

## North of the Colour Line: Sleeping Car Porters and the Battle Against Jim Crow on Canadian Rails, 1880-1920

Sarah-Jane (Saje) Mathieu

Volume 47, 2001

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/ilt47art01>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Mathieu, S.-J. (2001). North of the Colour Line: Sleeping Car Porters and the Battle Against Jim Crow on Canadian Rails, 1880-1920. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 47, 9–42.

Article abstract

This paper analyses the evolution of Jim Crow employment patterns in the Canadian railway industry from the 1880s to World War I. It presents race as a central organizing principle in employers' decision to hire black railwaymen for their sleeping and dining car departments. Canadian railway managers actively sought out African American, West Indian, and African Canadian labour, believing that they constituted an easily manipulated group of workers. White railroaders fought the introduction of black employees, arguing that they undermined white manhood and railway unionism. Trade union leaders demanded and won a racialized division of the workforce, locking black workers into low-waged service position when they had initially enjoyed a broader range of employment options. In effect, white railway trade unionists and their employers embraced segregation as a rational model for peaceful working conditions. Black railroaders, on the other hand, resisted the encroachment of segregationist policies by forming their own union, the Order of Sleeping Car Porters. They pressured for change by exposing the scope of Jim Crow practices in the railway industry and trade unionism.

# ARTICLES

## North of the Colour Line: Sleeping Car Porters and the Battle Against Jim Crow on Canadian Rails, 1880-1920

Sarah-Jane (Saje) Mathieu

IN APRIL 1854, the Great Western Railway declared that it urgently needed eight hundred workers to guard its tracks against stray cattle and hog crossings. Its advertisement, strategically placed in Canada's most important black newspaper of the day, the *Provincial Freeman*, sought African Canadians for the task.<sup>1</sup> Before the turn of the century, African Canadian men laid down tracks for the transcontinental railroad and worked as cooks and dining car attendants for the Grand Trunk Railway.<sup>2</sup> Black railroaders became more prominent figures on Canadian rails by the 1870s when the Pullman Palace Car Company introduced sleeping car porters to Canada.<sup>3</sup> George Pullman advertised his porters much in the same way he did his opulent sleeping cars: both, he promised, would provide comfort, luxury, and great service.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Provincial Freeman*, 16 September 1854.

<sup>2</sup>National Archives of Canada (NAC), MG28 I215, Records of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen (CBRE), William W. Overton to J.E. McGuire, 11 March 1943.

<sup>3</sup>*Canadian Illustrated News*, August 1870.

<sup>4</sup>Malinda Chateaufort, *Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* (Urbana 1998), William H. Harris, *Keeping the Faith: A. Philip Randolph, Milton P. Webster, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1925-37* (Urbana 1991), David Perata, *Those Pullman Blues: An Oral History of the African-American Railroad Attendant* (New York 1996).

Sarah-Jane (Saje) Mathieu, "North of the Colour Line: Sleeping Car Porters and the Battle Against Jim Crow on Canadian Rails, 1880-1920," *Labour/Le Travail*, 47 (Spring 2001), 9-41.

## 10 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

Canadian railway companies experienced rapid growth between the 1880s and World War I. They spent the period bemoaning persistent labour shortages, blaming restrictive immigration and labour laws for their troubles. William Van Horne, general manager of the Canadian Pacific Railway, fumed over Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier's opposition to foreign industrial workers, insisting that Canadian prosperity depended on unencumbered immigration. Van Horne, who normally remained tight lipped on federal matters, denounced Canada's restrictive immigration policy, claiming that "[w]hat we want is population. Labour is required ... throughout North and South America." He stressed that the "governments of other lands are not such idiots as we are in the matter of restricting immigration."<sup>5</sup>

Annoyed with chronic workforce shortages, Canadian railway companies experimented with Canadian and foreign-born black labour. They initially envisioned black workers for treacherous work — like hauling hog and cattle road kill from railway tracks — believing that workers of African descent were well suited for those positions. Because demand for workers soared when able hands were few, African Canadian railwaymen eventually enjoyed a wider range of employment options during the early days of railroading. For instance, the *Intercolonial Railways* tapped into existing black communities in the Maritimes and Québec, finding a ready-made pool of experienced transportation workers. In later years, the CPR turned a gleaming eye to Southern African Americans and West Indians as an under-explored source of cheap labour. As of the 1890s, company managers culled African American workers from the Deep South, exporting them to Canada as needed. By the turn of the century, Canadian industrialists also positioned black workers as a useful weapon against white workers clamouring for unionization.

White workers recognized management's heavy-handed tactics and protested the introduction of black workers in Canadian industries as demeaning to their manhood. Black labourers were, in their minds, scabs imported for the sole purpose of undermining unionization. The Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees (CBRE), the most powerful railway union of its time, codified its contempt for black railwaymen at its inaugural meeting in 1908 by extending membership to white men only. Locked out of meaningful partnership with white railwaymen by constitutional decree, black railroaders witnessed white supremacy as an integral part of Canadian trade unionism.

Though excluded from white unions, black workers viewed the rails as a viable career path, defending their right to work and newly-found place in Canadian industry. They understood that companies saw them as a disposable workforce, easily dismissed during economic recession. Black railroaders protested their displacement and capitalized on the national press and House of Commons when making their grievances known. Though often migrant workers, they affirmed their

<sup>5</sup> John Cameron, "Legislation Relating to Immigration in Canada Prior to Confederation," MA Thesis, University of Toronto, 1935, 4.

right to a livelihood as well. Unable to gain the respect of their white co-workers, they formed a union of their own in 1917, the Order of Sleeping Car Porters — the first black railway union in North America. John Arthur Robinson, who emerged as the chief defender of black workers during this era, cut his young union's teeth fighting Jim Crow trade unionism and segregationist employment policies on Canadian rails. He and other sleeping car porters used existing labour law and publicized the discrimination they faced in the Canadian workforce. By World War I, these politically savvy actors forced a place for themselves in the Canadian House of Labour and unmasked white supremacy in every aspect of their lives as working men and Canadian citizens.

The rapid growth in Canadian railway industries, the emergence of trade unionism, and institutionalization of segregation across North America gave way to Jim Crow employment practices on Canadian rails between the 1880s and 1914. White supremacy, institutionalized in separate and unequal practices governing both black and white workers, dictated labour-management relations as well as railway trade unionism. Both white workers and railway managers acted out their frustrations on black workers. Canadian companies imported black workers, even considering for a time the annexation of a Caribbean island as a source of cheap labour, because they viewed black men as a malleable class of workers, softened by Southern Jim Crow and colonial rule. Railway executives exploited racialized divisions in their workforce by pitting railroaders against each other and displacing white union men with illegally imported black labour.

White railway workers created, fostered, and capitalized from a racially stratified workforce. By 1915, white railwaymen demanded and won a colour line on Canadian rails. Separate and unequal guidelines prescribed the roles and privileges of black railroaders, hindering their career options in the process. They fought against the introduction of black workers on the rails, targeting them as the sole reason for their failed union efforts. Yet if Canadian industrialists and white trade unionists held conflicting positions on black labour, both conceded to a racialized division of the workforce. Consequently, the period from 1880 to World War I saw Jim Crow institutionalized as an ideal rationale for labour-management relations in the Canadian railway industry.

\* \* \* \*

Canadian railways experienced unprecedented growth after the completion of the CPR transcontinental line in 1885. The Grand Trunk Railways (GTR), in conjunction with the Intercolonial Railway (ICR) and Canadian Northern Railway (CNRY), completed another transcontinental line and joined the rapacious competition for passenger traffic.<sup>6</sup> Steam railway revenues soared at the turn of the century thanks

<sup>6</sup>Nick and Helma Mika, *An Illustrated History of Canadian Railways* (Belleville, Ont. 1986), 97 and 208.

## 12 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

to William Van Horne's and Charles M. Hays' enterprising expansion of railway service, especially in sleeping, dining, and parlour car departments.<sup>7</sup> A four hundred-pound bonvivant, Van Horne decided that he would make Canadian sleeping cars the most palatial liners in North America. The ambitious president tripled investments in the CPR's parlour and sleeping car department between 1885 and 1895.<sup>8</sup> He commissioned artists and interior designers who improved on Pullman's designs: they broadened berths to accommodate Van Horne's girth, installed bathrooms on first-class sleepers, and served generous portions in dining cars.<sup>9</sup>

Van Horne's tactics proved most lucrative. The Canadian Pacific Annual Shareholders reports boasted that revenue from the parlour and sleeping car department swelled from \$24,071 in 1884 to \$721,006 in 1904, with a profit margin for the latter year of over a half million dollars.<sup>10</sup> Even smaller lines like the Canada Atlantic Railway (CAR) joined the excitement over sleeping cars. In November 1898, the CAR ordered four new cars from the Pullman Palace Car Company at a total cost of \$31,740: two first-class sleeping cars with mahogany interiors and two second-class sleepers "finished in oak with double thick glass ... [and] seats of leather."<sup>11</sup> That same year, the Intercolonial Railway spent \$159,526.40 on eight sleeping cars built by Pullman's chief competitor, the Wagner Palace Car Company of New York.<sup>12</sup>

Corporate enthusiasm over sleeping car service produced a prodigious demand for other symbols of Pullman's signature service — black railway workers. Soon after the Civil War, George Pullman singled-out newly emancipated African American men for his service, regarding them as seasoned service workers. Historian Brailsford Brazeal contends that Pullman also solicited black porters because they were a "plentiful source of labor [and] societal caste distinctions between Negro and white people created a 'social distance' which had become an accepted

<sup>7</sup>Van Horne and Hays, both American-born, transformed Canadian railways during their tenure as general managers for the CPR and GTR respectively. Hays died on the Titanic in April 1914, never having witnessed the GTR's national service. See "Charles Melville Hays," 1052 and "William Cornelius Van Horne," *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (Toronto 2000), 2437.

<sup>8</sup>*Annual Report of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company*, Montreal, April 1896, 28. In 1885, CPR spent \$24,098.99 on the Parlour and Sleeping Car Department. *Annual Report*, May 1886, 27.

<sup>9</sup>Walter Vaughan, *The Life and Work of Sir William Van Horne* (New York 1920), 50-52 and 141-143.

<sup>10</sup>*Annual Report of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company*, Montreal, May 1884, 27 and August 1904, 26.

<sup>11</sup>NAC, Records of the Canadian National Railways (CNR), RG30-12619-508, "Canada Atlantic Railway contract with Pullman Palace Car Company," 1898.

<sup>12</sup>*Auditor General's Report, 1898-99 (AGR)*, "Railways and Canals Department," 63 Victoria A., 1900, R-29.

fact in the mores of American society."<sup>13</sup> Canadian railway companies avidly sought black railroaders for their sleeping car service because the image of broad smiling, white-gloved, crisply uniformed black men proved a moneymaking triumph with Canada's wealthy white railway clientele. Initially, the CPR, GTR, and ICR culled early black railwaymen from Canadian cities with sizable African Canadian populations, namely Halifax, Montreal, and Toronto.<sup>14</sup> In later years, Canadian railway companies turned to the Southern United States and West Indies for other black railroaders.

The Intercolonial Railway found a ready supply of black transportation workers in Africville, Halifax's historically black neighbourhood. Bordered by railway tracks and Halifax Harbour, Africville became a black neighbourhood during the 18th century when thousands of African American Loyalists and West Indians migrated to Halifax.<sup>15</sup> A vibrant port city and the railway capital of the Maritimes, Halifax teemed with black transportation workers.<sup>16</sup>

Black Haligonians' lives were steeped in Maritime culture. Hundreds of African American and West Indian seafarers docked in Halifax on their transatlantic steamship routes, with many establishing permanent residence in the city after careers at sea. Already accustomed to transnational lifestyles, mariners were well suited to life on the rails. Many seafarers welcomed railway work as relief from long, dangerous sojourns at sea. Charles Pinheiro, a Barbadian steward on the *SS Acadia* joined the ICR sleeping car department in 1888 and remained in its employ until his retirement.<sup>17</sup> Other black mariners wedded railroading with seafaring in order to insure full employment, offset boredom, and shield themselves from seasonal layoffs. In some cases, mariners retired their sealegs for work on the rails after marrying into Halifax families. Demararan seaman James Knight married Annie Joseph, a Halifax mariner's daughter, in 1880; thereafter, he worked intermittently for the ICR and sailed on the *Orion*.<sup>18</sup>

Black Haligonians enthusiastically joined the rails during the ICR's heyday. The railroad promised steady employment and a respectable wage for those

<sup>13</sup>Brailsford R. Brazeal, *The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters: Its Origin and Development* (New York 1946), 1-5.

<sup>14</sup>Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Canada 1911*, 372-3.

<sup>15</sup>James Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* 2d ed. (Toronto 1992), and Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (New Haven 1977), 24-95.

<sup>16</sup>Judith Fingard, "From Sea to Rail: Black Transportation Workers and their Families in Halifax, c. 1870-1916," *Acadiensis*, 24 (Spring 1995), 49-64. For a discussion of West Indian mariners, see James Winston, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (London 1998) and Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* 6d ed. (London 1992). For additional readings on the development of Africville, see Donald Clairmont, *Africville* (Toronto 1999).

<sup>17</sup>Judith Fingard, "Sea to Rail," 52.

<sup>18</sup>Fingard, 53.

## 14 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

fortunate enough to land full-time employment, such as W. H. Blair, John Collins, Thomas Corbett, Joseph H. Daley, P. Driscoll, and P. Grannan, each of whom portered over 340 days during 1898.<sup>19</sup> In fact, black railroaders readily found work across Canada. Many African Canadians migrated westward for promotions or better opportunities with the Pullman Palace Car Company, the Canadian Pacific Railway, and the Grand Trunk Railways headquartered in Montreal. Payroll rosters indicate that forty-nine men in Montreal, one hundred in Toronto, and thirty-nine in London portered for the GTR in 1902.<sup>20</sup> Full-time porters drew monthly salaries ranging from \$20-35 per month to \$300-450 a year.<sup>21</sup> Experienced porters were rewarded with higher-waged runs on private government cars. David Hawes and John B. Cameron, who manned the sleepers *Cumberland*, *Montreal*, and *Ottawa* exclusively reserved for prominent members of Parliament, earned annual salaries of \$420.<sup>22</sup> Even Winnipeg offered work for men willing to bear its harsh winters and long runs to the Pacific coast. Canadian Northern Railway payrolls show that seventy-six men portered out of Winnipeg during the summer of 1909, with wages varying from \$1.75 per day to \$50 per month for seasoned railroaders like E. Naperton.<sup>23</sup>

Black railroaders in Canada enjoyed a broad range of employment options not available to black railwaymen in the United States at the turn of the century, where *Jim Crow* and the *Big Four* brotherhoods limited their occupational choices. Variable wages, uncertain demand, and exclusion from white unions taught these black railroaders the importance of diversifying their experience on the rails, as evidenced by employment patterns on the Intercolonial Railway. R. J. Murray was a brakeman for 51¼ days, worked as a baggagemaster for 2 days, and portered for 12¼ days, while L. Scothorn worked as a brakeman for 67 days, then as a shunter for 14 days, and finally portered for 5 days.<sup>24</sup> B. Dickie, R. Elliott, J. R. Fraser, J. P. Gough, and B. F. McKinnon supplemented their portering wages with work as brakemen, car-checkers, shunters, and baggagemasters.<sup>25</sup>

Working the rails in any capacity meant flirting with danger. Brakemen had the death-defying task of running on top of moving railway cars, made icy during winter months, and turning the brake wheel while also maintaining their balance. Those who failed met with sudden death along the tracks. The shunter's work proved no less perilous. Switchmen, as they were also known, dropped a levy to

<sup>19</sup> AGR 1898-99, R-242.

<sup>20</sup> NAC, RG30-2035, CNR, "Grand Trunk Railway Payrolls for 1902."

<sup>21</sup> AGR 1898-99, R-207-208. Canadian Census reports do not list porters as a classification on the rails before 1921 and probably included their numbers under "labourers" or "other workers."

<sup>22</sup> AGR 1898-99, R-38.

<sup>23</sup> NAC, RG30-7075, CNR, "May 1909 Payroll Records for Canadian Northern Railway, Western Region."

<sup>24</sup> AGR 1900, R-196-7.

<sup>25</sup> AGR 1900, R-196-8.

stop the cars and switched often poorly lit tracks so that trains going in the opposite direction could gain safe passage. Less hazardous, though equally rare, were black nightwatchmen who moonlighted when on leave from the sleeping car service.<sup>26</sup> Other black railroaders like Peter Bushenpin and David Jones worked as coopers for the ICR after years of portering.<sup>27</sup> Black men worked as waiters and cooks on the ICR, GTR, and CPR, higher paying positions otherwise solely reserved for white men working for other North American railway companies.<sup>28</sup>

Black railwaymen in Canada held a virtual monopoly over sleeping car service as early as the 1880s. Caring for passengers in first class sleeping cars remained the porter's primary function, though the company also expected that he render various other services without compensation. The porter was responsible for all aspects of the sleeping car ride, except for collecting tickets, which the conductor performed. Railway companies required that porters report to their cars two hours prior to a scheduled run in order to prepare their sleepers. Once assigned to a car, they insured that it was clean and fully equipped; in case it was not, they hurriedly buffed and polished before passengers boarded. Canadian railway companies did not pay porters for this time consuming compulsory dead work.

Wood or coal burning ovens heated early sleepers not yet equipped with central heating at the turn of the century. Before leaving the station on a run, porters had to load their sleepers with enough fuel for the journey. They constantly struggled to keep soot from soiling the car or flying cinders from starting unruly fires. In summer, huge blocks of ice cooled down the sleepers. Loading these slabs was clumsy, dangerous work as it required that porters crawl onto the sleeper's roof and drop the cube down into its cooling mechanism compartment. Controlling the temperature, an on-going annoyance to both passengers and workers, often made early sleeping cars unbearably hot or cold, depending on the season.

Once on the road, the sleeping car porter tended to his passengers' every whim. The porter greeted travelers, stowed luggage, pulled down berths in the evening, and hurriedly converted them back into seats in the morning. Responsible for remembering passengers' schedules, he was severely reprimanded when someone missed their stop. The porter, whom passengers condescendingly called 'George' or 'boy', served food, mixed drinks, shined shoes, cared for small children, sick passengers, and drunken ones too.<sup>29</sup> Herb Carvery, who portered during the 1950s, remembered "we were babysitters, not only for little kids but for adults....

<sup>26</sup> *AGR 1900*, R-195-9.

<sup>27</sup> Fingard, 54.

<sup>28</sup> NAC, RG76-576-816222, Immigration Branch Records (IBR), H. F. Matthews to Thomas Gellely, 20 April 1920.

<sup>29</sup> Jack Santino, "Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle: The Negotiation of Black Occupational Identity Through Personal Experience Narratives," *Journal of American Folklore*, 96 (1983), 393-412. Also see Stanley Grizzle, *My Name's Not George: The Story of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in Canada* (Toronto 1998).



[S]omeone would get drunk on the train and many times you would have to stay up all night just to watch them so they wouldn't aggravate somebody else." He added that when "someone would get sick, you would have to attend to them."<sup>30</sup> Historians on wheels, passengers expected that the sleeping car porter know the landscape and history of areas along his trek. A confidante and armchair therapist, the porter feigned interest in travelers' tales and told a few of his own.

Sleeping car porters tended smoggy smoking cars, swept up cigarette and cigar ashes, washed out cuspidors, and inhaled stale, smoky air for hours on end. In the days before automated washrooms, they did their best to maintain sanitary conditions in crudely equipped lavatories. Porters frequently suffered chronic sleep deprivation since the company worked them on seventy-two hour shifts without providing any sleeping quarters. They endured other health hazards on the road as well. Derailments, common in the early days of rail travel, cost many railroaders their lives, particularly when traveling through the Rockies' slippery slopes.<sup>31</sup> Policing gamblers, thieves, and rambunctious passengers also posed a constant danger for black railwaymen.

The consummate diplomat, the porter walked a social tight rope in Pullman's romanticized mobile time capsule. In 1930, journalist Murray Kempton reflected that for many white travelers, porters seemed like "a domestic apparently unaltered by the passage of time or the Emancipation Proclamation." Yet alluding to the film *The Emperor Jones* featuring Paul Robeson, Kempton proposed that "[t]here was a certain thrill to the notion that he might be a Communist or a murderer or even an emperor."<sup>32</sup> Sleeping car porters understood that these racialized fantasies were inseparable from their passengers' other expectations. They enabled white passengers to cling to an Antebellum racial ideal, while black workers understood that their livelihood — and at times their very lives — depended on acting out the part of this offensively racialized construction. Challenges to the charade and perceived social transgressions, especially against white women, carried heavy penalties: a porter could be fired or subjected to a worse fate — lynching. Required to smile and act submissively, they did so hiding their thoughts, their dreams, and sometimes their rage.<sup>33</sup>

Though the work was certainly taxing, black Canadians embraced railway employment since other industrial jobs presented a different set of hazards without the reward of lasting employment. Likewise, working for Canadian railway companies afforded enterprising black transportation workers the freedom to pursue

<sup>30</sup>"Good Morning with Avril Benoit," CBC Radio interview with Stanley Grizzle, Herb Carvery, and Saje Mathieu, (Toronto), 11 August 1998.

<sup>31</sup>Hugh A. Halliday, *Wreck!: Canada's Worst Railway Accidents* (Toronto 1999).

<sup>32</sup>Murray Kempton, *Part of Our Time: Some Ruins and Monuments of the Thirties* (New York 1935), 240.

<sup>33</sup>James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven 1990), 17-45.

other professional interests. African Australian John D. Curl portered for a time before opening a cigar shop in Halifax.<sup>34</sup> B. A. Husbands operated a West Indian import goods store with money obtained from seafaring and portering, while Jamaican-born Rufus Rockhead financed his famous Montreal jazz club with income earned on the rails.<sup>35</sup>

Thus it seemed that by the end of the 19th century, Canadian railway companies and African Canadians had struck a mutually beneficial covenant. The railroads needed workers just as African Canadians needed stable employment. Canadian railway companies found an untapped pool of ready black workers among African Canadians who spoke English and adapted easily to railroading because of their experience in other transportation sectors. Best of all, black railroaders did not belong to any unions. For African Canadians, the rails fulfilled the wanderlust of men accustomed to lives on the move and promised dependable work during a period of industrial transition.

African Canadian railroaders hoped for a secure place on the rails but they did not find it. During periods of high unemployment or economic recession, Canadian railway companies discharged black workers, replacing them with inexperienced white labour. The *Halifax Herald* exposed this practice in the spring of 1898 when it headlined "Colored Porters on the Intercolonial Railway Were All 'Fired' and Without Cause."<sup>36</sup> J. S. Barbee, one of the dismissed ICR porters, told reporters "[o]ur places have been filled by white officials," and accused railway managers with "drawing the color line with a vengeance."<sup>37</sup> William Dixon, another fired ICR sleeping car porter and brother of the celebrated pugilist George Dixon, informed Halifax journalists that "the action of the government ... is a shabby piece of business. Men with families have been turned out without notice or cause, and failing to find work in Halifax they must leave the city."<sup>38</sup>

All of the fired Intercolonial Railway porters shared similar backgrounds. Experienced transportation workers, many had joined the ICR after careers at sea. A number of the men were West Indians, residing in Africville after marrying white or bi-racial women. All of the porters also belonged to Union Lodge, a black freemasons' temple popular with seafarers, sleeping car porters, and prosperous black Haligonian businessmen. Established in January 1856, Union Lodge members controlled commercial assets in Africville and served as guardians of their community's interests.<sup>39</sup> Hence, the federally-owned Intercolonial Railway's move

<sup>34</sup>Fingard, 53.

<sup>35</sup>Fingard 54, and John Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise: The Story of Jazz in Montreal* (Montreal 1989), 163-7 and 193-5.

<sup>36</sup>*Herald* (Halifax), 28 March 1898, 2.

<sup>37</sup>*Herald*, 28 March 1898, 2.

<sup>38</sup>*Herald*, 28 March 1898, 2.

<sup>39</sup>Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia (PANS), MG20-2012 and MG20-2218, Union Lodge Records. Pursuant to an agreement with Mr. Robert Northup, Grand Secretary of the Grand

against sleeping car porters roused black Haligonians who viewed these Union Lodge men as Africville's prominent denizens. Disillusioned, black Haligonians questioned whether the rails were indeed a wise investment in their future when white supremacy — more than industriousness — determined their fate.

"Righteously indignant," black Haligonians gathered to "consider the best means to be taken to remedy a most serious matter."<sup>40</sup> Reverend Doctor J. Francis Robinson, an African American Baptist minister stationed in Halifax, led the charge. Speaking before his predominantly black congregation at the Cornwallis Street Baptist Church only days after the firings, Reverend Robinson did not mince words. "The recent dismissal of the porters from the service of the ICR brings us face to face again with the race, which in the United States and here remains an unsettled question." Robinson urged his congregation and all African Canadians to concede that race "is no longer a sectional question: it is a national question."<sup>41</sup>

Reverend Robinson and other black Haligonian protesters insisted that in addition to race, the ICR's move against black workers underscored citizenship, right to work, and living wage issues of import to all Canadians. "Don't drive the poor white or the poor black man out of your country. Give him work and give him good pay.... [A] policy which would arm the strong and cast down the defenceless is unwise ... and one fraught with disastrous consequences." Robinson admonished white supremacist employment practices, reminding the Canadian government that "[p]eace between the races is not to be secured by degrading one race and exalting another; by giving power and employment to one and withholding it from another." Alluding to the United States' strained race relations, Robinson alerted his congregation that "[e]xperience proves that those [who] are most abused can be abused with greatest impunity." He stressed that white Canadians should distinguish themselves from Americans by "maintaining a state of equal justice between the classes."

African Canadians hoped for due process and "equal justice between the classes" but knew that they would only be attained through political mobilization. Peter Evander McKerrow, a West Indian sailor turned powerful black Haligonian businessman, maintained that since Reconstruction African Americans enjoyed certain citizenship rights still denied to blacks in the Maritimes. "The United States with her faults ... has done much for the elevation of the colored races. She has given to the race professors in colleges, senators, engineers, doctors, lawyers, mechanics of every description. Sad and sorry are we to say that is more than we can boast of here in Nova Scotia."

For Reverend Robinson, the solution to black railwaymen's problems was a simple one. He insisted that if "the Negro porters and the race [were] as strongly

---

Lodge of Nova Scotia, I am unable to release the names of Union Lodge members. Also see Fingard, 49-64.

<sup>40</sup>*Herald*, 25 March 1898, 3.

<sup>41</sup>*Herald*, 6 April 1898, 2.

organized into labour protective unions, etc., like their white brothers, the ICR would not have succeeded so well and peaceably in displacing their colored labour and substituting white in their stead."<sup>42</sup> Without unionization, black railwaymen in Canada would never enjoy true job security and would continually be forced into unemployment or positions "at starvation wages," held Robinson.<sup>43</sup> He berated the Canadian government and ICR managers for subjecting black men and their families to a life of poverty and degradation. "For over 250 years, this race served in bondage, suffering the most poignant sensations of shame, immorality, demoralization and degradation. Its men have been victimized, and they are still victimized, proscribed against and imposed upon by the dominant race both in the United States and here in Canada." Reverend Robinson warned against such white supremacist practices as violations of African Canadians' "civil rights [and] the human right to gain an honest livelihood for themselves and their families."<sup>44</sup>

Black Haligonians called immediate attention to Jim Crow in railway employment policy by notifying the national press.<sup>45</sup> "Have No Use For Them – Coloured Men on the Intercolonial Railway All Fired," exclaimed the Tory newspaper *Chatham Planet*. The Ontario newspaper accused the Liberal government of betraying its African Canadian constituents. "Liberal leaders at Ottawa seem to have completely lost their heads.... While Premier Laurier speaks in the most flattering manner of the African race, his officials strike them down in a most brutal way, no complaint, no investigation — just kick them out."<sup>46</sup>

Blacks in the Maritimes also contacted their federal members of Parliament Benjamin Russell and future Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden. Reverend Robinson emphasized that one thousand African Canadian voters in the Maritimes, "a sufficient number to give them the balance of power" would "get organized ... so that their voices and vote would be respected."<sup>47</sup> Conservative Parliament members took Robinson's warning to heart and laid the case of "Coloured Intercolonial Porters" before the House of Commons.<sup>48</sup> George Foster, the member from New Brunswick, inquired whether newspaper reports that "all the porters on the Pullman cars had been dismissed from the service of the Intercolonial" were indeed true. If so, Foster demanded that the Minister of Railways and Canals explain "whether they were dismissed for cause or whether the hon. gentleman is drawing the colour line in that service."<sup>49</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *Herald*, 6 April 1898, 2. The dismissed porters were eventually rehired by the ICR or accepted positions with the CPR once they were made available. See Fingard, 57-59.

<sup>43</sup> *Herald*, 6 April 1898, 2.

<sup>44</sup> *Herald*, 6 April 1898, 2.

<sup>45</sup> *Globe* (Toronto), 7 April 1898, 4, *Herald*, 25-28 March and 8-15 April 1898. *House of Commons Debates (HCD)*, 31 March – 14 April 1898.

<sup>46</sup> *Planet* (Chatham), as cited in *HCD*, 6 April 1898, 3167.

<sup>47</sup> *Herald*, 6 April 1898, 2.

<sup>48</sup> *HCD*, 31 March 1898, 2852.

<sup>49</sup> *HCD*, 31 March 1898, 2852.

Speaking for the Liberal government, Minister Blair rejected any notion that the colour line fueled employment practices on the government-owned ICR. "I am quite sure that the colour line has not been drawn." He assured the House that nothing had "been done in view of discriminating against the colour line in that service." Alphonse La Rivière of Québec was not so easily persuaded, proposing instead "[p]erhaps the gentleman is colour-blind."<sup>50</sup> Ironically, while Blair denied any governmental wrongdoing with respect to ICR porters, the Minister of Railways and Canals never actually disputed the existence of a colour line in Canadian industries. Over the next two weeks, federal legislators debated the application of discriminatory employment policies, worrying less about its existence than its gentlemanly exercise.

Representatives from Ontario and Nova Scotia resuscitated the "colour line" debate again during question period in early April, this time in defence of ICR managers. Ontario member Archibald Campbell motioned that the House retract "unfounded and unwarranted" charges of discrimination against black railroaders.<sup>51</sup> In the end, the House resolved that "[t]he report that the Government would at once draw the colour line and dismiss all the men, ought to have been rejected by ... common sense." Mr. Fraser hoped "that hereafter those who publish those statements will understand what the country understands, that there must be a terrific dearth of any ground of attack upon the Government, when they are compelled to fall back upon an attempt to raise the prejudices of the coloured population of Canada."<sup>52</sup>

Campbell's and Fraser's peculiar parade of circular reasoning branded African Canadians the racists for unveiling the specter of Jim Crow in a federal corporation and in Canadian railway policy. Yet African Canadians' swift mobilization of national advocates demonstrated their political sophistication and understanding of local and national institutions. Reverend Robinson and other advocates shrewdly argued for black railwaymen's entitlement to positions in the most powerful industry of the era, likely preventing greater unemployment among black railroaders. They couched their protest in the language of citizenship, suffrage, and civil rights.

The problems faced by black railroaders on the ICR mirrored growing tensions between management and employees. White workers also protested unfair labour practices, with miners and textile workers most vocal about their grievances. To complicate matters, at least in employers' minds, unions mushroomed, particularly in Québec and Ontario where their numbers doubled between 1899 and 1903. The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union founded in 1905 brought working women into the fold of early Canadian trade unionism. Even the Industrial Workers of the World, also known as the Wobblies, trickled into Canada, setting up shop in

<sup>50</sup>HCD, 31 March 1898, 2852.

<sup>51</sup>HCD, 6 April 1898, 368-9.

<sup>52</sup>HCD, 6 April 1898, 3169.

coal mines, railway construction compounds, and lumbering camps throughout Alberta and British Columbia.<sup>53</sup>

The Laurier government and Canadian capitalists fought union expansion tooth and nail. The Canadian Pacific Railway controlled unruly workers with its private Pinkerton-inspired police force.<sup>54</sup> Other corporations not equipped with privately funded firepower called in federal guns. On order from the Laurier government, the North-West Mounted Police (NWMP) and Canadian militia beat down men and women demanding fair working conditions and union recognition. So terrorized were Canadian workers during the early years of trade unionism that historian Stuart Jamieson concluded that the state's coercion had "been felt with enough force to tip the scales of battle in hundreds of strikes and labour demonstrations ... [and] in all probability has had a profound effect on the climate of industrial relations in this country."<sup>55</sup> The federal government's and police forces' support of Canadian business owners' interests over workers rights produced a deep-seated distrust "in the eyes of so many in the ranks of organized labour," confirmed years later during the postwar upheaval of the Winnipeg General Strike.

Violence only produced more violence, without crushing the surge of trade unionism in Canada. Laurier finally conceded that labour matters warranted more careful attention from the federal government. In 1900, Laurier created the Department of Labour and appointed William Lyon Mackenzie King the new Deputy Minister. A thirty year-old ambitious Harvard graduate, King dove headlong into labour affairs, launching and editing the Department of Labour's monthly publication, *Labour Gazette*. Initially conceived as a journal chronicling all matters related to labour in Canada, in later years the *Labour Gazette* kept pace with global labour news.

Believing that labour conflicts were best settled in mediation, King drafted new labour law that he hoped would bring peace to volatile labour-management relations. He also authored the 1907 Industrial Disputes Investigations Act (IDIA) and envisioned the statute as a pre-emptive strike against further warfare in industries most important to the national economy, namely mining, transportation, communications, and public utilities. The Department of Labour explained that "[o]bviously, the public interest, not less than the interests of employer and

<sup>53</sup> Jack Williams, *The Story of Unions in Canada* (Toronto 1975), 75-82. Also see Robert H. Babcock, *Gompers in Canada: A Study in American Continentalism Before the First World War* (Toronto 1974), Mercedes Steedman, *Angels of the Workplace: Women and the Construction of Gender Relations in the Canadian Clothing Industry, 1890-1914* (Toronto 1997), Mark Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows: The Industrial Workers of the World in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1990), A. Ross McCormick, *Reformers Rebels and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto 1977); Bryan D. Palmer, *Working Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991*, 2d. (Toronto 1992), 135-142, 155-210.

<sup>54</sup> Williams, *Story of Unions in Canada*, 77.

<sup>55</sup> Stuart Jamieson, as quoted in Williams, 79.

employed, lies in the settlement of such disputes in their initial stages and before they have assumed so serious a form as a lockout or a strike."<sup>56</sup>

The IDIA established three important labour policy principles. First, it recognized that workers had a right to represent themselves in a labour dispute. Second, insofar as the IDIA set up a board of conciliation, the Department of Labour implicitly endorsed workers' right to collective bargaining. Most importantly, the IDIA instituted a course of action for trade unionists and workers contesting unfair employment practices. This last provision proved particularly useful for black workers exiled from burgeoning unionization among white railwaymen. By World War I, sleeping car porters operating in Canada utilized the IDIA when challenging Jim Crow corporate and federal employment policies.

Whatever the ambiguities and complexities of the relationship of organized workers and the state, many unionists took the rhetoric surrounding the IDIA at its word, believing that Mackenzie King's legislation signaled a new era for Canadian workers. One such unionist, Aaron Mosher, a twenty-eight year old freight handler on the ICR, advocated nationalist trade unionism "for the mutual protection and benefit of Railway Employees in Canada." Mosher argued that American brotherhoods, which dominated Canadian trade unionism until the IDIA, created "a humiliating type of dependence on foreign influence and authority ... [and] an undesirable form of colonial servitude and subjection."<sup>57</sup>

Intent on shaping a distinctly Canadian union movement, Mosher and other white railway unionists on the Intercolonial Railway created the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees and Other Transport Workers (CBRE) in 1908. He pledged that his union would be a "wholly-Canadian organization" for all railway workers.<sup>58</sup> Mosher's nationalist vision appealed to white railroaders who joined the CBRE *en masse*. Within its first two months, the CBRE recruited one thousand ICR running tradesmen, including freight and office clerks, freight handlers, car checkers, roundhousemen, station engineers, watchmen, day labourers, and "all classes of the Sleeping, Parlour and Dining Car employees, except Sleeping Car Porters."<sup>59</sup>

White supremacy formed the bedrock of Mosher's "wholly Canadian organization." The CBRE's exclusion of sleeping car porters clearly implied black railroaders given that cooks, waiters, and other railwaymen who were black were likewise denied membership. By contrast, the CBRE welcomed white sleeping car

<sup>56</sup>Department of Labour (Labour), *Labour Gazette (LG)* (April 1906-1907), 1108. "An Act to Aid in the Prevention and Settlement of Strikes and Lockouts in Coal Mines and Industries Connect with Public Utilities" received royal assent on 23 April 1907. The IDIA was extended to all Canadian industries in 1919 but ruled unconstitutional in later years.

<sup>57</sup>W. E. Greening, *It Was Never Easy: A History of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway, Transport and General Workers* (Ottawa 1961), 7-14.

<sup>58</sup>Charter of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railroad Employees, 12 October 1908 as reprinted in W. E. Greening, *It Was Never Easy*, 2d.

<sup>59</sup>Greening, 9 and LG (December 1908), 606.

porters, though they were extremely rare and often recent immigrants.<sup>60</sup> Evidently, Mosher perceived white members' grievances — long hours, hazardous working conditions, low wages, workmen's compensation, lack of job security, and bargaining rights — as distinct from those of black railroaders. By adopting a motion ostracizing black running tradesmen from its brotherhood at its inaugural meeting, the nationalist CBRE gave its assent to racism in Canadian railway unionism.<sup>61</sup>

Like American Railway Brotherhoods, Canadian unionized railroaders defined their movement along the lines of white manhood rights.<sup>62</sup> White unionists demanded that the most lucrative jobs on the rails be reserved for Anglo-Saxon Canadian men. The American Big Four brotherhoods of conductors, engineers, firemen, and trainmen had long argued that Anglo-Saxon superiority warranted segregating railway workforces, with immigrants and black railroaders occupying the least desirable positions.<sup>63</sup> Black brakemen, firemen, and conductors were a rarity on American lines, particularly in the North where the Big Four reigned supreme.<sup>64</sup> The same, however, had not been true for black railwaymen on Canadian railroads before the advent of the CBRE.

Working against this diversity, the CBRE, just like the American Big Four, discouraged an interracial railway workforce and pressured Canadian railway companies for a more recognizable colour line among railroaders. During negotiations with the Intercolonial Railway, Aaron Mosher's new union called for separate negotiating schedules for white and black workers. In December 1909, the ICR agreed to a new contract that secured segregated collective bargaining rights, wage increases, and improved working conditions for white running tradesmen.<sup>65</sup> Black railwaymen on the ICR, however, gained nothing from the 1909 contract.

Emboldened by its agreement with the government-owned Intercolonial Railway, Mosher celebrated the CBRE's triumph for Canadian trade unionism. He now represented the largest class of previously non-unionized white running tradesmen and proclaimed the CBRE the forerunner of 20th-century nationalist industrial unionism. Yet by shutting out black workers, Mosher revealed that pioneering

<sup>60</sup>W. E. Greening, *Easy*, 59-60.

<sup>61</sup>NAC, MG28 I 215, CBRE, "CBRE Annual Convention Minutes 1908 and 1919."

<sup>62</sup>Eric Arnesen, "Like Banquo's Ghost, It Will Not Down: The Race Question and The American Railroad Brotherhoods, 1880-1920," *American Historical Review*, 99 (December 1994), 1601-1633; Scott Nelson, *Iron Confederacies: Southern Railways, Klan Violence, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill 1999); and Matthew F. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge 1998), 1-136.

<sup>63</sup>Arnesen, 1602. On international brotherhoods in Canada, see Joseph Hugh Tuck, "Canadian Railways and the International Brotherhoods: Labour Organization in the Railway Running Trade in Canada, 1865-1914," PhD Dissertation, University of Western Ontario, 1975.

<sup>64</sup>Arnesen, 1606-9.

<sup>65</sup>LG, (December 1909) and Greening, 17-9.



Canadian industrial unionists valued Jim Crow and white manhood rights as much as their American neighbours.

White railwaymen extended their segregationist union vision westward throughout the 1910s. Mosher struck victory for Canadian segregationist railway unionism in April 1913 with a new ICR agreement.<sup>66</sup> The CBRE's newest contract promised its members protection from harassment or discrimination by Canadian railway companies. It established requisite due process for all dismissal claims, with back pay in the event of wrongful termination. The agreement recognized white railroaders' seniority rights after six months of permanent employment, secured two weeks paid vacations, and payment for statutory holidays.<sup>67</sup> White running tradesmen won a ten-hour workday, with time and a half for overtime. Conductors, chefs, waiters, pantry-men, and cooks received sizeable raises. Conductors secured two lay off days for every seven days worked, free uniforms, and subsidized meals while on the road.<sup>68</sup> In contrast, third cooks, who were most often black, were not awarded wage increases though they worked the same shifts as other dining car employees.<sup>69</sup>

Most importantly, the 1913 ICR contract instituted segregated contract negotiation schedules for black and white railway workers. All CBRE members' contracts were negotiated under Schedule 1, while separate terms set conditions of employment for black workers. The agreement between the federally-owned ICR and the CBRE mandated that promotions to conductorships could only come from the parlour car staff. Both parties knew that Canadian railway companies rarely employed black workers in that higher waged sector. Consequently, the ICR agreement of 1913 institutionalized separate and unequal promotion scales for railway workers, reserving well-remunerated supervisory positions exclusively for white men. Moreover, it permanently locked black railroaders into service positions. The Grand Trunk Railways, Canadian Northern Railway, and Canadian Pacific Railway also followed the federal government's railway lead, segregating their workforces by 1915. By the dawn of World War I, white supremacy dictated employment policy on all Canadian railway lines. Whereas Americans eventually desegregated their sleeping and parlour car departments in 1945, Canadian railway corporations did not seriously consider African Canadians for managerial positions until 1964.<sup>70</sup>

Canadian railway companies worried that with all other classes of white workers unionized and their benefits publicized, black railroaders would soon

<sup>66</sup>LG, (October 1913), 466-74.

<sup>67</sup>LG, (October 1913), 468-9.

<sup>68</sup>LG, (October 1913), 472-3.

<sup>69</sup>LG, (October 1913), 472.

<sup>70</sup>Agnes Calliste, "Blacks on Canadian Railways," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 20 (1988), 44-7.

demand a contract of their own.<sup>71</sup> Without seniority rights, paid holidays, or workmens' compensation, and in constant danger of harassment by company officials for vocalizing union ideals, black railwaymen had ample cause for dissatisfaction. Remembering the 1898 ICR affair yet expecting continued prosperity with their sleeping car service, Canadian railway companies could not chance that their latest rebuke would rekindle discontent among African Canadian railwaymen.

The decision to turn to Southern African American and West Indian railroaders by Canadian railway companies corresponds with the emergence of the CBRE. Soon after white running tradesmen organized into the CBRE and demanded segregated promotion schemes, Canadian companies began complaining that African Canadian railroaders were ill-suited for their sleeping car service. Experienced black railwaymen were in short supply in Canada; such workers, they argued, would have to come from abroad. Because the Canadian Pacific Railway company owned and operated 60 per cent of first class sleeping and dining cars in Canada during the 1910s, no other Canadian line matched its aggressive pursuit of African American and West Indian railroaders.<sup>72</sup> It therefore offers insight into railway corporations' approaches to foreign black labour.

Canadian railway companies dispatched recruitment agents to the United States. They combed American cities, black churches, and historically black colleges for prospective African American railwaymen. During such trips, S.A. Simpson, Superintendent of the Canadian Pacific Railway sleeping car department, enlisted African American would-be porters in Harlem, Philadelphia, Washington, Detroit, Chicago, and Minneapolis.<sup>73</sup> CPR officials deliberately targeted American cities affected by recent Southern African American immigration, believing that having been raised in a Jim Crow South, Southern black railwaymen would make for a pliant class of workers.<sup>74</sup>

A porter recruited for work on the CPR's Western line described how Superintendent Simpson and Edward Williams, a sleeping car porter, handpicked one hundred men and arranged for their entry into Canada. The men were "furnished passes from St. Paul ... and just before arriving at Emerson [Manitoba] were awakened." Simpson provided each of the 100 prospective porters with "the sum of \$25.00" for their border entry requirement, in clear violation of Canadian

<sup>71</sup> All new wage agreements were reproduced in the *Labour Gazette*, pursuant to federal labour law.

<sup>72</sup> *Annual Report of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company*, 1910-19 and M. C. Urquhart (ed.), *Historical Statistics of Canada* (Toronto 1965), 532.

<sup>73</sup> NAC, MG28 I215, CBRE, Aaron Mosher to J. E. McGuire, 11 March 1943. Also see NAC, RG76-576-816222, IBR, Aaron Mosher to William D. Scott, 28 May 1919 and Thomas J. Murray to Assistant Commissioner of Immigration, 4 June 1919. Wilfred Israel, "Montreal Negro Community," MA Thesis, McGill University, 1928.

<sup>74</sup> Arnesen, and Philip Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker* (New York 1974).

immigration and labour laws. Once all African American porters cleared customs, the porter explained that the "money ... was again taken from each of them."<sup>75</sup>

Employment scouts even drafted would-be porters as far south as the West Indies. West Indian workers were thought to suit Canadian railway companies, given that colonial rule and plantation economies had forced black workers into service positions for the white ruling class.<sup>76</sup> Canadian corporate labour recruiters were particularly active in the Lesser Antilles, a string of archipelagoes stretching from the southeast of Puerto Rico to the northern tip of Trinidad. These little islands, too often reliant on single crop economies, faced labour surpluses just as Canadian industries needed more workers. No longer finding employment in Panama, Costa Rica, Cuba, and Trinidad, key destinations for immigrant workers within the Caribbean basin, some West Indian shuttle migrants accepted work in Canada. Longstanding intra-regional migration as skilled and semi-skilled labour shaped a strong sense as a transnational workforce among West Indian guest workers, making the decision to go to Canada more tractable.

Southern African Americans and West Indians who came to Canada reveal the breadth of black industrial labour migration at the turn of the century. Seasoned employment-driven intra-regional migrants, Southern African Americans willingly extended their journeys northward in search of better working conditions and fair wages. When hundreds of skilled black migrants bypassed Pittsburgh, New York, Chicago, and Detroit for Canadian railways, they affirmed that African Americans included Canada in their vision of a Great Migration.<sup>77</sup> These highly mobile skilled railroaders formed a new class of transnational industrial workers who capitalized on employment opportunities without regard for regional or national borders.<sup>78</sup> Insofar as black workers left Kingston, Birmingham, and New York for positions in Canadian industries, they confirmed that African Americans and West Indians

<sup>75</sup>NAC, RG76-57681622, IBR, Aaron Mosher to William D. Scott, 28 May 1919.

<sup>76</sup>Jacques Adelaide-Merlande, *Histoire générale des Antilles et des Guyannes: des Précolombiens à nos jours* (Paris 1994), 221-35; Isaac Dookhan, *A Post-Emancipation History of the West Indies* (Essex, England 1975), 9-105; and Ransford W. Palmer, *Pilgrims From the Sun: West Indian Migration to America* (New York 1995), 1-8.

<sup>77</sup>James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago 1989) and Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (New York 1991).

<sup>78</sup>On shuttle industrial migration among Southern African Americans, see Daniel Letwin, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878-1921* (Chapel Hill 1998); Dennis Dickerson, *Out of This Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875-1980* (Albany 1986); Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana 1993); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York 1995); and Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Women's Lives and Labor After the Civil War* (Cambridge 1997).

belonged to a global industrial workforce affected by the same push and pull factors driving Italian and other European workers across the continent.<sup>79</sup>

West Indian and African American sleeping car porters who crossed into Canada on short term contracts demonstrated that international migration did not depend on guaranteed long-term employment. Relief from segregationist politics compelled black migrant workers north, as much as the promise of better working and living standards. These early West Indian and African American shuttle industrial migrants followed the work when and where it became available, setting new roots in their host communities. They could not have known, however, the extent to which white supremacist employment policies circumscribed the lives of both white and black workers in Canada. If some returned to a South they knew and understood after a short sojourn in the Dominion, others dug their heels in determined to make their Canadian citizenship more meaningful than the one they had left behind.

Canadian corporations encouraged American and West Indian emigration by reinforcing their interests in the Caribbean, appealing to the notion of Empire, and downplaying Canada's hostility towards black migrants. As North American members of the British Empire, West Indians and Canadians supposedly shared a common bond. If Canadians worried about American annexation, so too did West Indians, especially after the Spanish-American conflict in 1898. The West Indian press, such as the *St. Vincent Times*, *St. Kitts Daily Express Mail*, *Barbados Advocate*, and *Demerara Daily Chronicle*, fostered this ostensibly shared experience, carrying regular reports on Canadian business and politics that familiarized West Indians with economic and political conditions in Canada.<sup>80</sup> Since some West Indians also had family already living in various parts of the Dominion, emigrating to Halifax, Montreal, or Toronto might often seem less alienating.<sup>81</sup>

Canadian corporations capitalized on these constructed connections, hoping to solve their economic, military, and labour needs. They curried favor with West Indian governments by promoting profitable trade relations and establishing banks, insurance companies, railroads, boards of trade, steamship lines, and import-export ventures.<sup>82</sup> Canadian businessmen felt particularly attracted to St. Kitts, a small island nestled between Puerto Rico and Guadeloupe. In 1912, Prime Minister Borden authorized reduced tariffs on West Indian sugar, sea island cotton, and other produce, making Canada the largest trading partner with islands like St. Kitts-Nevis, then known as St. Christopher. That same year, direct steamship service linked Basseterre with Montreal thanks to the Canadian Pacific steamship line,

<sup>79</sup>Dirk Hoerder, *Creating Communities: Immigrant Lives in Canada* (Montreal & Kingston 1999).

<sup>80</sup>See *St. Vincent Times*, 19 June 1919, 1, 12 June 1919, 2, 26 June 1919, 6; and *St. Kitts Daily Express*, 15 June 1919, 4.

<sup>81</sup>James Walker, *The West Indians in Canada* (Ottawa 1984).

<sup>82</sup>Sir Probyn Innis, *Historic Basseterre* (St. John's, West Indies 1985), 30-31.

transforming St. Kitts into a major portal to Canada for northbound commodities and labour.<sup>83</sup> In March 1915, the Royal Bank of Canada introduced modern banking to the island.<sup>84</sup> Some Canadian industrialists argued that Canada needed a permanent naval base in the Caribbean as a deterrent to American imperialist designs. Such a foothold would also conveniently provide Canadian ports for commercial freight liners doing business via the Panama Canal.<sup>85</sup>

Canadian businesses like the Canadian Pacific Railway and Dominion Iron and Steel Company trusted that the Caribbean could supply Canada with cheap labour in ways that would not circumvent the Alien Labour Act which outlawed enticing foreign workers. In 1913, a CPR agent lured nine Antiguan to Canada — including Charles Este, future Reverend of Montreal's influential Union United Church — with hollow promises of lucrative employment.<sup>86</sup> DISCO, acquainted with Southern African American workers since the turn of the century, courted West Indian steelworkers for its Nova Scotian mills.<sup>87</sup> In 1915, DISCO executive A.W. Macdonald petitioned the Department of Immigration for permission to import 150 West Indian steelworkers. The federal government's longstanding resistance to black immigration forestalled Macdonald's plan. The Department of Immigration's chief administrator, William D. Scott, flatly denied DISCO's request, proposing instead that the company find suitable workers in Newfoundland.<sup>88</sup>

Frustrated by Ottawa's bureaucracies, Canadian industrialists resolved that if the government insisted on barring foreign black labour, then extending provincial status to a West Indian island would cancel out the immigration question. Likewise, incorporation would secure greater trading rights and secure a permanent harbour for Canada's navy.<sup>89</sup> If the Department of Immigration insisted on sealing the

<sup>83</sup> Sir Probyn Innis, *Whither Bound: St. Kitts-Nevis* (St. John's, West Indies 1983), 49.

<sup>84</sup> Sir Probyn Innis, *Basseterre*, 32-33.

<sup>85</sup> The list of Canadian companies doing business in the Caribbean is extensive. See Robin Winks, "Canadian-West Indian Union: A Forty-Year Minuet," *Institute of Commonwealth Studies* (London 1968), 30-35.

<sup>86</sup> June Bertley, "The Role of the Black Community in Educating Blacks in Montreal, from 1910 to 1940, with Special Reference to Reverend Doctor Charles Humphrey Este," MA Thesis, McGill University, 1982, 10 and 16. Este, only 17 years old when he came to Canada, worked as a bootblack and bellhop before attending the Congregational College of Canada in 1918.

<sup>87</sup> John Schultz, "White Man's Country: Canada and the West Indian Immigrant, 1900-1965," *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 12 (1982), 53-64.

<sup>88</sup> NAC, RG76-566-810666, IBR, William D. Scott to A. W. Macdonald, 12 September 1915.

<sup>89</sup> *Globe*, 8 April 1911, Saturday Night Magazine Edition and 12 April 1911, 9. Also see *By-Water Magazine*, October 1916, 1, and Gobin Sawh (ed.), *The Canadian Caribbean Connection - Bridging North and South: History, Influences, Lifestyles* (Hansport, Nova Scotia 1992), 103-119; and Jean-Pierre Gagnon, "Canadian Soldiers in Bermuda During World War One," *Histoire sociale - Social History*, 23 (mai-May 1990), 9-36.

border to West Indians, Canadian financiers would extend the frontier to the Caribbean. Chief among these corporate imperialists, and co-founders of the Canadian-West Indian League, were T.B. Macaulay, future president of Sun Life Insurance Company of Canada, and Thomas G. Shaughnessy, first President of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

Macaulay and Shaughnessy lobbied for political union with the West Indies, recommending provincial status for the Bahamas, Bermuda, Jamaica, Barbados, and other smaller islands and in the process rekindled alarm over the growth of Canada's black population.<sup>90</sup> Advocates for West Indian appropriation argued that as guardians of the British Empire in the Americas, Canada was the logical and "natural 'big brother' of the British West Indies." Speaking for Bahamian confederacy, Macaulay proclaimed "[w]hy should not Nassau become the Key West of Canada? I am an Imperialist. I am proud of our Empire, and jealous of its interests."<sup>91</sup>

Macaulay persistently courted Bahamian and Jamaican parliamentarians with promises of favourable trade agreements, bountiful Canadian markets, and bustling tourism. To Canadians, he pledged strategic access to the Panama Canal and glory for the Empire. Just as the United States held Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico in its grasp, so too should Canada possess its own "great South," claimed members of the Canadian-West Indian League. Indeed some explained that the Dominion should adopt "imperial administrative tasks ... [just] as Australia was to be responsible in New Guinea." Macaulay and other West Indian pro-union delegations shuttled between Toronto and Caribbean capitals negotiating favourable terms for confederation and trusted eminent unification.

If Canadian industry readily envisioned gloriously upholding Anglo-Saxon imperialism in the Caribbean, the presence of blacks soiled their reverie. The colour question quickly soured Macaulay's negotiations with the House of Commons. White Canadians' jaundiced view of blacks sparked protest in Parliament and the press. Newspapers echoed admonitions that the presence of lascivious black men, whether from the West Indies or the United States, imperiled the morality of all white women in Canada. Robin Winks contends that for many white Canadians, "West Indians were aggressive, invariably urban, thought to be morally loose, and sufficiently hard working to constitute a threat."<sup>92</sup> In an interview about Bahamian confederation published in Toronto's *Globe*, the Governor-General of the Bahamas, Sir William Grey-Wilson, confessed "I had been specially requested to make a strong point of the absolute security enjoyed by the white woman in the midst of negroes, because as I was informed a great many Canadians were under the

<sup>90</sup>Sarah-Jane Mathieu, "Jim Crow Rides This Train: The Social and Political Impact of African American Sleeping Car Porters in Canada, 1880-1939," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 2001.

<sup>91</sup>Robin W. Winks, "Canadian-West Indian Union," 35, 32.

<sup>92</sup>Winks, 7-9, 36, 12.

impression that her position was as insecure as the American newspapers represent it to be in the Southern States."<sup>93</sup>

Canadians also worried that incorporation of predominantly black West Indian countries would upset political balance in Parliament. Extending provincial status for Canada's Caribbean possessions entitled them to House of Commons and Senate representation. How would Canadian entrepreneurs allay nativist concerns about West Indian movement to other parts of the Dominion? Given that black migrants would come to Canada as labourers, the federal government anticipated opposition from trade union officials as well.

Pro-unionists, including T. B. Macaulay, advocated various surreptitious ways of divesting West Indians of the franchise after a merger with Canada. Once again, Sir Grey-Wilson offered a crude solution. "Naturally no reference could be made to the question of colour. I don't think it would be expedient that the representatives we sent to the Federal Parliament should be elected on anything like the suffrage for the present local House." He proposed "we could get over the suffrage difficulty by putting the qualification of an elector in the Bahamas so high that we should automatically shut out the ignorant blacks of the colony. This would also shut out some of the whites, but I do not think that would be a grievance."<sup>94</sup> Grey-Wilson's plot disquietingly resembled American segregationist tactics. Its application, had it been successful, would have institutionalized Jim Crow in Canadian federal election law. Disheartened by his faltering campaign for Canada — British Guyana unification, Macaulay admitted "to allow British Guiana's heterogeneous and unassimilated population equal votes with the people of Ontario in controlling the destinies of Canada would strain our faith in democracy."<sup>95</sup>

By World War I, public debate over West Indian confederacy depicted blacks as not only a threat to white women's chastity but also to Canada's very democracy. With so many white Canadians certain of the inherent racial inferiority of blacks, nativists questioned their ability to assimilate complex democratic ideals. The *Manitoba Free Press* predicted that extending the franchise to a "race of people ... who have become indolent" would not only ensure the Dominion's demise, it might well sound the death knell of the British Empire's North American custodian.<sup>96</sup> The threat of blackening Canada with West Indian federation eradicated Canadian imperialist designs in the Caribbean, if not corporate interest in cheap black labour.

Canadian railway companies carried on their recruitment of African American and West Indian workers, continually displaying blatant disregard for federal immigration and labour laws. Section 1 of the Alien Labour Act of 1897 expressly forbade "any person, company, partnership or corporation, in any manner to prepay the transportation, or in any way to assist or encourage the importation or immi-

<sup>93</sup> *Globe* (Toronto), 27 October 1911, 9.

<sup>94</sup> *Globe* (Toronto), 27 October 1911, 9.

<sup>95</sup> Winks, "West Indian," 38.

<sup>96</sup> *Manitoba Free Press* (Winnipeg), 5 April 1911, 13.

gration of any alien or foreigner into Canada, under contract or agreement ... made previous to the importation or immigration of such alien or foreigner, to perform labour or service of any kind in Canada."<sup>97</sup> The act imposed a \$1000 fine on any person or company convicted of unlawfully soliciting foreign labour, with possible "separate suits ... brought for each alien or foreigner ... party to such contract or agreement."<sup>98</sup> Section 8 made "the master of any vessel who knowingly ... lands" contract foreign workers punishable by fines of \$500 or six months imprisonment. The revised Alien Labour Act of 1906 intensified limitations on foreign labour by barring persons and companies from importing immigrants "by promise of employment through advertisements printed or published" in foreign countries.<sup>99</sup>

Canadian railway companies did not feel bound by the Alien Labour Act; neither were they concerned with restrictions under the Immigration Act. They intentionally wooed Southern African American and West Indian immigrant workers, despite widespread press coverage of public agitation over black immigration. The Immigration Act of 1906 made violation of the law a costly expenditure. "All railway or transportation companies or other persons bringing immigrants from any country into Canada" were made responsible for deportation costs for "a period of two years" after entry.<sup>100</sup> The Act's section 38 expressly outlawed the solicitation, "either orally or by handbill or placard or in any other manner" of immigrants by unlicensed agents.

Yet Canadian Pacific Railway agents not only publicized their recruitment of black workers, Sleeping and Dining Car Department managers handed out company cards to American would-be porters. They informed new employees that border guards presented with the CPR's business cards would overlook restrictions on black migrants. Ulysses Poston, Russell Rice, and Charles Brannon of Kentucky; Theodore Donaldson, Vernon Collins, and Maurice Lee of Texas; John Whittaker, George Harkness, and Leroy Bingham of South Carolina; and Thomas Wyche, Marcus Hargrave, and Charles Foushee of North Carolina painlessly coasted past Canadian border guards, thanks to "cards bearing the name of Mr. W.A. Cooper," the CPR's Sleeping, Dining, and Parlour Car Department manager in Montreal.<sup>101</sup> The CPR boldly recruited foreign black railroaders, provided for their transportation, and paid their border taxes if it insured an uninterrupted flow of workers. Between 1916 and 1919 alone, the Canadian Pacific Railway imported more than 500 African American sleeping car porters under this scheme.<sup>102</sup> The arrival of so many sleeping car porters peppered among trainloads of homestead-bound white immi-

<sup>97</sup> Alien Labour Act, 6061 Victoria, c. 11.

<sup>98</sup> Alien Labour Act, 6061 Victoria, c. 11, s. 3.

<sup>99</sup> Alien Labour Act, *RSC* 1906, c.97, s. 12.

<sup>100</sup> Immigration Act, 6 Edward vii, c.19, s. 32.

<sup>101</sup> NAC, RG76-576-816222, IBR, Minister Blair to W. Y. Gillian, 11 July 1923.

<sup>102</sup> NAC, RG76-576-816222, IBR, T. Gelley to F. C. Blair, 22 April 1920.



grants confirmed that neither xenophobia nor the Canadian government's publicized ban effectively deterred determined black workers.

Canadian Pacific Railway executives blamed their insatiable demand for African American and West Indian railroaders on the Great War. With white men ripped from the rails for military service abroad, Canadian companies argued that the war aggravated existing labour shortages, forcing them into "bringing in colored help." Since special troop trains hauled soldiers and implements of war to eastern ports, railway companies maintained that more sleeping and dining car personnel were urgently needed, especially on western lines.

The movement of Canadian armed forces generated enormous passenger traffic revenues for Canadian railway companies. Canadian Pacific Railway Shareholders Reports indicate that earnings from the sleeping and dining car service rose from \$13 million in 1913 to over \$20 million in 1920.<sup>103</sup> The war promised such prosperity that the Canadian Northern Railway purchased 100 sleepers from the Canadian Car & Foundry Company Limited for \$325,000, the sum of which it hoped to make back from moving returning veterans.<sup>104</sup>

Emboldened by the demands of the war, the Canadian Pacific Railway Company became particularly brazen in its dealings with the Canadian Ministry of Immigration and the US Department of Labor. CPR superintendents notified the local commissioner of immigration, who then informed Ottawa, that African American and West Indian railroaders were headed for the Canadian border and bound for Canadian rails. In turn, the Ministry of Immigration petitioned the US Department of Labor for permission to export black railroaders on behalf of Canadian railway companies. A. Caminetti, the Commissioner General of Immigration in Washington, DC, advised the Canadian government that "there will be no objection to the Canadian Pacific Railway's securing in this country the services of twenty or more colored waiters, cooks, etc. citizens of the United States, for dining car service ... [and that] these men so engaged will experience no difficulty leaving."<sup>105</sup>

Once again, the Canadian Pacific Railway's aggressive pursuit of black workers outstripped rival corporations' schemes. The CPR's Superintendent of the Dining and Sleeping Car Department at Winnipeg, H.F. Matthews, shamelessly reminded the Ministry of Immigration of his company's longstanding defiance of labour and immigration laws. "You will recollect that for a number of years past, it has been necessary each Spring to bring in a large number of porters from south of the line to crew additional cars operated on summer train service."<sup>106</sup> Like the border guards who admitted black immigrant workers armed with CPR business

<sup>103</sup> *Annual Report of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company*, August 1913, 29 and March 1920, 29.

<sup>104</sup> NAC, RG30-9575, CNR, "Contract for Colonist Sleeping Cars, Canadian Foundry Car & Foundry Co. Ltd. and Canadian Northern Rolling Stock Ltd."

<sup>105</sup> NAC, RG76-576-816222, IBR, A. Caminetti to W. W. Cory, 11 January 1919.

<sup>106</sup> NAC, RG76-576-816222, IBR, H. F. Matthews to Thomas Gelliey, 20 April 1920.

cards, bureaucrats in the Ministry of Immigration abetted Canadian railway companies' traffic in black railway workers, actively undermining federal immigration and labour laws.

If the Ministry of Immigration obliged Canadian railway executives, trade unionists did not. World War I produced great wealth for Canadian railway corporations at great cost to workers. Desperate for peaceful labour relations, in 1918 the Canadian government used the War Measures Act to issue orders-in-council mandating arbitration of disputes and outlawing strikes and lockouts in all Canadian industries for the remainder of the war. The measures effectively gave Canadian employers free reign over their workers. They could, and often did, violate workers' rights with impunity. If railroaders worked long hours before, they were driven to exhaustion during the war. Though railway companies' incomes soared, profits did not trickle down to overworked railroaders. Unable to strike, disgruntled white railway employees protested what they could: rampant inflation, exploitative working conditions, and the increased presence of black railwaymen on Canadian lines.

Canadian railway unionists filed several complaints with the Minister of Immigration and Minister of Labour over the introduction of foreign black railway workers on Canadian lines. In June 1918, tensions between unionized white railwaymen and the CPR landed both parties before Industrial Disputes Investigations Boards of Conciliation. It was the first of many disputes over foreign black railroaders taken to federal court over the next two decades. At issue was the CPR's "alleged dismissal of certain employees who were union members and their replacement by negroes, the number affected being given as 205 directly and 500 indirectly."<sup>107</sup>

The Board, chaired by Justice W.A. Macdonald of Vancouver, heard evidence that "white employees of the Dining Cars, between Vancouver and Calgary, were being discharged by the company and replaced by negroes imported from the United States."<sup>108</sup> White workers claimed that they were "being discriminated against because of their membership in the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees."<sup>109</sup> According to white railwaymen, the CPR added insult to injury by supplanting them with "negroes." George Hepburn of the CBRE averred that "the men wanted better conditions, and they didn't like being replaced by black labor as Canadians and white men."<sup>110</sup>

White CPR employees testified that when they notified company managers of their intention to become "members of a Union" in April 1918, the CPR began ousting them from their runs. Superintendent at Winnipeg, H.F. Matthews, admitted to the Board of Conciliation that "the company did not want any such organi-

<sup>107</sup> *LG* (June 1918), 396.

<sup>108</sup> *LG* (August 1918), 597-604.

<sup>109</sup> *LG* (August 1918), 597-604.

<sup>110</sup> Testimony of George Hepburn in *LG* (August 1918), 603.

zation in the Dining Car Department and would discourage it all they could. Similar feelings of opposition to the Union were entertained or openly expressed" by other superintendents in Winnipeg, Moose Jaw, Calgary, and Vancouver.<sup>111</sup> Rather than recognize unionized dining car workers on its western lines, the Canadian Pacific Railway threatened that it would replace the men with "colored or Oriental help or employ women in their stead."<sup>112</sup> CPR vice president Grant Hall confessed that "the employing of women was seriously considered" but the company abandoned its plot "for obvious reasons, namely inability to provide proper sleeping quarters."<sup>113</sup>

If white women needed special provisions for work on the rails, black railwaymen did not, making it easier for CPR executives to follow through on their threat. The Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees charged that "[b]efore the company was called upon ... to recognize this Union the situation changed and a large number of colored dining car employees were engaged and brought into Canada." The company's "discouragement" of unionization among its white running tradesmen was easily measurable. African American railroaders "practically took the place of all the white employees" on runs "between Calgary and Vancouver" while "50 per cent" of dining cars running out of Winnipeg were manned by "colored crews."<sup>114</sup>

Canadian Pacific Railway executives presented the Board of Conciliation with an alternative labour scenario on its western lines. Superintendents bemoaned the perennial workforce shortage occasioned by war and explained that "a policy formulated in February 1918" envisioned "introducing colored help" on Canadian rails. Superintendent Matthews, the CPR's advocate at the IDIA proceedings, could not supply any reliable evidence that his company's policy predated the CBRE's April union drive. Instead, Matthews produced a telegram, dated the day after interviewing white union men, proposing that his colleague in Vancouver "secure a satisfactory colored crew or more in Seattle." Matthews insisted that the company did not inform white workers of the new hiring policy until June because "such publicity might cause disruption amongst the dining car employees and ... seriously effect, if not completely destroy, the service for a period."<sup>115</sup>

The Board's majority report exposed a dizzying case of circular reasoning. Justice Macdonald argued that "[i]t was not, and could not be contended, that there was any right or agreement on the part of the employees for continuous employment or that the company could not, without notice, discharge any, or all, of such employees at any time." Trade unionists certainly agreed. Lack of job security and

<sup>111</sup> Testimony of George Hepburn in *LG* (August 1918), 597.

<sup>112</sup> Testimony of George Hepburn in *LG* (August 1918), 593 and 598. CPR headquarters approved using women on the rails but Winnipeg officials vetoed the plan in favor of African Americans.

<sup>113</sup> Grant Hall to E. A. James, 6 July 1918, as quoted in *LG* (August 1918), 602.

<sup>114</sup> Grant Hall to E. A. James, 6 July 1918, as quoted in *LG* (August 1918), 602.

<sup>115</sup> Grant Hall to E. A. James, 6 July 1918, as quoted in *LG* (August 1918), 602.

due process in dismissals were long-standing union grievances. Justice Macdonald then argued that the CPR was justified in displacing white railroaders since "dining car employees are migratory in their disposition and frequent changes ... militate against efficiency." Macdonald conveniently disregarded that displacement by non-unionized foreign workers had caused white railroaders' recent unemployment; conscription also accounted for their high turnover rates on the rails. Ultimately, the Board was left to decide whether to believe workers' allegations that, faced with a discrimination suit, CPR executives fabricated a four-month old change of employment policy. Alternatively, Justice Macdonald could side with the Canadian Pacific Railway, assuming "honesty of words and acts" on the part of its executives.<sup>116</sup>

Two Board of Conciliation members, Justice Macdonald and E.A. James, ruled in favour of the CPR, citing "[i]t is not likely that persons would act in the reprehensible manner suggested" by the CBRE. "We believe that the presumptive case made by the employees, on whom the burden rested, has been rebuked by the sworn statements of Mr. Matthews." The third Board member, Victor Midgley, submitted a dissenting minority report. He averred that white workers had presented a "prima facie case of discrimination because of their membership in a labour organization, and insisted that white union men be immediately reinstated and foreign dining car workers be deported by the Canadian government."<sup>117</sup>

Midgley admonished the CPR for displacing white war veterans. "[W]hat will be the thoughts of these men when they learn that the jobs formerly held by them have been permanently filled with negroes, while they were shedding their blood and risking their lives in the defence of the Empire of which the Canadian Pacific Railway forms no small part?" He posited that CPR superintendents began their recruitment of African American railroaders in late April, well after learning of white unionization efforts. "If the company had definitely decided in February, 1918 to replace all the white men on the dining cars with coloured before the end of the summer, why did Messrs. Matthew, Tingley Simpson, Willard, and Fraser go to the trouble of discouraging the organization of these men?"<sup>118</sup> Neither the CPR nor Justice Macdonald could answer Midgley's inquiry.

The CBRE and the Board of Conciliation could not have known the extent of the CPR's duplicity. With a judgement in its favour and presumed support from the Ministry of Labour, CPR agents continued their hunt for more African American railroaders, this time for its sleeping car service. Aaron Mosher of the CBRE contested CPR recruitment of African American would-be porters in Chicago and Minneapolis, notifying the Department of Immigration: "my information is that Mr. Simpson, Superintendent of Sleeping Car Department, C.P.R., Winnipeg ... went to St. Paul and had announcements made in the churches of the colored people

<sup>116</sup> Grant Hall to E. A. James, 6 July 1918, as quoted in *LG* (August 1918), 597, 600, 603.

<sup>117</sup> Grant Hall to E. A. James, 6 July 1918, as quoted in *LG* (August 1918), 600, 604.

<sup>118</sup> Grant Hall to E. A. James, 6 July 1918, as quoted in *LG* (August 1918), 601, 603-4.

there to the effect that the C.P.R., required 500 colored men for work in Canada." Mosher advised the Ministry of Immigration that over 100 men were "being fed and housed in C.P.R. cars at Winnipeg terminals." He posited that the black immigrant workers were "not permitted to mingle with the other employees or citizens of Winnipeg."<sup>119</sup> The CBRE concluded that such strict corporate control over African American railroaders could only mean that they "have been imported for the sole purpose of action as strike breakers."<sup>120</sup> Attorneys for the CBRE alleged that the CPR clandestinely imported sleeping car porters from Minneapolis and St. Paul in anticipation of postwar labour unrest in the West. CBRE president Aaron Mosher warned the Commissioner of Immigration that the continued importation of foreign labour — particularly African Americans — would "very possibly ... lead to further industrial warfare and increased unrest among organized labour" in Canada.<sup>121</sup>

Though well aware of the CPR's recruitment program, having authorized the entry of African American railwaymen just months before, the Department of Immigration disavowed any knowledge of black labour migration to Canada. Instead, Mosher received a diplomatic denial of any wrong doing from the Department of Immigration. "I assure you that the immigration regulations are being carefully enforced and we are not consenting to the entry of any labour unable to comply with the law, without first ascertaining from the Labour Department that there are no idle men of the particular class wanted, in Canada."<sup>122</sup>

Completely unaware that his letters were falling into the hands of William "Big Bill" Scott, the CPR's greatest facilitator in the Department of Immigration, Aaron Mosher trusted government officials. The Superintendent of Immigration, Scott, single-handedly dictated department policy on black migration.<sup>123</sup> In every case between 1916 and 1945, the CPR obtained speedy approval for the importation of foreign black railwaymen, usually directly from Scott — the same man ordering border guards to reject black would-be homesteaders.<sup>124</sup>

Department of Immigration bureaucrats carefully monitored black immigration during the 1910s, documenting undesirable migrants in files earmarked "Immigration of Negroes from the United States to Western Canada" and "Dominion

<sup>119</sup>NAC, RG76-576-816222, IBR, Aaron Mosher to William D. Scott, 28 May 1919.

<sup>120</sup>NAC, RG76-576-816222, IBR, Thomas Murray to Assistant Commissioner of Immigration, 4 June 1919.

<sup>121</sup>NAC, RG76-576-816222, IBR, Thomas Murray to Commissioner of Immigration, 4 June 1919.

<sup>122</sup>NAC, RG76-576-816222, IBR, William Scott to Aaron Mosher, 23 May 1919.

<sup>123</sup>Valerie Knowles, *Strangers at our Gates: Canadian Immigration and Immigration Policy, 1540-1997* (Toronto 1997), 86-90.

<sup>124</sup>See William Scott directives in NAC, IBR, RG76-576-816222, IBR, RG76-566-810666, and IBR, RG76-7552-3.

Immigration Agent ... regarding vessels from the West Indies landing negroes."<sup>125</sup> Black workers bound for the rails, however, were tracked to another dossier — "Canadian Pacific Railway Requests Admission of Coloured Porters (Negros)."<sup>126</sup> On the one hand, the Department of Immigration castigated border inspectors for indulging black immigrants, deploring that more "colored persons are settling in the undesirable sections of our cities and towns."<sup>127</sup> A department circular grouched that "[s]ome Inspectors seem to be under the impression that if a colored person is an American citizen, and of money, he must be admitted." The department counseled more exacting defence of its borders: "strict examination, however, will often reveal some statutory cause for rejection under section 3, (d), (e), (f), (j), or (k). . . . Under section 33, ss. 13 a cash deposit may be taken from a non-immigrant, and Inspectors are requested to enforce this section."<sup>128</sup> On the other hand, and without ever admitting to his department's compact with Canadian railway companies, Scott reasoned to Mosher that "when people comply with the law we cannot very well shut them out."<sup>129</sup> I

Indeed, Scott's irresolute attempt to "shut them out" had completely failed by World War I when more black railwaymen worked on Canadian rails than ever before. By 1920, Canadian railway companies had assembled a class of black railroaders representing a melee of ethnicities, nationalities, and political cultures. Vexed by white men clamouring for unionization, yet worried about African Canadian trade unionism, railway executives gambled that black railroaders harvested from abroad would make for a malleable pool of workers.

If Canadian railway managers actively solicited a compliant immigrant black workforce, it certainly was not what they got. Black railwaymen in Canada recognized that Canadian industrialists and white trade unionists viewed them as gullible pawns. Canadian railway companies upheld an antiquated racialized mirage in their Pullman Car departments, exploiting black sleeping car porters in the process. When conditions deteriorated with white workers, Canadian railway administrators replaced them with African Americans and West Indians herded into Canada by conniving managers. Since the beginning of the war, conditions on the rails worsened for all workers, even if the work itself became more readily available. Fearing greater unemployment and distracted by the rhetoric of war, white workers begrudgingly worked alongside black railroaders, all the while pressuring for a more rigorous racialized division of the Canadian railway work-

<sup>125</sup> See William Scott directives in NAC, IBR, RG76-576-816222, IBR, RG76-566-810666, and IBR, RG76-7552-3.

<sup>126</sup> NAC, IBR, RG76-816222.

<sup>127</sup> NAC, IBR, RG76-7552-6, "Circular to all Border Inspectors of Western District," 2 July 1920.

<sup>128</sup> NAC, IBR, RG76-7552-6, "Circular to all Border Inspectors of Western District," 2 July 1920.

<sup>129</sup> NAC, IBR, RG76-576-816222, William Scott to Thomas Gelley, 10 June 1919.

force. Their nascent unions targeted black labour, Canadian and foreign-born, making them the scapegoats for unemployment, falling wages, and humiliation at the hands of company men.

Inasmuch as white workers and white managers thought little of black railroaders, West Indian, African American, and Canadian-born black railwaymen envisioned their position on the rails quite differently. Black railroaders understood white workers' growing hostility and sensed the nation's agitation over their presence. In the spring of 1917, Winnipeg-based porters John A. Robinson, J.W. Barber, B.F. Jones, and P. White began holding secret meetings. Robinson, who came to Canada from St. Kitts to work on the CPR in 1909, led the charge. If black railwaymen were to survive World War I, he resolved that they needed protection. The men carefully weighed their options. White union men had made clear that they would not accept black workers in their brotherhood. Their white-only membership clause and open animosity affirmed it daily. Though African American sleeping car porters were likely contemplating the value of railway unionization, no such organization existed at the time.<sup>130</sup>

Robinson and his allies discussed the possibility of forming a union for Canadian sleeping car porters. These clandestine deliberations changed the course of railway unionism in Canada. In April 1917, John A. Robinson and his co-workers chartered the Order of Sleeping Car Porters (OSCP) — the first black railway union in North America.<sup>131</sup> Their organization spread politicized trade union radicalism across Canada. Within two years of its inauguration, the OSCP negotiated successful contracts for all sleeping car porters — black as well as white — on the Canadian Northern and Grand Trunk Railways.<sup>132</sup> By the end of the decade, Robinson emerged as the champion of black railway unionism. His two-fisted approach to Jim Crow on Canadian rails fought segregation at work and in Canadian trade unionism simultaneously.

Black railwaymen in the Order of Sleeping Car Porters targeted white trade unionists, holding union leaders to their rhetoric of working-class solidarity. John A. Robinson began his campaign for national trade union recognition with the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada (TLC), a national coalition of trade and craft unions endowed with official collective bargaining recognition.<sup>133</sup> The Order of Sleeping Car Porters applied for a charter with the TLC in 1917, soon after its

<sup>130</sup> Brazeal, *The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters*, 6-14. See also F. Boyd's article "Previous Struggles of the Pullman Porters To Organize" in *The Messenger*, September 1926, 283-4. Boyd describes how twenty African American sleeping car porters on runs from Seattle to Chicago began discussing the possibility of forming a black railway union in 1909. No records indicate that these men considered Canadian porters for their union or that Robinson's group knew of their American compatriots' deliberations.

<sup>131</sup> NAC, MG28 I215, CBRE, John A. Robinson to J.E. McGuire, 27 March 1941.

<sup>132</sup> NAC, MG28 I215, CBRE, John A. Robinson to J.E. McGuire, 27 March 1941.

<sup>133</sup> *Canadian Railroad Employee Monthly*, Convention Number 1929, 33.

creation.<sup>134</sup> Though fully aware of the CBRE's white-only membership policy, TLC president Tom Moore denied the OSCP's petition, ruling instead that Canadian sleeping car porters seek auxiliary endorsement in the existing national railway union — the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees. In effect, the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada Jim Crowed black unionists into auxiliary status, a station otherwise exclusively reserved for women workers or trade unionists' wives and daughters.

Unwilling to concede such easy defeat, black railway unionists plotted their next move. The OSCP set its sights on the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employee's annual convention meeting in Port Arthur in September 1918. Sleeping car porters from across the country protested the CBRE's white-only membership policy, forcing the issue onto the convention floor. The question of black membership rocked the CBRE's 1918 assembly, developing into a tempestuous debate. White railroaders from Western Canada reminded delegates that throughout the spring of 1918, the "C.P.R. [had] imported a large number of coloured men from the States and promptly put into effect their threat" to replace "all the white cooks and waiters and putting negroes in their places."<sup>135</sup> Black workers, stressed field organizer E. Robson, jeopardized white workers and their families, as evidenced by the fact that "white men are still off and the negroes are on the road."<sup>136</sup>

Black railwaymen then presented their arguments for membership. George A. Fraser, President of Halifax's Canadian Grand Trunk Railways Sleeping Car Porters Association, seconded John A. Robinson's campaign against white supremacy in the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees. Fraser addressed an open letter to CBRE members meeting in Port Arthur and accused the CBRE of undermining national railway unionism with its racist policies. Fraser emphasized "[w]e wish to point out that we are working in the same capacity as all other railway men and in consequence we are asking for admission into the C.B.R.E." The continued exclusion of black railroaders from the CBRE amounted to an egregious breach of African Canadians' citizenship rights, declared Fraser. "We feel that as British subjects and also Loyal Canadians, that there should be no discrimination shown ... between different races." Dismantling racism in the CBRE, Fraser avowed, "will not only benefit us, but will greatly strengthen your Division No. 36, the [white] members of which are working hand in hand with us." Fraser requested that members of the Canadian Grand Trunk Railway Porters Association be admitted

<sup>134</sup>NAC, CBRE, "CBRE Convention Proceedings, 1918," MG28 I215. See also William E. Greening, *Easy*, 59.

<sup>135</sup>NAC, CBRE, MG28 I215, "CBRE Convention Proceedings, 1918," Port Arthur, 24 September 1918, 60.

<sup>136</sup>NAC, CBRE, MG28 I215, "CBRE Convention Proceedings, 1918," Port Arthur, 24 September 1918, 61.



to the CBRE and hoped that African Canadian railroaders would "receive a square deal."<sup>137</sup>

White delegates meeting in Port Arthur were not moved by Fraser's appeal for a "square deal." Instead, members buried the matter in the Committee on Constitution and Laws, then boarded a specially commissioned bus for the Orpheum Vaudeville Theatre. There, the men feasted on a banquet, cooled their palates with drink, and washed down the day's events with a minstrel show, "The Boys from Memphis," featuring blackface singers Fox and Evans.<sup>138</sup> Whereas CBRE delegates could not fathom a meaningful partnership with black railwaymen, they cheerfully welcomed burlesqued images of black men. They could digest chuckling and jiving black buffoons, if not equal status among workers as proposed by Fraser, Robinson, and other sleeping car porters.

Although the *Order of Sleeping Car Porters lost in Port Arthur*, black railroaders' initial bid for CBRE membership forced a debate on racial segregation among workers and unmasked the deep-seated resentments of white railwaymen. As such, they laid bare the hypocrisy of working-class rhetoric by a CBRE leadership wedded more to white supremacy than working-class solidarity. Insofar as sleeping car porters from across Canada joined in the battle against *Jim Crow unionization* in the CBRE, it demonstrates that the OSCP's following was indeed national. John Robinson's crusade against the largest and most powerful trade union of its time gave bite to his young union, establishing black railroaders as principled and savvy trade unionists who insisted that white supremacy disparaged the cause of labour for all workers.

World War I served as a catalyst for black insurgency, especially among *sleeping car porters*. Emboldened by their union and with little else to lose having witnessed the slow encroachment of *Jim Crow* ideology in the federal bureaucracy, employment policy, and trade unionism, sleeping car porters in Canada became the chief political advocates for their communities. Together with the clergy and black press, African Canadian railroaders protested violations of African Canadians' civil rights, particularly when *Jim Crow* fixed limitations on their citizenship.

The period between 1880 and 1914 thus held great promise for black railroaders in Canada. After setting tracks and feeding work crews, black railwaymen moved from the fields to the freight yards, finally gaining a footing in the industry poised to dominate the new century. They initially enjoyed a range of employment options and utilized railway work to insure full employment, countervail ennui, and pursue other commercial enterprises. Wages were good, if the work itself gritty and

<sup>137</sup>NAC, CBRE, MG28 I215, "CBRE Convention Proceedings," Port Arthur, 24 September 1918, 61.

<sup>138</sup>NAC, CBRE, MG28 I215, "CBRE Convention Proceedings," Port Arthur, 24 September 1918, 61. Also see *Port Arthur Daily-News Chronicle*, 24 September 1918, 8 and 28 September 1918, 24.

always dangerous. Black railroaders in Canada soon learned, however, that their welcome on the rails was conditional.

White trade unionists and railway management, defining their new roles in an age of rapid industrialization, held conflicting positions on black labour. Against the threat of industrial strife, both adopted Jim Crow as a rational model for labour relations. Railway management, burdened by what it construed as uppity white railwaymen, manipulated its workforce by fuelling racial tensions on their lines. When they wanted to appease disgruntled white railway workers, Canadian railway companies conceded to unionists' segregationist demands. White Canadian unionists won Jim Crow as one such compromise by 1915.

At other times, Canadian railway executives circumvented white unions by importing foreign black workers, knowing that their race prevented membership in existing unions. Canadian railway companies creatively ignored immigration and labour laws and successfully engaged accomplices in the Canadian government. Consequently, 20th-century immigration and labour restrictions never meaningfully hampered Canadian railway companies' insatiate appetite for African American and West Indian workers.

The Great War strained labour-management relations on Canadian lines. If the war made Canadian railway companies rich, it also roused trade union activists. Radicalism among white unionized railwaymen intensified and moved west during the 1910s. Railway unionists posited that the introduction of Southern African American and West Indian railroaders demeaned their white manhood, citizenship, and rights as union men. Their resentment, so deep-rooted, thwarted a bid for interracial unionization by sleeping car porters, favouring hollow white supremacy to equal status for all railway workers.

Likewise, black railroaders took notice of the climate on the rails. As president of the OSCP, John A. Robinson intensified his assault on Jim Crow in white Canadian unionism. The Order of Sleeping Car Porters targeted its first offensive on the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees' white-only membership doctrine. Robinson challenged the CBRE's rank and file, arguing that if the CBRE were really the beacon of Canadian trade unionism, it would set new industrial standards by striking racism out of its constitution. The time had come, Robinson contended, for black workers to get a permanent foothold in the Canadian House of Labour.



## The IWA in CANADA

The Life and Times  
of an Industrial Union

by Andrew Neufeld and Andrew Parnaby  
Foreword by MARK LEIER

A co-publication of IWA Canada and New Star Books



NEW STAR BOOKS

The only  
comprehensive  
history of one  
of Canada's  
most important  
unions

\$50

336 pages  
cloth

8 1/4 x 10 1/4

240 B&W and  
duotone photographs

ISBN 0-921586-80-9

[www.NewStarBooks.com](http://www.NewStarBooks.com) • [info@NewStarBooks.com](mailto:info@NewStarBooks.com) • 604.738.9429