

## GENDER, CLASS AND ETHNICITY IN WESTERN CANADIAN MINING TOWNS

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The mineral resources of Western Canada were not exploited until the nineteenth century when improvements in transport enabled miners from Europe and China to migrate to this new frontier. Unlike the agricultural settlers who came in response to offers of free land in the empty Prairies, the miners lived in company towns where they had to learn to cope not only with a new physical environment but also with a multi-cultural community. For a long time Chinese miners were not allowed to bring their families to Canada, but European miner's wives were encouraged from the earliest period of western coalmining, as it was felt that the presence of wives and children gave stability to the workforce. Most of the miners came from the working class of Europe but in the New World they found a class system linked to ethnicity and individual enterprise, in which women were instrumental in procuring the family's upward mobility.

North American research on settlement of the west has almost always drawn on documents written by male explorers, miners or settlers. But the reaction to new environments is not gender neutral and recent work has begun to consider gender differentiation in the attitudes of migrants to the New World (Schissel, 1982; Norwood and Monk, 1987). Hitherto, women migrants have been seen through male eyes, as reluctant pioneers, mere genteel civilisers, who while their men were out taming the wilderness, gently and passively brought civilisation to the frontier of settlement (Armitage and Jameson, 1987). This paper, through its focus on the experiences of immigrant women during the late nineteenth century in the mining camps of the western Canadian provinces of Alberta and British Columbia, shows that women were not just passive participants but often active change agents. Not only did they influence frontier society but the frontier environment also gave many women new op-

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portunities for self-expression.

## DATA SOURCES

Most analyses of the experiences of women who traversed the American continent in the nineteenth century have been based on their diaries (Schissel, 1982) but 'travelling colonist on the Canadian Pacific Railway was less conducive to diarizing than the extended overland journeys by wagon to Kansas or Oregon' (Jackel, 1987:7). It is particularly difficult to learn of the perceptions of working class women who migrated to Canada, such as the wives of coalminers studied in this paper, as they generally had neither the time nor the education to record their feelings. However, there are two major sources which do provide a broader overview of the perceptions of the Canadian West held by female settlers of all classes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both are used in this paper. The first consists of oral histories collected in British Columbia by the Coal Tyee project in Nanaimo and by my colleague, Ann Schofield, in coal mining towns of the Crowsnest Pass. The second is made up of the 328 questionnaires completed by female settlers in 1884 and returned to Alexander Begg, acting on behalf of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

The Begg questionnaires form a unique source of extensive baseline data on the attitudes of women immigrants in the Canadian Prairies a century ago. However, interpretation must be tempered by an appreciation of the context of the survey. The Canadian Pacific Railway, having completed its transcontinental line, was looking for positive images with which to encourage further immigration to western Canada and so greater profits for the railway company. It was in the interests of many settlers to comply. Furthermore, the patriarchal societal values of the period constrained women's freedom to express their true feelings in such official documents, especially where their attitudes differed from those of their husbands. Thus content analysis of the Begg data is fraught with ambiguities.

## COALMINING AND IMMIGRATION

Nineteenth century migration to western Canada was unusual in that it generally involved movement from rural to rural locations or from urban to rural locations. The

Canadian government sought settlement of the empty Prairies by people with farming skills. Urban settlement was seen as secondary, with towns functioning mainly as service centres for the scattered agricultural population. At this time in western Canada the distinction between urban and rural was fluid with many people combining urban and rural living. In the Begg survey of wives of homesteaders carried out in 1884, 22 percent of the respondents lived at least part of the year in urban areas.

Virtually the only people migrating as a group specifically to urban areas were the miners and their families who were recruited to exploit the newly discovered coal resources of western Canada. They came out, not to better themselves socially by becoming land owners like the homesteaders, but to practice their traditional skills in new mines on the frontier of settlement. Many of the men left Britain because they had fallen foul of local mine owners and so it is not surprising that they became radical leaders of both trade unions and government in the New World. In the mining towns most women immigrants were there only because of their husbands and their situation, as isolated wives and mothers thrown together with people of many nationalities and races in a strange and often hostile frontier environment, was very demanding.

### MINING TOWNS

The mining towns of western Canada were often ephemeral. Many sprang up along the line of rail to fuel the trains as the transcontinental railway cut through the Rockies. All that remains today, in many cases, as the occasional crumbling stone wall or rusty iron bar to mark yet another 'ghost' town. In the Alberta prairies the expansion of branch rail lines made it economic to open up mines in the Drumheller area in the early twentieth century. Now the mines of Drumheller are remembered only by tourist signs and, nearby, the few remaining people in the old mining town of East Coulee have turned their unneeded schoolhouse into a mining museum. Around Nanaimo on Vancouver Island, where coal was first discovered, there is little evidence left of mining. Newcastle Island, in Nanaimo Harbour, is now a provincial park with its abandoned coal mine as a tourist attraction.

The population structure of these coal-mining towns was dominated by transient young male workers. Despite this pattern which is typical of resource towns, Friesen sees them as the crucible of Canadian industrial capitalism (Friesen, 1984: 29). For

the capitalist mine owners and investors, who often owned much of the mining towns as well, it was essential that the miners should remain landless labourers for a long time after arriving in Canada. Work as a miner had status and was imbued with a set of values passed on from father to son. Despite the fact that many miners were also farmers part-time and often became landowners, mining towns had a special ethos and community spirit. Miners had a sense of common identity and it was amongst miners that 'that instrument of class defence' the union was first established in western Canada. According to Palmer (1979), ethnic and occupational residential segregation was more pronounced in the mining communities than in the farming communities and labour solidarity and radicalism were more evident.

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF COAL MINING

The discovery of coal in western Canada first occurred on Vancouver Island and preceded that of gold. Outcroppings of coal near Port Hardy at the north-eastern tip of the Island, were revealed to an agent of the Hudson's Bay Company by the Kwakiutl Indians in 1835. In 1850, a Nanaimo Indian, in return for a bottle of rum and the repair of his gun, showed James McKay of the Hudson's Bay Company, where the coal was in the Nanaimo area. The Hudson's Bay Company began the first of its active recruitment drives for miners in 1848 and in 1850. One of the last recruitment campaigns occurred in 1906 and 1907 when there was a sharp upswing in the demand for British Columbian coal. The Western Coal Company then "assisted some men to come out from the North of England where the mining conditions are very similar to here." (Gallacher, 1979: 210).

Inland coal mines were developed as the expanding rail network made them accessible. Mines in the Rocky Mountains opened in the 1880s and 1890s while the first mine in the Prairies to produce commercial coal started operations in 1912. This prairie coal was known as 'domestic coal'. It had a high ash and moisture content and did not store or travel well. Thus it was only in demand in the winter months and consequently Alberta miners rarely worked all year. In the 1930s most Alberta miners worked less than 40% of possible shifts in 'domestic' coalfields and around 80% in 'steam' coal mines and the majority earned less than \$1500 per year which placed them below the poverty line for a family of five at that time (Friesen, 1984: 296).

The situation was particularly acute in the 'hungry thirties' but was not new. The 1919 Royal Commission noted that Alberta miners rarely worked throughout the year and therefore were forced to hire on as farmhands, section hands or spare labourers on farms in the surrounding area during the spring and summer months of low demand for coal. In this way, the two industries of the west, farming and mining, were both seasonal in their labour demand but their seasonality was compatible, not conflicting, and there was constant interchange of workers between farming and mining. This did not reduce the strong strike in Alberta in 1917. The strike was largely due to dissatisfaction with poor working and living conditions. These matters had also provoked several earlier strikes in Vancouver Island and the Crowsnest Pass mining areas of British Columbia.

### THE ROLES OF WOMEN IN MINING COMMUNITIES

Within mining communities women often formed less than 30% of the population and their roles have remained largely invisible. The first serious studies of prostitution, a significant female industry in most larger mining towns, have only recently been published (see for example Butler, 1985 and Murphy, 1987). The lives of the miner's wives, struggling to raise families in the turbulent masculine society of nineteenth century mining towns, is little known. Oral histories, notably the records collected by the Coal Tyee project in Nanaimo in 1979 and Ann Schofield's work in the Crowsnest Pass in 1987, are beginning to fill this gap for western Canada.

These frontier women were involved in both mining and agriculture. Neither occupation was exclusive nor was an individual fixed in a particular economic role. In the Alberta coalfields the first miners were homesteaders and many mines were worked part-time by farmers and ranchers, while their wives farmed. This combination of occupations was also found at this period in northern Britain from whence many of the immigrant miners came. The first mine opened in the Alberta prairies was financed by a woman shopkeeper and run by her son. There is even one remarkable woman who was recorded by the Coal Tyee project as farming and mining in her own right. "You know we were farming and mining at the same time. I never thought anything about a women working. I liked working outside better than I did in. We tried everything you know, but that mining I really enjoyed." (Mrs Dolly Gregory: Coal Tyee, 1979). This underlines the diversity of western experiences for women and the different pat-

terns of their lives need to be understood before making generalisations about the attitudes of women migrants to the Canadian frontier.

### THE DOMESTIC ROLE OF MINER'S WIVES

The conditions in which miners and their families were expected to live were very poor. Most mining towns were controlled by a single company which was responsible for the provision of facilities for workers and their families. Mine owners provided small frame shacks without indoor plumbing. Outhouses were allowed to foul drinking water and consequently typhoid, cholera and other diseases related to poor hygiene were common. Company stores often sold supplies at very high prices, food in the bunkhouses of single miners was poor and school facilities for miners' children were sometimes non-existent. The daily burden on coping with this situation fell largely on the wives of the miners.

The mining towns of Vancouver Island differed from the later coal mining settlements of the mountains and the plains because they were settled before the transcontinental railway reached the west. In 1862 it was said of Nanaimo that

“Several shiploads of British coal miners and their families comprised the inhabitants of the town – the miners imported for their expertise, the families for their stabilising influence. For this was an adventure of immense proportions to men reared in the narrow confines of British coal towns and it was feared that they would quickly become discouraged when faced with the isolation, the climate and the working conditions on the rain-soaked island so far away from anywhere. A wife and children could offer much comfort and were also difficult to relocate should a man become dissatisfied with his lot” (Bowen, 1982: 21).

Many of the miner's wives felt alien and isolated in these New World mining towns to which they had followed their menfolk.

“It was the end of the world to me. When you come from a city in England to an old mining camp and all you see around you are a bunch of stumps and rocks, it's like the end of the world” (Bowen, 1982: 24).

Many of the families came out because they had relatives or friends from their home town already on Vancouver Island.

“At that time [1880’s] there were a lot of people leaving, [from Staffordshire] or had left for Nanaimo for the coal mining. And father decided he would like to come out. He had been here for four years before he had enough money to bring us all out. Mother had got her hands frozen several times. I know that she was very broken hearted lots of times and very lonely, coming away from all her relatives and come out to this country. She made herself very happy here, because when we got here there were other families that came out from the same town that we lived in, that she knew. There were five or six families all living close together in the south end of Nanaimo” (Coal Tyee, 1979).

The women who emigrated left their homes and family networks reluctantly. They were forced to follow their husbands by nineteenth century patriarchal norms which prevented women playing an overt role in family decision-making and made a refusal to comply with a husband’s wish almost unheard of. For young men, as Schlissel (1982) has shown, the voyage to the New World was often a statement of their manhood and imbued with a sense of adventure. For women it was undertaken at a time in their lives when they were in the vulnerable years of child-bearing and child-rearing and the positive aspects of migration were tempered by family responsibilities.

Those who settled on homesteads in the prairies found their isolated homesites, far from neighbours, protected their children from the contagious, often water-borne, diseases which were such killers in the cities of nineteenth century England (Begg, 1884-5). This improvement in family health was seen as one of the great benefits of migration to Canada by many women. For the miner’s wives, on the other hand, the raw mining settlements of western Canada did not offer such an improvement. They found similar squalor and disease levels to those of the urban slums of Britain and the ‘flu epidemic of 1918 took a heavy toll in the mining communities of western Canada. The inadequate shacks provided for miners in Nanaimo and the Crowsnest Pass towns were especially vulnerable to fire, and the Newcastle district of Drumheller, where most of the local miners lived, suffered regularly from flooding.

Interviews in 1987 with retired immigrant miners and their wives in Fernie in the Crowsnest Pass area revealed that

“The company houses were so thin that by morning your blankets were covered in ice and the contents of your chamber pot were frozen. Further, the houses were

so close together that nothing, really nothing was private. You'd say, 'poor old Mr Smith's having trouble with his bowels again, he's been so long in the privie.' Or if you were in the privie you'd recognise the footsteps of the passerby and shout out a good-day, or a message because you also knew where they were going." (Mrs Lerner: Schofield, 1987).

These houses in Fernie in the early twentieth century were little better than those in Nanaimo in the 1850s. There families were crammed, two to each hut, into Hudson's Bay Company cabins of only 300 to 600 square feet. The houses were constructed of rough hewn logs with chinks between the logs, 'through which the wind would blow with a shriek of triumph,' plastered up with clay or stuffed with moss. Light was provided by lamps filled with fish oil. In 1854 Nanaimo consisted of fifty-two houses, six outhouses, three stores, one school and no churches (Bowen, 1987: 77) but by 1881 there were 656 permanent and 18 temporary houses occupied by families. These conditions were however little worse than those the miners left behind in England. Not until the 1880s did miner's houses in Northumberland in northeastern England, have separate privies replacing the communal fetid ashpit. Overcrowding was endemic, with entire families being crammed into a single damp, dark room with 'not the slightest provision for either social or sanitary decency' (Cowen, 1873).

Above all, the severe cold and heavy snowfalls of the Canadian winter brought new problems for the British miner's wives. One miner's daughter revealed that her mother had to keep the water pump working outside their cottage by knocking the ice off with an axe every two hours – night and day. One miner's widow said that emptying a chamber pot in winter was a nightmare and quite a ritual developed within the community involving breaking the ice on the river in order to empty the pots into the fast-running water underneath. All the women interviewed in Fernie were able to build a house, or part of it. They also had experience of supplementing the family food supply by hunting and fishing and gathering plants and berries.

Washing clothes was a specially heavy chore both winter and summer for miner's wives. The men's pit clothes had to be washed after every shift and many families had several members working down the mine. One informant reported that in the Crowsnest Pass towns of Natal and Michel the women would talk endlessly about the weather because of the ever-present possibility that the wind would change direction blowing the coal dust from the coke ovens onto the clean clothes drying on the line, making it necessary to rewash them. Clearly, within the domestic sphere women faced



many unexpected circumstances and had to devise new ways of coping with family responsibilities in an alien environment far from the support of friends and relatives.

In addition, strikes and accidents were even more common than they had been in England and the consequences more severe because of the loneliness felt by many immigrant women. Wives and children could lose their homes if the right to live in company housing was withdrawn because the miner was no longer working. Yet women in the community gave great support to their menfolk during strikes. When an accident occurred neighbours and friends would assist the affected families for the unity of occupation in these company towns gave the settlements a strong community solidarity at times of crisis. Nanaimo cemetery records show that among miners from north-eastern England, the average age at death in the period 1877 to 1900 was only thirty-nine years. Widows and children left alone experienced great difficulties. Sometimes women were just abandoned as the men moved on to new mine sites leaving family encumbrances behind, as occurred in Nanaimo in 1855 with the first British coalminers brought to Canada (Bowen, 1987: 83).

Widows and single mothers had to become adept at supporting their children on their own, usually through an extension of their domestic skills to the public sphere as washerwomen, storekeepers, seamstresses or boarding house landladies. One informant in Fernie indicated that the community would create jobs for widows. Another informant remembered her mother selling furniture in order to buy a sewing machine so that she could make money dressmaking. According to several of the women interviewed in Fernie, widows had little choice but to marry again quickly, often with disastrous results. Remarriage was an easy option in some ways because the ratio of women to men was so low in western mining towns. For example, in Nanaimo in 1881 there were only 56 women per 100 men.

Even when their husbands were present, and especially during strikes, women were often expected to contribute to the family income by hunting and fishing, gathering berries, raising chickens and growing vegetables. Thus, these immigrant women, although town dwellers, had to learn how to utilise the resources of the surrounding wilderness. They were also very aware of the difficulties faced by women forced to enter the public sphere of paid employment. It is perhaps not surprising that it was an immigrant English woman, the wife of a coal miner and union official, Mary

Ellen Smith, who became the first woman member of the British Columbia legislature and introduced the first minimum wage law for women in Canada.

### CLASS AND ETHNICITY

In Canada miners and their families had to live and work side by side with people of other cultures and races, including Chinese and Indians as well as other Europeans (Table 1). The forced integration of workers of different nationalities led to many ten-

**Table 1. Ethnic origins of residents of selected Alberta coal mining communities in 1901**

| Nationality      | Community  |       |         |       |           |       |
|------------------|------------|-------|---------|-------|-----------|-------|
|                  | Anthracite |       | Canmore |       | Blairmore |       |
|                  | No         | %     | No      | %     | No        | %     |
| English          | 77         | 46.2  | 104     | 23.1  | 72        | 28.0  |
| Scottish         | 6          | 3.6   | 51      | 11.3  | 60        | 23.3  |
| Irish            | 9          | 5.4   | 38      | 8.4   | 45        | 17.5  |
| Welsh            | 15         | 9.0   | 7       | 1.6   | —         | —     |
| Scandinavian     | 14         | 8.4   | 6       | 1.3   | 4         | 1.6   |
| French           | —          | —     | 3       | 0.7   | 34        | 13.2  |
| German           | 5          | 2.9   | 6       | 1.3   | 15        | 5.8   |
| Italian          | 3          | 1.8   | 67      | 14.9  | 11        | 4.3   |
| Austro-Hungarian | 12         | 7.2   | 84      | 18.7  | 6         | 2.3   |
| Russian          | 2          | 1.2   | 45      | 10.0  | 1         | 0.4   |
| Belgian          | 5          | 2.9   | 7       | 1.6   | —         | —     |
| Chinese          | 18         | 10.8  | 30      | 6.7   | 4         | 1.6   |
| Indian           | —          | —     | —       | —     | 1         | 0.4   |
| Negro            | —          | —     | 2       | 0.4   | 4         | 1.6   |
| Unspecified      | 1          | 0.6   | —       | —     | —         | —     |
| Total            | 167        | 100.0 | 450     | 100.0 | 257       | 100.0 |

Source: Adapted from Harold Palmer, 1979. *Aspects of Ethnicity in Southern Alberta Coalmining Camps 1880–1920*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Calgary, Canada.

sions. In 1895, William McCardell, a shopowner in Canmore, Alberta, wrote to the *Calgary Herald* newspaper suggesting that Anthracite and Canmore were among the worst possible examples of company towns and he referred to the miners as a "bunch of foreign sheep" (quoted in Palmer, 1979: 16).

According to Palmer (1979) an informal and unstructured caste system existed in the mines of 'whites' and 'foreigners' which was instituted and reinforced by government policies both on immigration into Canada and on mine safety. Apparently Anglo-Saxons, Scandinavians and French-Canadians belonged to the former group and Slavs, Italians and Orientals to the latter. Furthermore British miners were preferred above all others. This was codified in Rule 43 of the first Coal Mines Ordinance of 1893 which stated that 'no person unable to speak and read English shall be appointed to or shall hold any position of trust or responsibility' (quoted in Palmer, 1979: 18). Chinese workers were paid less than Europeans and were not allowed to take skilled jobs. Thus ethnic and racial divisions between men within the workplace were very rigid but the social divisions between the women of the different immigrant groups in the community were often much less marked. There is considerable evidence that at times of crisis, such as mine accidents, all the women in the community would unite, ignoring divisions based on nationality.

At first, on Vancouver island, local Indian women were used as beasts of burden to load the coal. Later Chinese men took over many of the unskilled mining jobs. Chinese workers were most numerous in the mines of Vancouver Island but even in the town of Anthracite in Alberta they formed the second largest ethnic group after the English (Table 1). White women were not expected to work in the mines, as they had in Britain earlier in the nineteenth century. Even at the end of the century many immigrant miner's wives remembered working on the surface of British pits sorting the rocks out of the coal. In Canada, other racial groups replaced British women at the bottom of the mining hierarchy and this change was seen as a social benefit by immigrants (Bill Crawshaw: *Coal Tyee*, 1979). Canada was part of the British Empire and English was the language of their new country so British immigrants automatically had status based on language and ethnicity. Thus, although they had come to Canada as working class immigrants, with wages and living conditions little better if not worse than at home, the women, in particular, felt their situation had improved.

## CONCLUSION

During this period in Canada, the position of the woman of the family was fundamental to the attainment of middle-class status. The occupation or income of the male head of household was less significant to being middle class than the presence of a woman following a genteel life with no paid work outside the home. In addition, as David Gagan (1988) has suggested, in Canada the Victorian cult of true womanhood allowed women, through their nurturing skills, to train the working class to behave like the middle class.

Women were often reluctant pioneers for good reason, as migration to the frontier demanded much more of them than nineteenth century social mores prescribed. Immigrant women were expected both to preserve the family culture and to raise their social status, while at the same time, adopting new methods of child rearing, learning new forms of housekeeping, and gaining increased self-sufficiency in a strange land far from their normal support networks of family and friends. It is perhaps not surprising that among these women, who had often transported and raised families almost single-handed and been responsible for introducing the civilising influence of the urban community to the wildest parts of Canada, should be some who led the demand for female suffrage in their new homeland.

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# 性別、階級以及種族： 十九世紀的加拿大礦區研究

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## (中文摘要)

加拿大西部的煤礦城市經常是短暫的，他們的人口結構主要是由許多國家流動性的男性礦工所組成。他們在種族與居住地上的隔離，以及在勞工的團結性上均較非礦業地區顯著。婦女在總人口數中經常只佔三分之一以下，然而她們的角色對於家庭的社會流動極為重要。從英國來的婦女在地位上都比過去有所提昇，因為她們不必像在英國時那樣被期待參與煤礦工作；她們在加拿大的工作是由中國的男性礦工所取代。

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**GENDER, CLASS AND ETHNICITY IN NINETEENTH CENTURY  
CANADIAN MINING TOWNS**

**(ABSTRACT)**

The mining towns of Western Canada were often ephemeral and their population structure was dominated by transient male workers of many nationalities. Ethnic and residential segregation and labour solidarity was more marked than in non-mining communities. Women often formed less than one-third of the population but their role was vital for family social mobility. English-speaking women gained status because they were not expected to work in the coal mines, as they had in England, as in Canada their place was taken by Chinese male workers.

**Key words:** Western Canada, Women's Roles, Coal Mining, Class, Ethnicity.