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Bercuson, *Fools and Wisemen*

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REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS

David Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill 1978).

THERE ARE at least three ways to read *Fools and Wise Men*. One is as a synthesis of recent social history, albeit "old style" rather than "new," for this is a rigorously non-quantitative study. The second is as an explanatory account of the rise and fall of the One Big Union. The third is as an analysis of the collapse of western labour radicalism. On the first two counts, Bercuson has done a superb job. On the third, some questions remain.

The book opens with a description of working and living conditions in the mines and logging camps, and more briefly in the towns, of western Canada. Bercuson's point, of course, is to describe the milieu within which labour radicalism took root and to drive home the fact that real class conflict existed and was recognized. To specialists this will be no surprise. However, there are still many non-specialists whom working-class historians have not yet reached.

Indeed, Bercuson's early chapters should perform a valuable service by making readily available to non-specialists the kind of social history that is only now beginning to trickle down into textbooks. For this reason, if no other, the book should be strongly recommended to all who teach Canadian history in schools and colleges. Teachers will welcome it as a source of the vivid episode, the personal story, that is so useful in stimulating students. My own experience has been that Bercuson's account of the western miners quickly caught the imagination of students.

Frequently Bercuson gives us the character-sketch, the vignette, that serves to drive a point home. Apparently, good, old-fashioned literary history (the phrase is not meant pejoratively) is alive and well in Calgary. At times one wonders whether Bercuson, stylistically at least, is on the way to becoming the Creighton of labour history. He describes Tom Moore as a "round-faced, prosperous-looking labour statesman who came to Canada... to spend his days washing dishes at the Chateau Laurier Hotel." Tom Cassidy was "a handsome, debonair fellow who began his letters to Russell with 'mon cher Robert,' laced them with jaunty, flourishing language...." Selwyn Blaylock was "a rugged man who enjoyed hunting and fishing among the peaks in which his mines and smelters nestled... [He] hated the One Big Union."

In similar anecdotal vein (perhaps professional historians have finally decided to beat Pierre Berton at his own game), Bercuson dramatically describes Christophers' being run out of Bienfait and dumped over the US border; Cassidy's romantic adventures in a Brandon hotel which caused such problems for the OBU executive (especially when Cassidy refused to mend his ways: "I will admit that I was registered at a Brandon hotel as T. Cassidy and wife. I will admit that Miss Rose was seen in my company at that time, but even admitting all this I can knock any charge that is made into a cocked hat."); Russell's depressing day in Calgary nailing up posters in the pouring rain; and so on.

In short, the book is admirably written. Bercuson has not only given us a valuable contribution to working class history, but by making it readable, he has made it accessible to many outside the historical profession — surely an especially appropriate role for a labour historian. In addition, in E.P. Thompson's phrase, he has rescued a whole group of people "from the enormous condescension of posterity."[1]

[1] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth 1968), 13.

As social history, then, the book is well worth reading. For specialists its value will obviously lie in its account of the One Big Union. The OBU has often figured in books devoted to other topics, slipping in and out of their pages and being variously cheered or booed, usually on the basis of scanty evidence. Now its story has been thoroughly told, with perhaps one gap, for Bercuson gives its activities in the Maritimes fairly short shrift. We are told at one point, for example, that Amherst, Nova Scotia, was an OBU stronghold and that the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour "demonstrated OBU tendencies," but there is no further explanation. Bercuson gives us a full account of the shifts and turns of labour politics in the west, but eastern centres do not get the same detailed treatment. Admittedly, this can be defended on the ground that it was in the west that the OBU's strength lay, but it is a pity that the only time that the Maritimes really appear in the book is when the Nova Scotia miners took on BESCO in 1924-25, prompting the involvement of Russell and Hollywood's Ben Legere.

At most, however, this is a matter of balance. As it is, Bercuson has given us a detailed account of OBU activities in the west. We are getting an ever clearer picture of western labour radicalism in both Canada and the US — Dubofsky on the IWW; Lingenfelter on the miners; McCormack's recent study; various theses and articles; and now Bercuson on the OBU. The drought is becoming, if not a flood, at least a respectable stream.

Bercuson sees the OBU, and especially its decline, as a case study of the collapse of western radicalism. It was, he argues, "a failure," but "it carries with it an explanation of what happened to the spirit of radicalism and revolt that motivated many working people in the west prior to 1920."

His explanation of the OBU's collapse, however, raises more questions than it answers. It is difficult to escape the impression that, at bottom, he blames the OBU leaders themselves for what happened, and, in particular, the SPC's doctrinaire confusions. "The workers' revolt," he notes, "was betrayed not deliberately, but by an unreasonable fixation with an impractical and unrealizable form of organization." In this, his verdict resembles that of Dubofsky who described the one big union tendencies in the IWW as "a belief that usually ensured organizational chaos."[2] Elsewhere, Bercuson criticizes both the OBU and the SPC for their ideological cloudiness. At best, they knew what they opposed; they were not at all sure what they supported. Convinced that history was on their side, they waited for events to unfold, content mostly to give a little nudge here and there and to make sure that the workers' position was not eroded. To this argument, the obvious reply is that ideological obscurity has never been a bar to success in Canada; rather, the reverse. The OBU's problem was that its ideas were all too well understood by its enemies.

It is a truism that the left, taking theory seriously, is prone to factionalism. The OBU, it seems, was no exception, suffering from "indecision and division." However, it might have survived its troubles "if it had been a truer reflection of the needs and desires of western workers." Given this clearer view, the OBU "could have shaken Canadian society to its very roots." A number of comments are in order here. One is methodological and, to some extent, philosophical. It concerns the historian's role as judge and jury. It seems a little harsh that Russell, for example, having suffered at the hands of Justice Metcalfe, should now also have to stand before the historians' bar. To quote Thompson again, "they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and, if they were casualties of history, they remain, con-

[2] M. Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (New York 1974), 466.

demned in their own lives, as casualties."[3]

Bercuson makes a case, for example, that the OBU was mistaken and misguided in its espousal of the one big union. If only it had plumped for industrial unionism. But, surely, this is to ask the OBU to abandon its very principles. From its perspective, industrial unionism was simply another way to fragment the working class. To push for bringing all workers in one area into one union may have been utopian but, given the OBU/SPC analysis of Canadian society as divided into possessors and producers, it had its own logic. Similarly, to ask the OBU leaders to reflect more truly the needs and desires of western workers is, in effect, to ask them to abandon their fundamental social analysis. The distinction between trade-union consciousness and political consciousness is an old one on the left. The OBU can hardly be blamed for wishing to transmute one into the other. Where most workers were is poignantly testified by the upsurge of the OBU, financially at least, when it went into the football pools business.

To argue about what the OBU should have done, or even could have done, is to flirt with counter-factual history, which Eric Hobsbawm has nastily summarized as "if my grandmother had wheels she'd be a greyhound bus." As he goes on to say, "History is what happened, not what might have happened."[4]

Editorializing, however, is not typical of the book. It is, in fact, a credit to Bercuson's full account that one is able to argue with his analysis. As his descriptive sections clearly show, the OBU consistently faced the combined opposition of the state, business and the traditional unions. Indeed, it may be that one of the effects of OBU activity was to incorporate TLC unionism ever more closely into the capitalist order. Against this combined opposition, given the conditions of the period, failure was certain. The OBU was necessarily condemned to fight a losing battle, as the communists argued through the 1920s. This was especially so when its ideals and actions opened it to the charges of dual unionism. As Bercuson shows, not all union opponents of the OBU were political conservatives.

To put it at its simplest, the conditions necessary for success were not present. Kautsky once said of the German Social-Democrats, "We are a revolutionary not a revolution-making party." Bercuson gets his title from a similar comment of William Pritchard's, "Only fools try to make revolutions. Wise men conform to them." There was the OBU's dilemma: the revolution never came.

One can quarrel with the analysis, but Bercuson has given us a first-rate book, well-written and, to the publishers' credit, well-produced. In 1976 Kealey and Warrian predicted "a new distinctive synthesis of Canadian history."[5] This is the kind of book which will help to make it possible.

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[3] E.P. Thompson, *The Making*.

[4] E. Hobsbawm, "Labour History and Ideology," *Journal of Social History*, 7 (1974), 376.

[5] G.S. Kealey and P. Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto 1976), 9.

Daphne Read and Russell Hann, eds., *The Great War and Canadian Society, An Oral History* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1978).

TO START with, anyone interested in Canadian history of the twentieth century, oral or other, for academic or broader interests, should read *Great War and Canadian Society*. It should serve as an answer to those critics who believe that oral history tends to be skewed by progressive ideology. In part, *Great War and Canadian Society* documents the cultural bases of working and lower middle-class Toryism in this country — important 60 years ago and a cogent topic today.