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Making Steel: Technology, History, Culture of Work.
Co-Produced by the Steel Project, Beaton Institute, University
College of Cape Breton and the National Film Board of Canada,
1992, Colour, 56:30 on video.

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Making Steel: Technology, History, Culture of Work.

Co-produced by the Steel Project, Beaton Institute, University College of Cape Breton and the National Film Board of Canada, 1992, Colour, 56:30 on video.

Arguably there is no industry so perfectly symbolic of the industrial age as steel manufacturing. It draws together the characteristic material inputs of the nineteenth century: coal, iron, and (as this film makes very clear) much steam. Until recently, too, it has been a labour-intensive industry, although steelworkers on Cape Breton might complain that it hasn't been intense enough.

Separating a visual study of the Nova Scotian industry into three parts makes some sense. It allows teachers to cue up the relevant third, and to spare their students the other bits. However, the close relationship between technological change, the character of the workforce, and the impact of cyclical and crushing unemployment on the ability of the industry to recover ought not to be ignored, as it is here.

The first third, entitled *Technology*, is a heavy industry cookery course. "It's just like making a cake", according to the steelworkers, and the ingredients and the relevant temperatures are dutifully

recorded here. Unfortunately, there is little sense in this segment of how, let alone why, systems of production changed over the last 90 years. We are only introduced to the newest, state-of-the-art steel making facilities when we come to the tail end of the *History* portion. Something else is missing too: the labour inputs. There are few signs in this section of the scores of men and women who made the metal. We see handfuls, not hundreds. What were the other 2,000 up to?

The *History* section delivers what it promises, a chronological survey of the rise and fall, rise and fall again of steel in Sydney. Like a punchdrunk brawler, the industry staggers to its feet time and time again, only to be pummelled once more by an unfeeling global market and fickle governments in Halifax and Ottawa. The role of trade unions is touched upon, although I could not discern any struggle between local organization and international (i.e. American) unionism.

The final portion is a pastiche of recollections drawn from a community forged on the hearth of industrial history. Prominence is given to the wartime participation of women, but their "disappearance" thereafter is taken as the last word on the subject. Did women's employment in any way affect the 'culture of work', or was it incorrigibly male? Did the 'culture of work' end abruptly at the steelyard gates? There is a great deal of romanticizing in this section, the worst of it in an intrusive soundtrack that features a lament to Cape Breton's sinewy strong men of steel. The palliative is in the testimonies, where the interviewees repeatedly describe their mentors as blistered oldtimers who had worked in dangerous, hellish, thankless jobs for too long and for too little. They also tell of a workplace sharply divided by religion (Catholics at the open hearth, Orangemen in the mills), by ethnicity (the eastern Europeans had their own inviolate coffee rooms), and by race (Afro-Canadians were exclusively consigned to the gas producing area, the worst part of the whole Stygian mess).

Splendid aerial shots reveal Sydney, curled up in full fetal position behind the monstrous belching mill that made a mockery of education for generations of local kids, of clotheslines, of taking a clean breath of air. Should we not show some care when we nostalgically dignify that stifled and choking experience as a "culture"?

This video will achieve greatest effect in high schools where students are being introduced to the roots of industrial technology and the character of industrial society. But surely a more energetic

and more courageous discussion of the most pivotal industry in the modern era is possible?

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