

The Hierarchy of the Soil: Land and Labour in a 19th Century Cape Breton Community

Rusty Bittermann

Volume 18, numéro 1, autumn 1988

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad18_1art02

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Bittermann, R. (1988). The Hierarchy of the Soil:: Land and Labour in a 19th Century Cape Breton Community. *Acadiensis*, 18(1), 33–55.

RUSTY BITTERMANN

The Hierarchy of the Soil: Land and Labour in a 19th Century Cape Breton Community*

THE IMPRESSIVE RENAISSANCE OF MARITIME HISTORIOGRAPHY over the past two decades has concentrated on issues located outside of the countryside, while the rural spaces in which most of the region's population lived and the bulk of the region's economic activity occurred have received relatively little study. Despite this lack of attention, some common perceptions permeate the literature. It is assumed that farming was basically "subsistence" in nature for much of the 19th century and that rural residents enjoyed a rough equality of condition. The immigrant encounter with the rural environment of the region is perceived as generating, at least initially, a society characterized by rough equality and the supposed absence of markets for farm goods coupled with relatively open access to land resources is thought to have sustained egalitarian social structures.¹ Significant markets for Maritime agricultural goods are typically construed as a relatively late development.² The literature concerning rural Cape Breton in the 19th century is certainly no exception to these statements. Indeed, those districts settled by Highland Scots have commonly been portrayed as enclaves of self-sufficiency, since Highlanders, it is claimed,

*I would like to thank David Frank, Brian Tennyson, and Graeme Wynn for their comments on an earlier version of this paper and the participants in the 15th Conference on the Use of Quantitative Methods in Canadian Economic History for their responses to some of the methodology informing it. As well I wish gratefully to acknowledge the support for this research provided by Queen's and doctoral fellowships from the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada.

- 1 See for instance John Warkentin, "The Atlantic Region", in R. Cole Harris and John Warkentin, eds., *Canada Before Confederation: A Study of Historical Geography* (Toronto, 1977), pp. 169-231; Graeme Wynn, "The Maritimes: The Geography of Fragmentation and Underdevelopment", in L.D. McCann, ed., *A Geography of Canada: Heartland and Hinterland* (Scarborough, 1982), pp. 156-213. For exceptions to this statement see Debra McNabb, "Land and Families in Horton Township, N.S., 1760-1830", M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1986 and James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* (New York, 1976).
- 2 Melville Cumming, "Agriculture in the Maritime Provinces", in Adam Shortt and Arthur Doughty, eds., *Canada and its Provinces* (Toronto, 1913), XIV, p. 648; W.T. Easterbrook and H.G.J. Aitken, *Canadian Economic History* (Toronto, 1956), pp. 240-1; Peter Sinclair, "From Peasants to Corporations: The Development of Capitalist Agriculture in the Maritime Provinces", in John A. Fry, ed., *Contradictions in Canadian Society: Readings in Introductory Sociology* (Toronto, 1984), pp. 276-93; Stephen Hornsby, "Scottish Emigration and Settlement in Early Nineteenth Century Cape Breton", in Kenneth Donovan, ed., *Cape Breton Historical Essays* (forthcoming) and "An Historical Geography of Cape Breton Island in the Nineteenth Century", Ph.D. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1986.

knew little of agriculture, were uninterested in material progress, and farmed primarily for subsistence.³ Gaelic cultural traits supposedly combined with the absence of markets for farm goods to generate rural communities characterized by the most rudimentary forms of subsistence farming. Egalitarian social structures were thus rooted in a shared material poverty.

A close examination of the history of one fragment of the 19th century Maritime countryside, the Cape Breton community of Middle River, suggests the need to reconsider these assumptions. Settlement in this district was not a leveling but rather a differentiating process, as inequalities in the initial distribution of land resources laid the basis for enduring socioeconomic divisions. Because there were markets for agricultural products, land, and labour, and because some Highlanders were not uninterested in material progress, these inequalities deepened as they were reproduced over time. Nineteenth century Middle River was not a collectivity of essentially self-sufficient farm units, although census figures might cause it to appear so in aggregate. From the earliest decades of European settlement, there was a substantial export trade in farm products from the district, but not all households were involved to the same extent. Unequal access to resources, particularly land, meant that some households were in a position to produce substantial amounts of goods for export, while others were unable to meet household needs from their farm holdings. Middle River's 19th century history is grounded in the tensions induced by these differing relations to local resources. To relinquish rural visions rooted in the myth of self-sufficiency is to discern a social dynamic within the countryside.

Middle River, like other European communities in the Maritimes, was moulded by the pre-existent economies of the northern fisheries and southern plantation production. Agricultural goods, drawn by the demand for provisions to supply both fishermen and slaves, were produced and shipped from rural regions all about the eastern and western shores of the Atlantic basin. Perched on the busy western rim of seaborne communications between these two zones of demand, and with no area of land more than 30 miles from salt water, rural Nova Scotia was inexorably shaped by these patterns of trade. The economies of plantation and fishery which created demand for Maritime agricultural goods

3 Charles Dunn, *Highland Settler: A Portrait of the Scottish Gael in Nova Scotia* (1953, reprinted Toronto, 1980); Louis Gentilcore, "The Agricultural Background of Settlement in Eastern Nova Scotia", *Annals, Association of American Geographers*, 46 (1956), pp. 378-404; D. Campbell and R.A. MacLean, *Beyond the Atlantic Roar: A Study of the Nova Scotia Scots* (Toronto, 1974); R.A. MacLean, "The Scots Hector's Cargo", in Douglas F. Campbell, ed., *Banked Fires: The Ethnics of Nova Scotia* (Port Credit, Ontario, 1978), pp. 106-30; John Warkentin, "The Atlantic Region", pp. 186, 196. This characterization of Highland farming skills has been ably challenged in Alan MacNeil's study of farming in Pictou and Antigonish counties, "A Reconsideration of the State of Agriculture in Eastern Nova Scotia, 1791-1861", M.A. thesis, Queen's University, 1985.

also served to bring American agricultural production into competition with that of the Maritimes. Vessels transporting fish to the West Indies brought back not just Caribbean goods but foodstuffs — particularly flour — purchased at American ports on the route home. American vessels moving north to fish also played a significant, albeit immeasurable, role in transporting those agricultural goods that could be produced more cheaply in the United States than in Nova Scotia. Agriculture in the region assumed its unique shape not in the absence of market forces but in the presence both of strong sources of demand *and* of alternative sources of supply for foodstuffs.⁴

Like many other agricultural regions in Cape Breton, Middle River was particularly well-situated to take advantage of the Newfoundland market. The agricultural core of the district, the pear-shaped Wagamatcook River Valley, was located roughly six miles from the protected salt waters of the Bras d'Or Lakes. The distance from Indian Bay, the mouth of both the Baddeck and the Wagamatcook rivers, to St. John's was less than 500 miles, a voyage that could be hazarded by relatively small vessels. The farmers of the adjacent Baddeck Valley had established direct trading links with the Newfoundland market before the arrival of the first European settlers to Middle River.⁵ Though in time Middle River too would have direct trade with St. John's, the ports of Arichat and Sydney acted as intermediaries in the first exchanges originating from the Wagamatcook Valley.⁶ While Arichat had a considerable involvement with the Caribbean market, Sydney primarily served as a conduit for foodstuffs moving to Newfoundland.⁷ After being transported to the lakeshore, Middle River's farm goods were conveyed by open boat to these centres. Sydney soon supplanted Arichat and by the 1840s the Newfoundland market would

- 4 Harold Innis, *The Cod Fisheries: The History of an International Economy* (1940; reprinted Toronto, 1978), pp. 231, 267; Testimony of Mr. Morrison, general produce merchant of Halifax, "Report of the Select Committee on the State of the Coal Trade and for the Promoting of Inter-Provincial Trade", Canada, House of Commons, *Journal*, 1877, vol. XI, p. 38, App. 4; Graeme Wynn, "Late Eighteenth Century Agriculture on the Bay of Fundy Marshlands", *Acadiensis*, VIII, 2 (Spring 1979), p. 89. For reports indicating the trading activities of American fishing vessels along the coasts of Cape Breton at the time of early settlement in Middle River see Ainslie to Bathurst, 18 May 1817, CO 217, vol. 135, pp. 66-8 and Ainslie to Bathurst, 8 October 1818, CO 217, vol. 136, pp. 110-1.
- 5 W. James MacDonald, ed., *Patterson's History of Victoria County* (1885, reprinted, Sydney, 1978), p. 52.
- 6 Letter of John McLennan cited in Mrs. Charles Archibald, "Early Scottish Settlers in Cape Breton", *Nova Scotia Historical Society Collections*, 18 (1914), p. 90.
- 7 Thomas C. Haliburton, *History of Nova Scotia* (1829; reprinted Belleville, Ontario, 1973), II, p. 221; R. Montgomery Martin, *History of Nova Scotia, Cape Breton, the Sable Islands, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, the Bermudas, Newfoundland, etc. etc.* (London, 1837), pp. 102-4; C. Bruce Fergusson, ed., *Uniacke's Sketches of Cape Breton and Other Papers Relating to Cape Breton Island* (Halifax, 1958), pp. 48-9.

36 *Acadiensis*

overwhelmingly be the destination for Middle River's farm production.⁸ It is difficult to gain a clear sense of the chronology of the early growth of agricultural exports from the Middle River district. Even before road improvements and haulage with horses, there is evidence that during the shipping season 20 or more teams of oxen might be engaged in transporting farm produce to the lakeshore on sledges drawn across bare ground.⁹ As cattle and sheep might make their own way, such figures indicate that the early agricultural trade of the valley was conducted on a considerable scale. The first specific data on farm exports is from mid-century. According to the reports of Middle River's Agricultural Society, in 1847 300 cattle, 500 sheep, 400 firkins of butter, and a "considerable quantity of pork" were shipped out of the district, a not inconsiderable trade for a population of probably less than 800 people.¹⁰ Production of the two most significant agricultural exports, beef and butter, increased by 200 and 500 per cent respectively over the period 1847-1851 to 1858-1860.¹¹ The rich agricultural potential and locational advantages of Middle River were drawn into the mercantile nexus of sugar and fish long before industrialization and urbanization generated nearer markets.

Markets permitted and encouraged agricultural specialization in Middle River. Because these forces did not lead to extreme — single crop or single animal — forms of agriculture, the considerable degree of specialization that did exist is often overlooked. Though a mixture of crops and livestock were raised in Middle River, this variety did not entail a concomitant "mixed" economic strategy, for the agricultural economy, as elsewhere in northeastern Nova Scotia, overwhelmingly centred on the cow.¹² By mid-century, the importance of cattle to Middle River's agricultural economy was as great, or greater, than that of wheat to the economy of the agricultural districts of Ontario during the booming

8 Annual Reports of the Middle River Agricultural Society, RG 8, vol. 16, nos. 173-195, Public Archives of Nova Scotia [PANS].

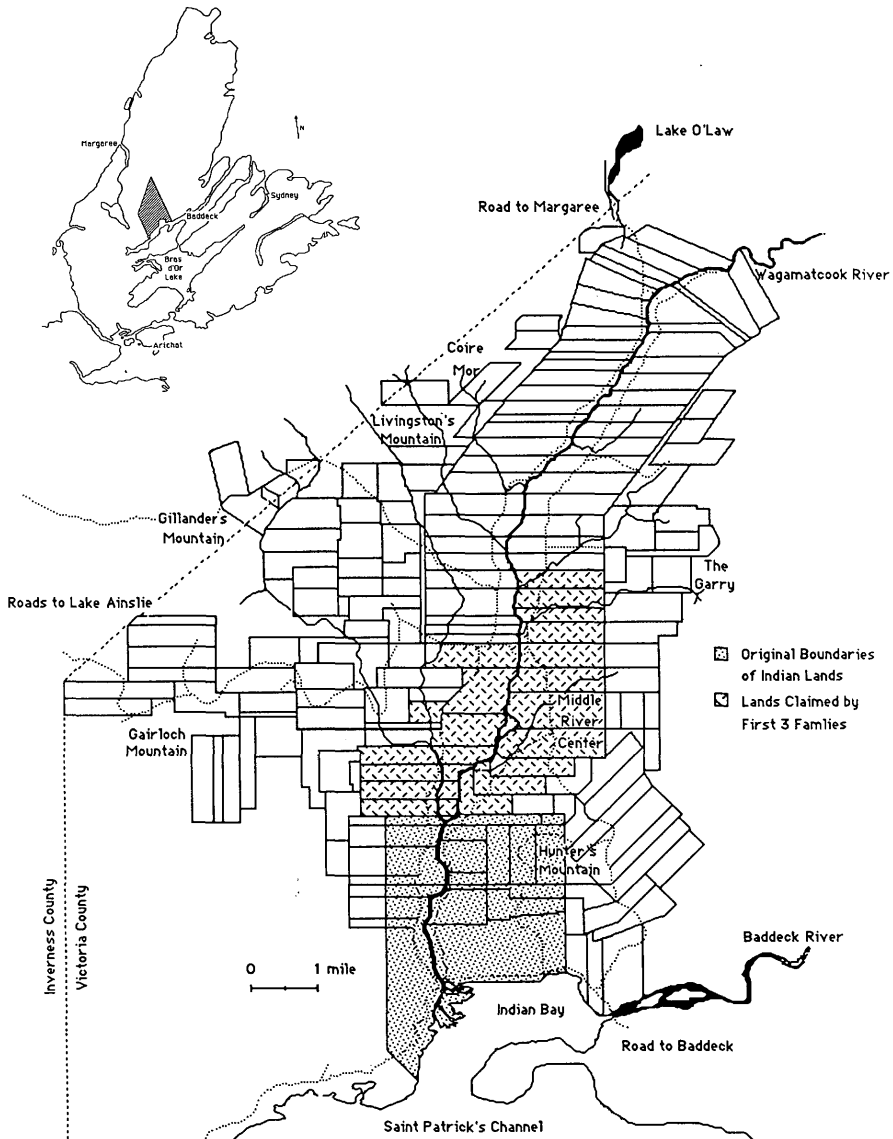
9 Letter of John McLennan cited in Archibald, "Early Scottish Settlers in Cape Breton", p. 90.

10 Annual Report of the Middle River Agricultural Society, 29 December 1847, RG 8, vol. 16, no. 185, PANS. Population estimates are based on the 1838 and 1860/61 Nova Scotia Census figures. "1838 Census of Nova Scotia", RG 1, vol. 449, nos. 55-57, PANS; Nova Scotia, Census, 1860/61, PANS.

11 Annual Reports of the Middle River Agricultural Society, RG 8, vol. 16, nos. 173-234, PANS.

12 The output of agricultural goods was calculated using the aggregate census figures. Field crop production figures were utilized as given and intermediary products deducted from the estimates. The returns to animal husbandry were calculated not on the basis of recorded slaughters and sales, but on the basis of the more reliable inventory figures through the use of production coefficients. Valuation of the farm products was based on both Halifax and local prices. Full details of the procedures used can be found in Rusty Bittermann, "Middle River: The Social Structure of Agriculture in a Nineteenth Century Cape Breton Community", M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1987, App. III and IV.

Hierarchy of the Soil 37



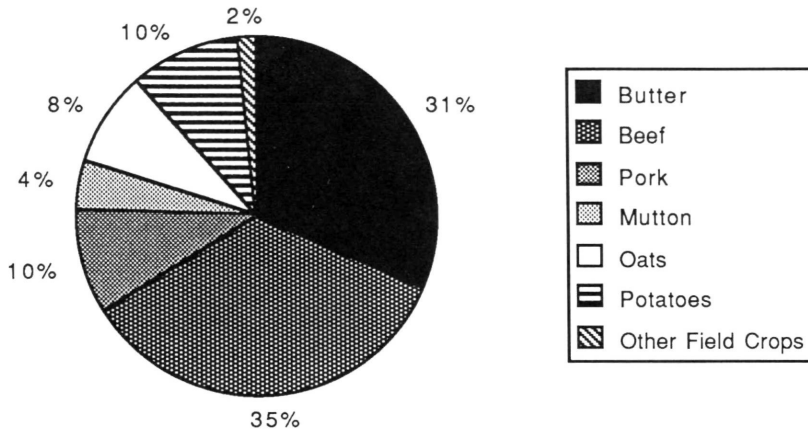
years of the wheat trade.¹³ Beef and milk products accounted for roughly two-thirds of the value of all agrarian end-products in Middle River in 1860/61 (see Figure 1). As agricultural exports, beef and milk played an even more prominent role. More than 80 per cent of the agricultural exports shipped from the nearby port of Baddeck over the years 1858 to 1865 originated with the string of dairy animals.¹⁴ Sheep and swine were important secondary agricultural products. Though roots and grain were raised, the people of Middle River specialized in livestock production and most households, to varying degrees, obtained breadstuffs by purchase. While it is possible, indeed likely, that the concentration on animal husbandry had increased over time because of failures with potato and grain crops and in response to surer and cheaper supplies of flour, the orientation toward animal husbandry is clearly discernable from the earliest reports of the Agricultural Society in the 1840s. As a consequence, hay was the pre-eminent field crop. Small grains and roots — most particularly oats and potatoes — were grown, but hay was by far the most important crop, accounting for roughly three-quarters of the value of all Middle River's field crop production.¹⁵ The quantities of livestock that could be carried on Middle River's farms was determined by the success of this single crop, harvested in a few short weeks.

13 The relative status of wheat within the farm economy of the region which would become Ontario has been a matter of some dispute. In *Unequal Beginnings: Agricultural and Economic Development in Quebec and Ontario Until 1870* (Toronto, 1980), John McCallum claims that it accounted for roughly 75 per cent of farm receipts and contends that in terms of "cash income" it was "more important to the Ontario farmer of the 1850s than to the Saskatchewan farmer of today" (p. 24). Marvin McNinnis' analysis of a sample (1100 farms) of the 1860/61 census returns for Canada West in "Marketable Surpluses in Ontario Farming, 1860", *Social Science History*, 8, 4 (Fall 1984), pp. 395-424, tends to support McCallum's figures. On these farms, wheat accounted for just under 70 per cent of total surpluses (p. 413). While not denying the "strategic" (p. 415) significance of wheat to Ontario's agrarian economy, Douglas McCalla, on the basis of a close analysis of the records from a dozen Ontario farms and roughly the same number of retail firms, has argued in "The Internal Economy of Upper Canada: New Evidence on Agricultural Marketing Before 1850", *Agricultural History*, 59 (1985), pp. 397-416 that McCallum exaggerates the relative significance of wheat. If one accepts McCallum's and McNinnis' figures, the relative importance of wheat to Ontario's agriculture and cattle to that of the Middle River region are roughly the same. If, on the other hand, McCalla is correct, then cows are relatively more important to Middle River's agriculture than wheat was to that of Ontario.

14 Baddeck exports were recorded beginning in 1858. During the period from 1858 to 1865 agricultural goods averaged 88 per cent of total exports. Animal products comprised, on average, 85 per cent of these agricultural goods. Nova Scotia, House of Assembly, *Journals*, 1859-1866, "Trade Returns". The reports of the Agricultural Society, including marketing information, are found both in the *Journal of Nova Scotia Agriculture* and RG 8, vol. 16, nos. 173-234, PANS.

15 The value of field crop production was estimated from data obtained from the Nova Scotia Census, 1860/61. The prices used are available in Bittermann, "Middle River: The Social Structure of Agriculture in a Nineteenth Century Cape Breton Community", App. III.

Figure I: Middle River Endproduct Production 1861



Source: Nova Scotia, Census, 1861

The landbase of the Middle River district of Cape Breton, like that of much of the Maritimes, is sharply variegated. Rich meadowland is seldom far removed from difficult upland. Varieties of soil, drainage, steepness, stoniness, and micro-climate sharply delimit the agricultural potential of different portions of the region's soils. The returns to capital and labour on the fertile intervale land along the central portions of the valley were considerably greater than those to be gained by applying similar investments to the soils found in the glens and on the hills around the periphery of the valley. With settlement, as the lines of private property encircled land assets of sharply varying potential value, this geography would come to articulate a social structure as variegated as the landscape. Each successive wave of settlers encountered the diminished crown assets left by the choices of those who had proceeded them. The costs of acquiring land did not, however, reflect its relative quality. Prior to changes in crown land policy in 1827, these differing opportunities were obtained at constant cost, one of the many mechanisms which operated to generate inequality during the course of the settlement process. Subsequently the differentiating affects of the mechanism were intentionally enlarged when a new lands policy, introduced after the best locations had been alienated, increased the cost of obtaining crown land. The new regulations, officially announced for British North America in 1827, replaced a "free land" policy with purchase by sale at auction combined with a reserve price fixed by the government.¹⁶

¹⁶ R.G. Riddell, "A Study of the Land Policy of the Colonial Office, 1763-1855", *Canadian Historical Review*, 18 (1937), p. 390. In Cape Breton, implementation of this policy was delayed

The first Europeans who settled in Middle River in 1811 enjoyed the strong markets engendered by the War of 1812 and by British restrictions on American trade with the British Caribbean.¹⁷ The first three families had eight years of New World agricultural experience behind them.¹⁸ At least two, perhaps all three, had been recruited from what one historian has described as "the more prosperous possessor class" of the tenantry of the Scottish Highlands selected for Lord Selkirk's settlements on Prince Edward Island.¹⁹ One of these families had possessed sufficient resources to construct a vessel, purchase stock, and depart Selkirk's lands, first for more favorable areas of settlement on the Island and subsequently for Middle River.²⁰ All three of the first families had children reaching maturity.²¹ Reportedly drawn by Middle River's rich interval lands, and possessing capital, Maritime agricultural experience, and considerable supplies of familial labour, these households were in a strong position to exploit the considerable natural resources and locational advantages of the Wagamatcook Valley.²² Exclusive of 4500 acres of land reserved for Micmac use at the mouth of the Wagamatcook, the first three families had the pick of the lands of the district. Being veteran settlers they chose wisely. As well, they chose repeatedly. Despite their modest numbers, they were able, both through grants

for five years. "Free" land grants never were, in fact, without cost and the *actual* changes in the costs to the settler of acquiring land have yet to be closely calculated. In terms of officially sanctioned fees, Stephen Hornsby has estimated that the new land policy resulted in a fivefold increase in costs. Stephen Hornsby, "Scottish Emigration and Settlement in Early Nineteenth Century Cape Breton". Consideration of the impact these changes in land policy had on the social structure of Upper Canada is provided in Leo Johnson, "Land Policy, Population Growth and Social Structure in the Home District, 1793-1851" in J.K. Johnson, ed., *Historical Essays on Upper Canada* (Toronto, 1975), pp. 32-57, and Joy Parr, "Hired Men: Ontario Agricultural Wage Labour in Historical Perspective", *Labour/Le Travail*, 15 (Spring 1985), pp. 91-103.

- 17 John Young, *The Letters of Agricola on the Principles of Vegetation and Tillage* (Halifax, 1822), p. xiii; W.T. Easterbrook and Hugh G.J. Aitken, *Canadian Economic History* (Toronto, 1965), pp. 142-50, 228-38. A fuller treatment of the settlement process can be found in Bittermann, "Economic Stratification and Agrarian Settlement: Middle River in the Early Nineteenth Century", in Donovan, ed., *Cape Breton Historical Essays*.
- 18 John A. Nicholson et al., *Middle River: Past and Present History of a Cape Breton Community 1806-1985* (Sydney, 1985), pp. 288-91; John Murray, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Cape Breton* (Truro, 1921), p. 91; Archibald, "Early Scottish Settlers in Cape Breton", p. 90.
- 19 J.M. Bumsted, ed., *The Collected Writings of Lord Selkirk, 1799-1809*, vol. II (Winnipeg, 1984), p. 34. See too Patrick C.T. White, *Lord Selkirk's Diary, 1803-1804: A Journal of His Travels in British North America and the Northeastern United States* (Toronto, 1958), pp. 33-5.
- 20 Nicholson et al., *Middle River*, pp. 288-91.
- 21 Cape Breton Census, 1818, in D.C. Harvey, ed., *Holland's Description of Cape Breton Island and Other Documents* (Halifax, 1935), pp. 163-4.
- 22 A traveller's report from 1827 remarking with favour upon the "very independent circumstances" of some of the Valley's households was undoubtedly referring to some of the first families. Glasgow Colonial Society Correspondence, M-1352, p. 129, Public Archives of Canada [PAC].

and occupation, to acquire roughly 4000 acres of the best of the district's land and their acquisitions, in conjunction with the lands reserved for the Micmacs, engrossed the first seven miles of land along the lower course of the Wagamatcook River.²³ Subsequent settlers would either have to contest the claims of these families, or the Indians, or settle further upstream or on lots not bordering the river.

The next influx of settlers, like the first, did not come directly to Middle River from the Old World. Rather they came from various Atlantic locales — Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and elsewhere on Cape Breton. Between 1812 and 1817 at least 13 claims were made for new grants in Middle River.²⁴ While most of these were filed by Highlanders, two of the petitioners were from Ireland and one from England. Unlike the first families, these settlers did not persist. By 1820 when a new wave of immigrants arrived in the valley, all of those who had migrated between 1812 and 1817 had either previously vacated their grants or were willing to sell their claims to the newcomers. The reasons for their departure are not clear, but it is possible that they lacked sufficient capital to develop their claims in an environment that was initially relatively remote from work opportunities.

The third wave of immigrants, who began arriving in 1820, was the first to come directly from the Old World. Between 1820 and 1823, roughly 100 emigrants, arrayed in 23 households, joined the population established by the first three families.²⁵ The limited evidence available suggests both that these immigrants were not impecunious and that they applied their resources toward the development of livestock production in the district.²⁶ While some complained of the costs of filing land claims, virtually all appear to have acquired legal claim to their lands soon after arrival. Like the first settlers established in the valley, the newcomers were Protestant Highlanders and they took up the holdings of the immigrants of the 1812 to 1817 period and acquired all the remaining agricultural land fronting on the river. Some even encroached upon

23 It is impossible to determine precisely the amount of land they attempted to alienate. Legal claims were supplemented by occupation and/or improvement of additional lands. See for instance the petition of Donald MacRae, Series "A", Land Papers, reel no. 78, PANS. The sources for my estimates are Series "A", Land Papers, PANS; Cape Breton Land Papers, 1787-1848, PANS; Nicholson *et al.*, *Middle River*, pp. 157-266. The boundaries of the Indians' lands are indicated in "Petition of the Cape Breton Indians", RG 5, Series "GP", Miscellaneous "A", 1855-58, vol. 3, no. 163, PANS.

24 Cape Breton Land Papers, 1787-1848, PANS.

25 Series "A", Land Papers, PANS.

26 One petition reports the misfortune of a widow on a 100 acre lot, who was forced to sell her land because she lost "all her cattle" to disease. Widowhood, the possession of only 100 acres, and the specific location of her farm all suggest that she would be among the poorer of this group of immigrants. Yet her petition indicates that she possessed a number of livestock a few years after arrival in Middle River. Cape Breton Land Papers, 1787-1848, p. 243, PANS.

the claims of the first three families and a few infringed on Indian lands. As well as initiating a period of significant growth in the settlement, the influx seems to have stimulated a concern on the part of the original families to define more sharply the boundaries of their lands.

There were significant differences in the quality and quantities of land obtained by the settlers of the early 1820s and those held by the first three families and their offspring. As well as having obtained the most favorable locations, the first settlers controlled greater quantities of crown land than the subsequent immigrants. Although some of the new households with mature sons applied for multiple grants, none was able to acquire more than 500 acres. The mature male to land ratio of the first settlers was in excess of 300 acres in the mid-1820s; that of the latter group was approximately 175. Although the distinctions between households just beginning the pioneer phase and those with a decade of improvement behind them was an important factor shaping access to new opportunities and capital accumulation, their differing circumstances were shaped as well by considerable variation in the landbase they controlled. Yet, despite these distinctions, the immigrants of the early 1820s shared a number of important characteristics with the first group of settlers. With few exceptions they too had acquired lands of sufficient quantity and quality to permit rapid farm-making and to justify hopes of meeting household needs from farm resources. Although one-third of these families had left the valley by 1838, most, like the first group of settlers, would persist in their residence.²⁷ By and large both groups appear to have prospered in the 1820s and 1830s. The teams of oxen bearing produce to the lake shore originated with both sets of households.²⁸

The final phase of settlement extended from the late 1820s to mid-century. Those arriving in the valley in this period were confronted with a sharply reduced supply of crown land. The best agricultural lands fronting on the Wagamatcook River had been claimed and these earlier claims were increasingly protected by clear title. Adding to the new settlers' difficulties were the changes in government land policy which had sharply increased the costs of acquiring crown land. Those with the last pick of public lands encountered the steepest costs. The immigrants of this period were probably the least able to bear this financial burden, since contemporary reports leave little doubt of the initial poverty of those who settled the backlands in Middle River and elsewhere in Cape Breton.²⁹ Many had lacked the resources even to provide for their own

27 1838 Census of Nova Scotia, RG 1, vol. 449, nos. 55-7, PANS.

28 Letter of John MacLennan, quoted in Mrs. Charles Archibald, "Early Scottish Settlers in Cape Breton", p. 90.

29 RG 5, Series "P", vol. 81, PANS; Glasgow Colonial Society Correspondence, M 1354, no. 98, no. 125, PAC; J.S. Martell, *Immigration to and Emigration from Nova Scotia, 1815-1838* (Halifax, 1942), pp. 57, 65-6, 77, 84. The pattern of increasing poverty has been noted at source too. See James Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh, 1976), pp. 39-49; Eric

passage across the Atlantic. Without the capital to participate in the active market in privately-held river front lands or to travel on to colonies where more valuable crown lands remained available, the last group of immigrants to enter the valley settled on crown lands located to the rear of the riverfront lands and on the Micmac lands. It is not accidental that the last group of settlers to acquire lands were also the poorest. Nor is it simply a result of the pattern of Highland out-migration. As the community grew, new socioeconomic niches were created at the bottom at the same time that the opportunities for those with modest means, capable of going elsewhere, narrowed. The geographical epithet adhering to this group of settlers, "Backlander", came to indicate not just the location of their holdings, or chronology of arrival, but, more importantly, their status and position in rural society. With few exceptions the quality of the lands they acquired made farm-making arduous and costly. Many of them, either because they had settled on Indian lands or because they lacked the means to pay for the crown lands, held their lands as squatters rather than as owner occupiers. Their legal status mirrored their precarious financial circumstances.

Because the Backlanders were confined to marginal agricultural lands, they also lost control over much of their labour power. The more marginal the land, the greater the capital and labour inputs necessary to wrest a living from the soil. Lacking the means of subsistence, the labour of Backlanders had, of necessity, to be directed off the farm in order to make ends meet. For many this proved an inescapable conundrum. Labour needed for farm-making had to be committed to off-farm employments, while the returns gained, which were needed for farm capitalization, were diminished by the demands of basic sustenance. Dreams of future independence on the land had to be weighed year by year against the advantages of applying one's labour elsewhere. Backlanders perpetually operated under the necessity of dual commitments: at issue was the relative mix of self-employment and wage work.

The fate of the Indian lands during this period is a reminder of the important role the state played in protecting the acquisitions of the first settlers from the land pressure engendered by subsequent waves of immigration. Despite the legal claim of the region's Micmacs to the lands lying along the lower three miles of the Wagamatcook River and their legal and physical resistance to its loss, squatters overran Indian lands, and subsequently persuaded the government to sanction these new property rights.³⁰ The intruders contended that the Micmacs

Richards, *A History of the Highland Clearances: Emigration, Protest, Reasons* (London, 1985), II, pp. 245-6.

30 Nova Scotia House of Assembly, *Journals*, 1844-5, App. 16; *ibid.*, 1847, App. 19; *ibid.*, 1849, App. 45; *ibid.*, 1851, App. 64; *ibid.*, 1860, "Indian Reserves", pp. 392-98; *ibid.*, 1860, "Report of the Committee on Indian Affairs", pp. 214-5; *ibid.*, 1862, "Indian Reserves", and "Indian Affairs", App. 29-30; *ibid.*, 1863, App. 16, "Indian Affairs", Petition of John Richard on behalf of the Indians of Wagamatcook, 1849, RG 5, Series "P", Misc. "B", vol. 49, no. 39; Petition of Paul Christmas and Andrew Christmas, 9 March 1864, RG 5, Series "P", vol. 18, no. 167.

were not utilizing their lands and that the squatters' needs, coupled with their cultivation of the soil, gave them greater claim to the property. Because they possessed quantities of land well in excess of current levels of use, many of the families located along the river frontage faced similar potential threats from the immigrants of the 1830s and 1840s. A shared Scottish heritage had not prevented these pressures from forcing a rearrangement of the property lines of well-situated Highlanders in the 1820s. In this case newcomers had pleaded the right to bring into production, and possess, lands which, though claimed, were not being utilized.³¹ In subsequent decades, however, the pressure of population on resources forced a rearrangement of the property lines only of Indian holdings. Behind this pattern lay the differing degrees of protection afforded by the state to private property in land.³²

Because the process of settlement in Middle River was differentiating, the early European residents of Middle River did not encounter one another as equals. While some of the more prosperous residents of Middle River were expanding their economic activities and constructing substantial houses during the 1830s and 1840s, many of the backlanders were fighting for their very existence. Stripped of personal resources by the capitalist transformation of the Scottish Highlands, they faced the difficulties of farm-making on marginal New World lands during unusually severe weather and the spread of diseases that ruined successive potato and grain crops.³³ Like the rural poor elsewhere in the western world during these decades, they suffered from the combined misery inflicted by agricultural failures coupled with more general economic downturns. Both their returns from the soil and their opportunities for wage work, were sharply reduced. The disparities in the personal circumstances of rich and poor were considerable. In May 1835 Kenneth MacLeod Jr., one of Middle River's wealthier farmers, expanded his holdings with the purchase of an

31 See petition of Roderick MacKenzie, 11 October 1821, reel no. 66; petition of Alexander Finalyson, 10 November 1824, reel no. 82; petition of Kenneth MacLeod Sr., 27 July 1825, reel no. 66; RG 20, Series "A", Land Papers, PANS.

32 It should be noted that the state was responding to grass roots political pressure. Some Crown officials were very sympathetic to the Indians' position and attempted to stem the erosion of their lands. Support for the squatters, however, seems to have been one of the few issues on which there was broad consensus among the Highlanders of Middle River. In part this support appears to have originated from a desire to have the roads passing across Reserve Lands improved, something which, given the statutory labour approach to road construction, would not occur without European settlement. Petition of Kenneth MacLeod *et al.*, 1 January 1839, RG 5, Series "P", vol. 106, no. 12; Petition of the Middle River Agricultural Society, 1 Feb. 1859, RG 5, Series "P", vol. 55, no. 6; Nova Scotia House of Assembly, *Journals*, 1844-5, App. 16; *ibid.*, 1847, App. 19; *ibid.*, 1849, App. 45; *ibid.*, 1851, App. 64.

33 Accounts of some of these disasters are found in Robert Morgan, " 'Poverty, wretchedness, and misery': The Great Famine in Cape Breton, 1845-1851", *Nova Scotia Historical Review*, 6, 1 (1986), pp. 88-104 and Hornsby, "Scottish Emigration and Settlement in Early Nineteenth Century Cape Breton" and "Historical Geography of Cape Breton Island", pp. 175-90.

adjacent farm for £155; the following month Peter Morrison, a backlander, mortgaged his entire farm to the Baddeck merchant C.J. Campbell for £5-13s-4d. worth of provisions.³⁴ One of the valley's finest stone houses was constructed in 1848, the same year that starvation was reported to be "stareing many in the face".³⁵ The account, probably from Middle River, of the death from exposure and weakness of "a poor woman at the head of a large and weak family in a rear settlement [who], while her husband was away was constrained in midwinter to leave her home and collect what meal she could in the settlement for her famishing children" is a story of backland circumstances.³⁶ Poverty, remote locale — her body was found on a footpath, not a road — and the sort of male occupational pluralism that left women and children alone for prolonged periods to fend for themselves, were regular features of life in the hill lands. During these years, when famine stalked the backlands, the reports of the Middle River Agricultural Society indicate the regular shipment of vast quantities of foodstuffs out of the district. The Secretary of the Society, while reporting in 1847 that once again the potato crop had been utterly destroyed by disease and that by spring the district would be "destitute of potatoes", continued his letter with news concerning the other crops and the happy arrival of a shipment of farm implements from the United States that would be a "great saving of time and labour".³⁷ Extreme poverty lived cheek by jowl with comfort and modest affluence; crises of sustenance coexisted with considerations of agricultural efficiency.

While we know that the inequalities grounded in the early years of settlement persisted, indeed deepened, during the second quarter of the 19th century, we know little about how the tensions induced by these divisions were socially handled. In times of scarcity the poor sought, and received, charity. The Reverend Norman MacLeod of the nearby community of St. Ann's has described how the human disaster induced by the potato blight of 1848 "made it impossible for the most saving to shut their ears and eyes from the alarming claims and craving of those around them, running continually from door to door, with the ghastly features of death on their very faces".³⁸ There are suggestions from elsewhere in rural Cape Breton that theft may have served on occasion to convey that which charity did not obtain. In the spring of 1848, H.D.

34 Deed Book "K", pp. 348-9, "M", p. 98.

35 W. Kidston to A. Scott, 18 April 1848, RG 8, vol. 16, no. 245, PANS.

36 Letter quoted in Archibald, "Early Scottish Settlers in Cape Breton", p. 80.

37 Annual report of the Middle River Agricultural Society, 29 December 1847, RG 8, vol. 16, no. 185, PANS. That foodstuffs were being exported from districts suffering from famine was noted in the local press. Letter to the editor, "R", *Cape Breton Spectator* (North Sydney), 3 June 1848.

38 "Letters of the Reverend Norman MacLeod, 1835-1851", in D.C. Harvey, ed., *Bulletin of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia*, 2, 1 (1939), p. 22.

Sellon travelled through the rural districts about Baddeck and St. Ann's and reported that "many that have provisions and property talk of removing to the States in the Fall, so that the little they have may not be plundered and devoured by the famishing population".³⁹ As well as acting as protector of private property from forcible requisitions, the state was summoned to alleviate these tensions through the provision of relief.⁴⁰ The crises were created by nature, as magistrates' reports and editorials alike agreed, but nature had exposed a social structure where some lived on the margin and others did not.

The linkage between the varied contours of the religious history of Cape Breton and the different rural class experiences of these decades deserves closer attention. Reverend Norman MacLeod, adhering to the Calvinist pole of Presbyterianism, appears to have had no difficulties justifying the very considerable wealth which he maintained in a sea of rural poverty.⁴¹ In his view wealth was indicative of moral worth and the potato famine of the 1840s was God's response to "unthriftiness and offensive indolence".⁴² But what of the evangelists whom he so roundly castigated, men like the Reverend Peter MacLean of Whycocomagh who drew crowds of thousands to his emotional religious services and who was himself from a crofter's background?⁴³ While some theologies provided a defense of accumulation, others may have posed a challenge to this order and/or provided succour to its victims. James Hunter has suggested that in the Highland context, evangelical religion responded to the

39 H.D. Sellon to the editor, *Cape Breton Spectator*, 12 May 1848. See too Petition of John C., 12 May 1847, RG 5, Series "P", vol. 83, no. 144, PANS; *Spirit of the Times* (Sydney), February 1848. Margaret MacPhail's novel, *Loch Bras d'Or* (Windsor, N.S., 1970), which is rooted in rural Cape Breton's rich oral traditions, portrays the prosperous mid-19th century farmer, John MacNab, as needing to secure and lock his goods from potential thieves. Her treatment of the tensions between rich and poor embraces two traditions. From the perspective of the more prosperous, the poor were "lazy fellows, who did not provide for long winter months" and who would "prowl at night to steal food and fodder". For the poor, though, MacNab was a likely target for their raids because he "seemed to have more than he needed and was considered a bit stingy and too ambitious", and he paid poorly those who worked in his fields (pp. 15-6).

40 Petition of the Magistrates of the County of Cape Breton, 12 February 1847, RG 5, Series "P", vol. 106, no. 83; H.D. Sellon to the editor, *Cape Breton Spectator*, 12 May 1848; "R" to the editor, *Cape Breton Spectator*, 3 June 1848.

41 Reverend Norman MacLeod's farm encompassed 1200 acres. In the midst of the mid-century economic and agricultural crisis it sold for the very tidy sum of \$3000. Flora McPherson, *Watchman Against the World* (Toronto, 1962), pp. 147-8. The wealth of this minister was not unique. Laurie Stanley has noted the fruitful merger of ministerial duties and capital accumulation by other Presbyterian clerics. Her attempt to discern "typical" behaviour obscures the important fact that there were significant differences in outlook both among ministers and believers. *The Well-Watered Garden: The Presbyterian Church in Cape Breton, 1798-1860* (Sydney, Nova Scotia, 1983), p. 126.

42 Petition of Reverend Norman MacLeod, 18 March 1848, RG 5, Series "P", vol. 84, no. 68. See too the potato famine prayer in *Presbyterian Witness* (Halifax), 9 December 1848.

43 Stanley, *The Well-Watered Garden*, p. 133.

needs of the dispossessed.⁴⁴ In that setting, evangelicals used Biblical injunctions concerning the rights of all men to access to the fruits of the earth to challenge the property rights of great proprietors. How might such notions have been translated in a Cape Breton context that lacked such great accumulations of landed wealth and yet in which the lines of property segregated desperation from modest comfort and affluence? Those who shouldered the burden of developing the backlands in the 1830s and 1840s did not do so because these were the only lands available, but because they could not afford to compete in the market for better agricultural lands. While some backlanders struggled to develop marginal land, considerable acreages of good agricultural land acquired well in advance of the potential for use remained under forest. As late as 1871 roughly half the best (class II and III) agricultural lands in the Middle River district still had not been brought into production.⁴⁵ Although class lines were less starkly drawn in the New World, as in the Highlands the social distribution of resources underlay the economic plight of much of the population. More consideration needs to be given to the possible class dimensions of the differing religious affiliations within Cape Breton's Presbyterian community and to the social aspect of the religious disputes which agitated settlements like Middle River for much of the 19th century.⁴⁶

How the social divisions in communities like Middle River affected the regional political experience deserves more attention as well. The cleavages and tensions between rich and poor appear to have been particularly strong in the 1840s. Letters to the editor and petitions speak of the resistance of those inhabiting "humble cottages" to the concentration of power in the hands of the wealthy. Road commissioners who were also prosperous farmers were accused of placing the poor in their debt for provisions when they ran short over the winter and then pocketing their less fortunate neighbors' share of the road monies the following spring. Magistrates were denounced for imposing fines on

44 Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community*, pp. 94-106, 159-60. See too Iain Fraser Grigor, *Mightier Than a Lord: The Highland Crofters' Struggle For the Land* (Stornoway, 1979), pp. 83, 125.

45 Estimates were established by correlating census data on land utilization with land records and modern soil maps. Canada, *Census*, 1870/71; D.B. Cann, J.I. MacDougall, and J.D. Hilchey, *Soil Survey of Cape Breton Island*, Nova Scotia Soil Survey, Report no. 12 (Truro, 1963). See Bittermann, "Middle River", App. VI.

46 Religious disputes and factional struggle for control of church property animated Middle River's Presbyterians for much of the 19th century. The clashes could at times be violent. Attempts to block the ascension of a new minister in 1864 saw rival groups armed with clubs and stones, and in at least one case a gun, battle it out at the church entrance on Sunday morning. *Queen v. Simon MacRae, et al.*, Victoria County Supreme Court Records, 1868, RG 39 "C", PANS; *Petition of Alexander MacRae et al.*, 1 February 1845, RG 5, Series GP, vol. 1, no. 122; John Murray, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Cape Breton* (Truro, 1921). Debra McNabb has raised similar questions concerning the social basis of the "New Light" movement in western Nova Scotia in "Land and Families in Horton Township", pp. 86-7.

the poor in order to requisition a labour force to work in their fields and censured for their indifference to the plight of the poor during periods of crop failure. In Middle River, those accused of the abuse of civic power reported "factions" forming and warned how "rebellion plans her accursed plots and prepares to blow settlements to ruin".⁴⁷ The scattered evidence suggests recurring conflict between front settler and backlander, rich and poor.

The implications of rural inequality can be most easily traced in the economic sphere. Differential access to resources, and the related circumstances of differences in the stages of farm-making, shaped local exchanges and patterned local relationships. Countryfolk met one another as buyers and sellers of foodstuffs and buyers and sellers of labour. They competed with one another for limited local resources. Depending upon their economic circumstances, rural residents interacted in different fashions with the broader environment in which they lived. While some households were integrated into the regional economic fabric primarily as commodity producers, others, despite having access to land, participated in markets primarily through the sale of labour.

During the 1830s and 1840s, when Backlanders repeatedly faced crises of life on the margin, the more prosperous early settlers extended their control over local resources. Because there were markets for agricultural production, and for the factors of production — such as land — used to generate these goods, the early settlers, who possessed farms of considerable productivity, were able to utilize the capital accumulated from the sale of agricultural goods, and from the increasing potential value of their farm assets, to enlarge their economic activities through purchases and investments. Some of these initiatives were directed toward acquiring more agricultural lands and making other investments to expand agricultural production. Because others did not share this affluence, the wealthier households were able to proceed beyond the limits on the extent of their agricultural production imposed by the capacities of household labour supplies. By 1860 roughly one-quarter of Middle River's farms were operating on a scale that necessitated the procurement of labour from beyond the household at harvest time.⁴⁸ These were the farms which

47 "Aonghus Liath" to the editor, *Spirit of the Times*, 19 July 1842; Angus MacLeod to the editor, *ibid.*; petition of Kenneth MacKenzie *et al.*, 19 May 1848, RG 5, Series "P", vol. 49, no. 168; "R" to the editor, *Cape Breton Spectator*, 3 June 1848. The conversion of road monies into farm income for the wealthier farmers through a form of debt peonage appears to have been widespread. See Captain W. Moorsom, *Letters From Nova Scotia: Comprising Sketches of a Young Country* (London, 1830), p. 288.

48 Estimates of the relationship of household labour supply to farm needs focused on the critical demands at harvest time. In the case of Middle River the key crop underpinning the agricultural regime was hay. The requirements for its harvest were calculated by combining figures concerning the length of the haying season and the labour requirements per acre with the manuscript census figures concerning the number of acres mown and the household labour force. Figures for the amount of time available for hay-making were calculated from contemporary

constituted the commercial core of agricultural production. In 1860 the most prosperous quartile of the district's farms accounted for half of the surpluses in livestock production. By contrast the least affluent half of all farm households produced only 15 per cent of the surplus production.⁴⁹ Fully 85 per cent of all livestock surpluses were the product of the wealthier two quartiles of Middle River's households. Overwhelmingly these were the farms of the first three families and the immigrants of the early 1820s and their descendents.⁵⁰

While a significant portion of the population invested in the growing export-oriented agricultural economy of the district, a more limited group purchased hydraulic sites and established processing facilities. In the 1830s the son of one of the original three families expanded an earlier modest milling establishment by acquiring one of the best sites for hydraulic power in the district and by procuring new milling equipment. Some of the capital necessary for the expansion was raised by mortgages secured against his agricultural holdings.⁵¹ Yet another son of one of the first three families began construction of another grist mill in 1848.⁵² Two years later the grandson of one of the first families attempted to found a fulling, dying, and dressing establishment. Once again the loans for this enterprise were secured with mortgages against his valuable agricultural holdings. The capital was supplied by the Reverend Hugh MacLeod, a wealthy Presbyterian minister residing in Sydney.⁵³ Other substantial farmers from the district became involved in the expanding shipbuilding industry along the rim of the Bras d'Or basin. Data from the first years of settlement are lacking, but in the period 1854-1869 a cluster of prosperous Middle River farmers financed the construction of at least three vessels ranging

Maritime reports. The labour requirements of hay-making were computed on the basis of a 19th century United States government study of agricultural hand labour. A full explanation of my estimating procedure and sources is contained in Bittermann, "Middle River", App. V.

- 49 Surplus production was calculated on a household basis from the manuscript census returns (see note no. 12). Household consumption needs, estimated on the basis of contemporary sources concerning diet and calculated to include the differentials in adult and child caloric requirements, were deducted from gross farm livestock output calculations to generate figures for livestock production surpluses. Full details of the procedures used can be found in Bittermann, "Middle River", App. IV.
- 50 This was determined by linking household level analysis of the census data with the district's land records. It should be noted that because of the concentration on animal husbandry many households which did not have positive net farm incomes did have livestock surpluses.
- 51 Some of these were held by family members at 6 per cent interest and others by outside interests. A sum of £107 was raised from John Tempest of Dartmouth, repayable with interest over 4 years. Deed Books "N", p. 495; "T", p. 258; "N", p. 532, PANS.
- 52 Petition of Finlay MacRae, 14 December 1847, RG 5, Series "P", vol. 53, no. 120, PANS. It is not clear how he financed this enterprise.
- 53 The mortgage, dated 1850, was for £125 payable with lawful interest in 3 years — penal sum £250. Deed Books, "R", p. 394, PANS.

from 75 to 94 tons.⁵⁴ It would appear that these vessels were constructed both to serve the produce trade to Newfoundland and as speculations for resale.⁵⁵ Like their shipbuilding counterparts elsewhere in Cape Breton, these farmer-entrepreneurs relied upon the availability of cheap labour supplies for their initiatives. Because the capital requirements for all these enterprises were considerable, they tended to be the ventures of offspring of the first three families, men able to exploit the advantages gained from considerable aggregations of agricultural wealth.⁵⁶

Even in years without severe weather conditions and crop failures, the economic strategies pursued by those occupying the other end of the agrarian spectrum were quite different. Many of Middle River's residents, from the earliest days of settlement through to the contemporary period, have found it necessary to live with one foot on the land and with the other in near and distant work environments. As Victoria County's Crown Surveyor, D.B. MacNab, observed in 1857, there was a distinct rural "class" which survived by constructing distended household economies: "by means of farming, conducted by their wives and children, and going themselves during the summer season to distant parts of the province or to the United States, they eke out the means of a scanty subsistence".⁵⁷ In the third quarter of the 19th century roughly one-half of the households in Middle River were dependent on the returns of off-farm work for their survival.⁵⁸ More than 80 per cent of these households were those of Backlanders.⁵⁹ Patterns of life which for many had begun in the Highlands were continued in Nova Scotia. Rural residents whose heritage embraced seasonal labour on Thomas Telford's canals and roads, with the Dutch herring fleet, on the Lowland "hairst", or in Scottish industrial centres, found themselves

54 John P. Parker, *Cape Breton Ships and Men* (Toronto, 1967), pp. 67, 70.

55 See the advertisement for the *Roderick MacRae* in *The Times and General Commercial Gazette* (St. John's), 26 October 1870, the year following the vessel's construction.

56 The patterns of capital accumulation in Middle River suggest that the ability of local merchants to control the terms of trade, and thus extract rural surpluses, has often been exaggerated. See, for instance, Sinclair, "From Peasants to Corporations: The Development of Capitalist Agriculture in the Maritime Provinces", p. 278. Once again the difficulty lies with the assumption of a shared rural condition. While dependence on the local merchant and the barter economy are often identified with the countryside as a whole, the evidence suggests that not all rural residents were equally powerless in the face of local terms of exchange. Some farmers were able to buy with cash and to sell directly in more distant markets; they were in a position to effectively bargain for competitive prices.

57 D.B. MacNab to Uniacke, 3 January 1857, Nova Scotia House of Assembly, *Journals*, 1857, App. 71, p. 421. See too W.J. Ousley to Uniacke, 19 February 1857, *ibid.*, App. 71, p. 413.

58 Based on a household level analysis of production and consumption using the 1860/61 and 1870/71 manuscript census returns. Full details of the procedures used can be found in Bittermann, "Middle River", App. II-IV.

59 Household level analysis of net farm income was linked with the district's land records.

working on North American roads, canals and rail lines, with the American fishing fleet, on their neighbor's harvest, and in New World cities.⁶⁰ Improvements in North American transportation systems permitted these distended family economies to be stretched across greater distances over time. By the mid-19th century some residents of Middle River were working seasonally in the United States. By the end of the century they were involved with labour markets in the western sectors of the continent, both in the United States and in Canada. For the poorer strata, rural life was not, and had seldom been, insular.

Middle River's 19th century experience does not conform to the idea that the social organization of the countryside was an obstacle to capitalist growth and the creation of a capitalist labour market.⁶¹ Nor does it fit well with the idea that the generation of a labour force from rural regions was primarily the result of demographic processes and population densities.⁶² It was Middle River's social structure — rooted in the relative wealth of the immigrant population and in the unequal distribution of local resources — which created a peripatetic labour force constantly on the move between potential zones of wage labour. From the early years of settlement, long before there was actual pressure on the district's arable lands, many found it necessary to labour for others in order to survive. The existence of these peripatetic labourers generated opportunities for those with capital and propelled capitalist growth. The explanation for the massive growth of Cape Breton's shipbuilding industry in the mid-19th century is to be found not just in the demand created by local staples and the growth of trans-Atlantic and international trade but also in the ready supplies of cheap labour originating in the countryside.⁶³ So too the cyclonic development of Cape

60 A.J. Youngson, *After the Forty-Five: The Economic Impact on the Scottish Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1973), pp. 182-4; T.M. Devine, "Temporary Migration and the Scottish Highlands in the Nineteenth Century", *Economic History Review*, 32 (1979), pp. 344-59; William Howatson, "The Scottish Hairst and Seasonal Labour 1600-1870", *Scottish Studies*, 26 (1982), pp. 13-36; E.J.T. Collins, "Migrant Labour in British Agriculture in the Nineteenth Century", *Economic History Review*, 29 (1976), pp. 38-59.

61 Michael Merrill, "'Cash is Good to Eat': Self-Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States", *Radical History Review*, 3 (1977), pp. 42-71; James Henretta, "Families and Farms Mentalité in Pre-Industrial America", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 40 (1978), pp. 3-32; Allan Greer, "Wage Labour and the Transition to Capitalism: A Critique of Pentland", *Labour/Le Travail*, 15 (1985), pp. 7-24.

62 MacLean, "The Scots: Hector's Cargo", pp. 118-9, Del Muijs "The Making of An Industrial Community: Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1867-1900", in Don Macgillivray and Brian Tennyson, eds., *Cape Breton Historical Essays* (Sydney, 1980), p. 81; Dunn, *Highland Settler*, pp. 124-6.

63 John P. Parker, *Cape Breton Ships and Men*; Keith Matthews, "The Shipping Industry of Atlantic Canada: Themes and Problems", in Keith Matthews and Gerald Panting, eds., *Ships and Shipbuilding in the North Atlantic Region* (St. John's, 1978), pp. 1-18. Ian McKay has noted the challenge that the abundant and cheap supply of peripatetic rural craftsmen — the "botchers" as the unionized termed them — posed to the wage rates of Haligonian carpenters, *The Craft Transformed* (Halifax, 1985), pp. 13-6.

Breton's coal industry in the late 1850s and 1860s was the product not just of the termination of the GMA monopoly, the Reciprocity Treaty, and enormous American demand, but also of the ready availability of an inexpensive rural labour force.⁶⁴ The expansion of coal mining in this period was dependent upon the labour of perhaps as many as 1500 new workers.⁶⁵ Further afield, and at other moments in the 19th century, Cape Breton's mobile, rural-based, labour force played a part in, among other things, manning the American fishing fleet, constructing Boston's streetcar suburbs, and bringing in the harvest on the Canadian prairies.⁶⁶ The social structure of rural communities like Middle River induced labour-injected patterns of economic change.

While the mobility of this labour ensured its usefulness for capitalists operating outside of the Middle River region, indeed even outside of the country, it posed difficulties for local entrepreneurs. By their movements, rural labourers brought the wage rates offered by local employers into competition with those

64 Richard Brown, *The Coal Fields and Coal Trade of the Island of Cape Breton* (London, 1871); S.A. Saunders, "The Maritime Provinces and the Reciprocity Treaty", *Dalhousie Review*, 14 (October 1934), pp. 355-71.

65 An estimate of the size of the work force in and about Cape Breton's mines in 1855 was made by using Richard Brown's figures of manpower and production from 1838 to calculate roughly manpower from the production figures of 1855. Assuming a steady man/ton ratio, roughly 900 men were working at the mines in 1855. The provincial mines report from 1864 provides a partial list of the workforce employed by Cape Breton's coal mines at this time. The figures, available for 11 of the 19 mines listed in the report, indicate an "average" workforce of 1,809 for 1864. The 1864 investments for four of the other mines are given as \$63,059. If we divide this by the man to investment ratio indicated with the other data — \$270 per man — it would indicate that these mines perhaps employed an additional 233 men. This still leaves the workforce at four of the other enumerated mines unaccounted for. As well there were other smaller operations that are not listed in these returns. A workforce figure of 2500 for all of Cape Breton's coal mines during this period of the coal boom would probably not be far off. The number of men who had worked at the coal operations at some point over the course of the year would be yet a higher figure as there appears to have been significant turnover. Inventory by Richard Brown, RG 1, vol. 463, no. 32, PANS; Brown, *The Coal Fields and Coal Trade of the Island of Cape Breton*, pp. 98, 111-39; Nova Scotia House of Assembly, *Journals*, 1865, "Mines Report", App. 6.

66 It was estimated at mid-century that roughly 4000 Nova Scotians were working with the American fishing fleet. Many of these men were recruited from the Strait of Canso region by vessels destined for the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Paul Crowell to James Uniacke, 10 February 1852, Nova Scotia House of Assembly, *Journals*, 1852, App. 25; John MacDougall, *History of Inverness County* (Truro, 1922), p. 17. On the Boston linkage see Alan Brookes, "The Exodus: Migration From the Maritime Provinces to Boston During the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century", Ph.D. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1978. On the involvement of Maritime labour in the Prairie harvest see A.A. MacKenzie, "Cape Breton and the Western Harvest Excursions, 1890-1928", in Ken Donovan, ed., *Cape Breton at 200: Historical Essays in Honour of the Island's Bicentennial, 1785-1985* (Sydney, 1985), pp. 71-84; W.J.C. Cherwinski, "The Incredible Harvest Excursion of 1908", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 5 (Spring 1980), pp. 57-80; John Herd Thompson, "Bringing in the Sheaves: The Harvest Excursions, 1890-1929", *Canadian Historical Review*, 59 (1978), pp. 467-89.

available elsewhere. They pitted demand in Middle River against that in other regions and they pitted the labour rates available within the agricultural sector against those available from other sectors of the economy. The social distribution of resources in Middle River, coupled with the seasonal nature of demand for agricultural labourers, ensured that many would be involved in continuous comparison and choice-making between the returns of labour on the homeholding, the neighbor's holding, and the wages to be obtained elsewhere. Reciprocally, the uncertainties of off-farm work, no doubt, contributed to the decisions of many to maintain dual commitments, rather than cast their lot entirely to the whims of the labour market. Such comparisons could create difficulties for local farmers and others reliant upon hired labour. They placed limits on the rates of capital growth and concentration within Middle River.

During the third quarter of the 19th century, the rapid growth of the industrial economy pitted commercially-oriented farmers against very strong regional competitors for labour. The complaint of shortages of harvest labour in the countryside in the 1860s and 1870s was widespread.⁶⁷ Rural wages were not keeping abreast of industrial ones. When they laboured off their own holdings, the small farmers who had traditionally provided the supplementary labour for the harvest activities of the larger farms were altering their pluralistic strategies to operate in the more rewarding industrial sector. Larger farmers felt the pinch of this choice. As one Sydney area farmer lamented in 1871: "farmers and their sons by hundreds, nay, thousands, [are] leaving their farms to the women, and seeking employment at the collieries and railways springing up in every direction, and the cry-out here is for more hands. Can nothing be done? If it go on, we must have Chinese or Coolies".⁶⁸ Despite this particular suggestion, the response of prosperous farmers during this period focused on the demand end of their dilemma — reduction of the need for agricultural labour through mechanization — rather than on strategies designed to increase the supply of labour in the countryside. In Middle River mechanization began with the introduction of horse rakes and mowers in the 1860s. Linkage of census data concerning implement ownership with an analysis of household labour supplies indicates that the first steps in this transformation were undertaken primarily by those households lacking sufficient family labour resources to get in their hay without recourse to supplementary labour.⁶⁹ Arguably it was peripatetic labour that forced these new capital investments and the greater reliance of the more prosperous farmers on industrial sources of supply. The timing of the transformation and the hand wringing of the elite of the agrarian community

67 *Journal of Agriculture for Nova Scotia*, April 1865, p. 19; *Acadian Recorder* (Halifax), 3 March 1866; *Journal of Agriculture for Nova Scotia*, May 1867, p. 237; *ibid.*, July 1871, p. 652.

68 *Journal of Agriculture for Nova Scotia*, July 1871, p. 652.

69 Hay harvest labour estimates were correlated with census data on implement ownership. Canada, *Census*, 1870/71.

strongly suggest that mechanization was a response to agricultural labour moving into other areas. The machines were, perhaps, drawn into the vacuum left behind more than they acted as a force of propulsion. Once in place, however, they irreversibly transformed the patterns of work in the countryside, changing the relations between the commercial and sub-subsistence farms, and changing the relations within families.

Middle River's history does not fit well with prevailing characterizations of the rural Maritimes in the early 19th century: economic independence arising from simple access to land resources, an agriculture of self-sufficiency, social organization characterized by an equality grounded in household independence, localized life experiences. None of these prevailing myths concerning the countryside holds up well under close inspection. Is Middle River's history likely to be representative of the patterns of other agrarian Maritime communities? Certainly there are grounds for doubting the representativeness of this community study. Cape Breton's sharply varied topography and the extreme poverty of many of the Highland immigrants who peopled the region while not unique to the Maritimes — poor immigrants did settle on difficult terrain elsewhere — still might suggest that the patterns of rural social structure and development in Middle River would be limited to other similar situations. Perhaps too the particular timing of the European settlement of this district might have played an important role in shaping its social configuration. Yet Middle River's history suggests that the land form simply articulated — rather than caused — the social structure. While the initial poverty of many of the original immigrants was a factor shaping the social organization of Middle River, the presence of impecunious settlers within the district was not fortuitous. The type of economic development which occurred was fostered by general factors in no way unique to Middle River — state policy, markets for farm products, and accumulative behaviour. These created the socioeconomic niches which attracted and initially sustained (and constrained) the rural poor. Middle River was probably not an anomaly.

Debra McNabb's fine study of Horton Township during the period 1760-1830 provides a particularly useful comparison since the land base of the settlement, the nature of the immigrant population, and the chronology of the peopling of the district were quite different from those of Middle River. Horton was settled by relatively prosperous pre-Loyalist immigrants who arrived in the wake of the Acadian deportations. The lands they acquired were among the best in Nova Scotia. Yet the social structure which developed was very similar to that of Middle River in the early 19th century. McNabb argues that in Horton access to abundant land resources never produced an egalitarian society characterized by household self-sufficiency. There too economic stratification emerged in the early years of settlement and many residents lacked the agricultural resources

necessary for economic independence.⁷⁰ While only further studies of other rural locations will provide truly persuasive evidence concerning the broad contours of the social landscape of the rural Maritimes in the early and mid-19th century, the evidence suggests that the patterns revealed in Middle River's case may well have been more general.

If Middle River was not an anomaly, this study indicates the need to ask new questions about the Maritime countryside and to reconsider the role of the rural population in regional history. Virtually every aspect of the rural experience, from agricultural commodity production through to family life and religious orientation, might usefully be examined and considered (or reexamined and reconsidered) in stratification-conscious terms. Studies which explain agricultural change in terms of "average" farm statistics, political behaviour in terms of a singular rural response, or provide a generalized portrait of rural ways of life need to be treated skeptically. Conceptualizing rural life in terms of household self-sufficiency and rough equality has provided a justification of sorts for the urban focus of contemporary historiography. With the exception of the supposedly inexorable pressures of demography, such a countryside is primarily static. Change originates elsewhere. To discern the currents inducing transformation one looks to the economic, social and intellectual forces arising in urban and industrial centres. Change in all its guises — markets included — originates here and "penetrates" the countryside. Middle River's history suggests the need to reconsider urban-focused explanations of regional transformation and to modify them with an appreciation of the critical role rural regions played in shaping and propelling change.

70 McNabb, "Land and Families in Horton Township", p. 72.