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ARTICLES

Class Conflict on the Canals of Upper Canada in the 1840s

Ruth Bleasdale

IRISH LABOURERS on the St. Lawrence canal system in the 1840s appeared to confirm the stereotype of the Irish Celt — irrational, emotionally unstable, and lacking in self-control. Clustered around construction sites in almost exclusively Irish communities, they engaged in violent confrontations with each other, local inhabitants, employers, and law enforcement agencies. Observers of these confrontations accepted as axiomatic the stereotype of violent Paddy, irreconcilable to Anglo-Saxon norms of rational behaviour, and government reports, private letters, and newspaper articles characterized the canallers as "persons predisposed to tumult even without cause."¹ As one of the contractors on the Lachine Canal put it: "they are a turbulent and discontented people that nothing can satisfy for any length of time, and who never will be kept to work peaceably unless overawed by some force for which they have respect."²

Yet men attempting to control the disturbances along the canals perceived an economic basis to these disturbances which directly challenged ethnocentric interpretations of the canallers' behaviour. In the letters and reports of government officials and law enforcement agents on the canal works in Upper Canada the violence of the labourers appears not as the excesses of an unruly nationality clinging to old behaviour patterns, but as a rational response to economic conditions in the new world. The Irish labourers' common ethnoculture did play a part in shaping their response to these conditions, defining acceptable standards of behaviour, and providing shared traditions and experiences which facilitated united protest. But the objective basis of the social disorder along the canals was, primarily, class conflict. With important exceptions, the canallers' collective action constituted a bitter resistance to the position which they were forced to assume in the society of British North America.

Southern Irish immigrants flooding into the Canadas during the 1840s became part of a developing capitalist labour market, a reserve pool of unskilled labourers who had little choice but to enter and remain in the labour

¹ Public Archives of Canada, Record Group 11, Department of Public Works: 5, Canals (hereafter cited RG11-5), Welland Canal Letterbook, Samuel Power to Thomas Begly, Chairman of Board of Works (hereafter cited WCLB), Power to Begly, 12 August 1842.

² Public Archives of Canada, Record Group 8, British Military and Naval Records I, C Series, Vol. 60, Canals (hereafter cited C Series, Vol. 60), Bethune to MacDonald, 31 March 1843.

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force.³ Most southern Irish arrived in the new world destitute. "Labouring paupers" was how the immigration agent at Quebec described them.⁴ They had little hope of establishing themselves on the land. By the 1840s the land granting and settlement policies of government and private companies had combined to put land beyond the reach of such poor immigrants. Settlement even on free grants in the backwoods was "virtually impossible without capital."⁵ The only option open to most southern Irish was to accept whatever wage labour they could find.

Many found work in the lumbering, shipping, and shipbuilding industries, and in the developing urban centres, where they clustered in casual and manual occupations. But the British North American economy could not absorb the massive immigration of unskilled Irish.⁶ Although the cholera epidemics of 1832 and 1834 and the commercial crisis of 1837 had led to a decline in immigration and a shortage of labour by 1838, a labour surplus rapidly developed in the opening years of the 1840s, as southern Irish arrived in record numbers.⁷ Added to this influx of labourers from across the Atlantic was a migration of Irish labourers north across the American border. During the 1830s the movement of labourers across the border had usually been in the opposite direction, a large proportion of Irish immigrants at Quebec proceeding to the United States in search of employment on public works projects. But the economic panic of 1837 had put a stop to "practically every form of public work" in that country, and further stoppages in 1842 sent 1000s of Irish labourers into the Canadas looking for work. Some new immigrants at Quebec still travelled through to the United States despite the dismal prospects of employment in that country; Pentland concludes, however, that the net flow into

³ H.C. Pentland, "Development of a Capitalistic Labour Market in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 25 (1959), 450-61.

⁴ A.C. Buchanan, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1842, No. 373, cited in W.F. Adams, *Ireland and the Irish Emigration to the New World* (Connecticut 1932).

⁵ Gary Teeple, "Land, Labour, and Capital in Pre-Confederation Canada," in Teeple, ed., *Capitalism and the National Question in Canada* (Toronto 1972), Leo A. Johnson, "Land Policy, Population Growth and Social Structure in the Home District, 1793-1851," *Ontario History* 63 (1971), 41-60. Both Teeple and Johnson attach particular significance to the ideas of Edward Gibbon Wakefield who advocated a prohibitive price on land to force immigrants into the labour force. V.C. Fowke, "The Myth of the Self Sufficient Canadian Pioneer," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 56 (1962).

⁶ R.T. Naylor, "The Rise and Fall of the Third Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence," in Gary Teeple, ed., *Capitalism and the National Question in Canada* (Toronto 1972), 1-13; Teeple, "Land, Labour, and Capital," 57-62.

⁷ H.C. Pentland, "Labour and the Development of Industrial Capitalism in Canada," Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1960, 239. In the fall of 1840, contractors in the Chamblé Canal could not procure labourers even at what the government considered "most extravagant rates." Canada, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly, 1841*, Appendix D. W.F. Adams, *Ireland and the Irish Emigration* and Helen I. Cowen, *British Emigration to British North America: The First Hundred Years* (Toronto 1961).

Canada from the United States in the years 1842-43 was 2,500.⁸ Large-scale migration of the unskilled south across the American border revived in the latter half of the decade, but the labour market continued to be over-supplied by destitute Irish immigrants fleeing famine in their homeland.⁹

The public works in progress along the Welland Canal and the St. Lawrence River attracted a large proportion of the unemployed Irish throughout the decade. The Emigration Committee for the Niagara District Council complained that construction sites along the Welland operated "as beacon lights to the whole redundant and transient population of not only British America, but of the United States."¹⁰ From the St. Lawrence Canals came similar reports of great numbers of "strange labourers" constantly descending on the canals. Even with little work left in the early months of 1847, labourers were still pouring into the area around the Williamsburg Canals. Chief Engineer J.B. Mills asked the Board of Works what could be done with all the labourers.¹¹

Many did secure work for a season or a few years. The massive canal construction programme undertaken by the government of the Canadas during the 1840s created a demand for as many as 10,000 unskilled labourers at one time in Upper Canada alone. The work was labour intensive, relying on the manpower of gangs of labourers. While mechanical inventions such as the steam-excavator in the Welland's Deep Cut played a small role in the construction process, unskilled labourers executed most aspects of the work, digging, puddling, hauling, and quarrying.¹² The Cornwall Canal needed 1,000 labour-

⁸ Pentland, "Labour and Industrial Capitalism," 273. See also: Frances Morehouse, "The Irish Migration of the 'Forties,'" *American Historical Review*, 33 (1927-28), 579-92.

⁹ The best treatment of famine immigrants in British North America is Kenneth Duncan, "Irish Famine Immigration and the Social Structure of Canada West," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* (1965), 19-40.

¹⁰ Report of the Niagara District Council, *Niagara Chronicle*, 4 August 1847.

¹¹ RG11-5, Vol. 390, file 93, Williamsburg Canals, Estimates and Returns, 1844-58, Public Notice of the Board of Works issued by Begly, 26 February 1844; RG11-5, Vol. 390, file 94, Police Protection and the Williamsburg Canals, Mills to Begly, 16 February 1847.

¹² J.P. Merritt, *Biography of the Hon. W.H. Merritt* (St. Catharines 1875), 310. Concerning the construction industry in Britain, Gosta E. Sandstrom has argued that the very existence of an easily exploitable labour pool deferred mechanization, relieving state and private management "of the need for constructive thinking." Gosta E. Sandstrom, *The History of Tunnelling* (London 1963). For a discussion of the relationship between labour supply and the development of mechanization in the mid-nineteenth century see Raphael Samuel, "The Workshop of the World: Steam Power and Hand Technology in mid-Victorian Britain," *History Workshop*, 3 (1977), 6-72. Labourers on North American canals in the 1840s were still performing basically the same tasks their counterparts had performed half a century earlier during the canal age in Europe. For a description of these tasks see: Anthony Burton, *The Canal Builders* (London 1972). Alvin Harlow describes a variety of new inventions used on the Erie Canal, which might have made their way to the canals of the Canadas. These ranged

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ers during peak construction seasons in 1842 and 1843; the Williamsburg Canals required as many as 2,000 between 1844 and 1847; while the improvements to the Welland employed between 3,000 and 4,000 labourers from 1842 to 1845, their numbers tapering off in the latter half of the decade.¹³

Despite this heavy demand, there were never enough jobs for the numbers who flocked to canal construction sites. Winter brought unemployment of desperate proportions. While some work continued on the Cornwall and Williamsburg Canals and on the Welland to a greater extent, the number of labourers who could be employed profitably was severely limited. Of the 5,000 along the Welland in January 1844, over 3,000 could not find jobs, and those at work could put in but few days out of the month because of the weather.¹⁴ Even during the spring and summer months, the number of unemployed in the area might exceed the number employed if work on one section came to an end or if work was suspended for the navigation season.¹⁵

Only a small number of those unable to get work on the canals appear to have found jobs on farms in the area. Despite the pressing demand for farm labourers and servants during the 1840s, the peasant background of the southern Irish had not equipped them to meet this demand, and many farmers in Upper Canada consequently professed reluctance to employ Irish immigrants.¹⁶ The Niagara District Council's 1843 enquiry into emigration and the labour needs of the district noted that farmers were not employing the labourers along the canal because they did not know "the improved system of British agriculture." Four years later the emigration committee for the same district gave a similar reason as to why farmers would not hire the immigrants squatting along the Welland Canal: "from the peculiar notions which they entertain, from the habits which they have formed, and from their ignorance of the manner in which the duties of farm labourers and servants are performed in this country, they are quite unprofitable in either capacity."¹⁷ In the last half of the decade,

from a sharp-edged shovel for cutting roots to a stump-puller operated by seven men and a team of horses or oxen. Alvin Hartow, *Old Towpaths: The Story of the American Canal Era* (New York 1964), 53.

¹³ John P. Heisler, *The Canals of Canada*, National Historic Sites Service, Manuscript Report Number 64, December 1971, 220-1, 224-5, 226-7.

¹⁴ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Daly, 10 January 1844.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Thorburn to Murdock, 18 August 1842; RG11-5, WCLB, Samuel Power to A. Thomas Begly, Chairman of Board of Works, Power to Begly, 20 March 1843; *Ibid.*, Power to Begly, 17 July 1843.

¹⁶ Duncan, "Irish Famine Immigration," 25-6. For a discussion of the application of the improved system of British agriculture to Upper Canada see: Kenneth Kelly, "The Transfer of British Ideas on Improved Farming to Ontario During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," *Ontario History*, 63 (1971), 103-11.

¹⁷ *St. Catharines Journal*, 31 August 1843; *Niagara Chronicle*, 4 August 1847.

fear that famine immigrants carried disease acted as a further barrier to employment of the Irish on farms.¹⁸

Despite their inability to find work the unemployed congregated along the canal banks. As construction commenced on the Welland, canal Superintendent Samuel Power endeavoured to explain why the surplus labourers would not move on: "the majority are so destitute that they are unable to go. The remainder are unwilling as there is not elsewhere any hope of employment." Four years later the situation had not changed. The Niagara District Council concluded that even if there had been somewhere for the unemployed to go, they were too indigent to travel.¹⁹ Instead they squatted along the public works, throwing together shanties from pilfered materials — the fence rails of farmers and boards from abandoned properties.²⁰

These shanties of the unemployed became a part of all construction sites. Their occupants maintained themselves by stealing from local merchants, farmers, and townspeople. According to government and newspaper reports, pilfering became the order of the day along public works projects, the unemployed stealing any portable commodity — food, fence rails, firewood, money, and livestock.²¹ While reports deplored this criminal activity, observers agreed that it was their extreme poverty which "impelled these poor, unfortunate beings to criminal acts."²² The *St. Catharines Journal*, a newspaper generally unsympathetic to the canallers, described the condition of the unemployed in the winter of 1844:

... the greatest distress imaginable has been, and still is, existing throughout the entire line of the Welland Canal, in consequence of the vast accumulation of unemployed labourers. ... There are, at this moment, many hundreds of men, women, and children, apparently in the last stages of starvation; and instead ... of any relief for them ... in the spring, ... more than one half of those who are now employed *must* be discharged. ... This is no exaggerated statement; it falls below the reality, and which requires to be seen, in all its appalling features to entitle any description of it to belief.²³

Such descriptions appear frequently enough in the letters of government officials to indicate that the *Journal* was not indulging in sensational reporting. The actual numbers of those on the verge of starvation might fluctuate — two years earlier 4,000 unemployed labourers, not a few hundred, had been "reduced to a state of absolute starvation."²⁴ But the threat of starvation was an ever-present part of life in the canal zones.

¹⁸ Duncan, "Irish Famine Immigration," 26.

¹⁹ RG11-5, WCLB, Power to Begly, 8 April 1843; *Niagara Chronicle*, 4 August 1847.

²⁰ RG11-5, Vol. 390, file 94, Hiel to Begly, 16 February 1847.

²¹ RG11-5, Vol. 390, file 93, Public Notice of Board of Works, 26 February 1844; *Legislative Journals*, 1844-45, Appendix Y, Report of Mills, 20 January 1845; *Ibid.*, Mills to Begly, 21 January 1845; *Ibid.*, Jarvis to Daly, 28 October 1845.

²² *Niagara Chronicle*, 4 August 1847.

²³ *St. Catharines Journal*, 16 February 1844.

²⁴ Petition of Constantine Lee and John William Baynes to Sir Charles Bagot, cited in Dean Harris, *The Catholic Church in the Niagara Peninsula* (Toronto 1895), 255. Lee

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Upper Canada lacked a system of public relief which might have mitigated the suffering of the unemployed and their families. Only gradually between 1792 and 1867 was there a "piecemeal assumption of public responsibility for those in need" and not until the mid-1840s did the province begin to operate on the principle of public support.²⁵ Even had the principle of public relief been operative, the Niagara, Johnston, and Eastern District lacked the resources to provide a relief programme such as that offered by Montreal to unemployed labourers on the Lachine Canal.²⁶ Nor was private charity a solution to the endemic poverty of the unemployed. When thousands of destitute immigrants first arrived in St. Catharines seeking employment on the Welland Canal in the spring of 1842, many citizens in the area came to their aid. But as the *St. Catharines Journal* pointed out in similar circumstances two years later: "Those living in the vicinity of the Canal [had] not the means of supporting the famishing scores who [were] hourly thronging their dwellings, begging for a morsel to save the life of a starving child."²⁷

The suffering of the unemployed shocked private individuals and government officials such as William Merritt who led a fund-raising campaign for the starving and charged the Board of Works that it was "bound to provide provisions, in some way."²⁸ The crime of the unemployed became an even greater concern as desperate men violated private property in their attempts to stay alive. But for the Board of Works and its contractors the surplus labourers around the canals provided a readily exploitable pool of unskilled labour. From this pool, contractors drew labourers as they needed them — for a few days, weeks, or a season — always confident that the supply would exceed the demand. The men they set to work were often far from the brawny navvies celebrated in the folklore of the day. Weakened by days and months without adequate food, at times on the verge of starvation, labourers were reported to stagger under the weight of their shovels when first set to work.²⁹

was the Roman Catholic priest for St. Catharines, Baynes the community's Presbyterian minister. See also: RG11-5, Vol. 389, file 89, Correspondence of Samuel Keefer, 1843-51, Superintendent of Welland Canal, 1848-52, Keefer to Begly, 1 February 1843; RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 114, McDonagh to Killaly, 2 May 1843; Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Daly, 10 January 1844; RG11-5, Vol. 381, file 56, John Rigney, Superintendent Cornwall Canal, 1841-44, Godfrey to Begly, 22 April 1843; *Ibid.*, Godfrey to Begly, 8 June 1843.

²⁵ Richard Splane, *Social Welfare in Ontario 1791-1893* (Toronto 1965), 68-9, 74.

²⁶ *St. Catharines Journal*, 26 January 1844.

²⁷ *St. Catharines Journal*, 16 February 1844.

²⁸ Harris, *The Catholic Church in the Niagara Peninsula*, 255; RG11-5, Vol. 388, file 87, Correspondence of General Killaly, 1841-55, Welland Canal, Merritt to Killaly, 12 August 1842.

²⁹ RG11-5, Vol. 389, file 89, Keefer to Begly, 1 February 1843. Terry Coleman discusses the stereotype of the navvy on construction sites in the British Isles in his chapter, "King of Labourers," Terry Coleman, *The Railway Navvies: A History of the Men Who Made the Railways* (London 1965), ch. 12.

Contractors offered temporary relief from the threat of starvation; but they offered little more. The typical contractor paid wages which were consistently higher than those of farm labourers in the area of construction sites. But for their back-breaking, dangerous labour and a summer work day of 14 hours, navvies received only the average or slightly above average daily wage for unskilled labour in the Canadas.³⁰ Since individual contractors set wage rates, wages varied from canal to canal and from section to section on the same canal; however, they usually hovered around the 2s6d which Pentland suggests was the average rate for unskilled labour during the decade. On the Cornwall and Williamsburg Canals wages fluctuated between 2s and 3s, and if on the Welland Canal labourers in some seasons forced an increase to 4s, wages usually dropped back to 2s6d at the onset of winter, when contractors justified lower wages on the grounds that labourers worked fewer hours.³¹

These wage levels were barely adequate to sustain life, according to an 1842 government investigation into riots on the Beauharnois Canal. Many of those who testified at the hearings — foremen, engineers, magistrates, and clergymen — maintained that along the St. Lawrence labourers could not live

³⁰ Farm labourers' wages appear in RG5-B21, Emigration Records, 1840-44, Information to Immigrants, April 1843, for Brockville, Chippewa, Cornwall, Fort Erie, Indiana, Niagara, Port Colborne, Prescott, Queenston, Smith's Falls; *ibid.* For the Information of Emigrants of the Labouring Classes, December 1840, the Johnston District. Wages were not consistently higher in the area round any one of the canals. Newspapers also contain references to wage levels for farm labourers. Only newspapers appear to have paid much attention to the serious accidents on construction sites. Navvies crushed by stones, kicked by horses, and drowned in the locks made good copy. Work on the canals under consideration did not involve tunnelling, by far the most hazardous aspect of the navy's work. But the malaria-producing mosquito which thrived on many canal construction sites in North America made up for this. In October 1842 Dr. John Jarrow reported to the Board of Works that "scarcely an individual" from among the over 800 men who had been on the Broad Creek works would escape the "lake fever." Three-quarters of the labourers' wives and children were already sick. Very few of those under two would recover. RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 104, Welland Canal Protection 1842-50, Memorandum of Dr. John Jarrow to the Board of Works, 1 October 1842.

³¹ H.C. Pentland, "Labour and the Development of Industrial Capitalism in Canada," 232. Pentland underlines the difficulty in making valid generalizations because of "considerable variation from time to time and from place to place." All wages have been translated into Sterling, using the conversion rate of 22s.2 3/4 d. Currency per £ Sterling, published in Canada, RG5-B21, Quarterly Return of Prices in the Province of Canada in the Quarter Ending 31 October 1844. The variation in wages along the canals was determined through the frequent references to wage levels in the records of the Department of Public Works and newspaper articles. Wages fluctuated within the same range on the Lachine and Beauharnois Canals in Canada East. H.C. Pentland, "The Lachine Strike of 1843," *Canadian Historical Review* 29 (1948), 255-77; *Legislative Journals*, 1843, Appendix T, Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Disturbances upon the line of the Beauharnois Canal, during the summer of 1843. *Legislative Journals*, 1843, Appendix Q; *ibid.*, 1845, Appendix AA.

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on 2s6d per day. A conservative estimate gave the cost of food alone for a single labourer for one day at 1s3d, suggesting that at the going rate a labourer could only feed himself and his wife, not to mention children, and then only on days when he was employed.³² Under the best of circumstances, with work being pushed ahead during the summer months, this would only mean 20 days out of the month. In winter, if he was lucky enough to get work on the canals, he could not expect to put in more than ten days in a good month.³³ Inadequate as his wages were, the labourer could not even be certain of receiving them. After a few months in a contractor's employ, labourers might discover that they had worked for nothing, the contractor running out of funds before he could pay his men. Other contractors, living under the threat of bankruptcy, forced labourers to wait months on end for their wages. These long intervals between pay days reduced labourers to desperate circumstances. Simply to stay alive, they entered into transactions with cutthroat speculators, running up long accounts at stores or "selling their time at a sacrifice," handing over the title to their wages in return for ready cash or credit. Such practices cost labourers as much as 13 per cent interest, pushing them steadily downward in a spiral of debt and dependency.³⁴

Labourers might become indebted to one of the "petty hucksters who swarmed around public works, charging whatever they could get," or to one of the country storekeepers who took advantage of an influx of labourers to extract exorbitant prices.³⁵ Or frequently the contractor who could not find the money to pay wages found the means to stock a company store and make a profit by extending credit for grossly overpriced provisions. Although contractors claimed they set up their stores as a convenience to the labourers, a government investigation concluded that in actual fact, stores were "known to

³² Given that labourers at Beauharnois used company stores and received store pay as did many canallers in Upper Canada, and considering the fairly constant price of foodstuffs along the St. Lawrence system, the findings of the Beauharnois Commission can be applied to labourers on the Cornwall, Welland, and Williamsburg Canals. *Legislative Journals*, 1843, Appendix T; RG5-B21, *Information to Immigrants*, April 1843; *Ibid.*, For the Information of Emigrants of the Labouring Classes, December 1840, the Johnston District; *Ibid.*, *Quarterly Return of Prices for the City of Montreal in the Quarter ended 31st October 1844*.

³³ These figures represent averages of the estimated number of days worked during each month on the Cornwall, Welland, and Williamsburg Canals.

³⁴ WCLB, Power to Begly, April 1842; *Ibid.*, Power to Begly, 10 March 1843; Welland Canal Commission, folder 8 (hereafter cited WCC-8), Begly to Power, 24 January 1844; RG11-5, Vol. 390, file 94, Killaly to Begly, 26 March 1846; Vol. 381, file 56, Godfrey to Begly, 8 June 1843; Vol. 389, file 89, Keefer to Begly, 2 May 1848; RG11-5, Vol. 388, file 88, Correspondence of Hamilton Killaly, Assistant Engineer on Welland Canal, 1842-57, Keefer to Begly, 14 March 1849. Frequently the government withheld money from contractors, making it impossible for them to pay their labourers. The government also took its time paying labourers employed directly by the Board of Works.

³⁵ *Legislative Journals*, 1843, Appendix Q; WCLB, Power to Begly, 1 October 1842.

be a source of great profit on which all the contractors calculated."³⁶ Many contractors ensured a profit from the sale of provisions by paying wages in credit tickets redeemable only at the company store. This system of truck payment was so widespread along the canals and so open to abuse³⁷ that the Board of Works introduced into the contracts a clause stipulating that wages must be paid in cash. The Board's real attitude toward truck, however, was more ambivalent than this clause suggests. Its 1843 Report to the Legislature argued that "truck payment" was in many cases "rather to be controlled than wholly put down."³⁸ It did not put a stop to store pay, and according to its officials on construction sites it did not control it very well either.³⁹ The result was that many canallers worked for nothing more than the provisions doled out by their employer. They did not see cash. Few could have left the public works with more than they had when they arrived. Many were probably in debt to the company store when their term of work ended.

The combination of low wages, payment in truck, and long waits between pay days kept canallers in poverty and insecurity, barely able to secure necessities during seasons of steady employment, unable to fortify themselves against seasons of sporadic work and the inevitable long periods when there was no work at all. Government commissions and individual reports detailed the misery of the labourers' existence. Drummond, member of the Legislature for Quebec, had served on the Commission investigating conditions along the Beauharnois. During debate in the House, his anger at the "grinding oppression" which he had witnessed flared into a bitter denunciation of "sleek" contractors who had "risen into a state of great wealth by the labour, the sweat, the want and woe" of their labourers. He charged the government with having betrayed and abused the immigrant labourers:

They were to have found continued employment, and been enabled to acquire means to purchase property of their own. They expected to meet with good treatment and what treatment had they met with? — With treatment worse than African slaves, with treatment against which no human being could bear up.⁴⁰

Drummond was backed up by Montreal MP Doctor Neilson, whose experience as medical attendant to the Lachine labourers prompted a less passionate, but no less devastating appraisal:

Their wants were of the direst kind. He [Dr. Neilson] had frequently to prescribe for them, not medicine, nor the ordinary nourishments recommended by the profession, but

³⁶ C Series, Vol. 60, Memorandum of Captain Wetherall, 3 April 1843.

³⁷ *Legislative Journals*, 1843, Appendix Q. WCLB, Power to Begly, 1 February 1844. Power draws attention to the public outcry, but does not elaborate.

³⁸ *Legislative Journals*, 1843, Appendix Q.

³⁹ RG11-5, Vol. 388, file 87, Correspondence of Hamilton Killaly, 1841-55, McDonagh to Killaly, 25 January 1843; WCLB, Power to Sherwood and Company, 1 February 1844; Vol. 390, file 94, Wetherall to Killaly, 2 March 1844.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Nish, ed., *Debates of the Legislative Assembly of United Canada*, Vol. IV, 1844-45, Lewis Thomas Drummond, 1460.

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the commonest necessities of life; he daily found them destitute of these necessities, and he was, therefore, most strongly of opinion that the system under which they were employed, and which afforded them such a wretched existence ought to be fully enquired into.⁴¹

Conditions were equally bad on canals further up the St. Lawrence system. Work did not guarantee adequate food even on the Welland, which offered the highest wages.⁴² David Thorburn, Magistrate for the Niagara District, wondered how the labourers could survive, as he watched them hit by a drop in wages and a simultaneous increase in food prices, struggling to feed their families, unable to provide "a sufficiency of food — even of potatoes."⁴³

Work did not guarantee adequate housing either. A few contractors lived up to the commitment to provide reasonable and "suitable accommodation," constructing barrack-like shanties along the works for the labourers and their families.⁴⁴ But as Pentland has pointed out, the bunkhouse, "a sign of some responsibility of the employer for his men," was a development of the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ The typical contractor of the 1840s left his employees to find whatever housing they could. Since only a very small percentage of canallers found room and board among the local inhabitants, most built their own temporary accommodation, borrowing and stealing materials in the neighbourhood to construct huts and shacks, similar to the shanties thrown up by the unemployed.⁴⁶ A canaller usually shared accommodation with other canallers either in the barrack-like structures provided by contractors or in the huts they erected themselves. Of the 163 shanties built by labourers at Broad Creek on the Welland, only 29 were single family dwellings. The rest were occupied by one, two, or three families with their various numbers of boarders. These dwellings formed a congested shanty town typical of the shanty towns which sprang up along the canals, and reminiscent of squalid Corktown, home of labourers on the Rideau Canal in the 1820s and 1830s.⁴⁷

For the brief period of their existence, these shanty towns along the canals became close-knit, homogeneous working-class communities, in which the bonds of living together reinforced and overlapped with bonds formed in the workplace. Canallers shared day to day social interaction and leisure activities, drinking together at the "grog" shops which sprang up to service the labourers

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Wilfred Nelson, 1511.

⁴² The cost of living does not appear to have fluctuated significantly from canal to canal. See note 32.

⁴³ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Daly, 19 January 1844.

⁴⁴ RG11-5, Vol. 388, file 87, Articles of Agreement between the Board of Works and Lewis Schiclaw, 1 April 1845. See Ruth Bleasdale, "Irish Labourers on the Canals of Upper Canada in the 1840's," M.A. thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1975, 34-7.

⁴⁵ Pentland, "The Lachine Strike of 1843," 259.

⁴⁶ Bleasdale, "Irish Labourers on the Canals," 36-7.

⁴⁷ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 104, Memorandum of Dr. Jarrow, 1 October 1842. A.H. Ross, *Ottawa, Past and Present* (Toronto 1927), 109.

and lying out on the hillsides on summer nights.⁴⁸ And they shared the daily struggle to subsist, the material poverty and insecurity, the wretched conditions, and the threat of starvation.

Bound together by their experiences along the canals, the Irish labourers were also united by what they brought from Ireland — a common culture shaped by ethnicity. Canaller communities were not simply homogeneous working-class communities, but Irish working-class communities, ethnic enclaves, in which the values, norms, traditions, and practices of the southern Irish ethno-culture thrived. Central to this culture was a communal organization which emphasized mutuality and fraternity, primarily within family and kinship networks.⁴⁹ While the persistence of kinship relationships amongst the canallers cannot be measured, many labourers lived with women and children in family units. In the winter of 1844, 1300 "diggers" brought 700 women and 1200 children to live along the Welland between Dalhousie and Allanburgh; and at Broad Creek in the summer of 1842, the Board of Works enumerated 250 families amongst the 797 men and 561 women and children. Shanty towns around the Cornwall and Williamsburg Canals also housed many women and children who had followed the labourers from Ireland or across the Canadian-American border, maintaining the strong family structure characteristic of southern Ireland.⁵⁰

Given the Irish pattern of migrating and emigrating in extended families, kinship networks may also have been reproduced on the canals. The fact that both newly-arrived immigrants and labourers from the United States were from the limited region of Munster and Connaught increases the probability that canallers were bound together by strong, persisting kinship ties. But whether or not the labourers were bound by blood they brought to the construction sites traditions of co-operation and mutual aid in the workplace. As peasants in Munster and Connaught, they had held land individually, but had worked it co-operatively. When forced into wage labour to supplement the yields from their tiny holdings, the pattern of work again had been co-operative, friends, relatives, and neighbours forming harvesting or construction gangs which travelled and worked together throughout the British Isles.⁵¹

The clearest evidence of cultural unity and continuity along the canals was the labourers' commitment to the Roman Catholic faith. In contrast with the Irish Catholic labourers in the Ottawa Valley lumbering industry whom Cross

⁴⁸ WCLB, Power to Begly, 17 January 1845; RG11-5, Vol. 390, file 93, Mills to Begly, 26 June 1845; RG11-5, Vol. 389, file 90, Miscellaneous, 1842-51, Keefer to Robinson, 1 March 1842.

⁴⁹ Conrad Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman* (New York 1950), 66-8.

⁵⁰ *St. Catharines Journal*, 16 February 1844; RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 104, Memorandum of Dr. Jarrow, 1 October 1842.

⁵¹ T.C. Foster, *Letters on the Condition of the People of Ireland* (London 1847); J.G. Kohl, *Travels in Ireland* (London 1844); K.H. Connell, *The Population of Ireland, 1760-1845* (Oxford 1950).

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found to be irreligious, canal labourers took their religion seriously enough to build shanty chapels for worship along the canals and to contribute to the construction of a new cathedral in St. Catharines. A stone tablet on the St. Catharines cathedral commemorates "the Irish working on the Welland Canal [who] built this monument to faith and piety" but who, in their eagerness to be part of the opening services, crowded into the churchyard 2,000 strong, destroying graves and markers in the process.⁵²

Canallers were prepared to defend their faith in active conflict with Orangemen. Each July 12th brought violent clashes between Orangemen commemorating the Battle of the Boyne, and Roman Catholic labourers infuriated at the celebration of an event which had produced the hated penal code. The entire canaller community rallied to participate in anti-Orange demonstrations. In 1844 all the canallers along the Welland, organized under leaders and joined by friends from public works projects in Buffalo, marched to confront Toronto Orangemen and their families on an excursion to Niagara Falls.⁵³ Similarly, all labourers on the Welland were encouraged to participate in an 1849 demonstration. A labourer with a large family who was reluctant to march on the Orangemen at Slabtown was ordered to join his fellows or leave the canal. He should have left the canal. Instead he went along to Slabtown and was shot in the head.⁵⁴

The canallers also demonstrated a continued identification with the cause of Irish nationalism and the struggle for repeal of the legislative union of Britain and Ireland. They participated in the agitation for repeal which spread throughout the British Isles and North America in 1843.⁵⁵ Lachine Canal labourers joined Irishmen in Montreal to call for an end to Ireland's colonial status; and labourers on the Welland met at Thorold to offer "their sympathy and assistance to their brethren at home in their struggle for the attainment of their just rights."⁵⁶ On the Williamsburg Canals, labourers also met together in support of Irish nationalism and Daniel O'Connell, the "Liberator" of Ireland. A local tavern keeper who interrupted a pro-O'Connell celebration by asking the canallers to move their bonfire away from his tavern, lived in fear they would be back to burn the tavern down.⁵⁷

Strong, persisting ethno-cultural bonds united the canallers, at times in active conflict with the dominant Protestant Anglo-Saxon culture. But their

⁵² Michael Cross, "The Dark Druidical Groves," Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1968, 470; Harris, *The Catholic Church in the Niagara Peninsula*, 262-4; *St. Catharines Journal*, 25 August 1843; Harris, *The Catholic Church in the Niagara Peninsula*.

⁵³ C Series, Vol. 60, Merritt to Daly, 21 September 1844; C. Series, Vol. 60, Elliott to Young, 23 July 1844.

⁵⁴ C Series, Vol. 317, MacDonald to Daly, 14 July 1849.

⁵⁵ Adams, *Ireland and Irish Emigration*, 89.

⁵⁶ *St. Catharines Journal*, 24 August 1843.

⁵⁷ *Legislative Journals*, 1844-45, Appendix Y, Gibbs to Higginson, 6 January 1845.

ethno-culture was also a source of bitter division. A long-standing feud between natives of Munster County and those from Connaught County divided the labourers into two hostile factions. The origin of the feud is obscure. It may have developed during confrontations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries between striking agricultural labourers of one county and black leg labourers transported across county lines. Or possibly it dated as far back as the rivalries of the old kingdoms of mediaeval Ireland.⁵⁸ Whatever its origin, the feud had become an integral part of the culture which southern Irish labourers carried to construction projects throughout Britain and North America.⁵⁹

The feud did not simply flare up now and then over an insult or dispute between men who otherwise mingled freely. Feuding was part of the way in which canallers organized their lives, membership in a faction dictating both working and living arrangements. Men of one faction usually worked with members of the same faction. At times Cork and Connaught did work together under one contractor on the same section of the work, particularly during the first few seasons of construction on the Welland when contractors hired labourers regardless of faction. But contractors quickly learned to honour the workers' preference to work with members of their faction, if only for the peace of the work.⁶⁰ Members of the same faction usually lived together also, cut off from the other faction in their separate Cork or Connaught community. Members of these communities offered each other material assistance in weathering difficult times. During summer and fall 1842 when half the Connaughtmen along the Broad Creek were ill with malaria, those Connaughtmen who were able to work "shared their miserable pittance," and provided necessities and medicine for the sick labourers and their dependants.⁶¹ During the same season, the Connaughtmen also pooled their resources to retain a lawyer to defend 17 faction members in prison awaiting trial.⁶²

The other side of this communal help and support, however, was suspicion of outsiders and intense hostility towards members of the rival faction. Hostility frequently erupted into violent confrontations between the factions. These confrontations were not a ritualized reminder of past skirmishes, but battles in deadly earnest, involving severe beatings and loss of life. The brutality of the encounters between Cork and Connaught led the *St. Catharines Journal* to denounce the participants as "strange and mad belligerent factions — brothers and countrymen, thirsting like savages for each other's blood — horribly infatuated."⁶³ Most participants in these skirmishes were heavily armed with

⁵⁸ T.D. Williams, *Secret Societies in Ireland* (Dublin 1973), 31.

⁵⁹ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Middlesex 1972).

⁶⁰ By commencement of the second season of construction, employers followed William Hamilton Merritt's suggestion to employ only Corkmen on the upper section and only Connaughtmen on the lower section of the Welland Canal. On the Williamsburg Canals also the factions laboured on different sections of the work.

⁶¹ WCLB, Power to Begly, 25 August 1843.

⁶² RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 104, Robinson to Begly, 19 October 1842.

⁶³ *St. Catharines Journal*, 7 July 1842.

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"guns, pistols, swords, pikes, or poles, pitch forks, scyths," many of which were procured from local inhabitants or the militia stores. In preparation for their revenge on the Corkmen, in one of their more spectacular thefts, Connaughtmen on the Welland actually took possession of blacksmith shops and materials to manufacture pikes and halberds.⁶⁴ Usually they simply accosted citizens in the streets or raided them at night.⁶⁵

Armed conflict between the factions could reduce the canal areas to virtual war zones for weeks on end, "parties of armed men, 200 or 300 in number constantly assembling and parading," planning attack and counter-attack, at times fighting it out on the streets of St. Catharines and smaller centres around the Williamsburg Canals.⁶⁶ As Power explained to military authorities in the Niagara District: "one riot is the parent of many others, for after one of their factional fights the friends of the worsted party rally from all quarters to avenge the defeat."⁶⁷

The fighting of two drunken men might precipitate a clash between the factions.⁶⁸ But men who reported to the Board of Works concerning factional fights were unanimous in concluding that the underlying cause of feuding was the massive and chronic unemployment in the canal areas. David Thorburn, magistrate for the Niagara District, explained: "The first moving cause that excites to the trouble is the want of work, if not employed they are devising schemes to procure it, such as driving away the party who are fewest in number who are not of their country. . . ."⁶⁹ Another magistrate for the Niagara District agreed that "the want of employment to procure bread" was the "principal root" of all the troubles; and Captain Wetherall, appointed to investigate the unrest along the canals, reached the same conclusion: "Strife to obtain work takes place between the two great sectional parties of Cork and Connaught. . . . The sole object of these combinations is to obtain work for themselves, by driving off the other party."⁷⁰ These observers appreciated the fact that the feud was a deep-seated hostility rooted in the southern Irish culture. They also believed that the Irish were given to letting their hostilities erupt into open conflict. Nonetheless, they were convinced that the problems associated with

⁶⁴ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Daly, 10 January 1844; Vol. 407, file 104, Hobson to Daly, 20 January 1844; Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Daly, 17 January 1844.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Thorburn to Daly, 10 January 1844; *Legislative Journals*, 1844-45, Appendix Y, Jarvis to Daly, 28 October 1844.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Appendix Y, Killaly to Daly, 5 November 1844; RG11-5, Vol. 389, file 89, Power to Begly, 17 January 1845; Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Daly, 10 January 1844; *St. Catharines Journal*, 7 July 1843; *Brockville Recorder*, 8 August 1844.

⁶⁷ WCLB, Power to Elliott, 28 December 1843.

⁶⁸ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Daly, 10 January 1844.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 104, Hobson to Daly, 20 January 1844. *Ibid.*, Wetherall to Killaly, 26 March 1844.

the feud, the open conflict and disruption of the work, would disappear if the problem of unemployment were solved.

This was the argument put forward by the labourers themselves at a meeting called by James Buchanan, ex-consul at New York and a respected member of the Irish community in North America. Buchanan posted notices along the Welland asking the "Sons of Erin" to meet with him to "reconcile and heal the divisions of [his] countrymen in Canada."⁷¹ Corkmen refused to attend since the Connaughtmen's priest was helping to organize the meeting. But the Connaughtmen sent delegates to meet privately with Buchanan and assembled for a public meeting at Thorold. After listening to patriotic speeches and admonitions to peace and order, the Connaughtmen laid down their terms for an end to factional fights: "give us work to earn a living, we cannot starve, the Corkmen have all the work, give us a share of it."⁷²

Thus, along the canals the feud of Cork and Connaught became the vehicle through which an excess of labourers fought for a limited number of jobs. In this respect, the feud was similar to other conflicts between hostile subgroups of workers competing in an over-stocked labour market. In the unskilled labour market of the Canadas, competition was frequently between French Canadians and Irish labourers. Along the canals, in the dockyards, and particularly in the Ottawa Valley lumbering industry, the two ethnic groups engaged in a violent conflict for work, at times as intense and brutal as the conflict of Cork and Connaught.⁷³

Similar ethnic clashes occurred between Anglo-Saxon and Irish Celtic labourers competing in the unskilled labour market in Britain. Long-standing animosities between these two groups have led historians to emphasize the xenophobic nature of such confrontations.⁷⁴ But in an analysis of navvies on the railways of northern England, J.B. Treble argues that these superficially ethnic clashes were actually rooted in economic conditions which fostered fears that one group was undercutting or taking the jobs of the other group. Treble concludes that however deep the racial or cultural animosities between groups of labourers, "the historian would ignore at his peril economic motivation, admittedly narrowly conceived in terms of personal advantage, but for that very reason immensely strong."⁷⁵ Like the conflict between Irish and French and Irish and Anglo-Saxon labourers, the factional fights became part

⁷¹ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 113, Public Notice to the Sons of Erin, Engaged on the Welland Canal, who are known as Corkmen and Connaughtmen, 12 January 1844.

⁷² WCC-6, Thorburn to Daly, 19 January 1844.

⁷³ Pentland, "The Lachine Strike of 1843;" J.I. Cooper, "The Quebec Ship Labourers' Benevolent Society," *Canadian Historical Review*, 30 (1949), 338-43; Cross, "The Dark Druidical Groves;" Michael Cross, "The Shiners' War: Social Violence in the Ottawa Valley in the 1830's," *Canadian Historical Review* 54 (1973), 1-26.

⁷⁴ E.L. Tapin, *Liverpool Dockers and Seamen, 1870-1890* (Hull 1974).

⁷⁵ J.H. Treble, "Irish Navvies in the North of England, 1830-50," *Transport History* 6 (1973), 227-47.

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of a general process of fragmentation and subgrouping which John Foster sees developing during the nineteenth century in response to industrialization. By bringing hostile groups into competition with each other, the process militated against united action and the growth of a broad working-class consciousness.⁷⁶ The feud was one variation in this broader pattern of division and conflict amongst workers.

Yet the feud and the bitter fight for work did not preclude united action in pursuit of common economic goals. In a few instances the factions joined together to demand the creation of jobs. During the first summer of construction on the Welland thousands of labourers and their families repeatedly paraded the streets of St. Catharines with placards demanding "Bread or Work," at one point breaking into stores, mills, and a schooner. In a petition to the people of Upper Canada, they warned that they would not "fall sacrifice to starvation:" "we were encouraged by contractors to build cantees [sic] on said work; now can't even afford 1 meals victuals . . . we all Irishmen; employment or devastation."⁷⁷ Setting aside their sectional differences and uniting as "Irish labourers," Cork and Connaught co-operated to ensure that no one took the few hundred jobs offered by the Board of Works. Posters along the canal threatened "death and vengeance to any who should dare to work until employment was given to the whole." Bands of labourers patrolled the works driving off any who tried to take a job.⁷⁸ By bringing all construction to a halt the labourers forced the Superintendent of the Welland to create more work. Going beyond the limits of his authority, Power immediately let the contract for locks three to six to George Barnett, and began pressuring contractors to increase their manpower.⁷⁹ But as construction expanded the canallers began a scramble for the available jobs until the struggle for work was no longer a conflict between labourers and the Board of Works, but a conflict between Cork and Connaught, each faction attempting to secure employment for its members.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Foster's comparative study of class consciousness in three nineteenth-century towns rests on an analysis of varying degrees of fragmentation and sub-group identification. For an argument see: John Foster, "Nineteenth-Century Towns — A Class Dimension," in H.J. Dyos, ed., *The Study of Urban History* (London 1968), 281-99. See also John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution: Early Industrial Capitalism in Three English Towns* (London 1974), and Neville Kirk, "Class and Fragmentation: Some Aspects of Working-Class Life in South-East Lancashire and North-East Cheshire, 1850-1870," Ph.D. thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1974. Kirk endeavours to explain the decline of class consciousness in mid-nineteenth century England in terms of the fragmentation of the working class into subgroups, emphasizing the widening gap between "respectable" and "non-respectable" workers, and the bitter conflict between Roman Catholic Irish and other segments of the workforce.

⁷⁷ Petition of Lee and Baynes, cited in Harris, *The Catholic Church*, 255. RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Murdock, 18 August 1842; *St. Catharines Journal*, 11 August 1842; Vol. 388, file 87, Petition presented to Reverend Lee, 1 August 1842.

⁷⁸ *St. Catharines Journal*, 11 August 1842.

⁷⁹ WCLB, Power to Begly, 12 August 1842.

⁸⁰ *St. Catharines Journal*, 11 August 1842; WCLB, Power to Begly, 15 August 1842.

The following summer unemployed labourers on the Welland again united to demand the creation of jobs. This was a season of particularly high and prolonged unemployment. In addition to the usual numbers of unemployed flooding into the area, 3,000 labourers discharged from the feeder and the Broad Creek branches in the early spring had to wait over three months for work to commence on the section from Allanburgh to Port Colborne. Incensed by the Board of Works' apparent indifference to their plight, the unemployed pressured officials until in mid-July Power again acted independently of the Board, authorizing contractors to begin work immediately.⁸¹ Anticipating the Board's censure, Power justified his actions as necessary to the protection of the work and the preservation of the peace: "However easy it may be for those who are at a distance to speculate on the propriety of delaying the work until precise instructions may arrive, it is very difficult for me, surrounded by men infuriated by hunger, to persist in a course which must drive them to despair."⁸² The jobs opened up by Power could employ only half of those seeking work, but that was sufficient to crack the canallers' united front and revive the sectional conflict.⁸³ In general, Cork and Connaught appear to have united to demand jobs only during periods when there was virtually no work available, and consequently no advantage to competing amongst themselves.

It was in their attempts to secure adequate wages that the canallers most clearly demonstrated their ability to unite around economic issues. During frequent strikes along the canals the antagonistic relationship between the two factions was subordinated to the labourers' common hostility towards their employers, so that in relation to the contractors the canallers stood united. A Board of Works investigation into one of the larger strikes on the Welland Canal found Cork and Connaught peacefully united in a work stoppage. Concerning the strike of 1,000 labourers below Marshville, the Board's agent, Dr. Jarrow, reported that the labourers at the Junction had gone along the line and found both factions "generally ready and willing" to join in an attempt to get higher wages:

No breach of the peace took place, nor can I find a tangible threat to have been issued. . . . Several men have been at work for the last two days on many of the jobs. . . . Those who have returned to work are not interfered with in the least degree. Contractors do not seem to apprehend the least breach of the peace. . . . The workmen seem well organized and determined not to render themselves liable to justice. . . . Both the Cork

⁸¹ Welland Canal Commission, folder 6 (hereafter cited WCC-6), Power to Begly, 14 February 1843; WCLB, Power to Begly, 20 March 1843; *Ibid.*, Power to Begly, 17 July 1843.

⁸² *Ibid.*, Power to Begly, 1 August 1843. The following winter, Thorburn praised Power for his attempts to ease unemployment by ensuring that contractors hired as many labourers as possible. RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Daly, 19 January 1844. Of course Power may have been motivated equally by a desire to push the work ahead.

⁸³ WCLB, Power to Begly, 25 August 1843.

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and Connaught men are at work on different jobs below Marshville, and they seem to have joined in the Strick [sic] and I have not been able to find that their party feelings have the least connection with it.⁸⁴

This was not an isolated instance of unity between the factions. Many strikes were small, involving only the men under one contractor, who usually belonged to the same faction; however, on the Welland in particular, Cork and Connaught joined in large strikes. Unity may have been fragile, but the overriding pattern that emerges during strikes is one of co-operation between the factions.⁸⁵ Not only did the factions unite in large strikes, but during a small strike involving only members of one faction, the other faction usually did not act as strike-breakers, taking the jobs abandoned by the strikers. What little information there is on strike-breaking concerns striking labourers confronting members of their own faction who tried to continue work, suggesting that the decision to work during a strike was not based on factional loyalties or hostilities.⁸⁶ Thus, most strikers did not become extensions of the bitter conflict for work. Rather strikes brought labourers together to pursue common economic interests. The instances in which Cork and Connaught united provide dramatic evidence of the ability of these economic interests to overcome an antipathy deeply-rooted in the canallers' culture.

Canallers frequently combined in work stoppages demanding the payment of overdue wages. More often their strikes centred on the issue of wage rates. In a report concerning labour unrest on the canals of Upper and Lower Canada, Captain Wetherall concluded: "the question of what constitutes a fair wage is the chief cause from which all the bitter fruit comes." The priest among labourers on the Williamsburg agreed with Wetherall, going so far as to suggest that if the rate of wages could be settled once and for all troops and police would not be required for the canal areas. Similarly, Thorburn ranked wage rates with unemployment as a major cause of labour disturbances on the Welland.⁸⁷

Since officials often reported "many" or "a few" strikes without indicating how many, the level of strike activity can only be suggested. Contractors expected, and usually faced, strikes in the late fall when they tried to impose the seasonal reduction in wage rates.⁸⁸ Strikes demanding an increase in wages were harder to predict, but more frequent. Each spring and summer on the Cornwall, Welland, and Williamsburg Canals work stoppages disrupted con-

⁸⁴ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 104, Jarow to Merritt, 6 January 1843.

⁸⁵ Pentland describes the betrayal of one faction by the other in one of the large strikes on the Lachine. Pentland, "The Lachine Strike."

⁸⁶ For example: RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 104, Cotton and Row to Wheeler, 26 August 1846.

⁸⁷ C Series, Vol. 60, Memorandum of Wetherall to the Board of Works, 3 April 1843; Vol. 90, file 94, Clarke to Killaly, 6 March 1845; RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Daly, 10 January 1844.

⁸⁸ See for example: *Legislative Journals*, 1844-45, Appendix Y, Jarvis to Begly, RG11-5, Vol. 390, file 93, Mills to Killaly, November 1844; *Ibid.*, Mills to Killaly, 29 November 1845.

struction. Even in winter those labourers fortunate enough to continue working attempted to push up wages through strikes.⁸⁰ The degree of success which canallers enjoyed in their strikes cannot be determined from the fragmentary and scattered references to work stoppages. It is clear, however, that they forced contractors to pay wages above the level for unskilled, manual labour in general, and above the 2s or 2s6d which the Board of Works considered the most labourers on public works could expect.⁸¹ On the Cornwall and Williamsburg Canals, strikes secured and maintained modest increases to as high as 3s and 3s6d.⁸² Gains were much greater on the Welland. As early as winter 1843 labourers had driven wages to what Power claimed was the highest rate being offered on the continent.⁸³ While Power's statement cannot be accepted at face value, wages on the Welland may well have been the highest for manual labour in the Canadas, and in the northeastern United States where jobs were scarce and wages depressed. Strikes on the Welland forced wages even higher during 1843 and 1844, until the Board of Works calculated that labourers on the Welland were receiving at least 30 per cent more than the men on all the other works under its superintendence.⁸⁴

How did the canallers, a fluid labour force engaged in casual, seasonal labour, achieve the solidarity and commitment necessary to successful strike action during a period of massive unemployment? Work stoppages protesting non-payment of wages may have been simply spontaneous reactions to a highly visible injustice, requiring little formal organization, more in the nature of protests than organized strikes. But the strikes through which canallers aggressively forced up wages or prevented contractors from lowering wages, required a greater degree of organization and long-term commitment. Labourers might be on strike for weeks, during which time they would become desperate for food.

In a variety of ways, the canallers' shared ethno-culture contributed to their successful strike action. Strikers found unity in the fact that they were "all Irishmen," in the same way that the unemployed identified with each other as "Irishmen" in their united demands for work. In the only well-documented strike by canallers, the Lachine strike of 1843, the labourers themselves stated this clearly. Corkmen and Connaughtmen issued joint petitions warning employers and would-be strike-breakers that they were not simply all canallers,

⁸⁰ *Legislative Journals*, 1843, Appendix Q; *Legislative Journals*, 1844-45, Appendix AA; RG11-5, Vol. 381, file 56, Godfrey to Begly, 26 March 1844; Vol. 390, file 94, Wetherall to Killaly, 2 March 1844; Vol. 389, file 89, Power to Begly, 4 March 1845.

⁸¹ *Legislative Journals*, 1843, Appendix Q; *Legislative Journals*, 1844-45, Appendix AA.

⁸² *St. Catharines Journal*, 7 June 1844; RG11-5, Vol. 381, file 56, Godfrey to Begly, 9 April 1844.

⁸³ RG11-5, WCLB, Power to Begly, 10 March, 1843.

⁸⁴ WCLB, Power to Begly, 17 July 1843; *St. Catharines Journal*, 16 November 1843; WCC-7, Power to Begly, 7 December 1843; *Legislative Journals*, 1844-45, Appendix AA.

they were "all Irishmen" whose purpose and solidarity would not be subverted.⁸⁴ Membership in a common ethnic community provided concrete aid in organizing united action. At least in summer 1844 on the Welland, leadership in anti-Orange demonstrations overlapped with leadership in labour organization. During this season of frequent strikes, as many as 1,000 labourers assembled for mass meetings.⁸⁵ The authorities could not discover exactly what transpired at these meetings, since admittance was restricted to those who knew the password; a military officer, however, was able to observe one meeting at a distance. Ensign Gael reported witnessing a collective decision-making process in which those present discussed, voted on, and passed resolutions. He drew particular attention to the participation of a man "who appeared to be their leader," a well-spoken individual of great influence, the same individual who had ridden at the head of the canallers on their march to intercept the Orangemen at Niagara Falls.⁸⁶ The situation on one canal during one season cannot support generalizations concerning organization on all canals throughout the 1840s. It does, however, suggest one way in which unity around ethno-cultural issues facilitated unity in economic struggles, by providing an established leadership.

Of more significance to the canallers' strike activity was the vehicle of organization provided by their ethno-culture. Like other groups of Irish labourers, most notably the Molly Maguires of the Pennsylvania coal fields, canallers found that the secret societies which flourished in nineteenth-century Ireland were well-adapted to labour organization in the new world.⁸⁷ At a time when those most active in strikes were subject to prosecution and immediate dismissal, oath-bound societies offered protection from the law and the reprisals of employers. The government investigation into disturbances on the Beauharnois found sufficient evidence to conclude that secret societies were the means by which the canallers organized their strikes. But it was unable to break through the labourers' secrecy and uncover details concerning the actual operation of the societies.⁸⁸ Similarly, Rev. McDonagh, despite his intimate knowledge of the canallers' personal lives, could only offer the authorities the names of two societies operating along the Welland, the Shamrock and Hibernian Societies. He could provide no information as to how they functioned, whether there were a number of small societies or a few large ones, whether all labourers or only a segment of the canallers belonged to them. And he "couldn't break them."⁸⁹

⁸⁴ *Montreal Transcript*, 28 March 1843, cited in Pentland, "The Lachine Strike," 266.

⁸⁵ According to the *St. Catharines Journal*, 20 September 1844, there were four major strikes between 1 April and 20 July.

⁸⁶ C Series, Vol. 60, Gael to Elliott, 23 July 1844; *Ibid.*, Elliott to Young, 23 July 1844.

⁸⁷ For an analysis of secret societies in Ireland see Williams, *Secret Societies in Ireland*. For a study of the Molly Maguires see Anthony Bimba, *The Molly Maguires* (New York 1932).

⁸⁸ *Legislative Journals*, 1843, Appendix T.

⁸⁹ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Daly, 10 January 1844.

The oaths which swore labourers to secrecy also bound them to be faithful to each other, ensuring solidarity and commitment in united action, and enforcing sanctions against any who betrayed his fellows. In addition, societies operated through an efficient chain of communication and command which allowed for tactics to be carefully formulated and executed.¹⁰⁰ Navvies did not develop a formal trade union. Consequently, in comparison with the activities of workers in the few trade unions of the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s in British North America, the direct action of the Irish labourers appears "ad hoc."¹⁰¹ But the fact that the navvies' organization was impenetrable to authorities and remains invisible to historians should not lead to the error of an "ad hoc" categorization. Although clandestine, secret societies were noted for the efficiency, even sophistication, of their organization,¹⁰² and although not institutionalized within the formal, structured labour movement, they were the means of organizing sustained resistance, not spontaneous outbreaks of protest. Organization within secret societies, rather than within a formal trade union also meant that canallers did not reach out to establish formal ties with other segments of the working class. As a result, they have left no concrete evidence of having identified the interests of their group with the interests of the larger working class, no clear demonstration that they perceived of themselves as participating in a broader working-class struggle. But while their method of organization ruled out formal linking and expression of solidarity with the protest of other groups of workers, secret societies testified to the Irish labourers' link with a long tradition of militant opposition to employers in the old world. The secret societies which flourished in Dublin throughout the first half of the nineteenth century were feared by moderates in the Irish nationalist movement, because of their aggressive pursuit of working-class interests. During the same period, the agrarian secret societies of the southern Irish countryside primarily organized agricultural labourers and cottiers around issues such as rising conacre rents and potato prices. Although the ruling class of Britain and Ireland insisted that agrarian societies were essentially sectarian, these societies were, in fact, the instruments of class action, class action which at times united Protestant and Catholic labourers in a common cause.¹⁰³

This cultural legacy of united opposition was invaluable to the canal labourers in their attempts to achieve higher wages. During their years of conflict with landlords and employers, the peasant labourers of southern Ireland acquired a belief system and values necessary to effective united action in the work place. Their belief system probably did not include a political critique of society which called for fundamental change in the relationship between capital and labour. Although Chartist and Irish nationalist leaders worked closely in

¹⁰⁰ Williams, *Secret Societies in Ireland*, 31.

¹⁰¹ Stephen Langdon, "The Emergence of the Canadian Working Class Movement, 1845-75," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 8 (1973), 3-4.

¹⁰² Williams, *Secret Societies in Ireland*, 31.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 7, 25-7.

the mid-nineteenth century, none of the varied radical strains of Chartism made significant advances in Ireland, which suggests that Irish labourers may not have seen themselves as members of a broader class whose interests were irreconcilable to the interests of capital.¹⁰⁴ But if theory had not given them a framework within which to understand the conflict of capital and labour, experience had created in them a deep-seated suspicion of employers and a sensitivity to exploitation. They brought to the new world the belief that their interests were in conflict with the employers' interest. Wetherall tried to explain their outlook to the Board of Works:

They look on a Contractor as they view the "Middle Man" of their own Country, as a grasping, money making person, who has made a good bargain with the Board of Works for labour to be performed; and they see, or imagine they see, an attempt to improve that bargain at their expense . . . such is the feeling of the people, that they cannot divest themselves of the feeling that they are being imposed on if the contractor has an interest in the transaction.¹⁰⁵

In the labourers' own words, posted along the works during the Lachine strike: "Are we to be tyrannized by Contractors . . . surrender/To No Contractors who wants to live by the sweat of our Brow."¹⁰⁶

Irish labourers also brought to the new world a willingness to defy the law and, if necessary, use force to achieve their ends. Years of repression and discrimination had fostered what Kenneth Duncan has characterized as "a tradition of violence and terrorism, outside the law and in defiance of all authority."¹⁰⁷ In Britain the Irish labourers' willingness to challenge the law and the authorities had earned them a reputation for militance in the union movements, at the same time that it had infused a revolutionary impulse into Chartism.¹⁰⁸ In the Canadas, this same willingness marked their strike activity.

Newspapers and government officials usually reported the strikes along the canals as "rioting" or "riotous conduct," the uncontrollable excesses of an ethnic group addicted to senseless violence.¹⁰⁹ Yet far from being excessive and indiscriminate, the canallers' use of violence was restrained and calculated. Force or the threat of force was a legitimate tactic to be used if necessary. Some strikes involved little, if any, violence. Although he claimed

¹⁰⁴ Rachel O'Higgins, "The Irish Influence in the Chartist Movement," *Past and Present*, 20 (1961), 83-96.

¹⁰⁵ C Series, Vol. 60, Wetherall to Board of Works, 3 April 1843.

¹⁰⁶ *Montreal Transcript*, 28 March 1843.

¹⁰⁷ Duncan, "Irish Famine Immigration."

¹⁰⁸ O'Higgins, "Irish in Chartist Movement," 83-6.

¹⁰⁹ *St. Catharines Journal*, 31 August 1843; *Niagara Chronicle*, 10 July 1844; for further examples of the sensational manner in which newspapers reported labour disturbances see: *St. Catharines Journal*, 16 November 1843, 14 December 1843, 21 December 1843, 17 May 1844, 2 August 1844, 16 August 1844, 20 September 1844; *Niagara Chronicle*, 20 February 1845; *Brockville Recorder*, 7 September 1843, 21 December 1843, 21 March 1844, 8 August 1844; *Cornwall Observer*, 8 December 1842, 9 January 1845.

to have looked very hard, Dr. Jarrow could find no instances of "outrage" during the first week of the Marshville strike, a strike involving 1,500 labourers along the Welland. In another large strike on the Welland the following summer, the *St. Catharines Journal* reported that there were no riotous disturbances.¹¹⁰ When strikers did use force it was calculated to achieve a specific end. Organized bands of strikers patrolling the canal with bludgeons were effective in keeping strike-breakers at home.¹¹¹ Similarly, when labourers turned their violence on contractors and foremen, the result was not only the winning of a strike but also a remarkable degree of job control.¹¹² After only one season on the Williamsburg Canals, labourers had thoroughly intimidated contractors. One did not dare go near his work. Another the labourers "set at defiance" and worked as they pleased.¹¹³ Canallers also attacked the canals, but these were not instances of senseless vandalism. Power viewed what he called "extraordinary accidents" as one way in which labourers pressured for redress of specific grievances.¹¹⁴ On the Welland a related pressure tactic was interfering with the navigation. During the strike of approximately 1,500 labourers in summer 1844, captains of boats were afraid to pass through because they feared rude attacks on their passengers. Such fears appear to have been well founded. The previous winter, 200 canallers had attacked an American schooner, broken open the hatches, and driven the crew from the vessel, seriously injuring the captain and a crew member. Soldiers were required to keep "at bay the blood-thirsty assailants" while the crew reboarded their vessel.¹¹⁵

The canallers' willingness to resort to violence and defy authority antagonized large segments of the population who lamented the transplanting to the new world of outrages "characteristic only of Tipperary."¹¹⁶ But despite the protestations of newspapers and private individuals that the canallers' use of force was inappropriate to the new world, the Irish labourers' militant tradition was well-suited to labour relations and power relations in the Canadas. The canallers' experience with the government and law enforcement agencies could only have reinforced what the past had taught — that the laws and the authorities did not operate in the interests of workers, particularly Irish Catholic workers. In their strikes, canallers confronted not just their employ-

¹¹⁰ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 104, Jarrow to Merritt, 6 January 1843; *St. Catharines Journal*, 28 June 1844.

¹¹¹ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Daly, 10 January 1844; C Series, Vol. 60, testimony of James McCloud, sworn before Justices Kerr and Turney, 14 September 1844.

¹¹² *Legislative Journals*, Jarvis to Daly, 28 October 1844; WCLB, Power to Begly, 3 January 1844.

¹¹³ *Legislative Journals*, Jarvis to Daly, 28 October 1844.

¹¹⁴ WCLB, Power to Begly, 14 February 1843.

¹¹⁵ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Begly, 1 July 1844; *Cornwall Observer*, 8 December 1842. See also: WCLB, Power to Begly, April 1842.

¹¹⁶ *Cornwall Observer*, 9 January 1845.

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ers, but the united opposition of the government, courts, and state law enforcement officers.

The government's opposition to strikes was based on the conviction that labourers should not attempt to influence wage rates. To government officials such as J.B. Mills of the Williamsburg Canal, the repeated strikes along the canals added up to a general "state of insubordination among the labourers," an "evil" which jeopardized the entire Public Works programme. Reports of the Board of Works condemned strikers for throwing construction schedules and cost estimates into chaos, and applauded contractors for their "indefatigable and praiseworthy exertions" in meeting turnouts and other difficulties with their labourers.¹¹⁷ Leaving no doubt as to its attitude toward demands for higher wages, the Board worked closely with contractors in their attempts to prevent and break strikes. On their own initiative, contractors met together to determine joint strategies for handling turnouts and holding the line against wage increases.¹¹⁸ The Board of Works went one step further, bringing contractors and law enforcement officers together to devise stratagems for labour control, and assuming the responsibility for co-ordinating and funding these stratagems.¹¹⁹ Contractors and the Board joined forces in a comprehensive system of blacklisting which threatened participants in strikes. Operating on the assumption that the majority of the "well-disposed" were being provoked by a few rabble-rousers, contractors immediately dismissed ringleaders. Even during a peaceful strike such as the one at Marshville, in winter 1843, contractors discharged "those most active."¹²⁰ For its part the Board of Works collected and circulated along the canals descriptions of men like "Patrick Mitchell, a troublesome character" who "created insubordination amongst labourers" wherever he went.¹²¹ Once blacklisted, men like Mitchell had little hope of employment on the public works in Canada.

Many labourers thus barred from public works projects also spent time in jail as part of the Board's attempt to suppress disturbances. Although British law gave workers the right to combine to withdraw their services in disputes over wages and hours, employers and the courts did not always honour this right. When the Board of Works' chief advisor on labour unrest argued that the Board should suppress the "illegal" combinations on the Welland and Williamsburg Canals, he was expressing an opinion widely-held in British North America and an opinion shared by many officials involved in controlling labour

¹¹⁷ RG11-5, Vol. 390, file 93, Mills to Killaly, 29 November 1845; *Ibid.*, Mills to Killaly, November 1844; *Legislative Journals*, 1845, Appendix AA.

¹¹⁸ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Daly, 10 January 1844; Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Daly, 17 January 1844.

¹¹⁹ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Daly, 10 January 1844.

¹²⁰ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 104, Jarrow to Merritt, 6 January 1843.

¹²¹ WCC-7, Power to Begly, 10 February 1843; *Ibid.*, Begly to Power, 8 April 1843; WCC-8, Begly to Power, 3 September 1845.

unrest on the Public Works.¹²² While opinion was divided over the rights of workers, there was general agreement that employers had the right to continue their operations during a strike, the course of action usually chosen by contractors, who seldom opted to negotiate with strikers. Workers who interfered with this right, by intimidating strike-breakers or contractors or generally obstructing the work, invited criminal charges. Since the charge of intimidation and obstruction was capable of broad interpretation, including anything from bludgeoning a contractor to talking to strike-breakers, this provision of the law gave contractors and the Board considerable scope for prosecuting strikers.¹²³

To supplement existing labour laws, the Board of Works secured passage of the 1845 Act for the Preservation of the Peace near Public Works, the first in a long series of regulatory acts directed solely at controlling canal and railway labourers throughout the nineteenth century.¹²⁴ The Act provided for the registration of all firearms on branches of the Public Works specified by the Executive. The Board of Works had already failed in earlier attempts to disarm labourers on projects under its supervision. An 1843 plan to induce canallers on the Beauharnois to surrender their weapons was discarded "partly because there [was] no legal basis for keeping them." The following year a similar system on the Welland was also abandoned as illegal. Magistrates who had asked labourers to give up their weapons and to "swear on the Holy Evangelist that they had no gun, firearm, or offensive weapon," were indicted.¹²⁵ The 1845 Public Works Act put the force of the law and the power of the state behind gun control.

Most members of the Assembly accepted the registration of firearms along the canals as unavoidable under circumstances which "the existing law was not sufficient to meet."¹²⁶ A few members joined Aylwin of Quebec City in denouncing the measure as a dangerous over-reaction to a situation of the government's own making, "an Act of proscription, an Act which brought back the violent times of the word Annals of Ireland."¹²⁷ A more sizeable group shared Lafontaine's reservations that the bill might be used as a general disarming measure against any citizen residing near the canals. But the Attorney

¹²² A. W. R. Carrothers, *Collective Bargaining Law in Canada* (Toronto 1965), 13-15. C Series, Vol. 60, Wetherall to Board of Works, 3 April 1843; *Legislative Journals*, 1843, Appendix T. Also see Pentland, "The Lachine Strike," for a discussion of the conflicting opinions concerning combinations and strikes.

¹²³ Carrothers, *Collective Bargaining Law*, 14; Henry Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unions* (Middlesex 1973), 31-2.

¹²⁴ Act for the better preservation of the Peace and the prevention of riots and violent outrages at and near public works while in progress of construction, 8 Vic.c.6.

¹²⁵ Pentland, "Labour and the Development of Industrial Capitalism," 413; RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Daly, 17 January 1844; WCC-6, Thorburn to Daly, 19 January 1844; WCLB, Power to contractors, 16 January 1844; Vol. 407, file 104, Wetherall to Killaly, 26 March 1844.

¹²⁶ *Legislative Debates*, 1844-45, Attorney General James Smith, 1443.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, Thomas Aylwin, 1459.

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General's assurances that the disarming clause would apply "only to actual labourers on the public works," secured for the Bill an easy passage.¹²⁸ Even a member like Drummond, one of the few to defend canallers' interests in the House, ended up supporting the disarming clause on the grounds that it would contribute to the canallers' welfare by preventing them from committing the acts of violence to which contractors and hunger drove them. Drummond managed to convince himself that disarming the labourers would not infringe on their rights. He believed that all men had the right to keep arms for the protection of their property. But the canallers had no property to protect — "they were too poor to acquire any." Therefore they had neither the need, nor the right to possess weapons.¹²⁹

In addition to disarming the labourers, the Public Works Act empowered the Executive to station mounted police forces on the public works.¹³⁰ Under the Act, Captain Wetherall secured an armed constabulary of 22 officers to preserve order among the labourers on the Williamsburg Canals. The Board of Works had already established its own constabulary on the Welland, two years prior to the legislation of 1845. Throughout 1843 and 1844 the Welland force fluctuated between 10 and 20, diminishing after 1845 as the number of labourers on the canals decreased. At a time when even the larger communities in Upper Canada, along with most communities in North America, still relied on only a few constables working under the direction of a magistrate, the size of these police forces testifies to the Board's commitment to labour control.¹³¹ While the forces fulfilled various functions, in the eyes of the Board of Works their primary purpose was to insure completion of the works within the scheduled time. Even protection of contractors from higher wages was not in itself sufficient reason for increasing the size of one of the forces. When Power asked for accommodation for a Superintendent of Police at the Junction, the Board answered that the old entrance lock was the only place where a strong force was necessary, since no combination of labourers for wages on the other works could delay the opening of the navigation, "the paramount object in view." A later communication expressed more forcefully the Board's general approach to funding police forces, stating that the only circumstances under which the expense of keeping the peace could be justified were that if it were

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, Louis Hippolyte Lafontaine, 1505; *Ibid.*, Attorney General James Smith, 1515-17.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, Lewis Thomas Drummond, 1516-17.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, Drummond, 1515.

¹³¹ WCLB, Bonnalie to Begly, 12 March 1844; RG11-5, Vol. 388, file 89, Power to Begly, 11 February 1846; *Ibid.*, Power to Begly, 17 January 1847; RG-8, C Series, Vol. 60, Daly to Taylor, 17 May 1845; RG11-5, Vol. 390, file 94, Hill to Begly, 16 February 1847; *Ibid.*, Hill to Begly, 21 June 1847. Both forces continued until the great bulk of the work on their respective canals was finished, the Welland Canal constabulary until 31 December 1849, that on the Williamsburg Canals until 31 October 1847, the month that the last of the canals was opened.

not kept up the canals would not be "available to the trade."¹³²

Despite this apparently strict criteria for funding police, the Board usually intervened to protect strike-breakers, probably because any strike threatened to delay opening of the navigation in the long, if not the short, term. Indeed, in their 1843 Report to the legislature, the Commissioners argued that it was part of their responsibility to help contractors meet deadlines by providing adequate protection to those labourers willing to work during a strike.¹³³ In meeting this responsibility the Board at times hired as many as 16 extra men on a temporary basis. When it was a question of getting the canals open for navigation the government appears to have been willing to go to almost any lengths to continue the work. In the winter of 1845, the Governor-General gave Power the authority to hire whatever number of constables it would take to ensure completion of construction by spring.¹³⁴

Canal police forces worked closely with existing law enforcement agencies, since the common law required the magistrates to give direction in matters "relating to the arrest of suspected or guilty persons," and generally to ensure that the police acted within the law.¹³⁵ But Wetherall's investigation into the conduct of the Welland Canal force revealed that magistrates did not always keep constables from abusing their powers: "The constables oft exceed their authority, cause irritation, and receive violent opposition, by their illegal and ill-judged manner of attempting to make arrests." In one instance, the constables' behaviour had resulted in a member of the force being wounded. In another, an action had been commenced for false imprisonment. Wetherall also drew attention to complaints that the police force was composed of Orangemen, at least one of whom had acted improperly in "publicly abusing the Roman Catholic Religion — damning the Pope — etc., etc."¹³⁶

The Williamsburg Canal force also came under attack for its provocative behaviour. Inhabitants of Williamsburg Township petitioned the Governor-General concerning the conduct of Captain James Macdonald and his men during a circus at Mariatown:

The police attended on said day where in course of the evening through the misconduct of the police on their duty two persons have been maltreated and abused cut with swords and stabbed, taken prisoners and escorted to the police office that all this abuse was committed by having the constables in a state of intoxication on their duty when the Magistrate who commanded them was so drunk that he fell out of a cart. A pretty representative is Mr. MacDonald.¹³⁷

¹³² WCC-8, Begly to Power, 2 December 1845; *Ibid.*, Begly to Power, 27 December 1845.

¹³³ *Legislative Journals*, 1843, Appendix Q.

¹³⁴ WCLB, Power to Begly, 3 March 1845; *Ibid.*, Power to Begly, 14 February 1845.

¹³⁵ Leon Radzinowicz, *A History of the Criminal Law and Its Administration from 1750*, Vol. III (London 1948), 284.

¹³⁶ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 104, Wetherall to Killaly, 26 March 1844.

¹³⁷ RG-5, C1, Provincial Secretary's Office, Canada West, Vol. 161, #11,362, Memorial of Inhabitants of Mariatown to Lord Metcalf Governor General.

The Roman Catholic priest on the Williamsburg Canals joined in denouncing the police force, warning the labourers: "They are like a parcel of wolves and roaring mad lions seeking the opportunity of shooting you like dogs and all they want is the chance in the name of God leave those public works."¹³⁸

Of invaluable assistance to the constables and magistrates were the Roman Catholic priests, hired by the Board of Works as part of the police establishment, and stationed amongst canallers. Referred to as "moral" or "spiritual" agents, they were in reality police agents, paid out of the Board's police budget, and commissioned to preserve "peace and order" by employing the ultimate threat — hell.¹³⁹ They were of limited value in controlling Orange/Green confrontations. They were actually suspected of encouraging them.¹⁴⁰ Their effectiveness in stopping factional fights was also limited, at least on the Welland where the Reverend McDonagh was suspected of harbouring sectional sentiments.¹⁴¹ Their most important function was to prevent or break strikes. Intimate involvement in the canallers' daily lives equipped them as informers concerning possible labour unrest.¹⁴² When canallers struck, authorities could rely on priests to admonish labourers to give up their "illegal" combinations and return to work, to show "that the Gospel has a more salutary effect than bayonets."¹⁴³ Priests were not insensitive to the suffering of their charges, and to its immediate cause. McDonagh repeatedly argued the canallers' case with government officials, contractors, and civil and military authorities.¹⁴⁴ On the Williamsburg Canals, the Reverend Clarke's criticism of the treatment of labourers became such an embarrassment to the government that he was shipped back to Ireland, supposedly for health reasons.¹⁴⁵ But at the same time that priests were protesting conditions along the canals, they were devoting most of their energy to subverting the protest of their parishioners. McDonagh fulfilled

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. 164, #11,611, MacDonald to Daly, 12 September 1845.

¹³⁹ Report of a Committee of the Executive Council, 31 July 1844, cited in Pentland, "Labour and Industrial Capitalism," 432. The Board of Works also employed moral agents on the Beauharnois and Lachine Canals in Lower Canada. Pentland, "Labour and Industrial Capitalism," 414. Reverend McDonagh received £200 per annum for his services on the Welland Canal.

¹⁴⁰ C Series, Vol. 317, MacDonald to Begly, 14 July 1849.

¹⁴¹ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 104, Wetherall to Killaly, 26 March 1844.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, Vol. 279, #2,195, Extract from Report of the Committee of the Executive Council, 25 October 1849; Vol. 407, file 114, McDonagh to Killaly, 2 May 1843; Vol. 407, file 104, Hobson to Daly, 20 January 1844.

¹⁴³ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 114, McDonagh to Killaly, 2 May 1843; Vol. 90, file 94, Clarke to Killaly, 6 March 1845; Vol. 90, file 94, Wetherall to Killaly, 2 March 1844; Vol. 388, file 87, McDonagh to Killaly, 25 January 1843; Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Daly, 10 January 1844; Vol. 407, file 104, Killaly to Begly, 10 October 1849.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, McDonagh to Killaly, 25 January 1843; Vol. 407, file 114, McDonagh to Killaly, 2 May 1843; Vol. 407, file 104, Wetherall to Killaly, 26 March 1844.

¹⁴⁵ RSO cw, Vol. 164, #11,611, MacDonald to Daly, 12 September 1845.

this function so successfully that the Superintendent on the Welland Canal told the Board he knew of "no one whose services could have been so efficient."¹⁴⁶

By supplementing existing laws and enforcement agencies, the government was able to bring an extraordinary degree of civil power against the canal labourers. Even an expanded civil power, however, was inadequate to control the canallers and the military became the real defenders of the peace in the canal areas. As early as the first summer of construction on the Welland, the Governor-General asked the Commander of the Forces to station the Royal Canadian Rifles in three locations along the Welland, 60 men at St. Catharines, 60 at Thorold, and 30 at Port Maitland. In addition, a detachment of the coloured Incorporated Militia attached to the Fifth Lincoln Militia was stationed at Port Robinson. Aid was also available from the Royal Canadian Rifles permanently stationed at Chippewa.¹⁴⁷ From these headquarters, troops marched to trouble spots for a few hours, days, or weeks. Longer postings necessitated temporary barracks such as those constructed at Broad Creek and Marshville in fall 1842.¹⁴⁸ No troops were posted on either the Cornwall or Williamsburg Canals, despite the requests of contractors and inhabitants. Detachments in the vicinity, however, were readily available for temporary postings.¹⁴⁹

With a long tradition of military intervention in civil disturbances both in Great Britain and British North America, the use of troops was a natural response to the inadequacies of the civil powers.¹⁵⁰ Troops were important for quickly ending disturbances and stopping the escalation of dangerous situations such as an Orange/Green clash or a confrontation between labourers and contractors.¹⁵¹ The use of troops carried the risk that men might be shot needlessly. As Aylwin told the Legislature:

If the constable exceed his duty there is a certain remedy; he may perhaps throw a man in prison; but if that man be innocent he will afterwards be restored to his family; when however, the military are called out the soldier is obliged to do his duty, and men are shot down who perhaps . . . are quite as unwilling to break the peace as any man in the world.

¹⁴⁶ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 104, Killaly to Begly, 10 October 1849.

¹⁴⁷ C Series, Vol. 60, Daly to Armstrong, 19 August 1842; *Ibid.*, Morris to Taylor, 19 August 1842; WCLB, MacDonald to Begly, 18 April 1843; C Series, Vol. 60, requisition to Fitzwilliam, 12 July 1844.

¹⁴⁸ RG-11, Vol. 407, file 104, Robinson to Begly, 1 October 1842.

¹⁴⁹ RG11-5, Vol. 379, file 44, Magistrates of the Eastern District to Begly, 31 August 1842; *Journals of the Legislative Assembly*, 1844-45, Appendix Y, 8 January 1845; *Ibid.*, Petition of the Justices of the Peace and other Inhabitants of the County of Dundas; RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Murdock, 18 August 1842.

¹⁵⁰ Radzinowicz, *A History of the Criminal Law*, Vol. IV, 115-39.

¹⁵¹ See for example WCLB, Power to Begly, 3 January 1844; Vol. 407, file 104, Hobson to Daly, 20 January 1844.

Such had been the case during a confrontation on the Beauharnois Canal. Troops were called in and "bloody murders were committed." Labourers were "shot, and cut down, and driven into the water and drowned."¹⁵² On the canals of Upper Canada, however, the military does not appear to have charged or opened fire on canallers. No matter how great their numbers or how well they were armed, canallers usually disbanded with the arrival of troops and the reading of the Riot Act.

Detachments were even more valuable as a preventive force. Before special detachments were posted along the Welland, the Governor-General explicitly instructed magistrates to use the troops in a preventive capacity, calling them out if "there should be any reason to fear a breach of the Peace, with which the civil power would be inadequate to deal."¹⁵³ Magistrates gave the broadest possible interpretation to the phrase "any reason to fear" and repeatedly called in the military when there had been merely verbal threats of trouble. When a large number of unemployed labourers appeared "ripe for mischief," when strikers seemed likely to harass the strike-breakers, magistrates requisitioned troops.¹⁵⁴

Magistrates used the troops to such an extent that they provoked the only real opposition to military intervention in civil affairs — opposition from the military itself. Both on-the-spot commanders and high-ranking military officials complained that troops were being "harassed" by the magistrates, that the requisitions for aid were "extremely irregular," and that the troops were marching about the frontier on the whim of alarmists.¹⁵⁵ The expense of keeping four or five detachments on the march does not appear to have been a factor in the dispute over the use of troops, since the civil authorities met the cost of deploying troops in civil disturbances. The British Treasury continued to pay for salaries, provisions, and stores, but the Board of Works accepted responsibility for constructing barracks and for providing transportation and temporary accommodation at trouble spots when necessary.¹⁵⁶ The only point at issue appears to have been the unorthodox and unnecessary use of detachments.

This dispute was the only disharmony in the co-operation between civil and military authorities and even it had little effect on the actual operation of the system of control. At the height of the dispute, commanding officers still answered virtually all requisitions, although in a few instances they withdrew

¹⁵² *Legislative Debates*, 1844-45, Thomas Aylwin, 1456.

¹⁵³ RG11-5, Vol. 407, file 113, Thorburn to Murdock, 18 August 1842.

¹⁵⁴ WCLB, Power to Elliott, 3 January 1844; C Series, MacDonald to Col. Elliott, 2 April 1844; *Ibid.*, Merritt to Daly, 21 September 1844; PSO CW, Vol. 100, #4956, Milne to Bagot, 21 December 1842.

¹⁵⁵ C Series, Vol. 60, Armstrong to Browning, Military Secretary, 11 January 1844; *Ibid.*, Temporary Commander of Canada West to Elliott, 16 July 1844.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Wm. Fielder to Taylor, 8 September 1843; Vol. 379, file 44, Harvey to Killaly, 30 August 1842.

their men immediately if they felt their services were not required.¹⁵⁷ After the Provincial Secretary ruled that commanders must respond to all requisitions, whatever the circumstances, even the grumbling stopped.¹⁵⁸ Particularly on the Welland, regular troops were kept constantly patrolling the canal areas in apprehension of disturbances, "looking for trouble," as Colonel Elliott put it.¹⁵⁹

With special laws, special police forces, and a military willing, if not eager to help, the government of the Canadas marshalled the coercive power of the state against labourers on the public works. Yet the government failed to suppress labour unrest and to prevent successful strike action. Many officials and contractors accepted this failure as proof of the Celt's ungovernable disposition. Invoking the Irish stereotype to explain the disorder along the canals, they ignored their own role in promoting unrest and obscured the class dimension of the canallers' behaviour. They also misinterpreted the nature of the relationship between the canallers' ethno-culture and their collective action. What the southern Irish brought to the new world was not a propensity for violence and rioting, but a culture shaped by class relations in the old world. Class tensions, inseparably interwoven with racial hatred and discrimination, had created in the southern Irish suspicion and hatred of employers, distrust of the laws and the authorities, and a willingness to violate the law to achieve their ends. This bitter cultural legacy shaped the Irish labourers' resistance to conditions in the Canadas and gave a distinctive form to class conflict on the canals.

I would like to thank Don Avery and Wayne Roberts for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

¹⁵⁷ RG11-5, Vol. 379, file 44, Tuscore to Killaly, 5 September 1842; WCLB, Power to Elliott, 3 January 1844; *Ibid.*, Power to Elliott, 28 December 1843.

¹⁵⁸ C Series, Vol. 60, Elliott to Cox and Gaelle, 30 September 1844.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Temporary Commander of Canada West to Elliott, 16 July 1844.

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