

A Newfoundland Printer on the Tramp

Robert H. Babcock

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Robert H. Babcock

LONG BEFORE THE INDUSTRIAL revolution in England, skilled artisans left their homes at intervals, travelling from town to town and taking work if it was available or simply receiving a tramp allowance — supper, lodging, and perhaps some beer — from their brethren in the same trade. According to E.J. Hobsbawm, the custom developed as a method of unemployment relief and may have originated among woollen workers in the West Country of England.¹ Tramping did not grow out of the exigencies of industrial capitalism, but rather was based on ancient artisanal custom. It may have reflected a wide-spread belief that “no man knows his ability or what he is worth until he has worked in more towns than one.” After the industrial revolution, periodic but massive unemployment overburdened this older artisan way of coping with localized gluts on the labour market. Larger labour markets, increasing specialization within crafts, and the rise of urban transport facilities led more unemployed artisans to seek jobs within range of their homes and families. “The tram replaced the tramp,” Hobsbawm observed.

But not entirely. In the later stages of tramping, artisans used the old custom as a way to make their own “grand tours” during an era when the wealthier classes popularized such travel. This seems to have been the case for Timothy J. Ryan, a young printer from St. John’s, Newfoundland, who embarked upon a sojourn across Canada and parts of the United States in spring 1913. The young Ryan had been boarding at 11 William Street, St. John’s, in a house probably owned by his parents or possibly a relative.²

¹ E.J. Hobsbawm, “The Tramping Artisan,” in *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (New York 1967), 41-74.

² I am grateful to Professor William Reeves, Memorial University, St. John’s, Newfoundland, for the information on Ryan which he culled from city directories and from the Minute Book of the printers’ union local. The latter is in the Newfoundland Studies Centre at Memorial University.

Robert H. Babcock, “A Newfoundland Printer on the Tramp,” *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 8/9 (Autumn/Spring 1981/82), 261-267.

Active in the local printers' union, Ryan may well have been jobless during spring 1913 when a sharp depression struck throughout North America. He left Newfoundland for Ottawa and points west, working as a printer's substitute or in other jobs that caught his fancy. Upon his return to his hometown and parents on Christmas Eve, 1914, some twenty months later, he suffered another stint of joblessness but finally found work and was re-admitted to the printers' local in May, 1915, serving as vice-president and later secretary-treasurer.

While an interesting and amusing story in its own right, Ryan's account also describes the continuities in working-class culture which enabled workers to deal with changing industrial conditions. His story reveals just how important the fraternity of craftsmen could be to an itinerant artisan in Canada. That his International Typographical Union travelling card was his most important meal and job ticket was clearly shown when he arrived in Regina without it. Each printers' union local was a vital source of information on the local labour market. Union officers, many of whom also served as foremen in job or newspaper offices, gave Ryan work. Often he substituted for printers, an old custom preserved by that trade. The young Newfoundlander relied heavily upon a strong camaraderie shared not only by printers but among workers in general. He regularly received free food and lodging (including one man's pyjamas!), dug clams with a garrulous black on the Pacific shore, and worked at several menial jobs when the spirit — or hunger — moved him. While sharing the traditional motives of tramping artisans who left home to find work, Ryan obviously travelled for the sheer adventure of it, too. The "bug" to travel frequently bit him; "I like experience," he wrote at one point.

The trip may have been a lark, but it also had an important influence on his judgements about the state of the printers' craft in his hometown. Ryan's brethren were not sufficiently unionized or aware, he said; "they don't seem to realize the situation and take the initiative and try to help themselves." Printers elsewhere in North America had achieved the eight hour day nearly a decade earlier but in St. John's they still worked a nine hour day at no fixed scale. Because of his trip, Ryan may have done more to goad his colleagues into demanding better wages and working conditions than did James Drury, the touring ITU organizer. But no one can say for certain because the history of the working class in Newfoundland's largest city remains to be written.

DOCUMENT

IN LOOKING OVER *The Journal*³ from time to time I have been struck by the brilliant and fluent language used by the contributors to that paper. I have always contended that we have members in our union who would creditably fill any position on this earth, and the more I see and know the printerman

³ *The Typographical Journal*, 47 (August 1915), 232-4.

the more emphatic the contention. (Certainly he is a strange creature, and no wonder — seeing he begins his career as a devil. With such a handicap, I am afraid very few of them will reach the angel seat.)

"Los Angeles, America's Dreamland, 1915."⁴ Newfoundland, "Land of the Midnight Sun," 1915.

Extreme ends, with the writer at the latter. Is he downhearted? No! He might just as easily be at the other — but we pulled out in the night, and the direction didn't matter. Seeing that we are here, a few "rambling" notes may not be amiss, and perchance make occasion to refresh the memory of a few whom we met on a tour of new territory. Leaving here in the spring of 1913, my first stop, of any account, was at Ottawa, Ont., where, in a quiet way, I began to get acquainted. Coming from such a backwoods country, naturally I had to be a little modest. Eventually I went to work in the office of Lowe-Martin, and struck up a friendship with the foreman, Jack Thompson, a Peterborough boy — a friendship I hope shall always last. I worked with them till the following October — Thanksgiving day, I think it was — when the roving fever got me, and I pulled out that night for Winnipeg, running into that city in a snowstorm. Here I started to dig in, and so consolidated my position that I held it for a couple of months. (I think Mr. Erb, of Stovel's, will recollect me.) It was here I first made the acquaintance of Secretary Hawley, of Winnipeg Union, a sport and a gentleman. He told me of an experience of his with a rifle; how he took his first prairie chicken, on the wing, with a bullet, and I believed him. It was a surprise to him, he said, but that he thought he could easily turn the same trick now most every time. I never heard if he went to Bisley. My horizon, from reading and thinking, only reached Regina, and for there, undaunted by the thoughts of a western winter, one evening in early December I pulled out, arriving in that city next morning. Here trouble started. I left 'Peg without my traveler⁵ (and right here it looks as if I was inviting trouble), and, to make matters worse, the working card I held was originally intended for some other member, but Secretary Hawley, being busy, scratched out the name and substituted mine. On reaching Regina I hunted out Mr. Marnell (I think he was secretary of the union at that time) and explained my position to him, and he asked me to show up that night on the Leader. In the meantime I had met some of the boys at the Windsor, and I knew there was going to be trouble. I nearly choked trying to explain, but they wouldn't have it. I don't know whether they gave me the benefit of the doubt or not, but they treated me fairly decent withal. According to Secretary Marnell's advice, I showed up that night, but not to work, as it was a wise bunch (God bless them!), and I hadn't energy enough to repeat the operation of explaining all over again, and a few hours later I started once more toward

⁴ Site of the forthcoming ITU annual convention, 1915.

⁵ ITU travelling card.

the setting sun, eventually reaching Moose Jaw, very weary, but not discouraged. Here my troubles ended for the winter (1913). Here I must say that from the first time I stepped into the office of the Moose Jaw News my troubles were over, and I could have remained with them till the present day. A J.W. Galbraith was the manager, and Stewart Copland foreman of their job department, and two better all-round men I never met. And if this should meet their eyes they may take it as thanks from me — without flattery. In fact, the whole job bunch, both men and women, were ideal. Well, in good time March rolled around, and as if that wasn't bad enough, the 17th and the foreman's birthday happened on the same day. To make matters worse for the writer, the snow and frost had gone back to their homes in the north, and Old Sol was scorching, so I started out again for where he goes to bed. The next morning I was in Calgary, but things were just beginning to slump, and I think from all accounts they are still going in the same direction. I hunted up the president of the union, got the market report, spent the day in millionaire fashion, and started over the Rockies. Blew the last million for a cup of coffee and whisky at the Banff hotel, and then took "the road right." Reached Revelstoke one Friday night, made the acquaintance of a few I.W.W.'s — didn't know what it meant at first, but later found they were everywhere. Made the acquaintance of a cardman named Johnson, who had just sold out a small job plant. During the next day (Saturday) accidentally struck up a friendship with an old-time printer (named Culhane), who took me about fourteen miles out in the wilderness to a ranch of his among the mountains — he made me drill the last four miles through snow almost up to my waist. He picked up his snowshoes about half way up the trail, but not to be too cruel to me he wouldn't strap them on. A good man, but a wee bit eccentric. I stayed with him until the following Monday forenoon, when he piloted me back to town, where I left him without even saying good-by; but if he is still in the land of the living and this should reach his eye, he can take it from me that I never forget kindness. Well, between the jigs and the reels, I reached Vancouver — and I may here mention that at the cookhouse of a big mill, before going into the city, I got one of the biggest and best feeds of my life (hunger is good sauce), therefore I was in condition to view Vancouver with a kindly eye. Here I introduced myself to Secretary Neelands, a decent chap, and kept quiet. Heard the home guard swap stories, and renewed acquaintance with a Boston chap, who seemed to have a cinch on the subbing on the News-Advertiser. Got Saturday night on that paper, hung around a few days, could see nothing, or very little, in the job line, spent one night with "Scotty," a good operator, slept a night in his pyjamas, and cleared out in the morning without seeing him any more or even remembering his name. Took things easy between Vancouver and Seattle; had tea one Sunday evening with the mayor of a small town just west of Bellingham. He was a printer, and besides being mayor published a small weekly paper. Stayed

with the clams two days on the beach near Everett; made the acquaintance of a "nigger" on the beach with a name including all the letters from A to Z, and then some, either original or made. He certainly cottoned on to me and was kindness personified. The Everett members must know him. Reaching Seattle I doffed my hat to Secretary McCullough, who coughed, but I never saw him since, as the next day he had started for the mountain fastnesses to hunt "tarnow," * and his office was ably filled by a brother member, in a blue shirt, whom the regular habitat called Mitchell — he certainly had a nice way about him. Gave the boys a little touch, and they came with a smile, which was worth three times as much cash — we love the cheerful giver, and he is the kind that will always get the best out of life. After spending about eight days in Seattle, I thought the weather was about warm enough to get over the "Hump" and go east — Spokane being the objective. I went south as far as Auburn, to set the compass, and then started. I reached a small place called Warner, and while sitting in the sun, trying to figure out why Sam Magee was so fond of cruising near the north pole, a rancher named Simeon MacDonald came along. He asked me if I wanted work. He wanted a man to "skin mules," and he wanted him bad. The term "skin mules" was a mystery to me, but in my mind I thought I could hold it down long enough to get a good meal. He said if I was going his way (he lived about fifteen miles out of town — Moses Lake) he would give me a lift. Fifteen miles in any direction was good enough for me just then, so I said, "That's the very way I am going." When we reached his place (1,000 acre ranch) naturally I had to rest and look around, and next morning I was seated on a disc harrow with four mules to do nothing but haul me all over the ground. I managed so well that the next morning I had the ribbons attached to eight mules, and a cushion seat on a three-shear plow. I held that job down for nearly a month and I say it was great. From 4:45 A.M. till dark (Washington state, summer time), I soon began to realize I was working more than eight hours a day, so decided to move again. Next day I was in Spokane. Saw the secretary of the union, found things were slow, kept clear of all offices for a few days, rested up, and set the course for Butte, Mont., spending a few days in Missoula. Found the Miner bunch all right. After spending a few days in Butte, decided to strike northwest into Alberta and then due east, objective point, St. Johns, N.F. Found Great Falls, Mont., and Lethbridge, Alta. (both good for a feed), and then Medicine Hat, where things brightened. Here I found my old friend Copland, whom I had left in Moose Jaw. He was foreman in the D. & A. job plant, on the Esplanade. Decided to stay a couple of months. Made good, and then the bug got me again, and one night, after shooting up the town, I am on the beaten path. Now I am down to notes which I didn't cache. I find I left the Hat on August 3, 1913 [1914], and spent the next two days in Moose Jaw, renewing acquaint-

* For the benefit of eastern readers I might say tarnow is not a fish, but an animal which had been running loose for some time. It fell to the lot of Giles Quimby to bag it before I left Seattle. (*In original.*)

ances. Now for Regina again (no scratched card this time). Again I called on Mr. Marnell, who still holds the same position in the union, and after introducing myself I find that he can recollect our first meeting. And some of the lads whom I met on my first visit make themselves known to me and say I look a different man, and one of them goes so far as to take me down to the paper where he is working and let me sub for him that night. Regina boys are good. But still another test. The last evening I spent in Regina Secretary Marnell promised to meet me near the Leader exit at knock-off time. I was there on time, but I suppose I was so interested in reading "Songs of a Sourdough" to the fireman seated on the bench next door that he overlooked me (I think the fireman was interested, too). Anyway, I had no other remedy left but to write a nice note, on hotel letter-paper, to Mr. Marnell, which I hope he preserved. Left Regina Thursday, August 7, 1913 [1914]. At Brandon Sunday Evening, August 10; found secretary of union at his home; forget his name — but he is a good lad (I think his name is Stitt). Next morning signed on for harvesting and was sent to Hartney, where I was placed with a rancher named McBurney. I was the only outsider. He had four sons — fine fellows — and here I also received the usual measure of kindness which seemed to dog me in spite of myself. Now I begin to realize that there is something about a printer that shows good, even when he is at his worst. I worked with him till August 29, when I began to realize I was on schedule time, and that afternoon I was again in 'Peg. Left there September 3, and had a blind baggage going back east all to myself till I reached Fort William. It being a glorious day I took a stroll down to Port Arthur. I intended to pull east that night, but owing to some bungler being too hasty, things went awry. The consequences were that I was introduced to a friend, whom I couldn't remember having seen before, and the upshot was, "he was trying out a new experimental farm up country, and would I go up and spend a few weeks looking over it." I didn't like to refuse, so it broke up my schedule by twenty-one days. But the experience was worth it — and I think I could have stayed another three weeks with very little urging — I like experience. Left Port Arthur September 6, 1913 [1914], taking it easy, and looking over all division points, reaching Ottawa October 8, finished the week-end with Lowe-Martin, arriving at Montreal Saturday, October 11, 7:30. Introduced myself to Secretary Phillips, who the following Wednesday put me wise to a job at the Will Ford Press, where I worked till November 29. I carry Will Ford's note for \$37.20 yet, and expect to carry it for the rest of my days. I left him on the 29th and went to work at J.C. Wilson's for the next two weeks. Left Montreal Friday, December 19, arriving home Wednesday, December 24, at 4:30 P.M., as a Christmas box to the old folks at home.

This is the outline of a twenty months' tramp, and the experienced roadster will understand that there is room for plenty of good stories in between.

Now, the members of the International Typographical Union might like to hear what kind of conditions exist in Newfoundland. For years and years we had a printers' union here and we got on fairly well. While I was out of

the country the International Typographical Union sent a representative here, and I expected great things. But the advantage (if any) which has accrued is scarcely noticeable. We are still working nine hours a day, with no fixed scale — members getting from \$10 to \$15 per, and in most cases it's their own fault. Now, having 65,000 (a rough estimate) of the best printers in Canada and the United States behind them, you would think it would give them a moral boost, but yet they don't seem to realize it. We have so few men here who have been out in the open, and being so far from the influence of a good union, and intimate touch with headquarters, they don't seem to realize the situation and take the initiative and try to help themselves. Therefore I ask headquarters not to forget us, but to keep an eye out. There is good material here. We have some nicely equipped offices, and some good printers. I met Representative Drury here last summer, but, owing to a mistake, I didn't see enough of him, or I could have given him the conditions and asked his advice. I believe he is a capable man and a gentleman. But we want something better to wake us up than a dissertation on the Colorado Home and old age pensions. We want to be told how the International Typographical Union can help us to better ourselves while we have youth on our side, and then probably we won't need the old age pension. They are talking of building a new poorhouse here, and personally, I think, that's as far as my ambition has reached yet. I am not talking in a carping spirit, but just asking you to keep an eye on a weak child. I might go on scribbling indefinitely, and tell the membership all about the policy of our government; how the seal fishery was a failure; how the icebergs are at present (June 13) floating in my backyard; how it's not safe, even in the middle of summer, to go out without a sheepskin coat; how we don't need razors here — we freeze our whiskers and break them off — but enough. But I will tell them that I know dozens of them that wouldn't begrudge \$100 if they could have been with me only last week in the woods. I have taken in most of the large cities in the states, and I know a little of Canada, but Newfoundland, with all her faults and half-savage population, is the spot for mine. Hoping these few lines may catch the eyes of some good fellows whom I have met, and are still guessing, I will now close. That bug may get me again, and then some more traveling for mine. I always watch for *The Journal* and read it from cover to cover. It's a nicely gotten up magazine and cleverly handled.

T. J. Ryan

The Atlantic Workshop, 1983

The Atlantic Workshop is an informal, interdisciplinary group of scholars with an interest in Atlantic Canada (broadly defined). The Workshop originated in 1977 when a group of graduate students at McGill University organized a workshop to which they invited historians, geographers, and anthropologists working on the "Gulf of St. Lawrence region." Subsequent meetings of the group have been held in St. John's Newfoundland (1978) in conjunction with the annual conference of the Maritime History Group, and, with financial assistance from the SSHRC, at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick (1979) and at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic in Halifax (1981). In St. John's, the focus was upon entrepreneurship in the Atlantic Provinces in the 19th century; in Sackville, papers dealt with aspects of "Land, Sea, and Livelihood" in the region; in Halifax, industrialization provided an organizing theme. Taken together the conferences have provided occasion for historians, geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, economists, folklorists, museum curators, and archivists to engage in discussion and exchange.

The next meeting of the Atlantic workshop is scheduled for Caraquet, New Brunswick in October 1983, where proceedings will be held at the Village Historique Acadien. Tentative programme plans call for a handful of plenary sessions — in which recent work on particular facets of the region will be assessed and future lines of inquiry suggested — alongside several more informal workshops on selected themes — in which moderators will identify central questions and co-ordinate discussion of precirculated papers.

Prospective contributors of papers for plenary sessions or workshops should indicate their interest to programme organizer, Dr. Graeme Wynn, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia, 1984 West Mall, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1W5, or to host and co-ordinator of local arrangements M. Clarence Le Breton, Historien, conservateur en chef, Village Historique Acadien, C.P. 820 Caraquet, Nouveau-Brunswick E0B 1K0 by *October 1, 1982*. Among possible workshop topics are: Community; Material Culture; Regionalism; Workers; and Underdevelopment. Further suggestions would be most welcome. It is anticipated that facilities for simultaneous translation will be available at the Village Historique Acadien.

Graeme Wynn
Clarence Le Breton