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The Gender and Class Dimensions of a Rural Childhood: Martin Butler in New Brunswick, 1857-1871

REFLECTING BACK ON HIS CHILDHOOD SPENT along the Salmon River in Queen's County, the journalist and poet Martin Butler outlined both the joys and hardships of growing up on the margins of the unforgiving mid-19th century New Brunswick economy. Imitating the work of his father and older brothers, who scratched out a living shaving shingles out of discarded logs from lumbering operations, Butler remembered that he and his brother would "sally forth to 'the plain' armed with butcher knives and cut the young poplars and willows, hauling them to the river with a span of kittens". "Often have we watched him and the two oldest brothers splitting and shaving them", he continued, "or rolled in the shavings in sport, or when there was a large pile accumulated, carried them to the waters edge to make a bonfire. This was our greatest delight in the winter nights on the ice when the flame would light up the river". However, childhood was an abbreviated experience for the children of the poor, rural labouring class of the province, as economic despair and changes in the household structure were never more than a season away. Indeed, the transition from play to work came abruptly for Butler himself, when "there came still harder times. . . . 'rift' began to get scarce and the two eldest boys Ephraim and Benjamin got discouraged and ran away. Young as we were we had then to assist in making the living and many a time have my arms ached from swinging the heavy mallet used for splitting shingles".¹

The reminiscences of Martin Butler, published as "Early Recollections" in *Butler's Journal* (1890-1915), provide a rare glimpse into the class and gender dynamics of childhood for the rural poor in mid-19th-century New Brunswick.² Although

1 From "Early Recollections". *Butler's Journal* [Fredericton], July 1890. Martin Butler's life is explored in terms of the problematic of class, gender and rural identity in Deborah Stiles, "Contexts and Identities: Martin Butler, Masculinity, Class, and Rural Identity, the Maine-New Brunswick Borderlands, 1857-1915", Ph.D. thesis, University of Maine, 1997.

2 Recent Canadian contributions to the history of childhood include Robert McIntosh, "Constructing the Child: New Approaches to the History of Childhood in Canada", *Acadiensis*, XXVIII, 2 (Spring 1999), pp. 126-40 and Neil Sutherland, *Children in English-Canadian Society: Framing the Twentieth-Century Consensus* (Toronto, 1978; reprint Waterloo, 2000). Childhood history shares a natural link with family history. See, for example, the essays in Bettina Bradbury, ed., *Canadian Family History: Selected Readings* (Toronto, 1992). Studies from labour history focusing on boys in the coal mines have looked at aspects of childhood where childhood concerned labouring and gender identity. See Ian MacKay, "The Realm of Uncertainty: The Experience of Work in the Cumberland Coal Mines, 1873-1927", *Acadiensis* XVI, 1 (Autumn, 1986), pp. 3-57; Robert McIntosh, "The Boys in the Nova Scotian Coal Mines: 1873-1923", *Acadiensis* XVI, 2 (Spring 1987), pp. 35-50 and his

Deborah Stiles, "The Gender and Class Dimensions of a Rural Childhood: Martin Butler in New Brunswick, 1857-1871", *Acadiensis*, XXXIII, 1 (Fall 2003), pp. 73-86.

subjective in nature and tinged with nostalgia, autobiographical writings are often among the few sources available for historians studying the childhoods of working-class and rural peoples.³ Such writings, Neil Sutherland has suggested, are a way for people to engage in “taking stock”, of “look[ing] back over a whole existence in order to justify themselves, to make the self-edited sum of their lives to have been worth living”. Reminiscences, Sutherland further suggests, contain two distinct sets of memories which comprise a childhood “script”: the “situational”, relating to the habitual, everyday patterns of activity in childhood, and the “personal”, which are those memories of life-altering events remaining vivid in childhood memory throughout the adult’s life.⁴ Butler’s recollections contain both the situational and personal and come at a time (the early 1890s) when he was establishing himself in Fredericton as a journalist and poet with the publication of *Maple Leaves and Hemlock Branches* and the founding of his newspaper, *Butler’s Journal*.

Martin Butler was born in Norton, Kings County, New Brunswick on 1 September 1857, the last of eleven children born to Sarah White and Benjamin Butler, five of whom survived infancy. Sarah, the daughter of a shoemaker from the north of England, emigrated to New Brunswick in 1819. Religious and well-read, according to her son, she proved fully capable of providing educational instruction to her children. Benjamin Butler’s father was of Irish and Loyalist descent. He spent his working life as a marginal farmer and labourer. Sarah and Benjamin Butler were married in 1838 and formally converted to Roman Catholicism in 1842. The other surviving children, Ephraim (ca. 1840), Benjamin (ca. 1844), Eliza (ca. 1849) and John (ca. 1851) were all older than Martin.⁵

Butler’s childhood reflected the uncertainties and hardships faced by families who occupied the lowest rung on the occupational ladder in rural agricultural New Brunswick in the middle decades of the 19th century. As T.W. Acheson, Rusty Bittermann, Graeme Wynn and others have noted, the notion – pervasive in the early historiography of the Maritime provinces – that the regional agricultural landscape was dominated by communities of independent yeoman farmers, who enjoyed a rough

Boys in the Pits: Child Labour in Coal Mines (Kingston-Montreal, 2000). In the history of education, see Chad Gaffield, “Labouring and Learning in Nineteenth Century Canada: Children in the Changing Process of Family Reproduction”, in Russell Smandych, Gordon Dodds, and Alvin Esau, eds., *Dimensions of Childhood: Essays on the History of Children and Youth in Canada* (Winnipeg, 1991) and Sharon Myers, “Revenge and Revolt: The Boys’ Industrial Home of East Saint John in the Inter-War Period”, in Hilary Thompson, ed., *Children’s Voices in Atlantic Literature and Culture: Essays on Childhood* (Guelph, 1995), pp. 104-13, 13-28. Earlier, but still important works in the field include Joy Parr, ed., *Childhood and Family in Canadian History* (Toronto, 1982) and Patricia T. Rooke and R.L. Schnell, eds., *Studies in Childhood History: A Canadian Perspective* (Calgary, 1982).

3 On the strengths and limitations of the use of autobiography in the history of childhood, see Liahna Babener, “Bitter Nostalgia: Recollections of Childhood on the Midwestern Frontier”, in Elliot West and Paula Petrik, eds., *Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in America, 1850-1950* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1992), pp. 301-20; Ray Hiner and Joseph M. Hawes, *Growing Up in America: Children in Historical Perspective* (Urbana, IL, 1985); Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner, eds., *American Childhood: A Research Guide and Historical Handbook* (Westport, Connecticut, 1985).

4 Sutherland, *Children in English Canadian Society*, Preface, p. xi.

5 *Butler’s Journal*, July 1890; Martin Butler, *Maple Leaves and Hemlock Branches* (Fredericton, 1889); David Frank, “Martin Butler”, *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, XIV, 1911-1920 (Toronto, 1998), pp. 164-6.

equality of wealth and power, was a myth. Most Maritime agricultural communities, these authors argue, were stratified from the very beginning. At the top of the rural “hierarchy of the soil” were the full-time farmers who were often in a position to hire labour; this elite was made up largely of farmers who descended from people who came to province during the early decades of settlement, possessed capital and settled on a piece of land with good soil. In the middle strata of the rural hierarchy were farmers who were partly self-sufficient, depending upon other means of income to varying degrees each year depending upon crop yields and a variety of other factors. At the bottom were people like the Butlers, who generally engaged in some farming activities but depended upon off-farm employment, foraging, charity and other means to scratch out an existence. With the extension of market-oriented farming and consequent consolidation of landholding and agricultural specialization, the proportion of non-landholding rural residents who made their livelihood primarily by selling their labour was increasing in the mid-19th century.⁶ This group was hardest hit by the cyclical fluctuations of the economy and over-represented in the large-scale out-migration from the region after 1870.⁷

Uncertainty plagued the Butler family for most of Martin’s childhood. When he was born in 1857, Benjamin and Sarah were working a small farm which had been granted to Benjamin sometime before the 1851 New Brunswick census was enumerated. Shortly thereafter, Martin noted in his adult writings, the farm was lost as a result of foreclosure on a debt to a St. John merchant and finally auctioned off in 1864.⁸ By 1861 the Butlers had moved to Harcourt Parish, Kent County. Harcourt (founded 1826) was a relatively new settlement made up mostly of young families. Seventy per cent of the 100 residents were New Brunswick-born, with Roman

6 On the stratification of rural communities in the Maritimes, see Rusty Bittermann, “The Hierarchy of the Soil: Land and Labour in a 19th Century Cape Breton Community”, *Acadiensis*, XVIII, 1 (Autumn 1988), pp. 33-55; Rusty Bittermann, “Farm Households and Wage Labour in the Northeast Maritimes in the Early 19th Century”, in Daniel Samson, ed., *Contested Countryside: Rural Workers and Modern Society in Atlantic Canada, 1800-1950* (Fredericton, 1994), pp. 34-69; Rusty Bittermann, R.A. McKinnon and Graeme Wynn, “Of Inequality and Interdependence in the Nova Scotia Countryside, 1850-1870”, *Canadian Historical Review*, LXXIV, 1 (March 1993), pp. 1-43; T.W. Acheson, “New Brunswick Agriculture at the End of the Colonial Period: A Reassessment”, *Acadiensis*, XXII, 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 5-26; Beatrice Craig, “Agriculture and the Lumberman’s Frontier in the Upper St. John Valley, 1800-1870”, *Journal of Forest History*, 32, 3 (July 1988), pp. 125-37; Beatrice Craig, “Agriculture in a Pioneer Region: The Upper St. John River Valley in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century”, in Kris Inwood, ed., *Farm Factory and Fortune: New Studies in the Economic History of the Maritime Provinces* (Fredericton, 1993), pp. 17-37. On the impact of industrialization on the countryside in the late 19th century, see Stephen Maynard, “Between Farm and Factory: The Productive Household and the Capitalist Transformation of the Maritime Countryside, Hopewell, Nova Scotia, 1869-1890”, in Samson, ed., *Contested Countryside*, pp. 70-104.

7 On out-migration from the region after 1870, see Alan A. Brookes, “Out-Migration from the Maritime Provinces: Some Preliminary Considerations”, *Acadiensis*, V, 2 (Spring 1976), pp. 26-55; Patricia Thornton, “The Problem of Out-Migration from Atlantic Canada, 1871-1921: A New Look”, *Acadiensis*, XV, 1 (Autumn 1985), pp. 3-34; Betsy Beattie, “Going up to Lynn: Single Maritime-Born Women in Lynn, Massachusetts, 1870-1930”, *Acadiensis*, XXII, 1 (Autumn 1992), pp. 65-86.

8 Census of New Brunswick, 1851, Kings County, Norton Parish, p. 39, reel 1590, Provincial Archives of New Brunswick [PANB]; Kings County Registry Office Records (1864), RS 89B, reel F-6244, PANB; *Butler’s Journal*, March 1894.

Catholics and Anglicans comprising the two dominant Christian denominations. All but 2 of the 21 heads of household in the settlement were listed as farmers in the 1861 census; however, as the relatively young age of most of the adults (between 21 and 40) suggests, Harcourt was still in the pioneer phase of agricultural development. The only market crop produced by the Butlers was hay; they owned no horse nor livestock and grew oats, turnips and potatoes in subsistence quantities.⁹ Such economic circumstances imposed a transient existence on the Butler family. On at least a few occasions in the early-to-mid-1860s, the Butler family moved seasonally to Chipman Parish, Queens County, where Benjamin and the older boys worked in the forest industries both as wage labourers and in making shingles. A permanent move from Harcourt in 1868 was precipitated by Ephraim, the oldest son, who left the family in search of work. Ephraim found employment in Kingsclear, York County and soon wrote back to his father reporting that there were employment opportunities for the other male family members.¹⁰ The Butlers rented a house from a farmer of the surname Long for \$16 per year, and Benjamin, Ephraim and John were hired by the Long family. Retained to herd cows for 50 cents per month, 11-year-old Martin began his working life in the employment of the Longs. Three years after the move to Kingsclear the family relocated again, this time across the border to Maine.

Martin spent most of his formative teenage years in Washington County, Maine, where he and his brothers and his father worked for the F. Shaw Brothers tannery operation at Grand Lake Stream and elsewhere in eastern Maine. It was also in Maine that Butler's aspirations as a writer took shape. As early as 1873 he began to write as a correspondent for the *Calais Times* and within a few years was providing regular correspondence to both the *Times* and the *St. Croix Courier*, a St. Stephen, New Brunswick newspaper.¹¹ Using his earnings from the Shaw Brothers tannery and working for his board, Martin gave formal education one last try in 1875, when he enrolled in the high school in nearby Kingman. His tenure at the school lasted only one term as he was unable to observe the "etiquette and decorum" required by the institution. By this time, Butler, by his own estimation, was trapped between his compulsion to be a writer and his strict upbringing in a struggling, rural working-class family. "Emancipated from tyranny at home", he later wrote in explaining his high school experience, "and an unreasonable and tyrannical boss in the tannery, scarcely ever used to having a kind word said to me except by my mother, ridiculed and 'run on' by my fellow-laborers, because I was different in my tastes and aspirations, this,

9 Census of New Brunswick, 1861, Kent County, Harcourt Parish, Household no. 21, Schedule 1, p. 2, reel 1597, PANB. For a description of Harcourt Parish, see also William F. Ganong, *Settlements of New Brunswick: A Monograph of the Original Settlements in the Province of New Brunswick* (Royal Society of Canada, 1904).

10 Stiles, "Contexts and Identities", pp. 102-14.

11 "Genealogies", Henry Harvey Stuart Collections, MG-H25, University of New Brunswick, Harriet Irving Library Archives. According to the Stuart Collection biography and Butler's own account, he began contributing reports to the *Calais [Maine] Times* in 1873. The newspaper does not survive prior to 27 July 1877. Between 1877 and 1883, 23 pieces appear in the *Times* from Grand Lake Stream under Butler's name. There are numerous other pieces published under pseudonyms from other Washington County tannery towns which, given the reporting style and other clues, were very likely written by Butler.

the first freedom and respect I had ever enjoyed flew to my head like wine and made me drunken.”¹²

Butler returned to the Shaw Brothers tannery after he left school; but in 1876, at the age of 18, he suffered an accident which would fundamentally alter his life and career path. His own account of the accident demonstrates that catastrophic injury was a constant spectre for the industrial worker of the late 19th century:

I was working at night, grinding bark, and having only one lantern to work by could not see very well what I was doing. Everything seemed to go wrong. The ‘bolter’ would clog up, the belts would slip on the pulleys and break, so that by twelve o’clock I had not got much more than three or four bushels of bark ground. . . . After having mended the belt for perhaps the fiftieth time, I went down to the furnace room to have my lunch, after which I fell into a troubled doze. . . . the liquor runner Andrew Bryanton [woke me to go back] to work. I slowly gathered myself up and going back put on the water and started the machinery, but the belt, which was frozen, refused to run and kept slipping around the pulley. It broke again and after fixing it I put on about half the power and getting up on frame work where the pulley ran commenced surging on it to release it, when, however, it happened the first thing I knew I heard a noise resembling the breaking of dry sticks, and felt my right arm gripped by the jaws of a savage beast. When I had recovered enough from the shock to take in the situation, I found my arm hauled up to the shoulder in one of the cog wheels, and the machinery stopped. All this was the work of a few seconds.¹³

The work of a few seconds left Butler’s arm so mangled that it had to be amputated two days later. While Butler would continue to work sporadically in the tanneries of Washington County for the next decade, he could no longer command a full day’s wage. As an alternative, he turned to peddling in the towns and rural communities along the Maine-New Brunswick border.

In the 15 years after his accident, Martin Butler traveled the borderland region extensively as a pedlar and itinerant labourer, accumulating experiences and contacts which would later figure prominently in his writings. He continued to write for local newspapers and even attempted, unsuccessfully, to launch a newspaper in Grand Lake Stream in 1882. Until his death in 1883, David Main, the editor of the *Courier*, acted as a mentor to Butler, providing financial assistance and encouraging Butler’s “struggling and uncultured thought”.¹⁴ From the beginning, his work was rooted in the simple joys and grinding hardships of the rural working-class experience. In 1889

12 *Butler’s Journal*, June, 1899.

13 *Butler’s Journal*, December 1899. The general story of Butler’s experience in the Maine tanneries is detailed in Deborah Stiles, “Masculinity, Martin Butler, and the North American Sole Leather Tanning Industry: 1871-1890”, *Labour/Le Travail* 42 (Fall 1998), pp. 85-114. See also Stiles, “Contexts and Identities”, pp. 124-57 and Jacques Ferland, “Solidarity and Estrangement Among Canadian Leather Workers: Sole Leather Tanning at Grand Lake Stream, Maine, 1871-1880”, paper presented at the Atlantic Canada Studies Conference, Orono, Maine, 1990.

14 “Early Recollections”, *Butler’s Journal*, December 1890; on the relationship between Main and Butler, see also Butler’s poem “David Main” in *Maple Leaves and Hemlock Branches*, p. 35.

Butler finally settled in Fredericton and published his first book of poems, *Maple Leaves and Hemlock Branches* (1889). During the following year he founded *Butler's Journal*, which he continued to edit and publish until just months before his death in 1915.

In its 25-year run as an independent monthly newspaper, with each issue ranging in length from 4 to 12 pages, *Butler's Journal* never produced for its editor and principal contributor the economic security that he so desired. To keep the *Journal* going, Butler took on job-printing and acted as a sales agent for out-of-town publications; at times he resorted to working in local mills and even as a day labourer to secure a livelihood. In the early years the *Journal* was reformist in tone, with Butler espousing anti-imperialist and republican sentiments, as well as advocating such diverse causes as a Canadian flag, sex education, public ownership and civil service reform. By the end of the 1890s, with the active encouragement of Henry Harvey Stuart, Butler was increasingly advocating socialism. Butler and Stuart founded a branch of the Canadian Socialist League in 1902, and in 1905 established a local of the newly-founded Socialist Party of Canada.¹⁵ One constant in the life of *Butler's Journal* was its working-class and, especially, rural orientation. Butler combed the countryside in and around Fredericton in search of articles, subscriptions and advertisements from the "honest, large hearted working men and farmers".¹⁶ Butler's writing style tended toward the personal as he frequently drew on his own experiences and those of his parents and others to both generate entertaining reading and advocate social reform. Indeed, as William Bauer has suggested, Butler was "surpassingly and deeply impressed with the significance of his own being and experiences" and his "total work, scattered widely in his earlier years in several newspapers, in his own *Journal*, in his broadside poems [and] collections of poems, together constitutes a full, minute and lively corpus, comprehensible as a single work of self-portraiture".¹⁷

This style was reflected in the "Early Recollections", a series of articles Butler published in the *Journal* in 1890 and 1891. As Martin Butler made the transition from itinerant journalist and pedlar to poet and newspaperman he was clearly in a mood to take stock of his life. Following the typology set out by Sutherland, Butler's recollections were both situational and personal. They contained a personal script of important and life-changing events in his youth, including the death of his sister Eliza, the instances when his brothers Ephraim and Benjamin ran away from home and the loss of his arm. Overall, however, the recollections are situational, in the sense that they focused on the day-to-day realities of boyhood in rural New Brunswick and Maine. The situational script presented by Butler included details on hunting, fishing, berry picking, work in the woods and other seasonal subsistence activities. It also contained abundant references to the simple pleasures of rural life – the

15 David Frank, "Martin Butler"; Gerald H. Allaby, "New Brunswick Prophets of Radicalism: 1890-1914", M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1972; David Frank and Nolan Reilly, "The Emergence of the Socialist Movement in the Maritimes, 1899-1916", in Robert J. Brym and R. James Sacouman, eds., *Underdevelopment and Social Movements in Atlantic Canada* (Toronto, 1979), pp. 81-106.

16 Butler, quoted in Frank, "Martin Butler", p. 165.

17 William Bauer, "Martin Butler: Early Recollections", *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 2, 3 (Summer, 1973), pp. 180-90.

companionship of nearby neighbours' children, fun with the Butler's dog Beaver and time spent with the family toad "Mr. Stewart, who came regularly every spring and took up his place in the chimney corner for several years. No one was allowed to molest him and we would eagerly wait our turns to take him on our laps and caress him and hear him sing".¹⁸

The first three instalments of "Early Recollections", in particular, published in July, August and September 1890, suggest the situational in their discussions of connections to nature, isolation from more organized human social and economic activity and livelihoods invested in a combination of rurally-oriented resource extraction and agricultural activities.¹⁹ Patterns of seasonal activity were as regular as tides, and as inseparable from their regularity as from the more striking personal memories exposed by the particular dates, names and locations attached to them. Intermittent visits the family made to "the bush" in nearby Queens County, for instance, are intertwined with childhood activities remembered in Harcourt Parish. Both involved Butler's and other households engaged in subsistence activities, whether in agricultural production or the lumber industry. A "log hut" in Chipman Parish, Queens County, was home, for example, while the family did wage work in the lumber industry, and Butler's father himself marketed the shaved shingles he and his sons made from rejected lumber, poling them down-river in a canoe.

Butler's situational text offers insights as well into the gender dimensions of rural childhood. Activities about which Butler wrote, which can be termed "work-play" – play that mimicked the work of adults – were frequently gender specific. Work-play appears to have followed whatever work had been assigned to Butler, his brother John and their companions – the other neighbour boys close to Martin's and John's ages. Butler recalled that "even in those days of poverty and distress, the suffering was only momentary and we were more than repaid for all when our task was accomplished, and we were allowed to go fishing for trout in the brook, or sail the canoe up to the next neighbor's or wander along the river side and pluck the wild roses and honeysuckle". Work-play imitated the rural and subsistence work male adults were doing around them. Rather than axes, the young boys did their "work" with butcher knives; instead of a span of horses, one of kittens. The hauling of their "timber" to the river mimicked the only transportation link to markets, the all-important streams and rivers. Play was most frequently modeled on the work of adult male woodworkers, and, in Butler's case, this was an imitation of the work his father and his older brothers did. They also enjoyed leisure that was an outgrowth of the work of the adults, as in the bonfires enjoyed by the river's edge, an activity that likely was an end-of-work activity enjoyed by the whole community.²⁰

In terms that suggest that male children had considerable time that was free from adult supervision, Butler described how he, his brother John (closest to him in age) and the neighbour boys "would wander over the great blue-berry plain, holding

18 "Early Recollections", *Butler's Journal*, August 1890.

19 Similar patterns for Ontario were noted by Chad Gaffield. See his "Labouring and Learning in Nineteenth Century Canada".

20 "Early Recollections", *Butler's Journal*, July 1890, August 1890, September 1890.

picnics all by ourselves, in which stewed blue-berries, potatoes boiled in a tin cup, and fish caught from the brook, were our articles of diet". Butler also described how they would "wander to the river, in which we would wade to our necks, or propel the dug-out up to the Salmon-hole".²¹ Did mid-19th-century rural working-class children enjoy more freedom/latitude than other rural, but farm-based children in their day-to-day activities? The free rein given urban working-class children was of concern to early reformers. Comparisons of the similarities or differences in the play of rural and urban working-class children might reveal whether Butler's experiences were typical or atypical, and yield insights into how the experience of class changed childhood, depending on the spatial, physical and cultural matrix of rurality.²²

The seamlessness of the days of childhood, as anyone who has ever spent time with young children will attest to, meant, by Butler's recollection at least, that no sharp delineation existed between work activity or play activity. From the ages of approximately four to ten, in the rural environs of the backwoods settlement, a task might be assigned, but once it was accomplished there appears to have been ample time for boys (at least) to play, a playing-at the activities in which the adults around them were engaged. As long as there were sufficient hands for "making the living", male children apparently were given fairly free rein. This contrasts sharply with normal practice in farming families, where children were given specific chores to do, according to age and ability.²³ The labour of young children in the rural resource economy may only have been called upon in more meaningful ways when there was insufficient labour available in the household – in this case, when "still harder times" came and the two older brothers left home.²⁴ What could be called work-play as well as work in childhood, and how both were structured by the natural world, may have been quite important in helping to shape the identity of the rural working-class child. As Robert McIntosh notes, "the history of children is the history of their labour".²⁵

And were there gender differences in play? Based on the intensity of the emotions expressed in the writings about his sister Eliza, it is clear that an emotional bond existed between her and Butler. Yet, perhaps because of Eliza being older, she is not mentioned nearly as often as John. The fact that she was older, and the only female child, may also have meant that she was called upon to do household work to the

21 "Early Recollections", *Butler's Journal*, August 1890.

22 Christine Stansell, "Women, Children, and the Uses of the Streets: Class and Gender Conflict in New York City, 1850-1860", *Feminist Studies*, 8, 2 (Summer 1982), pp. 309-35; John Bullen, "Hidden Workers: Child Labour and the Family Economy in Late Nineteenth-Century Urban Ontario", in Bradbury, ed., *Canadian Family History*, pp. 199-219; Chad Gaffield, "Labouring and Learning in Nineteenth Century Canada".

23 As Mary Neth points out, "helping out" defined the work of young children on the family farm; this was an element of farm life which continued until well into the 20th century. See Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (Baltimore and London, 1995), p. 20.

24 "Early Recollections", *Butler's Journal*, July and August, 1890.

25 McIntosh, *Boys in the Pits*, p. 4. This aspect of identity appears to be one feature of childhood expressing continuity over time. Neil Sutherland argues that in most of the 20th century, work "played a central role in shaping the adult identities . . . eventually assumed". See Sutherland, "'We always had things to do': The Paid and Unpaid Work of Anglophone Children Between the 1920s and the 1960s", *Labour/Le Travail* 25 (Spring 1990), pp. 105-41.

extent that she could not participate in the work-play activities Butler described.²⁶ In games of imagination rather than ‘work-play’, however, Eliza was mentioned as a participant. Many rainy and snowy days were no doubt spent in the imaginative type of play Butler described in his essays, in which Eliza, as well as the other Butler children, participated in fashioning new worlds, new peoples, a new language. In one instance, their games were influenced by global events; Butler wrote of how the American Civil War inspired pretend-war-making, the children making stick and snow figures (depending on the season) for soldiers. Butler recalled that they created “far-off worlds” with their imaginations and attributed this creativity to their having little or no access to books. Their “originality,” he claimed in retrospect, “was equal in its arrangement to anything produced by Dickens or Thackeray”.²⁷

Butler’s descriptions of an elaborate imaginary geography, polity and language are reminiscent of what has been documented for a much more famous group of siblings – the Brontës. In *The Brontës’ Web of Childhood*, F.E. Ratchford argues that the Brontës’ games of imagination contained contemporaneous events, subsequently re-fashioned in their fantasy world. The resultant writings were painstakingly penned into miniature volumes. Sisters Charlotte, Emily and Anne, and their brother Branwell, grew up on the moors of northern England in the 1820s and early 1830s. What the sisters wrote in their early years – the imaginary worlds they created – they took with them into their young adult lives. Poems connected to these early writings were the building stones, in the case of Emily and Charlotte Brontë, for the masterpieces *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. While Butler only briefly mentioned the worlds he and his siblings created, the similarity here suggests that interactions with nature and the isolation induced by certain rural settings were significant factors in linking rural, pre-industrial childhood with activity such as imaginative play. Such play was not necessarily gender-divided. Both boys and girls played together when games of imagination were the choice of play, although the games themselves appear to have been in several instances guided by male-normative patterns, the soldier-war games being the most obvious example.²⁸

Butler’s “Early Recollections” indicate, nevertheless, that gender norms were operative, in terms of gender divides being part of the wider, community reality. Butler recalled he and his brother John going to nearby lumber camps to visit. There,

26 See Bettina Bradbury’s “Gender at Work at Home: Family Decisions, The Labour Market, and Girls’ Contributions to the Family Economy”, in Bettina Bradbury, ed., *Canadian Family History*, pp. 177-99; Stiles, “Contexts and Identities”, pp. 100, 133.

27 “Early Recollections”, *Butler’s Journal*, September 1890. Literary critic Joyce Carol Oates notes that the Brontë children also began their imaginative play with some toy soldiers brought home by the father for the son. See Oates, “The Magnanimity of *Wuthering Heights*” [first pub. *Critical Inquiry*, Winter, 1983], <http://storm.usfca.edu/~southern/wuthering.html>.

28 Butler mentions the American Civil War having touched off their stick-man and snow-man soldier games; the Brontës’ play writing and story writing began when their father gave their brother Branwell a set of toy soldiers, with which they all began to play. Interestingly enough, the Brontë children began with combat scenarios in their games; but then, at the urging of the sisters, they branched out into other imagined worlds, using the toy soldiers, in games which did not involve war-making. See F. E. Ratchford, *The Brontës’ Web of Childhood* (New York, 1941), pp. 6-35. For a discussion of their (especially Emily’s) connection to nature as children, which involved, in large part, wandering in the fields and woods around the parsonage where they lived, see pp. 64-6.

the two were introduced to some of the aspects of male identity and social relations common to such working-class environments in the 19th century. One of the common practices of male work culture in the 19th century was the bullying of the youngest and/or weakest workers, which Martin and John experienced when they visited camps near their home on Sundays. "Some of the men, considering themselves smart", Butler recalled, "used to scare me by making believe to kill me, which I took to be real, and would sometimes tear the clothes off my back. The result has been a shock to my nervous system from which I never entirely recovered". Butler also recalled that he picked up the habit of swearing at a young age from being around the men in the camps. He dropped the habit at once and permanently, though, after a male member of the community (in league with Butler's parents, no doubt) dressed up as Satan and threatened to carry the young impressionable child away to hell unless he mended his ways.²⁹

The gender and class-specific dynamics of the rural, lumbering culture also informed the personal script in Butler's recollections. His "first drunk", a male rite of passage, occurred when he was about ten years of age and had been given permission to accompany John to a "piling bee" being held at a distant neighbour's house. There, some older males forced a half pint of whisky down his throat. Butler credited John with saving his life when he fell face down into the shallows of the river going home and, intoxicated, nearly drowned. "[M]other was not pleased when I came home drunk", Butler remembered; he escaped punishment, however, when the circumstances were revealed to his parents. Maleness, as expressed by fathers and by the men of the logging camps and in the rural community, provided for boys like Butler and his brother specifically-gendered experiences of rural childhood. His brother John, for example, became "a great marksman," hunting partridge and wild pigeons.³⁰

The gender dimensions of childhood in the 19th century were seldom more in evidence than in the power structure of the household; Benjamin Butler emerges in the writings of his son Martin as a stern and unyielding patriarch as do the other fathers. The Butler boys and their childhood companions may have, at times, had the freedom to roam, but, as Martin recalled, "we had to take care and be back on time or we would catch it, as our fathers were very severe".³¹ Benjamin Butler used corporal punishment to ensure order and discipline. He also organized how the family's time together was spent (such as all the Butler children being compelled to spend two hours every Sunday on their knees in prayer) and made the final decisions with respect to when the family was going to make their various moves for employment. While these realities do not seem out of place in view of prevailing marital and parental relationships in the 19th century, it is clear that Martin Butler was deeply affected by the severity of his father. Unlike his other memories, those about his father and mother, both in the "Early Recollections" and in other pieces, had attached to them commentary on contemporary issues related to such reforms as regulating corporal punishment or any other severe treatment of children by parents or the state.³²

29 "Early Recollections", *Butler's Journal*, August 1890.

30 "Early Recollections", *Butler's Journal*, July 1890, August 1890, September, 1890.

31 "Early Recollections", *Butler's Journal*, August, 1890, September 1890.

32 *Butler's Journal*, March 1894, January 1895, October 1890.

Other class dimensions shaped those life-altering events that were part of Butler's personal childhood script. One of Butler's most poignant memories was when his second oldest brother, Benjamin, ran away from home forever. Unlike the mention given in the anecdote above, when both Ephraim and Benjamin "got discouraged and ran away", Butler recalled in an anguished tone the turning point when Benjamin left on his own and never returned. The family never heard from him again. Butler was about four at the time. He later recreated the event in a poem, "To My Absent Brother". Butler and his brother Ben

walked awhile, and then sat down
Upon a knoll with grass o'ergrown;
[He] took me on [his] knee to rest,
And fondly clasped me to [his] breast.

I could not tell the conflict sore
Within your breast, that fateful hour,
The agonies of mind and heart
From all you loved on earth to part.

You gently told me to go home,
Assuring me you soon would come,
And toddling off, in childish pride,
I soon was at my mother's side.

That night, the news to us did come,
That Ben had [run] away from home;
He'd left the word with neighbors near,
Well knowing that we soon would hear.³³

Part of how Butler experienced growing up, of course, was his relationship with his siblings, ties that involved both class and gender dimensions. The ties he felt, for example, were expressed in his recollection of being Ben's "special pet" and of how devastated he was at Ben's leave-taking, an event undoubtedly precipitated not only by familial conflict but also by the challenges the family faced in survival. The Butlers were a close-knit family, though the challenges of their economic status could and did cause family tensions, expressed most keenly in the loss of Benjamin from the family circle.

Equally poignant as well as reflective of the divisions between the experiences of male and female children was Martin Butler's recollection of his sister's death. Eliza Butler became ill in the autumn of 1869 and the family "laid her to rest in a nameless grave" the following February. The death of his 19 year-old sister had a profound impact on Martin, and his expressions of devotion to Eliza suggests that she played a central role in raising him. "Twenty years have passed away in shine and shadow", Butler wrote in his recollections, "and yet her loving memory is as fresh in my heart,

33 Butler, "To My Absent Brother," *Maple Leaves and Hemlock Branches* (Fredericton, 1889), pp. 58-60; see also "Early Recollections", *Butler's Journal*, July-September, 1890.

and will be until life with all its trials and suffering is over, and I meet her in a land where parting is no more". "Her gentle influence", he continued, "has been with me, helping me in difficulties, cheering me in distress and when the load has seemed too heavy". While death due to illness was endemic to 19th-century life, the loss of a caregiver, for Butler at least, was no less traumatic than in more recent times.

Martin Butler's reminiscences of his education reveal what was in all likelihood a common pattern for the children of migratory rural labouring families in late 19th-century New Brunswick. Sarah Butler taught her children at home. While Butler claimed that "at the breaking out of the American [U.S. Civil] war I could read the accounts of it in the papers", he would have been only four years old at the time (1861).³⁴ Nevertheless, he quickly came to share his mother's affinity for reading and by the age of sixteen "could recite all of the shorter, and some of the longer pieces in Longfellow, Whittier, Moore, and several other texts". Sarah Butler's teaching efforts extended to a neighbour's male children; however, Martin judged these efforts a failure, for "though naturally bright, they were averse to learning, and anything like discipline or decorum in school hours could not be impressed on them, so they soon quit coming".³⁵ In 1868, when the family was in Kingsclear, Martin got his first taste of formal schooling. He was "allowed to attend in consideration of building the fires and sweeping out the room, as this was the before the days of Free Schools". This late introduction to the formal school environment was not a success, as his "natural disposition for mischief" and lack of discipline undermined any success he might have achieved. However, he also remembered the class bias of the teacher as contributing to the less-than-satisfying experience. "I fancied, with good reason", he wrote, "that she showed more favour to the rest of the scholars, especially those whose parents were well to do and this made me worse".³⁶ Such comments suggest that the rural, working poor in 19th-century New Brunswick received less than subtle reminders of their class position on a regular basis. The treatment Martin Butler received from community members as a child may have contributed to the fierce egalitarianism evident in his adult writings.

Butler had fonder memories of the informal education he received during his years in York County. While Benjamin Butler and his two older sons worked for the Long family, Martin found a mentor in their youngest son Alfred. Alfred, who aspired to and, eventually, became a physician, was devoid, Butler recalled, of "that proud and disdainful bearing which distinguished the other members of the family, toward those whom they were pleased to consider their inferiors". As Martin accompanied Alfred on his daily round of activities, which included chores and frequent trips to the woods in search of medicinal roots and herbs, the older boy imparted "much valuable information" and "took great pains to smooth" Butler's "rough and uncultured mind".³⁷ His second and chief mentoring in York county was an "apprenticeship" with Kingsclear merchant George Hammond. "Apprenticeship" was how Butler described the relationship, though it consisted mainly of his cutting wood and doing general

34 "Early Recollections", *Butler's Journal*, August, 1890.

35 "Early Recollections", *Butler's Journal*, August 1890.

36 "Early Recollections", *Butler's Journal*, November 1890.

37 "Early Recollections", *Butler's Journal*, November 1890.

chores around the store for Hammond and his wife, in exchange for “good food and comfortable clothing”. Yet, the term describes fairly accurately, if imperfectly, the agreement entered into between Butler, his parents and Hammond. Butler was a house servant and store clerk, but, at the same time, Hammond, who was an amateur poet and printer as well as a devout Baptist, taught Butler the skills of setting type and perhaps a thing or two about poetry.³⁸ By the 1860s, apprenticeship was no longer an integral part of male growing up in North America, largely because the capitalist economy had changed so dramatically. As W.J. Rorabaugh suggests, “Gone was the intricate and carefully balanced social fabric that had both comforted and constricted youths as they learned to become adults. . . . Gone were the old rules for learning how to grow up”.³⁹ Butler’s descriptions indicate that what skills and training he did receive in printing and writing were almost by accident, through an informal process of learning, though that learning proved crucial.⁴⁰ The apprenticeship, such as it was, was also brief. While originally planned for an indefinite but fairly lengthy period, the apprenticeship ended after only eight months. Butler later admitted that it was due to conflict with Hammond’s wife, not Hammond himself, which caused the split. Indeed, his friendship with Hammond continued into the 20th century.⁴¹

At the abrupt termination of the Hammond apprenticeship in the fall of 1869, Butler returned home. The family was now in nearby Smithfield, also in York County, renting a farm. “My father”, Butler recalled, “not calculating on having one more to support, did not welcome me with any degree of enthusiasm”. That there was one more mouth to feed perhaps strained resources to the breaking point. Butler’s sister Eliza, 19 years of age by this time, became ill that autumn and died in February of 1870. The emotional distress was, undoubtedly, exacerbated by the financial necessity to make several more moves, all initially in the same area of York County and all for the purposes of employment. Butler went out to work first in Kitchen Settlement, as a farm labourer, where he was promised a pair of shoes and the chance to go to school (neither materialized). Next, in the fall of 1870, Butler worked for Thomas Hoyt of Prince William.⁴² The death of Eliza can, perhaps, be viewed as the end of his age of innocence, and the reception he received when returning home, having just had his thirteenth birthday, in a more concrete way, signaled that his childhood was coming to an end. In 1871 the Butler family was on the move again, this time to Washington County, Maine, to work in the expanding leather tanning industry. Here Martin Butler would assume a permanent place in the rural working class.⁴³

Clearly, Martin Butler was a remarkable person in the sense that he grew up poor, had little formal education and still managed to leave a considerable body of

38 “Early Recollections”, *Butler’s Journal*, November, 1890; Stiles, “Contexts and Identities”, pp. 155-277.

39 W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice: From Franklin to the Machine Age in America* (New York, 1986), p. 209. See also T.W. Acheson, *Saint John: The Making of a Colonial Urban Community* (Toronto, 1985).

40 “Early Recollections”, *Butler’s Journal*, November 1890.

41 “Early Recollections”, *Butler’s Journal*, January 1891. Butler later revealed that it was the wife’s physically abusive treatment of him which led him to dissolve the apprenticeship. *Butler’s Journal*, June 1896, September 1900.

42 “Early Recollections”, *Butler’s Journal*, November 1890.

43 “Early Recollections”, *Butler’s Journal*, November 1890.

published writing containing lively and cogent ideas. However, there is no reason to suggest that his experience growing up as a child of poor working parents in 19th-century New Brunswick was atypical. Transiency, a demanding and sometimes harsh father, lack of opportunity for formal education, the frightening and early introduction to male work culture and the disapprobation of social betters, could, for poor children, make childhood a demoralizing, albeit abbreviated, passage. Butler came of age at a time when a new consensus about childhood was beginning to form, as concerns about universal education, child labour, corporal punishment and other reforms were assuming a prominent place on the social agenda. Given the experiences outlined in his recollections, it is not surprising that Martin Butler would become a consistent and vocal advocate of child welfare reform.

The recollections of Martin Butler are also a testament to the indomitable spirit of children. While the destabilizing effect of relocation and changes to the structure of the household due to economic hardship, as well as the death of family members, may have created enduring emotional scars, on a day-to-day basis the rural environment of 19th-century New Brunswick offered an abundance of simple pleasures and gave full license to children to indulge their imaginations. Indeed, the economic situation of Butler's parents may have afforded him more leisure than was enjoyed by the children of financially-stable farm families. On the rivers and in the fields, forests and humble dwellings of his youth, Butler and his siblings and friends could cast off the restraints of poverty and hardship and create imaginary worlds of wonder and heroism. It mattered little that play, particularly work-play, was often socializing them into the class-divided and rigidly gendered world of their parents. Martin Butler aptly captured the dichotomy of his childhood in 19th-century New Brunswick when he wrote, "We were poor, very poor, but with a crust of bread, and a shelter, with flowers and sunshine, the birds and the bees and the few playmates we had, we were oh! so happy".⁴⁴

44 "Early Recollections", *Butler's Journal*, September 1890.