Labour/Le Travailleur

Editor's Note / Note de Directeur

Gregory S. Kealey

Volume 39, 1997

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt39en01

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)
1911-4842 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Kealey, G. S. (1997). Editor's Note / Note de Directeur. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, *39*, 7–9.

EDITOR'S NOTE / NOTE DE DIRECTEUR

I wish to apologize to Franca Iacovetta, Michael Quinlan, and Ian Radforth for failing to delete a phrase from a footnote that appeared in *Labour/Le Travail* 39. A full explanation by the authors follows below. The failure to delete was inadvertent and fully my responsibility.

GSK

The footnote that never went away: a complaint and explanation

Franca Iacovetta and Michael Quinlan

THE CO-PUBLICATION of *Labour/Le Travail*, 38 (Fall 1996) and *Labour History*, 71 (November 1996) was a theme issue on Australia and Canada and included an article we wrote with Ian Radforth entitled "Immigration and Labour: Australia and Canada Compared." While writing the essay was an entirely positive collaboration, the final publication — due to one editor's oversight — has become a source of considerable discomfort. It has entirely to do with an anecdote that appears in footnote 11, which describes Quinlan's great grandfather, an Irish engineer who immigrated to Australia, and then concludes: "After working at this trade for some time he became a brewery cart driver — with predictable consequences!"

The final three words, which some readers might interpret as an ethnic slur against the Irish should *never* have appeared. We have accepted Greg Kealey's apology for the error, but we nonetheless find ourselves in the unenviable position of telling readers that no ethnic stereotyping of the Irish was intended. We offer an explanation of what happened.

Labour/Le Travail failed to follow up on Iacovetta's request —made emphatically in a fax sent last summer — to eliminate from the "final" draft of our paper the anecdote in question — which Quinlan had added while expanding a section on the 19th-century Irish in Australia. In Iacovetta's view, the anecdote, as written, amounted to an ethnic slur that drew on stereotypes of "the drunken Irishman," and

she insisted it be removed. She contacted Kealey, who told her the matter would be addressed, by which she assumed that Quinlan would be contacted and the note (or offending words) removed. Since the collaboration to that date had been an entirely positive one, she had assumed that Quinlan would oblige. When she heard no further, she assumed the matter resolved. (Neither a copy-edited version of our paper nor "page proofs" were ever made available to us.)

It turns out, however, that Quinlan had never been contacted by Kealey — and the footnote appeared. As a feminist immigration and labour historian who has devoted part of her scholarly and political life to writing about racism against "white ethnics," Iacovetta was furious and embarrassed by the presence of an essay she had co-written that included what in her view was a slur against the Irish. That the article focuses on anti-immigrant racism in the organized labour movements of Canada and Australia was doubly ironic.

It was only after the article appeared, and Iacovetta immediately requested an apology from the editors, that Quinlan himself was finally informed. Mortified to think that anyone might "misread" the anecdote as an ethnic slur against the Irish, and indeed his own great grandfather, Quinlan immediately explained that the anecdote was meant as a reference to the well-known occupational hazard — alcoholism — that has long affected workers involved in the brewing industry. Alcoholism amongst brewery workers was no joking matter but a serious health risk which arose not simply from individual frailty but because drink was imbedded in the reward and control system used by brewery management. As a specialist in workers' health and safety, Quinlan is especially attuned to this issue. The note was meant to convey the observation that it was the occupation that had predictable results, not his great grandfather's ethnicity. Since Quinlan's great grandfather had in fact died from an alcohol-related disease, Quinlan is not at all predisposed to cruel caricatures about Irishmen and drink.

So why bring this attention to a footnote that many readers might never notice, or possibly interpret as intended? Because whatever the intended meaning, some readers will interpret the footnote as Iacovetta originally did. And her extreme discomfort with this possibility forced the issue. For her, the footnote "that never went away" will inevitably raise some sensitive and disturbing questions about the politics of "ethnic jokes." Some readers might well wonder whether we were sufficiently arrogant to think that our shared working-class and immigrant backgrounds (the one Irish, the other Italian) gave us the right to "crack" an ethnic joke — or indeed one about alcoholics — in the pages of a history journal. While neither of us has an easy answer to the larger question — is it ever okay to tell ethnic jokes? — we certainly are agreed that the appropriateness of any joke that exposes human frailties or cruelties depends in part on context: on who is the teller and who the audience, on whether there is a level of shared trust and mutual understanding (and perhaps even shared experience), and on how and where it is told. As the children and grandchildren of immigrants who experienced both racism and work-related

illnesses first-hand, we know too that humour is a powerful tool that can be used to ameliorate emotional pain— or do harmful damage. The pages of a scholarly journal are not an appropriate context for jokes about Irish workers or about drinking on the job. We know that.