For all that I enjoyed this book with its focus on the “small finds,” I have to say I was left somewhat unsatisfied. While the discussion was—as far as it goes—enjoyable, I feel it could have been further developed. For example, the conclusion might have been better positioned as an introduction with its points picked up and further explored throughout the book as they relate to the various needlework tools and, then, returned to in a concluding chapter. That said, I suspect that this work holds more for those in Archeology than for readers outside that discipline. And, Beaudry’s thorough historical discussion in Findings will undoubtedly provide an important foundation for others to create future deeper cultural analyses. In the meantime, it is wonderful to see women’s material culture, which is often very difficult to assess and appreciate, taken seriously. Findings reminds its readers that the everyday is important and that the simplest objects often hide complexities.

References


ELIZABETH BEATON

Review of


This is an important publication because it is the first book specifically about the Cape Breton steel industry intended for popular reading. Through numerous interviews of former steelworkers and others, and almost 100 photographs, it provides a comprehensive and empathetic—but not romanticized—look at the Cape Breton steel industry. This collection offers a strong realization of industrial life both inside and outside the plant. The early days of the industry, the labour movement, steel-making technology, management and the wider steel community are represented both through the voices of men and women directly involved and through song and poetry. Readers of more than twenty-seven years of Cape Breton’s Magazine will notice that every chapter in Views From the Steel Plant is a reprint, and one is a secondary reprint from Acadiensis. Nevertheless, the book’s accessibility and its relevance for many workers from the industrial era give it particular value, not only as a tribute to Cape Breton steelworkers, but also as a serious contribution to oral history in Canada.

The vignettes related to each topic capture the steelworkers’ pride in their work. The workers describe how they acquired their steelmaking skills through watching and doing and, if lucky, though the generosity of more experienced workers. The different departments of the plant—open hearth, blast furnace, mills, shops, cranes, transporta-
brought forth a range of products. Sydney Steel made 200 grades of steel for its own manufacture of rails, tie plates, wire, nails and bar which were sold to Canadian National and Canadian Pacific Railway. Product was also shipped to Poland, Malaysia, South Africa and elsewhere. The plant’s raw steel was sent to national and international manufacturers for other secondary products. Clem Anson, who came to Sydney Steel in 1925, and who later became general manager of the plant, noted that shipping raw steel to England in 1932 pulled Sydney out of the Depression while other plants were still struggling.

The contribution of women to Cape Breton’s steel industry during the Second World War is documented in two chapters of Views. Eight women who came from jobs in retail, hospitality and teaching tell of their experience working at the coke ovens and in the mills. Some of them juggled motherhood with their jobs at the plant, where they did the same work as the men. All gave this up—jobs with exciting possibilities and good pay—when the men returned from the war.

There was a very tangible culture of work in the Cape Breton steel industry. Outside the plant, the workers supported each other, usually through their specific departments: they celebrated together at weddings, or provided comfort and financial aid to one another in times of illness or death. Benefit societies and immigrant organizations such as the Ukrainian Labour Temple became part of the steelworkers’ labour movement. Ethnicity and religion decided work placements or, in some cases, barriers to work placements. For example, Catholics dominated the open hearth; Protestants controlled the shops. A black steelworker remembered, “People of foreign extraction [and blacks] could not get a job with the bricklayers” (204). An immigrant seeking regular shifts in the “yard” had to give a bottle of rum (also maybe a chicken or cigars) to the foreman in payment for the favour.

The union movement made important changes to these “traditions” at the Sydney steel plant and the story of that evolution is well recorded in this book. Labour leader George MacEachern provides a concise history of the coming of the trade union act in 1937 that opened the way for a steelworker’s union. Winston Ruck, who became Canada’s first black union local president in 1970, tells of gradual changes at the plant from the time of the establishment in 1940 of the steelworkers union. Quotes from the Cape Breton Post act to weave together steelworkers’ remembrances of the 1923 strike and the attack on steelworkers’ families as they walked home from church on that July 1 Sunday.

Probably the most poignant moment in the history of the Cape Breton steel industry took place outside the plant gates. It was the Parade of Concern on November 19, 1967—a month after owners Hawker-Siddley called for the closure of Sydney Steel. The response of an industrial community to the loss of its lifeblood industry is found in the words of Fr. William Roach, St. F X Extension worker, who helped organize politicians, media and thousands of people to walk in the famous march through Sydney. He tells of the moment when singer Charlie MacKinnon stood up with his guitar and started to sing “Let’s Save our Industry,” written the night before on the back of a cigarette package. “And my God, the people joined in … you know, it was a pure accident” (186). Unfortunately, the outcome of this community action—the takeover of Sydney Steel by the Nova Scotia government—did not result in continued good health for the industry in Cape Breton.

For one steelworker, the bitterness of the difficult times took the form of poetry. MacGillivray and Frank (1987) present the life and several poems of John S. “Slim” MacInnis whose writings over fifty years speak eloquently of working conditions and poor pay, strikes and the ignominy of war. MacInnis’s works appeared anonymously in the Steelworker and Miner, sometimes creating anxiety for the paper’s editors. That his poetry was taken seriously by both rank and file and management is indicated by apparent attempts to silence him—including sending him off to war. MacGillivray notes that Slim MacInnis’s compositions may be the only verse to come directly from a steelworker at Sydney Steel.

This publication walks a sometimes-awkward line between the academic and the popular, even while it benefits both constituencies. That conundrum is shared by academics who write community histories. If there is a follow-up edition to Views From the Steel Plant, there might be more consideration for its use in cultural or history studies. For instance, an introduction by the editor could explain his selection of interviewees, his interview and transcription methods and his editing decisions. While this may seem to risk turning a good read into arcane analysis, a fuller explanation of approach would be appropriate given the potential wider use of this publication, and the position of Ron Caplan as a North American leader in the field of oral history.
1. Heron (1988) provides a historical analysis of the Cape Breton steel industry in the context of the wider Canadian steel industry. This publication would not be termed “popular”.

2. See MacGillivray and Frank (1987) for a more complete oral history of MacEachern’s life in the labour movement.

References

Heron, Craig. 1988. Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Notes

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