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Lachlan MacKinnon

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## RESEARCH NOTE / NOTE DE RECHERCHE

# "To Those Who Lost Their Lives": Reading a Labour Landmark in Sydney, Nova Scotia

**Lachlan MacKinnon**

HARBOURSIDE COMMERCIAL PARK, created on an extensive, empty patch of land between the neighbourhoods of Ashby and Whitney Pier in the City of Sydney, today includes only a few sparsely positioned buildings, a soccer field, and a water tower. This is part of the site of what was once Sydney's largest employer, the Sydney steel plant, which closed in 2001. Just below the water tower, near an old apple tree left over from the days when the steel plant was working, rests the Steelworkers' Memorial Monument. It was unveiled here on June 21, 2007, after being moved from its original location at the intersection of Prince and Disco Streets outside the union hall belonging to the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), Local 1064.<sup>1</sup> The monument was first erected on October 31, 1986, during the United Steelworkers of America Atlantic Conference in Sydney.<sup>2</sup> It stood to one side of the entrance to the union hall, next to a busy intersection. Harbourside Commercial Park provides a much more contemplative atmosphere; there are a number of benches surrounding the monument, which now stands in the middle of a small green space.

The monument is a large, grey, granite slab. The USWA symbol is featured prominently at the centre, along with an inscription that reads: "Dedicated to the Memory of Those Who Lost Their Lives at the Sydney Steel Plant, Erected by Local 1064." The left, right, and rear sections of the monument are engraved with the names of 308 steelworkers who lost their lives on the job. Standing before the monument, one is struck by the sheer number of names. The names

1. *Cape Breton Post*, 21 June 2007.

2. This conference celebrated 50 years of Local 1064 and the United Steelworkers of America. The monument was unveiled by Local 1064 President, John Callaghan. "Atlantic Conference," *Steelabour: Canadian Edition*, 49 (December 1986): 7.

of the dead are even more staggering when one realizes that the total number of workers who have lost their lives at the Sydney steel plant is likely much higher. Charles MacDonald, a USWA member, was responsible for the selection of names on the steelworkers' monument; these names were compiled using fatality lists from the steel plant and local union records. MacDonald asserts that in the early years of the plant, the only deaths that were recorded were those that occurred on steel plant property, even if a victim was injured on the job and died later at hospital.<sup>3</sup>

In Sydney, a city that continues to deal with the social and economic effects of deindustrialization, the Steelworkers' Memorial Monument embodies both the "social memory" of the workplace among former steelworkers, and the "individual memory" of those who personally knew the men commemorated on the memorial. Social memory, according to Edward Casey, is held within a network of kinship, community, or common engagement (which can include a common workplace), while individual memory is uniquely personal. When these types of memory are expressed in public space, whether through commemoration, performance, or re-enactment, they become manifestations of "public memory." Sites or performances of public memory influence how the public conceptualizes particular past events. These "multiple remembrances" of a particular event or theme, which can exist among people who may or may not be known to one another, have been termed "collective memory"; there is no need for overlapping experience, Casey writes, "all that matters [for collective memory] is commonality of content."<sup>4</sup>

Public memory acts to legitimize and support particular historical narratives of the past.<sup>5</sup> Ian McKay and Robin Bates argue that a utopian and premodern version of Nova Scotia has become enshrined in tourism literature and provincial marketing campaigns. In "the Province of History," they write, quaint fisherfolk and agrarian farmers converge in the creation of "Canada's Ocean Playground."<sup>6</sup> The top-down implementation of public memory reinforces existing political, social, and economic hegemony. Contrarily, physical manifestations of public memory that commemorate working-class experiences are able to counter preexisting hegemonic narratives, present the past

3. Charles MacDonald, interview by Syd Slaven, 9 November 1996, Steel Project Papers, Beaton Institute Archives, Collection MG 14.206.07, Cape Breton University, Sydney; Donald MacGillivray names at least six other steelworkers killed in 1901 whose names are not included on the monument. Donald MacGillivray, "Russell, Archibald (Archie)," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, <http://www.biographi.ca>.

4. Edward Casey, "Public Memory in Place and Time," in Kendall Phillips, ed., *Framing Public Memory* (Tuscaloosa 2004), 21–23.

5. Craig Heron, "The Labour Historian and Public History," *Labour/Le Travail*, 45 (Spring 2000): 171; Casey, "Public Memory in Place and Time," 26.

6. Ian McKay and Robin Bates, *In the Province of History: The Making of the Public Past in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Montréal 2010).

as it existed for workers and their families, and create public spaces of power in which dominant hierarchies are subverted. In Sydney, the Steelworkers' Memorial Monument exists as a foil to the top-down structure of "official" historical memory. Historian and folklorist Archie Green has coined the term "labour landmarks" to describe these counter-hegemonic workers' memorials and commemorations.<sup>7</sup>

Labour landmarks possess significant symbolic value. Green has gone to great lengths to illuminate the interconnectivity between workers' culture and labour landmarks. "Each landmark," he writes, "reveals hidden messages and suggests a particular web of meaning."<sup>8</sup> This web of meaning stretches across North America; labour landmarks have been established on the Atlantic coast, the Pacific coast, and everywhere in between. Carol Pearson outlines a number of examples: the Fishermen's Memorial in Nova Scotia, the Ludlow Monument in Colorado, and the Miners' Memorial at Kirkland Lake, Ontario. She argues that these commemorations can memorialize workers' ways of life while also lamenting the loss of industry and livelihood.<sup>9</sup> The American Labor Heritage Foundation has catalogued over 170 labour landmarks throughout the United States.<sup>10</sup>

In one pioneering Canadian example, Ed Thomas, a tractor operator in the City of Hamilton and a member of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, compiled a survey of Canadian and international workers' memorials.<sup>11</sup> Thomas explains that the establishment of these sites can provide an anonymous tribute to fallen workers or memorialize a specific tragic event; they present messages of remembrance, sadness, and the hope of achieving safer workplaces and communities.<sup>12</sup> Thomas hopes that Canadians will eventually internalize the meanings behind these commemorations and keep workers' rights and workplace safety at the forefront of our social discourse.<sup>13</sup> This is also the hope and the purpose of all labour landmarks; their existence creates pockets of workers' social memory in the urban landscape and allows the wider population to reconsider the present and future in terms of workers' experiences.

7. Archie Green, "Labor Landmarks Past and Present," *Labor's Heritage*, 6 (Spring 1995): 28.

8. Green, "Labor Landmarks," 53.

9. Carole Pearson, "Monuments to Memory," *Our Times*, 27 (August/September 2008): 27.

10. "Inventory of American Labor Landmarks," *Labor Heritage Foundation*, <http://www.laborheritage.org>. The AFL-CIO, has undertaken a similar project. See "A Collection of Workers' Memorials," AFL-CIO, <http://www.aflcio.org/Issues/Job-Safety/WorkersMemorialDay/A-Collection-of-Workers-Memorials>.

11. Ed Thomas, *Dead but Not Forgotten: Monuments to Workers/Mort, mais pas oubliés: les monuments aux Travailleurs* (Hamilton, ON 2001), 4.

12. Thomas, *Dead But Not Forgotten*, 7.

13. Thomas, *Dead But Not Forgotten*, 8.

Historian David Frank has explored labour landmarks in the Atlantic Canadian context, particularly working with examples from New Brunswick.<sup>14</sup> Frank addresses the ways in which labour landmarks provide compelling historical narratives while illuminating the importance of modern labour issues. This claim is expanded upon in his study of a plaque, established in 1983 in Minto, New Brunswick, that memorializes the deaths of three children and two men in 1932.<sup>15</sup> The children had been overcome by carbon dioxide gas after gaining access to an abandoned mine shaft, and the two adults were killed during the rescue operations. Frank writes, "the often anonymous drama of resource exploitation and economic development in a small industrial community suddenly revealed an 'embodied' working class in the form of children, women and men who played, worked and struggled in the course of daily events that were both ordinary and exceptional."<sup>16</sup> The duality embodied within this labour landmark, the commemoration of those killed in the mine coupled with the theme of working-class struggle and workers' rights, presents the value of these markers and their inclusion within the commemorative landscape.

Industrial Cape Breton, which has a past that has been especially prominent in the labour and working-class history of Canada, is a rich landscape for the exploration of workers' public history. A close reading and visual analysis of the USWA Steelworkers' Memorial Monument in Sydney reveals how the symbols etched into the monument, coupled with its location, represent an attempt to influence local collective memory while memorializing those killed on the job. Adrienne Burk writes that commemorative sites seek to educate the public in two ways: either they depend upon a shared social context or experience, or they aesthetically draw the attention and inquisitiveness of passers-by.<sup>17</sup> In terms of the steelworkers' monument, an attempt to elicit specific interaction from tourists or other visitors from outside of the community is unlikely, considering its current location in the midst of a developing industrial park. Shared social context is the basis for the monument's pedagogical message; its intended audience are those who live and work in Sydney, and who have some knowledge of the city's industrial past. The monument also contains several narratives that speak directly to the experiences of former steelworkers and their families, who are intended as the primary audience.

The steelworkers' monument explicitly commemorates workers killed on the job and the importance of unionism at the plant, while implicitly

14. David Frank and Nicole Lang, *Labour Landmarks in New Brunswick/ Lieux historiques ouvriers au Nouveau-Brunswick* (Edmonton, AB 2010).

15. David Frank, "Minto 1932: The Origins and Significance of a New Brunswick Labour Landmark," *Acadiensis*, 36 (Spring 2007): 3.

16. Frank, "Minto 1932," 26.

17. Adrienne L. Burk, *Speaking for a Long Time: Public Space and Social Memory in Vancouver* (Vancouver 2010), 115.

highlighting the individual memories of former steelworkers and their families, the advancement of health and safety at the plant, and ultimately the end of the steel industry in the community. Its location, on the site of the former steel plant, reflects the processes of deindustrialization and the effects of economic decline on the region. The monument represents the duality of public memory in general; it looks backward to memorialize the victims of industry, while also attempting to influence the community's future by keeping the voices of workers at the forefront of collective discourse. Aside from its role as a memorial to the workers who lost their lives, the Steelworkers' Memorial Monument offers the opportunity to explore several other narratives of the industrial past that have emerged in Sydney since 2001.

### Historical Memory and Steelmaking in Sydney, Nova Scotia

IN 1899, WEALTHY INDUSTRIALIST H.M. Whitney launched the Dominion Iron and Steel Company (Disco) and began construction of the steel plant at Sydney.<sup>18</sup> The community developed alongside the steel plant; between 1891 and 1901 the population of Sydney grew from 2,427 to 9,902.<sup>19</sup> In 1904, Sydney was officially incorporated as a city by the provincial government.<sup>20</sup> The population continued to grow into the mid-century; by 1941 there were 28,305 residents in Sydney.<sup>21</sup> The 1950s, however, witnessed a decline in the local steel industry; the plant at Sydney was falling behind other Canadian steel companies, and workers were laid off.<sup>22</sup> In 1967, the plant was sold to the provincial government. Following decades of political infighting, attempted modernizations, and fluctuations of the global steel market, the province announced the final closure of Sydney Steel in 2001.<sup>23</sup>

Historical memory in Sydney has been publically presented in various ways. Downtown, near the waterfront, stands a statue of J.F.W. DesBarres. This statue memorializes the pre-industrial settlement of the Sydney area. DesBarres is considered the "founder" of the town, as he organized the settlement of Sydney during his role as lieutenant-governor of Cape Breton in 1785.<sup>24</sup>

18. Craig Heron, *Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada, 1883–1935* (Toronto 1988), 21.

19. Heron, *Working in Steel*, 31.

20. Robert Morgan, *Rise Again! The Story of Cape Breton Island from 1900 to Today* (Sydney, NS 2009), 19.

21. Heron, *Working in Steel*, 31.

22. Ron Crawley, "Conflict within the Union: Struggles Among Sydney Steel Workers, 1936–1972," PhD Dissertation, Carleton University, 1995, 236–237.

23. Joan Bishop, "Sydney Steel: Public Ownership and the Welfare State, 1967 to 1975," in Kenneth Donovan, ed., *The Island: New Perspectives on Cape Breton History* (Fredericton, NB 1990), 165–186; *Cape Breton Post*, 20 January 2001.

24. Robert Morgan, *Early Cape Breton: From Founding to Famine* (Sydney, NS 2000), 10.

Also at the waterfront stands a large fiddle. Touted as the “largest fiddle in the world,” it is meant to symbolize the pre-industrial, agrarian-Celtic “identity” of Cape Breton Island. Aside from its intended symbolism of Celticity, however, the fiddle was constructed at a local steel yard using ten tons of steel plating. The construction of the fiddle, and the materials with which it is composed, provides another layer of meaning than its immediate appearance might suggest – that of the city’s industrial past. Historian Dan MacDonald argues that this industrial meaning is overlooked, and perhaps intentionally forgotten. He writes, “instead of working-class ingenuity that accompanies the steel-making heritage, the fiddle symbolizes the quaint, docile, and sluggish nature of the locals, a post-industrial folk.”<sup>25</sup>

While the “Big Fiddle” markets the island as a pre-industrial paradise to visiting tourists, the city’s industrial history is strongly represented in other areas of the commemorative landscape. There are at least two other monuments devoted to the steel industry. One is a discarded steel ladle, complete with a plaque commemorating steelworkers’ “contributions to innovation in the industry, to their communities, and to the North American labour movement,” which sat idle for many years next to the busy intersection of Prince Street and Ashby Road in Sydney. It was erected in 1995, during a ceremony presided over by Mayor Vince MacLean, and was dedicated to the contributions of steelworkers and their families who developed the local community. This monument, too, was recently moved; on July 4, 2013, the ladle was dismantled and reconstructed at the entrance to the “Open Hearth Park,” which is a community green space that has been developed on a portion of the former plant site. Another labour landmark, a large “melting pot” that contains the flags of 23 countries from where the steel plant drew labour, was erected in 2010 on Victoria Road in Whitney Pier as a memorial to the many different nationalities that came together in the city.

The Steelworkers’ Memorial Monument, however, provides a specific narrative of the industrial past that focuses explicitly on the memorialization of the dead and the importance of unionism at the Sydney steel plant. Each name on the monument represents an individual, but they also collectively represent steelworkers as an occupational group. Many of the names carry a dual significance; considering that the more recent names are still remembered by surviving family members within the community, they retain great personal

25. Dan MacDonald, “Steel-ing Cape Breton’s Labour History,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 57 (Spring 2006): 269. There is also a wide selection of academic and popular histories that examine the steel industry in Sydney. These range from explorations that contextualize the Sydney steel industry in the wider national narrative, to first-hand accounts of work at the plant and labour organization. Popular histories generally explore the steel industry in a more local context, often alongside the coal mining industry. Heron, *Working in Steel*; George MacEachern, *George MacEachern, An Autobiography: The Story of a Cape Breton Labour Radical*, edited and introduced by David Frank and Don MacGillivray (Sydney, NS 1987); Paul MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers: Labour in Cape Breton* (Toronto 1976); Morgan, *Rise Again!*



and collective significance. The individual memories that are prompted by the names on the monument might be glimpsed through historical research, but even this type of examination is only an approximation of the true gravity of workplace death as experienced by a friend or family member of the deceased. In this way, the more recent names on the monument carry a greater significance; they continue to be remembered individually and collectively. This is perhaps not the case for the names that are memorialized from the early years of the plant; these names have come to represent the wider experiences of steelmaking in Sydney, and the role of the industry in the city's development.

The names on the Steelworkers' Memorial Monument are presented chronologically by year of death. In reading the chronology of deaths at the plant, the viewer is presented with a history of the steel plant writ through tragedy. There is a narrative here, as well; if the names were alphabetically listed, there would be no "beginning," "middle," and "end" to the monument's history of workers' experience. The act of naming is also politically charged; the monument was constructed using on-site fatality lists, so any worker whose death occurred as the result of work at the plant – from Sydney's notoriously high cancer rates, for instance – are not included. Similarly, it would be difficult to assign an "end" to the monument's tally if all these names were included; health concerns continue to plague many of those who worked at Sydney Steel and others in the community, even years after the plant's final closure.

This article is based upon the individual narratives that exist within each name listed on the monument. These names allow insight into the broader meanings of the monument, and their chronological contextualization provides the basis for an examination of working conditions, unionism, and workers' experience. The names were chosen for the availability of documentary and genealogical source material, drawn primarily from contemporary newspaper accounts and historical vital statistics. Each name chosen for this article is meant to be representative of workers' experience at the steel plant during the associated decade. These deaths reveal details regarding the availability of safety equipment, medical attention, and workers' compensation at the plant. While each death is unique, all of the steelworkers at the plant experienced the conditions that surrounded these accidents during each period.

The purpose here is not to provide an exhaustive exploration of individual memory, but to contextualize these stories in terms of a monument that provides access to the broader social memory of work at the Sydney steel plant. This social memory encompasses the changing contexts of work at the plant during the 20th century, advancements in labour organization, the fight for workers' rights, and concerns regarding the environmental and health impacts of steelmaking on the community. If a viewer possesses the social memory of work at the steel plant, they are able to discern other significant meanings of the monument, such as the decline in on-site fatalities during the 20th century that is depicted in the tables below. The monument, as a manifestation of workers' public memory, also represents an attempt to inform the



Table 1: Recorded Deaths on Steelworkers’ Memorial Monument by Decade

Decade	Recorded Deaths	Decade	Recorded Deaths
1900s	67	1960s	18
1910s	92	1970s	9
1920s	39	1980s	8
1930s	18	1990s	1
1940s	33	2000s	2
1950s	21		

community’s collective memory of the industrial past with the individual and social memories of steelworkers’ and their families. The final section of this article examines several competing narratives regarding the industrial legacy in Sydney, and explores how each of these also attempt to inform local collective memory.

Archie Russell, 1874–1901

THE FIFTH NAME ENGRAVED on the steelworkers’ monument is that of Archibald Russell. Born in Conception Bay, Newfoundland c. 1874, Russell was one of the thousands of Newfoundlanders who immigrated to Cape Breton in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to find work in the steel and coal industries.<sup>26</sup> According to historian Ron Crawley, these men were often discriminated against and employed in the most dangerous jobs.<sup>27</sup> Even before the Dominion Iron and Steel Company had completed the \$15 million Sydney steel works in 1902, the plant had seen its first fatalities.<sup>28</sup> On June 8, 1901, Archie Russell was working in the open hearth department when an improperly attached block and tackle let go and crushed his skull, killing him instantly. Historian Donald MacGillivray notes that normally such an accident would receive a verdict of “accidental death,” although in the case of Russell the coroner’s inquest specifically blamed “the carelessness of the officials.”<sup>29</sup> The memorial lists 66 more workplace deaths for the first decade of production at the plant, although that number is almost certainly a low estimate. Considering that Disco only had around 2,000 employees in 1903, this is stark

26. MacGillivray, “Russell, Archibald (Archie),” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, <http://www.biographi.ca>. Historian Ron Crawley finds that between 1891 and 1901 more than 2,500 of these men came to Cape Breton: Ron Crawley, “Off to Sydney: Newfoundlanders Emigrate to Industrial Cape Breton, 1890–1914,” *Acadiensis*, 17 (Spring 1988): 29.

27. Crawley, “Off to Sydney,” 45.

28. Heron, *Working in Steel*, 20.

29. MacGillivray, “Russell, Archibald (Archie),” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*.

**Table 2: Recorded Deaths on Steelworkers' Memorial Monument by Year**

Year	Recorded Deaths	Year	Recorded Deaths	Year	Recorded Deaths
1901	6	1931	2	1963	4
1902	11	1933	3	1964	2
1903	9	1934	2	1965	1
1904	10	1935	1	1966	1
1905	6	1936	1	1967	2
1906	7	1937	3	1968	2
1907	9	1938	2	1969	1
1908	3	1939	1	1970	2
1909	6	1940	2	1971	2
1910	3	1941	4	1972	1
1911	11	1942	5	1973	1
1912	9	1943	5	1974	1
1913	13	1944	6	1977	1
1914	4	1945	1	1979	1
1915	7	1946	4	1981	1
1916	16	1948	4	1983	3
1917	12	1949	2	1984	1
1918	7	1950	6	1986	3
1919	11	1951	2	1993	1
1920	8	1952	3	2003	1
1921	5	1953	1	2004	1
1922	4	1954	1		
1923	5	1955	1		
1924	2	1956	1		
1925	1	1957	3		
1926	3	1958	1		
1927	4	1959	1		
1928	3	1960	2		
1929	4	1961	2		
1930	3	1962	1		

evidence of the dangers that came with working in the steel industry during the first decade of the 20th century.<sup>30</sup>

While the early days of the Sydney steel plant were fraught with the possibility of death or dismemberment, men who worked alongside Russell were already clamouring for safer working conditions and increased rights. Seven days before his death, more than 250 members of a group the newspapers called “the Labor Union of Sydney” decided to strike for higher wages and shorter hours. This was preceded by the firing of a number of steelworkers who belonged to the union.<sup>31</sup> On June 14, 1901, with Russell’s father still in mourning, nearly 2,000 people gathered at Victoria Park in Sydney to hear speakers call for the nine-hour day to be implemented at Disco.<sup>32</sup> Unsafe and unfair working conditions at the steel plant, such as those that resulted in Russell’s death, were catalysts for the organization of labour, the fight for fair wages, and the demand for shorter hours. With the establishment of the steel plant in Sydney, the city was thrust into the dynamic relationship between capital and labour. The earliest names on the Steelworkers’ Memorial Monument offer a snapshot of the difficulties of workers’ lives during this period; the industrial legacy that began with the erection of the steel plant continued to shape the collective memory of the community for the next 100 years.<sup>33</sup>

### Joseph Oram, 1868–1911

THE STEELWORKERS’ MONUMENT lists eleven names for the year of 1911. That year remains one of the worst in the plant’s history for the number of workplace deaths.<sup>34</sup> It was on the evening of April 24, 1911 that 43-year-old Joseph Oram earned his place among the other names on the monument. He had just finished his shift at the steel plant around six o’clock in the evening, and was making his way toward the gates. The plant was always noisy, and Oram’s mind was perhaps on his wife and two children back home in Sydney Mines. As he decided to cross the tracks behind the blooming mill, he did not hear the engine rumbling toward him.<sup>35</sup> It knocked him onto the tracks,

30. Ron Crawley, “Class Conflict and the Establishment of the Sydney Steel Industry, 1899–1904,” in Kenneth Donovan, ed., *The Island: New Perspectives on Cape Breton History, 1713–1990* (Fredericton, NB 1990), 161.

31. *Sydney Daily Post*, 1 June 1901.

32. *Sydney Daily Post*, 14 June 1901.

33. Morgan, *Rise Again!* 19.

34. Two other years, 1902 and 1919, also list eleven deaths. Three years, 1913, 1916, and 1917, list more than eleven deaths.

35. The blooming mill was where steel ingots were mechanically manipulated into smaller sets of rolls that could then be turned into rails or billets. This was one of the most mechanized and technologically advanced areas in a steel plant during the early 20th century. Heron, *Working in Steel*, 47.

before passing over his right arm and right leg. Both were severed from his body, sending him immediately into shock. The local doctor approved Oram's removal to Brooklands Hospital in Sydney after a cursory examination. He passed away two hours later, missing an arm and a leg and suffering from the effects of blood loss and shock.<sup>36</sup>

Oram's death came during a period of increased power for organized labour; early in the decade, a number of provinces had implemented workmen's compensation laws.<sup>37</sup> Accidental deaths remained commonplace in Sydney; a 1913 report found that the majority of workplace accidents took place during the last three hours of a twelve-hour shift.<sup>38</sup> This environment prompted calls for shorter hours and better working conditions at the plant. With the declaration of war in 1914, the high turnover rate of labour at the Sydney steel plant became more pronounced; the situation allowed labour organizers to gain support. By the middle of the war, workers and labour groups had become more confident, and unionism could be discussed more freely.<sup>39</sup> Robert Babcock writes, "In 1915, Nova Scotia ... enacted an up to date, no-fault law ... [this was] a system whereby employers submitted payrolls to a government agency that grouped the industries according to risk and levied varying assessments in order to carry the liability."<sup>40</sup> The year 1917 witnessed the growth of trade unionism at the Sydney steel plant, when a number of workers associated themselves with the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers (AAISTW).<sup>41</sup>

### James Ferguson, 1890–1923

THIRTY-YEAR-OLD JAMES FERGUSON, another name on the steelworkers' monument, was likely not thinking about labour unrest or his job at the plant when he descended the steps of Bethel Presbyterian Church on Falmouth Street in Sydney on October 27, 1920. It was his wedding day. As Ferguson left the church with his new bride, Sadie Anne, he was perhaps picturing the life that they would build together. Over the next three years, the Fergusons would move into a house on Alexander Street and begin a family. When Ferguson

36. *Sydney Daily Post*, 25 April 1911; Historical Vital Statistics, "Deaths – Joseph Oram," Book 3, no. 2825, 1911, <https://novascotiagenealogy.com/>.

37. Alvin Finkel, *Social Practice and Policy in Canada: A History* (Waterloo, ON 2006), 82.

38. Bryce Stewart, *Sydney, Nova Scotia. The report of a brief investigation of social conditions in the city which indicate the need of an intensive social survey, the lines of which are herein suggested* (Toronto 1913), 19–20.

39. Craig Heron and Myer Siemiatycki, "The Great War, the State, and Working-Class Canada," in Craig Heron, ed., *The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917–1925* (Toronto 1998), 19.

40. Robert H. Babcock, "Blood on the Factory Floor: The Workers' Compensation Movement in Canada and the United States," in Raymond B. Blake and Jeffrey A. Keshen, eds., *Social Fabric or Patchwork Quilt: The Development of Social Policy in Canada* (Toronto 2006), 54.

41. Heron, *Working in Steel*, 131.

was killed at the steel plant almost three years after his wedding, his wife was left with two young children.<sup>42</sup>

While working on the steel plant pier on the morning of September 17, 1923, Ferguson attempted to cross the railroad tracks. As he stepped between a heavy car and a bumper, the car gave way and smashed into his hips. His pelvis was crushed. Ferguson was taken to the steel plant's emergency hospital before being moved to the city hospital. He passed away from his injuries later that day. Although "Accidental Death" was the verdict of the inquiry into his death, the *Sydney Daily Post* made sure to report that "had Mr. Ferguson walked around the cars instead of entering between them, death would have been averted."<sup>43</sup> The newspaper account places blame for the accident directly on Ferguson; on-site conditions, which had resulted in more than 150 deaths since the plant first opened, are not mentioned.

Safety in the steel plant was an important topic for workers at the end of World War I. Canadian steel companies appeared to be taking a greater interest in the basic social welfare of their workers. In his autobiography, George MacEachern - a former steelworker and labour leader - discusses the "Safety First" month that was implemented by the British Empire Steel Corporation (Besco) at the Sydney plant in December 1922: "They had a well-dressed man come and stand on the surface table.... He made a speech about safety, the value of safety.... It was alright as speeches go, but we didn't learn anything.... My God, the carnage in December. Gee! A friend of mine, who just started around the plant the same time I did, got squeezed to death up at the coke oven."<sup>44</sup> These programs, argues Craig Heron, were designed wholly to increase the level of dependency among workers and create a stable labour pool for employers.<sup>45</sup> Besco, which had taken over Disco in 1921, announced a new pension plan in early 1923.<sup>46</sup> Ferguson would not benefit from this plan, however, as it required 25 years of service to the company. This was an especially cruel irony considering that the plant had only been making steel for 22 years when this new policy was announced.<sup>47</sup>

42. Historical Vital Statistics, "Province of Nova Scotia Marriage Register – James Ferguson and Sadie Ann Ormond," Book 26, 1920, <https://novascotiagenealogy.com/>; Historical Vital Statistics, "Province of Nova Scotia, Certificate of Registration of Death – James Ferguson," Book 78, 1923, <https://novascotiagenealogy.com/>.

43. *Sydney Daily Post*, 18 September 1923.

44. MacEachern, *George MacEachern*, 20.

45. Heron, *Working in Steel*, 99.

46. Disco's parent company, Dominion Steel, was taken over by a new group of financiers through a series of stock purchases in 1918 and 1919, which was described at the time as a "silent revolution" and led to the organization of a new conglomerate, the British Empire Steel Corporation, in 1920. See David Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation," *Acadiensis*, 7 (Autumn 1977): 16.

47. Heron, *Working in Steel*, 102.

At the time of his death in September 1923, Ferguson had lived through some of the most dramatic months in local labour history. Many of the steelworkers had been organized into the AAISTW since 1917, and support for unionism remained strong. After the Besco takeover in 1921, the union sought recognition from the company.<sup>48</sup> Besco refused demands of higher wages, union recognition, and the eight-hour day. After continued calls for wage increases, the steelworkers announced a strike on June 28, 1923. Picketers crowded the gates in front of the plant, scuffles with company police broke out, and the Riot Act was shouted down.<sup>49</sup> On 30 June the troops showed up, indicating the willingness of the Nova Scotian government to use violence against striking workers. The gates of the steel plant bristled with machine guns, barbed wire, and fixed bayonets.<sup>50</sup> Ultimately, the strike was broken with no recognition of the union. Fewer men were hired back at the plant than had gone out on strike and the position of the steelworkers appeared grim. In September 1923, a commission appointed by the federal government to look into the events of the strike reported, "it appeared from the evidence that the militia rendered effective aid to the civil power in the protection of life, liberty, order, and property under the law."<sup>51</sup>

Steel continued to be made in Cape Breton, but Besco did not last out the decade. The original capital investments that funded Besco were based on promises of massive financial returns to creditors. As the demand for coal and steel fell during the interwar period, Besco attempted to offset their "watered stock" by cutting wages. The resulting 1923 steelworkers' strike and the massive 1925 coal miners' strike drove Besco even closer to insolvency and shattered the company's reputation. In January 1928, Roy Wolvin resigned as the president of Besco and was succeeded by C.B. McNaught, a director of the Royal Bank. Within two months, a newly incorporated company, the Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation (Dosco), had taken over all of Besco's property and assets.<sup>52</sup> Dosco remained highly skeptical of the labour movement, however, and continued policies of corporate welfare in an attempt to dampen union activism.

48. MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, 91.

49. MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, 95; David Frank, *J.B. McLachlan: A Biography* (Toronto, ON 1999), 301.

50. Don MacGillivray, "Military Aid to the Civil Power: The Cape Breton Experience in the 1920s," *Acadiensis*, 3 (Spring 1974): 56.

51. *Report of Commission appointed under Order in Council to inquire into The Industrial Unrest among the Steel Workers at Sydney, NS* (Ottawa, ON 1923). Beaton Institute Archives, Cape Breton University, PAM 966.

52. Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of British Empire Steel Corporation," 31–33.

## George Smith, 1894–1938

GEORGE SMITH IS ONE of the two names listed on the steelworkers' monument for the year 1938. Smith was 44 years old at the time of his death. His daughter remembers the last words that he spoke to her before his death; "So long, Margaret," he said as he left his family home on Bay Street in Whitney Pier for the three o'clock shift at the steel plant on 26 June.<sup>53</sup> Dosco had changed from the twelve-hour shift to the eight-hour shift in 1935, which is the reason that Smith was able to spend the morning at home with his family.<sup>54</sup> That afternoon, he was helping to repair the No. 1 blast furnace. While walking along the scaffolding, Smith was overcome by gas and fell 35 feet to the ground. His skull was fractured, but he managed to survive for two more days in the city hospital. Smith never regained consciousness and died on June 28, 1938.<sup>55</sup>

The 1930s was the decade that labour organization finally succeeded at the Sydney steel plant. In 1935, George MacEachern and several other workers on the plant council began organizing for the creation of a union. Nearly 2 per cent of the workforce showed up for the first open meeting of the new Independent Steelworkers' Union of Nova Scotia. The company responded with a 10 per cent wage increase, followed soon after by two more increases of 7.5 per cent. This was done in an attempt to sway support from the union by proving that the plant council was able to act in the interest of the workers. It had the opposite effect, however, and union membership ballooned to more than 3,000 members within a few months.<sup>56</sup> The following year, the independent union gained a Steelworkers' Organizing Committee (swoc) charter under the auspices of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO). The steelworkers were officially united as Lodge 1064 swoc.<sup>57</sup> MacEachern and other union members took the fight to Premier Angus L. Macdonald, proposing legislation that would enshrine workers' right to organize in provincial law. Macdonald, seeking to avoid a bitter recognition strike, signed the Nova Scotia Trade Union Act into law on April 17, 1937, which forced Dosco to recognize

53. *Cape Breton Post*, 29 April 2007.

54. This was nearly a decade after legislation forced similar changes in the United States and Europe. Heron, *Working in Steel*, 89.

55. *Cape Breton Post*, 28 April 2007; *Cape Breton Post*, 29 April 2007; Historical Vital Statistics, "Province of Nova Scotia Certificate of Registration of Death – George Smith," Book 177, 1938, [www.novascotiagenalogy.com](http://www.novascotiagenalogy.com).

56. MacEachern, *George MacEachern*, 66; MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, 208; Crawley, "Conflict within the Union," 69.

57. Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History* (Toronto 1989), 72; MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, 208; MacEachern, *George MacEachern*, 70–71.



the steelworkers' union.<sup>58</sup> SWOC became the United Steelworkers of America in 1942.<sup>59</sup>

The steelworkers' unionization, and the hardships that preceded it, are explicitly commemorated on the Steelworkers' Memorial Monument by the central place of the USWA logo. George MacEachern and the other workers on the plant council not only set the stage for the recognition of the USWA at the plant, but they also provided steelworkers with the organizational strength to fight against the conditions that resulted in so many deaths and injuries. While the names on the monument offer us insight into the individual experiences of steelworkers in life and death, the central image on the monument is a reminder of the importance of the union in the decline of on-site fatalities and the achievement of workers' rights within the plant. The union logo also links the monument explicitly to the social memory of organized workers; while it hopes to inform the collective memory of the industrial past, it does not claim to represent *all* experiences or present *all* possible narratives. The monument is explicit in its claim; it is meant to represent the experience of workers at the plant and their achievements through unionism. The price of those achievements, including labour organization, is presented through the grim tally of on-site deaths juxtaposed with the central USWA symbol.

### George Crane, 1880–1944

ON JUNE 12, 1944, WORLD WAR II was in full swing. The previous week, more than 150,000 Allied troops had stormed the beaches of Normandy, and there were sporadic reports of German U-boat activity in the Atlantic Ocean off Cape Breton Island and Newfoundland.<sup>60</sup> The war was perhaps a topic of discussion between John Johnson and his friend, 64-year-old George Crane, as they walked along the railway tracks near the slag ladle at the Sydney steel plant. Crane was born in Conception Bay, Newfoundland, and had moved to Sydney as a young man to work at the steel plant; in Sydney he married his wife, Effie. As the two men were walking, the ladle exploded and splattered burning slag on both men. Johnson was lucky, as he was only lightly splashed and was able to remove his clothes. Crane, however, was covered with burning slag. As Johnson tore off his clothes, Crane took off running up the tracks and screamed for help as his skin burned. When he fell to the ground, about 100

58. Judy Fudge and Eric Tucker, *Labour Before the Law: The Regulation of Workers' Collective Action in Canada, 1900–1948* (Toronto 2001), 218–19.

59. This was during the first constitutional steelworkers' convention in Cleveland, Ohio, which George MacEachern attended as a representative from the Sydney steel plant. MacEachern, *George MacEachern*, 89; Gary M. Fink, ed., *Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Institutions: Labour Unions* (Westport, CT 1977), 358.

60. "Slow convoys" heading to Europe with supplies started their journeys in Sydney and Halifax. These were tempting targets for U-boats. "Sydney Harbour in World War II," *Cape Breton's Magazine*, 13 (June 1976): 29–30.

yards up the track, other workers were able to remove his burning clothes and wrap him in a blanket. A shipping operator from Sydney, W.M. MacDonald, drove Crane to the on-site emergency hospital. Crane would not see the end of the war; he passed away early the next morning, on June 13, 1944.<sup>61</sup>

Health and safety remained low priorities for Dosco during the war, and first aid supplies were scarce. In 1943, the only safety equipment that a steelworker could count on from the company was a pair of heavy boots and work gloves, and those were paid for from his paycheque.<sup>62</sup> Although the on-site hospital had access to doctors' services, an X-ray room, and equipment for surgery, the men hired to drive the company ambulance had absolutely no training in even rudimentary first aid. Romeo Sylvester was hired on in the machine shop in 1943, and began working on the ambulance after only a few shifts at the plant. He received no official medical training and, at first, the only equipment in the ambulance was a stretcher. Sylvester recalls that on his first shift working on the ambulance, he had to deal with two young men whose legs had gotten tied up in some machinery. Both of the men had to have their legs amputated.<sup>63</sup>

World War II was a period of unprecedented growth for the Canadian labour movement. Historian Laurel Sefton MacDowell explains, "at the outbreak of the war, there were only 359,000 organized workers. Union membership more than doubled during the war, so that by 1946 there were 832,000 organized employees engaged in collective bargaining."<sup>64</sup> Although earlier attempts at organization had failed, by the time of his death in 1944, George Crane had lived to see one of the major victories for the Sydney steelworkers – the recognition of the steelworkers' union and the implementation of collective bargaining rights. That same year, the federal government implemented Privy Council Order 1003 (PC 1003). This order ensured union recognition, mandatory collective bargaining, and protection for organized labour from "unfair labour practices."<sup>65</sup> The tragedy of Crane's untimely death, however, highlights that there was still plenty to be done to attain a safer, healthier workplace.

61. *Sydney Post Record*, 14 June 1944; Historical Vital Statistics, "Province of Nova Scotia Certificate of Registration of Death – George Crane," Book 217, 1944, [www.novascotiagenalogy.com](http://www.novascotiagenalogy.com).

62. Bennie Delorenzo, interview by Syd Slaven, Sydney, 13 November 1996, Steel Project Papers, Beaton Institute Archives, Collection MG 14.206.07, Cape Breton University, Sydney.

63. Romeo Sylvester, interview by Syd Slaven, Sydney, 13 November 1996, Steel Project Papers, Beaton Institute Archives, Collection MG 14.206.07, Cape Breton University, Sydney.

64. Laurel Sefton MacDowell, "The Formation of the Canadian Industrial Relations System During World War II," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 3 (1978): 176.

65. Aaron McCrorie, "PC 1003: Labour, Capital and the State," in Cy Gonick, Paul Phillips and Jesse Vorst, eds., *Labour Gains, Labour Pains: 50 Years of PC 1003* (Halifax 1995), 16.

## Charles Sherwood, 1900–1950

THE FIRST NAME ON THE steelworkers' monument for the 1950s is Charles Sherwood. It was just a few weeks after the turn of the decade on January 25, 1950, that Malcolm Pitcher, a heavy machine operator at the coke ovens ran over his close friend, 49-year-old Sherwood, and killed him. Pitcher had been backing a company truck out of a loading dock at the plant when he felt an impact and heard another worker, Frank Smith, yell for help. It was not until he jumped out of the truck that Pitcher realized what had happened.<sup>66</sup> Sherwood, who was originally from New Brunswick but had lived in Sydney for the past twenty years, was likely killed outright – the registration of his death notes that his skull had been crushed.<sup>67</sup> He left behind a wife, three sons, and a daughter.<sup>68</sup>

In the 1950s, the production gap between the Sydney steel plant and those in Central Canada began to widen. This was a direct result of the decision made by the federal government during World War II to support the modernization of the steel industry in Central Canada while nearly ignoring the Maritimes.<sup>69</sup> As historian Alvin Finkel writes, “the period from 1945 to 1980 ... represented the heyday of Canadian commitment to creating greater economic equality among citizens.” However, Finkel also cautions, “[these] commitments to greater social justice were predicated on an expanding economy and an ability to distribute monies to the poor without attacking the privileges of either the rich or the growing middle class ... [the capitalist] system seemed unable to deliver much to already disadvantaged regions.”<sup>70</sup> Economic geographer Donald Kerr directed attention to this flaw as early as 1959, arguing, “despite \$20,000,000 in government subsidies between 1947 and 1951, by 1955 Dosco's share of Canadian steel shipments had dropped from 17 per cent to less than 10 per cent.”<sup>71</sup> More than 1,200 steelworkers had been laid off by 1954, which reduced employment from 4,791 to 3,530.<sup>72</sup> Uneven development, a theme that was present since the opening of the plant, was a major contributor to the decline of the Nova Scotia steel industry, and was a major factor in the

66. Malcolm was absolved of any wrongdoing by a decision of the coroner's inquiry. *Chronicle-Herald*, 26 January 1950.

67. Historical Vital Statistics, “Province of Nova Scotia Certificate of Registration of Death – Charles Otha Sherwood,” 1938, [www.novascotiagenalogy.com](http://www.novascotiagenalogy.com).

68. *Chronicle-Herald*, 26 January 1950.

69. E.R. Forbes, “Consolidating Disparity: The Maritimes and the Industrialization of Canada during the Second World War,” in E.R. Forbes, ed., *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes* (Fredericton, NB 1989), 172–199.

70. Finkel, *Social Practice and Policy in Canada: A History*, 274.

71. Donald Kerr, “The Geography of the Canadian Iron and Steel Industry,” *Economic Geography*, 35 (April 1959): 154.

72. Crawley, “Conflict within the Union,” 238.

steelworkers' failure to attain wage parity with their Ontario counterparts by the end of the 1950s.

In August 1957, rumours began spreading through Sydney that A.V. Roe, a subsidiary of Hawker-Siddeley, was seeking control of Dosco.<sup>73</sup> Although Dosco President Charles B. Lang originally denied any knowledge of the deal, the next week Avro offered to purchase the company.<sup>74</sup> To allay the concerns of some of Dosco's board of directors, A. Ron Williams, the assistant to the President of Avro Canada stated, "we are not putting up as much as \$100 million in shares and cash to close down or slow down Dosco in the Maritimes. We might as well throw the money in the Bay of Fundy."<sup>75</sup> The sale went through the next month, and much local skepticism was alleviated the following year when Hawker-Siddeley announced the construction of a \$25 million bar and rod mill. Despite the assurances, Hawker-Siddeley immediately began a clandestine policy of deindustrialization in Cape Breton. Instead of reinvesting profits into the Sydney plant, money was given for the construction of rod and rolling mills in Central Canada. The promised mill in Sydney was never constructed.<sup>76</sup>

### Walter Fifield, 1908–1967

TEN YEARS AFTER THE ACQUISITION of Dosco by Hawker-Siddeley, in the spring of 1967, a conductor on the Dosco railway fell from a moving train and was crushed between the train and a snow bank. Eight days later, on April 9, 1967, 59-year-old Walter Fifield died of his injuries. He had lived on East Street in Whitney Pier with his wife, Catherine, and daughter, Clara. At the time of his death, Fifield had worked for Dosco for 27 years.<sup>77</sup> His is the fourteenth name inscribed on the steelworkers' monument for the 1960s.

Just three months after Fifield's death, Hawker-Siddeley dropped a bombshell on the citizens of Sydney. On October 13 1967, a day that became known as "Black Friday" in Cape Breton, the company announced that the Sydney steel plant was to close by the following April, which would leave 3,000 steelworkers without jobs. Premier G.I. Smith immediately responded that Dosco was "completely lacking in any sense of corporate responsibility to its employees and to the community in which it has operated."<sup>78</sup> The *Cape Breton Post* printed an outraged editorial:

73. *Cape Breton Post*, 2 August 1957.

74. *Cape Breton Post*, 7 August 1957.

75. *Cape Breton Post*, 28 August 1957.

76. Steel Research Group, "Report on Sydney Steel," *Canadian Dimension*, 14 (February/March 1980), 39. The mill was instead erected at Contrecoeur, Québec in 1963.

77. *Cape Breton Post*, 10 April 1967.

78. *Cape Breton Post*, 14 October 1967.

Sydney's steelworkers stand today as the victims of the biggest double cross in Cape Breton's industrial history.... As recently as 12 days ago, Hawker-Siddeley and Dosco high officials approved a steel report which recommended expansion and improvements for the Sydney plant.... The Sydney steel industry will not die just because Hawker-Siddeley says it will.... They can't get away with it.<sup>79</sup>

The USWA offered two recommendations for the future of Sydney Steel. The first was for the government to nationalize all of Dosco's holdings. This would protect jobs, guarantee markets, and ensure a place for industry in the future of Sydney. The second recommendation was to modernize the steel plant, which was a familiar call in the days after the closure announcement.<sup>80</sup>

"Save our steel," was the collective refrain heard on Sunday, November 19, 1967 when, although Walter Fifield was not there to march, nearly 20,000 members of his community took to the streets in a "Parade of Concern" over the future of the Sydney steel industry.<sup>81</sup> The *Cape Breton Post* described the parade as "the largest gathering in the history of this province."<sup>82</sup> This illustrates the depths of meaning that the steel industry held, not only for steelworkers and their families, but for the collective identity of the community. In response, the provincial government created a crown corporation, the Sydney Steel Corporation (Sysco), to take control of the plant in January 1968.<sup>83</sup>

Although the events of 1967 are not reflected in any etching or engraving on the steelworkers' monument, each of the names after that year speak to the success of community organization in keeping the plant open. This would not be clear to somebody without the associated contextual knowledge, but to those with the social memory of work in the plant or general knowledge about the community's past, the names after 1967 speak to the importance of community support for the plant. They also reveal the double-edged nature of the area's relationship with industry; if the plant had closed in 1967, there would be no need for the names on the monument after that point. This is perhaps the reason why 1967 is not given prominence on what is, first and foremost, a funerary monument. Although steelworkers and their union firmly supported efforts to maintain and modernize the steel plant, as evidenced by their actions during the Parade of Concern, the monument reflects the reality that the continuation of industry did come with a tragic cost.

79. *Cape Breton Post*, 14 October 1967.

80. Steel Research Group, "Report on Sydney Steel," 42.

81. *Cape Breton Post*, 20 November 1967.

82. *Cape Breton Post*, 20 November 1967.

83. Provincial Government of Nova Scotia, "Sydney Steel Corporation Act," <http://nslegislature.ca>.



Figure 1: Steelworkers' Memorial Monument, Harbourside Commercial Park

## Joseph Morrison, 1952–1979

IN THE DECADE AFTER SYSCO took over operations at the steel plant, there were fewer recorded deaths than in any other decade in the plant's history, although this could also be linked to the declining number of workers employed there. After the Parade of Concern, reinvigorated workers wished to prove that the plant was worth saving. Crawley writes, "the improved position of the Sydney steel industry in the immediate post-1967 period ... [was] also made possible by a determined workforce infused with young, expectant workers."<sup>84</sup> There were, nonetheless, nine fatalities during the course of the decade. The final death at the steel plant in the 1970s was that of 27-year-old Joseph Morrison. Morrison had been employed at the Sysco billet mill. On April 15, 1979, he became entangled in a piece of equipment and was killed.<sup>85</sup>

Immediately after Sysco took over, new health and safety regulations were implemented at the Sydney steel plant. The federal and provincial governments began offering first aid training for one in every fifteen steelworkers, and also hired safety inspectors for the plant.<sup>86</sup> Bennie Delorenzo, a former

84. Crawley, "Conflict within the Union," 330.

85. *Chronicle-Herald*, 16 April 1979.

86. Sylvester interview.



safety officer at the plant, believes that attention to the new safety regulations “cut the accident rate from over 100 [per year] to under 40” by 1977.<sup>87</sup>

During the 1970s, modernization was required at the Sydney steel plant to bring much of the aging equipment up to date. By the middle of the decade, however, it had become clear that Sysco would be unable to fund its own modernization to any significant extent, and had missed an opportunity to profit from favourable world markets. While subsidies trickled in between 1978 and 1979, the modernization of basic steel-making equipment remained elusive.<sup>88</sup> As Joan Bishop writes, “the years since 1967 brought growing disillusionment as output and employment declined. Some have interpreted this decline as proof that public ownership cannot succeed. In fact, public ownership was never seriously tried.”<sup>89</sup>

### **Thomas Farr, 1943–1983; James Sheaves, 1947–1983; Henry Gear, 1946–1983**

TEN DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS IN 1983, disaster struck at the aging blast furnace. An explosion shook the steel plant, and was heard by residents from as far away as five kilometres. Eyewitnesses described “huge flames, a large mushroom-shaped cloud of smoke, and pieces of hot metal thrust high into the air.”<sup>90</sup> Details were slow to emerge, but soon it became clear that three men had been killed and five more were injured.<sup>91</sup> The men who were killed in the explosion are the only names on the steelworkers’ monument for the year 1983. Their names are Thomas Farr, James Sheaves, and Henry Gear. After the explosion, Farr had been trapped in the slag pit while the other men were evacuating the plant. Noticing that their friend was still inside, Gear and Sheaves returned to try to bring him out. None of them made it out alive.<sup>92</sup>

By the time of the explosion in 1983, the province had already assumed the majority of Sysco’s \$300 million of debt. The Buchanan government maintained the theory that Sysco would be able to fund its own modernization. Although the market for steel was again in a slump, the plant was kept open so that the province would not have to risk another community outcry.<sup>93</sup> Instead of closing the plant, the Buchanan administration began bleeding it of its funds and equipment. One of the newly built blast furnaces closed in 1988,

87. Delorenzo interview.

88. Steel Research Group, “Report on Sydney Steel,” 45.

89. Bishop, “Sydney Steel,” 167.

90. *Chronicle-Herald*, 17 December 1983.

91. *Chronicle-Herald*, 16 December 1983.

92. Maude Barlow and Elizabeth May, *Frederick Street: Living and Dying on Canada’s Love Canal* (Toronto 2000), 38.

93. Bishop, “Sydney Steel,” 185.



as did the coke ovens. As Bishop argues, “Sysco had never recovered from the disastrous mistakes of the early years under provincial ownership.”<sup>94</sup>

The growing disillusionment for Cape Breton’s economic future became coupled with another emerging narrative, that of the destructive environmental legacy of steelmaking. Decades of pollution from the steelmaking process at the integrated mill directly affected the families who had lived around the plant for generations. Studies by Environment Canada and the Bureau of Chemical Hazards at Health and Welfare Canada expressed concerns over mortality statistics among former steelworkers and their families, and Sydney was shown to have a significantly higher cancer rate than other areas of Canada. Premier John Buchanan viewed these studies with skepticism, as any type of sustained shutdown of the plant would have resulted in devastating economic consequences for the community.<sup>95</sup> The government did, however, give contracts to Acres International in 1984 to provide consultation regarding the clean-up of the former coke ovens site. This area was heavily polluted, and a planned remediation was originally scheduled to finish by the mid-1990s.<sup>96</sup>

### James MacKillop, 1949–1993

JUST DAYS INTO THE NEW YEAR OF 1993, a 44-year-old Sydney steelworker was killed in the mill’s rail yard.<sup>97</sup> James “Roddie” MacKillop, the first fatality at the plant in seven years, was killed when steel rails were driven through the window of the locomotive that he was driving. MacKillop had been employed at the plant for 23 years; he left behind his wife, Theresa, and two daughters, Allison and Shauna.<sup>98</sup> His is the only name on the steelworkers’ monument for the 1990s.

In 1988, Sysco had converted its steelmaking operations from open hearth to electric arc furnaces.<sup>99</sup> This was a costly venture, but in the early 1990s rail orders began to increase.<sup>100</sup> At the same time, Canada was experiencing the neoliberal ideological shift which began under the Mulroney government in the 1980s. Governments, both national and provincial, began favouring deregulation, fiscal austerity, and the privatization of nationalized industry.<sup>101</sup>

94. Bishop, “Sydney Steel,” 185.

95. Barlow and May, *Frederick Street*, 78–79.

96. Barlow and May, *Frederick Street*, 75.

97. *Chronicle-Herald*, 11 January 1993.

98. *Chronicle-Herald*, 12 January 1993.

99. “Tar Ponds Timeline,” CBC News online, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/tarponds/timeline.html>.

100. Peter Clancy, *Micro-politics and Canadian Business: Paper, Steel and the Airlines* (Toronto 2004), 180.

101. Timothy Lewis, *In the Long Run We’re All Dead: The Canadian Turn to Fiscal Restraint*

In 1993 it was announced that half of Sysco was to be offloaded to Minmetals, a China-based company that wanted to use Sydney steel to supply a growing Chinese infrastructure market.<sup>102</sup> Such efforts would characterize government policy with regard to Sysco for the remainder of the decade. A number of other prospective buyers were involved, but in the end none of the deals came through.

Fatalities at the Sydney steel plant had decreased dramatically by the 1990s, as equipment was sold and jobs were cut. The implementation of new safety policies in the 1980s had also resulted in a much safer workplace. In 1996, the Nova Scotia government passed the Occupational Health and Safety Act, which placed primary responsibility for the maintenance of a safe and healthy workplace on the employer.<sup>103</sup> Former steelworker Dan Yakimchuk attributes some of the decrease in on-site fatalities to the provincial takeover in 1967, which resulted in more frequent inspections.<sup>104</sup> These factors, in combination with the decreasing capacity of the plant, resulted in fewer deaths than any other decade in the plant's history.

Also in the 1990s came the high-water mark of public interest in the environmental and health problems associated with the tar ponds and coke ovens sites. The high cancer rates in Sydney, especially among steelworkers, were well documented.<sup>105</sup> Despite plant-sponsored respiratory and blood tests for workers during the 1990s, many who had been employed during the 1970s and 1980s had worked without masks, or with dust masks that did not protect against dangerous gasses.<sup>106</sup> The narrative of the environmental and health effects of the Sydney steel plant is one that plays a large part in the current collective memory of the industrial past in Sydney. It is not, however, directly represented on the Steelworkers' Memorial Monument; perhaps, had it been included in some way, it would have brought further attention to the workers whose names are not found on the monument.

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(Vancouver 2003), 95–96.

102. John Demont, "A Suitor from China: Cape Breton's Struggling Mill is Sold," *Maclean's Magazine* (13 December 1993), 44.

103. Nova Scotia Legislature, Occupational Health and Safety Act (1996), [http://nslegislature.ca/legc/statutes/occp\\_h\\_s.htm](http://nslegislature.ca/legc/statutes/occp_h_s.htm).

104. Dan Yakimchuk, interview by Syd Slaven, Sydney, 9 November 1996, Steel Project Papers, Beaton Institute Archives, Collection MG 14.206.07, Cape Breton University, Sydney.

105. Nancy Robb, "Were Jobs More Important Than Health in Sydney?" *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 152 (March 1995): 920.

106. Robb, "Were Jobs More Important Than Health in Sydney?" 920.

## Roy Marchand, 1946–2004

THE FINAL PERSON TO BE KILLED at the Sydney steel plant was Roy Marchand, a 58-year-old retired steelworker from Dutch Brook near Sydney. He was employed by Zoom Developers, the company hired to dismantle the Sysco property. On September 24, 2004, a falling beam struck him on the head and killed him. A bystander explained, “the load was lifted and was laid down again because he wanted to make it safer. He put his hand on the beams, bent over to pick up a chain ... when the load shifted and crushed him.”<sup>107</sup> Three years after Marchand’s death, 62-year-old George Dearing was issued a \$1,000 fine for having violated the Nova Scotia Occupational Health and Safety Act at the site of the former plant. The presiding judge, Jamie Campbell, noted in his decision that “it was rather ironic that Marchand died dismantling a century-old industry that had claimed numerous lives.”<sup>108</sup> Marchand’s name is the latest to be engraved on the Steelworkers’ Memorial Monument. He left behind a wife, Sharon, three sons, Duane, Joshua, and Roy Jr., and a daughter, Darlene.<sup>109</sup>

In the early 2000s, the future of Sydney Steel was once again plunged into uncertainty. The provincial government’s attempts to sell the plant during the late 1990s had failed and, by the spring of 2000, steelworkers were clamouring for other options to keep the plant running. Bill McNeil, President of Local 1064, wrote to the *Cape Breton Post* lamenting “promises of steelworker input into the process to sell Sydney Steel have been consistently broken.”<sup>110</sup> Around 650 people were employed at the steel plant at this time. Although there was speculation that two companies were interested in purchasing the plant, the final steel rail was rolled out on May 22, 2000. A spokesman for Ernst & Young, the company hired to find a buyer for the plant, noted: “the workforce will be adjusted to reflect the current operation.”<sup>111</sup> On the closing of the rail mill, McNeil said, “Rails were our bread and butter for the last 100 years.... We’re not considering the end of a chapter at all. Maybe somebody is, but we’re not. We’re going to fight to keep the mill open. We won’t stand by and watch the province close another part of Sydney Steel. That’s not acceptable.”<sup>112</sup>

Two days later, more than 250 steelworkers were laid off from Sysco.<sup>113</sup> Although a skeleton crew remained at the plant, on 27 May they found that the doors to a number of sections had been welded shut. The company claimed

107. *Chronicle-Herald*, 24 September 2004; *Cape Breton Post*, 9 May 2007.

108. *Cape Breton Post*, 9 May 2007.

109. *Cape Breton Post*, 25 September 2004.

110. *Cape Breton Post*, 13 May 2000.

111. *Cape Breton Post*, 23 May 2000.

112. *Cape Breton Post*, 23 May 2000.

113. *Cape Breton Post*, 26 May 2000.

that this was “normal procedure” during a shutdown, but the action prompted a number of rumours concerning the future of the plant.<sup>114</sup> The steelworkers were furious. That weekend, nearly 100 angry workers travelled to New Glasgow to confront Progressive Conservative Premier John Hamm on the future of the steel plant. They were told that the province was still considering a number of options for the sale of the plant.<sup>115</sup> This was the same answer that steelworkers and their families were given for the remainder of the year, until it became clear that the deal to sell Sydney Steel had fallen into trouble.

In January 2001, just weeks before the provincial deadline for a sale agreement, one of the interested companies, Duferco, expressed concern over the Sysco deal. The company was “hesitant” to work with Nova Scotia Power, a provincial Crown corporation, and cited a depressed world steel market and low prices.<sup>116</sup> Liberal MLA Manning MacDonald expressed disbelief that Duferco could be unaware of Nova Scotia Power’s status as a Crown corporation.<sup>117</sup> It seemed that Duferco was simply stalling in the hopes of receiving a better deal from Nova Scotia Power, but on January 18, 2001 they backed out of the deal altogether. Cabinet Minister Gordon Balser stated, “it’s time for Nova Scotia to move on,” while worried steelworkers gathered at the union hall to discuss the news.<sup>118</sup> Gus MacLean worked at the Sydney steel plant for 36 years. He expressed what the plant meant to him and the rest of the community: “I can remember when I was just that high ... holding my father’s hand as he walked to pick up his paycheque at the plant. The steel plant has been a part of my life, my whole life. That’s all we’ve known.”<sup>119</sup> Despite the wishes of workers and their families, the opposition of the union, and a \$31 million offer from another prospective buyer, the Hamm government refused to consider prolonging the life of Sydney Steel. Demolition of the structures that remained on the site began in July 2001, and a century of steelmaking came to a close.<sup>120</sup>

### **Industrial Discourses, 2001–2013**

CONSIDERING THAT THE STEEL INDUSTRY has been gone from Cape Breton for only a short time, there has not yet emerged an all-encompassing collective memory of the industrial past in Sydney. Instead, there are a number of competing public memories, each attempting to inform communal perception of the history of steel in the community. It cannot be denied that steelmaking

114. *Chronicle-Herald*, 27 May 2000.

115. *Chronicle-Herald*, 28 May 2000.

116. *Chronicle-Herald*, 5 January 2001.

117. *Chronicle-Herald*, 6 January 2001.

118. *Chronicle-Herald*, 19 January 2001.

119. *Chronicle-Herald*, 19 January 2001.

120. *Chronicle-Herald*, 20 July 2001.

is at the heart of civic identity in the city. Everywhere that one looks, there are symbols of the industrial past. The streets bear the memory in their names: Disco Street, Vulcan Avenue, Union Street. Whitney Pier, a vibrant local neighbourhood, is named after H.M. Whitney, the early president of Disco. The cultural heritage of the industrial past is an important part of public memory in the area. The question remains, how is this cultural heritage contextualized in the formation of collective memory?

One narrative that has emerged since the 1980s is that of unmitigated environmental and medical catastrophe, a “toxic legacy.”<sup>121</sup> Many people have been hurt by the steel industry in Sydney. The high cancer rates and early mortality among steelworkers and those who lived in the areas surrounding the steel plant are a disastrous consequence of years of toxic pollution. When children are found with high levels of arsenic in their blood, as they were in Sydney in 2001, it is clear that there is a severe problem.<sup>122</sup> The narrative of “toxic legacy” is one that Maude Barlow and Elizabeth May reflect in their book, *Frederick Street*. The authors’ speak only in discourses of exploitation when they present the lives of Sydney’s steelworkers as “Hobbesian ... nasty, brutish and short,” albeit among a people with “indomitable spirits.” They assert, “in 1968, the steel plant should have closed ... many lives would have been spared. But this was a steel mill that would not die, even if it killed everything around it.”<sup>123</sup> This comes perilously close to ignoring, or denying, the agency of workers and their families in their opposition to the planned shutdown of the steel plant.

The human cost of steelmaking in Sydney has been tragically high; this cost has, for many people, irreversibly shaped their memories of the industrial past. This legacy of environmental and medical damage must be taken into account in the formation of collective memory in Sydney. In focusing only on these issues, however, we risk excluding the many layers of meaning that exist in a community built around making steel. Syd Slaven remembers falling asleep to the sounds of industry, which punctuated the quiet nights. “Now,” he writes, “the nights of Sydney are ... as silent as a cemetery.”<sup>124</sup> To ignore these sentiments, or write them off as nostalgia, would be a mistake. The sense of pride, camaraderie, and workplace attachment among the men and women involved in making steel in Sydney should not be forgotten in public presentations of history and in the broader formation of collective memory.

Steelmaking in Sydney is also recalled as a boondoggle, an expensive waste of time and money, and a pork-barrelled excuse for politicians to buy votes. Ralph Hindson, author of the 1967 “Sydney Steelmaking Study,” argues

121. Barlow and May, “Dedication,” *Frederick Street*.

122. *Chronicle-Herald*, 17 July 2001.

123. Barlow and May, *Frederick Street*, 44, 19.

124. Sydney S. Slaven, “The Sounds of Silence – The End of an Era,” Sydney Steel Plant Museum, <http://sydneysteelmuseum.com>.

that since that time the company had no real future, and that distance from markets and high costs made steelmaking in Sydney untenable. Consequently, he views all subsidy money that was spent on Sysco since 1967 as wasteful expenditures.<sup>125</sup> Arnie Patterson, a Nova Scotia businessman, argues that “militant” unions pressured the government into the failed social measure.<sup>126</sup> The possibility of greater profits elsewhere, in this view, outweighs localized community prosperity. This paradigm uses the history of Sysco since 1967 to argue that public ownership cannot work in a modern economy. It asserts that the slow decline of Sydney Steel is a perfect example of what happens when “those people,” in this case steelworkers and their families, are allowed to influence public policy.

A third discourse encompasses the nationalization of Sydney Steel and questions the role of public enterprise in industrial communities. After 1967, there was hope that the plant, under public ownership, could benefit from modernization, reinvestment, and diversification into national and international markets. This was certainly visible in the 1980 “Report on Sydney Steel,” which argued, “to give the Sydney steel plant a solid future as an efficient and profit-making operation would require that we write off the existing debt and that we complete modernization of the plant.”<sup>127</sup> This was the hope of many steelworkers and their families after Black Friday, but as time passed this discourse grew weaker.

The Steelworkers’ Memorial Monument offers a public memory of the steelmaking past that is centred upon the memorialization of the dead, the advances in workplace safety made possible through unionism, and finally, the end of the steel industry in Sydney. The list of names is a repository of both individual and social memory; the memorialized dead are represented both as individuals and collectively as “Sydney steelworkers.” Depending on the viewer’s relationship to the history of steelmaking in Sydney, the monument can be read in multiple ways. While it omits the names of those who were killed off-site and does not directly address the plant’s “toxic legacy,” the monument directs the viewer’s attention to the dangers faced daily by those who worked at the Sydney steel plant throughout the 20th century. The decline in names on the monument towards the end of the 20th century speaks to advances in workplace conditions and health and safety, but also to the long decline of the local steel industry and the community-based challenges to keep the plant open. The names listed after 1967 represent an affirmation of the hopes of steelworkers and their families to influence government policy, but also highlight the dangers of industrial work in the modern plant. Listing

125. Ralph Hindson et al., “R.I.P. Sydney Steel,” in John Wood, ed., *Days of Reckoning: Young Canadians Discover How Decisions by the Older Generations have Jeopardized the Country’s Future* (Toronto 2003), 57.

126. Hindson et al., “R.I.P. Sydney Steel,” 57–58.

127. Steel Research Group, “Report on Sydney Steel,” 49–50.

the names chronologically has provided the monument with an historical narrative of steelmaking in Sydney, but so, too, does it implicitly commemorate the eventual failure of the steelworkers in halting the closure of the plant in 2001. Although the most recent name listed, Roy Marchand, was killed in 2004, the deconstruction of the former site is now complete. There will be never be another name added to the steelworkers' monument because there is no longer a steel plant in Sydney.

This monument does not establish a hegemonic collective memory centred upon the industrial past. Rather, it attempts to add the voice of steelworkers, unionists, and working-class community members to the cacophony of narratives, each attempting to influence the view of the past, that exist in this formerly industrial city. Alessandro Portelli has explored collective memory in Harlan County, Kentucky, a former mining area and union stronghold, and found that memories of the labour wars and working-class struggle remain. Portelli has also found, though, that collective memory in Harlan County has contextualized its industrial past in terms of political and cultural defeat; this sense of defeat has become particularly pronounced since the late 20th century, when Harlan began to face the economic and social problems of deindustrialization.<sup>128</sup>

It is for this reason that working-class sites of public memory are so important; although the Steelworkers' Memorial Monument is a memorial to those who have died on the job, these people are not presented as powerless victims. Instead, with the inclusion of union symbolism, the names are linked to the advancement of workers' rights, greater attention to health and safety, and the ability of workers to influence government policy. This power is checked, however, by the closure of the plant and the monument's current location on the former work site. Nonetheless, the monument ascribes agency to workers and their families in Cape Breton's history; this agency is not found in top-down implementations of Celticity as described by McKay and Bates, it is missing from the discourse surrounding the "toxic legacy," and it is purposely subverted by narratives that view the history of Sydney Steel as a waste of time and money. Labour landmarks, in this sense, are deeply political constructions; in the neoliberal era, when workers and labour organizations find themselves facing considerable opposition, these sites highlight the importance of workers' agency in the past, present, and future.

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128. Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* (Oxford 2011), 177.