre that was indeed the moving force behind the OBU. But Gosden did not stop there. He went on to outline a concerted plan of action to crush the fledgling organization. The combination of shrewd observation, intimate knowledge of the labour and radical movements, and utter disdain for conventional morality are strongly reminiscent of Gosden's earlier career. He realized that the state could, if it proceeded carefully, use the more conservative trade union movement against the OBU. The OBU, with its vision of one Canadian union of all workers and the empowerment of the unskilled, was a threat to the labour bureaucracy. If successful, it would "lead to the loss of their positions as heads of the Internationals, with the salaries, political prestige, etc., which goes with these positions." The top trade union leadership and the AFL and DTLC would, Agent 10 predicted, respond quickly to this threat and would use "their influence, chiefly of a financial nature and promise of officialdom," to co-opt others in the fight with the OBU for the allegiance of the working class. The lower ranks of the leadership would wait to see which side was winning before they jumped, but would prefer to stay with the old internationals. They realized, said Gosden, that if the OBU became

<sup>42</sup>Until now, there was no positive proof that Gosden was No. 10, though the case for it was strong. Greg Kealey argues that Gosden was "almost certainly" No. 10, in "The Surveillance State," 201. James Dubro and Robin Rowland, *Undercover: Cases of the RCMP's Most Secret Operative* (Markham 1991), suggest No. 10 "was probably Gosden," 44-5. Daniel Francis, following Dubro and Rowland, assumes that Gosden was No. 10, in *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History* (Vancouver 1997), 40. The proof that he was No. 10 is found in BCARS, GR 1323, Attorney-General, Correspondence, B2300, File L-125, "RCMP Assistant Commissioner J.W. Spalding to Officer Commanding "E" Division," and "S.T. Wood, Superintendent, BC District, RCMP, to Commissioner, BC Provincial Police." Gosden's report, from which the following quotes are taken, may be found in NAC, Borden Papers, Volume 104, File Oc519 (A)1, "Report of SA No.10, 19 March 1919."

the dominant labour organization, "the most they can hope for ... is to play a subordinate part ... without financial compensation. ..." On the other hand, the victory of the conservative unionists would mean they would continue "within the unions of which they are now practically masters." If encouraged and backed by the internationals, these local leaders could be depended upon to fight savagely to defend their privilege. Therefore, the government should strengthen the conservative wing of the labour movement by giving it "the widest publicity." Certainly the history of the OBU proved Gosden correct in this assessment.

His next suggestion was far more ominous. Now Gosden advocated kidnapping the most important SPC leaders and holding them incommunicado. The rationale for this is highly reminiscent of Gosden's attack on Parker Williams's masculinity two years earlier. The "Red element," he wrote, were "intelligent opportunists; their one weakness consists of the fact that they lack the physical courage of their convictions and they possess the fear of the consequences of their acts." The key, then, was to play upon this fear. The terror resulting from having a few of these men "automatically disappear" would freeze the others, "because their ambitions towards leadership and power is [sic] greater than their willingness to suffer and sacrifice for revolution." In his estimation, the social revolution was, to these leaders, only a tool, a bauble they dangled cynically in front of the masses. Their plan was to pose as radicals to inspire the idealistic and trusting masses to carry the socialists to power on "a wave of revolution." At the same time, the SPCers had "carefully excluded from official capacities ... those types of revolutionists who are sincere in their convictions and who may be willing, when the acid test of opposition comes, to lead the hesitating mass to revolution even though it may mean their own death." This secured positions of power for the SPC leaders, but it also "materially weakened" the possibilities of real revolution.

There was a third element in Gosden's plan to destroy the OBU. The terror campaign would demoralize the radicals and give the conservative union leaders time to regroup and sow their own divisive seeds. The final step was to eliminate the social problems that gave the revolutionaries an eager audience. To this end, Agent 10 called for a range of "progressive reforms" that echoed Gosden's suggestions to Harlan Brewster in 1916. These included the regulation of working hours, a minimum wage tied to the cost of living, and "big public works of national importance," such as highways. In return for their loyalty — and to ensure that it continued — conservative labour leaders should be placed in charge of the "practical working end" of the public works. Together, these reforms would eliminate the "fear of unemployment, which is one of the biggest arguments of the social revolutionaries."

The parallels of this with Gosden's earlier actions are obvious. Several themes reappear: the references to physical courage, the duplicity of socialists, the suggestion that real revolutionaries were being thwarted by the opportunists. The report is indicative of his world view and provides some insight into his motivation.

Certainly the money was a necessary condition to attract a labour spy, but it may not have been a sufficient condition. The report of Agent 10 demonstrates the other draws that espionage held. It allowed the application of intelligence, of reasoning. It also encouraged a kind of cunning and love of intrigue that Gosden had in ample supply. Being a spy immersed one in a treacherous world where it was necessary to live by one's wits rather than one's back. The delicious appeal of a secret identity, of being other than one was, and the power of secret knowledge were undoubtedly attractive to one such as Gosden who had been digging ditches three winters earlier. Earlier he had made the powerful tremble with his revelations of scandal and illegality; now he could make them tremble with his revelations of subversion and revolution. Again he could make them listen to him, and this time with respect. Even better, as a spy, he allayed their fears by providing them with a solution to their problem, and of course, could also pick up \$5.00 a day for the privilege. Gosden could even cling to his earlier ideals of socialism and revolution while spying on his erstwhile comrades. The revolution had not been betrayed by him. Rather, it had been betrayed by the cowardly parliamentarians and political tricksters of the SPC. In helping destroy the socialist influence, he would in fact be working for the revolution. And as the report suggests, with the SPC gone, real men, real revolutionaries could step into the breach to lead the masses where the socialists feared to tread.

His career as a spy for the RNWMP was a short one. The March 1919 report is the last one that can be tied to Gosden, and presumably his utility as a secret agent diminished quickly after his exposure at the OBU conference. He does seem to have "double-dipped," for a report on a second labour conference at Calgary was sent to the RNWMP in June 1919. This report is virtually identical to Gosden's March report; likely the agent collected twice for the same material. This seems perfectly in character. One of his RCMP handlers noted that his "reports were found to be unreliable and in some cases false. He was considered untrustworthy." Another reflected that "while he furnished most useful information," he was "too restless and unstable for regular employment."<sup>43</sup>

By 1920, Gosden was nearly forty years old, with no career, stable job, or home life. He turned to the spiritualism he had rejected so vehemently while in California, perhaps for some of the same psychological reasons he had earlier turned to radicalism and to espionage. He became particularly interested in Theosophy and became a follower of the English reformer and mystic Annie Besant. Started in 1875 by the Russian émigré Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the *Theosophical Society*

<sup>43</sup>Todd McCallum brought this report to my attention. He found it at the Public Archives of Manitoba, P4199, file 9. BCARS, GR 1323, Attorney-General, Correspondence, B2300, File L-125, "RCMP Assistant Commissioner J.W. Spalding to Officer Commanding "E" Division," 15 April 1932, and "S.T. Wood, Superintendent, BC District, RCMP, to Commissioner, BC Provincial Police," 15 April 1932. I am grateful to Andy Parnaby for uncovering these important documents that prove Gosden was Agent 10.

set out a convoluted creed that freely blended millenarianism, eastern mysticism, pyramid worship, the power of personal will, and belief in spirits, fairies, and superior beings from Atlantis. It was a strong movement in the 1910s and 1920s, and in Europe and North America it attracted numerous political reformers of all stripes. Gosden's tirade against mysticism in California in 1912 may have been a screen to hide his own fascination for it. As early as 1916 Gosden was living in a boarding house run by a woman who allegedly was clairvoyant and held seances. By 1919, he was deeply immersed in occult studies, a passion that he maintained until his death.<sup>44</sup>

The appeal of this mysticism to someone like Gosden is not so hard to understand. These movements promised to reveal hidden wisdom to the special band of followers and provided forums for discussion and social activities. Intricate ritual and murky, complex doctrines gave adherents a sense of power and special knowledge, while the suggestion that one's lot could be improved through personal action and will power is as seductive today as then. To a man such as Gosden, the mysterious world of Theosophy offered an escape from the harsh reality of life as a migrant worker and gave him opportunity to exercise his mind in study and debate. Theosophy also offered a critique of modern science and social thought that could

<sup>44</sup>For the Theosophical Society and Madame Blavatsky, see James Webb, *The Flight From Reason* (London 1971), especially Chapter 3. A brief overview of the movement is given by Jay Kinney in "Deja Vu: The Hidden History of the New Age," in Ted Schultz, ed., *The Fringes of Reason* (New York 1989), 22-30. Theosophy in Canada is examined by Michele Lacombe in "Theosophy and the Canadian Idealist Tradition," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 17 (1983), 100-20. See also Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto 1985), 167-9, 172-3. E.P. Thompson has commented on the attraction of millenarian movements to political radicals in *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth 1975), and speaks of the "chiliasm of despair" in his chapter "The Transforming Power of the Cross." Eugen Weber gives an overview of recent French literature on the issue in "Religion or Superstition?," *My France: Politics, Culture, and Myth* (Cambridge 1991), 103-36. Logie Barrow examines the connection between spiritualism and socialism in *Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebeians, 1850-1910* (London 1986), while its connection to feminism is explored in Ann Braude, *"Radical Spirits": Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth Century America* (Boston 1989). BC activist Helena Gutteridge's membership in the Vancouver Co-Masons Inner Light Lodge, Number 399, a Theosophy branch of the Masons, may be found in Vancouver City Archives, Additional Manuscripts 831, Volume 1, File 1, and Volume 2, File 2. For Canadian socialist Phillips Thompson's advocacy of Theosophy, see the *Western Clarion*, 24 April 1903, and Cook, 167-9, 172-3. The suggestion that Gosden's landlady was interested in spiritualism is reported in *Times*, 7 November 1916. The interview with Captain Bunyan revealed that Gosden was involved with the theosophy movement by 1919, and continued his research into paranormal and occult phenomena throughout his life. Gosden set numerous occult symbols into the sidewalk to his house in Gibson's Landing, BC in the 1950s and early 1960s. Interview with Captain John Bunyan, 16 August 1989, and interview with Mr. and Mrs. Arthur, 29 January 1989.

easily be grafted onto the revolutionary's critique of capitalism and parliamentary democracy. Indeed, since these mystical movements maintained that the modern world was built on false principles of materialism, linear logic, and empiricism, Theosophists could argue that their analysis was more fundamental and more radical than that of the socialists who accepted so much of the bourgeois world. Thus Theosophy offered Gosden a slightly different mixture of secret knowledge, hidden power, intrigue, and excitement as had radical politics and espionage.<sup>45</sup>

He was back in Vancouver around 1922, when he met the woman who would be his companion for the next sixteen years. Isabella Bunyan was widowed by the Great War, left with two young sons. She met Robert Gosden through another mystical group, the British Israelites, and they took up residence together. Gosden helped raise her sons John and Bill and continued to work as a labourer and cement worker. The couple pre-empted land at Gibson's Landing, a rural peninsula north of Vancouver accessible only by water, and Gosden worked to clear the plot and build on it.<sup>46</sup>

By 1932, he was again involved in spying for the authorities, this time for the BC Provincial Police. The Great Depression helped focus discontent and radicalism, and the infamous relief camps were soon filled with angry men prepared to listen to organizers and communists. Gosden entered the relief camps in the area around Deroche, BC, between Mission and Hope. Here he compiled lists of activists and organizers for the Provincial Police, and, ever helpful, made suggestions and gave warnings. Gosden recommended that the government deport "every individual ... who has shown his communistic activities" and that vagrancy laws be strictly enforced. As he had before, he called for reform, for the present policies meant the government "is committing political suicide and forcing on anarchy and bloodshed." Unless a "firm, just hand" was taken, it would be "too late to avert a national tragedy." Gosden also gave several suggestions for improving camp security,

<sup>45</sup>The appeal of Theosophy, Spiritualism, and other mystical creeds was no more restricted to members of the working class in the 19th century than the "New Age" is today. The desire to shape the world according one's will, the delight in receiving hidden knowledge, and the wish that human existence has a deeper, more profound meaning than is apparent in our day-to-day lives certainly transcends class. Ronald Reagan and Nazis believed in astrology, movie stars believe in channelling and reincarnation, and thousands have paid out huge sums to groups such as Scientology and to "gurus" who give fire-walking and positive thinking seminars. The middle class in the 19th century was no less attracted to the mystical movements of its day. Nor did these occult and spiritual pitch their creeds primarily to the left and social reformers, for they sought believers from all layers of society. This equality *among the initiated may in itself have attracted working class people to the cults.*

<sup>46</sup>Interview, John Bunyan; the Vancouver city directories for 1931, 1933, 1934, 1936, 1937, and 1938 list Gosden's occupations as cement worker and labourer and list him as a resident in the different houses owned by Isabella Bunyan, widow.



warning that if his advice were not taken, "your camps will burn and your commiserate [sic, no doubt for commissariat] will be looted."<sup>47</sup>

The reports are written with Gosden's usual verve and overstatement. They are best seen as attempts to secure work with the provincial police. He offers some information, and hints that the "secret, dangerous, and irreconcilable" agitators would be revealed later, presumably after receipt of appropriate emolument. He warns of secret plans, militant action, and the danger to the government posed by the relief camp organizers. Gosden completed his report by indicating how crucial his services were. Further investigation would "necessitate me being given carte blanche action of movement as I might need. ... If I am needed at any time for this work I am at your service. ..."<sup>48</sup>

It has not been possible to determine if Gosden was subsequently employed by the BC Provincial Police. His former RCMP handlers, who were asked about Gosden's work with them, gave him a mixed reference. They considered him an "alarmist," and believed that his Deroche reports were "highly coloured" and that Gosden was "drawing on his imagination to the fullest extent possible. ..." Someone wrote in hand across a covering letter for the reports, "I think this man is ultra pessimistic." The RCMP officers, however, also believed that Gosden "undoubtedly has an intimate knowledge of the aims and objects of Radical leaders and a fair understanding of the psychology of that element of the masses which are susceptible to the doctrine of Communism. ... Gosden's experience and intimate knowledge of Radical activities would prove of value in an emergency." Perhaps most intriguing, RCMP Superintendent S.T. Wood noted that Gosden was known by Gordon Wismer, an important figure in BC Liberal circles who would soon be elected MLA in *Vancouver Centre* and would become Duff Pattullo's Attorney-General in 1937. Thus it appears that Gosden kept some of the ties to the Liberals that he forged in 1916. It may be significant that Wismer's political machine would become known for having "the gamiest reputation in Canada." Such a machine could no doubt find use for a man of Gosden's talents.<sup>49</sup>

In 1936, Gosden was singled out by Communist Party writer William Bennett and attacked for his connection with local political and radio personality, Tom McInnes. McInnes was the son of Thomas R. McInnes, a former Lieutenant-Governor of BC. Closely connected with the right-wing Shipping Federation, McInnes formed the reactionary Nationalist Party of Canada and devoted newspaper col-

<sup>47</sup>BCARS, GR 1323, Attorney-General, Correspondence, B2300, File L-125, R.R. Gosden, 21 March, 22 March 1932.

<sup>48</sup>BCARS, GR 1323, Attorney-General, Correspondence, B2300, File L-125, R.R. Gosden, 21 March, 22 March 1932.

<sup>49</sup>BCARS, GR 1323, Attorney-General, Correspondence, B2300, File L-125, "RCMP Assistant Commissioner J.W. Spalding to Officer Commanding "E" Division," 15 April 1932, and "S.T. Wood, Superintendent, BC District, RCMP, to Commissioner, BC Provincial Police," 15 April 1932. The characterization of Wismer's machine is cited in Martin Robin, *Pillars of Profit: The Company Province, 1934-1972* (Toronto 1973), 9.

umns and radio broadcasts to attacking the left and the labour movements of the day. According to Bennett, Gosden was “bodyguard to the fascist radio-orator.”<sup>50</sup> Nothing else about Gosden could be found for this period. Isabella Bunyan died in 1938, and Gosden moved to West Vancouver, again residing with a widow and giving his occupation as gardener. Around 1950, he began a relationship with Helena Hesson, a Vancouver school teacher also keen on Theosophy and the supernatural. By 1952, the two lived together in Gibsons, until Gosden’s death in 1961, age 78.<sup>51</sup>

Gosden became more interested in the occult over time, attending seances and exploring Theosophy and other mystic religions. He was an early survivalist who was always encouraging people to cache food, and talked about how workers needed to hide weapons. His love of intrigue stayed with him as well. In 1951, at age 69, he sent a letter to John Cates, BC minister of labour responsible for native Indian affairs and land claims. In it, he claimed that an old British dispatch case, long hidden in the woods, contained an early treaty document between natives and early government officials. He gave detailed instructions on how to find the case, and emphasized that he was not seeking publicity, but thought a quiet reconnoitre might prove useful to the government. If the denial of a desire for publicity seems rather out of character, the old themes of hidden knowledge and intrigue remain as clues to his earlier experiments in espionage.<sup>52</sup>

Most surprising, given his record of betrayal, Gosden continued to be attracted to radicalism. He talked about the need for a workers’ revolution, and thought the collapse of capitalism inevitable and desirable. He kept with him until his death in 1961 postcards of Wesley Everest and Joe Hill, the famous Wobbly martyrs. These postcards were issued by the Industrial Workers of the World after the death of well-known organizers to commemorate them and to raise money for the union. Gosden also left about twelve pages of autobiographical sketches that talked proudly about his meeting another IWW martyr, Frank Little, in 1912, and the anarchist organizer Lucy Parsons. One of these sketches ended with the words, “These Joe Hills and Frank Littles in their countless thousands, are working and helping to complete what they died for, and you will meet them, sooner than you may think, for remember, they cannot be killed now, but they can and do help the cause of progress. ... The ruling class are [sic] now absolutely insane, and are committing social suicide which is the Karma they have earned.”<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup>Bennett, *BC Workers News*, 2 October 1936. For more on McInnes, see *Province*, 12 February 1951.

<sup>51</sup>Interviews, John Bunyan, the Arthurs; city directories; BC death certificate, Robert Gosden.

<sup>52</sup>BCARS, GR 1071, Box 2, File 8, letter from Bob Gosden, dated 9 December 1951, emphasis in original. I am grateful to Ira Chaikin for bringing this document to my attention.

<sup>53</sup>Robert Gosden, typescript, in author’s possession. This material was kindly supplied to me by the Arthurs.

What is the historical significance of Robert Raglan Gosden? His story is useful for the light it sheds on several aspects of labour history. First, it gives us some insight into the world of the migrant male worker in the early years of the 20th century. In sharp contrast to the romanticized notions of the hobo and tramp, his life story boils with rage. It is the rage of the oppressed, of those who are damned to a life of harsh toil. It is a rage Gosden shared with many other Wobblies, and it is something that is often neglected when we study labour history. It is easy and more palatable perhaps to recall the humour of the Wobblies, the wry songs and cartoons, the jokes and stories. The song by Haywire "Mac" McClintock, "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" is a good example of that genre. But McClintock also wrote a poem in 1916 that echoes Gosden's anger and forces us to remember the stark reality the working class faced. Titled "Hymn of Hate," it reads, in part,

We hate you with hand and heart and head, and body and mind and brain,  
 We hate at the forge, in the mine and mill, in the field of golden grain. ...  
 We shall keep our hate and cherish our hate and our hate shall ever grow,  
 We shall spread our hate and scatter our hate till all of the workers know.  
 And The Day shall come with a red, red dawn; and you in your gilded halls,  
 Shall taste the wrath and the vengeance of the men in the overalls.<sup>54</sup>

Gosden's rage was similarly shared by Wobbly Jim Seymour in his 1913 poem, "The Dishwasher." Alone in the kitchen, he railed against a capitalism that "makes me a dullard in brain-burning heat" while he looked "at rich viands, not daring to eat." Seymour wrote of the "grease-laden steam," of the "foul, indescribable muck," into which he plunged his "red blistered hands." He dared the "leeches," the "overfed parasites," to

... look at my hand.  
 You laugh at it now, it is blistered and coarse,  
 But such are the hands quite familiar with force;  
 And such are the hands that have furnished your drink,  
 The hands of the slaves who are learning to think,  
 And hands that have fed you can crush you as well  
 And cast your damned carcasses clear into hell!<sup>55</sup>

Thus Gosden is important because he reminds us that oppression was not simply a word for these workers: it was a harsh, grinding, degrading, daily reality. It was a world that was manifestly unfair and Gosden's life demonstrates just how unfair it was even to someone who appeared to have the advantages of gender and racial privilege.

<sup>54</sup> Cited in *Rebel Voices*, 29-30.

<sup>55</sup> *Rebel Voices*, 77-9.

Gosden is also notable for he demonstrates a particular construction of working-class masculinity. He tended to define masculinity without reference to women as "the other." Created in a homosocial world of work and unionism, this vision of masculinity counterposed "men" to immature males and beasts; masculinity was not so much pitched as a binary opposition as a linear, progressive evolution. But Gosden's construction of masculinity differed in important respects from that of the labourists. In their world of relative stability and affluence, masculinity included such respectable virtues as forthrightness, temperance, and forbearance. A man was a male who told the truth and could be depended on, who stood up and spoke his mind and was responsible for what he said and did. "The Recipe for a Union Man" printed in the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council newspaper, the *Independent*, called for

... an ounce of gumption  
 Just a grain of sand.  
 A little independence,  
 Some manly spirit, and  
 Mix them well together  
 With patience — if you can.  
 Add to it unselfishness —  
 And you have a union man.<sup>56</sup>

Gosden deplored this construction of masculinity. Instead, in an informal, unexamined way, he contributed to the making of what one historian has labelled "virile syndicalism" and another "Marxist masculinity."<sup>57</sup> The code of manliness put forward by the labourists lacked the raw, physical courage and the political audacity that were at the centre of Gosden's radicalism and masculinity. The politics of labourism and parliamentary socialism held no promise or hope for workers in his position. Talk was cheap, he pointed out in his article on sabotage; what counted was action. Throughout his life, images of sexuality and power were entwined: the California idealists he met in 1911 were "emasculated"; the stool pigeon Shorty O'Donnell was dared to "stand on his legs and be a man." The socialist Parker Williams lacked the manhood to be a revolutionary while socialists

<sup>56</sup>*Independent*, 8 August 1903. For other descriptions of labourism and masculinity, see Ava Baron, "An 'Other' Side of Gender Antagonism at Work: Men, Boys, and the Remasculinization of Printers' Work, 1830-1920," in Ava Baron, ed., *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca 1991), 47-69; Shirley Tillotson, "We may all soon be 'first-class Men': Gender and skill in Canada's early twentieth century urban telegraph industry," *Labour/Le Travail*, 27 (Spring 1991), 97-125; Christina Burr, "Defending the 'Art Preservative': Class and Gender Relations in the Printing Trade Unions, 1850-1914," *Labour/Le Travail*, 31 (Spring 1993), 47-73, and Burr, "Class and Gender in the Toronto Printing Trades," PhD dissertation, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1992; Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape: The Making of a Labour Bureaucracy* (Toronto 1995), 135-42.

in the OBU did not have the courage of their convictions. The alleged virtues of honesty and responsibility became, for a man in Gosden's position, excuses for moderate and cowardly behaviour. As he himself noted, "the ends justified the means," and those who refused to take up violence and betrayal were cowards, unmanly, and class traitors all at once. Gosden's radicalism signified his refusal to be ground down without a fight, a fight in which every weapon was judged by its tactical, rather than its moral, worth. His call for sabotage, direct action, and violence set him apart from the reformism of labourists and parliamentary socialists on the terrain of class politics and gender relations.

Finally, Gosden gives us some insight into the shadowy world of the labour spy. Sometime between 1910 and 1919, Gosden turned full circle as the conditions of his life helped push him to the point where he could rationalize virtually every twist and turn, where any crime could be justified. He differed from other spies, however. The RCMP agent Frank Zaneth, for example, was not a worker who turned against his comrades; he was a policeman who went undercover to spy on and entrap radicals. Other famous spies, such as James McParland, who infiltrated the Molly Maguires and later tried to frame Big Bill Haywood and other Western Federation of Miners leaders, were employees of the notorious Pinkerton, Burns, and Thiel detective agencies. Despicable as these men were, they at least had the flimsy excuse that they were following orders. Nor was Gosden like the hapless Canadian Harry Orchard, the half-wit thug hired by McParland to implicate Haywood. Orchard was truly a member of the lumpen-proletariat, a thug for hire who required no incentive greater than money.<sup>58</sup>

If Gosden's actions were no more admirable than those of Zaneth, McParland, or Orchard, his motives were more complex. It may be that Gosden was a sociopath, devoid of the emotions and conscience that kept others from such behaviour. But such an explanation is surely too simple and ahistorical. It reduces historical process to individual defects and is unable to consider the particular causes that led to Gosden's particular actions. We need to understand the conditions that limited Gosden's life and allowed and encouraged him to act as he did. In examining his life, we get some sense of the complicated braiding of the personal and the political.

<sup>57</sup>Shor, "Masculine Power and Virile Syndicalism," 83-99; McCallum, "A Modern Weapon for Modern Man."

<sup>58</sup>For Frank Zaneth, see James Dubro and Robin Rowland, *Undercover: Cases of the RCMP's Most Secret Operative* (Markham 1991). James McParland and Harry Orchard are outlined in Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (New York 1969), 97-104, and in Stewart H. Holbrook, *The Rocky Mountain Revolution* (New York 1956). Other accounts of labour spies may be found in Jean E. Spielman, *The Stool Pigeon and the Open Shop Movement* (Minneapolis 1923); Leo Huberman, *The Labor Spy Racket* (1937. Reprint, Monthly Review Press, 1966); Gary M. Fink, *The Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills Strike of 1914-1915: Espionage, Labor Conflict, and New South Industrial Relations* (Ithaca 1993).

Certainly the money was important: the pay was good for work that was considerably easier than railway construction or ditch-digging. But we must also consider Gosden's love of the limelight, evidenced by his pleasure in making front-page headlines during the plugging scandal. His obvious love of intrigue can perhaps be better explained by psychologists, but it certainly required the use of his native intelligence in ways that manual labour did not. Involvement in intricate plans, double-dealing, and conspiracy may have given some higher meaning to his rough life in much the way mysticism did later. Presumably Gosden also derived some satisfaction from playing both ends against the middle: in serving the state that oppressed him, he was able to deal a blow against the socialists he regarded as cowards and traitors. Even as Agent 10, we can detect in Gosden the faint hope that once the traitors were kidnapped, the real radicals, including himself, could rise to lead the working class in revolt. This may well be dismissed as grandiose, even pathological, but it surely suggests a more complex motivation than money for his duplicitous actions.

Gosden, like all humans, was complex, contradictory, and shaped by circumstance. As a result, he had an ability to hold several apparently contradictory strands of thought simultaneously. Even near the end of his life he saw no contradiction between mysticism, conspiracy theory, and radicalism, and had woven them together into a useful, if unwieldy and inconsistent, world view. We see in this odd ideology the attempt of a bright, self-educated, man to make sense of his world, to explain the injustices he saw and lived and to hold out some ray of hope, in the next world if not this one. It was a chiliastic view, but one in which the actions of an individual might count for something, if he could find his way through the maze of conspiracy and trickery created by the powerful. It was a world view that held courage and strength at a premium, for without them one could hardly withstand the class violence employed by bosses and the state. It was also a world view that allowed him to hate, and surely he had cause to do that. An intelligent man, he was forced to take up near slave labour, and was denied access to the reins of power by the bourgeoisie, the labour aristocracy, and the socialist elite. In his own mind, any betrayal by him, of employers, politicians, or the left, may have seemed but a pale echo of the betrayals played on him. Gosden's radicalism and his sensitivity to questions of masculinity, his love of intrigue and the sense of power it gave, all stemming from his class experience, swirled together in such a way that taking money for spying on his fellow workers seemed expedient and justified. Spying may even have served to reinforce his belief in his own courage and rewarded him with a sense of beating everyone at their own game. Far from being shocking, Gosden's perfidy may well have been, for him, a logical and consistent step to take. The same conditions that created a disdain for bourgeois morality and respectability and fuelled an uncompromising, if temporary, revolutionary sentiment, ultimately led to a self-serving ethos that could accommodate any betrayal or immoral activity. Even the IWW recognized the dual nature of the class experience of its members.

When author John Graham Brooks suggested that the revolutionary union attracted "the most unselfish and courageous, together with the self-seeking and the semi-criminal," the IWW reviewer noted that "we cannot quarrel with this statement."<sup>59</sup> It may be an appropriate observation to make of Robert Raglan Gosden, who made his own history, though hardly in circumstances of his own choosing.

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*Given that spies are generally secretive, and that the poor and infamous rarely leave much in the way of records, much of the material used here was brought to my attention by others. I would like to thank Allen Seager, who first suggested I keep an eye out for traces of Gosden; Greg Kealey, who graciously shared his research into Canada's security services and helped me through the maze of freedom of information procedures; Mary Lynn Stewart and Philip Stigger, who shared their knowledge of French and British intelligence records and operations; Bill and Joan Fletcher, Roger Stonebanks, and Ira Chaikin, who shared ideas and information on Gosden. Particular thanks are due to Todd McCallum for his close reading and ideas on working class masculinity, to Andy Parnaby, to Sean Cadi-gan, and to Annette DeFaveri.*

<sup>59</sup>*Industrial Worker*, 8 May 1913. Brooks's book is *American Syndicalism: The IWW* (New York 1913).