The Great Unravelling: New Histories of Deindustrialization

DEINDUSTRIALIZATION IS A PROCESS, NOT AN EVENT. Historians have long understood this, although the field of deindustrialization studies is itself of more recent vintage.[1] The socio-economic and political implications of colliery closures, the shutting of steelworks, and the loss of cod and lobster fisheries, papermills, and other large-scale primary industries has served as a catalyst for community activism and scholarly activity in Atlantic Canada, as elsewhere, for half a century. Writing in *Acadiensis* in 2000, as part of the famous debate on region and regionalism, Colin Howell recalled that one of the founding aspirations of the Acadiensis Generation was to make Canadians outside of Atlantic Canada "aware of how capitalism worked to the [region's] disadvantage"; he also noted that in his Atlantic Canada Studies classes at Saint Mary's from the 1970s onwards, discussions centred on historical industrialization and contemporary deindustrialization.[2] It is, by now, well understood that the latter is experienced from below and, in the words of Christopher H. Johnson, often "engenders quiescence, the internalization of despair."[3] Industrial communities, once so central to the national story as drivers of development, as absorbers of migrants, as modernity embodied in the white heat of production, are pushed to the margins: disregarded, peripheralized, stereotyped, and subjected to every whim of the metropolitan fallacy – part of the false narrative that the big, modern city leads and the

1 The field may be reasonably dated from the appearance of Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison's *The Deindustrialization of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), although there has been a substantial uptick in research and publication since 2000. See, for instance: Stephen High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt, 1969–1984* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Tracy Neumann, *Remaking the Rust Belt: The Postindustrial Transformation of North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Ewan Gibbs, *Coal Country: The Meaning and Memory of Deindustrialization in Postwar Scotland* (London: University College London Press, 2021); and Andy Sumner, *Deindustrialization, Distribution and Development: Structural Change in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

2 Colin D. Howell, "Development, Deconstruction and Region: A Personal Memoir," Acadiensis 30, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 23–30.

3 Christopher H. Johnson, *The Life and Death of Industrial Languedoc, 1700–1920: The Politics of Deindustrialization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 259.

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ex-coalfields or ex-steeltowns or ex-papertowns or ex-fishing villages all follow along behind like an Oliver Twist asking for more.

No one who has spent any time in a former industrial community can escape the palpable sense of loss that pervades, particularly amongst those older generations who were witness-participants to what was once there. To grow up in such a place, as did I and the writers of the two books under discussion here – Steven High's *One Job Town: Work, Belonging and Betrayal in Northern Ontario* and Lachlan MacKinnon's *Closing Sysco: Industrial Decline in Atlantic Canada's Steel City* – is to be rooted in a very particular mode of collective storytelling and of history writing.[4] Memory acts as palimpsest. An empty patch of waste land is still called "the pit," a squared-off parcel, not far away is called "the pony field" because this is where the colliery horses went during their holidays or (if they were fortunate) their retirement, a house holds onto to its tarnished reputation because a former inhabitant once broke a strike. Descendants, whether they live in the stained dwelling or not, retain the black mark of the "scab"; they are never fully trusted and never entirely integrated into the common weal of what is, otherwise, their home, their community. As Lachlan MacKinnon aptly describes in the introduction to *Closing Sysco*, "The historical moment in which I grew up was defined wholly by what came before."[5] It was ever thus on the industrial frontier.

The deindustrializing present and a post-industrial future are the direct result of a great unravelling of the industrial past – a past in which *the* community was brought together around *the* pit, *the* steelworks, *the* papermill while producing a singular, genealogical sense of place and people or a place-identity. It will be apparent to readers external to such contexts just how emotive the language used often is, as though this is history written not in prose but in elegiac poetry. Thus, in the preface to *One Job Town*, Steven High writes of the papermill in Sturgeon Falls, Northern Ontario, being "suddenly ripped away," its contents either removed and shipped out or "pulverized into dust."[6] It will be apparent also that for both authors this is personal history, the fourth wall between their observation and their involvement frequently shatters or is dispensed with entirely. "I cannot pretend to be a disinterested observer of this unfolding story," High writes, indicatively. "I saw in Sturgeon

4 Steven High, *One Job Town: Work, Belonging and Betrayal in Northern Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018); Lachlan MacKinnon, *Closing Sysco: Industrial Decline in Atlantic Canada's Steel City* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).

5 MacKinnon, *Closing Sysco*, 3.

6 High, *One Job Town*, ix.

Falls a microcosm of the economic and political crisis facing the region as a whole."[7] This sense of connectivity is not an uncommon feature of histories written from below, although, per Eric Hobsbawm's warning, it does require a careful handling to avoid producing "in-group histories."[8]

As an interdisciplinary field of study, deindustrialization studies has taken root in recent years as scholars now endeavour to come to terms with the impact that the loss of industry – and an industrial way of life – has had on working-class communities, institutions, patterns of behaviour, and people.[9] Much of the existing scholarship has focused on Europe and North America, but there have been useful and important attempts to rebalance the "mismatch between where deindustrialization is researched and where it is occurring" (namely in the Global South).[10] The local case study predominates regardless of geographical emphasis – a stock in trade inherited from the older, more discrete fields that have fed into deindustrialization studies: labour history and oral history. In fact, it may be argued that area studies of this kind have rescued especially labour history from the doldrums of the 1990s by turning away from an ultimately doomed narrative of 19th-century rise and 20th-century fall, albeit with moments of grassroots resistance, to more contemporary struggles that reveal the richness of working-class experience in a neoliberal age. Gone is the "tragedy" of industry or the "melodrama" of industrial politics; it has been replaced with the "epic" of surviving against the odds.[11]

Oral history provides the essential methodological component of this new historiographical mode. Writing about industrial loss, High has argued,

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7 High, *One Job Town*, x.

8 Eric Hobsbawm, "Marxist Historiography Today," in *Marxist History-Writing for the Twenty-First century,* ed. Chris Wickham (Oxford: Oxford University Press/British Academy, 2007), 184–5.

9 Steven High, Lachlan MacKinnon, and Andrew Perchard, eds., *The Deindustrialized World: Confronting Ruination in Postindustrial Places* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017); Lachlan MacKinnon and Steven High, "Deindustrialization," in *The Routledge Handbook to the Political Economy and Governance of the Americas*, ed. Olaf Kaltmeier, Anne Tittor, Daniel Hawkins, and Eleonora Rohland (London: Routledge, 2020).

10 Seth Schindler, Tom Gillespie, Nicola Banks, Mustafa Kemal Bayırbağ, Himanshu Burte, J. Miguel Kanai, and Neha Sami, "Deindustrialization in Cities of the Global South," *Area Development and Policy* 5, no. 3 (September 2020): 283–304.

11 It should be noted here, though, that new themes did, of course, emerge within the broader field of labour history despite the relative decline described, including public sector unionism, the nationalization of Canadian labour, and the role of women in the workforce. See, for instance, Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage, eds., *Public Sector Unions in the Age of Austerity* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2013) and Joan Sangster, *Transforming Labour: Women and Work in Postwar Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

"requires that we try to understand the world as the marginalized see it."[12] In other words – and leaving aside what might be meant by "the marginalized" for a moment – oral history as method and as source allows for the transfer of agency from the individual scholar-researcher (or intellectual) to members of a given community, thus effecting a shared authority.[13] It is not my purpose, here, to rehearse fully the (more than 50-year-old) debate about oral history as a method: the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity, narrative and analysis, empowerment and intersubjectivity, or memory and (capitalized) History have been well-examined elsewhere. Indeed, labour history did more than its fair share of the methodological development of these themes.[14] But there has always been a weak point: the historian as activist or, in a more moderate characterization, the activist orientation of the historian. Take MacKinnon's observation about the "popularity of Labour's Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom" (6), which can only have been written in fulfilment of this activist mode.[15] As the 2019 general election revealed, and there were signs of this throughout his tenure, Corbyn was deeply unpopular and, ironically, especially so in deindustrializing or post-industrial parts of the country he wished to lead.

Corbynite electoral strategy, like that of Bernie Sanders in 2016 and 2020, leaned heavily on a positive vision of the postwar world which, as MacKinnon puts it, "reveal[led] the real perception that a moment of working-class achievement has been lost and is in need of recovery."[16] This left-wing motif of a golden age, mirrored in a Granatsteinian obsession with the Second World War, demands careful, scholarly scrutiny lest the nostalgic overwrite the historical. Can oral history truly support this? That is the question – to pose, here, rather than to answer – since individual faith in oral history as method and oral testimony as empirical source will necessarily shape one's response, professional and personal. Instead, let us tackle the use of the postwar "golden age" as the anchor point for deindustrialization studies. Hobsbawm famously cleaved the second half of his *Age of Extremes* into the golden age of social

12 Steven High, "Beyond Aesthetics: Visibility and Invisibility in the Aftermath of Deindustrialization," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (Fall 2013): 141.

13 Steven High, "Sharing Authority: An Introduction," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43 (Winter 2009): 12–34.

14 Rick Halpern, "Oral History and Labor History: A Historiographic Assessment after Twenty-five Years," *Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (September 1998): 596–610.

15 High employs a similar motif, drawing on the writing of British journalist Owen Jones; see High, *One Job Town*, 16–18.

16 MacKinnon, *Closing Sysco*, 6.

democracy, running from 1945 until 1980 at the latest, although the end point was probably closer to the energy crises of the early 1970s, and the subsequent landslide of neoliberal economic "theology" (his term) lasting from 1980 onwards.[17] For Hobsbawm, the golden age was marked by economic prosperity and a strong labour movement. A prominent generation of labour historians, too, one might add. This motif of golden ageism is implicit in the postwar experiences of workers in Northern Ontario and industrial Cape Breton as High and MacKinnon present them.

There is an identifiable paradox at the heart of working-class memory of the postwar years, of this "golden age." The boom that occurred in the Canadian paper and pulp industry after the war and that was to the benefit of Sturgeon Falls, for example, was not so apparent, as MacKinnon reveals, in the Sydney steelworks. Simply put, job losses in heavy industries were high. Whether in British coal or Sydney steel, there were fewer workers in 1970 than there had been in 1945 or 1950. But workers have generally expressed warm feelings about those years, a warmth that contrasts strikingly with both the preceding interwar period and the succeeding neoliberal age. Is this industrial nostalgia? Relativism because what came before and after was worse? The glow that accompanies one's youth? Or something else, perhaps? The literature on deindustrialization has been somewhat preoccupied with answering these questions.[18] At the same time popular understanding has been affected by the rise of the heritage industry, which itself serves to reify the past and to commodify smokestack nostalgia. Visitors can wander through a steel works or paper mill or coal mine as museum, absent the noise, the heat, the danger, and the masculine camaraderie that would once have characterised those places as places of work.

The heavy use of illustration in *One Job Town* comes closest to reproducing that "visitor experience" – *Closing Sysco* employs illustration in a more traditional manner. Read as an independent narrative, High's use of photography is telling. On one page, one sees the paper mill in full flow, on the next it is empty with tarpaulin covering the machinery, a few pages later

17 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994); Eric Hobsbawm, *On the Edge of the New Century* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 102.

18 Indicative studies include Tim Strangleman, "'Smokestack Nostalgia,' 'Ruin Porn,' or Working-Class Obituary: The Role and Meaning of Deindustrial Representation," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (Fall 2013), 23–37 and Jackie Clarke, "Closing Time: Deindustrialization and Nostalgia in Contemporary France," *History Workshop Journal* 79, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 107–25.

on the mill has been demolished and all we can see is a fence and a padlock to keep people out. These illustrations are, in instinct and effect, a museum exhibition and should be treated as such. Unfortunately, High rarely makes connective links between his text and his imagery, his captions often lack any interpretive detail, and his theoretical consideration of the role of the visual material in the book (drawing on Doreen Massey) comes belatedly in the final chapter "Salvaging History." In a telling caption on page 286, High refers to photographs of "the remains" of the mill before turning on page 289 to the idea of "cultural erasure" and "exile from memories." These evoke funereal sentiments, the languages of death and of commemoration. One mourns a loss, marks a passing, hangs a photograph on the wall of those who are no longer with us, attaches new meaning to the salvaged but precarious evidence of a life. Photographs and memories fade, after all. They become the detritus of industrial nostalgia.

If economics served as the reason for a perceived golden age in Sturgeon Falls, then, to return to our broader discussion, in Cape Breton it was the strength of the labour movement. Organized labour there in the postwar years was more moderate in speech and action than it had been in between the wars, when the island was the powerbase of leftists like J.B. MacLachlan.[19] Nevertheless, this moderation, portrayed by MacKinnon as a "turning away from the so-called 'red phase' of Cape Breton workers' culture," resulted in a "perceived strengthening of working-class institutions and social positions."[20] Labour was able to exercise some of its potential in Northern Ontario, as well, procuring a "limited and unstable truce" with the papermill's management.[21] This second experience was not entirely unusual in contexts of relative affluence. High's characterization of the truce calls to mind the relationship between the British National Coal Board and the National Union of Mineworkers in the years before colliery closures became visibly controversial in the 1970s and 1980s. But one must not lose sight of the paradox: a wave of deindustrialization had happened during the so-called golden age, when organized labour was apparently strong and had used this strength to acquiesce to pit closures and job losses. It is nostalgia for that former potency that leads

19 David Frank, *J. B. MacLachlan: A Biography* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1999).

20 MacKinnon, *Closing Sysco*, 17–18.

21 High, *One Job Town*, 71.

to policy cul-de-sacs such as Corbyn's proposal – correctly reported and then subsequently denied – to re-open Britain's deep coal mines.[22]

Absent oral history, that famously "slippery medium for preserving facts," or with oral history placed on the periphery of methodology, the above discussion would not likely occur – or, at least, not quite in this fashion.[23] But oral testimony focused on the waning of the industrial way of life, and from below, often amplifies a sense of decline, a dwelling on worsening current circumstances as compared to apparently more stable pasts – hence the value of the golden age paradox. Decline, if not "declinism," is a recurrent theme for High and MacKinnon, while prosperity and affluence, even in relative terms, less frequently appear in their narratives. This is an important point of contestation. As a theme, deindustrialization can easily lend support to a politically and scholarly potent rhetoric of loss (especially in Britain and the United States, though it is less obvious in Canadian circles at present) – a declinist tendency that has social and cultural resonance in formerly industrial communities; it lies perniciously at the heart of smokestack nostalgia.[24] Moreover, as Jim Tomlinson has argued, "growth" versus "decline" tends to distract from those observable realities of deindustrialization that have "increased wage inequalities and job insecurity [and] also reshaped the social security system and the pattern of public employment."[25]

Closing Sysco and *One Job Town* are studies anchored in testimony, rooted in the voicing of loss and decline, corporate divestment and mismanagement, and environmental destruction and protest thereagainst. Put together, the explicit thematic content of both volumes is complementary and convergent: politics, poverty, physical health, regional development, and environmental change. There are implicit themes, too, including gender relations, a history of emotions in industrial and deindustrializing contexts, colonialism, skills and training, and various modes of embodiment: the body politic, the human body, the community as a body of people, the mill as a body of workers, and so forth.

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22 Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, "'Reopen the coal mines'? Deindustrialisation and the Labour Party," *Political Quarterly* 92, no. 2 (April-June 2021): 246-54.

23 Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Abacus, 1997), 206. Hobsbawm's observation was originally made in 1985; see E.J. Hobsbawm, "History from Below – Some Reflections," in *History from Below: Studies in Popular Protest and Popular Ideology in Honour of George Rudé*, ed. Frederick Krantz (Montreal: Concordia University Press, 1985), 66.

24 Jim Tomlinson, "Thrice Denied: 'Declinism' as a Recurrent Theme in British History in the Long Twentieth Century," *Twentieth Century British History* 20, no. 2 (2009): 227-51.

25 Jim Tomlinson, "De-industrialization Not Decline: A New Meta-Narrative for Post-War British History," *Twentieth Century British History* 27, no. 1 (March 2016): 76-99.

This list is not exhaustive, although at times it can appear exclusive. Sexuality, for instance, is absent. This last subject may not have directly impacted upon the economics of deindustrialization, or the associated processes of change, but it surely nuances otherwise essentialized conceptions of industrial-proletarian community and the "traditional masculinity" marshalled in "resistance" to closures and job losses.[26] Terms such as "hard men" (from Ronnie Johnstone and Arthur McIvor[27]) as well as phrases such as "boys will be boys" (from Craig Heron[28]) and "innate notions of working-class masculinity" (MacKinnon's own) are deeply heteronormative, yet at no stage is that normativity challenged or even examined as such as it is taken for granted.[29]

We may reasonably ask, in contradiction and with nuance in mind, whether the Cape Breton experience differed from that of steelworkers in Indiana, for example, where, as Anne Balay discovered, there was "violent homophobia every day" and queer narrators "each thought they were absolutely alone in the mills."[30] Perhaps, instead, the atmosphere in the Sysco works was more akin to that found by Helen Smith in the homosocial industries of Sheffield, the steel town of the north of England.[31] This is not just a challenge for MacKinnon, although the literature is more usefully comparative given the common focus on steel rather than paper; High, likewise, offers a "history of 'men as men'."[32] In common with Thomas Dunk's examination of working-class masculinity in Thunder Bay, High finds that there are few avenues for vulnerability – that men rely instead on stoicism, anger, violence, and on visible signs of manhood.[33] Given that, in both volumes, queer working-class men are rendered invisible and silent if not deliberately silenced, their experiences of community and of masculinity are not considered and working-class masculinity remains essentialized and heteronormative. This is a weakness of deindustrialization

26 MacKinnon, *Closing Sysco*, 149.

27 Ronnie Johnston and Arthur McIvor, "Dangerous Work, Hard Men, and Broken Bodies: Masculinity in the Clydeside Heavy Industries, c.1930–1970s," *Labour History Review* 69, no. 2 (August 2004): 135–51.

28 Craig Heron, "Boys Will Be Boys: Working-Class Masculinities in the Age of Mass Production," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 69 (Spring 2006): 6–34.

29 MacKinnon, *Closing Sysco*, 122.

30 Anne Balay, *Steel Closets: Voices of Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Steelworkers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

31 Helen Smith, *Masculinity, Class and Same-Sex Desire in Industrial England, 1895–1957* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2015).

32 High, *One Job Town*, 14.

33 High, *One Job Town*, 270; Thomas W. Dunk, *It's A Working Man's Town: Male Working-Class Culture* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).

studies more generally – a failure to reach effective accommodation between gender and sexuality, on the one hand, and class, on the other, thus replicating the same flaw apparent in older forms of labour history.

Then, as now, male breadwinners are centered and male workplaces are established as "the locus from which identity, behaviour, social relations and consciousness of working people ultimately emanates," to borrow an apposite observation from Alice Kessler-Harris; queer people and women are ultimately cast as supporters of men (that is, heteronormative men) rather than as co-workers or as equal parts of the "community."[34] As High tellingly observes, "women were largely confined to the mill offices. They did not hire women for jobs in the 'plant proper'."[35] It was similar in Cape Breton, where women were employed in the offices of the steelworks rather than on the shop floor.[36] This emphasis tends to reinforce the narrative of decline and decay. But if men were decentered and the vital role of women in maintaining the economic security of a household made the focus, a different conclusion might well be drawn – change rather than decline, perhaps. This is what makes MacKinnon's turn in his sixth chapter to the campaign against environmental damage such a powerful piece of writing. Here women are at the forefront, of both the protest action and the historian's narrative. The testimony provided by Debbie Ouellette and Juanita McKenzie, especially, reveals a feminist environmental politics rooted not only in the direct personal effects of industrial pollution but also a profound sense of heavy industry's toxic legacy – indeed, its social reproduction from one generation to the next.[37]

The opposite side of environmentalism emerges in High's eighth chapter "Recycled Dreams," where the papermill in Sturgeon Falls turns to producing new products from older processes to survive. It would become the first 100 per cent recycled papermill in Canada.[38] Whereas MacKinnon's focus moves outside the steelworks and his narrative is propelled forward by women as

34 Alice Kessler-Harris, "Treating the Male as 'Other': Redefining the Parameters of Labor History," *Labor History* 34, no. 2-3 (1993): 195; Diarmaid Kelliher "Solidarity and Sexuality: Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners, 1984-5," *History Workshop Journal* 77, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 240-62; MacKinnon, Closing Sysco, 75.

35 High, *One Job Town*, 85-6.

36 MacKinnon, *Closing Sysco*, 82.

37 Kate Bezanson and Meg Luxton, eds., *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neo-Liberalism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006); June Corman and Meg Luxton, *Getting By in Hard Times: Gendered Labour at Home and on the Job* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

38 High, *One Job Town*, 202.

activists and campaigners, High maintains his emphasis on labouring men and their work. The distinction is useful, since it reveals how workers inside the papermill adapted to change and found new outlets for old techniques. As High points out, one of the superintendents was able to sustain his authority amidst teething problems because of "years on the shop floor and [a] natural ingenuity with machines and an ability to fix things." Shifting the papermill to recycled material "sidestepped the pollution problem" but it had wider economic impacts, particularly in terms of the sawmills – previously an essential part of the supply chain. Production waste from the sawmills was historically used in the manufacture of paper. The papermill was saved, but the "little sawmills [that] had no place to send their wood chips and sawdust and bark" were devastated. Job losses were simply passed along the line.[39]

These subtle differences in approach and emphasis are not only useful to a reviewer, since they serve to distinguish between two highly complementary and intersecting works of scholarship, but they also reveal to specialists and non-specialists alike that there is no one way of telling a deindustrialization story. There are historiographical approaches, literary approaches, heritage approaches, folklorist approaches, and the approach using received traditions passed from one generation to another. *One Job Town* conveys a clear sense of the historical rootedness of the Sturgeon Falls papermill and its surrounding community: High opens his narrative with tentative beginnings in the 1890s, whereas *Closing Sysco* provides more of a précis-cum-sketch of the industrial development of Cape Breton before focusing on the period from 1945 onwards. Readers of *Acadiensis* can be forgiven for not noticing this "reduction" given the relative familiarity of the earlier chronology; but it does illustrate the freer, if at times deliberately impressionist, hand with which High moves across his subject. One is reminded of the traditional, "tragedian" mode of labour history with its points of struggle, strife, and strikes. As High reveals in his second chapter, the 17-year closure of the paper mill between the wars ruptured lives and "were truly lost years."[40] Tragedy gives way to the epic – the "survival against the odds" motif apparent throughout deindustrialization studies, and of which MacKinnon provides a masterclass.

39 High, *One Job Town*, 127, 208.

40 High, *One Job Town*, 46. The phrase recalls Barry Broadfoot's oral history of the Depression in Canada; see Broadfoot, *Ten Lost Years, 1929–1939: Memories of Canadians who Survived the Depression* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1997).

It was Hayden White, writing 30 years ago and more, who encouraged historians to think about modes of storytelling and the relationship between narrative and the historical-empirical data being presented.[41] A field that makes so heavy a use of oral testimony, as does deindustrialization studies, must surely think very carefully about these matters; alas, White does not appear in either bibliography. MacKinnon employs two sets of oral history: the first a project of his own making conducted between 2013 and 2016 and the second a research project run via the Beaton Institute at Cape Breton University between 1987 and 1990. This provides comparative material through which "experiences of deindustrialization" reveal themselves to be "historically contingent."[42] It will be obvious that the Beaton Institute project, undertaken as a gathering of eyewitness accounts, and conducted by a folklorist (almost always a warning sign, as Ian McKay amply demonstrated in his *The Quest of the Folk*),[43] is less easily acclimatized to the more theoretically informed nature of contemporary oral history research. High similarly employs diachronic oral testimonies, although both sets of material were designed into the project from the beginning and the gap between each round of interviewing was far smaller. The first round was conducted "within two years of the mill's closure," at around the time the mill buildings were demolished; the second followed in 2005 and 2006, with a view to tracking changing attitudes.[44]

In neither book is oral evidence used as recovery per se, as a means of gathering objective eyewitness data (although this is less true of the Beaton Institute project employed by MacKinnon). Following the theoretical work of Alessandro Portelli, it is the subjective (and intersubjective) mode of autobiographical narration and storytelling that matters most.[45] Thus, High and MacKinnon are at their most compelling when giving lengthy quotations from the workers themselves. Working-class use of language is revealed as not only regional in character but also specialist and skillful in form. There are many forms of knowledge. Here is a very clear – even deliberate – reminder

41 Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

42 MacKinnon, *Closing Sysco*, 15.

43 Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994).

44 High, *One Job Town*, x.

45 Alessandro Portelli, "Oral History as Genre," in *Narrative & Genre: Contexts and Types of Communication*, ed. Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson (London: Routledge, 1998), 23–45; Alessandro Portelli, "Living Voices: The Oral History Interview as Dialogue and Experience," *Oral History Review* 45, no. 2 (2018): 239–48.

that the hard work of deconstructing the essentialism still associated with the industrial frontier and with working-class people has not gone away. Moreover, what oral narratives offer in *Closing Sysco* and *One Job Town* are bridges across the gaps between the respective author-historian's life and experience, which stand outside of the industry at hand (if not the community, to say nothing of the usual reader of university press publications) and that of the former steel workers or paper mill workers and their families. This is, in a sense, an act of belonging, of solidarity – the historian as activist.

The narrative richness of *Closing Sysco* and *One Job Town*, as individual works of scholarship and indicative contributions to a field of study, enables a conversation such as this to take place, whatever one's individual quibbles with chosen empirical methods (particularly oral history). If deindustrialization studies is to supplant labour history as the dominant form-cum-field of working-class history within the academy, there is much in each volume to take away and to learn from. But there are weaknesses, too, that need to find some resolution if all working people are to find a voice, if deindustrialization studies is not to replicate some of the biggest flaws of old labour history – not least regarding gender and sexuality. Eyebrows ought always to be raised at a phrase like "men as men" when it is not immediately followed by a recognition of its heteronormative essentialism. In fact, if deindustrialization is a process, and there is no doubt that it is, one function of its emergence as a field of study is surely to force a broader rethink of the industrial frontier and of working-class communities and of the (often socially reproduced) relationships between politics, organizations and institutions, work, family, the environment, and sexuality (an indicative but not exhaustive list).

Whether deindustrialization will, as Jim Tomlinson has proposed, become the new metanarrative of the postwar world, remains to be seen. There is considerable value in its translation and application to Atlantic Canada, as MacKinnon demonstrates with admirable grace in *Closing Sysco*. Certainly deindustrialization, as an interdisciplinary field of study and as a metanarrative, has the potential to revive and to sustain interest in working-class history, in history from below, and in the rejection of the metropolitan fallacy, especially at a time when various participants in various history wars seem determined to reassert centralizing, nationalizing forms. Is this to be a new phase of making Canadians outside the Atlantic region aware of how capitalism works disadvantageously? Perhaps. Or maybe it is something different, a means of bringing together working-class experiences in ways

that do not replicate ideas of the nation and of nationalism or, for that matter, folkish ideas of region and regionalism. There is nothing to suggest that both aims cannot be achieved, although comparative, global-thematic syntheses are, of course, often as elusive as genuinely inclusive "national" histories. Judging from these two works, *Closing Sysco* and *One Job Town*, and the scholarly field that they represent, we have set out on that journey with a renewed sense of purpose.

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