

“When you can’t work, that’s it, it’s finished.”

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Volume 24, Number 2, Fall 2009

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds24_2re01

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Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Muiise, D. (2009). “When you can’t work, that’s it, it’s finished.” *Newfoundland Studies*, 24(2), 271–275.

REVIEW ESSAYS

*“When you can’t work, that’s it,
it’s finished.”*

DEL MUISE

Rick Rennie, *The Dirt: Industrial Disease and Conflict at St. Lawrence, Newfoundland*, Halifax: Fernwood Press, 2008. ISBN: 9781552662-59-5.

Gail Weir, *The Miners of Wabana: The Story of the Iron Ore Miners of Bell Island*, St John’s: Breakwater Books, 2006, 1989. ISBN 0920911-69-2.

Elliott Leyton, *Dying Hard: Industrial Carnage in St. Lawrence Newfoundland*, Portugal Cove: Boulder Publications, 2004, 1975 and 1997. ISBN 0195413-03-2.

THE RECENT RELEASE of Rick Rennie’s *The Dirt* places into perspective the work of two recently reissued classics of Newfoundland and Labrador working class oral history — *The Miners of Wabana* and *Dying Hard*. Together, these offer insights into Newfoundland and Labrador’s mining heritage as well as in labour and oral history more generally, unusual for such a small community of scholars. Our sense of the experience of the men and women living through Newfoundland and Labra-

dor's landward encounters with mining's hard realities has been dramatically influenced by these studies. The iron ore mines of Bell Island and the Fluorspar mines of the St. Lawrence area were both early excursions of off-shore capital into the Newfoundland and Labrador resource base. Both had been in existence long before Newfoundland and Labrador joined Canada and both had closed, or were about to close, by the time the oral histories that form the basis of the books by Weir and Layton were completed in the 1970s. So, voices captured in the two earlier excursions into Newfoundlanders at work, along with a few later interviews done by Rennie for his Memorial University PhD thesis, which forms the basis of his book, constitute an important collection of Canadian oral history of work.

Much mining has been undertaken since closure of mines at Bell Island and St. Lawrence, and it has been less controversial from a worker safety perspective, though the *Ocean Ranger* disaster still casts a pall over resource industries.¹ Lots more oil and gas exploration and development has occurred, and we are on the cusp of huge new developments at Voisey's Bay and adjacent mineral resources in Labrador. Continuing concern for workers' safety, as we were reminded of with the 2009 crash of a helicopter ferrying workers to offshore oil platforms, and potential ravages of unfettered resource exploration and development are as apparent today in Newfoundland and Labrador as elsewhere.

All the miners interviewed by Elliott Leyton in St. Lawrence are dead now; and Gail Weir tells us that most of those she interviewed in the early 1970s on Bell Island are gone as well. The reissuing of these two books is a graceful reminder of lives lived in such trauma, as well as a great warning about the need to heed the past. While the collection and publication, as well as interpretation of workers' voices has advanced a great deal in the decades since these two books were first published; on the whole, they still stand as fine examples of their genre (and there have been only modest efforts to update them). Weir provides a brief account of the recent historicizing of the mining experience, particularly through the large urban murals depicting the history of mining on Bell Island and the attempts to turn history into a heritage resource through tourism. Leyton's brief introduction to the new edition once again expresses his outrage over the fate of St. Lawrence's miners, though he fails to add much to the subsequent work of other scholars.

Miners have long proven apt subjects for exploring working class culture, though sometimes it must have seemed that Canadian mining was made up exclusively of the ubiquitous coal miners. For outsiders, miners are quintessential proletarians; though when examined in any depth they prove to be as quixotic and unmanageable as any group of skilled commodity producers. Throughout the developed western world, coal miners have often been the most prominent testifiers to the nature of their work; though often in the context of enquiries into the disruptions caused by labour strife over working conditions or to enquire into massive accidents. In Canada the breathtaking number of such commissions of enquiry has produced a wide variety of first-hand testimonies; however, much of it is yet to be

properly studied.² And similar sorts of enquiries have taken place in many other countries. Oral history projects specifically aimed at capturing the testimony of workers, though less common, are replete with case studies in specific community experiences.³ More recently, scholars such as Stephen High have placed the experience of miners and other workers in exhausted resource industries at the forefront of their work.⁴

Dying Hard is a classic in the genre of life course work, history-based, oral testimony. Leyton does little more than set the scene to allow surviving miners to narrate their own work lives. St Lawrence's story is captured in the subtitle, "*Industrial Carnage*," and the carnage of the effects of fluorspar is what gets spoken of most frequently by surviving miners and their families. The miners had virtually no protection against ingesting the ever present carcinogens, which resulted in so much cancer and pulmonary diseases that survival rates for those who worked there for even a brief time were lowered. Much of the story in this still-fresh book could be repeated for all workers who face the indifference of corporations that take their health less seriously than they should. The fact that such conditions mostly exist outside the developed western world today should not blind us to their continued presence. What is striking in these testimonies is the extent to which the provincial government remained intransigent in its refusal to take account of the miners' plight. It is little wonder that so many survivors and their families took to the road to Ontario and places further west to escape at least some of the carnage.

Gail Weir's *Miners of Wabana* is a loving reconstruction of a community by a gifted folklorist, who also happens to hail from Bell Island and so had privileged access to many of her informants. In many ways the voices of her informants compare well with those assembled by Leyton, but the difference is that miners from Wabana mostly seem to be smiling when they talk of their mine work and are nostalgic about what was left behind when the mines closed in 1966. While there is considerable anger expressed toward the new bosses who came in to run the mines in their closing days, it is mostly a story of close community co-operation with the mining process itself.

Weir's book began as an MA thesis in the Department of Folklore at Memorial, and in some ways remains a thesis. Unlike Leyton's book though, hers is organized thematically around a broad series of familiar tropes within the community-based folklore genre. But there is more than that. We get a neat summation of the history of the mines and some background on the development of the community; it is somewhat slim for those who might want to make a more political-economy type assessment of the experience of the community. Tragedies, work practices, "Sky-larking" and "Ghosts and Fairies" are the core of the book. What Weir delivered to her academic supervisors almost twenty years ago remains important in this book. She makes no apology for the high regard in which she holds her home town, and the core of the book remains those voices she captured back in the early 1980s. In those days memory of work and life in the community — along with the relative

proximity of the shutdown of the Wabana iron mines — was still relatively fresh. The absence of close analysis of the plight of the community is compensated by the richness of the miners' and their families' testimony. The voices remain as clear today as they did back then and we can only wish more of them were still available from communities like Bell Island all across the country.⁵

Rick Rennie's recent book, *The Dirt*, is another matter altogether. While it was completed as a PhD thesis with a strong labour history orientation, it also is written from the perspective of an insider. A native of St. Lawrence and descended from mining families, he had access to the community that was not available to Layton who was working at an earlier time. What Rennie produces is a stronger and more linear history of the industry in St. Lawrence and surrounding communities and a more systematic assessment of the history of provincial inaction over the plight of the miners who survived to fight for some sort of compensation. It is a hard story of bureaucratic indifference and struggle, but the conclusion is not too far removed from Layton's cry of outrage; it is just that the details are much more apparent.

More studies like this are necessary if we are to fully understand the powerful grip that unfettered capital has had over our resource development. The complicity of governments, which failed to protect the rights of workers, has to be fully exposed. Rennie's book is a detailed reflection on the full implications of this process and a caution to future generations about the fragility of work and work related issues. His relentless accounting of the failures of the government and of various union-assisted attempts at redress, alert us to the ways in which Newfoundlanders and Labradorians have to hold government responsible for its behaviour. The survivors are the ones who bore the real costs of the development of the mines.

All three of these books touch on the issue of how declining resource-based communities historicize their experience of struggle and survival. The iron ore mines at the centre of Weir's Bell Island are now at the heart of attempts to attract tourists to the island. Cultural and adventure tourism are blended in a variety of ways, including an attempt to design underwater tours of the abandoned mine workings for scuba divers. St. Lawrence has a museum to its mining history as well. The Glace Bay Miners' Museum in Cape Breton is a leading example of this sort of development, but dozens of museums are dedicated to coal mining and other resource industries across the country. When miners stop taking ore from the earth, communities mine memories to help survive the collapse of industries, which by their very nature are prone to exhaustion. But they also create a cultural formation that can be very important to the development of our sense of the past.⁶

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Notes

¹The Mines Branch of Newfoundland's *Department of Mines and Energy* actively pursues increased investment in all aspects of mining and maintains a web site with updates on what is occurring in various sectors. See, <http://www.nr.gov.nl.ca/mines&en/mining/October2007overview.pdf> for an example of their publicity. A popular account of mining was produced under their auspices by Wendy Martin, "Once Upon a Mine: The Story of Pre-Confederation Mining on the Island of Newfoundland." Available as a PDF file on the Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage web site at: <http://www.heritage.nf.ca/environment/mine/default.html>

²A very partial list of some important sources of such testimony in Canada would include: *The Duncan Royal Commission into Coal mining in Nova Scotia* (1925) [4500 pages]; Alberta's coal industry, 1919, (edited with an introduction by David Bercuson, Calgary, 1978); For the United States, see Thomas Dublin, *When the Mines Closed: Stories of Struggles in Hard Times*, (Ithaca, 1998).

³Rex Lucas, *Men in Crisis: an anatomy of a mine disaster* (New York, 1969) and Melissa Fay Greene, *Last Man Out: The Story of the Springhill Mine Disaster*, (New York, 2003) both draw on a vast archive of oral testimony regarding the 1958 Springhill mine disaster.

⁴For example, see Stephen High and David W. Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Toronto, 2007); and Stephen High, "Placing the Displaced Worker: Narrating Place in Deindustrializing Sturgeon Falls, Ontario" in *Placing Memory and Remembering Place in Canada* Edited by James Opp and John C. Walsh (Toronto, 2009).

⁵A number of studies treat mining communities in a similar fashion: see among others, Karen Buckley, *Danger, Death, Disaster: Coal Mining in the Crow's Nest Pass, 1902-1928* (Calgary, 2003); Lynne Bowen, *Boss Whistle: the Coal miners of Vancouver Island remember*, (Lantzville, B.C., 1982); and John R. Hinde, *When coal was king: Ladysmith and the coal-mining industry on Vancouver Island* (Vancouver, 2003).

⁶Readers interested in this theme might consult a special issue of the *Urban History Review* (Spring, 2007) dealing with Deindustrialization, which includes: James Overton, "'A Future in the Past?' Tourism Development, Outport Archaeology, and the Politics of deindustrialization in Newfoundland and Labrador in the 1990s."



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