

The Boys in the Nova Scotian Coal Mines: 1873 to 1923

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ROBERT MCINTOSH

The Boys in the Nova Scotian Coal Mines: 1873-1923

A CORRESPONDENT OF THE *Scottish American Journal*, who visited the Albion Mines in Pictou County in 1880, could not help but be struck by a sharp division in the mine labour force: “The boys seem(ed) happy enough, and were bright little fellows from 11 to 15 years of age; the men were respectful and small in stature, but they appeared dull and phlegmatic by contrast with the younger generation”. Unfortunately, colliery boys have not caught historians’ attention as they did this Victorian correspondent’s. While the relatively “dull and phlegmatic” older Nova Scotian miners have been the subject of an extensive amount of recent historical research, the boys have been virtually ignored.¹

The boys were by no means a homogeneous group. In the provincial Mines Act, the term “boy” was taken to refer to anyone under 18; within the mining community, it was often applied to anyone not yet meriting the use of the handpick — in other words, one who had yet to attain the position of coal cutter, or miner proper. “Boy” described individuals aged from eight to 21, engaged in a variety of occupations within the mine. From 1880 to 1890 the proportion of boys in the provincial colliery workforce rose from 17.1 to 21.5 per cent, but they failed to participate fully in the large expansion in the mine workforce after the turn of the century. Their relative strength in the mine workforce fell steadily during the early 20th century as their average age increased and by 1910 they comprised only 8.8 per cent of the mine workers (see Table One). In 1923, legislation virtually excluded boys from the province’s coal mines.²

Boys were in the mines for a number of reasons. The state of technology in the late 19th century required that individuals under a certain size be employed for

Special thanks to Del Muise for reading an earlier draft of this paper. Research was assisted by an M.A. fellowship from the SSHRCC.

1 *Trades Journal*, 15 September 1880. Recent theses on the miners include David Frank, “Coal Masters and Coal Miners: the 1922 Strike and the Roots of Class Conflict in the Cape Breton Coal Industry”, M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1974; “The Cape Breton Coal Miners 1919-1925”, Ph.D. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1979; Don Macgillivray, “Industrial Unrest in Cape Breton 1919-1925”, M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1971; Ian McKay, “Industry, work and community in the Cumberland coalfields, 1848-1927”, Ph.D. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1983; Robert McIntosh, “A Community Transformed: The Nova Scotian Coal Miners 1879-1925”, M.A. thesis, Carleton University, 1985; Sharon Reilly, “The Provincial Workmen’s Association of Nova Scotia 1879-1898”, M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1979. A recent exception to general inattention to mine boys is Ian McKay’s article “The Realm of Uncertainty: The Experience of Work in the Cumberland Coal Mines, 1873-1927”, *Acadiensis*, XVI, 1 (Fall 1986), pp. 3-57.

2 Nova Scotia, Department of Mines Reports, in *Journals and Proceedings of the House of Assembly*, for 1880, 1890, and 1910; Nova Scotia *Statutes*, 1923, 13 Geo. V, c. 54, sect. 1.

Table One

| | No. of Boys in Workforce | Total Colliery Workforce | Percentage of Boys in Workforce |
|------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1874 | 555 | 3939 | 14.1 |
| 1876 | 565 | 3510 | 16.1 |
| 1878 | 510 | 3017 | 16.9 |
| 1880 | 519 | 3041 | 17.1 |
| 1882 | 627 | 3455 | 18.1 |
| 1884 | 768 | 4565 | 16.8 |
| 1886 | 722 | 4379 | 16.5 |
| 1888 | 740 | 4312 | 17.2 |
| 1890 | 1102 | 5119 | 21.5 |
| 1892 | 882 | 5659 | 15.6 |
| 1894 | 844 | 5826 | 14.5 |
| 1896 | 699 | 5704 | 12.3 |
| 1898 | 686 | 5127 | 13.4 |
| 1900 | 735 | 5500 | 13.4 |
| 1902 | 792 | 7606 | 10.4 |
| 1904 | 877 | 10624 | 8.3 |
| 1906 | 826 | 10712 | 7.7 |
| 1908 | 921 | 12087 | 7.6 |
| 1910 | 1063 | 12059 | 8.8 |
| 1912 | 922 | 12504 | 7.4 |
| 1914 | 831 | 13632 | 6.1 |

Department of Mines *Reports* give no separate figures for boys after 1915. These figures exclude those engaged in construction work at provincial collieries.

particular tasks. Wage levels have also to be stressed: the labour of boys was cheaper than that of their fathers and older brothers. The presence of young workers in the mine had further advantages for older workers: by equating "boys" with low-skill, poorly-paid work, the status of the "skilled" collier was safeguarded. At the same time, the boys' employment was welcomed within mining families, since they could then contribute to the family income and since their early initiation into the Victorian coal mine was expected to lead eventually to the most highly skilled positions.

One important factor determining the number of boys employed was the method of late 19th and early 20th century coal mining. The technique used over this period, labelled "room and pillar", had been introduced into Nova Scotia by

the General Mining Association in the middle third of the 19th century.³ A variety of levels were driven outward from the core shaft in the mine; balances were cut up into the coal seam from these levels. In each balance, “rooms” from which coal was mined in an initial cutting alternated with the “pillars” of coal left to buttress the mine ceiling. This technique of extraction gave the mine a characteristic “honeycomb” appearance. Popular with the miners — the disparate workplaces within the mine allowed them a good deal of autonomy — it persisted in the province against the in-roads of more modern mining techniques. Notwithstanding minor 19th century experiments, the more regimented “longwall” system of mining did not first appear in a major Springhill pit until 1924; “room and pillar” endured into the 1920s and beyond on Cape Breton and not until 1930 did longwall begin to replace “room and pillar” in Pictou County.⁴ Loading continued to be undertaken by hand at least as long.⁵ Although improvements in haulage continued to be introduced over this period, horses had yet to be displaced by 1923. While the introduction of mechanical cutters transformed facework between 1873 and 1923, boys’ work was substantially unchanged.

Two early 19th century innovations in mining greatly increased the demand for child labour. Pioneered in Great Britain, these and other state of the art mining techniques were subsequently introduced into Nova Scotia by the General Mining Association. In Great Britain, the introduction of horses and some wheeled vehicles underground had gradually displaced women, the traditional “beasts of burden”. As the burden of work became lighter, women were replaced by the less expensive labour of boys. By mid-century the task of hauling coal generally fell to 14 to 17 year old boys, called drivers, and the horses they led. Where seams were too narrow to permit the passage of horses (or adults), coal continued to be moved manually by boys on all fours dragging sledges. A second technological innovation early in the 19th century encouraged the employment of even younger children. As mines extended deeper underground, problems of ventilation became more pressing. Under the compound system of mine ventilation developed by John Buddle, doors known as “traps” were introduced into mines. Generally closed so as to channel air throughout the mine, these doors had to be frequently opened to allow the passage of drivers, their horses and material. “Trappers”, often less than 10 years old, were employed to perform this task. These boys worked long days relative even to the

3 Donald MacLeod, “Miners, mining men and mining reform: the changing technology of Nova Scotian gold mines and collieries, 1858-1910”, Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1982, p. 308.

4 McKay, “Industry, work and community”, p. 243; Frank, “Coal Masters and Coal Miners”, p. 220; James M. Cameron, *The Pictonian Colliers* (Halifax, 1974), p. 120.

5 At the more technologically advanced U.S. bituminous mines, the first successful mechanical loader was not introduced until 1922. See Alexander Mackenzie Thompson, “Technology, Labour and Industrial Structure of the United States Coal Industry: A Historical Perspective”, Ph.D. thesis, Stanford University, 1979, p. 61.

miners, since they were the first down the shaft and the last to leave the mine at the end of the shift. At Victorian mines where “expansion and technical progress” were most pronounced, child labour was most extensive.⁶

The child’s experience of work in the mine, shaped by the technology of the day, changed as he grew older. The boy, introduced to the mine by his father, would likely be employed in various odd jobs on the surface, if he were not immediately placed by a trap. Surface employment might include running errands, cleaning lamps or distributing picks. Far less pleasant work involved the sorting of coal; perched above a belt carrying the recently-mined coal, it was the boys’ responsibility to remove any stone inadvertently brought up with the coal. The work of trapper boys was no more appealing. Labouring “under conditions which were very like solitary confinement in darkness”, these boys almost welcomed the bullying of passing drivers as a relief from tedium.⁷ The contrast between the frightened trapper boy and the self-confident driver is captured in two mid-19th century colliery songs from Great Britain. In one the following verse is found: “Father! must I go down with you/ Into that dark and dismal hole,/ And leave the sky above so blue,/ Buried amidst the blackest coal?” And in the other song, this verse: “What a merry gay life is that of the Driver/ And what if I scarce see the sun,/ I can sing in the dark, and spend my last stiver/ In sweeties, and frolic, and fun”.⁸ The trapper was a novice in the mine; the driver was familiar with its rhythm.

The variety of tasks a boy might perform in the course of his education in “practical mining”, as the miners called it, was described to the 1888 Labour Commission by a number of Springhill mine workers. William Terrace, a veteran of the mine at 15, had first worked at the age of ten turning a fan and had recently started driving. Murdoch McLeod, a 29-year old miner, had entered the pit at nine as a trapper; he had “worked [him]self up”, spending many years as a driver before becoming a miner. Elisha Paul’s path to coal cutter was even more varied. Employed first as a trapper, Paul graduated to the position of driver within a few months. His next occupation was on a balance, supervising the movement of empty boxes up to the miners’ workplaces and the passage of boxes full of coal down to the levels. By 16 he was a cage runner; he removed full boxes from the balance and replaced them with empty ones for the return trip back to the miners. Later he was employed as a loader; he filled the boxes with

6 See J.S. Martell, “Early Coal-Mining in Nova Scotia”, *Dalhousie Review*, XXV, 2 (July 1945), pp. 156-72; D.A. Muise, “The GMA and the Nova Scotia Coal Industry”, *Bulletin of Canadian Studies*, VI,2/ VII,1 (Autumn 1983), pp. 70-87; Neil K. Buxton, *The Economic Development of the British Coal Industry* (London, 1978), pp. 27, 131; Angela V. John, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Women Workers at Victorian Coal Mines* (London, 1980), pp. 23, 33.

7 Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *The Age of Reform* (Oxford, 1962), p. 153; John Benson, *British Coalminers in the Nineteenth Century: A Social History* (Dublin, 1980), p. 49.

8 J.R. Leifchild, *Our Coal and Our Coal-Pits* (London, 1968 [1856]), pp. 151, 155.

the coal freshly cut by the miner. At 19, Paul became a cutter.⁹ The experience of these boys was not untypical of the late 19th century Nova Scotian colliery; the hierarchy of tasks was not rigid and boys who aspired to the handpick could follow a variety of routes to the position of cutter.

A handful of miners enjoyed even greater upward mobility, despite their early introduction to mine work. The establishment of mining schools in the coal towns, long a goal of the Provincial Workmen's Association (PWA), the first miners' union in Nova Scotia, aided the ambitious miner. The career of J.R. Dinn provides one of the more spectacular examples of mobility within the mine workforce. Dinn started work in the "Caledonia" mine, Dominion Coal #4, in 1900. Sixteen years old at the time, his first job was as a loader. Attending night school during the winter months, Dinn passed the examination for overman in 1906 and was appointed to this minor underground supervisory position. Five years later he was appointed assistant underground manager; in 1919, underground manager; and finally, in 1921, Dinn became manager of the mine he had entered 25 years earlier as a labourer. Indeed, by the turn of the century all Nova Scotian colliery managers had risen from the position of "practical miner".¹⁰ These individuals were, of course, exceptional; the typical boy had a much different experience of the mines. In accordance with an expression current in the turn of the century Pennsylvania anthracite fields, "twice a boy and once a man is a poor miner's life", the miner's working life would usually end above ground, where he would engage in light work similar to that of boys.¹¹

A boy's experience of the mine might end yet another way: in death or disability. The youngest workers, less attentive and knowledgeable, nonetheless shared the dangers of the mine with older miners. Like them, the boys fell victim to the great mine disasters. The explosion in the number one mine at Springhill in 1891 killed 125 — 17 of them boys 16 years of age and younger.¹² Although far less striking, the daily small accidents in the colliery were in fact the greater killers. Death or disability could occur in a variety of ways. A roof fall, a

9 Royal Commission on the Relations of Capital and Labor, *Nova Scotia Evidence* (Ottawa, 1889), pp. 302, 288; Greg Kealey, ed., *Canada Investigates Industrialism (The Royal Commission on the Relations of Labor and Capital, 1889)* (Toronto, 1973), pp. 402-3.

10 E.H. Armstrong papers, MG2, Box 686, F2/17830, PANS; Donald MacLeod, "Colliers, Colliery Safety and Workplace Control: The Nova Scotian Experience, 1873-1910", *Historical Papers* (1983), p. 251. The PWA congratulated itself in 1888 that promotions from its ranks to those of management included five former Grand Masters and two Assistant Grand Masters. See the *Trades Journal*, 11 April 1888. This pattern of spectacular upward mobility was found in fiction also. See Ian McKay's introduction to C.W. Lunn's "From Trapper Boy to General Manager: A Story of Brother Love and Perseverance", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 4 (1979), pp. 211-40.

11 Harold W. Aurand, *From the Molly Maguires to the United Mine Workers: The Ecology of an Industrial Union 1869-1897* (Philadelphia, 1971), p. 37.

12 Roger David Brown, *Blood on the Coal: The Story of the Springhill Mining Disasters* (Windsor, N.S., 1976), p. 13.

common accident, killed a boy at Little Glace Bay in 1882. George Jones, approximately 14 years old, died in an explosion in 1889 while hauling timber on the nightshift; his brother James was badly burned at the same time. That same decade a boy lost his arm in an accident in the blacksmith shop at the Drummond colliery in Westville.¹³ Only the fortunate survived to enjoy what PWA leader John Moffatt described as the goal of the respectable miner: “a good, comfortable home, education, music, good literature, [and] insurance with sufficient wages to lay by to help out in old age”.¹⁴

The circumstances of boys' work in the mine changed little over the turn of the century. Boys continued to occupy the same kinds of positions and to receive the same levels of pay relative to adult mine workers. C.O. Macdonald estimated that in 1880 the average pay of a boy employed in a Nova Scotian colliery was 65 cents per day. An adult labourer received 50 per cent more than a boy; a cutter, nearly 2 1/2 times as much.¹⁵ These differential wage rates remained intact as long as boys were employed in the mines. At Sydney Mines, boys had closed the wage differential somewhat by 1920, likely because the youngest children had been excluded from the Nova Scotian mines by then, but a mine worker classified as a boy could still expect to receive approximately 60 to 70 per cent of a man's pay. Boys, limited to tasks designated for them, continued to be paid at a discriminatory rate.¹⁶

From these observations, it should be clear that neither changes in the techniques of mining nor a substantial narrowing of differential wage rates can fully explain the boys' gradual exclusion from the mine. In fact, a change in social attitudes was the most important single cause of the boys' dwindling place in the colliery workforce. This crisis of legitimation, as it will be labelled here, was expressed in a series of amendments to the provincial Mines Act, which raised the minimum age required for work in the mine from 10 in 1873, to 12 in 1891, and to 16 in 1923.¹⁷

The 1842 outcry in Great Britain against female and child employment provides a useful entry into the question of legitimation. The Children's Employment Commission (whose purview was later extended to include women) was established in the autumn of 1840 to probe conditions in the British coalfields. It was among the first in the English-speaking world, and followed an earlier inquiry into child millworkers. Although the commissioners and their

13 *Trades Journal*, 11 October 1882, 26 June 1889, 10 June 1885.

14 Quoted in Robert Drummond, *Recollections and Reflections of a Former Trades Union Leader* (n.p., c.1926), pp. 184-5.

15 C. Ochiltree Macdonald, *The Coal and Iron Industries of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1909), p. 45.

16 See the schedule of wages recommended by the Board of Arbitration under Judge G. Patterson for the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Corporation, in the *Labour Gazette* (April 1920), p. 394.

17 In 1947 the minimum age for underground employment became 17; in 1954, 18. Nova Scotia *Revised Statutes*, 1873, c. 10, sect. 4; *Laws of Nova Scotia*, 1891, 54 Vic., c. 9, sect. 3; 1923, 13 Geo. V, c. 54, sect. 1; 1947, 11 Geo. VI, c. 39, sect. 7; 1954, 3 Eliz. II, c. 56, sect. 14.

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public may have been morally outraged at the conditions within British mines, no problem of legitimation existed within the isolated mining communities, where child labour was not only needed; it was expected.¹⁸ Indeed, one of the more poignant aspects of the history of legislation restricting child labour is the extent to which working class parents resisted such laws. This resistance has to be appreciated in light of what has been labelled family “survival strategies”.¹⁹ The child worker had a significant role to play in contributing to the family income; state efforts to limit his potential for employment struck directly at the family’s struggle to resist poverty. The economic importance of child labour collided with new social attitudes emerging over the Victorian age, which idealized childhood and the family. This ideal, aspired to but not necessarily practised by male trade unionists, defined the male as the sole family wage-earner; along with the related “cult of domesticity”, it enhanced his status within the family.²⁰ When abhorrence of child labour was allied with the contemporary call for universal schooling, legislative restrictions on the employment of children began to appear.

In Nova Scotia the crisis of legitimation was more subtle than in Great Britain. Having developed its coal industry at a later date, Nova Scotia was able to avoid to some extent the controversies which emerged in Britain. For instance, as the conflict developed anew in Britain in the 1880s over the employment of women as surface workers, Nova Scotian mine workers could congratulate themselves that neither women nor girls had ever been employed in provincial collieries.²¹ The burden of supporting the family therefore fell to the principal male breadwinner and as many of his sons as were employed. In the

18 Neil J. Smelser, *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution* (Chicago, 1959), esp. ch. 9.

19 Survival strategies took numerous forms. Miners in Scotland traditionally kept a garden; when the British Empire Steel Company pushed wages down to a starvation level, company president Roy Wolvin criticized miners for spurning his 1921 offer of free plowing and fertilizer, with seed potatoes at cost. (The (Duncan) Royal Commission Respecting the Coal Mines of the Province of Nova Scotia, *Minutes of Evidence*, p. 2743, Labour Canada Library, Hull.) Other 19th century survival strategies are discussed in Bettina Bradbury, “Pigs, Cows, and Boarders: Non-Wage Forms of Survival among Montreal Families, 1861-91”, *Labour/Le Travail*, 14 (Fall 1984), pp. 9-48; Joy Parr, *Labouring Children: British Immigrant Apprentices to Canada 1869-1924* (Montreal, 1980); Bettina Bradbury, “The Fragmented Family: Family Strategies in the Face of Death, Illness and Poverty, Montreal, 1860-1885” in Joy Parr, ed., *Childhood and Family in Canadian History* (Toronto, 1982), pp. 109-28. Benson, *British Coal Miners*, p. 139, notes that in Great Britain children handed over their pay to their parents as long as they lived in the family home. The testimony of Robert McTagarth before the 1888 Labour Royal Commission provides evidence of this practise in Canada. See Kealey, ed., *Canada Investigates*, p. 423.

20 Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870* (New Haven, 1957), p. 344; Heidi Hartmann, “Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation by Sex”, *Signs*, 1, 3, part 2 (Spring 1976), pp. 137-69; Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, (London, 1983), esp. ch. IV, “The Men are as Bad as their Masters...”: Working Women and the Owenite Economic Offensive, 1828-34”.

21 *Trades Journal*, 18 March 1885.

42 *Acadiensis*

provincial coalfields, miners took steps to safeguard their employment by attempting to control the market for mine workers. In 1879, when they formed the Provincial Workmen's Association, miners sought to establish a system of "apprenticeship" to protect the integrity of coal mining as skilled labour. The PWA strove to enforce, not only in practise but also to some extent by law, the prolonged process such as that by which Elisha Paul, the miner from Springhill, had received the pick. Legislative provisions for the certification of colliery employees, largely the result of PWA intimacy with the provincial Liberal government under W.S. Fielding, bear witness to partial PWA success in protecting this pattern of apprenticeship. An 1881 amendment to the Mines act required the certification of colliery officials by a provincially-constituted board of examiners and by the end of the decade cutters themselves needed provincial accreditation.²²

The struggle over employment in the coalfields, whereby the miners attempted to restrict and management fought to broaden access to the picks, was closely tied to the question of child labour. Because they were "apprenticed" to the craft of mining, the boys would have been given priority over newcomers to the mine by the PWA. It was never able to accomplish this objective. At a meeting of the PWA Grand Council in 1884, a delegate announced indignantly that "at one of the mines lads verging on manhood and who had been brought up in the mine and were capable of mining were denied the picks, while those about whom the officials knew nothing were given them".²³ While the PWA protested that "coal smashers fresh from the back woods" were being employed as cutters, a "prominent colliery manager" criticized PWA efforts "to make as it were a guild and prevent the employment of strangers at a time when labor below may be required".²⁴ On the question of control of the labour market, the interests of the miners clashed continually with those of management.

In the clash between workers and mine management the participation of boys was also evident. Indeed, the boys' response to mine work was noteworthy for its vigour: the small, frightened trapper boy matured rapidly and mine boys consistently demonstrated resilience and self-reliance. An early editorial in the *Trades Journal*, the official PWA newspaper, remarked on the boys' general lack of respect for their elders and on their readiness to abuse verbally mine officials — in the expression of the day, their "saucing".²⁵ In Springhill in 1887 a boy was ordered, and refused, to travel through a section of the mine he

22 H.A. Logan, *Trade Unions in Canada* (Toronto, 1948), pp. 172-4, provides a succinct overview of provincial legislation passed at PWA instigation during the 1880s and 1890s. The term "apprenticeship" is used loosely here, in terms of initiation to mine work.

23 (Semi-) Annual Meeting of (PWA) Grand Council, *Minutes* (April 1884), p. 59, Labour Canada Library, Hull.

24 *Trades Journal*, 11 May 1887; *Canadian Mining Review*, 15, 2 (February 1896), p. 30.

25 *Trades Journal*, 11 August 1880. See as well the *Trades Journal*, 15 February 1888 for miners' complaints regarding a pick boy "having a tendency to be a boss".

considered dangerous. “Harsh words passed between them”, reported the *Trades Journal*, “the boy using the harshest it is said”.²⁶ Their brazenness was more than merely verbal: boys’ strikes over the turn of the century were a continual irritant to mine management — and, occasionally, to older mine workers.

Boys demonstrated repeatedly their willingness to quit the mine; in fact, they may have struck more often than older mine workers. Former PWA Grand Secretary and *Trades Journal* editor Robert Drummond remarked that for two years after the Dominion Steel Company gained control of Dominion coal in 1910 there was “not even a boy strike”.²⁷ In 1925 A.S. MacNeil, General Superintendent of the British Empire Steel Company mines, testified to the Duncan Royal Commission that “a boy if he was disciplined in any way, or did anything wrong, he was liable to go home and would cause a strike in that part of the mine, or the whole of the mine, or two or three mines”.²⁸ A variety of motives prompted the boys to strike. Even verbal clashes with mine officials could lead to a general walkout of boys.²⁹ Recreational strikes — the lure of a circus or a game of baseball — also occurred periodically.³⁰ As well, boys struck in defence of traditional patterns of work. Dominion Coal drivers walked out to resist the replacement of contract pay by a daily rate in 1904.³¹ More importantly, boys and officials consistently disputed what constituted a fair day’s work and a just level of pay. Boys struck a pit at New Waterford in 1921, for instance, over hours of work — whether horses were to be stabled on the company’s or the boys’ time.³² One of the earliest strikes recorded by the *Trades Journal* stemmed from a dispute over pay at Stellarton.³³ The boys’ frustration at the restrictions placed on their access to promotion also gave rise to strikes. The boys at the Drummond colliery in Westville walked out for a day in June 1887 in protest against their obligation to perform boys’ work — at a maximum of 75 cents per day — until the age of 18. Although mine boys were unable to graduate to the position of loader, mine neophytes — “greenhorns” — were taken on for this task. Although the *Trades Journal* believed the boys to have “acted a little

26 *Trades Journal*, 17 August 1887.

27 Robert Drummond, *Minerals and Mining Nova Scotia* (Stellarton, 1918), p. 243.

28 Duncan Commission, *Minutes*, p. 2555.

29 This occurred, for example, after the altercation in Springhill mentioned above. The boy was sent home, at which time the rest of the boys in the slope struck, closing it down. *Trades Journal*, 17 August 1887.

30 Ian McKay refers to instances of boys at the Joggins mines foregoing work in favour of baseball in “Industry, work and community”, p. 608; *Halifax Herald*, 15 August 1905, 7 June 1906.

31 *Halifax Herald*, 30 January, 2 February 1904; *Maritime Mining Record*, 10 February 1904. My thanks to one of the anonymous readers for this reference.

32 “Strikes and lockouts” file, RG 27, vol. 327, no. 171, Public Archives of Canada (PAC).

33 *Trades Journal*, 2 June 1880.

44 *Acadiensis*

rashly”, it acknowledged their “just cause of complaint”.³⁴

The qualification in this editorial reflects the ambivalence of adult miners regarding independent action on the part of boys, and suggests that tension existed between boys and older mine workers. Although employment enhanced the boy’s status within the family and may have been welcomed by the boy for that reason, the boy whose father carried him to the pit, “the little fellow being unable [to manage] the long journey”, probably entered the workforce unwillingly.³⁵ At the Reserve Mines (Cape Breton), one observer reported in the 1880s, the “parents generally ask for the work”.³⁶ At the same time, adult miners, while condoning their boys’ entry into the workforce, balked at their assumption of adult roles. Reports of drunken colliery boys on mine pay days were not uncommon: a couple of “drunk and disorderly” Stellarton boys, aged 12 and 14, found themselves jailed in the course of a particularly boisterous evening in 1888. Adult miners found intoxicated boys, in the expression of the day, “a hard-looking sight”.³⁷

Although only those at least 17 years old qualified for membership in an adult lodge, the PWA constitution made provision for the establishment of boys’ lodges with the sanction of the existing adult lodge at a given pit. “Junior” lodges, as they were called, tended to be short-lived and presumably failed to meet the interests of the boys, since they appear to have played no part in boys’ strikes.³⁸ Indeed, PWA officials as a rule discouraged strikes; their commitment to various kinds of arbitration was reinforced when written contracts were introduced into the Nova Scotian coalfields after the turn of the century.³⁹ With the introduction of the federal Industrial Disputes Investigation Act in 1907, which provided more legal penalties for spontaneous strikes, the PWA redoubled its efforts to avoid them. On occasion, adult unionists would even act themselves to break a boys’ strike. In July 1887 drivers were on strike for four days over wages at Bridgeport, Cape Breton. Because “the parents of the fractious youths considered that the step was ill-chosen they took the culprits in

34 *Trades Journal*, 8 June 1887.

35 See McKay, “Industry, work and community”, p. 598; Annual Meeting of Grand Council, *Minutes*, 1890, p. 221.

36 Macdonald, *Coal and Iron Industry*, p. 57.

37 *Trades Journal*, 21 November 1888, 2 January 1889.

38 Eugene Forsey, *Trade Unions in Canada 1812-1902* (Toronto, 1982), p. 348, mentions two such lodges: Garfield, founded in March 1884 at Westville and Springhill Juvenile, formed in January 1891. The *Trades Journal*, 26 October 1887, referred to “Stedfast” lodge, organized that year at the Reserve Mines. The *Labour Gazette* (February 1905), p. 878, noted two boys’ lodges on Cape Breton shortly after the turn of the century: Standard, at Dominion #3, and Redpath, at New Aberdeen. King George (Sydney Mines) was represented at the PWA Grand Council Meeting in 1911. See Annual Meeting of Grand Council, *Minutes*, 1911, p. 676.

39 The first PWA contract was signed with the Dominion Coal Company in December 1904. See the *Labour Gazette*, May 1905, pp. 1222-3.

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hand and sent them to work”.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, the boys’ agenda differed from that of adult miners and they struck frequently.⁴¹ After 1917 the United Mine Workers represented Nova Scotia miners, but even UMW District 26, noted for its radicalism, did not condone spontaneous boys’ strikes. “So far as I can foresee”, wrote ex-PWA Grand Secretary John Moffatt in 1924, “there will be no major labour troubles this year. There are nearly always small incipient strikes among the boys but they don’t last long and are frowned down by the Unions”.⁴² Cape Breton drivers, in particular, contested regularly and independently of adult miners their conditions of employment.⁴³ With neither the PWA nor the UMW did the boys see their interests completely served by the adult unionists.

Certainly miners’ unions in Nova Scotia sanctioned discrimination against those labelled “boys” in terms of tasks and pay. Recent research in Great Britain has underlined the role of nominally industrial unions in maintaining hierarchies of status and wages in the labour process not only by enshrining hierarchical wage scales in collective agreements with management, but also by a union commitment to subcontracting, whereby high skill workers would supervise their helpers, paying them directly.⁴⁴ Both practices were employed in the Nova Scotian collieries. Although trapper boys and coal sorters were generally on the company payroll, at times, particularly in the 19th century,

40 *Trades Journal*, 20 July 1887.

41 The following is certainly an incomplete list of boys’ strikes during the PWA years, 1897 to 1917. Only those strikes not noted elsewhere in this paper are listed here. The year of the strike, its location, and the persons striking (if known) are given: 1883, Pictou Co.; 1887, Reserve Mines, drivers; 1888, Thorburn; 1889, Springhill; 1905, Springhill; 1906 Springhill (2); 1907, Westville; 1907, Acadia colliery; 1909, Springhill, drivers; 1909, Westville. See *Trades Journal*, 20 June 1883, 22 June 1887, 27 June 1888, 31 July 1889; “Lacelle” file, RG 27, vol. 143, file 611:04.10, PAC; *Labour Gazette* (August 1906), p. 174; (October 1907), p. 468; “Strikes and lockouts” file, RG 27, vol. 296, no. 2998, PAC; *Halifax Herald*, 10 March 1909; *Labour Gazette* (July 1909), p. 124.

42 “Strikes and lockouts” file, RG 27, vol. 332, no. 2, PAC. Moffatt made his remark in a letter to federal Deputy Minister of Labour H.H. Ward, dated 26 April 1924.

43 These include those during October 1920 at Dominion #1 and #9, two strikes at New Waterford in July 1921, and strikes at Dominion #1 and #9 in June 1922. See “Strikes and lockouts” file, RG 27, vol. 323, nos. 361 and 364; vol. 327, nos. 171-2; vol. 327, no. 4, PAC.

44 See, for instance, Roger Penn, “Trade union organization and skill in the cotton and engineering industries in Britain, 1850-1960”, *Social History*, 8, 1 (January 1983), pp. 37-55; William Lazonick, “Industrial relations and technical change: the case of the self-acting mule”, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 3, 3 (September 1979), pp. 231-62; “Production Relations, Labor Productivity, and Choice of Technique: British and U.S. Cotton Spinning”, *Journal of Economic History*, XLI, 3 (September 1981), pp. 491-516. Miners could however act to improve the levels of pay of those they “employed”. This occurred, for instance, in Pictou County in November 1887, when the Acadia Coal Co. put a ceiling of \$1.20 per day on the sum it would deduct from a miner’s pay for his loader. This practise was of sufficient concern to Drummond that he raised it in his testimony before the 1888 Labour Commission. (*Trades Journal*, 9 November 1887; Kealey, ed., *Canada Investigates*, p. 438.)

drivers and loaders were paid directly by the miners. The failure of the PWA to implement satisfactorily its system of apprenticeship — as a result of the access of ‘greenhorns’ to the mine — and thus protect the job market led to discontent among the boys who were subject to discriminatory wage levels, especially since boyhood apprenticeship did not directly involve the acquisition of the skills of the handpick miner. Nonetheless, the pattern of initiation into mining which the PWA sought to safeguard had relative advantages. Many of the occupations available to children at this time were barred to them when they reached maturity.⁴⁵ By entering the mine, in contrast, a boy could expect to acquire the handpick eventually, and to remain a miner throughout his working life.

One of the consequences of this practise was a low level of formal education among miners. In the late 19th century the mining community made “practical mining” the focus of a boy’s education; although schooling could be combined with work in the mine, this made school attendance irregular and to some extent seasonal. In Cape Breton in the 1880s, attendance was relatively good over the winter when mines were closed. At other times of the year, colliery boys attended school on the days when the pit was idle.⁴⁶ Commitment within the mining community to this customary, casual approach to children’s education was eroded over the turn of the century, due partly to pressure from the province, which continually raised the minimum acceptable level of formal education and established the means to enforce this minimum. The impact on the colliery boy of this evolving provincial position on education was profound.

By virtue of successive provincial school acts over the turn of the century an increasingly greater proportion of Nova Scotian children attended school to a greater age for a greater portion of the year.⁴⁷ Contemporary changes in the way childhood was defined, aspects of which emerged as early as the mid-19th century, reinforced ideas about the need for universal and compulsory children’s education. When the child became defined as dependent on adults and at the same time in need of protection from adults, the door was opened to extensive interference with the manner in which parents raised their children.⁴⁸ In tandem

45 Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (Harmondsworth, 1971), pp. 68-70.

46 Macdonald, *Coal and Iron Industry*, p. 48.

47 Measured as the percentage of those enrolled in daily attendance in the winter term, attendance figures rose slightly over the late 19th century, from 53.2 in 1878 to 55.8 ten years later. Attendance in the second quarter (November through January) stood at 63.7 in 1900, 70.2 in 1910, and 74.4 in 1922. These figures are taken from the “Annual Report on Schools” for the relevant year, found in Nova Scotia, *Journals and Proceedings of the House of Assembly*. Averages in mining counties such as Cumberland or Cape Breton do not differ significantly from the provincial average, but county-level figures will obscure to some extent those from mining communities.

48 A useful introduction to the extensive literature on education is Chad Gaffield, “Back to School: Towards a New Agenda for the History of Education”, *Acadiensis*, XV, 2 (Spring 1986), pp. 169-90. Early research on childhood dated the emergence of modern ideas on childhood at the

with the emergence of this modern notion of childhood appeared the outlines of a universal system of schools.

In Nova Scotia, the "Free Schools Act" of 1864 established the framework for a common school system and an 1865 act guaranteed this system's viability by providing for compulsory assessment of property owners for the upkeep of schools. A child's formal education was not necessarily ensured by the mere existence of a school system and no provision was made in the 1860s for compulsory attendance. In 1883, however, local school boards were permitted to oblige children between seven and 12 to attend school for at least 80 days per year and to fine parents who did not send their children to school. In 1895 the "Towns' Compulsory Attendance Act" was passed by the province; at local option, school boards could compel every child aged between six and 16, resident in an incorporated town, to attend school at least 120 days per year. At the same time provision was made for truancy officers who were empowered to arrest children absent from school. Their parents were subject to fines; the child, in certain circumstances, to imprisonment. Exemptions from school were, however, granted to children over 12 with at least a grade seven common school education and any child over 13 whose income was indispensable. Because many mining communities remained unincorporated until well into the 20th century their school boards were subject to the provisions of the Education Act pertaining to rural areas; the stipulations of 1883, which compelled children from seven to 12 to attend school at least 80 days per year, remained in force. In 1915 the urban upper age limit was raised to 16; the House of Assembly did not inaugurate province-wide compulsory school attendance (for those seven to 14) in rural areas until 1921. In 1923 rural school boards were given the discretion to require six to 16 year olds to attend school and the framework of a modern primary system of education was established in Nova Scotia.⁴⁹

Concern for children's education was reflected not only in school legislation, but also in mines legislation. Although age restrictions on Nova Scotian mine workers had been in place since the first provincial Mines Act of 1873, which had prohibited the employment of boys under ten in or about the mines,

turn of the century. See Neil Sutherland, *Children in English-Canada: Framing the Twentieth-Century Consensus* (Toronto, 1976). Subsequently, a case has been made for an earlier, mid-19th century change in public attitudes towards children. See Patricia T. Rooke and R.L. Schnell, "Childhood and Charity in Nineteenth-Century British North America", *Histoire sociale-Social History*, XV, 29 (May 1982), pp. 157-79. In neither instance is consideration given to the changing role of children in the workplace in shaping our notion of childhood.

49 P.L. McCreath, "Charles Tupper and the Politics of Education in Nova Scotia", *Nova Scotia Historical Quarterly*, 1, 3 (September 1971), pp. 203-24; William B. Hamilton, "Society and Schools in Nova Scotia" in J. Donald Wilson *et al.*, eds., *Canadian Education: A History* (Scarborough, 1970), pp. 86-105. 46 Vic., c. 17, "An Act to Secure Better Attendance at Public Schools"; 58 Vic., c. 1, sect. 4; 5 Geo. V, c. 4, "The Cities' and Towns' Compulsory Attendance Act"; 11-12 Geo. V, c. 59, sect. 7; 13 Geo. V, c. 52, sect. 11. A synopsis of much of this legislation is found in Department of Labour, *The Employment of Children and Young Persons in Canada* (Ottawa, 1930), p. 98.

amendments in 1891 were the first in Nova Scotia to place educational restrictions on boys entering the mines. Legislation passed in 1908 prohibited from the mine any boy between 12 and 16 who had not completed grade seven.⁵⁰ A general concern for the child's welfare and concern specifically for his education began to push the boy from the workforce.

The role of the Nova Scotian mining community regarding legislation restricting the employment of its boys was ambivalent. Robert Drummond, in his submission before the Royal Commission on the Relations between Labour and Capital in 1888, pressed for a minimum age of 12 for work underground in the mines. Other witnesses stressed to the commissioners the need within the mining community for the boys' income.⁵¹ Even with Drummond, the question of child labour held a low priority. In 1882 the *Trades Journal* had reported that an eight-year old labourer, "a very precocious little chap", was employed at the Halifax Company colliery in Pictou County. The newspaper did not note that his employment brazenly contravened existing provincial statutes, but stressed that the child was foregoing "a fair chance of education".⁵² Drummond was very reluctant to sanction interference with parental control of children in areas apart from education. When disturbing reports of child abuse at J.M. Fortier's Montreal tobacco factory arrived in Nova Scotia in 1888, Drummond maintained that it was more important to protect the worker than his child. Although he acknowledged that some protection in law was desirable for both parent and child, he insisted that "the parent, or the guardian of the child has surely certain rights which should not be interfered with".⁵³ Although the question of child labour was of limited importance to Drummond, he was concerned that a child receive a minimum level of schooling.⁵⁴ This concern, as an examination of PWA activity shows, was also limited.

PWA efforts on behalf of formal schooling focused on protecting the integrity of the miners' trade. At a meeting of the PWA Grand Council in October 1890, Drummond stressed the desirability of keeping uneducated boys out of the mine, because they were a threat to safety within the mine and they demeaned the status of the mining community generally. The Council, acknowledging the importance of schooling for miner certification, instructed the PWA legislative

50 *Revised Statutes of Nova Scotia*, 1873, c. 10, part I, Nova Scotia, *Laws*, 1891, 54 Vic. c. 9, sect. 3; 1908, 7 Edward c. 8, sect. 19. The principle requiring a minimum level of formal education before children were permitted to work was adopted in British collieries in 1860, when legislation was enacted stipulating that ten- and 11-year old boys could only be employed if they had earned an educational certificate or if they attended school at least two days a week for at least three hours per day. See Frederic Keeling, *Child Labour in the United Kingdom* (London, 1914), p. xiv.

51 Kealey, ed., *Canada Investigates*, p. 440; Labour Commission, *Evidence*, pp. 294, 301, 303, 351, 414.

52 *Trades Journal*, 6 December 1882.

53 *Trades Journal*, 14 March 1888.

54 The minimum age Drummond recommended, 12, was well below that recommended by the royal commissioners, 14. See also the *Trades Journal*, 24 April 1889.

committee to propose to the province a minimum age of 12 for colliery workers; in addition, a boy was not to be permitted to work “unless he be able to read, write and count as far as fractions”. The Fielding government acquiesced and the desired amendment to the Mines Act passed without debate in 1891. Although the PWA Grand Council continued to discuss child labour intermittently, the initiative for delayed entry into the collieries in order to acquire an extended formal education passed from the miners’ unions in Nova Scotia to a larger community.⁵⁵

PWA interest in children’s schooling was limited to the youngest and confined to the rudiments. Even so, it appears to have been more concerned than the mining community as a whole. The *Trades Journal* reported regularly on school activities, and just as regularly berated parents for their lack of interest.⁵⁶ As late as 1908, the provincial director of technical education, F.H. Sexton, singled out the mining community for criticism, charging that boys remained ill-educated in mining towns owing to their early entry into the mine.⁵⁷ School attendance improved steadily over the turn of the century, bolstered not only by heightened provincial requirements for education but also by improved wage levels which reduced the mining family’s dependence on boys’ pay.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, given the entrenched sanction within the mining community for child labour, the income it brought the family, and the promises held out by formal education, the decision to send a boy into the mine or to school — or to continue school — must often have been anguished.⁵⁹

In 1923, when the Mines Act was amended to exclude from colliery work everyone under 16, the employment of individuals who would be unhesitatingly labelled children came to a close. A variety of factors prompted the 1923 amendment. Following World War One a crisis occurred in the coal industry and there was a general rise in unemployment. Adult miners could no longer afford the luxury of apprenticed boys. By excluding boys from the mines, jobs

55 Annual Meeting of Grand Council, *Minutes*, 1890, pp. 221-2; Nova Scotia, House of Assembly, *Proceedings and Debates*, 1891; see the Annual Meeting of Grand Council, *Minutes*, 1906, p. 532, for a debate on child labour in the context of the night shift. One delegate argued with passion that “it is unfair and almost inhuman to have a boy of tender years go into the coal mine to be stunted in physical growth and in intellect, or else be injured, possibly fatally as sometimes occurs”. The PWA showed much greater interest in adult education. See Donald MacLeod, “Practicality Ascendant: The Origins and Establishment of Technical Education in Nova Scotia”, *Acadiensis*, XV, 2 (Spring 1986), pp. 68-9.

56 See, for instance, *Trades Journal*, 4 November 1885, for Drummond’s complaints about poor parental attendance at school examinations.

57 See the “Annual Report For the Public Schools, 1907-08”, in Nova Scotia, *Journals and Proceedings of the House of Assembly*, 1908, p. 81.

58 Wages in the provincial collieries improved significantly after the turn of the century. See Ian McKay, “The Provincial Workmen’s Association”, in W.J.C. Cherwinski and G.S. Kealey, eds., *Lectures in Canadian Labour and Working-Class History* (St. John’s, 1985), p. 130.

59 McKay, “Industry, work, and community”, p. 598, discusses this in reference to the Cumberland County mines.

were created for family heads. Nova Scotia also lagged seriously behind the rest of Canada with respect to legislation restricting child employment within the mine; Ontario, for instance, had prohibited the employment of boys under 15 in 1890 and in 1912 set the minimum age at 17.⁶⁰ Finally, in 1923 Nova Scotian rural school boards also received approval to raise the school-leaving age to 16. Provincial sanction had been won for a new status for children, who were universally now defined as school children. This particular amendment simply capped a lengthy process whereby the traditional sanctions for the employment of children collapsed. Social attitudes changed slowly, childhood was redefined, and new means of educating children were instituted. By this process, traditional notions of apprenticeship and collective contributions to the family budget were succeeded by state-enforced provisions for a universal, minimum level of formal education. The colliery boy gave way to the school child.

60 Quebec had set the age for male underground employment at 15 in 1892; Ontario had raised the age to 18 by 1919; Saskatchewan to 14 in 1917; Alberta to 16 in 1908; and British Columbia to 15 in 1911. See Department of Labour, *Employment of Children and Young Persons in Canada* (Ottawa, 1930), Table C.