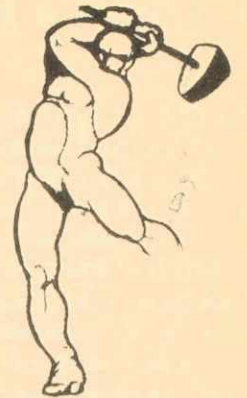


The people's history of Cape Breton



by bruce m. lantz

"This is a story of the working people of Cape Breton. It is not your usual kind of history. It is not about kings and queens, explorers, adventurers, politicians and prime ministers. It is a history of the common people of Cape Breton, of their day-to-day fight to improve their working conditions and their struggle to build a better way of life. The story of Cape Breton tells us a lot about the social system that Canadians live under, and about how ordinary men and women, when they work together, can change it.

(intro to People's History of C.B.)

So begins the People's History of Cape Breton, a local project of the past summer's Opportunities for Youth program. It's 48 pages are filled with the history of a people largely ignored by our history books and exploited from the beginning by industrial monopolies.

The People's History of Cape Breton is a first attempt at dispelling the misconceptions and breaching the void of nearly two centuries. It is the story of the real backbone of Cape Breton and indeed of any area — the workers.

The People's History begins with a resume of the discovery of the area and its earliest industrial beginnings. In doing this the authors quite properly emphasize the importance of coal and steel — the beginnings of industrial feudalism.

"Over the years, say these corporations, Cape Breton was 'developed'. We would prefer to say it was robbed blind. It was a one-sided process; the coal was extracted and shipped off to Montreal, Upper Canada and New England... Its iron and steel went to feed manufacturing and industry in the heartland of the empire. Hundreds of millions of dollars of profits created by the coal miners and steelworkers of Cape Breton have been invested not here, but in distant industrial centres. All this was made possible because the riches of our country are not distributed wisely and rationally; they are distributed by the business decisions of huge international corporations."

The book is mainly concerned with the development of the workers and their attempts to organize into functional bodies. The authors hold to a definite pro-worker bias in this respect, yet their account of organizing attempts and "business unions" is varied and useful.

According to John L. Lewis, international president of the United Mine Workers, "The main object of trade unionism... was to make peace between the owning and working classes. If working and living conditions happened to be improved in this way, that was fine. But the main business was to make a deal, to establish a stable, business-like relationship between the exploiter and the exploited... The other characteristic of business unionism is that it is fundamentally undemocratic. Decisions are not made by the rank and file of the membership but by all-powerful leaders."

The material dealing with the militant actions of the workers and the reprisals against them by industry and government alike are solid and very well documented. The 100 percent strike of the miners against the British Empire Steel and Coal Company (BESCO) is a vivid example of the emphasis and striking clarity to be found throughout the book.

The authors are speaking of a time when BESCO shut down the mines and refused to give the usual credit at the company stores. Starving families forced the workers to ask for future credit; when they were turned down they took the food they needed. The men were arrested for stealing, even though they asked that an accounting be kept. "One of the men had taken only a bag of flour to give his family a meal of pancakes. Under the laws of capitalism the claims of private property take priority over the rights of hungry stomachs. Thirteen men were sentenced to two years in jail, each for stealing food."

The People's History contains a very good description of the unfair attitude of government with regard to these people. The authors simply state the facts and

allow the reader to draw the only conclusion possible concerning the general steel strike of 1923.

"Here's how J. B. McLachlan, at this time Secretary Treasurer of the miner's union, described the incident in a report sent to the union's locals: 'On Sunday night last the provincial police, in the most brutal manner, rode down the people of Whitney Pier, who were out on the street, most of whom were coming from church. Neither age, sex nor physical disability were proof against these brutes. One old woman over 70 years of age was beaten into insensibility and may die. A boy of nine years old was trampled under the horses hooves and had his breast bone crushed in. A woman, being beaten over the head with a police club, gave premature birth to a child. The child is dead and the woman's life is despaired of. Men and women were beaten up inside their own homes.' And here is how a government Royal Commission, later set up to investigate the 'unrest' among the steelworkers recorded the incident: 'On Sunday evening, July 1, between eight and nine o'clock a riotous condition prevailed outside gate No. 4 and in the adjacent streets. The provincial police were called upon to suppress the riot and to disperse the unlawful assembly. They did that. After that there was no more rioting.'

Later in the month J. B. MacLachlan was arrested for writing his description of the incident even though several Sydney policemen said publicly that the attack was pre-arranged by the provincial police."

The problem here, as is the case with much of the book, is that an account of McLachlan's trial and sentencing does not appear until some time later. Although this is presumably done for

purposes of emphasis and easy reference, it breaks the historical continuity and requires a great deal of back-checking.

The People's History of Cape Breton is a history, and like most true histories, it has a relation to the present. In 1918 the War Measures Act (an object of much controversy today) was invoked and used to outlaw 14 political and trade union organizations. It also made the possession of any of 1,000 books a crime. This was due to the fact that the government feared the spread of radicalism, the most active proponent being the trade unions.

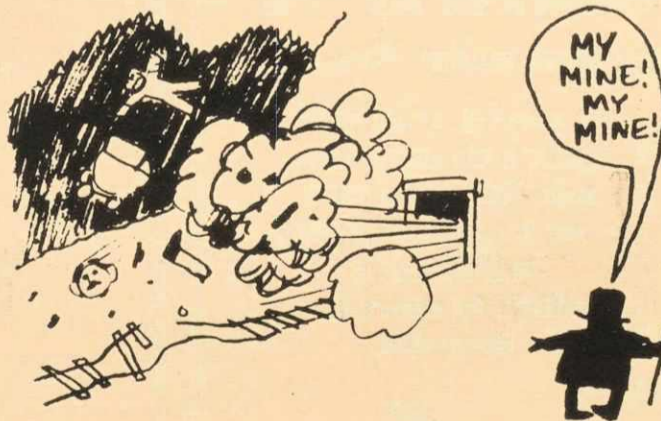
The problem with many historiographies is that they are dull and grey; this one is not. The basic facts are spread out by use of vivid description and anecdotes, and the actual pages are full of graphics which have a meaning, but also serve to bring color and life to the book.

Technically, the People's History of Cape Breton could be better, but not if we realize that it is the summer's work of two individuals. It is often vague, with unexplained gaps appearing throughout (when did BESCO become DOSCO?). Some items are out of chronological order and are not adequately supported. The wording is at times awkward and the editing of copy is not all that it might be.

The problem with this book is that things are missing. There is much left to be written with regard to the farmers and fishermen of Cape Breton. The only mention that they receive here is in passing near the end of the book. Though the coal miners and steelworkers are the backbone of this area, there are others who need to speak. Realizing that this work was accomplished on a tight schedule (which is evidenced by the hasty tie-off of the material dealt with in the last four pages); it can only be hoped that more work will be done in these areas of the Cape Breton struggle.

The People's History of Cape Breton contains the story of workers and their struggles for a better existence. It is not a nice book, it is not at all detached, as is often the case with such works; it hits hard, and often below the money belt, but it is real. Such a book is a part of this struggle which is not isolated in Cape Breton; for that reason, because it affects all people, it must be read!

It is all over Nova Scotia, it costs only ten cents, and it is worth far more.



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