

BELL ISLAND BALLADS

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IN 1895 large scale mining of iron ore was started at Bell Island, Conception Bay, Newfoundland. This mining venture, which in time became an important element in the development of an integrated iron and steel industry in the Atlantic region of Canada, lasted until 1966, when the sudden closure of the last of the mines (on one month's notice from the Company, Dominion Wabana Ore Limited, a subsidiary of Hawker Siddeley Canada Ltd.), deprived a community which had numbered 12,281 in 1961 of its sole means of support. This in turn precipitated one of the greatest single industrial catastrophes in Canadian history — a catastrophe for which neither the federal nor provincial government was prepared.

The ballads which follow were collected on Bell Island during the autumn and winter of 1972-73. My purpose in making this effort was to look for evidence in the popular culture of the Island which would reveal how ordinary Newfoundlanders had reacted towards industrial labour and life in company towns when these had first intruded into their traditional outport and mercantile world around the turn of the century. The ballad tradition of the island of Newfoundland and Labrador seemed an obvious place to look for information of this kind because it has clearly been carried over from the pre-industrial to the industrial Newfoundland world.

The best known ballad of the relevant genre is "The Badger Drive", which was written by John V. Devine around 1915 and which describes the life of loggers working for the Anglo-Newfoundland Development Company, Newfoundland's first pulp and paper manufacturing concern. It bears many resemblances to the two songs presented here. All three celebrate the courage, fortitude and skill of the working man. In "The Badger Drive" the point is very explicit: "There is one class of men in this country that never is mentioned in song/But now that their trade is advancing they'll come out on top before long/They say that our sailors have danger and likewise our warriors bold/But there's none know the life

of a driver what he suffers in hardship and cold/With their pike poles and peavies and batteaux and all/And it's hard to get over their time." In the first of the Bell Island songs — "Wabana You're a Corker"²¹ — the miner is characterized as someone who "must be more than brave". There was among the Newfoundland working class a great solidarity and a great pride but these were not such, as the checkered history of unionism on Bell Island suggests, as to make straight the path of working class organization in the new industrial world. The reasons why these very attractive Newfoundland attributes could not easily be mobilized by union organizers let alone by political reformers are also hinted at in the "Badger Drive" and the two Bell Island songs. All three point to a deeply entrenched acceptance of the efficacy of social and industrial hierarchy and a profound sense of deference among Newfoundland working people. "The Badger Drive" and the two songs printed below also suggest that there were many Newfoundlanders who welcomed enthusiastically the foreign entrepreneurs who sought to use the resources of their land; in contemporary economic nationalist terms they were full of "false consciousness". The frequent references to time in the ballad "Wabana You're a Corker" are also significant. As has been the case in many other pre-industrial societies, Newfoundlanders did not adjust very readily to the time discipline required by industrial work; significantly in 1925 there was a wildcat strike on Bell Island when the Company first tried to introduce a punch clock system. All these elements — the acceptance of social and industrial hierarchy; the sense of deference; and the enthusiasm for the new resource ventures — are made quite explicit in the last verse of "The Badger Drive": "So now to conclude and to finish, I hope that ye all will agree/In wishing success to all Badger and the A.N.D. Company/And long may they live for to flourish, and continue to chop drive and roll/And long may the business be managed by Mr. Dorothy and Mr. Cole." The song "The Eighteenth of April" from Bell Island is less explicit about this but the idea is there nevertheless: "It's for Bobby Chambers, he's the boss of the mine/He planned out the trestle and then the main line/He planned out the main line that runs east and west/And everything runs in his mine for the best." All of this is a reminder of the danger of projecting into the past and particularly on to the working class the contemporary disdain for the "corporate ripoff" of Canadian resources. The Newfoundland workingman offered little resistance to the activities of foreign entrepreneurs. Like the French Canadians who erected in the centre of the town of Baie Comeau a statue of Colonel Robert McCormick (1880-1955) of the *Chicago Tribune*, dressed in the costume of a voyageur and seated in a canoe, Newfoundlanders showed themselves very willing

indeed to be made over into an industrial proletariat. Nor was the point of their potential lost on the developers. In 1910 an English visitor to Grand Falls, the centre of the Anglo-Newfoundland Development Company's operations and a town remarkably like Baie Comeau, gave this account of the Newfoundland working man :

The workers at the Grand Falls factory, though the great majority are natives, are described by the superintendent as being as various of language as though they came straight from the construction of the Tower of Babel. But he hopes to have them practically all natives soon. The love of the sea and the fishing, however, is in the blood of the native folk, and they are apt to obey its call and get down to their fishing work again after a spell of this up-country labour. Still, it is thought that they will soon be broken of this, will realize the advantage of the good houses in which they are placed at the Falls, and the blessing of a constant employment and a steady wage. Lord Northcliffe, in his liberal, long-sighted way, does all that can be imagined to make their life agreeable. He has made a present of a gramophone to each of the more important houses — we are not informed of the effect, if all are set going with a different "record" in each, at the same moment — and has sent them out a large assortment of instruments of music, with a view to the institution of a town band. For lack of a bandmaster, it appears that a certain discord rather than the desired harmony, is the immediate result, but no doubt this will mend itself. And there is a cricket ground of sorts; so what more have they to wish for? Speaking in all seriousness, life seems as good as can be expected for these workers at the Falls, and in a short while they will, no doubt, realize all its goodness.²

The ballads which follow, and to which this note is intended to serve as an introduction, were collected on Bell Island in November 1972, and February 1973. John Fred Squires, who sang the ballads for the author, was born at Broad Cove on November 25, 1883. His parents died when he was very young and he was "raised up"³ at Natick, Massachusetts, by two of his sisters. He returned to Newfoundland in 1910 and began work on Bell Island. In typical Newfoundland fashion he was unwilling "to tie [himself] up to one job all the time". He wanted "to try it all". Accordingly, he "worked on every job was on this Island". He loaded ore, laid rail, drilled, blasted, and repaired. He worked both on the "surface" and "underground". He also managed to keep a small farm. In short he is a fine example of a "knock about" Newfoundlander — the best that his island home has produced. The ballads he remembers date from the early years of the mining venture. Mr. Squires thinks that "The Eighteenth of April" is the older of the two; "Wabana You're a Corker" was written around 1910, mainly by his friend

Mike Hibbs, a “surface man” from Portugal Cove. The very existence of these songs is evidence of the successful transfer of an outpost tradition to the industrial world. But the ballads are important too for the clues they give to the attitudes of ordinary Newfoundlanders to their new working environment. They form part of a small group of ballads that hold up this mirror for the historian to the beginnings of “the new Newfoundland”. The songs remembered by Mr. Squires exhibit the infectious enthusiasm of the first fine careless moment, long before the more sombre side of the new life had become fully apparent — when Wabana was a corker in a real rather than an ironic sense.

Wabana You're A Corker⁴

Ye men that works down in this cave,
Your courage must be more than brave,
To work a mine beneath the wave,
Wabana you're a corker.

With your oil flash strapped up to your side,
And on your back a miner's pride,
And bold John Davis⁵ for your guide,
Wabana you're a corker.

Down in those dark and weary deeps,
Where the drills do hum and the rats do squeak,
Day after day, week after week,
Wabana you're a corker.

The boss will show you to your room,
With a lighted lamp will show a gloom,
And perhaps those walls will be your tomb,
Wabana you're a corker.

John Fred Squires⁶ repairs the drills,
When he gets them ready, he'll send them in,
If she don't work now she never will,
Wabana you're a corker.

The driller he jacks up his bar,
Between the rib and a loaded car,
Where all those miss exploders are,
Wabana you're a corker.

Come now boys and look alive,
 Another pair of slices drive,
 And don't come up 'till half past five,
 Wabana you're a corker.

When you comes up by the drain,
 Who will you meet but that McLean,⁷
 Saying, "I will cut your time again",
 Wabana you're a corker.

I asked old Alfred⁸ for my time,
 I knowed he couldn't write a line,
 And Lockey⁹ was down in the mine,
 Wabana you're a corker.

All the women on Bell Isle,
 They sleeps in bed 'til half past nine,
 And light's their fire with the batcher's¹⁰ oil,
 Wabana you're a corker.

All the women joins a club,
 To feed their pigs on the batcher's grub.
 They feeds them in a ten pound tub,
 Wabana you're a corker.

With one hello and a simple knock,
 Get up old cook it's six o'clock,
 The water wagon is around the block,
 Wabana you're a corker.

If you're living on the Green,
 Every morning you'll get beans,
 And at supper time again its beans,
 Wabana you're a corker.

*The Eighteenth of April*¹¹

The eighteenth of April, being the date of the year,
 We jumped in our small boats, for Bell Island did steer,
 To land on the island we were all inclined
 Take our picks and our shovels, go to work in the mine.

It's for Bobby Chambers,¹² he's the boss of the mine,
 He planned out the trestle and then the main line,¹³
 He planned out the main line that runs east and west,
 And everything ran in his mine for the best.

It's for Davey Fraser,¹⁴ he's boss on the pier,
 And likewise young William is a chief engineer,
 For doing up steamwork or anything wrong,
 Stop a leak in a boiler, it won't take him long.

It's for Billy Nurse,¹⁵ he's a fine looking man,
 Comes down in the pit¹⁶ with the book in his hand,
 He'll ask you your number, he'll take down your time,
 He will give you every hour that you work in the mine.

It's for Jabez Butler,¹⁷ he's working up West,
 He takes all the new cars away from the rest,
 He fills them with ore, he fills them up there,
 Grips them on the main line, sends them out to the pier.

The cars from the east'ard they comes very slow,
 The cars from the west'ard like hell they do go,
 They're took from the donkey,¹⁸ oh isn't that fine,
 Takes 'em out on the switch, and grips them to the main line.

It's for Billy Sutherland,¹⁹ he's a sturgy old block,
 He haves Charlie Carter²⁰ by night on the rock,
 And likewise young William looking after the ore,
 And if you lets a car off he'll dump you for sure.

NOTES

¹ The name Wabana came into existence after the mining operation began. It was not legally defined until 1950 but in general was taken to mean the area of the Island around the mining operation. E. R. Seary gives the following information on the name in *Place Names of the Avalon Peninsula of the Island of Newfoundland* (Toronto, 1971), 26: "Wabana, on Bell Island . . . which is almost the most easterly land in the American continent, was imposed about 1895 by Thomas Cantley, an official of the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company, which had secured a lease of the iron deposits on the island in 1893. WABANA seems to be an arbitrary formation from an Abnaki word *Wâbuna'ki*, from *wâbun*, a term associated with 'light', 'white', and refers to the morning and the east; *a'ki* 'earth', 'land'; hence *wâbuna'ki* is an inanimate singular term signifying 'east-land', or 'morning-land', the elements referring to animate dwellers of the east being wanting." Professor Seary's reference is to *The Daily News*, St. John's, January -6, 1962.

² Horace G. Hutchinson, *A Saga of the "Sunbeam"* (London, 1911), 119-20.

- ³ Mr. Squires' words are from my tape-recorded conversations with him.
- ⁴ The song was communal in origin and was, according to Mr. Squires, composed over a period of time, with many voices contributing to the final product. Mike Hibbs was not, therefore, an author in the conventional sense but the central figure in a communal process. The version of the ballad given here is a composite of two renditions by Mr. Squires — one given in November 1972, and the other in February 1973. A "corker" in Newfoundland is someone or something enjoying a heady success.
- ⁵ John Davis was from Harbour Grace and had worked at the seal fishery. On Bell Island he was "head kicker" (foreman) in the Scotia No. 2 mine (Squires interview, February 12, 1973).
- ⁶ The singer of the ballad.
- ⁷ Lockey McLean was from Nova Scotia and was "boss man" with the Scotia Company (Squires interview, February 12, 1973).
- ⁸ Alfred George was from Harbour Grace and worked on Bell Island as a "surface man", i.e. one who worked for the mining companies above ground (Squires interview, February 12, 1973).
- ⁹ Lockey McLean.
- ¹⁰ Batcher's were "mainlandsmen", i.e. men from elsewhere in Newfoundland, who boarded in company owned houses with resident families. They were expected to provide part of the family provisions.
- ¹¹ This song apparently has no formal title. The title given here is taken from the first stanza.
- ¹² Bobby Chambers was from Nova Scotia and was "head man" for the Scotia Company. The Scotia No. 1 area was often referred to as Chamber's No. 1 in his honour (Squires interview, February 12, 1973).
- ¹³ For a long time ore was carried from the 'Back' of the Island to the piers at the 'Front' in open cars over a narrow gauge railway, which was known as "the main line".
- ¹⁴ Davey Fraser was from Nova Scotia. He worked around the piers, on the deckheads and for a time ran the company staff house (Squires interview, February 12, 1973). The deckhead stood at the mine entrance and housed the machinery controlling its main transportation system. After passing over the deckhead the ore went through a refining process before being hauled across the Island to the loading piers.
- ¹⁵ Billy Nurse was from Nova Scotia and was a timekeeper (Squires interview, February 19, 1973).
- ¹⁶ A generalized name for the mines.
- ¹⁷ Jabez Butler of Clarke's Beach, Conception Bay, was a policeman who "threw it up" to work on Bell Island (Squires interview, February 12, 1973).
- ¹⁸ A small engine that hoisted cars from the surface pits and onto "the main line" (Squires interview, February 19, 1973).
- ¹⁹ Billy Sutherland was from Nova Scotia. He was "foreman by night" with the Scotia Company (Squires interview, February 19, 1973).
- ²⁰ Charlie Carter was from Topsail, Conception Bay. He worked as a "rock picker by night" (Squires interview, February 19, 1973).