

# Mining the Connections: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in Nanaimo, British Columbia, 1891

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*In British Columbia the 1891 census of Canada coincided with the largest and most politically consequential strike recorded in the province to that time. The Wellington strike was a drawn-out dispute over the refusal of one of the most important capitalists in British Columbia, the Dunsmuir interests on Vancouver Island, to recognize the Mines and Mine Labourers' Protective Association. The authors use this combination of events to examine some aspects of the relationship between industrial growth and social relations in nineteenth-century Nanaimo. This community, a hitherto obscure outpost of industry and empire, was being transformed into a place where class, ethnic/racial, and gender roles took on an appropriate and respectable order.*

*En 1891, la tenue du recensement du Canada coïncida en Colombie-Britannique avec la plus importante et la plus politique des grèves jamais déclenchées dans cette province à l'époque. La grève de Wellington fut un long conflit de travail né du refus d'un des plus importants capitalistes de Colombie-Britannique, le financier Dunsmuir de l'île de Vancouver, de reconnaître la Mines and Mine Labourers' Protective Association. Les auteurs utilisent cette conjoncture pour examiner certains aspects du rapport entre la croissance industrielle et les relations sociales à Nanaimo au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Cette collectivité, jusque là un obscur avant-poste de l'industrie et de l'empire, se transformait en un lieu où les rôles des classes, des groupes ethniques et raciaux et des sexes tombaient en place au sein d'une hiérarchie appropriée et respectable.*

AS REGIONAL HISTORICAL geographers and demographers would agree, the Canadian census of 1891 was the first to canvass a recognizably “Canadian” British Columbia, including, among other things, a more effective juridical sovereignty over the province as a whole than had hitherto been known.<sup>1</sup> Arguably, it was the first to canvass a recognizably capitalist British Columbia as well.

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert Galois and Cole Harris, “Recalibrating Society: The Population Geography of British Columbia in 1891”, *The Canadian Geographer*, vol. 38, no. 1 (1994), pp. 37–53.

Without coincidence, the period of planning and executing the 1891 census also witnessed the largest and most politically consequential strike as yet recorded in the province. The Wellington strike was a drawn-out dispute over the refusal of one of the most important capitalists in British Columbia, the Dunsmuir interests on Vancouver Island, to recognize the Mines and Mine Labourers' Protective Association (MMLPA). It began in May 1890 and continued for 20 months, as a complicated strategy gradually evolved of boycotting the "blackleg" coal trade in favour of the union operators' coal trade. Friday, April 3, 1891, would be the last day of testimony at the Select Committee appointed by the Legislative Assembly "to enquire into the circumstances which led up to the strike, or lockout, of the coalminers employed at Wellington" in the Nanaimo district.<sup>2</sup> Monday, April 6, was the official date set for the statistical enumeration of Nanaimo and all other Canadian census districts. The precise juxtaposition of the two events was purely accidental and to that extent irrelevant. However, considering the common subject of intervention by the two levels of government, each presumably interested in consolidating effective political authority over civil society in British Columbia, one grasps an inkling of an underlying theme: order, or the lack of it, in the frontier setting.

Described in terms of an archetypal labour "war" by regional historian Carlos Schwantes — the "artillery" or militia was called out early in the dispute, though later withdrawn with no serious casualties on either side — the strike was indubitably lost insofar as the Dunsmuir family was never brought to heel by labour. It had its meed of influence, Schwantes asserts, in the "further encouragement it gave to labor's growing involvement in political affairs", on a "typical [reformist] labour platform".<sup>3</sup> The evident desire of the fledgling miners' union not only to govern itself but to be governed in a "civil way" was perhaps most typical or historically representative. Tully Boyce, Irish-American leader of the MMPLA, would testify in support of the principle of arbitration, an ideological hallmark of the Knights of Labor movement in the 1880s. In his own words: "We looked at it this way: The miners were interested on one side, and the company on the other; we would leave it to an arbitrating body, composed of parties not interested in either side, and if they said we were wrong, of course we would have to give in." Boyce spoke equally clearly to the relationship between government and self-government in the workplace: "I do say — emphatically — that they [the miners] are not in a position to take advan-

2 Province of British Columbia, *Journals 1891*, Select Committee on [the] Wellington Strike, 1890, "Evidence", pp. ccxli–ccxxxvii.

3 Carlos Schwantes, *Radical Heritage: Labor, Social, and Reform in Washington and British Columbia, 1885–1917* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1979), p.73. Schwantes specifically mentions the link between the miners' strike of 1890–1891 and the attempted formation of a Provincial Federated Labour Congress under miners' leadership at that time.

tage of the laws unless they are organised.’’<sup>4</sup> Both arguments, particularly the former, articulated a mixture of class consciousness and confidence in such classically progressivist notions as the benevolence of the state, the salutary nature of public opinion, or, for that matter, empirical methodologies like gathering statistics on census day.

Using a broad definition of Schwantes’s “political affairs”, one can easily see that the strike, lockout, or boycott on Vancouver Island in 1891 was as much an outcome as a catalyst of change. Specifically, it reflected the construction of one of the first provincial communities to bear more than a “little resemblance to any in Britain or eastern North America”.<sup>5</sup> Agitation by the coalfield labour movement and the taking of the dominion census were two sides of the same historical coin, if not exactly cut from the same political cloth.

This unlikely but felicitous combination of events provides an opportunity for us to examine some aspects of the relationship between industrial growth and social relations in nineteenth-century Nanaimo. The methodology employed, less ambitious than the typical longitudinal study but no less fruitful in an interpretive sense, consists of an examination of relevant data gathered mainly from the census and strike year, 1891, allowing us to address the sometimes conflicting but always interrelated identities of class, gender, ethnicity, and race at a particular intersection of time and space.

As we shall see, a “snapshot” of the community which waged, sustained, and in some cases profited by the conflict in question reveals a social process not likely to be disclosed by a narrowly labourist focus on events. Who, for example, were the union operators or, in other words, the acceptable capitalists? What exactly did the anti-union employer mean when he blamed the whole dispute on “outside agitators” like Boyce?<sup>6</sup> Why was an interpreter for miners speaking one “foreign” language — in this case, French<sup>7</sup> — sworn in by the Select Committee, but not others? What were the views or experience of women of the mining community, none of whom was called to testify at the Select Committee in any language? Mining the connections between these and other themes reveals a community “in the making”, as well as “in struggle”, a community struggling above all for an elusive unity of interests and of values within the emerging hegemonies of “Canada” and of capitalism in late-nineteenth-century British Columbia.

The protracted local struggle that became known as the Wellington strike

4 Select Committee, “Evidence”, pp. ccxlv and *passim*.

5 Galois and Harris, “Recalibrating Society”, p. 51.

6 James Dunsmuir, quoted in “Strike at Wellington”, *Victoria Colonist*, May 21, 1890.

7 Select Committee, “Evidence”, p. clxxxvi, regarding swearing in of Ar. Bertaux, francophone interpreter. Like several other Canadian coalfields, Vancouver Island had a small but significant community of francophone immigrants generally known as Franco-Belgians. In the area surveyed in this article, for example, the census enumerated 17 miners born in France and 29 born in Belgium, a bi-national country whose mining population was nonetheless predominantly French-speaking.

was a regional and even international *cause célèbre*. Samuel Gompers of the supportive American Federation of Labor (AFL) pronounced the main antagonists, the Victoria-based Dunsmuir family, to be “one of the most villainous corporations that ever lived”. The Dunsmuirs actually formed no corporation of any recognizable type but did possess immense wealth as well as a principled commitment against trade unionism (or put another way, in favour of a not yet entirely outmoded individualism), from which they never deviated. It is significant, however, that a majority of the people of Nanaimo almost certainly perceived the struggle as a “people’s strike” against “a grasping corporation” — consistent with progressivist and popular-class views of “monopoly’s” threat to the social order in the 1880s and 1890s.<sup>8</sup>

Such conflicts drew out the social actors that were becoming more generally known as capital and labour, but also revealed much about the relationship between class, gender, and ethnic identities within the community. A local incident that we will call “Naomi Poulet’s strike” illustrates this well. While lacking the elements of grand drama contained in the confrontation between the MMLPA and hereditary coal baron James Dunsmuir, the incident does illuminate the complexity of social experience in Nanaimo in 1891.

It began when Naomi Poulet, an otherwise totally obscure individual, joined 17 of her sisters in a self-proclaimed “March for Female Suffrage” in March 1891: a comparatively rare but significant assertion of working-class women in Nanaimo’s public sphere. “The ranks were not so orderly as the men’s had been, however,” notes a local historian of the Wellington strike.<sup>9</sup> One of countless demonstrations held along the roadways connecting the main colliery community of Nanaimo City with the outlying villages of Northfield and Wellington to protest evictions, the presence of the militia, or other outrages, this one may well have been designed to deepen and broaden the politics of the miners’ insurgency. But if such a display of feminine mutiny would have rankled some of the pillars of the community, it equally offended certain working-class sensibilities. Witnessing the procession, a 17-year-old coalminer named Robert Bagster,

8 Samuel Gompers, quoted in “A Grasping Corporation!! President Gompers’ Opinion of the Wellington Lockout-out”, *Nanaimo Free Press*, March 21, 1891; see also Jeremy Mouat, “The Politics of Coal: A Study of the Wellington Miners’ Strike of 1890–91”, *BC Studies*, vol. 77 (Spring 1988), pp. 3–29. The AFL was not formally involved but aided the strike by proclaiming an international boycott of Wellington coal in 1891. The term “people’s strike” is not encountered in the local sources but is generally associated with the “Great Upheaval” after 1885. Building on the work of the late Herbert Gutman in the United States, Canadian historians have built a not unconvincing case for the peculiarly defensive as well as offensive character of that moment. Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

9 Lynne Bowen, *Three Dollar Dreams* (Lantzville, B.C.: Oolichan Books, 1987), p. 346.

one of about 300 non-unionists working in Wellington in defiance of organized labour's edicts, appears to have become particularly distressed, and from this "disorder" flowed. Bagster pursued Poulet down the streets of the village, reportedly crying, "Belgian women are no good for work, only for processions", and struck her with a blow across the mouth; Poulet, in turn, picked up a rock, shook her fist between Bagster's eyes, and retaliated with an equally powerful verbal lashing, calling Bagster "a black-legged s[on] of a b[itch]". Later, it was ironically Poulet who had to defend herself, ultimately successfully, against a formal charge of assault laid by the hard-shoed miner for reasons one can only imagine.<sup>10</sup>

While such a scene might, in other circumstances, be simply viewed as an unimportant fracas, even the insults they traded illustrate significant features of a conflict over industrial values, as well as the details of a contract Dunsmuir, of course, refused to sign. Obviously writ large are several meanings of gender within the smaller script of the unchivalrous Bagster questioning Poulet's womanhood and the indelicate Poulet, Bagster's manhood. The standards by which they judged each other, however, might have mystified the average middle-class Victorian. Bagster condemned the suffragist for shirking work — that is, unpaid domestic labour, clearly recognized as "work" — and for her part Poulet had contemptuously dismissed Bagster's capacity for *honest* work, as a "manly" miner, loyal to his fellows in the Union. Both spoke to notions of masculinity and femininity firmly grounded in working-class experience.

An unexpected subtext of ethnicity likewise emerges from the evidence produced during the rather farcical court case of Bagster *versus* Poulet, as well as another docket that will be mentioned shortly. Sixteen of the eighteen participants in the women's march were described as "Belgians", and reports of "lots of talking in French" would obscure the testimony of the litigants. It is possible that the demonstration of March 13, 1891, had something to do with a current of socialism outside the mainstream, the commemoration of the Paris Commune or related "ethnic" dissidence. Although francophones were almost never mentioned in late-nineteenth-century debates over immigration in Canada (except, for distinct reasons, within Quebec), a typical expression of political nativism was expressed by a writer in Hamilton's *Palladium of Labor* a few years before: "No Knight of Labor is in favour of the importation of Nihilists from Russia, or Socialists from Germany or Austria."<sup>11</sup> In any case, francophones were peculiarly prominent on the strikers' side in Nanaimo, a Belgian miner named Arthur Ber-

10 *Ibid.*; see also "Police Court", *Nanaimo Free Press*, March 21, 1891. One may presume, however, that Bagster's action was part of Dunsmuir's general strategy of harrying the strikers in the courts.

11 *Palladium of Labor*, May 8, 1886, cited in Magdalena Fahrni, "The Rhetoric of Order: Respectability, Deviance, and the Criminalizing of Class in Ontario, 1880–1914" (Master's thesis, Queen's University, 1993), p. 100.

toux, for example, heading up a so-called French Syndicate in the Northfield camp. Bertoux and five other miners, named Greenwell, Carter, Melzer, Van Endriche, and Suggett, were sent “to the Dungeons” for various offences in March 1891. This suggests that local unionism was no longer strictly associated with English-speaking colliers, as well as the possibility that “foreign agitators” were being singled out for discipline by English-speaking authority.<sup>12</sup> Naomi Poulet was likely a working-class heroine in the eyes of the local *syndicat*; by the same token, non-unionists of British background would probably not have censured Bagster for his actions against any member of that faction.

Uncertain disputes within the white mining community call attention to the better-known racial background of the Wellington strike. The organizing effort of the MMLPA had been hopelessly intertwined with a broadly based labour reform campaign for the passage and enforcement of a law banning the employment of Chinese workers underground, gathering steam on Vancouver Island since about 1886, when candidates of the Knights of Labor (KoL) gathered a small number of votes on a standard platform calling for, among many other things, the ousting of the Chinese. After 51 “Chinamen” and 97 white men and boys were slaughtered together at Nanaimo No. 1 colliery of the Vancouver Coal Company on May 3, 1887 — casualties included Samuel Myers, the defeated KoL standbearer in Nanaimo — the campaign gained new urgency. No fewer than 1,421 individuals in the Nanaimo coalfield were persuaded to sign a petition calling for the exclusion of “Asiatics” on the grounds that their presence in the collieries was inimical to safety. The KoL, important to note, remained the vanguard of the anti-Chinese movement as well as the *de facto* political party of local labour, its two local assemblies enjoying fraternal relations with the ostensibly separate miners’ union, formally established at a mass meeting attended by upwards of 1,000 on February 1, 1890.<sup>13</sup>

12 “For Sentence — The Six Union Miners”, *Nanaimo Free Press*, March 23, 1891. Sentencing in the case was clearly meant to be a lesson in justice tempered with mercy, their terms being only six weeks. For the Northfield *syndicat*, see Bowen, *Three Dollar Dreams*, p. 341.

13 See, for example, reports on the Victory Assembly of the KoL in relation to the MMLPA movement in the *Nanaimo Free Press*, January 24, 1891. John Belshaw’s “The British Collier in British Columbia: Another Archetype Reconsidered”, *Labour/Le Travail*, vol. 34 (Fall 1994), pp. 11–36, speculates that British coal miners found the KoL uncongenial, but it is equally likely that for tactical reasons it was simply decided to separate the organizing drive from the Order: the remnants of the KoL in the American coalfields formed part of the original coalition around the United Mine Workers at about the same time, and the main spokesman for the MMLPA, Tully Boyce, was actually Pennsylvania Irish, not British — as these parties understood the term. For a detailed narrative and bibliography of the otherwise seamless web of anti-Chinese, labour-reform, and union organizing in post-1885 Nanaimo, the reader is referred to Allen Seager, “Miners’ Struggles in Western Canada, 1890–1930” in Deain Hopkin and Gregory S. Kealey, eds., *Class, Community and Labour Movement* (St. John’s: The Society for Welsh Labour History and Canadian Committee for Labour History, 1989), pp. 164–167. Paul Phillips, “The Underground Economy” in David Coburn and Rennie Warburton,

Like so much else, the anti-Chinese movement was a sword that cut in more than one direction. Some of the “offending caste” were directly employed as wage labourers and occasionally even contract miners by the coal operators. The majority, however, were traditionally employed as “butties” by other miners — a hitherto profitable system for most of those concerned. A union of “independent colliers” like the MMLPA did not advocate radical economic levelling at the workplace but rather the supplanting of a racial division of labour with a more conventional hierarchy of age and skill, whereby the sons of established British colliers, for example, would have jobs customarily held by Chinese migrant workers (who, apparently without exception, were locally unattached “single men”). Thus, all parties outside the Chinese community were being asked to set aside narrow monetary considerations for what the anti-Chinese party believed to be prerequisites for order, progress, and stability. In 1889 the Vancouver Coal Company (the Dunsmuirs’ main competitor) had finally agreed to bar the Chinese from their underground works and reportedly suffered no loss. As Thomas Keith, Nanaimo City’s Labour representative in the provincial legislature, said in moving his exclusionist motion in 1891, miners “who had been accustomed to employ Chinamen at \$1.50 a day, had also concluded that it was cheaper to employ white men at \$2.50”.<sup>14</sup>

The resistance to unionism by Bagster and his mates suggests that not everyone outside the Chinese community (or the Dunsmuir family) agreed with Labour’s improving logic. The politics of the anti-Chinese movement, however, mirrored as much as shaped the changing industrial demography of the district. Blocked from upward job mobility in most instances, Chinese workers lost their early foothold as “cheap labour” for the coal industry for various reasons. On the other hand, the arcadian vision of an alternative industrial order cemented by family and kinship ties among the British-born remained cloudy. Much indeed was unclear at the time of “Naomi Poulet’s strike” — with one exception. The coal industry was booming, and, like most nineteenth century actors, the Nanaimo labourists, the union, and the *syndicat* had all chosen exactly the right moment to press their claims upon capital and upon the state.

The coal trade set the stage, of course, upon which most social actors in late-nineteenth-century Nanaimo played their parts. Daniel Gallacher’s study

eds., *Workers, Capital and the State in British Columbia: Selected Papers* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988), p. 44, understates the case when he writes that it is “difficult to document” the relationship between colliery safety and the employment of Chinese-speaking labour at this time. Rudimentary Cantonese-English manuals of mining, for example, are known to have been created in the coalfield but likely date from a later period.

14 The Vancouver Coal Company was officially dubbed the New Vancouver Island Coal Mining and Land Company. Thomas Keith quoted in “Legislative Assembly”, *Nanaimo Free Press*, April 9, 1891. Relevant amendments to the Mines Act were in fact made, but successfully contested by the Dunsmuirs as *ultra vires* and never actually enforced.

of entrepreneurship on the island to 1891 reminds us of the economic agency of the coalowners, but it would be a mistake to imagine that their obvious ambitions were unconstrained.<sup>15</sup> Above all, the coalfield was dependent upon external markets, typically selling 80 per cent of its output to consumers in the United States. Shipments to California, Alaska, and Hawaii totalled over 800,000 (long) tons in 1891, while as late as 1897 provincial consumption of island-mined coal did not exceed 300,000 tons. A “crisis of dependent development” such as that identified by historians of the roughly contemporary Nova Scotia coal trade, however, was not (yet) in evidence: opportunity, not crisis, was the local economic keynote in 1891.<sup>16</sup>

The island coal trade was in an extremely buoyant state that year, when regional output surpassed, for the first time, one million (long) tons: dramatically up from 580,000 tons as recently as 1889 and ten times larger than the output in 1875. The Wellington strike did have a slight impact, the output of the affected Dunsmuir mines increasing only marginally from 274,000 tons in 1889 to 345,000 tons in 1891. The *Coast Seaman's Journal*, organ of allied maritime unions, estimated that production or sales at the struck collieries had been curtailed by as much as 50 per cent in certain months, probably indicative of the maximum leverage nineteenth-century coal unions ever exercised in practice.<sup>17</sup> Predictably, though, the main impact of sectional or labour militancy was the diversion of business to other mines and communities. The Dunsmuir could well afford to defy the local union in Nanaimo because they were diversifying their coal operations geographically, the family's “up-island” Cumberland mines being a new and relatively hospitable locale for both non-unionism and Chinese labour in 1891. (These reported less than 2,000 tons in 1888 but 114,000 tons in 1891 and 241,000 tons by 1894.)

The middle-class anti-Dunsmuir party in Nanaimo, then, had various reasons for its support of the organized miners' version of the moral econo-

15 Daniel T. Gallacher, “Men, Money, and Machines: Studies Comparing Factors of Production in British Columbia's Coal Industry to 1891” (Ph.D. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1979).

16 Gallacher and all other sources agree that the island coal industry was definitively export-based, and good data on coal production and sales were regularly published in the provincial *Sessional Papers* (Reports of the Minister of Mines) after 1877. For the eastern analogue, see Ian McKay, “The Crisis of Dependent Development: Class Conflict in the Nova Scotia Coalfields, 1872–1876” in Gregory S. Kealey, ed., *Class, Gender, and Region: Essays in Canadian Historical Sociology* (St. John's: *Canadian Journal of Sociology* and the Committee on Canadian Labour History, 1988), pp. 9–48. For details of regional coal production, see R. Louis Gentilcore, ed., *Historical Atlas of Canada*, vol. 2: *The Land Transformed 1800–1891*, Plate 46, “From Firewood to Coal: Fueling the Nation to 1891”.

17 See “Wellington Coal”, *Coast Seaman's Journal* (San Francisco), June 25, 1890 (reference courtesy of Douglas Cruikshank). Nineteenth-century coal unions are above all not to be confused with twentieth-century coal unions. Western Canadian coal miners in the late 1930s, for example, were practically all organized, despite poor market conditions that were particularly desperate on Vancouver Island.



my in 1891. Said an editorialist in the *Free Press*, “but one feeling has dominated the minds of those which locked out the Union men and that is, that they should control the machinery of the law even as they control the throbbing pulsing engine that draws coal from the bowels of the earth.” The Dunsmuirs’ “gigantic monopoly” was “now sapping, as it were, the life-blood of the insular portion of the Province”.<sup>18</sup> In light of their two-million-acre railway land grant, the Dunsmuirs’ besetting sins, in the eyes of their middle-class critics, were parasitical landlordism and lack of commitment to local enterprise — only incidentally the exploitation of the working class.

Objectively speaking, the strike was not a clear-cut battle, but rather a sectional strike of white workers against objectionable employers. The majority of miners in the Nanaimo coalfield (employed in Nanaimo City, Northfield, and East Wellington) also remained at work without dispute. Few would have fully endorsed the half-progressivist, half-traditional position advanced by Samuel Robins, longtime general manager of the Vancouver Coal Company, “that the true interests of capital and labor are absolutely and unalterably identical”.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, a practical accommodation between miners and managers developed at the Vancouver Coal Company’s works by 1891, based on the exclusion of the Chinese from underground labour, recognition of the union or its pit committees, and the union’s eschewal of any demand which would leave the “fair” employer unable to compete with the “unfair” employer. Advertisements placed by the Robins company in newspapers or *Henderson’s British Columbia Directory* during and after the Wellington strike/boycott could just as easily have been taken out by the AFL or the MMLPA: “Nanaimo Coal (Famous Gas and House Coal) — Southfield Coal (Steam Fuel) — New Wellington [Northfield] Coal (Favourite House and Steam Coal) — These Coals are Mined by this Company Only and by Union Labor.”

The outcome of the local business rivalry on balance supported union labour but not any expectation of real-wage gains. The Nanaimo coalfield later became a fertile field for socialist “impossiblism” partly because of its rather unique schooling in the dynamics of competitive capitalism. After the signing of an open-ended agreement (including a sliding scale of wages) with the Vancouver Coal Company in July 1891, rude dichotomies between union and non-union labour would be revealed as highly problematic. For the present, however, the salient point was the commercial viability of union labour. In all but two years between 1888 and 1901 the Vancouver Coal Company outproduced the Dunsmuirs (exclusive of the latter’s Cumberland mines), despite the Dunsmuirs’ many comparative advantages. In 1892, after the dust had settled from the strike, the Robins company typically reported

18 “A Wellington Magistrate”, *Nanaimo Free Press*, May 29, 1891.

19 “Mr. Robins Replies to Mr. Hunter”, *Nanaimo Free Press*, April 14, 1891.

an average monthly payroll of 1,367, compared with 815 for the Dunsmuirs' Wellington mines. The only other operator in the Nanaimo coalfield, a Mr. Chander at East Wellington who followed Robins's leadership in labour matters, contributed an additional 152 miners to the district payroll in 1892.

The secular growth of the post-1885 period was of course a general regional phenomenon. Its symbol and to some extent its substance was the nineteenth-century clarion call of railway building. If John A. Macdonald missed the mainline CPR ceremony at Craigellachie in 1885, he personally tapped the last spike of the no less politically wearisome Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway at Shawnigan Lake in 1886. Physically and financially unconnected with the Canadian Pacific Railway, the island section of the transcontinental was effectively controlled by the Dunsmuirs, but the prime minister had pointedly toasted the promise of the railway for all the local coalowners — following the public ceremony, a private gathering of key elite figures met 600 feet below the surface of the earth at the Vancouver Coal Company's Nanaimo No. 1 colliery.<sup>20</sup>

Coal, as a natural resource, speculative asset, or industrial commodity, figured prominently in late Victorian British Columbia's "Great Expectations",<sup>21</sup> while imperial themes were never far from rhetorical view. Unfortunately, as even imperial Federationist George Parkin admitted, all Vancouver Island coalowners were in direct competition with producers in New South Wales and in Wales itself in the key San Francisco market, while expectations that the British naval base near Victoria would form a staple market for island steam coal never materialized.<sup>22</sup> Potential for growth in the home market seemed, in fact, more promising.

Vancouver, the CPR's terminal city on the mainland, immediately became the site of potentially significant coal-using enterprises while a few other infant industries were situated at the consuming end of the 78-mile island railway. Victoria's aptly named Albion Iron Works occupied a site of 3.5 acres and employed about 230 stove-moulders, engine-builders, and boilermakers in 1890. Coalowners were deeply interested in this venture, and it is probably no accident that it did not survive the dismantling of the Dunsmuir empire after 1900.<sup>23</sup> Nanaimo itself boasted a tannery, brewery,

20 Bowen, *Three Dollar Dreams*, p. 247.

21 See Martin Robin, *Rush for Spoils: The Company Province 1871–1933* (Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1973), chaps. 1–2.

22 See George Parkin, *The Great Dominion* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1895), chap. 4, "Coal".

23 Albion was effectively controlled by an alliance between the Dunsmuirs and a family of Victoria merchants, the Rithets. British Columbia Archives and Records Service (hereafter BCARS), Albion Iron Works papers, *Director's Minutes*, 1882–1902; G. R. Genn Collection, vol. 40 f, "Albion Iron Works" (liquidated September 8, 1908). See also the excellent study by John Lutz, focused on market issues with but slight attention to the entrepreneurial group: "Losing Steam: The Boiler and Engine Industry as an Index of British Columbia's Deindustrialization, 1880–1915", *Canadian Historical Association Annual Papers* (1988), pp. 168–208.

lumber mill, and small-scale shipyard servicing the local fishery. A local trades and labour council formed in 1891 included delegates from the long-shoremen, teamsters, merchants' employees, engineers, tailors, blacksmiths, and carpenters, as well as the miners, an accurate reflection of Nanaimo's artisanal as well as extractive maritime economy. Local industrialization in any real sense, however, still remained a mainly hypothetical scenario.

The Vancouver Coal Company was otherwise very illustrative of themes in Victorian capitalism. Floated on the basis of free-hold resource and land holdings acquired from the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) at Nanaimo, the firm was legally incorporated in London on August 1, 1862, and remained essentially unchanged until its disappearance in a merger movement in 1905. Partly mortgaged to the English stockholders of the HBC, it had as its first chair the nationally and imperially minded Nova Scotian novelist, T. C. Haliburton. During the quarter-century after 1875 the firm "often paid dividends, usually 3 or 5 per cent per annum", but sometimes none at all, while the "New" version of the same company was formed in 1889 in the course of a successful manoeuvre of the controlling group to avoid their "grasping creditors". Neither totally impecunious nor particularly lucrative, the firm bore little resemblance to the vast majority of speculative mining issues in the North American West, but had something in common with the archetypal British coalowners described by Welsh historian L. J. Williams. Presiding over a rather conservative enterprise, wherein transactions of investment were quickly superseded by mundane procedures of accountancy, the firm's functional role was essentially that of a commercial intermediary between miners and the market. Certain managerial skills were not unimportant and individual agents like Samuel Robins might have been highly regarded, but they typically left no monuments.<sup>24</sup>

Managerial strategies at the Vancouver Coal Company revolved around relatively intensive development of spatially limited resources, requiring a more settled work force and, in general, a degree of "cooperation" with labour and community. Thus did Nanaimo become known as a "cheerful little place" in self-conscious British Empire literature published after 1890, although local inhabitants undoubtedly acquired a slightly more jaded view of the "coal hub of B.C." Oral history by definition excludes nineteenth-century perceptions but an unsentimental recollection of early twentieth-century Nanaimo by a Scottish orphan-immigrant is perhaps worth quoting:

24 For a fascinating study of origins of the Nanaimo firm, see A. W. Currie, "The Vancouver Coal Mining Company: A Source for Galsworthy's Strife", *Queen's Quarterly*, no. 70 (1963-1964), pp. 53-54 and *passim*. L. J. Williams, "The Coalowners" in David Smith, ed., *A People and a Proletariat: Essays in the History of Wales* (London: Pluto Press, 1980), pp. 94-113, is a rare example of serious reflection on the history of this class, generally neglected, Williams notes, "perhaps because of some consideration for the rightness of things".

The pubs did a roaring trade on Saturday night with beer a nickel a glass, and a lot of the men would get drunk to drown out their troubles and come home and sometimes would beat up the wife and kids [;] it was almost like slavery in a company town and I presume that by fighting they worked out their anger & frustrations.<sup>25</sup>

The rival Dunsmuirs never established a well-developed “company town” in the 1870s, 1880s, or 1890s. Pursuing an equally rational strategy of relatively less intensive development of spatially dispersed resources in the Nanaimo district, their own settlement became a peculiarly perambulating coal camp. About this scattered commentary is predictably negative, if only because of its visibly chaotic as well as relatively multi-racial character, perfectly emblematic of the Dunsmuirs’ top-down resistance to the rhetoric of order *circa* 1891. Wellington, as such, had no cartography to speak of, only a geology, being not one place but many located along the so-called Wellington coal seam.<sup>26</sup>

Testaments to working-class views on the existing economy are few and far between in this period. While there may have been no evident crisis of capital or trade, this did not mean that the miners’ leaders were not economically minded. “Quite an interesting discussion” took place in the Northfield camp, for example, over the question of commercial unionism in advance of the dominion elections of 1891: “On the vote being put to the meeting the Protectionists carried by quite a large majority.” Nationalist and imperial arguments must have carried at least some weight in enfranchised Nanaimo’s significant endorsement of John A. Macdonald’s last campaign, local labourism being as yet unorganized on the federal field.<sup>27</sup> In a broad-

25 “Cheerful” from C. F. J. Galloway, *The Call of the West: Letters from British Columbia* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1916), pp. 89–90; “slavery” from Alfred George Preston manuscript, n.d., copy in the authors’ possession. Preston here explains his own role in a typically supportive trade in Nanaimo, having been more or less auctioned off for room and board in a local dairy operation. To illustrate the connection he notes that pastoral work began not with the rooster’s call, but with the shrill reminder of the colliery’s “boss whistle” at 5:30 a.m. Given his non-mining background, Preston feared the collieries and successfully ran away to work for wages in a nearby lumber camp instead; one might add that no research has shown that either one of these staple occupations on the island was actually more life-threatening (or more or less lucrative) than the other.

26 See Lynne Bowen, *Boss Whistle: Vancouver Island Miners Remember* (Lantzville: Oolichan Books, 1982), chap. 2, “The Put-Up and Pull-Down-Again Towns”; also John D. Belshaw, “Mining Technique and Social Division on Vancouver Island, 1848–1900”, *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (June 1986), pp. 45–65. Albeit late in the day, James Dunsmuir did materially embrace the rhetoric of order with his planned townsite of Ladysmith — obviously of South African War vintage. There is significant evidence of bottom-up resistance to what amounted to forced resettlement in Ladysmith *circa* 1903, but this cannot detain us here.

27 Debate reported in the *Free Press*, April 14, 1891. National Policy Conservatism easily carried the Nanaimo (Vancouver electoral) district among others in pro-Macdonald British Columbia. As a measure of underlying “labour” strength, the same district elected an MMLPA representative, Ralph Smith, in a three-way split in 1900. Bryan D. Palmer, “Class Formation and the History of Nine-

er sense, however, “protectionism” was in all respects the political *mot d’ordre* of nineteenth-century Nanaimo.

Northfield miners declared their economic faith in the nation of Canada against a local backdrop of increasing ethnic heterogeneity. Indeed, the coal-mining community of Nanaimo in the 1890s was characterized by a diversity that conventional commentary on the British/Chinese cleavage cannot entirely explain. That the scrutinizing eye of the dominion’s third census scanned Nanaimo’s shores in 1891 allows us to create an analysis of the coal-mining population identified on the nominal rolls of the Nanaimo census district; indeed, the significance of the census did not go unnoticed by community leaders at the time. The *Nanaimo Free Press* looked upon the event as an occasion for civic pride; all citizens were exhorted to cooperate, and the *Press* took care to explain the patriotic and progressive purposes of the state’s inquiry, “which while verging on the impertinent, so far as requiring a person to divulge his private affairs”, was “considered for the public good”. The outcome of the commission’s labours (including the introduction, for the first time, of a definite census day upon which all information was to be current), the coalfield paper promised, would be “the most valuable statistical statement ever prepared in British North America, and will throw an immense amount of light upon matters of which existing information is by no means satisfactory.”<sup>28</sup>

Coalfield boosters could take heart from the evidence of industrial progress the census documented. In ten years the population of the Vancouver (Island Electoral) District, for example, had apparently doubled, standing at 27,470 on April 5, 1891, while the population of Nanaimo City, the largest town, had nearly tripled, showing an increase of 180 per cent since 1881, standing at 4,595 men, women, and children according to the census of 1891.<sup>29</sup> A total of 6,512 residents were counted in the census sub-district of the same name (Vancouver: Nanaimo, subdistrict “k’”), which in turn bounds the area of the following discussion, based on examination of the core mining population identified in the nominal rolls for that district.<sup>30</sup> Numbering about 3,000 strong in 1891, or a little less than half of the total

teenth Century Canada” (paper presented to the Australia-Canada Conference, Sydney, December 1993) draws attention to the largely unstudied problem of working-class conceptions of nationhood, but a formally utilitarian debate over commercial union is (perhaps typically) the only shred of relevant evidence we have been able to glean from local sources even in a key election year.

28 “The Canadian Census”, *Nanaimo Free Press*, April 8, 1891. Also see *Instructions to Enumerators* (Ottawa: Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1890).

29 *Census of Canada 1890–1* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1893), vol. I, p. 8 and *passim*.

30 This part of the paper is in large part the result of a collective research effort, and the authors would acknowledge the work of Susan Peters, Douglas Cruickshank, Duff Sutherland, and especially Marilyn Janzen. A President’s Research Grant from Simon Fraser University aided in coding the data, as did various small grants from government under the Work-Study Programme in the late 1980s. The term “core mining population” refers to miners and their immediate dependants or cohabitants. It therefore accounts for all people whose lives and employment were dependent upon the coal trade.

population, this included 1,387 to 1,401 male breadwinners (the latter figure counting a typically minuscule number of supervisory and administrative personnel) plus 1,485 to 1,540 people defined, by the census, as direct dependants. Nearly two-thirds of the wage and contract workers so identified lived in three “city” wards: South (553), Middle (209), and North (142). The remaining 35 per cent (483) resided in an unorganized territory noted as “Wellington” in the census manuscript.

The historical demography of industrial Vancouver Island has hitherto been examined in unpublished works based on evidence from the 1881 census manuscript, when the number of settlers was still quite small. Owing in part to the nature of this source, these studies have tended to emphasize the comparatively settled and even more British character of the white work force. While these are critical findings in the social history of the coalfield, they are a misleading clue as to the situation existing in 1891. There were still only 247 colliers of British birth in Nanaimo in 1881. The British-born part of the population grew considerably over the following decade but also shrank, in relative terms, from 76.5 per cent of the non-Asian work force in 1881 to 53 per cent ten years later.<sup>31</sup>

Thus the much-vaunted cleavage between British settler families and male Asian sojourners was increasingly refracted. In 1891 only 79 Chinese miners and mine labourers were enumerated in the entire Nanaimo census district, and all but a mere half-dozen lived in Wellington, where Asians formed a minority of 15 per cent. (This community included individuals with such surnames as Yip, Yee, or Yan, but only one more or less clearly identified kin group, known by the name of Sing: five men aged 21 to 40, one of whom was married to a non-resident spouse.)<sup>32</sup> The 1891 census reveals a far more complex social landscape which incorporated but transcended the much-publicized racial gulf. Among 1,378 wage and contract workers enumerated in the sample, exactly half were British-born (444 English, 139 Scots, 73 Welsh, and 41 Irish); 13 per cent (176 individuals) were American-born, while just over one-fifth (284 individuals) had been born in continental Europe. (Both the Americans and the Europeans were also weightier groups in Wellington, where the figures were 21 and 29 per cent respectively.) Finns, a typical immigrant group, were the most numerous among the European-born, with 69 representatives at the coal face, followed

31 Data for 1881 from John D. Belshaw, “British Coalminers on Vancouver Island: A Social History” (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1987), p. 108 and *passim*. For another overview based on the 1881 census, see the excellent geographical survey by Ben Lawrence Moffat, “A Community of Working Men: The Residential Environment of Early Nanaimo, British Columbia” (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1982).

32 One significance of this finding is to give the lie to the racially opportunistic claim that members of the excluded minority formed the force of strikebreakers or even the backbone of this force in the Nanaimo/Wellington district. For a typical example of historical ambiguity on this point, see Phillips, “The Underground Economy”, p. 44.

by 51 Austro-Hungarians and another 51 Russians and Poles, 46 Franco-Belgians, and 45 Italians. No better evidence of Nanaimo's increasingly Canadian character can be found than the presence of Nova Scotia miners, more numerous than the Chinese, with 90 representatives at the coal face.

Constituted by a diverse mixture of immigrant groups, old and new, this community was not entirely conducive to the normative notions of cultural order prevalent in *fin-de-siècle* English Canada.<sup>33</sup> In part, the extravagant anti-Chinese discourse that developed in Nanaimo seems a reaction to the emergence of this polyglot community. In other words, it can be seen as an attempt to render cultural order from diversity by construction of a conveniently marginal "Other", intensifying the local quest for what Patricia Roy aptly calls "A White Man's Province".<sup>34</sup>

Just as Nanaimo's mining population was not defined solely by the Asian/white cleavage, the local labour movement's vision of suitable racial and ethnic relations cut a wide swath. When Nanaimo's KoL Local Assembly No. 3017 testified before the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration in 1885, it asked the government to promote the settlement of people

imbued with the spirit of patriotism, and bound to their brethren in other provinces by the sympathies which always exist between those who are kin in blood, who speak a common language, who have the same manners and customs, who have been trained under the same laws, institutions, rules, and usages, and who are animated by the same hopes, aims, and aspirations.<sup>35</sup>

The Knights' call for ethnic, racial, and cultural hegemony belied a community whose reality was far more complex than either they desired or most social histories have acknowledged.

Recent mining historiography attests to the central role of gender in industry, community, and protest alike. Generally, moreover, this literature concurs on the extent to which mining communities supported a working-class version of the nineteenth-century bourgeois family, revolving around men's publicness, women's privateness, and the key element of the male breadwinner's wage.<sup>36</sup> In Nanaimo this model was not entirely without

33 While one contemporary noted the presence of "Nanaimo Indians" working in the mines in 1891, none were identified as such in the census rolls. BCARS, Cornelius Bryant Collection, add. ms. 2819, vol. 1, f. 2, Bryant to Bro. Watson, August, 18, 1891.

34 Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), especially chap. 2; Patricia Roy, *A White Man's Province: British Columbia's Politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858-1914* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1989).

35 Canada, *Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration: Report and Evidence* (Ottawa: Royal Commission, 1885), p. 1885.

36 For Canadian work, see Jeremy Mouat, "Men and Women in Rossland: The Significance of Gender in a Mining Community, 1890-1919" (paper presented to *BC Studies*, November 1990, University

historical authenticity. Yet the community's ability to foster conventionally "respectable" gender relations was never assured and was, like the other pieces in the puzzle, an area of struggle in 1891.

Nanaimo's demography provided a first and substantive barrier. That men outnumbered women was a particular hurdle to establishing what was understood as "proper" family relationships.<sup>37</sup> In 1891 the ratio of men to women in the Nanaimo census area was approximately 2:1 (36 per cent female). While the presence of unenumerated Aboriginal women likely muted this imbalance, its impact was felt in a number of ways.<sup>38</sup> Groups other than the British- or native-born suffered from a particularly acute gender imbalance, most noticeably Asians, the nominal roll for the Nanaimo census district yielding not a single case of a Chinese coalminer or mine labourer who was locally "attached".<sup>39</sup>

Mine workers had a variety of domestic arrangements, of which the "conventional" family was merely a minority situation. Only 29 per cent were members of households with resident spouses. Among 1,387 wage and contract mine workers identified, almost half (49.5 per cent) were listed as lodgers. In Wellington more than two-thirds (68 per cent) of the miners were lodgers, and only 14 per cent were enumerated as the "heads" of more-or-less "conventional" households. Ten per cent of the coalminers were related to the head of the household in which they lived, but again this

of British Columbia); D. A. Muise, "The Industrial Context of Inequality: Female Participation in Nova Scotia's Paid Labour Force", *Acadiensis*, vol. 20, no. 2 (Spring 1991), pp. 3–31; Sylvia Van Kirk, "A Vital Presence: Women in the Cariboo Goldrush, 1862–1875" in Gillian Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag, eds., *British Columbia Reconsidered: Essays on Women* (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1992); Steven Penfold, "'Have You No Manhood In You?': Gender and Class in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1920–1926", *Acadiensis*, vol. 23, no. 2 (Spring 1994), pp. 21–44. For international literature, see, for instance, Elizabeth Jameson, "Imperfect Unions: Class and Gender in Cripple Creek 1894–1904" in Milton Cantor and Bruce Laurie, eds., *Class, Sex and the Woman Worker* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977); Winnifred Mitchell, "Women in Mining Communities" in Elizabeth Windschuttle, ed., *Women, Class, and History: Feminist Perspectives on Australia 1788–1978* (Melbourne: Fontana, 1980); Dot Jones, "Serfdom and Slavery: Women's Work in Wales, 1890–1930" in Deian R. Hopkin and Gregory S. Kealey, *Class, Community, and the Labour Movement: Wales and Canada, 1850–1930* (Toronto: LLAFUR and CCLH, 1989).

37 On this, see Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), pp. 89–90, 130, 369; Adele Perry, "'Oh I'm just sick of the faces of men': Gender-Imbalance, Race, Sexuality and Sociability in Nineteenth-Century British Columbia", forthcoming in *BC Studies* (1995); John Douglas Belshaw, "Cradle to Grave: An Examination of Demographic Behaviour on Two British Columbian Frontiers" (paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association Annual Meeting, Calgary, 1994).

38 Aboriginal people are excluded from the aggregate census figures, and our sample includes no First Nations people. Yet Moffat's analysis of the manuscripts found at least 49 Aboriginal women living in Nanaimo in 1881. See Moffat, "A Community of Working Men", p. 63.

39 See The Women's Book Committee, Chinese Canadian National Council, *Gin Guo: Voices of Chinese Canadian Women* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1992), pp. 17–24, for a discussion of the racist and sexist legislation and cultural pressures that discouraged or prohibited Asian women's immigration to Canada.



measure of working-class establishment dropped to just 4 per cent in Wellington. The number of working miners who were sons or other relatives living in family households had apparently doubled since 1881, but their relative proportion had in fact declined over the intervening decade.<sup>40</sup>

Not only was Nanaimo populated with a large number of men who lived outside the nexus of familial relations, but the coal workers were overwhelmingly young and frequently mobile. The mean age of wage and contract workers in the Nanaimo census district was 31.25 years, ranging from a low of 25.16 among central and eastern Europeans, nearly all of whom were newcomers, to a high of 34.46 for the Chinese, who were a charter group. The British-born cohort, a mixture of old and new immigrants, defined the average. Such young men were also on the move. There were 323 coalminers on the 1886 Nanaimo voters' list: 72, or 22 per cent, could be identified in the 1891 census rolls. An 1895 directory finds a more significant minority of the 1891 work force persisting over a five-year period, 448 out of 1,387, or 32 per cent, rising to 44 per cent (339 of 904) among miners resident in Nanaimo City.<sup>41</sup> Coalfield residents in 1891 were a people in motion, some of whom would later settle in.

While this demographic profile did not hearten those who saw the breadwinner family as the only acceptable model of gender relations, not everyone considered the prominence of unmarried, young working men to be a problem. A meeting of Northfield miners in 1891 put the proposition "single life is more preferable to married life" to formal debate, with three speakers for each side. The "single life" was unanimously endorsed as the preferred option.<sup>42</sup> Yet the voices of those who celebrated the homosocial world of young, working-class men were usually drowned out by those who took it as cause for concern. Cornelius Bryant, a school-teacher cum Methodist clergyman, identified the large numbers of single, transient men as a major social problem in 1875:

In many cases the newly arrived immigrant is compelled to spend sometime at the hotel where his first acquaintance will likely lead him into temptation unless he be very watchful and circumspect at all events, such associations will not have a moral and religious tendency. Besides, among miners, and this is principally a mining district, there is a large number of migratory and unsettled, as proof of which only three of four of our original church members remain here.<sup>43</sup>

40 For 1881 data, see Belshaw, "British Coalminers", p. 122.

41 Only 22 per cent could be found in directories published in 1892 as well as 1895, indicating the arbitrary standards of such sources. Of miners netted by both directories, just over 50 per cent had moved to a different address between 1891–1892 and 1894–1895, suggesting a certain amount of geographical mobility even among the most established colliers.

42 *Nanaimo Free Press*, April, 4, 1891.

43 BCARS, Bryant Collection, vol. 4, f. 1, Bryant to Dr. Wood, September, 30, 1875.

Bryant's view reflected a widespread concern with the "problem" of young, transient, single men that remained in 1891. What the numerical predominance of men meant for women — whether, for instance, it challenged or intensified the divisions, hierarchies, and abuses of gender — was not the question that worried men like Bryant. For these commentators, such men posed a threat to the process of community building, not to local women.

Yet, when issues of ethnicity and race merged with this concern about working-class single men, as Karen Dubinsky's analysis of Northern Ontario suggests, these sentiments were often intensified.<sup>44</sup> In 1885 the Knights singled out what they considered the problematic character of Chinese gender organization for particular comment. "They have no ties to bind them to this land," the KoL testified, "for they come without wives or families, and rarely make permanent investments ... for out of 1,000 Chinese in the district only three or four have wives."<sup>45</sup> Robert O'Brien, president of the Nanaimo Trades' Association, similarly considered the breadwinner model central to the struggle for respectability and Asian men's lack of adherence to it as cause for comment. "Civilization has made it necessary", he argued, that good citizens "should live, eat and clothe themselves in a certain style, that they should marry and educate their children".<sup>46</sup> O'Brien's contention that Asian men were a threat to the creation of "proper" gender relations, of course, was an invocation of the familiar Chinese scapegoat that is once again belied by a perusal of local sources in 1891.

In some senses, concern for establishment of normative family relations was waged in a losing battle against a local economy which did little to foster "respectable" gender organization. Official policies in the colonial and early provincial periods had actively encouraged the settlement of skilled British colliers in family groups directly recruited from England and Scotland, and tacitly accepted the Chinese as an industrial underclass.<sup>47</sup> The regional coal boom, combined with other factors, effectively ended such experiments. Coal capitalists of the 1880s benefitted instead from the patterns of transatlantic immigration and transcontinental labour migration wrought by the railways, and, despite a cloying rhetoric of coalfield familialism, most of the new workers either were unattached or supported families elsewhere.

Yet the norm of the male breadwinner family was not entirely elusive, at least for the white, British- or Canadian-born community. A systematic

44 Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880–1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), especially chap. 6.

45 *Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration*, p. 156. See Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885–1925* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991), pp. 86–87, for a discussion of social purity activists' use of images of Asian peoples.

46 *Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration*, p. 170.

47 Bowen, *Three Dollar Dreams*, p. 69.

discussion of the state of the mining family in Nanaimo is not possible here, but a superficial analysis of relevant data in the 1891 census rolls confirms the impression that a good portion of the white community lived up to the Knights' expectations of male publicness and female reproductiveness.<sup>48</sup> If 75 per cent of local miners had no resident offspring in 1891, 83 per cent of a relatively youthful cohort of miners' wives were mothering. Looking at family formation from the bottom up, we find that, of 1,073 coalminers' children in the Nanaimo census district in 1891, 73 per cent had more than one brother or sister. Yet the child-rearing groups were not representative of Nanaimo's ethnic communities. Among 325 nuclear families identified by the birthplaces of the male breadwinner, almost two-thirds were English (165 families) or Scottish (42 families), with the Welsh and the Irish contributing another 16 and 10 family groups, respectively. There were as many Nova Scotian families (34) as all of the continental European nationalities put together. For all intents and purposes, the Nanaimo coalfield was still an outpost of the "Old Country" as far as family formation was concerned, the English pattern (mean number of children of 2.53) determining the coalfield average of 2.48.

Most of Nanaimo's women of child-bearing age were themselves products of British coal-mining communities with traditions of early marriage and relatively high fertility, and concomitant social pressures to marry young and mother often.<sup>49</sup> Yet, for all women in Nanaimo, as in other mining communities, there were few enough alternatives in the field of paid labour. Perhaps 10 per cent of the census area's "gainfully employed" were women, including the typically female occupations of domestic servants, farm workers, teachers, hotel and retail employees, seamstresses and milliners, and members of a religious order.<sup>50</sup> Within the realm of paid service-sector employment, Nanaimo's coal-mining women were said to have faced "unfair" competition from Asian men, presumably including those who had been hounded out of the collieries by their menfolk.<sup>51</sup>

Certainly women did not work in or atop the mines. Despite the assuredness with which mining was designated male, the construction of mining as a male preserve was a manifestly historical process.<sup>52</sup> First Nations women

48 See Belshaw, "British Coalminers", pp. 122–139, for the most detailed account of nuptiality and fertility in the Nanaimo coalfield, emphasizing that "where [employment] opportunities for boys survived ... the presence of a substantial family population would be assured."

49 Michael R. Haines, "Fertility, Nuptiality, and Occupation: A Study of Coal Mining Populations and Regions in England and Wales in the Mid-Nineteenth Century", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 8, no. 2 (Autumn 1977), pp. 245–280.

50 See Peter Baskerville, *et al.*, eds., *1881 Canadian Census: Vancouver Island* (Victoria: University of Victoria Public History Group, 1990), for the various occupations held by women in 1881.

51 John Douglas Belshaw, "The Standard of Living of Vancouver Island Coal Miners, 1848–1900", *BC Studies*, no. 84 (Winter 1989–1990), pp. 37–64.

52 See Angela V. John, *By the Sweat of their Brow: Women Workers at Victorian Coal Mines* (London:

had been employed as transport workers in colonial coal mining, but neither indigenous nor immigrant women gained a foothold in later enterprises.<sup>53</sup> In March 1877 the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia formally debated women's right to work in the province's collieries. Premier Andrew Charles Elliot – no friend of male miners when he obliged Robert Duns-muir's request to send out the militia against Wellington strikers<sup>54</sup> — nonetheless championed the cause of potential female colliers by supporting women's right to a mining wage and arguing that government “must not interfere with women's rights”. Another member, the once and future premier George Anthony Walkem, took the middle ground and argued that surface work was an acceptable sphere of female endeavour.<sup>55</sup> Both were met with plentiful jeers and insufficient support. Women's absence underground and their restricted presence on the surface was thus formalized with the passage of “An Act to make Regulations with respect to Coal Mines”.<sup>56</sup>

Women's absence in British Columbia's collieries was thus neither an act of nature nor an automatic reflex of culture and tradition. Not only had women once worked in provincial coal extraction, but, given that women were not banned from underground work in Britain until 1842, it is ironic that some of Nanaimo's miners may have laboured alongside women before emigrating.<sup>57</sup> Yet by the late 1870s the very suggestion of women working underground was treated merely as an entertaining trifle. The *Nanaimo Free Press* commented that a “young and dashing woman neatly and tastely [*sic*] attired with a pick on her shoulder and a pan in her hand would present a picturesque appearance, but such a sight never appeared in our imagination.”<sup>58</sup>

Nothing prevented and much encouraged women from contributing to the

Croom Helm, 1980); Gill Burke, “The Decline of the Independent Bal Maiden: The Impact of Change in the Cornish Mining Industry” in Angela V. John, *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England: 1800–1918* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1988); Jane Humphries, “Protective Legislation, the Capitalist State, and Working Class Men: The Case of the 1842 Mines Regulation Act”, *Feminist Review*, vol. 7 (Spring 1981), pp. 1–33; Jane Mark-Lawson and Anne Witz, “From ‘Family Labour’ to ‘Family Wage’? The Case of Women's Labour in Nineteenth-Century Coalmining”, *Social History*, vol. 13, no. 2 (May 1988), pp. 151–174.

53 Robert G. McIntosh, “‘Grotesque Figures and Faces’: Boy Labour in Canadian Coalfields, 1820–1930” (Ph.D. thesis, Carleton University, 1990), p. 92.

54 “Andrew Charles Elliot”, *Canadian Dictionary of Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1982), vol. 11.

55 *Daily British Colonist* (Victoria), quoted in McIntosh, “‘Grotesque Figures and Faces’”, p. 98.

56 “An Act to make Regulations with respect to Coal Mines”, *B.C. Statutes*, 1877, 40 Victoria, C.15. It was not until the surprisingly late date of 1951, however, that a similar clause was integrated into Nova Scotia's mining regulations. Constance Backhouse, *Petticoats and Prejudice: Women and the Law in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: Osgoode Society, 1991), p. 290 and f. 77.

57 John, *By the Sweat of their Brow*, pp. 12 and 244.

58 “A Female Striker?”, *Nanaimo Free Press*, August 4, 1877.

local economy in ways that evaded the searching eyes of the census-taker.<sup>59</sup> First Nations women performed casual domestic labour often enough that one contemporary claimed that “the Nanaimo Indians have been civilized by ... their women washing ie for white families.”<sup>60</sup> Miners’ wives cultivated the five-acre plots of land sold to employees by the Vancouver Coal Company, generating foodstuffs and frequently income from cash crops.<sup>61</sup> The typical lodger in the coalfield boarded with a family, and women’s labour proved crucial to these enterprises. Perhaps the heaviest burdens were shouldered by women in non-British communities, given the tendency of immigrant men to board with people of their own nationality. Sophia Anderson, a member of a small established Finnish community in South Nanaimo, was taking care of daughter Hilma, plus ten lodgers, in 1891. Wellington housewife Ellen Daskenski, a Pole, had six children and five lodgers; neighbour Marie Lekedi, an Italian, had three boarders, plus two working sons and a husband to support.

Men’s grounding in the paid labour of mining and women’s relegation to the worlds of childcare, domestic work, and non-wage labours suggest, at least superficially, that Nanaimo conformed to an idealized model of male-dominated, breadwinner families. Yet beneath the veneer of stability existed a community overwhelmed by single men and an occupational group for whom family formation was closely associated with ethnic and racial identity. Equally significant is that whatever success the community had in achieving orderly and respectable gender organization was not taken for granted, but was subject to constant reconstruction.

A survey of the social scene in Nanaimo, British Columbia, in 1891 reveals, at first glance, a sharply polarized industrial community galvanized into class formation by the events of the Wellington strike. The reality was more complex. First, a labour market formerly structured by strict racial divisions was being transformed into a multi-ethnic pattern with a more ambiguous set of problems. As but one example, the relatively minor but symbolically significant issue of real or alleged discrimination against “The Belgians” was raised at the Select Committee in 1891; no such issue would have ever have been raised, at least by contemporary trade unionists, with respect to the Chinese, the traditionally suborned group.<sup>62</sup> Multi-ethnicity also reflected to some extent an increasingly important division of the

59 On women and the informal economy, see Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993).

60 BCARS, Bryant Collection, vol. 1, f. 2, Bryant to Bro. Watson, August 18, 1891.

61 Frances Macnab, *British Columbia For Settlers: Its Mines, Trade, and Agriculture* (London: Chapel and Hall, 1898), p. 200.

62 Select Committee, “Evidence”, p. ccvlix. Here, in the course of an exchange between Tully Boyce and Dunsmuir’s agent, Mr. Bodwell, the employer’s representative indignantly denied any such discrimination (over the allocation of “places”, not jobs, within the colliery), and the employees’ representative could supply no proof of contentions made by others.

frontier work force between family breadwinners and unattached single men of diverse origins, which sometimes seemed to threaten the hegemony of gender division and the male breadwinner family. Capital, too, wore a Janus face, the local coalowners being significantly divided between those who sought to harness the uneven development of the white working-class community to their own economic chariot, and those who were perfectly content to maintain an absolutist *laissez-faire* control.

The year 1891 was clearly many things to many people in Nanaimo, but it was also a moment when the community, a hitherto obscure outpost of industry and empire, became transformed into a place where class, ethnic/racial, and gender roles would be appropriately ordered and made “respectable”. Such an observation does not negate the importance of class identity or conflict, but rather places events like the Wellington strike in context as something other than set-piece battles in the class war. The battle between Naomi Poulet and Robert Bagster, for example, was a clash of individuals across the picket lines and in the court docket, and also a parable of the curious inversions of normative social roles that almost inevitably occur in time of crisis: women fighting for men, outsiders for the local interest. Although in conflict, both Bagster (the male British blackleg) and Poulet (the female and foreign militant) spoke to the larger struggle for order which perhaps unites diverse threads of social meaning and experience in Nanaimo in 1891.