

This well written volume is flavoured by occasional touches of humour, such as “[Malaspina] was getting into very deep water; for a navigator this is the best place for his ship, but Malaspina was swimming in

the waters of politics” (137). It is an important contribution to the growing literature on the Malaspina expedition, especially for readers not at home in Spanish.

*Unwilling Idlers: The Urban Unemployed
and Their Families in Late Victorian Canada*

Peter Baskerville and Eric W. Sager

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998. 294 pp. Illus. \$24.95 paper.

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UNEMPLOYMENT IN CANADA appeared in the Victorian era as a corollary of growing dependence on wage labour as a source of income. As alternative non-wage strategies began to shrink or disappear, and as “seasonality” became a less relevant consideration, the phenomenon of unemployment was “discovered.” Nineteenth-century observers, steeped in liberal individualism, were quick to assign to the unemployed negative qualities, among which “sloth” was the principle deadly sin. Naming the fact of regular, widespread, and persistent joblessness was a first step in problematizing unemployment; coming to know what it was in human terms proved elusive for Victorian commentators. The identification of unemployment as a “social problem” is the subject of the first substantive chapter in this text, but it is a theme to which the authors return repeatedly.

Peter Baskerville and Eric Sager approach their quarry – the economically vulnerable, those thousands

of Canadians who fell between labour market cracks 100 years ago – from a mainly quantitative angle. They tease out the correlation between unemployment and underemployment on the one hand, and gender, neighbourhood, trade, age, and other variables found in the census manuscripts from the late nineteenth century and 1901 on the other. Focusing their efforts on six cities (Victoria, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Hamilton, Montreal, and Halifax), the authors situate employment in its specific economic milieu, being sensitive to the particular while alert to the general. The picture that emerges of the nation’s unemployed is unsettlingly familiar. The experience and “problem” of unemployment in the past, likewise, turns out to be even more recognizable in the present than one might have guessed.

Through careful demographic spadework, Baskerville and Sager not only provide an understanding of *who* was unemployed, but also, in some measure, *why* unemployment struck certain households and *how* those

households replied. In this respect the book is evenly divided between the phenomena of joblessness/under-employment/unemployment, family survival strategies, the spatial distribution of unemployment in cities, and the challenges faced by the least powerful and generally least skilled part of the working class in their efforts to combat economic precariousness. The authors are meticulous in their selection of variables and are alive to the patriarchal language of the census and "work." For these reasons and others this is a book that will appeal to (and well serve) historians of urban life, families, social policy, population, and – thanks to its comparative framework – the national experience as a whole.

There are forceful and poignant elements in all of this. It becomes clear that migration from underemployment in one community to underemployment in another was neither a winning option nor, in most cases, a possibility. Parents found a variety of ways to exploit the income potential of their children. Reliance on benevolent organizations proved to be widespread but susceptible to the concentration of social authority in the state. Unable to muster effective support from a nascent labour movement, into which they fit imperfectly, the jobless were equally voiceless. In short, we see the underemployed acting historically but only between frustratingly narrow margins.

This is an accessible book, though rich with tabular material. An innumerate reader terrified of tables and charts need not fear: discussions of regression formulae do not dominate, although they are there for the specialist to enjoy. One could quibble with small editorial points (the term "injured trade" is introduced on page 73 but isn't defined for another dozen pages), or with the style (the authors seem uncommonly fond of exclamation marks as well as of posing questions in a manner that suggests lecture notes), or with the choice of sample cities (the inclusion of Victoria can only be justified by the authors' address, and they could have been more forthright about it). Even if these flaws were far more numerous than they are, they do not detract from the overarching messages of the text: unemployment existed well before the dirty thirties; the costs of reproducing labour, of surviving unwanted idleness, of providing the market with a surplus labour supply were all shouldered by the least privileged and most vulnerable members of our society; and, finally, the liberal economic cant that characterized the unemployed as shiftless was (and is) profoundly ignorant of reality. Released at a time when the social safety net has developed gaping holes, this is a book to be quoted whenever condescending and simplistic neo-conservative shibboleths are piously intoned.