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REVIEW

Ommer, Rosemary E., ed. *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies in Historical Perspective*. Acadiensis Press: Fredericton, N.B., 1990. 376 p. $39.95.

STUART PIERSON

BY THE TIME you read these words it will have been five years at least since the scholars — historians, anthropologists, sociologists, economists — who contributed to this volume gathered at the Battery Motel overlooking St. John's harbour for the conference whose proceedings the volume reports. Sixteen papers and nine commentaries by men and women from Canada, England and the U.S., comprise this handsome volume from the Acadiensis Press; the discussions, too, which followed the presentations were recorded and transcribed for inclusion. The organizers, Rosemary E. Ommer (who edited the volume)[1] and Daniel Vickers of Memorial University's History Department, called the affair "The Conference on Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies in North America." There were six parts to it, three to do with fishing, one with gathering furs, one with farming and one with manufacturing (or production in a "mature economy"). Jacob Price, a distinguished American economic historian, ably summarized the findings in a paper at the end. Coverage in time and in geography was not systematic, and the range was wide: from the early seventeenth to the late nineteenth century; from Labrador to the American south and west, then north to the areas traversed by the Hudson's Bay Company's trappers.

A collection of this sort is not easy to review. I think that the only reason I got the job was that nearly everyone competent to do it was in on the conference. The papers are specialized, expert, closely reasoned, thick with detail. Here is a fair sample of the prose, selected quasi-randomly:

> Through the commercial system, the Upper Canadian economy derived external credit that amounted, on average, to something like the total value of its imports

> for the current year. The actual annual credit would vary with fluctuations in imports, exports, and other capital flows, but the credit provided through the import mode can best be seen as a long-term credit increasing incrementally as the value of imports rose...[etc.]

Entirely serviceable for someone who lives the subject; for the general reader, if there are any left, it is a chore. Thus I shall apologize here to those who laboured hard on their share of the conference and of the volume, for I shall not mention them all,[2] and I shall not meet them precisely on their own ground, nor engage their arguments directly. There is always a paradoxical inconclusiveness about academic conferences of this kind, where a confined set of questions is posed. Opinions on these questions cluster around poles, and one wonders whether experts can ever settle anything. The experts themselves often end their remarks with a call for even closer investigation: "We need to know more about ..."

Let us begin with the title. "Merchant" seems a harmless and uncontroversial word. In the minds of the participants at our meeting, however, it connotes not Ed Murphy, whose mercantile premises are visible from where I now sit, but a man (or perhaps a type) whose place in society (subversive and ascending) and whose practices (grasping and accumulative) defined a whole historical era in Western Europe and North America, roughly from the "Discoveries" around 1500 to the middle of the nineteenth century,[3] when he was replaced by someone called an industrialist, at least in "mature economies," of which Newfoundland has never been one. We are not talking about capitalism in its recent form, in which much to do with work is centrally organized by those who own or at least control the tools, but rather with a kind of proto-capitalism in which most of the work went on in traditional ways, the capitalist or merchant simply taking a cut of the proceeds by virtue of his having advanced the tools or the grub, or by virtue of his market smarts. The organizers and members of the conference wanted to know whether these men — sometimes referred to in the impersonal mode, "merchant capital," as though this latter entity had an autonomous spring of action independent of the people who embodied it — did good by doing well.[4] Were they parasites or animators? In the language of the conference, did they help or hinder economic development?[5] Here the answer seems to be: they aided economic development where this occurred and obstructed it where it did not occur. One of the more enthusiastic of the American scholars, Stephen Innes, who teaches history at the University of Virginia, commenting on the contributions of three participants, was thankful that after

> some two decades of either neglect or abuse at the hands of the new social historians, merchant creditors are about to get their day in the sun. All three ... papers offer evidence of the beneficial — rather than simply 'exploitative' — effects of rural merchant creditors. Both McCalla and Nicholls ... come close to

> making abundant credit *the* essential precondition for both ordinary production and capital formation in the developing rural economies of early America.[6]

But he was referring to southern Ontario and to areas in the U.S. that had become prosperous by 1900 and continue to do fairly well.[7] In Newfoundland and along the shores of the Gaspé peninsula, however, the merchant — or, if you prefer, the mercantile system — stood in the way of getting rich and self-sufficient, because these depend on replacing imported goods with those made at home and on making the insatiable human desire for stuff effective by somehow providing cash or other means by which desirers can buy it. Ommer complained about the Jersey company of Charles Robin (CRC), in the Channel Islands, the major firm controlling the fish trade in the lower St. Lawrence (and Bay de Chaleur) for most of the nineteenth century:

> the bulk of the responsibility for suppression of final demand linkages (through the reduction of real earnings and hence purchasing power)[8] must lie with the system itself and with the conservative entrepreneurial vision of fish-merchant capital... [M]ercantile removal of and inhibition of linkages ... through the use of a truck system and the Gaspé fishery undoubtedly contributed significantly to the economic retardation and underdevelopment of the region.[9]

On a similar note, J.K. Hiller concluded his discussion of merchants here in Newfoundland:

> There can be little doubt ... that the credit system deserved much of the criticism that was heaped upon it. Its operation contributed to rural poverty and mercantile precariousness. It helped retard Newfoundland's economic development and was damaging to the fishery itself. Traditional, familiar, entrenched, it was a feature of life which Newfoundlanders accepted and tolerated... Merchants allowed the fishery to stagnate and to follow traditional paths, and they were slow and inefficient in their attempt to capture for Newfoundland benefits that instead flowed to countries providing the inputs.[10]

There does not seem to be much difference between Innes's merchants and Ommer's or Hiller's merchants. Yet the one set brought wealth to their districts, the other poverty. Something awry here.

The second term, "credit," is equally troublesome. Was it something granted or imposed? Was it something desired and demanded or something grimly accepted and hated? Boon or curse? We should distinguish, following Jacob Price's summing-up remarks,[11] between credit and truck, the first being the general term, the second a species. Credit is any advance against future earnings; truck is any such advance not in cash, and it may involve forced or imposed acceptance of payments in goods or scrip — "company store" is it in a nutshell. Here the conference divided on whether merchants in extending credit or dealing in truck gouged their customers. Most of our authors argue that melodramatic forms of "debt bondage" or "debt peonage" were rare. An exception is Carol Brice-Bennett's lengthy account[12] of relations between

Moravian settlers and Inuit in Labrador. She quite categorically declares that "merchant credit [provided by Moravians] became a mechanism of bondage for Inuit" (246).[13] In addition, Raoul Andersen, Anthropology, Memorial, and Christopher Clark, a historian from York University in England,[14] remark that those on the receiving end of truck payments or "store pay" hated this pseudo-cash. Andersen quotes Captain Arch Thornhill (1901-76), Fortune Bay skipper, on this:

> From the time before you start fishing, you'd have to start charging things. Everything from a needle to an anchor, would be charged to your account. And the price would be higher than if you paid cash... And the higher the item's cost, the more was charged on *charge* prices! It was clear Roguery! (180)

Clark, in his discussion of New England truck in the first half of the nineteenth century (cash payment became common practice after 1850), called attention to "the charge made by radical and labour movement critics from the 1830's onward, that truck enabled millowners to tyrannize workers and gain extra profit at their expense" (323). And various authors quoted songs and verses, usually resigned and wry rather than fighting mad, on owing one's soul to the company store. Tennessee Ernie Ford's song from the 1950s, quoted by Ommer in her introduction (13), is only the most famous of these.[15] Gerald Sider, whose ghost many times made itself heard during the conference, says that "The truck system, the dominant form of payment in the family fishery ... prevented local alternatives to merchant domination from emerging ... severely reducing the amount of cash in circulation in the outports ... [It] was a major factor creating the 'traditionalism' of Newfoundland outports."[16] Is he correct?

No simple or clear picture emerged from depictions in this volume of the numerous versions of truck and credit here and elsewhere in North America. Early in the conference Gregory H. Nobles, of the Georgia Institute of Technology, asked whether "debt may not have been so threatening, especially to fishermen, as we assume?" And while "debt as a form of control was to be the central topic of the whole conference," and while the "debt-credit relationship gave the merchant a measure of control," Nobles later conceded that "within the broader context of the rural credit system, [this relationship] did not represent an especially coercive form of indebtedness."[17] Along the way several authors amplify this judgement from three points of view.

First, we heard that in early North American circumstances, in which labour, capital and coin were in short supply, while resources (land, fish, fur) were abundant — a "well-defined arena," as Vickers put it, "in which to observe the logic of frontier staple production playing itself out" — the beginnings of production had to run on credit if they were to run at all. Jacob Price recapitulated:

> the role of credit in frontier areas was constructive, greatly speeding settlement and helping individual families to advance in the world... Historically, when

> medium or long term price trends turned unfavourable, real suffering ensued. Debt burdens and costs exacerbated that suffering but the fundamental cause of the trouble was not credit, but the market for the commodity produced.[18]

Arch Thornhill was wrong: not only were merchants not systematically roguish, but the system they ran was the natural outcome of the production function.

Second, we were told of several instances — not, apparently, isolated ones — of reluctant or nail-chewing merchants being forced against their wills or better judgements to extend credit in order to keep custom or indeed just to stay afloat. We were told also that the Cree and other native peoples who ran traps for the Hudson's Bay Company's fur trade *demanded* credit, and that the Company tried periodically to cut them off, only succeeding finally in the depths of the Depression of the 1930s, a period we may call the zenith and nadir of capitalism.[19] The fishermen that forced the transition from a "servant" or wage-based to a "planter" fishery in the Strait of Belle Isle in the 1890s "took the initiative" in arranging perennial lines of credit with the Joseph Bird Company, according to Patricia Thornton's compelling argument on the subject.[20] Douglas McCalla, speaking of conditions in rural Upper Canada in the same period, noted that "the new merchant found he could not sell unless he extended credit" (258). Similarly, as Nicholls says (288), Virginians half a century or so earlier

> had found available credit a great boon in expanding the settlement and economy of their region. Competition among the several merchants operating there allowed many ... to obtain greater credit extensions than they might have otherwise.[21]

According to Alan Taylor, in rural Maine around the turn of the 18th into the 19th century "economic tensions were real and pervasive, but the settlers were far from passive victims; they gave as well as they got;" and the merchants, though they might have liked to herd in a labour force by means of debt, periodically resolved to cut off all credit and import wage workers from Boston (292, 299). In his "Commentary" on this group of papers Stephen Innes put it abruptly: "merchants quickly learned that no credit means no sale" (304). There are similar claims in the paper by Gregory Nobles on rural Massachusetts in the nineteenth century and in Gavin Wright's "Commentary" on it and Christopher Clark's paper.[22]

The third angle from which early credit or truck relationships are seen to be unreprehensible differs slightly from the other two. The first invokes the impersonal laws of economics, under which it is naive to blame anybody for anything. Steven Antler, once a member of Memorial's Economics Department and now a contented businessman in Chicago, put it nicely when he summed up his own "Commentary" on the papers of Hiller, Lewis and MacDonald:

> The truck system [in the Newfoundland fishery] could be modelled as a non-market, institutional feature which was rational and competitive in an international

> sense, or else as a non-market, power-based wage system, such as apartheid, against which market forces were constantly pushing.[23]

"Rational" presumably implies with the consent of all concerned, the natural or optimal use of resources. The second way to exorcise Simon Legree or Ebenezer Scrooge, as we have seen, is to listen to merchants' complaints of customer wheedling, to find credit or truck something actively sought after by fishermen, farmers, trappers and loggers. The third viewpoint resembles the second. It treats the relationship between (merchant) creditor and debtor as a symbiotic one between patron and client. This requires a word of explanation.

In the last little while — in the last generation, say — social and political scientists of various stripes have been exploring the value of the terms "patron," "broker," and "client" to explain some of the ways humans get on together. There is a large literature on the subject.[24] I think the discussion arose, first, from an assumption Western European academics sometimes make without thinking about it very much, that complete personal autonomy — perfect freedom — is universally desired and desirable; and second, from the uncomfortable observation that many persons acquiesce in — even seek — positions of dependence or subordination.[25] That is a mere guess. In the present connection, however, many of our authors used the language of "clientelism," without deliberately or studiedly applying its theory. They caught a hint of the saw-off between debtors and creditors; they could not find the "bondage" that is legendary in these ties; they rather gingerly admitted that the propertyless, resourceless possessor of only his or her own labour power gets something out of "signing on." Here is Ommer:

> Full understanding of the system ... must rest on a grasp of the reciprocity of trade-offs between merchant and client, along with an appreciation that the large merchant firm and the individual fisherman were not equal partners. (67)

A question kept recurring: why did people stay? Clark: why were these people (he is talking about Thornton's paper about Belle Isle and Andersen's about Fortune Bay) "locked into a situation where they were forced to work their lives out producing something which did not make them well off?" (186) Robert Lewis affirmed that a comparison between the Labrador Moravians and the Fisherman's Trading Company would show that starting very differently, the two

> over a period of 20 years evolved into something very like the "normal" Newfoundland mercantile model. This suggests that clients *have* power: they would seem to be able to push companies into the standard model of behaviours over time. (253)

Stephen Innes in the Commentary cited above thought that patronage is perforce big-hearted:

> offering generous credit terms, particularly with regard to repayment schedules, was the quickest way to build up a clientele, and a reputation for hard bargaining and resort to law was the fastest way to drive it away. (304)

Winifred Rothenberg, an economist from Tufts University in Boston, warming to the theme, averred that debtors and creditors stood in a "multiplex" relation which suggests "benign patron-client interactions that secure[d] both labour for the patron and employment for the client across bad times and good."[26] Finally Jacob Price added a refinement, characterizing the early (17th century) grants of credit by New England merchants to individual sailors as creating "what was self-evidently a patron-client relationship" which, however, did not last: "The ugly world market and the uglier monetary system intruded into this idyllic picture," as fishermen and others were proletarianized. From credit as a favour to a broke friend or neighbour

> there is a considerable shift in *"mentalité"* to the world of cash nexus, consumer sovereignty and anti-truck laws. One does not move abruptly from one culture to another. Patronage and the cash-continued nexus can exist side by side over long periods.[27]

This is a long way from another day older and deeper in debt.

We can take the last two terms in the title together. "Labour Strategies" is at first misleading because it is not parallel to "Merchant Credit" in the sense of merchants doing something and "Labour" doing something else. Rather the phrase is parallel to "credit": merchants provide credit *and* have a strategy for labour. This is a book about merchants. From what has been said already, it will be easy to infer the positions taken at the conference on the questions that surround the idea of credit as strategy. "Strategy" being a word from war and games, one might ask, strategy against what enemy or opponent? The answer was shortage of cash,[28] shortage of labour,[29] and the natural desire for freedom (and for the cash which is its primary symbol in a money economy) on the part of workers on the scene.[30] Those who regarded the merchant as a benevolent storekeeper eager to please his customers saw credit (and truck) as the unavoidable mechanism, where cash was in short supply, to set in train and continue any sort of dealings whatever. On the other hand, those who emphasized the calculating nature of mercantile practice — "CRC was not a compassionate business" said Ommer pungently about her firm of Jersey merchants who controlled the Gaspé fishery in the 19th century (66) — portrayed the relationship to workers as similar to that of team-owners to a "stable" of hockey-players. At numerous points in this polyvocal text, the good fairies who come to rescue labourers or cottagers or even factory-workers from bondage or from the hard-bargaining owners of tools and raw materials are, first, a free market in labour or mobility or the last-ditch freedom to skip out,[31] and second, competition[32] among merchants. But then, both these pixies aided the merchants as a group too, since a labour market meant they no longer had to

think strategically about corralling a labour force, and since competition increased their own efficiency, etc.

The time has come to speak of exploitation, a word I have deliberately avoided until now. Several ghosts haunted the Battery Hotel during those balmy August days of 1987. The first was the ghost of Karl Marx who, in his indispensable analysis of bourgeois "relations of production," identifies "exploitation" as *intrinsic* to any system in which one segment of the community owns or controls the tools and material and another segment has only its own labour to contribute to the making of goods necessary for life. But since in Marx's view it is precisely that labour which takes those tools and materials and creates things of value, mere ownership of the former would be sterile without the labour. It follows that profit stemming from ownership is really stolen from value that labour alone brings into existence, and anyone who enjoys or lives off that profit exploits the labour from which it arose.[33] Further, those who own and those who do not own fall into different classes of people with fundamentally opposed interests.[34]

On the other side, the ghost of neo-classical economics also hovered in the room. What we have in the world, that ghost silently proposed, is land (and maybe sea), labour and capital. Any example of these is a commodity whose value is wholly extrinsic to itself and determined in the marketplace. Labour in particular receives, in competitive conditions, exactly the marginal value of its product. If this spectre intimates the truth, exploitation only exists where the market is out of whack:

> The precise meaning of [the term "exploitative"] is not always clear. Credit truck arrangements could be "exploitative" where the merchant was the sole supplier of needed inputs (or monopolist) and the sole buyer of the commodity produced (or monopsonist).[35]

Most of the authors who gravitated towards the neo-classical side of the room agreed that in their own findings monopolies and monopsonies were rare; that enough competition existed in Maine, in Massachusetts, Southern Ontario, southside Virginia and so on to keep merchants from exploiting their debtors or clients; that extracting a surplus by jacking up prices on goods at the company store may have occasionally occurred but was neither a systematic nor a very grinding practice;[36] and that "debt peonage" is a concept of no analytical force. In fact, some of our authors betrayed a slight irritation at the very notion of exploitation. During one discussion David W. Galenson asked the participants, a little snappishly, to stop generalizing about "dependency relationships" and look at "particular episodes within an analytical framework provided by economic theory" (316). Similarly, Stephen Innes regarded the term "exploit (in both technical marxian and colloquial usage)" as an example of "ideologically loaded language" that we must stop using (307-8); Gavin Wright echoed these complaints — "the nineteenth-century labour critique of truck as a form of

feudal exploitation cannot be taken literally" (349); and Winifred Rothenberg thought that calling the relationships between merchants and labourers "'interlinked and multiplex' ... strips them ... of the resonance of exploitation."[37]

The other ghost had fewer takers. No one at the conference made a fully-developed Marxist case. In fact, at least one paper — Patricia Thornton's — coolly examined and largely rejected Gerald Sider's Marxist essay on the Newfoundland fishery. Despite this, there were echoes. G.S. Kealey of Memorial University's History Department wondered, in a tone of voice with rue and belligerence mixed in about equal measure, whether it is still permitted to talk of exploitation; it is a word, he said, "I trust I can still use." He went on to quote, first, E.P. Thompson's beautiful essay on time and discipline in the capitalism of the middle Industrial Revolution,[38] with the stress it exerted on "the whole culture," and, second (354), a recent work, insisting that it is

> areas of custom and culture which must be described and analyzed before we become immersed in and blinkered by supply and demand analysis, indifference and utility curves and comparative advantage models.[39]

Or in other words before we yield to the other spectre.

Objections to Panglossian versions of credit and truck relations — "it took two to make a bargain" and "market and commercial credit relationships played a far more integrative than disintegrative role in human relationships"(267, 306-7) — came mainly from those who noticed that differences in power are now and then involved. Vickers was brief but eloquent on the subject:

> The relationship between merchants and heads of families might well have been relatively free, open and competitive, but that did not mean that the relationship between credit and economic power was unimportant... Crucial power relationships that credit facilitated were ... those between planter and slave, father and son, mother and daughter... Credit made slave purchase possible, land purchase possible, the keeping of children at home possible. It can be argued to be a delegation of economic power. (216; speaking mainly of antebellum America)

Christopher Clark, similarly, after noting all the evidence against truck as exploitative, asked why the nineteenth-century labour movement hated it?

> Hostility to store pay and other 'abuses' formed part of a wider criticism of capitalism as a set of power relationships... [I]ssues of power and morality, rather than the narrow financial definition of 'exploitation,' ... make late nineteenth-century opposition to the truck system comprehensible. (330-1)

Credit in almost all of its forms, that is, runs downhill, from the more to the less powerful. "There is an element of truth ... in the view that credit markets are unequally coercive for rich and poor," as Gavin Wright put it (352).

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that both ends of the debate are right, that merchants did organize and spur on ("facilitate") what investment and development of production took place, and that they did exploit when they

could. They were resented when times were good and execrated — even made the victims of *jacqueries* — when times were bad. Marx could agree that "capitalism" unleased productive capacity to a historically unprecedented degree, and still hate capitalists; Adam Smith could agree that every merchant in his heart cherished hopes of a monopoly position, and that such dreams could only be tamed by competition and market discipline.[40] This at least seems to be the conclusion of the latest work on these matters as they pertain to early Newfoundland circumstances. Sean Cadigan, in the dissertation that made his the first Ph.D. completed in Memorial University's History Department, argues that "truck represented a paternal accommodation between fish-merchants and fishing families in an industry dominated by cyclical depression in prices and catches," but that "this is not to say that truck was somehow 'good' for Newfoundland, or that it was not exploitative." Families did not see returns commensurate with their labour:

> Merchants wanted to profit from their trade with fishing families, and were quick to withdraw credit from the fishery at times when they felt that they were not earning enough from it.[41]

In the same vein Olaf Janzen, reviewing Gordon Handcock:

> The merchants ... played a key role in nurturing settlement through ... "truck" ... [T]he relationship between the inhabitants and the fisheries was not antipathetic... The ... "merchants continued to be the main pivots in the migration system" ... This is not to say that the relationship was not exploitative; it was.

This is because the wealth from fishing disappeared into England and thus produced no development here.

> Nevertheless, had it not been for the merchants, it is unlikely that there would have been nearly as much settlement in Newfoundland as there was by 1830... Handcock makes clear that the ability of people to live here year-round depended on their ability to exploit every available resource and economic opportunity. The cod-fishery may have been the mainstay of the island economy, but it did not function... [all] year. The credit system was not a system of ruthless exploitation ... but a valuable mechanism by which the merchant's access to fish became more reliable and the planters secured their survival through the winter.[42]

It sounds quite a lot like the clientelism discussed above. Maybe that is what it was.

I hate the on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand place in which I now find myself. Also, I am not sure how to finish this review, by now already too long. Let me make a few observations in no logical order on what I suppose I think after living with credit and truck and its literature for a time:

1) "Patronage" and its correlate "clientage" seem to be categories that can better account for the way creditors and debtors dealt with one another than the categories of "class," strictly applied, because, first, they can

accommodate the odd hierarchies one finds, for example, in Belle Isle Strait amongst Joseph Bird's crowd: the company and its agents and factors dealt with "planters" who in turn hired "servants," themselves probably exploiters of the labour of women and children. On the other side of the ledger, we hear of a "chain of credit" connecting bay merchants to St. John's merchants and from there to Bristol merchants and to London and so on into the "World system."[43] Society is layered, to be sure, and there is sideways solidarity, but dependencies up and down triumph. Secondly, I find in my own surroundings patronage networks spontaneously forming. Laboratory "chiefs" know how to get grants, just as St. John's merchants knew how to place saltfish in Mediterranean markets, and they are rewarded for their knowledge by the same kind of adoring and resentful clientele which will not only work zealously and self-interestedly in their fields, but will also do them unsolicited favours in their spare time. (Gore Vidal calls graduate students "indentured servants.")

2) But the indenture ends at an early age, whereas in early-modern economic relationships patronage and clientage might last a single lifetime or even immemorially. Further, though they may be "multiplex" and so forth, they are still relationships of dominance and subordination.[44] Credit reinforces this in ways more subtle than I think was brought out at the conference. Talleyrand's customer who borrowed with a reservation, Price's debtors who "flit," heads of family who exercised the very right of mobility that is supposed to guarantee that the system was not oppressive — all got a bad reputation. They were "shiftless," careless, trouble-makers maybe. Sociologists who write about patron-client bonds as "dyadic"[45] — that is, involving only two parties — are all wet. Tristan and Isolde may be a dyad, so intense that the one could not outlive the other, but they are unthinkable without King Mark, the servants Brangaene and Kurneval and a host of courtiers. We are always surrounded by the living and the dead, the present and the absent, real, imagined and forgotten persons. Robinson Crusoe was accompanied by Archimedes. The whole community loomed in the minds of those facing a life of clientage and ruminating on whether to go or stay. Gavin Wright asserted that "very high rates of labour mobility" existed where "exploitation" seemed clearest in the American South, but that this " 'high mobility' (as indicated by frequent moves) among labourers has not been associated with economic success, but with failure." Further, a free and open market in labour works against family and community. Those who are in such a market "are generally trying to get out, into something more stable and secure" (349). This is what fishermen accepted. Security, dependence on the merchant and the *escape* from the labour market. So, says Ommer, did

their counterparts in Gaspé.

3) In the absence of a measure for exploitation, there is no solution to the questions of when and where it took place, and at what intensity. The authors in the volume under review all represent exploitation as a matter of degree. One of them — Stephen Innes (305) — distinguished between "creative" and "destructive" debt, and said that finding the line between them was the "central one for [the] conference." Cadigan affirmed in his dissertation (415) that fishing families did not see "all of the fruits of their labour returned to them." *Some*, not all. Ommer made exploitation a function of restricted markets but at the same time admitted that even when CRC's monopsony was threatened, fishermen stayed under the company's umbrella of "reliability":

> It was this security which was the key to understanding why fishermen in Gaspé were held by more than a simple logic of truck indebtedness. (79)

At the end, Innes's line proved no easier drawn than at the beginning.

4) The consequences of all this for Newfoundland history are some of them clear, some muddled. I have already said that the universality of credit and the repeated occurrence of truck across North America suggest that these institutions cannot in the Newfoundland setting be blamed for our peculiar economic gimpiness.[46] Cadigan made this point in his dissertation. At the conference, more than one wondered at the *persistence* of store credit and the mercantile sclerosis that went with it — down to World War II. Jacob Price asked in his conclusion why Water Street did not rationalize the fishery in the 1880s in response to low prices for fish: "Were the obstacles to such rationalization broadly cultural rather than narrowly entrepreneurial?" (367) The answer was not forthcoming, but in one sense the question is not a real one, for everyone assumes he knows what the "narrowly entrepreneurial" response would have been. So the next question is, what was it "broadly cultural" about Newfoundland that stood in the way of aggressive and imaginative harvesting and marketing of fish? What was it that made cargo-cult schemes like the railway so compelling?

5) No one seemed to be able to say what made Newfoundland different. Cadigan, in the concluding chapter of his dissertation, returns to Keith Matthews' answer: "resource endowment."[47] The same is implicit in several opinions expressed at the conference. This passage from McCalla's paper on Upper Canada certainly evokes Newfoundland:

> where communities lacked the agricultural base and potential for diversification that Upper Canada possessed, were isolated from one another, and were not prosperous or large enough to sustain local retail competition, there was a greater possibility that the credit system would take on the exploitative character that critics have assumed it invariably had. (270)

> I have a strong suspicion that the absence of tracts of fertile soil is at the heart of it, not just in the sense of a "resource" but as a lack that must have been profoundly disturbing in ways that were never exactly articulated but had far-reaching sociological consequences. People who left Europe left a continent where ownership of land meant power, prestige, wealth, stability and freedom. To be landless was to be forever a servant. To arrive on this continent and find limitless extents of unenclosed land must have done something to the quality and quantity of aspiration let loose in the new communities. But to land on a rock meant to be thrown back on yourselves: no deer parks or latifundia would ever be possible, and thus no aristocracy — fish merchants might get rich, but they were still in "trade." Nobody was going to be very grand, despite some airs. Also the sea, where you got your living, was unenclosable; thus the cooperative spirit of the agricultural village could carry on without the sense of being employed on somebody else's estate. The uncertainties, moreover, made for a deep conservatism. Just as you couldn't enclose the sea, you couldn't predict what it held, either in the way of weather or catch. And who knew what happened to the fish after you weighed it in at the merchants? How much was it going to be worth in Naples? All you could so was pray and rely on one another.

Enough speculation. A final word: I don't know whether to be cheered or dismayed by the persistence of dilemmas that inform our work in history, dilemmas that are perhaps unresolvable and that will never yield to evidence. Between those who think that someone or some one group is in charge and those who think that one studies ineluctable and impersonal processes in history ("logic of truck"), little ground for agreement on the questions we have been examining is likely to be forthcoming. Nobles, concluding his perceptive paper on the "putting-out" system of domestic industry in rural Massachusetts, calls for more research:

> we need to know more, not just about who participated in the putting-out system, but also about who ultimately directed the system and determined its fate ... The question of control has always presented itself to historians of the factory system. Historians who deal with the different manifestations of manufacture outside the factory must ask it as well. (347)

Kealey in his "Commentary" seconds this. Gavin Wright, on the other side, argues that this position

> seems to imply that someone ... did possess "ultimate control" over the situation. Yet it is in the nature of these long-distance competitive market processes that there is no such control. Indeed the word "control" is one of those loaded, suggestive terms that should always be queried if used at all ... [I]n economic life, events are almost always in the saddle. (351)

It is an odd coincidence that Fox-Genovese and Genovese, in *The Fruits of*

Merchant Capital (1983), should have chosen the same equine figure of speech for their alternative version:

> history, when it transcends chronicle, romance and ideology — including 'left-wing' versions — is primarily the story of who rides whom and how. (211-12)

Is there a way to decide who is right?

Notes

[1]And edited it very well. In the good old days, competent (even talented) editors were found at publishing houses. One remembers stories of Maxwell Perkins at Scribner's rewriting Thomas Wolfe's novels for him. I remember also errata slips in the fronts of books to correct the odd mistake that someone discovered to his or her horror late in production. Now I find in recent books errors sprinkled liberally over the pages, names spelled one way in the text, another way in the notes, words broken in mid-syllable at the end of the line, missing or misplaced lines, and so on. I happen just now to be reviewing another book from Acadiensis Press and find it brimming with small annoying errors. The present book (in which I have met with just six of these) therefore must owe its quality to the labours of Dr. Ommer.

[2]All the formal participants are identified in a list at the end (374-76). Contributors to the discussion named but not identified are Barbara Neis, Memorial University, Sociology Department (187); Jeff Webb, Ph.D. candidate, University of New Brunswick (137); Françoise Noel, then of Memorial University's History Department and now at Lakehead University (358); Adrian Tanner, Anthropology Department, Memorial University (358-9). There is, I am sorry to have to report, *no index*.

[3]See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, *The Fruits of Merchant Capital* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

[4]Apologies to Tom Lehrer, whose song "The Old Dope Peddler" goes like this:

> When the shades of night are falling,
> comes a fellow everyone knows.
> It's the old dope peddler,
> spreading joy wherever he goes.
> Every evening you will find him,
> around our neighbourhood.
> It's the old dope peddler,
> doing well by doing good.
> He gives the kids free samples
> because he knows full well
> That today's young innocent faces
> will be tomorrow's clientele.
> Here's a cure for all your troubles,
> here's an end to all distress.
> It's the old dope peddler
> with his powdered happiness.

See *The Tom Lehrer Song Book* (New York: Crown, 1957), 51-53. There is more than one point of contact between this lyric and some traditional interpretations of

merchant credit, as we shall see.

[5]See R.E. Ommer's introduction, p. 10.

[6]Innes, "Commentary" (303-8) on three papers: Douglas McCalla (Trent University), "Rural Credit and Rural Development in Upper Canada, 1790-1850" (255-72); Michael L. Nicholls (Utah State University), "Competition, Credit and Crisis: Merchant-Planter Relations in Southside Virginia" (273-89); Alan Taylor (Boston University), " 'A Struggle of Finesse': Creditors and Debtors on the Northeastern Frontier, 1780-1820" (290-302).

[7]The fate of southern Ontario might be uncertain now, but in the period under consideration it was well off.

[8]That is, nothing to buy and nothing to buy with.

[9]"The Truck System in Gaspé, 1822-1877," 72. Ommer has written a fine book on the subject: *From Outpost to Outport: A Structural Analysis of the Jersey-Gaspé Cod Fishery, 1767-1886* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1991).

[10]"The Newfoundland Credit System: An Interpretation," 100-101. Peter Sinclair, of Memorial University's Sociology Department, who commented on papers by Dr. Patricia Thornton of Concordia ("The Transition from the Migratory to the Resident Fishery in the Strait of Belle Isle," 138-66) and Raoul Andersen of Memorial University's Anthropology Department (" 'Chance' and Contract: Lessons from a Newfoundland Banks Fisherman's Anecdote," 167-82) remark (185) that merchant-labour truck relationships were cozy enough to cause merchants not to seek ways to reduce costs or increase output, and therefore made for "economic backwardness."

[11]"Conclusion," 360-73. Price is a historian at the University of Michigan.

[12]"Missionaries as Traders: Moravians and Labrador Inuit, 1771-1860," 223-46. Brice-Bennett is Director of Memorial University's Labrador Institute of Northern Studies.

[13]Ralph Pastore of Memorial University's History Department provided the only glimmer of wit in the whole conference by suggesting in his "Commentary" on Brice-Bennett's paper that we might look on it the other way around. Perhaps the Moravians, with their supply-lines to Europe and their obstinate and pious tenacity on the coast, seemed to the Inuit to be one more species — less fickle and easier to bag than bear or caribou — to live off in a penurious environment.

[14]Respectively " 'Chance' and Contract: Lessons from a Newfoundland Banks Fisherman's Anecdote," 167-82, and "The Truck System in Nineteenth Century New England: An Interpretation," 318-32.

[15]Perhaps we might notice here that in 18th-century Massachusetts, according to Joseph A. Ernst of the History Department, York University (Canada), writers of pamphlets and letters to the press on economic affairs deplored the truck system and believed the "labourers [to] have been the greatest sufferers." Householders, one author wrote in 1740, if paid in cash "would many times look on their money before they would give it to buy their wives and daughter velvet hoods, red cloaks, or silk garments" (35). This is not a complaint you find echoed in songs like "Sixteen Tons." Ernst's paper led off the conference, and is called " 'The Labourers Have Been the Greatest Sufferers': The Truck System in Early Eighteenth Century Massachusetts," 16-35.

[16]*Culture and Class in Anthropology and History: A Newfoundland Illustration* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), 21-3, cited by Robert M. Lewis in "The

Survival of the Planters' Fishery in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Newfoundland," 103. See later citations of Sider (138, 291).

[17]Nobles delivered his reminder about the central theme of the conference in the discussion (82) following Ernst's paper, cited above, note 15.

[18]The quote from Vickers is on p. 36; that from Price on p. 372. This idea is developed in the classical study of truck, referred to many times in the present collection, George W. Hilton's *The Truck System, Including a History of the Truck Acts 1465-1960.* (Cambridge, 1960); cf. Ommer, 58.

[19]See the papers by Arthur J. Ray, History Department, University of British Columbia, "The Decline of Paternalism in the Hudson's Bay Company Fur Trade, 1870-1945," 188-202, and Toby Morantz, " 'So Evil a Practice': A Look at the Debt System in the James Bay Fur Trade," 203-22. Morantz teaches Anthropology at McGill. That "evil practice" in her title, in the mind of London directors of the Hudson's Bay Company, was trusting Indians. The papers on native peoples laid a curious emphasis on something called an "ideology of reciprocity" (Morantz, 221). That meant "if people looked after you, you looked after them." This is supposed to be some sort of cultural trait peculiar to the Cree. No one in the gathering at the Battery Motel — middle class people, academics almost all of them — noticed that some relation might exist between this ethic of reciprocity and the anxiety most of them have gone through over the dinner party balance sheet.

[20]"The Transition from the Migratory to the Resident Fishery in the Strait of Belle Isle," 138-66.

[21]Note how this theme is restated by Price in his "Conclusion," 360-73.

[22]Gavin Wright is a historian at Stanford University; see his commentary, 348-52.

[23]See Antler's "Commentary," 129-34; David Macdonald's paper (114-28), entitled "They Cannot Pay Us In Money: Newman and Company and the Supplying System in the Newfoundland Fishery, 1850-1884," will have no truck with "truck." It was a *supply* system, he insists, and it was *investment*, not a plot to hold hapless fishermen in thrall. Macdonald is an anthropologist who has taught in Memorial University's Department of Anthropology.

[24]See for example, Robert Paine (to whom thanks, by the way, for some of these references), ed., *Patrons and Brokers in the East Arctic* (St. John's: Memorial Univ. of Nfld., Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1971); Steffen W. Schmidt, James C. Scott, Carl Landé, Laura Guasti, eds., *Friends, Followers, and Factions: A Reader in Political Clientelism* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1977); Ernest Gellner and John Waterbury, eds., *Patrons and Clients in Mediterranean Societies* (London: Duckworth, 1977); S.N. Eisenstadt and René Lemarchand, eds., *Political Clientelism, Patronage and Development* (Beverly Hills and London: Sage, 1981); Christopher Clapham, ed., *Private Patronage and Public Power: Political Clientelism in the Modern State* (New York: St. Martin's, 1982); and William L. Rodman and Dorothy Ayers Counts, eds., *Middlemen and Brokers in Oceania* (Lanham, Maryland, New York and London: University Press, 1983). We may note here that S.J.R. Noel, who was just the smallest amount sniffy about elements of patronage hereabouts in *Politics in Newfoundland* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1971), has now decided that things are not much different upalong: see his *Patrons, Clients, Brokers: Ontario Society and Politics 1791-1896* (Univ. of Toronto Press, 1990).

[25]The classical contrast is between Jane Austen's Mr. Darcy at one pole, and at the other extreme Mr. Collins, about whom we are told that

> A fortunate chance had recommended him to Lady Catherine de Bourgh when the living of Hunsford was vacant; and the respect which he felt for her high rank, and his veneration for her as his patroness, mingling with a very good opinion of himself, of his authority as a clergyman, and his right as a rector, made him altogether a mixture of pride and obsequiousness, self-importance and humility. (*Pride and Prejudice*, ch. 15).

Of course Darcy, the epitome of freedom, inherited a fortune, while Collins was brought up by "an illiterate and miserly father." Could either one help being what he was? I think it is insufficiently appreciated the extent to which the liberal ideal of a free and autonomous individual who makes the right choices is of *aristocratic* derivation (battered and exiled Hobbes and Locke *projecting* what they imagined was the freedom of the nobility onto the state of nature). It is surely not accidental that modern theories of anarchism, which is liberalism taken to its logical limit, were created by Russian aristocrats — Mikhail Bakunin, for example, or Peter Kropotkin.

[26]"Commentary," 309-15, on the same group of papers that Innes reflected on. Rothenberg went on to ask what the economic consequences were, in Newfoundland, of this "clientelism" — what were the effects for the distribution of income, formation of markets, and so on — and concluded with an eloquent turn, rare at conferences of this kind (and gratifying when they occur), in which she thanked Ommer and Vickers for the chance to "think about these issues in this gaunt and beautiful land where they are being lived out every day" (314).

[27]Price, "Conclusion," 365, 370.

[28]Ommer, in the discussion following the first set of papers: "the truck system represented a solution to the problem of a cash-scarce economy; it was a deal between a merchant and his client when there was no 'circulating medium' of exchange available" (82).

[29]Vickers, writing on the Massachusetts fishery of mid-17th century, says that merchant exporters

> needed a regular supply of fish at a reasonable cost in a part of the world where the scarcity of manpower ruled out direct production and the efficient functioning of a local labour market. Clients who would bear the full responsibility should some problem in marketing occur and who could be brought to their knees by the threat of a civil suit for debt were admirable agents (43).

[30]This last adversary in merchant strategics appeared late in our period. Thus in the late nineteenth century "payment in current money was one condition of the workman's freedom" — E. Levasseur, *The American Workman* (Baltimore, 1900), 114, cited by Christopher Clark, 329.

[31]It is impossible to resist quoting the succinct and cynical epitome of Charles Maurice de Perigard Talleyrand (1754-1838) who had managed to absent himself from Paris during the Terror, and who found the time just then to tour (North American) Maine. (He is of course famous for his equally succinct and cynical recipe for political success: "*pas de zéle.*") He wrote about the frontier:

> An inhabitant becomes the merchant of a section; rum, molasses, some coarse cloth, some household utensils and work tools are the attractions which he offers to a whole bay, which comes to him from ten miles around. Then there is begun between the seller and buyers a struggle of finesse. The merchant intends to sell only in order to get the customers in debt; he offers credit ... and does not quarrel about the conditions as long as they do not dispute the price. One hundred percent profit or often more does not frighten the purchaser, who reserves secretly the resource of not paying.

("Letter on the Eastern Part of America, September 24, 1794," in Hans Huth and Wilma Pugh, "Talleyrand in America as a Financial Promoter, 1794-1796," American Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1941 [Washington, D.C. 1942], 82-3, quoted by Alan Taylor, 291.)

[32]"Competition was ... the prime force that prevented local merchants from exploiting their customers in the drastic and systematic manner depicted by critics. Farmers could still have found themselves entrapped in debt if the terms of trade had moved systematically against them over a protracted period, but the evidence discounts this possibility." McCalla's paper, 266.

[33]Cf. Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) (Oxford, 1923), I, 137.

> The property which every man has in his own labour, as it is the original foundation of all other property, so it is the most sacred and inviolable. The patrimony of a poor man lies in the strength and dexterity of his hands; and to hinder him from employing this strength and dexterity in what manner he thinks proper, without injury to his neighbour, is a plain violation of this most sacred property.

[34]Note that this is not a matter of human character or niceness. When Stephen Innes urges us "to abandon all residual tendencies to treat merchants as innately villainous and 'producers' as innately virtuous" (307), he may be rejecting a form of popular melodrama — "you *must* pay the rent!" (twists mustachios) — but not a Marxist position strictly speaking. The point is not that the producer is virtuous but that he or she is a victim. How many mine-owners were trapped underground at Westray mines in Nova Scotia?

[35]Price, "Conclusion," 372.

[36]Several authors quoted Price Fishback's article, "Did Coal Miners' Owe their Souls to the Company Store? Theory and Evidence from the Early 1900s," *Journal of Economic History* 46 (1986), 1011-29, which argued that "the company store's monopoly power in non-union districts [in Appalachia] was limited because store prices were part of an employment package offered to geographically mobile miners in a labour market with hundreds of mines" (1012), and that therefore store prices weren't far out of line with ambient prices.

[37]Rothenberg, 309, cites Pranab Bardhan as having coined the phrase "interlinked and multiplex." See "Interlocking Factor Markets and Agrarian Development: A Review of Issues," *Oxford Economic Papers* 32 (1980), 85.

[38]"Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present* 38 (1967), 56-97. Let us not forget our own connection with that period. Newfoundland's settlement — its foundation — coincided with the canonical dates of the Industrial

Revolution — ca. 1780 to ca. 1830 — and a lot of the protein harvested in these waters fuelled West Indian slaves, who in turn harvested the sugar which constituted an increasing proportion of the caloric intake of British workers. The energy budget of that Revolution — if that is what it was — must include the salt fish prepared by families drawing store credit from merchants in Newfoundland bays.

[39]Quoted from Maxine Berg, Pat Hudson, and Michael Sonenscher, eds., *Manufacture in Town and Country Before the Factory* (Cambridge, 1983), 30.

[40]Cf. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, I, 146.

> People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices.

[41]Cadigan, *Economic and Social Relations of Production on the Northeast Coast of Newfoundland, with Special Reference to Conception Bay, 1785-1855.* Ph.D. Diss., Memorial Univ. of Nfld., 1991, 415-16.

[42]Janzen, "Handcock, Marshall, and Breakwater Books," *Newfoundland Studies* 7, 1 (1991), 70-71. Handcock's book is *So longe as there comes noe women: Origins of English Settlement in Newfoundland.* (St. John's: Breakwater, 1989). There is something odd about the phrase "mechanism by which the merchant's access to fish became more reliable." That was what was cushy about the whole arrangement: "access to fish" without getting cold or wet or drowned.

[43]"Chain of credit" is Jacob Price's term, 360; "World system" is a phrase of Immanuel Wallerstein's, the self-appointed successor to Fernand Braudel — see *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the 16th Century* (New York, 1976).

[44]The point is well made by Peter Flynn in "Class, Clientelism, and Coercion: Some Mechanisms of Internal Dependency and Control," *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 12 (1974), 134-56.

[45]See the collection edited by Schmidt et al. cited above, note 24, especially the lead-off essay, Carl H. Landé, "The Dyadic Basis of Clientelism," xiii-xxxvii.

[46]When we speak, therefore, of "instruments" of credit we reveal credit's nature. It is a tool and can do nothing by itself. The intentions, abilities, position, expectations and habits of those who wield it are what count. Assigning historical agency to tools is common. There is a whole literature on the printing press as cause of the Renaissance, Reformation, Scientific Revolution and so on; there is an equally large literature on the spinning jenny, water frame, power loom, and steam engine as causes of the Industrial Revolution. McLuhan, however, was wrong: the medium is the medium, and the message is the message, and the tool is strictly neutral.

[47]I am not sure where Matthews might have written the opinion in question; I am drawing on my memory of many protracted late-night conservations with him on this (and many other subjects).