

Boys in the Pits: Child Labour in Coal Mines

Robert McIntosh

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THE BOY (to slightly modify an old saying) is father of the man. A few years ago Allen Seager, taking a chance on the family name, kindly sent me a hand-written report regarding the death of a "thorough practical miner" at Frank, NWT (later Alberta), in 1902. It describes a forty-seven-year-old English collier who had "been steadily working at the trade since he was eight years of age." A "shell of coal and rock" a half metre thick fell upon him and, according to the inspector of coal mines, was bound to prove fatal to "a man of his years, so long working in the mines." This two-page synopsis neatly cleared away the family mystery of whatever happened to great-granddad. It also serves to show how a youth spent in the mines simultaneously deducted years from "childhood" and subtracted years from adulthood. No three score and ten for Robert Belshaw, nor for many other Victorian-era boys who filed into pits around the globe before their tenth birthdays.

Industrial coal mines had a voracious appetite for labour, and this extended to boys. Employed to push tubs of coal along subterranean passageways, to mind ventilation doors, to work with cantankerous mules, and to sort and size coal on the surface, boys appeared in mines in Nova Scotia, on the Prairies, in the Rockies, and on Vancouver Island. Invariably they worked below

an elder (e.g., a father or brother) who "won" the coal from the seam, and the lads were typically able to make a significant contribution to the household wage. In the late nineteenth century, pitboys' labour came under attack by reformers of many stripes as "a new model of appropriate childhood was constructed, underpinned by an emerging view of children as dependent, weak, vulnerable, and incompetent" (5). Contemporary morality was increasingly opposed to their presence in the mines, while other agendas – including mass education and Imperial war-readiness – also came into play. In British Columbia, where inexpensive Asian labour could be substituted for boy labour (thus undermining the White miners' control of entry into and seniority within the workforce), boy labourers were excluded less by law and more by capitalist economic opportunism. By the 1930s boys were no longer to be found in mine work anywhere in Canada.

Robert McIntosh has been working for several years on the subject of boys who toiled in Nova Scotian coal mines. Taking this study to the national level is an ambitious and welcome evolution of his work. McIntosh examines the intersections of childhood and mine work, technological change, state intervention, the family, the community, and class. Perhaps most surprising are the descriptions of lads of twelve and

younger downing tools to improve their wages or working conditions (despite the disapproval of employers and adult co-workers alike), a sobering reminder of how historic agency is not restricted to those who hold the franchise. By way of a bonus, the second chapter of this well researched book provides an extremely useful survey of the social reform/control movement of the period. The story of the boy miners exemplifies that systematic transformation of childhood.

Boys in the Pits is an unusual book in several respects. McIntosh courageously challenges the prevailing view that child labour was merely "a tragic record of forfeited childhood" (178). *Boys* is also exceptional in that, while it is a national study, its focus is essentially upon Nova Scotia and British Columbia. That is a rare combination. Scholars working in the histories of both province will benefit from the cogent discussion of legal frameworks and workplace dynamics that both link and distinguish the Atlantic and Pacific provinces.

I have several, perhaps petty, quibbles. Admittedly the subject is "boys," but the almost complete invisibility of girls in this study is disappointing. Mining coal was an extremely gendered, extremely male business, but girls' domestic, commercial, and farm work constituted the other part of the household income equation. In other words, boys pushed coal below ground

because girls pulled their weight on the surface. Identifying the connections between these gendered experiences would provide a more complete picture of boys' lives without compromising the central focus of the study. At the risk of seeming to contradict myself, I must point out that, as the book stands, we lose sight of the boys for pages at a time. McIntosh successfully contextualizes boys' pitwork by devoting the balance of the book to the larger story of coal mining; however, in so doing he sometimes obscures what was specific to the boys' history. Finally, two technical quibbles: the bibliography includes dissertations under "published sources," and the book is pitched as part of McGill-Queen's Celtic Studies Series, although there is no discussion of Scottish culture sufficient to justify such an association.

Setting aside these minor flaws, *Boys in the Pits* will rightly appeal to a wide academic readership, including labour, social, legal, and family historians. It is crisply written, and, in defining the problem of Victorian child labour, McIntosh contrasts the call for "light, soap, and water" to cure social ills with the fact that "the pit boy laboured deep underground in the dark. And he was dirty" (41). Quite literally the "poster children" for exploitation in industrial society, Canada's pint-size proletarians have at last emerged into the light.