

Film and History in Atlantic Canada

Colin Howell

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underdevelopment of Atlantic Canada is not only interesting and original, but also innovative and exciting. This pioneering work offers a promising alternative to traditional analysis of the region.

JOAN MCFARLAND

some questions and problems", in J. Paul Grayson, ed., *Class, State, Ideology and Change: Marxist Perspectives on Canada* (Toronto, 1980), pp. 273-283, and R.J. Sacouman, "Semi-proletarianization and rural underdevelopment in the Maritimes", *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 17 (August 1980), pp. 232-45.

Film and History in Atlantic Canada

Much has been said about the need to give history back to the people who made it. Both independent film-makers and the National Film Board of Canada have taken up this call with varying degrees of commitment and success. In the past five years film-makers have produced a number of useful documentaries focusing on the development of the Atlantic Region and the people who shaped it. These films reveal the essential component of regional popular culture, a deeply rooted populism which involves both antagonism towards the "big interests" and a concomitant belief in the possibilities of self-help and individualism. This populism is revealed as well in the ambivalent reaction on the part of many Maritimers to successful regional entrepreneurs and a suspicion of national politicians for their betrayal of regional interests. Finally, lest one think that popular culture involves only attitudes and not behaviour, these films also demonstrate the continuing resistance on the part of working people in the region to conditions that oppress them.

The most ambitious of these films is *Empty Harbours, Empty Dreams* (National Film Board, 1976), a visually exquisite hour-long documentary directed by Kent Martin. Unfortunately, however, the powerful visual imagery of *Empty Harbours, Empty Dreams* is marshalled in support of a highly romanticized analysis of the region's history. *Empty Harbours, Empty Dreams* reiterates the myth of the mid-19th century "Golden Age" of sail and the subsequent decline of the region. Film clips and still photographs document the bustling activity of the 19th century, the era of wooden shipbuilding and the prosperous international shipping trade. But when we are introduced to the 20th century the images are those of lonely seagulls standing vigil over empty fishing boats in empty harbours. The film also has its more original moments. A series of cartoons chronicling the loss of innocence of the Canadian nymph at the hands of her worldly suitor Uncle Sam reveals the ironic influence of a National Policy which at once purported to save us from Yankee domination and encouraged the origins of the branch plant. More useful still is the treatment of

Boss Gibson, the maverick New Brunswick entrepreneur and industrialist whose Marysville empire suffered the same fate as other industrial boomtowns in the region. As the camera pans Gibson's mighty burial monument and those of his descendants in the family burial plot, we are reminded of what might have been if Gibson's offspring had been able to develop the kind of family empires that emerged elsewhere in the industrial capitalist world.

But in the end *Empty Harbours, Empty Dreams* succumbs to its own sentimentalism. The region's century-long decline, it seems, was progressive and unbroken; New Brunswick, we are informed at one point, "never ever industrialized". Attached to this melodramatic story are a set of predictable villains: slick Canadian Confederationists who demanded the subordination of a "natural" sea-based economy to a new "artificial" industrial economy dominated by Central Canada, the advocates of a National Policy more appropriate to an industrializing hinterland than a sea-based region like the Maritimes, and the insensitive nationalists who dismantled the Intercolonial's preferential rate system. What is lacking in the film is a sense of historical process or a careful treatment of the process of industrialization and deindustrialization that has preoccupied historians of the region since the publication of T.W. Acheson's seminal article a decade ago. (Acheson's name appears in the credits but in a badly mangled fashion.) The result is predictable. Rather than a plausible analysis of how we came to be what we are, the film represents a plaintive lament for a lost past. Exemplifying as it does the romantic view of regional history that much of the recent scholarship has attempted to modify, the film provides a point of departure for further discussion of the region's decline rather than a credible foundation for popular understanding.

If *Empty Harbours, Empty Dreams* gives vent to a Maritime sense of betrayal within Confederation, *Moses Coady* (National Film Board, 1976) investigates the antagonism between producers and the "big interests" which was at the heart of the Antigonish Movement. A self-styled champion of the little guy, Coady brought a blend of fiery oratory and Catholic reformism to the farmers and fishermen of northeastern Nova Scotia during the depression of the 1920s and 1930s. Through the Extension Department at Saint Francis Xavier University Coady promoted a campaign of popular education, preaching a gospel of cooperation and self-help which he hoped would overcome widespread defeatism and stem massive outmigration to the Boston States. Arguing that cooperation was "private enterprise in its finest form", Coady set out to attack the corporations, the fish merchants, and the aristocratic bureaucrats on their own ground. The result of his efforts was a plethora of marketing co-ops, co-op buying clubs, consumer co-ops, producer-owned canning factories, and credit unions which provided loans for farm machinery, fishing boats and new homes. Director Kent Martin demonstrates the quasi-feudal conditions of life in north-eastern Nova Scotia between the wars, and claims that Coady and the cooperative principle provided an effective antidote to the oppression of working people.

In the long run, however, the cooperative movement failed to achieve Coady's objectives. Postwar prosperity and extensive government spending in the area of social services (not to mention the impact of McCarthyism) robbed the movement of much of its earlier intensity. Unfortunately the film seems unwilling to address the possibility that the movement's failure grew out of the limitations of Coady's own populist principles. Given Coady's emphasis upon the naked rapacity of the "vested interests" and his failure to recognize that the state was not a neutral defender of popular "democracy" but an integral component of the dominant hierarchy, the movement was ill-prepared to meet the seemingly more responsible character of reformed capitalism. Coady's uncritical faith in private enterprise and liberal democracy blinded him to the subtle ways in which those who control power in society maintain their influence. Indeed, as modern corporations discarded their robber baron image in favour of that of the responsible corporate citizen, and as the state assumed a broad commitment to liberal welfarism in order to secure its legitimacy, the hegemony of the dominant classes was ensured.

Coady's belief in the ability of producers to compete effectively in the capitalist marketplace left him critical of those who proposed revolutionary solutions to the problem of worker exploitation. But if the farmers and fishermen who treasured notions of independence found Coady's cooperative ideal persuasive, the coal miners of Cape Breton tended to express their faith in worker solidarity in a different way. *12,000 Men* (Martin Duckworth, director, National Film Board, 1978), a 30-minute film which builds upon the recent historiography of working class resistance to the coal operators in Cape Breton, is excellent for classroom use. Except for the somewhat cavalier use of photographs and film clips from Britain and the United States as a supplement to the limited visual record for Cape Breton, the film provides an accurate portrayal of the struggle between coal miners and operators that accompanied the penetration of the region by modern industrial capitalism at the end of the 19th century. That struggle — evident in the ten-month strike in 1909 for union recognition, in the bitter strikes of the early 1920s culminating in the imprisonment of J.B. McLachlan for seditious libel in 1923, and in the death of William Davis in 1925 — was a continuing battle against brutal and dangerous conditions, starvation wages, and absentee ownership. These challenges to the miners' dignity resulted in the emergence of a tradition of militant unionism in Cape Breton. Unfortunately, *12,000 Men* does not probe deeply enough into the early history of the movement; the treatment of miners and operators before the First World War lacks a certain richness of detail and personality, especially when compared to the more dramatic struggle between the miners and Besco during the 1920s. Nor does the title of the film itself do justice to the struggle of an entire working class community in industrial Cape Breton. The film is more successful in showing how miners and the community fought the combined influence of the companies, the state, the courts, and even their own union hierarchy. But even

then, there were no real victories. Wage levels remained seriously depressed until the Second World War, and the size of the work force shrank. Where there once were 12,000 employed in the mines there are now only one-quarter that number. Perhaps this depressing circumstance explains Nova Scotia's record of "labour stability" in recent years.¹

If failed industrialization helps explain the stability of the present Nova Scotian labour force, it may also help explain why contemporary empire-builders such as K.C. Irving are regarded by many people as saviours rather than parasites. In *I Like to See the Wheels Turn* (National Film Board/Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1981), director Giles Walker analyzes the Irving business empire, which includes some 200 vertically integrated companies valued at more than \$7 billion, many of which operate under the umbrella of Bermudian holding companies free from Canadian taxation. At the same time the film offers a sensitive portrait of Kenneth Colin Irving, an old-style Presbyterian capitalist faithful to the traditional values of hard work, abstinence, and the family. In part this commitment to traditional notions of the dignity of work and self-help explains the deferential attitude of many New Brunswickers to the mighty Irving family; more likely Irving's popularity is a product of his central place in the revitalization of Saint John after the Second World War. Through all of this one is left with the feeling that popular support for the likes of K.C. Irving represents not so much an affirmation of the virtue of corporate capitalism as it does New Brunswick's longing for a more equitable share of Canada's industrial wealth.

Among inshore fishermen and many small farmers in the region, popular resistance to modern corporate capitalism has by no means diminished over time. Gary Toole's excellent short film *Potatoes* (National Film Board, 1976) reveals the difficulties New Brunswick potato producers experience as the intrusion of modern machine technology creates serious instability in the marketplace. While heavy machinery has meant more efficient production, the huge capital outlays attached to mechanization mean that farmers now produce more for less. Furthermore, as the fresh potato market continues to decline in the face of frozen food production, many potato farmers have tried to overcome the hazards of the marketplace by contracting for a prearranged stable price with McCain's, a New Brunswick based multinational corporation in the convenience foods industry. The result has been a growing recognition among these producers that their traditional independence has been lost, and an increasing

1 A recent study of labour stability in Canada shows that between 1966 and 1978 Nova Scotia man-days lost through strikes and lockouts when taken as a percentage of man-days worked averaged 0.20%, compared with Ontario 0.34%, Quebec 0.46%, Newfoundland 0.49% and British Columbia 0.56%. "Nova Scotia and New Brunswick" the report concludes, "have work forces which are twice as stable as Canada as a whole." Peter F. O'Brien, *The Myth of Labour Instability. Nova Scotia vs Competing Jurisdictions*, (Halifax, 1980), p. 26. The 1981 coal strike in Cape Breton was the first since 1947.

willingness to join together under the banner of the National Farmers Union.

Two recent films produced by Bill McKiggan and Tom Burger of the Fish or Cut Bait Collective do for the inshore fisherman what *Potatoes* does for the New Brunswick potato producer. *The Finest Kind* (1979) provides a useful historical record of the Lockeport strike of 1939 which pitted members of the infant Canadian Fishermen's Union against the fish companies, the RCMP, and the government of Angus L. Macdonald. The state raised the red menace, harassed union organizers Pat Sullivan and Charlie Murray, and sent 60 members of the RCMP to Lockeport to break the strike. Against this array of state power the chances of success were small and the union was eventually manoeuvred into a settlement. When war broke out the movement was weakened further; many fishermen considered the hazards of the overseas battlefield a potential respite from the continuing exploitation at home. Murray was arrested under the provisions of the War Measures Act and sent to an internment camp in Petawawa for continuing his fight to organize the fishermen.

As was the case with miners and agricultural workers, the struggle of the fishermen has been a long one with few tangible victories. *Fish or Cut Bait* (1981) addresses the way in which inshore fishermen in recent years have tried to defend their traditional way of life against the challenge of multinational corporations. In the east-coast fishery the Nickerson/National Sea empire is the Irving of the fishing industry. These Maritime-based corporations with connections to the Weston group, Power Corporation, and the Royal Bank, use large freezer trawlers to drag the ocean floor and mine the sea. The issue is whether large offshore operations should be allowed to take fish in the way they do and in the process to threaten the livelihood of inshore fishermen. The film concentrates on the attempts of inshore fishermen in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland over the past decade to defend their interests. In Canso and more recently in Caraquet, fishermen faced the combined power of the companies, the police and the courts, just as the fishermen of Lockeport had 40 years before. For example, when members of the Maritime Fishermen's Union protesting the depletion of fish stocks in the Northumberland Strait tried to interfere with the offloading of herring seiners at Caraquet late in 1979, the RCMP attacked the crowd three times with teargas. And although the recent restrictions on fishing in the Northumberland Strait area will no doubt help rebuild the existing fish stocks, no one is sure what will happen in the long term.

Throughout this film the message is the same as that contained in *12,000 Men*, *Potatoes*, and *The Finest Kind*, and to a certain extent in the other films reviewed here. In the absence of fundamental structural or systemic changes the Maritimers' struggles will continue, and whatever victories working people in the region achieve will likely be partial ones at best. Whether one agrees with the conclusions or not, films of this sort are unquestionably worth the attention of

the professional historian. Indeed, a closer professional interest in films intended for popular consumption should contribute to a less sentimental and more critical popular understanding of regional history.²

COLIN D. HOWELL

² The NFB films are distributed through the National Film Board's district and regional offices. The Fish or Cut Bait films are available from the Development Education Resources Information Centre (DEVERIC, Box 3460, Halifax, N.S.)