Common Labour

Workers and the Digging of North American Canals 1780–1860

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

ensured a labour supply, but also meant that hands had to be cared for even when their labour was not needed. Some companies avoided the problem by hiring out their slaves in slack time, as Virginia's Upper Appamattox Company did in 1816. Contractors with their own slaves might also own a farm to which they could be shifted when needed. This was the case for one builder on the James River Canal who occasionally sent his bondsmen from the line to harvest wheat or plant "Irish Potatoes." Slave labour's seeming inflexibility was also offset by its value as property. In dire circumstances, slaves could be sold for a quick infusion of cash, as the Cape Fear & Deep River Navigation Company was forced to do in the late 1850s. An official on the Kanawha River Improvement in Virginia, after experimenting with local white labour, made clear this advantage. "The negroes being your own (or hired) you can command their service when you please – when your work is completed, if you have not further occasion for them, they can be sold for nearly as much, or probably more than they cost you."[25]

Although slave labour was the norm in the South throughout the period of canal construction, local whites and free labourers from the North were increasingly used from the 1820s. Southern yeomen farmers were wedged into a slavery system that offered few opportunities for wage labour, but this system altered as agriculture became more commercialized and the ability of petty producers to compete declined.[26] A few found their way onto public works, but like farmers in the North, they appear to have done so only on a temporary basis, working a few days here and there for cash wages. This was the case for whites who worked on a section of the James River & Kanawha during 1851.[27] Perhaps because of their casual attitude toward the work, or maybe as a result of already developing stereotypes about "poor white trash," they were usually not seen as a satisfactory labour source. The Kanawha River Improvement used locals at first, but found them slow workers, so the company built in an incentive system whereby bonuses were paid for yards of earth dug. "Although free men should not require such a stimulus to the performance of their duty," moralized the

25 Journal A, p. 59, Journal B, p. 99, Journals of the Board of Public Works, entry 6, Virginia Board of Public Works Records, Archives, Virginia State Library, Commonwealth of Virginia, Richmond (hereafter VA/BPW); Time Charts for Workers on the James River and Kanawha Canal 1848–57 (Ms. 25), June 1849 and March 1851, in Austin-Twyman Papers, Earl Gregg Swem Library, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Va.; Account, 15 April–31 Oct. 1856, Cape Fear and Deep River Navigation Co. Papers (No. 2992), SHC; Thomas Bragg to Henry London, 9 April 1857, London Family Papers (No. 2442), SHC; Payrolls, 1859–60, Cape Fear and Deep River Navigation Company Records, Internal Improvements Papers, State of North Carolina Treasurer's and Comptroller's Records, North Carolina Archives, Raleigh (hereafter NCA); John Bosher to Robert Pollard, 11 Nov. 1822, Kanawha River Improvement, Letters, Accounts, Contracts, box 194, James River Company Records, VA/BPW (hereafter JRCR).

26 Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeomen Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

27 Time Chart for Workers on the James River and Kanawha Canal, Jan.–Dec. 1851, Austin-Twyman Papers (see n. 25 above).

superintendent, "the great bulk of labourers here are very illiterate, and without much sense of that kind of honour, which makes men desirous to earn their wages before receiving them."[28] The Kanawha ultimately depended upon slaves to supply Southern honour.

Elsewhere free labour was imported from the North to provide missing skills. A stream of Irish immigrants flowed from New York to New Orleans, some of whom found their way onto the Crescent City's canals. In 1820, about 1,000 Northern workers, probably Irishmen, were employed by South Carolina's Board of Works. Contractors for that state's Catawba and Saluda canals imported men from Philadelphia, Boston and Connecticut, providing passage, food, medical attention and sometimes advanced wages as inducements. Northern workers seemed to have spent only the work season in the South, returning north during winter. Some workers were brought down only to be left unemployed after a short period in a region without many other job opportunities. Such was the case of the hundred Irishmen brought in by the contractors Kirksey, Cotton & Co. for the Cape Fear & Deep River Navigation works in 1856.[29] Considerable traffic thus existed between North and South, but it appears to have been composed of Irish immigrants rather than native-born Northerners. Along with local labourers, this made for a significant contingent of free white workers on Southern canals. It is impossible to estimate the proportion of whites to blacks on Southern canals, but scattered evidence shows slaves almost always predominated.

The experience on Southern canals, as in Southern society in general, was set apart by the presence of slavery. For the bulk of the workforce it meant a more restrictive labour regimen than that confronted by their white co-workers. And although moving off the land, in the sense that they slaved off of plantations, blacks by no means were moving toward the free status of most canallers. Even for white labour, slavery meant fewer job opportunities. Still, with a growing number of white wage workers, both natives and migrants, the South was inching toward a world of work that already was fast overtaking labourers elsewhere.

The forces uprooting North Americans were but continuations of changes transforming Europe that had the same effect of setting people in motion,

28 Bosher, 5 Nov. 1821; Bosher to Pollard, 11 Nov. 1822, Kanawha River Improvement Letters, JRCR.

29 Earl F. Niehaus, *The Irish in New Orleans, 1800–1860* (Baton-Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 35; "Report of the Board of Public Works to the Legislature of South Carolina, 1820," in *Internal Improvements in South Carolina*, ed. Kohn (see Ch. 2, n. 28 above), 50; "Report of the Board of Public Works, 1821," in ibid., 131–37; Clipping from Camden, South Carolina, Newspaper, March 1820, in ibid., 67; Phillips, *History of Transportation* (see Ch. 1, n. 6 above), 85–86; "Report of the Board of Public Works, 1822," in *Internal Improvements in South Carolina*, ed. Kohn (see Ch. 2, n. 28 above), 165–66; Report of the Superintendent of Public Works for 1825, in ibid., 425; D. G. McDuffie to President and Directors, 7 June 1856, London Family Papers (No. 2442), SHC.

blazing the most important pathway to canals. The great transatlantic migrations of the sixteenth through twentieth centuries took place at a time when Europe was changing from feudal to capitalist society. Movement, internal and external, was a result of the process by which people were cut from the land or the craft and directed into the labour market. This obviously was a long-term and piecemeal development. The transformation from peasant to proletarian stretched over hundreds of years, was intergenerational rather than personal for most, and was at its essence an economic metamorphosis, not simple cultural flight. Necessarily, what happened in Europe was important to what happened in North America. Immigrants were fragments of European society carrying with them the seeds of social and economic transformation, unfinished business that would be transacted on canals where immigrants made up much of the labour force.

The importance of immigration to public works was made clear early on. An Irish-American newspaper maintained that "so long as necessary canals, roads, and bridges, remain unfinished or unattempted, so long must we feel the necessity of increasing the population by adding thereto the laborious and scientific foreigners. Then let emigration be encouraged, and this most solid of all riches flow in without interruption."[30] It was largely natives of Ireland who performed these public services. "The Irish labourers are found uncommonly handy and active, and for years have a large portion of the work on canals and turnpikes," Mathew Carey, the Irish-American printer and pamphleteer, wrote in the 1820s. More to the point, Ralph Waldo Emerson maintained, "the poor Irishman, the wheelbarrow is his country," while Charles Dickens asked rhetorically, "who else would dig, and delve, and drudge, and do domestic work, and make canals and roads, and execute great lines of Internal Improvement?"[31] These few literary examples hint at the emerging truism in the mid-nineteenth century that where there was scut work you would find the Irish. This relationship fed an emerging stereotype that the Irish were more suited to strenuous work than their Anglo peers, a rationalization of labour exploitation reminiscent of the assertion that blacks were built to work under a broiling sun or in fetid rice swamps. What led the Irish to canals, and how they came to be considered so handy with a spade – rather rudimentary technology in itself – is a fragment of a larger story in which a traditional peasant culture was broken down and capitalist society put in its place.

The Great Famine has been seen as the watershed in Irish history, with what went before irretrievably changed by this abrupt and catastrophic holocaust. Recent literature has moderated this position, however, tracing many of the phenomena associated with the Famine – the dissolution of the peasantry, the reformulation of family life and massive emigration – back into the eighteenth century, portraying this event as the culmination of a longstanding process.[32] Into the eighteenth century, most Irish rural dwellers lived communally, with the most common arrangement being the *clachan*, a cluster of dwellings in which groups of families, usually related, lived. The land they farmed was leased and worked in common in a system known as *rundale* in which each household was assigned a share of tillage and pasture land, while the land was always changing hands to ensure that no one family monopolized the best holdings, the emphasis being on subsistence not profit.[33] From the late seventeenth century, this communal system came under pressure as Ireland was drawn into the British market. Landlords confiscated land, evicted peasants and converted it to commercial production, a process facilitated by the government which chipped away at tenants' rights within the clachan system. After 1750, Irish market involvement accelerated as English demand grew apace and landlords shifted production to meet it. The Irish government promoted this growing commercial orientation, and the construction of the Grand and Royal canals was among its most significant initiatives. Ireland was a colonial appendage of the British economy, manipulated by the needs of English capital, and those drawn from the land into commercial production were reduced to pauper status, the wealth they produced transferred across the Irish Sea or into the hands of the Protestant Ascendancy at home. This process – what Kerby Miller calls commercialization – was a protracted one, not being completed until the Famine.[34] Most clung tenaciously to the land, adopting a variety of strategies to prevent complete amputation of traditional agrarian life.

The scarcity of land caused by its conversion to commercial production meant family strategies had to be altered to maintain access. The partible inheritance pattern that characterized the clachan, defining its familial and communal structure, was replaced by impartibility, conferring ownership on the oldest male offspring. Siblings were thus reduced to dependent status at home, wage labour or emigration. This classic shift in family priorities generally occurs when land is scarce. Farmers moved into the market gradually, more pushed by the need of cash for provisions, taxes,

30 *Shamrock*, 17 Aug. 1816, quoted in Svejda, *Irish Immigrant Participation in the Construction of the Erie Canal* (see Ch. 1, n. 11 above), 16.

31 Mathew Carey, *Reflections on the Subject of Emigration from Europe* (Philadelphia, 1826), 22; Emerson quoted in Richard D. Borgeson, "Irish Canal Laborers in America: 1817–1846," M.A. thesis, Pennsylvania State University, 1964, 24; Dickens quoted in Max Berger, *The British Traveller in America, 1836–1860* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith Publishers, 1964), 68.

32 "General Introduction," *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest 1780–1914*, ed. Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly, Jr. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983).

33 Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 27–28.

34 Ibid., 28–33; Michael Beames, *Peasants and Power: The Whiteboy Movements and their Control in Pre-Famine Ireland* (New York: St. Martin's, 1983), 8–13; Joel Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved: A Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800–1850* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), 144–47.

rents, tithes and other demands, than pulled by perceived profit-making opportunities. As changes in the land squeezed tenants from their relatively secure leases, they entered more temporary agreements where rents fluctuated with the market and caused greater turnover. Population pressures and high rents shrank the amount of land people could afford and many were reduced to a *conacre* system, renting small plots for one season's potato crop that barely allowed them to keep a toehold on the land.[35]

Peasants gradually were transformed into labourers. The lucky found steady employment in one place, but many had to turn to migrant or *spalpeen* work part of the year. Some shipped for the season to fish the Grand Banks off Newfoundland. Others left the land for part of the year to work the harvests in Ireland; in particular, those from the poor West poured into the South leading to resentment among local residents (and sowing the seeds of the Cork–Connaught feud that flared along North American canals). By 1816, steamboat service made passage to England and Scotland affordable, and many followed the harvests across the Irish Sea. Public works in Ireland and Britain also drew many from the land, spurring their conversion to wage work. Tramping from job to job, trying to piece together enough wages with the potatoes on the small plot at home to keep alive, spalpeeners were neither wholly of the land nor of the labour market. Eventually, most would stay on at wage work although this step was not usually taken until all other options had been exhausted.[36] Most fought their displacement from the land; it was not a mystical relation but a practical realization that access to the soil meant greater control over subsistence. The stick not the carrot prodded peasants into becoming proletarians. Tired of being pushed along, they increasingly turned and fought.

By the early nineteenth century, Irish society was resolving into two classes with diverging interests, the landed and the landless. Widespread social disorder was the result.[37] The most common form of conflict in Ireland, the faction fight, pitted kinship or community networks against each other in ritualized combat that served recreative functions while playing a crucial role in controlling access to land and jobs.[38] In a more systematic fashion, peasants formed secret societies and waged a war of

35 Powers, "Invisible Immigrants" (see Ch. 2, n. 37 above), 61–63; Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles* (see n. 33 above), 34, 217–18; Beames, *Peasants and Power* (see n. 34 above), 6–8.

36 Barbara M. Kerr, "Irish Seasonal Migration to Great Britain, 1800–38," *Irish Historical Studies*, v. 3 (Sept. 1943), 365–80; Arthur Redford, *Labour Migration in England 1800–1850* (orig. ed. 1926; New York: Augustus Kelley, 1968), 141–49; James E. Handley, *The Navvy in Scotland* (Cork: Cork University, 1970), 16–20; Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles* (see n. 33 above), 34.

37 Beames, *Peasants and Power* (see n. 34 above), 13, 16–17; Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles* (see n. 33 above), 53–54.

38 Paul E. W. Roberts, "Caravats and Shanavests: Whiteboyism and Faction Fighting in East Munster, 1802–11," in *Irish Peasants*, ed. Clark and Donnelly (see n. 32 above), 64–101; Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles* (see n. 33 above), 60–61.

violence to resist the collapse of traditional agricultural production. Michael Beames's study of Whiteboyism traces the economic roots of a representative agrarian protest movement. Originating in the 1760s and spreading to all of Ireland outside Ulster by the end of the century, the movement was a response to the commercialization of social relations and the proletarianization of many peasants. The Whiteboys' overriding goal was maintaining access to the land, thereby ensuring subsistence, the central concern of peasantries. In the process, they developed an alternative vision of social relations to that of the market. While there were other types of movements, all different in some way, they all shared certain features with the Whiteboys. They were secret societies, some of a religiously sectarian nature, that grew out of economic grievances and used force and violence – terrorism – to achieve their ends; as such, they were indicative of the degree of social turmoil caused in Ireland by the transition to capitalism.[39] They also provided an important historical precedent for canallers caught in the same vise of dwindling means and narrowing options.

Collective violence was a stopgap measure, not a solution, and the Irish ultimately faced a tough decision: landless status at home always on the edge of poverty, or emigration abroad, which also meant proletarianization for most. In fact, there was little choice in the matter. Options like conacre and spalpeen labour gave the illusion of volition, but these also were products of diminished expectations. The social and economic changes undergone by Irish society as a result of its integration into the marketplace narrowed opportunity. An individual could not choose to remain a peasant on a clachan, but was instead left with the pick of two lesser evils, partial or complete separation from the land. To characterize emigration, then, as a rational decision made in light of prevailing social and economic conditions is to miss the fact that conditions for two centuries and more had been increasingly stacked against those involved and imposed an ultimatum more than a free choice. People exerted some control over their immediate condition and this was of significant personal importance. Yet seen as a whole, this was but a patina of volition overlaying the rock-hard imperatives of historical forces propelling people into emigrating. Emigration was a daunting experience, filled with both terror and anticipation. Whatever their future prospects, most would-be North Americans found the transition a painful one.

Unlike those of Richard Kelley and Fred Fry, the emigration experience of most canallers cannot be reconstructed; yet there is little reason to suspect that it diverged greatly from that of other migrants. Moving from

39 Beames, *Peasants and Power* (see n. 34 above); James S. Donnelly, Jr., "The Whiteboy Movement, 1761–5," *Irish Historical Studies*, v. 21 (March 1978), 20–54; *Secret Societies in Ireland*, ed. T. Desmond Williams (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1973); *Irish Peasants*, ed. Clark and Donnelly (see n. 32 above); Gale E. Christianson, "Secret Societies and Agrarian Violence, 1790–1840," *Agricultural History*, v. 46 (July 1972), 369–84.

the land, some got their first taste of navvying on Ireland's canals, and quickly learned the lesson of wage labour.[40] Led by work at potato harvesting or lured by the promise of higher wages, many Irish made the jump to Britain's public works, where they constituted a significant component of the labour force.[41] From there it was but another step to North America. Engineers from the Erie Canal made a fact-finding trip to England in 1816, and news of opportunities in North America percolated among the navvies. The following year, Canvass White, a New York engineer, returned to England and recruited a force of experienced Irish workers. By the end of the 1818 season there were significant numbers of Irish on the Erie.[42] The seeming plethora of jobs and higher wages in North America made migration an attractive proposition for both experienced canallers and labourers in general, especially as Ireland and Britain slid into agricultural crisis in the 1820s. To tap this labour supply, canal companies and contractors sent over recruiting agents, and several states set up immigration commissions.[43]

From one instance of orchestrated immigration it is possible to get a sense of the experience of some canallers. Facing an endemic labour shortage, the C&O Canal sought to exploit Europe's depressed economic situation. "Meat, three times a day, a plenty of bread and vegetables, with a reasonable allowance of liquor, and light, ten, or twelve dollars a month for wages, would we have supposed," wrote Charles Mercer, the company president, "prove a powerful attraction to those, who, narrowed down in the circle of their enjoyments, have at this moment, a year of scarcity presented to them." Mercer argued that emigration would relieve Great Britain "of a wretched surplus population, by transferring it to America, where its presence is much needed, and its labour would be amply rewarded." Agents were sent to Europe and notices placed in Irish and Dutch newspapers of the wonderful opportunities available. The C&O claimed it would take three to four thousand Irish and their priests, while ten thousand job openings in all, over three times what was needed, were advertised.[44]

40 For instance, workers on the Shannon link of the Grand Canal several times struck for higher wages. Ruth Delaney, *A Celebration of 250 years of Ireland's Inland Waterways* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1986), 87.

41 Terry Coleman estimated that one-third of Britain's railway navvies were Irish. David Brooke found the Irish concentrated in the West Midlands and Scottish border region. In his study of a Yorkshire railway navvy gang in 1851, J. A. Patmore determined that 26% were Irish-born. Coleman, *The Railway Navvies* (see Ch. 2, n. 26 above), 83–84; Brooke, *The Railway Navvy* (see Ch. 2, n. 26 above), 21, 26–29; Patmore, "A Navvy Gang of 1851," *Journal of Transport History*, v. 5 (May 1962), 185.

42 The Canal Commissioners reported that one-quarter (roughly 1,000) of the workforce were foreign-born, presumably mostly Irish. *Annual Report of the Canal Commissioners* (Albany, 1819), 10.

43 Powers, "Invisible Immigrants" (see Ch. 2, n. 37 above), 89–90; George E. Condon, *Stars in the Water: The Story of the Erie Canal* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974), 63, 67; Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City 1825–1863* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1949), ch. 1.

44 Mercer to James Maury, 18 Nov. 1828 (A 38–40), C&O/LS; Mercer to James Barbour, 18 Nov. 1828 (A 41–43), ibid.; Circular to U.S. Consuls at Cork, Belfast and Dublin, 18 Nov. 1828 (A 43), ibid.; Mercer to Thomas P. Cope, 18 Nov. 1828 (A 40–41), ibid.; Mercer to Maury, 7 March 1829 (A 60–61), ibid. The Illinois & Michigan also recruited labourers from abroad. *Second Annual Report of the Commissioners of the Illinois and Michigan Canal* (Vandalia, 1837), 10.

Those who took up the C&O's offer signed a limited-term indenture of two to three months in return for passage to America. In all, several hundred men entered into this scaled-down indenture and emigrated, some with their families. Skilled hands were especially desired, and a number of colliers and miners from England and Wales, "men of good character steady and industrious," made the move. "Some few Irishmen are among them," noted the agent, "but all these have worked sometime in England, amongst Englishmen and are good workmen and peacable."[45] The desperation of prospective employees was made clear by the case of an Irish civil engineer who travelled to New York with his wife on faith of the advertisements. He wrote to Mercer expressing his desire for work, "I care not how fataguing [*sic*], or how low the wages."[46]

The move to the New World for these economic migrants was not a smooth one. A number of willing labourers were swindled by a man posing as the agent of the C&O who directed them to Liverpool in return for a £1 fee.[47] During the passage, the labourers were fed too little and what they got was often rotten, leading them to threaten the company's agents and attempt to break into the ship's storeroom to "gratify their own ingovernable appetites."[48] It was no surprise, then, that many were in sorry shape on landing. Contractors complained that they arrived "destitute of the comforts of life, and we have been compelled to clothe them." Other employers were not so solicitous; one in particular saw his hands abandon the line because he refused to provide adequate food and shelter. A number of the immigrants needed medical attention, provided by the company but at the ultimate expense of the individual, while others appealed to charitable organizations for relief.[49] Disenchanted with the situation and lured by the possibility of immediate wages, many soon ran off to nearby cities or to work on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. The company prosecuted a number of these runaways, but the Baltimore court ruled that the indenture did not constitute a master-and-servant relationship. Instead, it was determined to be an ordinary contract and therefore could only be enforced by an action for damages. The company decided to let the matter drop.[50] The

45 Henry B. Richards, 21 Aug. 1829, C&O/LR. Also Mercer to Maury, 8 July 1829 (A 82–84), C&O/LS; Mercer to Richards, 8 July 1829 (A 84–87), ibid.

46 Daniel Teer to Mercer, 12 Jan. 1829, 19 Aug. 1830, C&O/LR.

47 [Baltimore] *Niles' Register*, v. 37, 169 (7 Nov. 1829).

48 George Gill, 18 Nov. 1829; Peter Powell, 18 Nov. 1829, C&O/LR.

49 Boteler & Reynolds to John P. Ingle, 5 Nov. 1829, C&O/LR; C&O/PRO, 6 Oct. 1829 (A 367–68); Ingle to M. S. Wines, 3 Oct. 1829 (A 112–14), C&O/LS; Ingle to Dr. Joshua Riley, 21 Oct. 1829, ibid.; Stewards of the "Society of the Sons of St. George" to Ingle, 17 Feb. 1830, C&O/LR.

50 Peter Powell, 18 Nov. 1829, C&O/LR; William Wirt to Ingle, 28 Oct., 4, 6 Nov. 1829, ibid. Ingle to M. S. Wines, 3 Oct. 1829 (A 112–14), C&O/LS; Ingle to Phineas Janney, 26 Oct. 1829 (A 122–24), ibid.; Ingle to Wirt, 29 Oct., 6, 7, 13, 25 Nov. 1829 (A 125–29, 138), ibid.; Ingle to

C&O's attempt to resurrect indentured labour showed how difficult the move was for prospective navvies, even in cases of assisted immigration.

Traditionally, it has been assumed that the Irish arrived as peasants and collected in city slums as a floating proletariat. The first part of this assumption must be seen as largely false. The majority of emigrants had prior experience with commercial relations and wage labour, and thus cannot be viewed as peasants, at least not in the pure sense; in fact, emigration was largely a result of the breakdown of the peasantry. What evidence there is for canallers bears out this revision. Of the 635 signators on a petition from Rideau canallers in 1829, 428 (67%) were from the provinces of Ulster in the North and Leinster in the East, the two most commercialized parts of Ireland at the time, as opposed to the less developed South and West. This breakdown reflected contemporary immigration patterns.[51] The second part of the assumption – that the Irish became an urban proletariat – would not apply to most canal labourers, who would probably have been considered rural dwellers given the location of shanty camps, yet they were as much members of a proletariat as if they lived in a city slum.[52] Although it is impossible to determine exactly, it is not too far-fetched to say that the overwhelming majority arrived as labourers and remained so for some time.

It was certainly the view of contemporary observers that the Irish worked on canals not by choice but by necessity. For example, an official on Canada's canals noted that "the labour is invariably performed by Irishmen, who . . . having no other mode of gaining their livelihood seem to monopolize all the labour of the public works, both here and in the United States."[53] What evidence there is points to the fact that canallers often arrived with but the barest essentials and in a weakened physical state. Many moved right onto public works; for example, the Cleveland *Herald*

Glenn, 1 April 1830 (A 194–95), ibid.; *Second Annual Report of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company* (Washington, 1830), 5–6; *Niles' Register*, v. 37, 150 (31 Oct. 1829).

51 Lt. Col. By, petition on behalf of the Irish working on the Rideau Canal, Canada, to the Colonial Office, 5 Feb. 1829, p. 64, v. 22, C.O. 384, Colonial Office Records, Public Records Office, London, England. I would like to thank Dr. Kerby Miller of the University of Missouri at Columbia for drawing this document to my attention, and for kindly providing his data for my use.

52 In a study of Ontario's Irish, Donald Akenson found that the overwhelming majority of Irish people and two-thirds of Catholics lived in rural areas. The crucial question missed by his urban–rural dichotomy is whether these people were labourers or proprietors. Mere rural residence did not provide one with independence; some control over the means of production was necessary. One would suspect that many of these were indeed farm labourers, perhaps insulated from the worst conditions of a ghetto but no more in control than an urban worker. Even those who rented or owned farm property were not necessarily in a favourable position, as the pressures on land and creeping soil exhaustion in Ontario at this time made many holdings marginal at best. See Akenson, "Ontario: Whatever Happened to the Irish?" *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, v. 3, ed. Akenson (Gananoque, Ontario: Langdale Press, 1982), 231–33; John McCallum, *Unequal Beginnings: Agriculture and Economic Development in Quebec and Ontario until 1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980); Gagan, *Hopeful Travellers* (see n. 8 above); Parr, "Hired Men" (see n. 9 above), 93–97.

53 Memorandum of Charles Wetherall, 3 April 1843, Lachine Canal – Riots on the Canal 1842–45, file 9, v. 60 (hereafter Lachine Riots), Records of the Department of Public Works, series Al, Record Group 11, Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa (hereafter PAC/RG11).

noted the arrival of some Irish on the Ohio Canal in 1825 who had come directly from landing at Quebec. Colonel By, chief engineer of the Rideau, wrote of recent arrivals that "at present the poor fellows lay with nothing but their rags to cover them." And in 1854, a director of the St. Mary's Canal described the workers scoured from upstate New York as "sick, starved, lean, lank, slim, light of build, fallow, and about half of them will weigh under 100 lbs. They look as if they had come from abroad or an emigrant ship lately."[54] The pitiful condition of newly arrived canallers certainly became worse after the depression of the late 1830s and the famine seized Ireland.

John Mactaggart, an official on the Rideau, did not agree that the Irish were necessary for the public works. Stating a preference for French workers, he felt that migrating to Canada meant only misery for the Irish. "Let some plan, therefore, be found to keep these people in bread at home. . . . Emigration only increases their distress, and they may just as well die in Ireland as in Canada." William Thomas, our Welsh immigrant, echoed Mactaggart's dyspeptic view of immigration. Lured across the Atlantic by fellow Welshmen who spoke glowingly of the opportunity to be met there, Thomas found work on the Erie near Utica in the late 1810s. His experiences were less than rewarding, as he revealed in a letter home to his family. "These men sent back a lot of lies. . . . If it were not for the canal, many of the Welsh would be without work. I beg all of my old neighbors not to think of coming here as they would spend more coming here than they think. My advice to them is to love their district and stay there. I am thinking of coming home myself this spring if I have the support of the Lord." Whether Thomas was expressing just a natural homesickness or a more profound discontent with his reduced condition as a canal labourer, it is clear that he did not consider the New World a land of milk and honey. Of course, some canallers improved their condition by immigrating. A group of Irish workers on the Rideau maintained that "on the whole we most certainly conclude that the Poor Man's situation is bettered by emigrating to Canada, as our own personal experience has fully convinced us." The fact that they deemed themselves to have attained "a state of comfort and happiness we never could have hoped to meet had we remained in Ireland" shows that the peasant-to-proletarian pathway could lead up as well as down.[55]

For good or ill, most canallers were Irish by the 1830s. "For some years

54 Cleveland *Herald*, 16 Sept. 1825; By quoted in Wylie, "Poverty, Distress, and Disease" (see Introduction, n. 11 above), 9; John Brooks quoted in Dickinson, *To Build a Canal* (see Ch. 2, n. 14 above), 81.

55 John Mactaggart, *Three Years in Canada; An Account of the Actual State of the Country in 1826–7–8* (London, 1829), v. 2, 249; William Thomas to His Father et al., 17 Aug. 1818, in *The Welsh in America*, ed. Conway (see n. 51 above), 60–62; Petition on behalf of the Irish working on the Rideau Canal, 5 Feb. 1829 (see n. 51 above).

past, the Public Works, both in the United States & in Canada, have been carried on almost exclusively by Irish Labourers, who have been accustomed to flock in Masses from work to work," affirmed the engineer Charles Atherton, "& thus a large proportion of the Labourers on the Lachine Canal Improvements are men of unsettled habits, having no established home, & consequently not bound by the moral ties which influence a settled population." Martin Donnelly, a labourer on the Beauharnois, at least concurred on the transiency of his fellow workers: "The larger portion of these men are Irishmen who have worked in the United States. The remaining portion are with very few exceptions, Emigrants from Ireland, recently arrived in this Province."[56] They swarmed public works sites, making them virtual Irish villages – at least in demographic terms, for the transient, competitive nature of shanty camps would never delude a navvy into thinking he was in a peasant clachan back home.

For immigrant canallers there is no question that the end of their journeys, however different their backgrounds, was much the same: wage work in a notoriously rough occupation. They may have moved on again in a short time, but most would have been likely to remain in wage work. We see here the connection between European industrial development, class formation and North American labour demand, a chain with immigration as the crucial link. The changes begun over a century before were concluded on the shores of North America. Irish peasants had been made into proletarians. Their story – gradual separation from the land, transfer to wage labour and migration to where the market dictated – was played out around the world in varying renditions. Representatives of the many people set in motion by the transition to capitalism, among them Africans, Germans, Swiss and Welsh, found their way onto canals. The story of canallers, then, is one small thread in this tapestry.

The canal construction industry built a labour force that mirrored North America's developing social landscape. The makeup of this army of workers and the conditions they experienced on canals were moulded by the nature of the labour market, which into the late 1830s was understocked. No rock was left unturned in an attempt to fill this insatiable demand. Labour agents were sent to Europe and large Eastern U.S. cities, notices posted, ads placed in papers, immigrants rounded up, slaves hired or bought, farmers drained from the soil, and women and children harnessed to production. Still this was not enough. Canal boards looked to other sources of untapped labour. In 1818, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun unsuccessfully recommended that the military be used on transportation projects. The C&O's bid to Congress to have federal troops dig its proposed

56 Atherton to Hope, 29 March 1843, Lachine Riots (see n. 53 above); Deposition of Martin Donnelly (No. 3), "Beauharnois Report" (see Introduction, n. 3 above).

mountain section proved equally fruitless. New York exempted labourers on the Erie Canal from militia duty in 1819 so that construction would not be interrupted, and Canada's Rideau and Ottawa River canals were built partly by the British military.[57] Canals also turned to convict labour. In 1821, Governor DeWitt Clinton pardoned prisoners from New York's Auburn State Prison who agreed to work for contractors on the Erie Canal at prevailing wage rates, a practice renewed the next year. Indiana's state prison was located in Jeffersonville in anticipation of using its prisoners to build a canal around the falls on the Ohio River. And Ohio released a number of prisoners from its state penitentiary in 1827 to work on the Columbus feeder of the Ohio Canal.[58]

In the process, canal companies constructed a workforce divided by ethnic and cultural background and by freedom and bondage, and riddled throughout by differences of gender and age. This segmentation was further compounded by the physical separation imposed on the labourers by the nature of the industry, strung out as it was between two countries. Despite its heterogeneity and diffuse nature, however, the canal workforce was unified by its common condition. Free or unfree, man, woman or child, canallers had a weak grip on the fruits of their labour, and one that was being progressively loosened by the growing power of the market.

Markets and human capital

The tens of thousands of workers employed in the canal construction industry at its peak in the 1820s and 1830s collected into distinct yet overlapping regional labour markets marked by different types of workers with divergent wage rates. The one true dividing line was that between North and South, which bisected North America into prevailing free and unfree forms of labour. Nonetheless, the tramping Irish canaller acted as a solvent that blurred even this distinction.

Quebec and Ontario constituted the northernmost labour market. The international boundary separated Canada and the United States into distinct social and political systems with different currencies, yet did little to stop

57 Forrest G. Hill, *Roads, Rails and Waterways: The Army Engineers and Early Transportation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), 41; Ward, *Early Development of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal* (see Ch. 2, n. 14 above), 35–36; *Second Annual Report of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal* (Washington, 1830), 17, 25–27; Noble E. Whitford, *History of the Canal System of the State of New York* (Albany: Brandow Printing Co., 1906), v. 1, 91; Wylie, "Poverty, Distress, and Disease" (see Introduction, n. 11 above), 10–12.

58 Minutes of the New York Canal Commission, 16 July 1821 (v. 1, 23), 7 Feb. 1822 (v. 1, 25) (see Ch. 2, n. 29 above); Shaw, *Erie Water West* (see Ch. 1, n. 21 above), 129; Condon, *Stars in the Water* (see n. 43 above), 64; *Indiana Gazatteer* (Indianapolis, 1833), 135; State of Ohio, "An Act to commute the punishment of certain convicts in the Penitentiary, for labor on the Columbus feeder of the Ohio Canal, 30 Jan. 1827," in *Public Documents Concerning the Ohio Canals*, ed. Kilbourne (see Ch. 2, n. 64 above), 266–67; State of Ohio, General Assembly, *Journal of the House of Representatives* (Columbus, 1827), 19–20; [Chillicothe, Ohio] *Scioto Gazette*, 10 May 1827.

was joined increasingly by married men and their families, often recent immigrants, who moved from job to job, setting up residence in each new location; bunkhouses yielded to family shanties. This offered more scope for a domestic existence but was also a sign of dependence on canal work. Increasingly, married men did not have a life off public works, a place to retreat to and perhaps investigate other employment opportunities; meanwhile, women and children were drawn more fully into the canal economy. As there was a surplus of adult male labour, and because room and board was no longer provided – a service within which family members had formerly worked – it was less likely that women and children would find employment. The consequent decline in family earnings was a main complaint of strikers on the Beauharnois in 1843. At the same time, the growing Irish domination of the workforce was a measure of canaller's exclusion from society, their ethnic solidarity an indication of their weakness, manipulated to justify harsh and unjust treatment. As was so often the case in the rise of industrial capitalism, a dialectic of economic and social exploitation powered the degradation of entire groups of people. The desperate shanty camps of this era reflected canallers' growing marginality.

As a result of these negative forces, the already fragile seams of shanty culture often gave way, as embittered people turned to tramping or thieving to try to survive, and the old points of conflict – personal, racial, ethnic and regional – sparked ever more violent internecine conflict. More positively, the depths of their shared descent periodically convinced workers that they must work as one to resist the deterioration of their condition. As a result, this period was also one marked by labour organization and action. This was the one beacon of hope in an otherwise dismal landscape – yet it was a false dawn, as the industry responded with military, legal and cultural might to stem worker power.

The fruits of their labours

It was a long hot summer of 1842 in St. Catharines, Ontario, a village under siege by "hordes of Irish laborers" flooding in from New York or fresh off immigrant boats looking for work on the Welland. As a result, there was work for only "one in ten of those who are waiting for it." Destitution and hunger bred desperation in the shanty camps, and in June fighting broke out between factions over jobs, a result of "the shameful and most unnatural feud between the Corkonians, as they are styled, and the Connaught and Far Downs men." The former drove the latter from work, but the Connaughtmen marshalled forces (to the number of 250) and assaulted St. Catharines, sending their opponents "flying in all directions, through houses, yards, and over fences." Only the intervention of the militia, ably supported by the Catholic priest, Reverend Lee, prevented an escalation of hostilities between "these strange and mad belligerent factions

– brothers and countrymen, thirsting like savages for each others blood – horrible infatuation."[38] In August, differences were temporarily put aside as the workers halted all work on the line, refusing to let any labour until jobs were provided for all, and took their protest to the streets in an unusual display of mutual need. A local magistrate wrote that "they have paraded the Streets of St. Catharines repeatedly within these few days and last night about Six hundred of them did so with a Board on which was printed 'Bread or Work' and a 'red flag' hoisted with it." "The District is in a state of anarchy," it was warned.[39] An expansion of construction temporarily stilled the troubled waters, however.

The events in St. Catharines that summer demonstrated the mixed effects the transformation of canal construction had on canallers. Unemployment, job competition and shrinking earnings sharpened the edge of existence, a knife that pricked the workers' yielding flesh. It is not surprising that some seized the bloody blade and turned it on each other. Faction fights were a continuing feature in navvies' lives, powered by both harsh work conditions and regional animosities. This was one dimension of the experience of proletarianization: the creation of a workforce fragmented into particularistic groups or even a jigsaw puzzle of individuals. At the same time, the march on St. Catharines, part bread riot, part general strike, was different from the violence and protest that welled up on canals in earlier years, showing both greater despair and more radical direction. And this incident was a small part of the new wave of labour conflict that swept canals in the 1840s and more clearly etched class lines. Thus, heightening class conflict was the other dimension of proletarianization.

Faction fighting captured the ambivalent heart of the navvy experience. At the same time an expression of very real social antipathies imported from Ireland and embellished on public works, and an outgrowth of the harsh conditions canallers laboured under, this conflict was neither wholly residual Old World squabbling nor entirely embedded in class experience. The transformation of peasant into proletarian culminated in the 1840s, and the resulting unemployment, low wages and pared-down existence caused canallers to look backwards to old loyalties and past grievances, and to turn on each other in a mad scramble for the dwindling opportunities available. This was not entirely new, but both the degree and intensity of social conflict pointed to sharpening tensions. In all, there were fifty riots during this decade (forty-seven in Canada), the vast majority of which involved faction fights. This compares to thirty-two incidents in the 1830s

38 *St. Catharines Journal*, 7 July, 11 Aug. 1842.

39 Thorburn to Thomas Murdoch, 18 Aug. 1842, Welland Riots (see Ch. 6, n. 67 above); *St. Catharines Journal*, 11 Aug. 1842; Power to Begley, 12, 15 Aug. 1842, Welland Canal Letterbook, PAC/RG43. The red flag likely symbolized blood, which, according to E. P. Thompson, was linked to bread in English food protests. "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present*, no. 50 (1971), 135.