

## ARTICLES

### Farm Households and Wage Labour in the Northeastern Maritimes in the Early 19th Century

Rusty Bittermann

ONE OF THE MOST ENDURING MYTHOLOGIES of rural life in the temperate regions of North America has centred on the freedom resulting from easy access to land. In the New World unlike the Old, the story goes, land was plentiful, free from the encumbrances of a feudal past, and common folk might gain unimpeded access to its abundance and carve an independent niche for themselves. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the mythology was fostered by the effusions of travel accounts and emigrant manuals as well as by the writings of immigrants themselves. Since then it has been broadly sustained in North American historiography.

In keeping with the larger trend, the myth of the independent yeoman has held a prominent place in Maritime literature. It can be found in the works of such Gaelic bards as Allan the Ridge of Mabou, himself one of the many immigrants who arrived in the region from Scotland early in the 19th century. In the New World, he lyricized, "free land" gave rise to "riches and herds of cattle" for common folk: "Now that you have come across the sea/to this fair land,/ you will want for nothing the rest of your life;/ everything prospers for us."<sup>1</sup> It figures in Joseph Howe's "Western Rambles." With "a wife and an axe," Howe maintained, an industrious man might carve out a handsome competence and become "truly rich and inde-

<sup>1</sup>Margaret MacDonell, *The Emigrant Experience: Songs of Highland Emigrants in North America* (Toronto 1982), 90-2.

Rusty Bittermann, "Farm Households and Wage Labour in the Northeastern Maritimes in the Early 19th Century," *Labour/Le Travail*, 31 (Spring 1993), 13-45.

pendent."<sup>2</sup> Thomas McCulloch's Mephibosheth Stepsure, too, sustains the contention that in the Nova Scotian countryside a natural abundance insured that those with frugal and industrious habits would be rewarded with economic security and independence.<sup>3</sup> The theme of yeomanly independence emerges as well in the writings of these men's descendants: "Every man in Washabuckt," wrote Neil MacNeil recalling his experiences in a turn-of-the-century Cape Breton rural community, "was his own boss, for he got his livelihood from nature and did not have to work for any other man or thank any one but God for it."<sup>4</sup> And so it is still told to younger generations by older folk in Cape Breton: there was a time before the dependence of the contemporary era when those willing to work might combine their labour with an abundant land to derive a livelihood and secure an independence for themselves. In contemporary regional historiography it reemerges in the works of those who emphasize the insularity and self-sufficiency of rural households in the early 19th century and conceptualize the history of the countryside during subsequent decades in terms of the loss of an earlier independence rooted in the direct fulfilment of needs through access to the land.<sup>5</sup>

That the image of the independent yeoman was to a certain degree a reflection of a reality experienced by some rural residents in the Maritimes is indisputable. The opportunities for acquiring an independent rural livelihood were relatively greater in British North America than they were in the Old World. Many transformed these possibilities into reality and achieved a "propertied independence."<sup>6</sup> Those who enjoyed such circumstances, however, were but one component of a larger farming population. And many who came to enjoy a modicum of yeomanly independence only experienced this condition during a fraction of their lives. Like any powerful and pervasive mythology, the image of the independent yeoman is partly rooted in a reality. Problems arise, though, when a fragment of the rural experience becomes a characterization of the whole. It is not my intention here to consider how this mythology developed, or to unravel the various strands of peasant dream, liberal ideology, and social critique that have sustained it. Rather, I want to

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Howe, "Western Rambles," in *Travel Sketches of Nova Scotia*, M.G. Parks, ed., (Toronto 1973), 95-6.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas McCulloch, *The Stepsure Letters* (Toronto 1960).

<sup>4</sup>Neil MacNeil, *The Highland Heart in Nova Scotia* (Antigonish 1948, 1980).

<sup>5</sup>Charles W. Dunn, *Highland Settler: A Portrait of the Scottish Gael in Nova Scotia* (Toronto 1953); D. Campbell and R.A. MacLean, *Beyond the Atlantic Roar: A Study of the Nova Scotia Scots* (Toronto 1974); John Warkentin, "The Atlantic Region," in R. Cole Harris and John Warkentin eds., *Canada Before Confederation: A Study of Historical Geography* (Toronto 1977), 169-231; Peter Sinclair, "From Peasants to Corporations: The Development of Capitalist Agriculture in the Maritime Provinces," in John A. Fry, ed., *Contradictions in Canadian Society: Readings in Introductory Sociology* (Toronto 1984), 276-93.

<sup>6</sup>The phrase is drawn from Daniel Vickers' superb analysis of the ideal and some of its implications. Daniel Vickers, "Competency and Competition: Economic Culture in Early America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 47:1 (1990), 3-29.

examine what it has obscured, indeed tends to deny: the importance of wage labour to farmfolk in the northeastern Maritimes in the first half of the 19th century.<sup>7</sup> The survey which follows underlines the significance of wages to the farm population and highlights the profile of farm dwellers within the larger labour force.

Much of the rural population of the Maritimes began farm-making in the New World by spending part of their time as employees. In his study of rural life in Ontario, Robert Leslie Jones suggested a three-tier typology of new agricultural settlers: those with the capital (or credit) to hire others to speed construction and land clearing, those with the means to support themselves during the start-up period of farm-making, and, lastly, those who found it necessary to engage in off-farm work in order to sustain themselves while farm-making.<sup>8</sup> Given what we know of the economic circumstances of many of those who settled in the northeastern Maritimes in the late 18th and early 19th century, it is clear that thousands in Atlantic Canada fell in the latter category.<sup>9</sup> Rev. George Patterson's description of the adaptive strategies employed by the passengers who arrived on the *Hector* reflects the difficulties and possibilities available to other emigrants who came to the region under similar circumstances. Initially lacking the means to establish themselves on the land, Patterson noted, they spread out to places distant from Pictou where they could find work: "Not only men, but mothers of families, hired out, and their children, male and female, they bound out for service, till they should come of age."<sup>10</sup> As John Cambridge, a Prince Edward Island landlord, observed in the first years of the 19th century, those who arrived with little or no capital "generally work for others till they have acquired a little stock" and in the years that follow they "get assistance by working for the neighbouring farmers, till they have brought their own farms gradually forward."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup>The mythology is often incongruously juxtaposed with another reality. Neil MacNeil, for instance, even as he extols the independence Washabuckers achieved on the land, tells of the regular flow of labour southward and of his grandfather's difficult experiences commuting on foot between Washabuckt and a job many miles north in industrial Cape Breton.

<sup>8</sup>Robert Leslie Jones, *History of Agriculture in Ontario 1613-1880* (Toronto 1946), 60.

<sup>9</sup>J.S. Martell, *Immigration to and Emigration From Nova Scotia, 1815-1838* (Halifax 1942); R.G. Flewelling, "Immigration to and Emigration from Nova Scotia," *Nova Scotia Historical Society Collections*, 28 (1949), 75-105; D.C. Harvey, "Scottish Immigration to Cape Breton," *Dalhousie Review*, 21:1 (April 1941), 313-24; Barbara Kincaid, "Scottish Immigration to Cape Breton, 1758-1838," MA dissertation, Dalhousie University, 1964; D. Campbell and R.A. MacLean, *Beyond the Atlantic Roar*, 7-75; Helen I. Cowan, *British Emigration to British North America: The First Hundred Years* (Toronto 1961), 172-227.

<sup>10</sup>Rev. George Patterson, *A History of the County of Pictou Nova Scotia* (Montréal 1877; rept. ed. Belleville, Ontario 1972), 86.

<sup>11</sup>[John Cambridge], *A Description of Prince Edward Island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, North America with a Map of the Island and a Few Cursory Observations Respecting the Climate, Natural Productions and Advantages of its Situation in Regard to Agriculture and Commerce; Together with Some Remarks, as Instructions to New Settlers* (London 1805),

## 16 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

A good account of the settlement process in Pictou County in the early 19th century is provided by Lord Selkirk. Describing the farm-making labours of a household from Perthshire, he noted that the man of the house was "obliged to work for hire" to feed his family and sustain the credit necessary for purchasing the articles needed for capitalizing his farm. This particular household had the advantage of being settled on good land adjacent to West River and its occupants had the potential, one would imagine, of escaping from the necessity of wage dependence, but in the early years of establishment, Selkirk estimated that the Perthshire man spent "full half his time employed at wages off the farm."<sup>12</sup>

The ledger book of Cape Breton merchant Lawrence Kavanaugh provides insights into the process as well. In 1818, Kavanaugh recorded the influx of a number of settlers from Prince Edward Island who took up lands along the eastern shoreline of the Bras d'Or Lakes. Several opened accounts in St. Peters with Kavanaugh shortly after their arrival. James Corbit began his dealings with Kavanaugh by depositing £5 in cash and selling him a saddle for £2 1/2.<sup>13</sup> In return Kavanaugh provided Corbit with provisions and supplies -- flour, meal, codfish, tea, vinegar, rum, tobacco, a pipe, salt, cod line, shoes, and calico -- as well as the financing necessary to buy out a previous occupant of the lot he had occupied. Corbit's account with Kavanaugh was a relatively modest £33 (provisions plus interest) during the next six years, suggesting -- particularly given the quantities of goods and the absence of building materials and tools on the account -- that he was dealing with others as well to obtain his household supplies. To meet these particular debts, Corbit worked for Kavanaugh, 2 1/2 days in 1819, 33 days repairing and building a boat in 1821, 1 day sawing planks in 1822, 24 days sawing the following year, and half a day sawing in 1824. A credit to his account by a man named McAdam for 29 shillings in 1820 probably represents yet another 12 days work performed in this case for McAdam. The survival strategies of many countryfolk, as the landlord John Hill noted in the case of Prince Edward Island, commonly included temporary work for anyone who might give them "an order on the shopkeepers for cloathing and tools."<sup>14</sup> As well, Corbit sold Kavanaugh a

---

8. See too John Lewellin, *Emigration. Prince Edward Island: A Brief But Faithful Account of this Fine Colony* (1832), reprinted in D.C. Harvey, ed., *Journeys to the Island of St. John* (Toronto 1955), 199. Captain Moorsom provides evidence on the process as well, though in this case viewed from the vantage point of the agricultural employer. Moorsom notes that in the Windsor region agricultural labourers were primarily recruited from among new settlers who had not become established and from the younger members of poorer farm households who worked away in the summer and returned in the winter. Captain W. Moorsom, *Letters From Nova Scotia; Comprising Sketches of a Young Country* (London 1830), 207-8.

<sup>12</sup>Lord Selkirk's *Diary, 1803-1804: A Journal of his Travels in British North America and the Northeastern United States*, Patrick C. White, ed., (Toronto 1958), 51.

<sup>13</sup>For Corbit's account see the Kavanaugh Account Book, 1818-1824, MG3, vol 301, 212, Public Archives of Nova Scotia (PANS).

<sup>14</sup>John Hill, Memo on Quit Rents, [1802], CO 226/18/230.

couple of chickens in 1820, an ox and a small amount of fresh mackerel and chickens in 1823, and 6 shillings worth of butter in 1824, leaving him still in debt to the St. Peter's merchant for £8 at the end of the year. Lacking knowledge of Corbit's dealings with others, it is impossible to gauge how much off-farm work he in fact engaged in during these years or to calculate his progress in farm-making, though the nature and scale of farm produce suggest a rudimentary, perhaps a single-cow, holding. The evidence from Corbit's account and from the other new arrivals from Prince Edward Island who appear on Kavanaugh's books reinforce, though, Cambridge's, Selkirk's, Hill's, and Patterson's observations concerning the importance of wage work to new settlers in the early stages of farm-making.

How long might immigrants such as those appearing in Kavanaugh's ledgers, or observed by Selkirk and Cambridge, engage in wage work before they could sustain themselves and their households with the returns of their farms? The answer would vary, of course, depending upon their circumstances at the time of arrival, the natural resources of their farm properties, the annual returns that could be made from wage work, and the level of their commitment to acquire a self-sustaining operation. Peter Russell's calculation of an average clearing rate in Upper Canada during the early 19th century of 1.5 acres per year per adult male probably is a reasonable estimate for the Maritimes as well.<sup>15</sup> At such a rate, a minimal 25 acres of fields would, when additional labour could not be hired, typically be realized only after a decade of work. Often, it would seem, this took longer. The itinerant shoemaker and missionary, Walter Johnstone, estimated that on average, the first generation of settlers on Prince Edward Island would, "not clear more than 20 or 30 acres all their life."<sup>16</sup> Another observer noted that there were "many who have been 20 years in the colony" and "have no more than 5 acres cleared."<sup>17</sup> To the cost of sustaining a household while preparing the land base necessary for household subsistence were added the costs of stocking and equipping such a farm. S.S. Hill, the son of John Hill, one of Prince Edward's Island's largest landlords, advised would-be immigrants to expect costs of roughly £200 for the livestock, tools, and

<sup>15</sup>Peter A. Russell, "Forest into Farmland: Upper Canadian Clearing Rates, 1822-1839," *Agricultural History*, 57:3 (July 1983), 326-39. A listing of squatters on Indian lands in Middle River indicating length of settlement and the extent of their fields gives some indication of the clearing rates of Highlanders in Cape Breton. For the eleven households for which there was adequate data, the average rate of clearing was just under 2 acres per year. On average these households had been located on their lands for 6 years and had just under eleven acres of land cleared. If anything these particular rates could be somewhat inflated as the cleared acreages may include lands that natives had cleared and/or those improved by other squatters who were driven off prior to the settlement of these individuals. Nova Scotia House of Assembly, *Journals*, 1862, App. 30, Report of Indian Committee, 7.

<sup>16</sup>Walter Johnstone, *A Series of Letters, Descriptive of Prince Edward Island* (1822) reprinted in D.C. Harvey, ed., *Journeys to the Island of St. John*, 126.

<sup>17</sup>Rusticus to the editor, *Prince Edward Island Register* (Charlottetown), 29 November 1825, 1.

## 18 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

supplies necessary for establishing a farm of 30 cleared acres.<sup>18</sup> Though it was not in his interest to exaggerate the costs of farm-making on the Island, Hill's figure seems high.<sup>19</sup> What is beyond doubt is that with wages typically averaging around two and a half shillings per day, with work sporadic and seasonal, and with the needs of daily subsistence having first claim on income, raising the monies necessary to equip a farm was, typically, the product of years of labour.

The cost of land, of course, had to be factored into the farm-making process as well. On Prince Edward Island, there was little Crown land and most immigrants found it necessary to obtain land from landlords. In the 1820s and 1830s, an unimproved freehold would, typically, cost somewhere from 10 shillings to one pound per acre.<sup>20</sup> By leasing land, a new settler might defer these start-up costs, but in time would incur a rental cost of around £5 per year for 100 acres of land.<sup>21</sup> In Nova Scotia, the costs of acquiring "free" Crown land probably ran around £20 for a typical 200-acre lot.<sup>22</sup> With the termination of a "free" Crown land policy in the late 1820s, these costs increased as lands were sold at public auction with a base price established at 2/3 to 2/6 per acre.<sup>23</sup>

Given the costs of land, stock, and equipment, and the labour required for preparing fields, even when a household managed to acquire good lands -- and many in the region did not -- years and probably decades elapsed between beginning the tasks of clearing and planting and arriving at a condition where, as Neil MacNeil phrased it, one did not have to "thank anyone but God" for one's living.<sup>24</sup> We can multiply, then, the experiences of Corbit and his fellow Prince

<sup>18</sup>[S.S. Hill], *A Short Account of Prince Edward Island Designed Chiefly for the Information of Agriculturalists and other Emigrants of Small Capital* (London 1839), 66.

<sup>19</sup>Graeme Wynn's estimate of a minimal outlay of £30 to £40 is admittedly a very conservative estimate of simple start-up costs. Working farms of 100 acres with 20 acres cleared would, he notes, have fetched from £100 to £300 in New Brunswick in the 1830s. Graeme Wynn, *Timber Colony: A Historical Geography of Early Nineteenth Century New Brunswick* (Toronto 1981), 80.

<sup>20</sup>George Seymour to T.H. Haviland, 5 February 1837, 114 A/508/3, Warwick County Record Office (WCRO); Robert Stewart to John Pendergast, 23 April 1834, Robert Stewart Letterbooks, Ms. 2989/1, PAPEI (Public Archives of Prince Edward Island); State of Sales of Land by Sir James Montgomery, Baronet and Brothers, GD1/409/15/C14568, Scottish Record Office (SRO).

<sup>21</sup>Selkirk Papers, MG 19/E1/73/19302-13, National Archives of Canada (NAC); Rental of the Property of Sir James Montgomery, Baronet and Brothers, GD1/409/16/C14568, SRO.

<sup>22</sup>Donald Campbell to [a relative in Lewis], 7 October 1830, reprinted in the *Stornaway Gazette*, 30 September 1972, MG 100, vol. 115, #33, PANS.

<sup>23</sup>S.J. Hornsby, "Scottish Emigration and Settlement in Early Nineteenth Century Cape Breton," in Kenneth Donovan, ed., *The Island: New Perspectives on Cape Breton History 1713-1975* (Sydney, Nova Scotia 1990), 58.

<sup>24</sup>Graeme Wynn's commentary on J.E. Woolford's 1817 watercolour, *View on the Road from Windsor to Horton by Avon Bridge at Gaspreaux River*, that behind the security portrayed in this image of a farm household which had achieved a comfortable competency

Edward Islanders newly arrived in Cape Breton whose wage work appears in Kavanaugh's books, the Perthshireman who Selkirk observed, or those who took passage aboard the *Hector* described by Rev. Patterson, by the thousands of emigrants of modest means who took up farms in the northeastern Maritimes in the late 18th and early 19th century -- people who of necessity had to follow similar work strategies for many years. The ongoing process of settlement and farm-making was intimately linked with the maintenance of a vast pool of farm-based labourers in pursuit of work opportunities.

Weather conditions and the presence or absence of crop and animal diseases played a substantial part in expediting the progress of household independence or, alternatively, in dashing hopes of agricultural security. A household which enjoyed a margin of independence in a favourable year could be plunged into debt and dependence in another. The extraordinary frosts of 1816 and the 1830s, and the repeated failure of the potato crops due to blight in the 1840s in particular, forced large numbers of farm households into an increased reliance on purchased foodstuffs. Particularly vulnerable were the newer and poorer farm households with limited inventories of livestock and reliant almost exclusively on their harvest of their potato and grain crops. Such natural disasters swelled the numbers in pursuit of work and expanded the commitments many households found necessary to make to off-farm labour. Employment was needed to pay for provisions and to meet the costs and debts incurred during years of crisis.<sup>25</sup>

For many, the quality of land resources available -- particularly when coupled with a poverty that diverted labour and capital away from farm improvements and toward the needs of basic sustenance -- precluded ever escaping the necessity of engaging in extensive wage work.<sup>26</sup> As the Crown surveyor in Baddeck, D. B.

---

there lay a "half-century of unremitting work," is acute. Graeme Wynn, "On the Margins of Empire, 1760-1840," in Craig Brown, ed., *The Illustrated History of Canada* (Toronto 1987), 256.

<sup>25</sup>On the frosts of 1816, a year that became known as "eighteen hundred and froze to death" see Rev. George Patterson, *A History of the County of Pictou Nova Scotia* (Montréal 1877; reprint ed. Belleville, Ontario 1972), 286; Howard Russell, *A Long Deep Furrow: Three Centuries of Farming in New England* (Hannover, New Hampshire 1976), 136, 147-8. For discussions of those of the 1830s and government initiatives to ban exports of foodstuffs and provide relief see the *Royal Gazette* (Charlottetown), 12 August 1834, 3; 9 December 1834, 3; 26 July 1836, 3; 13 September 1836, 3; 14 February 1837, 3; 28 February 1837, 3; 7 March 1837, 1-2; 11 April 1837, 3. The impact the potato blight of the 1840s had on Cape Breton is dealt with in Robert Morgan, "'Poverty, wretchedness, and misery': The Great Famine in Cape Breton, 1845-1851," *Nova Scotia Historical Review*, 6:1 (1986), 88-104 and S.J. Hornsby, *Nineteenth Century Cape Breton: A Historical Geography* (Montréal 1992), 111-20. For discussion of the impact of the potato failures of the late 1840s on Prince Edward Island see the *Islander* (Charlottetown), 26 November 1847, 2; 24 December 1847, 3; 7 April 1848, 3; 114 April 1848, 3; 3 November 1848, 2; 12 January 1848, 3.

<sup>26</sup>In his study of farm-making in Upper Canada in this period, Norman Ball notes the presence of immigrants trapped by similar cycles of poverty there. Norman Rodger Ball, "The

McNab, noted in 1857, there were “hundreds” of farms in this region of Cape Breton where ten, twenty, or thirty years after initial settlement their occupants remained heavily reliant on off-farm employment in order to “eke out the means of a scanty subsistence.”<sup>27</sup> In general, he contended, such settlers occupied the difficult hill lands, the backlands, of the Island and tended to be squatters rather than freeholders. The Land Commissioners taking evidence on Prince Edward Island in 1860 heard similar testimony concerning areas of Prince Edward Island, often predominantly occupied by squatters, where few settlers successfully managed to derive the bulk of their livelihood from the soil.<sup>28</sup>

While some households made ends meet by combining wage work with the sale of selected farm “surpluses,” often enough exchanging costly foods like butter and meat for cheaper breadstuffs and fish, there were others which appear to have been exclusively, or almost exclusively, reliant on the sale of labour to meet the costs of household goods and food and to procure seed and animal provisions. The ledger books of the North Sydney trader, John Beamish Moore,<sup>29</sup> for instance, reveal a number of backland households whose occupants had nothing but labour to sell during the years of their dealings with him.<sup>30</sup> During the period 1853 to 1860, the members of Angus Link’s household paid for their supplies of oatmeal, barley flour, and oats through a combination of Angus’s own labour and that of his wife and daughter.<sup>31</sup> So, too, did the Angus McDonald household pay its debts through Angus’s own labour and that of his sons and daughter.<sup>32</sup> The debts of the Murdoch Ferguson household as well were repaid entirely by Murdoch’s labour and that of a female member of the household.<sup>33</sup> Moore’s account book reveals something of the seasonality of the pressures on these backland households as well. Between 1853 and 1861, the accounts of those identified as backlanders in his books reveal

---

Technology of Settlement and Land Clearing in Upper Canada Prior to 1840,” PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1979, 30-2.

<sup>27</sup>D.B. McNab to Uniacke, 3 January 1857, Nova Scotia House of Assembly, *Journals*, 1857, app. 71, 421.

<sup>28</sup>Ian Ross Robertson, ed., *The Prince Edward Island Land Commission of 1860* (Fredericton, 1988), 136.

<sup>29</sup>A number of John Moores lived in and about North Sydney in the mid-19th century. Stephen Hornsby treats this account book as being that of John *Belcher* Moore. The Public Archives of Nova Scotia, though, stand by their description of it as being that of John *Beamish* Moore. Stephen J. Hornsby, *Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton: A Historical Geography*, 72, 138-9; private correspondence with J.B. Cahill, 26 October 1992.

<sup>30</sup>These backlanders may have been selling farm products elsewhere, perhaps closer at hand, but the fact that they routinely purchased bulky items, such as 1/2 barrels of flour and bushels of grain from Moore without ever selling farm goods seems to suggest that they had little or nothing to sell.

<sup>31</sup>John Beamish Moore Account Book, 1848-67, 14, Micro Biography, PANS.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 23.

recurrent debts for hay, barley flour, and oatmeal needed in April and May to replenish exhausted winter supplies, and seed grain (barley and oats) needed in May and June to permit planting another season's crop. Merchant ledgers reveal only a fragment of these patterns. Wealthier members of rural communities as well often took on the role, and assumed the benefits, of acting as provisioners and sources of credit to poorer households through the months of greatest scarcity. It appears to have been particularly common for those acting as road commissioners to sell provisions on credit during the winter and to retain the road-work returns due to these households the following summer.<sup>34</sup>

Backlanders such as these, though possessing or occupying considerable acreages, were yet compelled by necessity to participate extensively in labour markets near and far in order to make up for the great inadequacies of their farm returns. They were, as the Crown surveyor in Baddeck, D.B. McNab, noted, the New World equivalent of Great Britain's day labourers: they "represent[ed] this class."<sup>35</sup> Quantitative analysis of census data from Middle River in Cape Breton and from Hardwood Hill in Pictou County suggests that in the third quarter of the 19th century, somewhere between a quarter and a third of the households in these agricultural districts of northeastern Nova Scotia needed to earn \$100 or more in off-farm income in order to secure a minimal livelihood.<sup>36</sup> At the common agricultural wage rate of roughly 80 cents per day, this would be the equivalent of 125 or more working days.<sup>37</sup> Viewed in another fashion, given an average family food requirement of roughly \$200, these farms at best probably derived only half their food needs from their own resources.<sup>38</sup> Data from Middle River confirms as well D.B. McNab's assertion that reliance on off-farm sources of income most often occurred among those who occupied rough hill lands: 84 per cent of the households with negative net farm incomes estimated to be greater than \$100 in 1860-61 were

<sup>34</sup>*Spirit of the Times* (Sydney), 19 July 1842, 347; Captain W. Moorsom, *Letters From Nova Scotia*, 288.

<sup>35</sup>Nova Scotia House of Assembly, *Journals*, 1857, Appendix No. 72, 421.

<sup>36</sup>Rusty Bittermann, Robert H. MacKinnon, and Graeme Wynn, "Of Inequality and Interdependence in the Nova Scotian Countryside, 1850-1870," *Canadian Historical Review*, (forthcoming March 1993).

<sup>37</sup>The estimate of an average agricultural wage for Nova Scotia is drawn from Julian Gwyn, "Golden Age or Bronze Moment? Wealth and Poverty in Nova Scotia: the 1850s and 1860s," *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, 8 (1992), 195-230.

<sup>38</sup>Charles H. Farnham, "Cape Breton Folk," *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* (1886), reprinted in *Acadiensis*, 8:2 (Spring 1979), 100. These estimates are considered in detail in Bittermann, MacKinnon, and Wynn, "Of Inequality and Interdependence in the Nova Scotian Countryside," and Rusty Bittermann, "Middle River: The Social Structure of Agriculture in a Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton Community," MA dissertation, University of New Brunswick, 1987, app. IV.

## 22 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

those of backlanders.<sup>39</sup> Physical constraints necessitated much of the pattern of adaptation that McNab and others described.

Besides new settlers requiring an income during their years of farm establishment and backlanders grappling with chronic resource problems, analysis of the Middle River census returns indicates yet another stream of rural peoples being propelled into participation in the work force in the mid-19th century and beyond. Estimates of the relationship between farm resources and household needs reveal three basic household categories. At one end of the spectrum there were households, primarily those of backlanders, where farm returns were chronically and substantially short of household subsistence needs -- households that of necessity had to look for income beyond the farm across the full course of the family life cycle. On the other extreme there was a significant minority of households, the commercial core of the valley's agricultural economy, where farm production was well in excess of household subsistence needs and the returns from farm product sales were sufficient to permit substantial reinvestments in agriculture and in other pursuits. Members of such households had the option of working for themselves with their own resources or working for others. Wedged between these two strata were families whose condition more closely approximated the image of household self-sufficiency permeating so much of the literature on the rural Maritimes — farms on which the value of production roughly matched current needs. Although they possessed sufficient resources to derive a livelihood from the land, it is clear though, from the census and probate returns, that the resources of many of these households were not expanding at a rate sufficient to permit all their offspring to begin life in similar circumstances. Demographic growth was forcing, and would force, many individuals from an emerging generation within these middle strata households into participation in the labour force.<sup>40</sup>

Throughout the early 19th century, then, substantial numbers of the members of farm households situated in the northeastern Maritimes -- new settlers, backlanders (along with others whose farm resources were chronically insufficient for household needs), and some of the offspring of middle-strata households -- necessarily had to maintain a significant and regular involvement in the labour force despite the fact that they had access to extensive tracts of land. Added to the ranks of these workers of necessity were many who were drawn for one reason or another by the opportunities afforded by off-farm work, people who might move in and out of the workforce at will alternately deriving a living from farm resources or choosing to participate in the labour force.

<sup>39</sup>Rusty Bittermann, "Economic Stratification and Agrarian Settlement: Middle River in the Early Nineteenth Century," in Kenneth Donovan, ed., *The Island: New Perspectives on Cape Breton History 1713-1975*, 86-7.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*; Rusty Bittermann, "Middle River: The Social Structure of Agriculture in a Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton Community," 157-9.

Those seeking employment might work in many different niches of the regional economy. Some of the Prince Edward Islanders who settled along Cape Breton's Bras d'Or Lakes in the second decade of the 19th century found jobs with Lawrence Kavanaugh, the merchant from whom they obtained provisions. John Corbit made ends meet in part by sawing lumber and doing boat-carpentry work for Kavanaugh. During the period 1818 to 1824, others worked for this St. Peters merchant building fences, mowing hay, planting potatoes, looking after livestock, driving cattle that he had purchased, rafting timber, and working in his fishing operations. Daily wages ranged from 1 shilling 4d. to the more common 2 shilling 6d. Some jobs, such as mowing, were arranged by piece work, 5 shillings per acre, while yet other workers were hired on a monthly basis. Women appear sporadically in Kavanaugh's ledger, "knitting" twine at a fixed price per length and doing washing of some sort, again being paid by the piece.

The variety of tasks for which Kavanaugh hired labour, the different rates and means of payment, and the diverse composition of his work force -- both in terms of age and gender -- help suggest the complexity of the labour market in this period. The different areas of economic activity noted in his ledger -- agriculture, the timber trade, vessel construction, the fishery, and general tasks associated with operating a mercantile establishment -- capture much of the array of work available to the farm-based labourer of the northeastern Maritimes in the first quarter of the 19th century. Timber, ships, fishing, and trade -- the listing of occupations sounds so close to T.C. Haliburton's description of the typical Nova Scotian who could be "found superintending the cultivation of a farm and building a vessel at the same time; and is not only able to catch and cure a cargo of fish, but to find his way to the West Indies or the Mediterranean" with it, that it is necessary to underline an important distinction between Haliburton's figure and those whose lives are under discussion here.<sup>41</sup> The occupational pluralist figuring in the *Old Judge* is an extension of the independent yeoman of other regional literature; his life is grounded in his control over a material abundance. The goods with which he loads his vessel are the "surplus" remaining from the produce of his farm, and though Haliburton does not address productive relationships, the thrust of this passage is that woods work and shipbuilding, too, are rooted in family labour which is being applied to resources over which this Nova Scotian exercises ownership or control. Certainly there were such people scattered about the Maritime countryside, although as I have argued elsewhere and will argue below, family labour alone did not typically sustain this sort of productivity.<sup>42</sup> I am focusing here, though, on the property-poor farm dweller whose labour sustained the entrepreneurial pluralism of others. The capital barriers which prevented acquiring an independence in

<sup>41</sup>Thomas Chandler Haliburton, *The Old Judge; or, Life in a Colony*, ed. with an introduction and notes by M.G. Parks, (Ottawa 1978), xxi.

<sup>42</sup>Rusty Bittermann, "The Hierarchy of the Soil: Land and Labour in a 19th-Century Cape Breton Community," *Acadiensis*, 18:1 (Autumn 1988), 33-55.

## 24 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

agricultural production tended to be similarly limiting in other sectors of the economy. Whereas, for instance, the household with an agricultural abundance might be in a position to send their oxen to the woods and equip a cutting crew, ultimately selling the endproduct in the timber market, the participation of the capital-poor in this trade was more likely to be for the wages gained from handling an ax.<sup>43</sup>

Although other facets of the regional economy probably rivaled it in terms of the amount of wage employment offered, during the first half of the 19th century agriculture may well have been the pre-eminent type of wage work when measured in terms of sheer numbers of participants, even if the extreme seasonality of demand meant that few worked as farm hands for extensive periods. The labour requirements of agriculture in the Maritimes in the era before the mechanisation of harvesting and planting were such that not only big farms with scores of acres in hay and crops but even many relatively small operations found it necessary to hire seasonal help. Harvesting operations in particular required the assistance of many hands. A small operation might hire an extra worker or two for a few days or weeks to assist with getting in the crops, while a larger operation might add many daily labourers to its more permanent workforce. Timber operators also sometimes employed large crews to gather hay for their woods operations.<sup>44</sup>

Peter MacNutt, for instance, a merchant and farmer living near Princetown, Prince Edward Island, harvested his crops in summer and autumn 1837 with the aid of his "own men" -- household members and long-term employees -- augmented by the daily labour of 30 workers drawn from neighbouring farms. During that autumn, some worked for only a day, while others worked for MacNutt for ten or 11 days, though never at a continuous stretch. The patterns point to the varied nature of MacNutt's labour needs even during the harvest. There were some tasks that required few or no additional hands and others for which he would hire nine additional workers on a daily basis to complement household members and servants. The composition of his crews varied in accordance with the farm calendar and the progress of harvesting operations. For certain tasks, such as raking hay, bundling grain, and digging potatoes, MacNutt employed the cheaper labour of women, girls, and boys. A few men, for instance, might start mowing at the

<sup>43</sup>There were, of course, other ways by which impecunious farmfolk might participate in these economies including share systems and the acquisition of outfits on credit. In some regions, though, even the more prosperous farm households increasingly found it difficult to maintain an independent foothold in the logging business in the Maritimes. See Béatrice Craig, "Agriculture and the Lumberman's Frontier in the Upper St. John Valley, 1800-70," *Journal of Forest History*, 32:3 (July 1988), 125-37.

<sup>44</sup>James Yeo, for example, appears to have recruited large hay harvesting crews drawing extensively from among the Acadian and Native populations of Prince Edward Island. See George Seymour, *Journal of Tour of Canada and the United States* (1840), entry for 7 September, CR 114A/1380, WCRO; Robert Stewart to John Lawson, 7 October 1835, Robert Stewart Letterbooks, Ms. 2989/2, PAPEI.

beginning of the week and be joined by a growing and more heterogeneous work force later in the week as the mowed hay began to dry and required raking, hauling, and stacking.<sup>45</sup>

The patterns of wage work recorded in MacNutt's diary also reflect, one can be sure, the needs of the rural folk recruited to work on his farm. Having to attend to crops of their own, they moved back and forth first between hay-making on their own farms and MacNutt's, and later between the harvesting of their own grain and root crops and those of MacNutt. Records from the 1830s concerning the nearby David Ross farm show Donald MacLean, a casual labourer on the farm, alternately working on his own holding and that of the Rosses, at times spending half a day harvesting MacLean crops and the other working with David Ross. On other occasions he would work at the Ross farm in the evenings, though in general he, like the workers on Peter MacNutt's farm, spent an entire day or a cluster of days working for wages, returning, one assumes then, to the demands of the home harvest.<sup>46</sup> The degree of flexibility workers might have in moving between their own farm operations and that of their employer(s) varied, of course, as a function of proximity. Donald MacLean lived close to the Ross farm and might, if he could negotiate it, work on his own *and* his neighbour's farm in the course of a day. Many of the labourers appearing on the payroll of those harvesting the hay on William MacKenzie's fields in Middle River later in the century, though, had traveled greater distances to the farm. Workers such as these found it necessary to take up residence at the work site for the duration of the harvest.<sup>47</sup>

In the era before the mechanization of harvest operations, the demand for agricultural labourers during the late summer and autumn was extensive. Analysis of the crop returns and household composition of farm households in Middle River between 1850 and 1875 suggest that roughly one-quarter of the farms there required some help from beyond the household in order to harvest their crops.<sup>48</sup> The labour demands for harvesting the crops on Middle River's farms were typical of those found elsewhere in the agricultural districts of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. There was, as a Nova Scotian report on labour conditions noted at mid-century, "always a great cry for field labour" at harvest time.<sup>49</sup> Certainly the employment of the wage labour in the agricultural sector was concentrated in these late

<sup>45</sup>Diary of Honorable Peter MacNutt, Sr., Ms. 3552, 7 August 1837 - 4 November 1837, PAPEI.

<sup>46</sup>David Ross Diary, 3-5, Prince Edward Island Collection, University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI).

<sup>47</sup>William MacLean versus William MacKenzie, RG 39, "C", #645, PANS.

<sup>48</sup>Rusty Bittermann, "Middle River," 63.

<sup>49</sup>Nova Scotia House of Assembly, *Journals*, 1867, Immigration Report, App. 7. See too Captain W. Moorsom, *Letters from Nova Scotia*, 206-7; *Abstract of the Proceedings of the Land Commissioners' Court Held During the Summer of 1860 to Inquire into the Differences Relative to the Rights of Landowners and Tenants in Prince Edward Island* (Charlottetown: *The Protestant*, 1862), 101, 141.

summer and autumn months. The difficulty for the worker who was also a member of a farm household was that this too was the busiest period on the home farm. Such conflicts of interest could be solved, as Donald MacLean did, by moving back and forth between the work demands of the home farm and wage labour on the harvest of an adjacent holding or, as it would appear that some of those working for Peter MacNutt did, by dividing the total household workforce between the limited requirements of home-farm crops and the wage opportunities on more prosperous farms.

Although the bulk of wage labour was drawn into agriculture during the harvest season, some daily employment was available for men, women, and children throughout the year. The David Ross farm hired help for fencing, ploughing, harrowing, sowing, quarrying stones, cutting and sawing firewood, and slaughtering livestock as well as for harvest operations. The record books of Alex McLellan at Indian River, Prince Edward Island and Joseph Dingwell at Little River in the same colony show both purchasing labour not only for the harvest but for threshing in the winter, ploughing in the spring, and for fence work and building construction at other times of the year.<sup>50</sup> Labourers also were hired for land clearing.<sup>51</sup> As well, some farmers found it expedient to maintain year-around servants. As with much daily work, the wage rates associated with these long-term contracts varied depending on age and gender. John Lewellin noted in 1832 that while "farming men-servants" were retained at 30 to 40 shillings per month, girls received 12 to 15 shillings.<sup>52</sup>

The use of agricultural machinery that sharply reduced the critical demands for harvest labour was not widespread until well into the second half of the 19th century. Thus the demands for agricultural labour grew at roughly the same pace as the expansion of agricultural output in the first half of the 19th century. Mechanical threshers which permitted grain to be readied quickly for market began to be used in the 1830s, but these reduced a labour demand that could, if necessary, be spread across late fall and winter. The mowers, rakes, reapers, and binders that would, when in place, reduce the enormous demands for labour during harvest season by as much as 80 per cent were not a significant presence in the region until the 1860s and afterward.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup>Alex McLellan Account Book, ms. 2802/1, PAPEI; Joseph Dingwell, Ledger, ms. 3554/1, PAPEI.

<sup>51</sup>*Royal Gazette*, 15 March 1836, 2.

<sup>52</sup>John Lewellin, *Emigration. Prince Edward Island*, 196. In 1851 John Lawson reported wages of £24 to £30 per year for farm servants. John Lawson, *Letters on Prince Edward Island* (Charlottetown 1851), 20.

<sup>53</sup>*Royal Gazette* 18 April 1837, 3; James Robb, *Agricultural Progress: An Outline of the Course of Improvement in Agriculture Considered as a Business, an Art, and a Science with Special Reference to New Brunswick* (Fredericton 1856), 18; Rusty Bittermann, "Middle River: The Social Structure of Agriculture in a Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton Community," 150-2.

For many of the Maritime-born, agricultural work probably was their first taste of wage employment. There was demand for the labour of both girls and boys in the harvest fields, and the scale and nature of the work, coupled with the manner in which it was organized, made it a relatively small step from working on the home farm. Those engaged in agricultural employment might work as a lone addition to another family's work force, or they might be part of a crew of a dozen or more working the harvest fields. In either case, though, they were likely to be working for someone they already knew in a familiar setting among familiar faces, with a heterogeneous workforce -- both in terms of age and gender -- and to be performing tasks that were the common stuff of agricultural life. The work contract was likely to be informal, struck on a daily basis, and to demand a transportation commitment no more onerous than a walk.

Wage work in the timber trade and the shipbuilding industry -- agriculture's great rivals for labour in the first half of the 19th century -- was, in general, quite different from that in agriculture. This was male employment, and much of the work in these industries was concentrated at sites at some distance from the farms from which many came. Such employment was often for extended periods of time, for woods work was available from late fall until spring, and shipbuilding, when the market dictated, might be conducted on a year-round basis.<sup>54</sup> There were, of course, considerable variations in the nature of the work experience in woods work and shipbuilding. Some of the employment available within these industries was local and organized in small, perhaps primarily family-based, crews. Hired hands might be added to a cluster of brothers cutting logs for the winter or be employed casually in one of the many lesser shipyards turning out modest numbers of smaller vessels. Employment with small local operations where one might return home on a daily basis aided the integration of wage work with farm work. The Irish who settled on the backlands of Lot 29 in southwestern Queen's County, Prince Edward Island, for instance, and who worked in W.W. Lord's timber and shipbuilding operations, were said to have been able to clear their lands and hoe their crops "in spare time."<sup>55</sup> Looking back on his Cape Breton childhood, Aeneas McCharles recalled that his father combined working on his farm in the Baddeck Valley with carpentry work at the shipyards four miles away in the port of Baddeck.<sup>56</sup> Labour in these pursuits, however, was also being organized by capitalists operating on a

<sup>54</sup>A.R.M. Lower, *The North American Assault on the Canadian Forest: A History of the Lumber Trade Between Canada and the United States* (Toronto 1938), 32-3; Graeme Wynn, *Timber Colony*, 54; Richard Rice, "Shipbuilding in British America, 1787-1890: An Introductory Study," PhD dissertation, University of Liverpool, 1977, 178-81.

<sup>55</sup>Mary Brehaut, ed., *Pioneers on the Island* (Charlottetown 1959), 58. On the local organization of farm-based labour for Prince Edward Island's shipyards see too Basil Greenhill and Ann Giffard, *Westcountrymen in Prince Edward's Isle* (Toronto 1967), 56-76; Malcolm MacQueen, *Skye Pioneers and "The Island"* (Winnipeg 1929), 26.

<sup>56</sup>Aeneas McCharles, *Bemocked of Destiny: The Actual Struggles and Experiences of a Canadian Pioneer and the Recollections of a Lifetime* (Toronto 1908), 10-1.

much larger scale, who relied upon recruiting labourers from beyond the immediate locality of their operations. Entrepreneurs like the Archibalds in Cape Breton and the Popes, Macdonalds, and Cambridges on Prince Edward Island hired scores of men to work at their shipyards, sawmills, and woods operations. So too did their counterparts elsewhere in the region who, even before steam vessels and rail transportation eased the burdens of travel, were drawing labourers from the farms of northern Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island to work in their operations. By the 1820s and 1830s, farmers in significant numbers were traveling back and forth between the timber camps and shipyards of the Miramichi and their homes in northern Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island.<sup>57</sup>

Many of those working in these operations were likely to spend part of their lives as bunkhouse men, living at the worksite and labouring on a regular schedule for extended periods of time.<sup>58</sup> In both logging and boatbuilding, wages might be paid partly in kind -- shipyards tended to be organized around a truck store -- and differentially paid in accordance with a division of labour along skill lines.<sup>59</sup> Farmers and farmers' sons working in the large shipyards shared their workspace with greater numbers than did those in woods camps, and were engaged in work

<sup>57</sup>*Prince Edward Island Register*, 20 October 1825, 3; John MacGregor, *Historical and Descriptive Sketches of the Maritime Colonies of British America* (London 1828), 168; David Stewart's Journal, 31, PAPEI, 3209/28; *Royal Gazette*, 30 May 1837, 3. See too the *Royal Gazette* 26 June 1838, 3, on the theft of £35 -- a season's wages -- from a lumberman returning from the Miramichi woods to his residence in West River, Pictou County.

<sup>58</sup>Abraham Gesner, *The Industrial Resources of Nova Scotia* (Halifax 1849), 215-7; Graeme Wynn, *The Timber Colony*, 62; Arthur R.M. Lower, *Great Britain's Woodyard: British America and the Timber Trade, 1763-1867* (Montréal 1973), 189-96. On shipyard/bunkhouse deaths due to drunkenness and violence see the *Prince Edward Island Register*, 25 September 1824, 3; *Prince Edward Island Register*, 27 February 1827, 3.

<sup>59</sup>Richard Rice, "Shipbuilding in British America, 1787-1890: An Introductory Study," PhD dissertation, University of Liverpool, 1977, 171, 186-92. The labour contracts from the 1840s entered in Joseph Dingwell's ledger indicate that he paid most of his labourers half in cash and half in "trade." Joseph Dingwell Ledger, Ms. 3554/1, PAPEI. Capt Moorsom's account of labour relations on the waterfront in Liverpool in the summer of 1828, suggests the reasons for Dingwell's clear indications of the mode of payment in his contracts. There were, he noted, "two scales of value, the "cash price," and the "goods price," and "the various gradations thereof distinctly marked in all transactions between employers and labourers." Moorsom reported a rate of exchange in favor of cash at a ratio of 3 to 4. Captain W. Moorsom, *Letters From Nova Scotia; Comprising Sketches of a Young Country*, 292. For information on Joseph Pope's shipyard and truck store see John Mollison, "Prince County," in D.A. Mackinnon and A.B. Warburton, eds., *Past and Present of Prince Edward Island* (Charlottetown 1906), 86. Lemuel and Artemas Cambridge offered their ship carpenters the choice of employment by the month or payment "by the seam." *Prince Edward Island Register*, 23 May 1826, 3.

that required more complex forms of organization.<sup>60</sup> The experience of work in the shipbuilding yards that produced large vessels was, as Richard Rice has argued, that of a large, complexly-orchestrated manufactory.

In 1824 it was estimated that perhaps 1,000 men, drawn from a total Island population of roughly 20,000, worked in Prince Edward Island's shipyards to produce some 10,000 tons of shipping.<sup>61</sup> This figure excludes those working in the woods to supply materials for the shipyards, and those working in the woods to produce timber for export. If a similar worker/tonnage ratio held in Nova Scotia, the numbers employed at shipbuilding there would be roughly double those of Prince Edward Island. In both cases, the expansion of shipbuilding during the pre-Confederation decades took place at roughly the same pace as the growth of population in these provinces.<sup>62</sup> As a consequence, the percentage of those engaged in shipbuilding to the larger population probably remained more or less the same on average across these decades, while varying sharply, of course, from year to year as the tonnage under construction responded to external demand.

Despite a number of efforts, a commercial fishery based in Prince Edward Island developed slowly. Prior to 1850, the fishery conducted by Island merchants provided few job opportunities.<sup>63</sup> In Cape Breton, on the other hand, fishing was an enterprise of greater significance. Of particular importance were the Channel Island firms that conducted an extensive industry from their bases in Arichat and Cheticamp. Although the scale of operations was large, and the work labour-intensive, it does not appear that these firms drew substantial amounts of wage labour from among the farm population of the interior. Stephen Hornsby suggests instead that their operations were conducted by combining the independent commodity production of fisherfolk clustered in coastal communities, linked to the firms by ties of credit, with the work of a seasonal wage-labour force drawn from the Channel Islands rather than Cape Breton.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup>According to Dougald Henry (b. 1817) the modest shipbuilding operation run by the Bells of Stanley River Prince Edward Island employed 30 or more men in the yards. Working days, he relates, began at six with a break for breakfast at 8. For Dougald Henry's account of shipyard life as compiled by Dr. Hedley Ross, see Mary Brehaut, ed., *Pioneers on the Island*, 47.

<sup>61</sup>*Prince Edward Island Register*, 27 March 1824, 3. Shipbuilding declined precipitously after the depression of the mid-1820s. It would be more than a decade before output on Prince Edward Island would surpass these figures. Evidence compiled by Richard Rice from 3 Québec shipyards suggest reasonably similar man/ton labour force rations there in the mid 1850s varying from 8.6 to 16.3 tons per man. Richard Rice, "Shipbuilding in British America," 179.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 15-6; John Warkentin, "The Atlantic Region," 180.

<sup>63</sup>John MacGregor, *Historical and Descriptive Sketches of the Maritime Colonies of British America*, 63; *Prince Edward Island Register* 24 March 1829, 3.

<sup>64</sup>Stephen J. Hornsby, "Staple Trades, Subsistence Agriculture, and Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton Island," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 79:3 (1989), 415.

The opportunities available for wage work with the American fishing fleet as it worked in Maritime waters may well have been of greater significance. Vessels working out of New England ports came by the hundreds to the small harbours of the Atlantic coast and the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where they picked up supplies of food and water, profited by smuggling, and often engaged additional hands both for fishing in Maritime waters and for pursuing the fishery off Labrador and Newfoundland.<sup>65</sup> At midcentury, it was estimated that perhaps 4000 Nova Scotians were working with the American fishing fleet, typically labouring aboard vessels crewed by a dozen or so fishermen. Although the majority would have been drawn from fishing communities about the coast, some of these hands traveled from interior regions to join the fleet as it moved through the Strait of Canso region. Others traveled south to the fishing ports of Maine and Massachusetts to sign on.<sup>66</sup> While the labour of women was a significant component of the family-based in-shore fishery, recruitment for the American fishing fleet, as for the timber industry and the shipyards, and unlike wage labour in agriculture, almost exclusively tapped the male members of farm households.<sup>67</sup> Workers were paid, it would appear, either on a monthly basis or by a share in the value of the catch and were signed on for periods ranging from weeks to months.<sup>68</sup> Islanders working on American vessels in the late 1830s reportedly were paid at a rate of £6 per month.<sup>69</sup>

Beyond the labour required for the tasks associated with the production of commodities from fields, forests, and fisheries, the merchants and others involved in these trades required workers for the multitude of tasks associated with assem-

---

Rosemary Ommer too notes the significance of wage workers drawn from Jersey in the Gulf fishery. Rosemary Ommer, "'All the Fish of the Post': Property Resource Rights and Development in a Nineteenth-Century Inshore Fishery," *Acadiensis*, 10:2 (Spring 1981), 113. Father Anselme Chiasson, though, notes the exploitation of *Acadian* wage workers in the early 19th century by the Robin Company in Cheticamp. Father Anselme Chiasson, *Chéticamp: History and Acadian Traditions*, trans. by Jean Doris LeBlanc, (St. John's 1986), 66-7. Certainly too resident fish merchants like Laurence Kavanaugh made use of local wage labour.

<sup>65</sup>John MacDougall, *History of Inverness County*, 17; Abraham Gesner, *The Industrial Resources of Nova Scotia*, 104-10; *Colonial Herald* (Charlottetown), 17 October, 1838, 3; *Colonial Herald* (Charlottetown), 5 June 1839, 4.

<sup>66</sup>For the general patterns of recruitment see Paul Crowell to James Uniacke, 10 February 1852, Nova Scotia House of Assembly, *Journals*, 1852, app. 25 and the statements of David Bears, Nova Scotia House of Assembly, *Journals*, 1852, app. 13. On some of the folklore arising from the involvement of Cape Bretoners in these patterns of work see John P. Parker, *Cape Breton Ships and Men* (Toronto 1967), 130-1 and John MacDougall, *History of Inverness County*, 123-4.

<sup>67</sup>Marilyn Porter, "'She was Skipper of the Shore Crew': Notes on the History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Newfoundland," *Labour/Le Travail*, 15 (Spring 1985), 105-24.

<sup>68</sup>Harold Innis, *The Cod Fisheries: The History of an International Economy* (Washington, D.C., 1940; reprint ed. Toronto 1978), 325, 326-7, 333-4.

<sup>69</sup>*Journals*, Prince Edward Island House of Assembly, 1837, 81-2.

bling, transporting and managing these goods. The ledgers of merchants like Lawrence Kavanaugh, John Munro, Joseph Dingwell, Peter MacNutt, Peter Smyth, Robert Elmsley, and John Beamish Moore show wages paid for delivering messages, rounding up and driving livestock, hauling hay, "looking after timber," sorting fish, stacking deal, loading vessels, tending stock, both onshore and on voyages to market, and a host of other irregularly-necessary tasks generated by the uneven rhythms of mercantile activity. Work might also be obtained aboard the vessels moving these goods between ports.<sup>70</sup>

Grist mills, saw mills, and other processing industries scattered about the coast and waterways provided work opportunities for farm-based labourers too. While most of those employed were men, women and boys as well sometimes found work in these enterprises. In 1871 nearly 20 per cent of those working in the carding and fulling mills of the seven northeastern counties of Nova Scotia were women.<sup>71</sup> Many enterprises, either because they were reliant upon seasonally-fluctuating water supplies for their power or because demand was irregular, were part-time operations requiring labour for limited periods. The ledger books of John Munro of St. Ann's Cape Breton, for instance, indicate that the labour he obtained for his grist and carding mill in 1851 and 1852 was hired on a daily basis putting in from 25 to 58 days of work over the course of the year.<sup>72</sup> Some coming from a distance to work for Munro, such as Alex McKenzie of Big Harbour, surely must have stayed in St. Ann's during the period when the mill was running. A similar pattern of part-time employment was followed as well by those whom Lawrence Kavanaugh hired for his sawmill operations in St. Peters earlier in the century, and in Middle River too.<sup>73</sup> In 1870 one of the saw mills in the community worked for two months, the other for four. The three grist mills in Middle River operated for seven months of the year on average.<sup>74</sup>

In the first half of the 19th century, farm-based labourers found wages in building construction and work on roads, wharfs, canals, and the first of the region's railways. State expenditures on public buildings — such as the construction of Government House and county court houses and jails in Prince Edward Island during the 1830s — played a significant, though often short-lived, role in generating demand for construction workers. So too did projects like the Shubenacadie Canal and the Albion Mines Railway, portents of the demand for labour that bigger

<sup>70</sup>Lawrence Kavanaugh Account Book, 1817-24, MG 3, vol. 301-2, PANS; John Munro Daybook, 1851-55, Micro Biography, PANS; Joseph Dingwell Ledger, Ms. 3554/1, PAPEI; Diary of Honorable Peter MacNutt, Sr., Ms. 3552, PAPEI; Peter Smyth Ledger, 1833-6, MG 3 vol. 284, PANS; Robert Elmsley Diary, 1855-89, PANS; John Beamish Moore Account Book, 1848-67, Micro Biography, PANS; Eric Sager, *Seafaring Labour: The Merchant Marine of Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914* (Kingston 1989), 136-63.

<sup>71</sup>*Census of Canada, 1870-71*, vol. 3, (Ottawa 1875), 316.

<sup>72</sup>John Munro Daybook, 1851-55, Micro Biography, PANS.

<sup>73</sup>Lawrence Kavanaugh Account Book, 1817-24, MG 3, vol. 301, PANS.

<sup>74</sup>Canada, Census, 1870/71, Schedule 6.

transportation projects would engender in the third quarter of the 19th century. On a more regular and local basis, annual state appropriations for road, bridge, and wharf improvements created a substantial amount of wage employment. Such state-generated work was, as Murray Beck has noted, central to the household economies of many of the rural poor, and its interruption could be the cause of considerable deprivation in the countryside.<sup>75</sup> Privately-funded rural and urban construction work also provided employment for farm-based workers. Most of this work, like the construction work associated with transportation systems, tended to be seasonal employment for males.<sup>76</sup> When the work was close to home, the remuneration to be gained at road work or on construction jobs might, for those who possessed draft animals, be broadened by bringing horses or oxen to the job. Many, though, took their skills further afield. By the 1840s, if not sooner, labourers from the farms of the northeastern Maritimes were moving seasonally to construction sites in Boston and to other distant centres. Though an urban Cape Bretoner it would seem, George Musgrave's description of employment with a crew of nine in Roxbury, Massachusetts beginning work at dawn with breaks at six for breakfast, noon for dinner, and supper after dark at the end of the day probably captures the experience of many farm-based workers as well. Working and lodging with other single young men, he set the relatively high wages he was earning, and the expectation that he would soon accumulate enough to enable him to quit, against the discomforts of his long days.<sup>77</sup>

The coal mining industry as well provided work for farm-based labourers, even as it increasingly came to rely upon a skilled workforce for the actual mining. In the first decades of the 19th century, few of those working the coal seams of Cape Breton or Pictou were skilled colliers. Men more accustomed to finding their way about fish flakes or over cutover ground might yet find work in the pit signing on for a few months or a year. The experience of work in the Cape Breton coal fields in this period paralleled in some ways the work in the timber and shipbuilding industries: bunkhouse life, an entirely male workforce, and the truck store.<sup>78</sup> With

<sup>75</sup>Beck perceptively notes the differential impact of the blockage of appropriations in the revenue dispute of 1830: wealthier farmers suffered because of the deteriorating condition of the roads and bridges they used to move their goods; the rural poor suffered because of the loss of wages gained from working on the roads. J. Murray Beck, *Joseph Howe*, vol. 1, *Conservative Reformer, 1804-1848* (Kingston 1982), 72.

<sup>76</sup>Those working on road crews gained income from both directly from the state through the disbursement of government monies in wages (albeit through the often-sticky hands of local road commissioners) and indirectly through the performance of statutory labour requirements for wealthier rural residents. For examples of the latter see the David Ross Diary, 2, Prince Edward Island Collection, UPEI, and Lawrence Kavanaugh Account Book, 1817-24, MG 3, vol. 302, 99.

<sup>77</sup>George Musgrave to Ann, 7 August 1842, Micro Biography: Moore, no. 10, PANS.

<sup>78</sup>Richard Brown, *The Coal Fields and Coal Trade of the Island of Cape Breton* (London 1871), 70-2; J.S. Martell, "Early Coal Mining in Nova Scotia," in Don Macgillivray and Brian Tennyson, eds, *Cape Breton Historical Essays* (Sydney 1980), 41-53.

the arrival of the General Mining Association in the 1820s and the massive injections of capital that came with it, coal mining became technologically more sophisticated and corporate policy favoured reliance upon a professional core of miners imported from the British coal fields. There remained, however, much demand for less-skilled casual workers in and about the mines. Of the 335 employees on the payroll at the Albion mines in the mid-1830s, only 66 were actually colliers. Scores of others were involved in construction and transportation tasks.<sup>79</sup> To meet this demand, the General Mining Association drew from the surrounding countryside about their mines and yet farther afield.<sup>80</sup> As Abraham Gesner noted, the labour force employed at the mines was divided. There was a well-housed and well-paid professional core and then there were the others, the "labouring farmers," who received less-generous treatment and were paid at roughly half the rate of the skilled miners.<sup>81</sup> Over time both the General Mining Association and subsequent operators in the Nova Scotian coal fields would increasingly turn again to the countryside for the recruitment of miners as well as general labourers.<sup>82</sup>

Around 1,500 men found employment in and about Nova Scotia's coal mines in the 1830s. Thousands more would be recruited in the coal boom of the third quarter of the 19th century.<sup>83</sup> Some of these workers were young men from the farm communities of the region who were in the process of severing their ties to the soil. Some ultimately would return to the countryside with their savings.<sup>84</sup> Yet others continued to farm even as they worked for mining companies. In the 1860s it was reported in Cape Breton that surface workers by the hundreds "leave their work, at certain seasons, to attend to their crops."<sup>85</sup>

<sup>79</sup>James M. Cameron, *The Pictonian Colliers* (Halifax 1974), 27.

<sup>80</sup>The Albion Mines ran ads for "seasonal" labourers in Prince Edward Island in the 1830s. See the *Colonial Herald*, 4 May 1839, 4. See too Joseph Howe, "Eastern Rambles," in *Travel Sketches of Nova Scotia*, 163; James M. Cameron, *The Pictonian Colliers*, 102.

<sup>81</sup>Abraham Gesner, *The Industrial Resources of Nova Scotia*, 273.

<sup>82</sup>Del Muise, "The Making of an Industrial Community: Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1867-1900," in *Cape Breton Historical Essays*, 80.

<sup>83</sup>Ian McKay, "The Crisis of Dependent Development: Class Conflict in the Nova Scotia Coalfields, 1872-1876," in Gregory S. Kealey, ed., *Class, Gender, and Region: Essays in Canadian Historical Sociology* (St. John's 1988), 21, 30-4; Richard Brown, *The Coal Fields and Coal Trade of the Island of Cape Breton*, 98, 111-39.

<sup>84</sup>There were obviously other variations here as well. Some floated back and forth for years at a time between wage work in the mines and life on the land.

<sup>85</sup>Nova Scotia House of Assembly, *Journals* 1864, app. 4, 3. On the continuing linkages some mine workers maintained between country home and mine and the significance of these to social relations in the working class communities about the mines in the late 19th and early 20th centuries see David Frank, "The Industrial Folk Song in Cape Breton," *Canadian Folklore, Canadien*, 8:1-2 (1986), 21-42; Danny Samson, "The Making of a Cape Breton Coal Town: Dependent Development in Inverness, Nova Scotia, 1899-1915," MA dissertation, University of New Brunswick, 1988.

A more heterogeneous workforce found wages in employment as domestic servants and in textile work and factory work. With increasing urbanization and the growth of middle-class demand for domestic servants, both within the region and in more distant centres, many young farm men and women were drawn out of the countryside and into domestic service for at least part of their working lives.<sup>86</sup> Wanted "an active LAD from 14 to 16 years of age to be indented as a house servant. One from the country would be preferred," ran an ad in the Charlottetown paper.<sup>87</sup> By 1851, roughly 20 per cent of Saint John households employed a servant, or servants, and one out of seven Haligonian households employed at least one servant.<sup>88</sup> Other farmfolk found employment as domestic servants in wealthier rural homes. Though putting-out work does not appear to have been conducted on a large scale in the northeastern Maritimes, some men and women were hired by merchants to weave homespun by the yard. Women were hired as well to knit and perform other hand work.<sup>89</sup> More significantly, by the 1840s women were being recruited from the southern Maritimes to work in the factories of New England. In July of 1849, the Saint John *Courier* reported the departure aboard the "Fairy Queen" of "upwards of 100 young women who had been engaged to work in a factory at Salmon Falls near Portland."<sup>90</sup>

Clearly as the nature of off-farm work varied, so too the ways in which it was integrated into the household economy differed. Daily work close at hand, such as on a neighbouring farm or for a local merchant, permitted, at least in theory, a good deal of flexibility. That farmers and merchants alike required casual labour and

<sup>86</sup>Faye E. Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Connecticut 1983). Claudette Lacelle's study of domestic servants in Montréal and Québec City in the second decade of the 19th century and Toronto, Québec City and Halifax in the 1870s, suggests a reasonably equal split between men and women domestics early in the century. Over the next half century, though, the numbers of women in domestic service grew and rural recruitment became increasingly important. Claudette Lacelle, *Urban Domestic Servants in 19th-Century Canada* (Ottawa 1987), 18-20, 78. John Lawson reported that women servants were receiving £9 to £12 per year in Prince Edward Island at mid-century. John Lawson, *Letters on Prince Edward Island*, 20. For an insightful early 20th-century account of a country woman's experience as a domestic servant in Charlottetown see Bertha MacDonald, *Diary of a Housemaid* (n.p. 1986).

<sup>87</sup>*Prince Edward Island Register*, 23 May 1826, 3. See too *Prince Edward Island Register*, 20 January 1825, 3; 21 August 1827, 3.

<sup>88</sup>T.W. Acheson, *Saint John: The Making of a Colonial Urban Community* (Toronto 1985), 233-4; Claudette Lacelle, *Urban Domestic Servants in 19th-Century Canada*, 81.

<sup>89</sup>For examples, see John Munro Daybook, 1851-55, Ann McLeod's account, 2 November 1852, Micro Biography, PANS; John Beamish Moore Account Book, 1848-67, 11, 13, 16, 23, and 30, Micro Biography, PANS; Lawrence Kavanaugh Account Book, 1818-24, 193, MG 3, vol. 302, PANS; Lawrence Kavanaugh Account Book, 1817-24, 228, MG 3, vol. 301, PANS.

<sup>90</sup>*Courier* (Saint John), 21 July 1849, 2.

employed adults and children, both males and females, meant that various household members might move back and forth between work on the home farm and wage employment. John Beamish Moore's ledger from North Sydney in the 1850s, for instance, shows that the backlander Archy McDonald's household earned wages alternately from Archy's work, that of "his boys," and that of "the girl."<sup>91</sup> The accounts of other backlanders on Moore's ledger show a similar heterogeneity in the composition of household labour made available to the merchant for wages. The same pattern of varying daily movement of different members of the same household in and out of the local agricultural labour force is apparent in the MacNutt farm ledger as men and children, male and female, appear in varying numbers from day to day. One day a father and a couple of sons might be on the pay-roll, another day perhaps only the sons or only the daughters would be employed. There is no way to know whether the pattern was set by demand or by supply, or to discern how in fact those who momentarily disappear from the day book deployed their labour, but clearly local work afforded the possibility of a varied and shifting household response to the needs of the home farm. Local contract work and putting-out work offered similar flexibility. A man who had been hired to mow a field, dig a cellar, or clear land might, particularly if the work was close at hand, exercise some discretion in choosing his hours of employment and integrating such work into other tasks concerning his own resources. As well, he might flexibly use the labour of other members of his household to complete the task. Such would also be the case with the farmer/tailors contracted to sew trousers or for shirtmaking, or the farm women employed by the piece for spinning, weaving, or knitting.

Other employments permitted less flexibility. Some types of work — such as that in shipbuilding, the timber industry, employment with the American fishing fleet, or the construction trades — provided employment almost exclusively for adult males and often entailed working at a considerable distance from one's residence. In homes where the male head engaged in such work, women often were left to manage household and farm for extended periods. Seeking lodgings at a farm house on the Cape Breton-side of the Strait of Canso in the summer of 1831, David Stewart, a Prince Edward Island landlord, and his traveling companion Richard Smith of the General Mining Association, discovered that the man of the farm "was gone to Miramichi to cut lumber."<sup>92</sup> Only Mrs. MacPherson and her two children were home. At midcentury, the Crown surveyor in Baddeck, D.B. McNab, reported that there were "hundreds" of farms located on poorer lands in his region of the Island where the men of the household traveled to "distant parts of the province or to the United States" each summer and left the maintenance of the farm to "their wives and children."<sup>93</sup> With the boom in railway construction and coal mining in

<sup>91</sup> John Beamish Moore Account Book, 1848-67, 22.

<sup>92</sup> David Stewart's Journal, 31, PAPEI, 3209/28.

<sup>93</sup> Nova Scotia House of Assembly, *Journals*, 1857, Appendix No. 72, 421.

the third quarter of the 19th century, a local observer noted that Cape Breton farmers and their sons "by hundreds, nay, thousands, [were] leaving their farms to the women, and seeking employment at the collieries and railways."<sup>94</sup> Some, such as a Highlander born on Lewis residing in Middle River who planted his crop of oats and potatoes and then traveled on foot to Halifax to work on the railway each year, appear to have regularized their patterns of distant wage work so that they synchronized with the seasonal rounds of farming. Come harvest time, the Lewis man would be back in Middle River.<sup>95</sup> In other households the distant wage work of males was made possible because females and children assumed a full array of farm tasks.<sup>96</sup>

The types of employment possibilities available to farm-based labourers varied across place -- though the mobility of labour minimized the significance of some of this -- and across time as the economies of timber, ships, fish, and agriculture waxed or waned and as decisions of the state and the private sector shaped the demand side of the labour market. The possibilities for the integration of wage employment into the economies of farm households varied, too, across the cyclical passages of family time. In some households a wage supplement was obtainable only if the male household-head worked off the farm on a daily or more extended basis. In others further along in the family life cycle, younger members of the household, male and female, might take on the role of subsidizing the farm with wage work. As the Prince Edward Island Land Commissioners learned when they inquired into the survival strategies of the rural poor there, household budgets were balanced because "the boys hire out," the family had put their "children out to service," and/or wages were sent home by family members who had moved away.<sup>97</sup> Such possibilities were available to households only at certain points in the family life cycle. The Strait of Canso household David Stewart and Richard Smith visited -- finding a woman and two children at home and the husband in the Miramichi woods -- probably was a young family with limited options, but a household with older children might be sustained, in part, by the remittance of money from the earnings of children working at distant locales.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>94</sup> *Journal of Agriculture for Nova Scotia*, July 1871, 652.

<sup>95</sup> Francis MacGregor, "Days that I Remember," January 1962, Mg. 12, vol. 71, 31, Beaton Institute, Sydney, Nova Scotia.

<sup>96</sup> These different patterns of domestic life in poorer households no doubt underwrote the perception that backland women were particularly able workers. Backland girls, notes Margaret MacPhail's character John Campbell, made the best marriage partners as "They can work outside and in and keeps a fellow warm in bed. What else would you want!" Margaret MacPhail, *Loch Bras d'Or* (Windsor, Nova Scotia 1970), 84, 65.

<sup>97</sup> Ian Ross Robertson, ed., *The Prince Edward Island Land Commission of 1860* (Fredericton 1988), 116-9.

<sup>98</sup> Alan Brookes, "The Exodus: Migration From the Maritime Provinces to Boston During the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century," PhD dissertation, University of New

Earnings gained by a younger generation working away for prolonged periods might be sent to support a home farm but might as well be saved to finance a new household.<sup>99</sup> For many, prolonged, and often distant, wage work, was an early phase in lives that ultimately would be lived out on the land. Young men or women might work away for years to accumulate the cash necessary to permit them to acquire the things needed to establish a household of their own. "Tell Mary MacDonald," wrote Thomas Murchison from Boston to his cousin on Prince Edward Island, "not to engage with any in marriage until my return."<sup>100</sup> Cousin Malcolm was instructed to look after Thomas Murchison's Island property in his absence as well. Further afield, Walter McDonald wrote home to Pictou from Melbourne, Australia concerning his impending return and his traveling companion's interest in marrying sister Marion who had remained in Nova Scotia.<sup>101</sup> Such requests surely must have been repeated again and again as young rural Maritimers sought to combine distant earnings with local ambitions. For many others, of course, off-farm work was the first step in lives that would ultimately be lived out elsewhere.

Although remote worksites could be attractive because of the wages being offered (and perhaps the fact that in most cases they were being offered in cash), the ability to gain continuous work was a drawing card for many as well. "It would surprise you," wrote Thomas Murchison on his arrival in Boston in January 1846, "to see all the work there is going on here. As far as I travelled I could not see an idle man that wished to work." He was, he reported, "in very good employment and making money fast" and intended to be back by spring.<sup>102</sup> George Musgrave wrote in a similar vein from Roxbury in August of 1842. Work had been easy to obtain, and though the hours were long he was making five dollars a week plus board and would not be returning to Cape Breton until the fall.<sup>103</sup> Such returns compared favourably to the wages offered in Prince Edward Island and Cape Breton, and the ability to obtain steady employment at cash wages meant that the migrant worker might return with substantial savings. The unusual opportunities for big wages drew others able to afford the passage monies yet further afield. A

---

Brunswick, 1978, 88; Bette Beattie, "Going Up to Lynn: Single Women from the Maritime Provinces Working in Lynn, Massachusetts, 1870-1930," paper presented to the Atlantic Canada Studies Conference, Orono, Maine, 18 May 1990. In her insightful evocation of life in mid-19th century rural Cape Breton, Margaret MacPhail's relates how the MacKiel's, a backland family, survived in part because an older daughter working as a domestic in Arichat sent money home as did a son working with the Grand Banks fishing fleet. Margaret MacPhail, *Loch Bras d'Or*, 7.

<sup>99</sup>These were not, of course, mutually exclusive endeavours. Labouring to support the home farm could affect one's inheritance and thus ultimately contribute to the ability to become established on one's own at a later date.

<sup>100</sup>Thomas Murchison to Malcolm Murchison, 15 January 1846, Ms. 3084/1, PAPEL.

<sup>101</sup>Walter McDonald to Mother, 25 December 1862, MG 100/184/13, PANS.

<sup>102</sup>Thomas Murchison to Malcolm Murchison, 15 January 1846, Ms. 3084/1, PAPEL.

<sup>103</sup>George Musgrave to Ann, 7 August 1842, Micro Biography: Moore, no. 10, PANS.

Yarmouth man working in the California gold fields wrote home in July of 1849 that labourers were receiving from eight to sixteen dollars per day. Although the cost of board was extraordinarily high and life precarious and violent, he would not, he thought, start making his way homeward until autumn because the opportunities for amassing a vast savings were unrivalled.<sup>104</sup>

One of the most striking things revealed by a survey of the waged work of farm-based labourers during this era is its multiformity. Employment might be on a daily basis or for extended periods of time. It might entail working with a small family unit or with a large, complexly-organized, stratified work force composed exclusively of wage labourers. It might involve working with those of the same age, gender, and class background or with a more heterogeneous grouping. And it might be found in staples production, construction, manufacturing, transportation, or in aid of the "self-sufficient" activities of other farm households. Remuneration might be in cash, in kind, as a positive ledger entry, or in a mixture of these forms.

Insofar as the terms of contract between employer and employee were concerned, working circumstances varied across a broad spectrum of personal and impersonal relationships. Wage work might be found locally with a relative or neighbour or with a previously unknown employer in a distant locale. In the case of a local employer, who was a friend or relative, mutually advantageous terms may have been negotiable. Employee choices concerning the timing and terms of work -- and employer -- may have been more sharply constrained, though, in other localized working circumstances when the resident elite, particularly those possessing the power of a ledger or rent book, or perhaps holding a mortgage, sought extra hands. Did those working for merchants like Lawrence Kavanaugh, John Beamish Moore, and Peter Smyth — workers whose wages were set against ledger debts already incurred — come seeking employment, or were they summoned? And, if they lacked the cash or commodities to clear their debts, did they have the freedom to say "no"? The same question clearly applies to the many tenants on Prince Edward Island employed by land agents for road work, land clearing, construction, and shipbuilding whose wages were directly set against their arrears on rent rolls.<sup>105</sup> Although in theory they were working for wages, in practice many of these tenants came to be under a labour obligation to their landlords. At the other extreme were the farm-based labourers earning wages from strangers in distant work sites. The Cape Bretoner George Musgrave was initially put off by the long hours he was expected to work in Roxbury and in consequence quit his job. But, he wrote home, "on consideration of my employer adding a dollar per week to my

<sup>104</sup> *Nova Scotian* (Halifax), 30 July 1849, 243, col 1 & 2.

<sup>105</sup> The practice was widespread. Lord Selkirk's agent William Douse, for instance, had at least 80 men working off their rents at a rate of 3/6 for a 6 AM to 7 PM working day in the summer of 1838. Selkirk Papers, MG 19, E1, v. 73, 19207, PAC. See too Robert and David Stewart's notice to tenants in *Royal Gazette* 30 September 1834, 1 and the Worrell rent books, RG. 15, PAPEI.

wages I returned to work again."<sup>106</sup> Clearly, a cash nexus was at the heart of this work relationship and many others like it.

These variations in the labouring experiences of farm-based workers raise questions about the extent to which paternal or "personal" relations can be said to be broadly characteristic of the working experiences of British North Americans in this period. No doubt paternalism informed the relationship between employers and employees in many instances, and quite possibly in most. This model, however, with its emphasis on local power structures and non-economic forms of labour recruitment and control, does not effectively capture the labouring experiences of temporary workers, often originating in the countryside, who moved in and out of the work force. As Clare Pentland admitted in his exploration of the concept, their circumstances do not fit the model.<sup>107</sup> The issue of numbers is, of course, important here. If workers such as these represent a relatively insignificant part of the total labouring population, perhaps there is some justification for viewing the nature of their circumstances as marginal to the broader picture. Existing research does not provide a clear answer to the numbers question. It is perhaps significant, though, that seasonal employees equaled or outnumbered permanent workers at the St. Maurice forges and at D.D. Calvin's lumber operations at Garden Island, supposedly classic examples of paternalistic labour practices in action. These enterprises in fact employed more workers who fell outside the model than within it.<sup>108</sup> The pattern was repeated in the Maritimes. The General Mining Association in Nova Scotia, too, had its well-paid and well-housed skilled workforce operating within locally-sustained, paternalistic structures, and a numerous body of differently-treated "labouring farmers" who moved in and out of the mining towns. Such, to varying degrees, appears to have been the case in other Maritime industries as well. Perhaps the circumstances of a skilled fraction of the work force have assumed too great a profile in our conceptualization of labour relations, and worker consciousness, during the first half of the 19th century. Greater attention to the lives of farm-based workers may force some reassessment in our understanding of the contours of the experience of work during this period.<sup>109</sup>

The issue of numbers emerges again with the broader argument being presented here. While it is relatively easy to assemble data pointing to the involvement of farm-based workers in a wide variety of wage labour, establishing the

<sup>106</sup> George Musgrave to Ann, 7 August 1842, *Micro Biography*: Moore, no. 10, PANS.

<sup>107</sup> H. Clare Pentland, *Labour and Capital in Canada, 1650-1860* (Toronto 1981), 45-6.

<sup>108</sup> The majority of the work force at the forges appear to have been temporary. The division between permanent and temporary workers at D.D. Calvin's operations was roughly equal. H. Clare Pentland, *Labour and Capital in Canada, 1650-1860*, 42-5; Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800-1980* (Toronto 1983), 15.

<sup>109</sup> For a consideration of this issue in a European context see Jean H. Quataert, "A New Look at Working-Class Formation: Reflections on the Historical Perspective," *International Labour and Working Class History*, 27 (Spring 1985), 72-6.

breadth of this is another matter. One way to approach the issue is from the supply side, from the perspective of the household. Where data -- such as census returns -- permit, it is possible to estimate farm production and consumption and to calculate the numbers of farms requiring an income supplement. Applying this sort of analysis to the census returns from Middle River and Hardwood Hill suggested that roughly one-quarter to one-third of households fell into this category. Though the ratios would vary, similar analysis of data from farming communities elsewhere in the northeast Maritimes almost certainly would reveal roughly-comparable patterns. Perusal of the census returns from the region indicate the recurring presence of farms with insufficient resources to maintain their occupants. It does not require the application of a complex algorithm to discern that, given the climate and soils of this region, a family of eight would not have been able to make ends meet with five cleared acres and a single cow. But since wage work was not the only strategy for augmenting deficiencies in farm income, it is not safe to equate all farm deficits with a comparable involvement in wage labour. Moreover, there were inducements to wage work other than that of immediate necessity. Wage labourers were drawn from across the spectrum of farm types, not just from operations with annual deficits. Likely these numbers more than compensate for those who may have successfully managed to supplement insufficiencies of farm income without recourse to wages, judging from a reading of a variety of sources. What needs to be emphasized is that the analysis of farm deficits ultimately rests on a series of assumptions concerning patterns of production and consumption. No matter how carefully done, the resulting figures are estimates. Shave down the calculations for household consumption levels or increase the coefficients for livestock productivity and we arrive at new estimates for the numbers of farm households requiring income supplements. To test the accuracy of such estimates, we need close analysis of the economic behaviour of specific households.

The problems of quantifying workforce participation do not get any easier when approached from the demand side. Existing evidence concerning employee numbers, length of work, and origins is fragmentary, although there are some sectors for which we have contemporary estimates of the numbers of workers. Shipbuilding, according to the editor of the *Prince Edward Island Register*, employed 1000 Islanders in 1824. The Island was a relatively small place and the editor took a keen interest in developments in the shipbuilding industry. His figure is probably well-grounded. Assuming that perhaps one-quarter of the total Island population of 20,000 comprised adult males, this would mean that one-fifth of them were working at the shipyards for some period of the year. In adjacent New Brunswick two decades later, it was estimated that roughly 20 thousand were employed in the timber industry.<sup>110</sup> Figures such as these can be set against production tallies to provide a starting point for compiling estimates of the labour force in other years and other locales. So, too, fragmentary evidence concerning

<sup>110</sup>Report from the New Brunswick *Royal Gazette* cited in the *Islander*, 20 November 1846, 2.

the numbers of labourers employed on specific farms and in particular enterprises can permit, by extrapolation, the creation of rough estimates of the labour demands of the industry as a whole. Unfortunately, little such work has been done. The fragments of evidence concerning employment, however, suggest that a composite picture would reveal substantial numbers of farm dwellers participating in near and distant labour markets. It needs to be emphasized, though, that for many participation was brief. The percentage of farm-dwellers engaging in the wage economy is a very different figure from the percentage of the total productive time farm folk spent within the wage economy. Which is the more important figure depends, of course, on the questions we ask.

The problem of attempting to quantify the extent of farm-based wage labour in the first half of the 19th century is a difficult one. With more research into the behaviour of particular households and the circumstances of specific communities or industries for which there are good records, it will be possible to obtain a better sense of the scale of the phenomenon. At best, though, the figures will be very rough estimates, reasonable guesses based on limited evidence. What is clear, however, even given the limits of the existing state of our understanding, is that wage work needs to be carefully factored into our understandings of rural life.<sup>111</sup> Though an oft-noted reality, it has not always assumed the profile that it should. Too often the appealing vision of rural autonomy and insularity has nudged it aside. Drawn in by the image of the independent yeoman, we seek to explain his decline. Influenced by the mythology of the autonomous household, or by its more recent derivative, the autonomous community in which households achieved independence by equitable sharing, we examine rural life in terms of narrowly-defined geographical communities. None of this is entirely wrongheaded, but we need to recognize more explicitly that the presuppositions that are guiding these questions and approaches originate in a powerful mythology that is rooted only partly in the rural reality of the early 19th-century Maritimes.

I am reminded of the discrepancies in the assumptions which the scholar Bernard Pares brought to his study of the Russian countryside and the reality that he encountered when he actually moved among rural folk on the eve of the Revolution of 1905. Arriving at a peasant meeting in Tver, miles from the nearest train station, he expected to find rural folk with but a dim perception of the world that lay beyond their village. He discovered instead that more than 40 per cent had worked in either Petersburg or Moscow.<sup>112</sup> The rural world that he found was not the insular one he had expected. Charles Farnham had a similar experience in Cape Breton in the 1880s. Traveling across the remote northernmost highlands, he

<sup>111</sup>Certainly too, as Larry McCann has noted, these patterns have implications for urban development in the Maritimes as well. Larry McCann, "Living a Double Life': Town and Country in the Industrialization of the Maritimes," in Douglas Day, ed., *Geographical Perspectives on the Maritime Provinces* (Halifax 1988), 93-113.

<sup>112</sup>Bernard Pares, *A Wandering Student: The Story of a Purpose* (Syracuse 1948), 127.

encountered a young woman along the road and gave her a lift. When she asked to be put down at an intersecting cart trail, Farnham, who had come to Cape Breton to experience life in its primitive purity, inquired as to the direction she was taking. "Where does that road go to Maggie?" "It goes to the Strait of Canso, sir, and on to Montana . . ." <sup>113</sup> Twenty years earlier, perhaps the answer would have been Boston and half a century before, as David Stewart and Richard Smith discovered when they wandered the island, the trails led to Chatham and the Miramichi. The paths, roads, and waterways of the northeast Maritimes took countryfolk in many directions. And they brought many of them back again, weeks, months, and years later. Work in a neighbour's field or house or mill provided training for, and gave way to, work in more distant settings. With their movements, farm-based labourers continuously integrated a host of near and distant economies and experiences into the fabric of rural life. In Margaree, Marshy Hope, and Bear River, life was shaped not just by local crop returns and the relations between neighbours but by wages remitted from away and by the experiences and ideas of those who worked elsewhere. <sup>114</sup> Externalities visited on familiar feet.

From a rural perspective, from the hearths of these workers, there is a central commonality in many of these work experiences: their function, their integration into the economies of households that maintained a commitment to (or reliance upon) a soil-based livelihood. <sup>115</sup> Many worked so that they might farm. For the new settlers that Lord Selkirk and John Cambridge observed, wage work was undertaken as a temporary means by which sufficient capital might be acquired to permit an escape from the necessity of working for others. So too for the young men and women labouring to acquire a nest egg, wage work was a necessary phase in a life that it was hoped might be lived primarily outside of it. The contemporary language of praise underscores the importance of the objective. Describing the agricultural prosperity that a cousin had come to enjoy on Prince Edward Island, John McRa indicated the extent of his accomplishments by reporting that he had become "very independent." <sup>116</sup> Joseph Howe spoke to the same goal and perhaps beyond when he argued that the industrious Nova Scotian yeoman might with "a wife and an axe" become "truly rich and independent." The Rev. John MacLennan, on tour in

<sup>113</sup> Charles H. Farnham, "Cape Breton Folk," 97.

<sup>114</sup> For a splendid example of how a focus on migratory labour can deepen our understanding of change in agrarian and urban and industrial society, see Bruno Ramirez, *On the Move: French-Canadian and Italian Migrants in the North Atlantic Economy, 1860-1914* (Toronto 1991).

<sup>115</sup> For Russian peasants, the perceived importance of the functional commonality of all such off-farm work is reflected in its designation by a single word, *promysly*, meaning all those activities necessary to round out the insufficient returns gained from the soil. Theodor Shanin, *Russia as a Developing Society*, vol. 1, *The Roots of Otherness: Russia's Turn of Century* (New Haven 1985), 68.

<sup>116</sup> John McRa to Archibald McRa, 1 January 1817, ms. 3363/2, PAPEL.

the 1820s from his parish in Belfast, Prince Edward Island, lauded the condition of some of Middle River's farm households by noting that they were in "very independent circumstances."<sup>117</sup> Donald Campbell indicated the extent of the good fortune he had obtained in Cape Breton by saying that he was free from the impositions of factor and laird and "any toilsome work but what I do myself."<sup>118</sup>

These people had to some extent gained what many sought. The dream of achieving control over one's labour and its product and of acquiring "independence" was, of course, a widely shared aspiration of rural and urban dwellers alike. The language and arguments used to articulate these ideals in the Escheat struggle on Prince Edward Island in the 1830s are not dissimilar to those employed by many urban workers in this period.<sup>119</sup> The belief that such goals of autonomy and independence might best be achieved by securing a land-based livelihood was both widespread and persistent even among those deeply imbedded in the industrial labour force. The Ohio labour commissioners who assembled the state's first annual labour report in 1877 estimated that roughly one-half the mechanics and labourers in Ohio's urban centres were working to accumulate the savings necessary so that they might acquire a farm.<sup>120</sup> Similarly, as Ewa Morawska has argued, the majority of East Central European peasants who traveled to American industrial centres at the turn of the 20th century engaged in wage labour thousands of miles from home so that they and their families might become more securely established on the soil; they did so with the intention of returning to their rural communities.<sup>121</sup> Such was the case as well, Theodore von Laue has argued, with much of the industrial work force in late-19th and early-20th century Russia.<sup>122</sup> For centuries peasants in the Friuli and Saxony have "consciously" chosen, Douglas Holmes and Jean Quataert contend, to integrate wage work with agrarian pursuits on their rural holdings as a way of resisting a "propertyless working-class existence."<sup>123</sup>

<sup>117</sup>Letter of Rev. John MacLennan, 1827, Glasgow Colonial Society Correspondence, M-1352, 129, PAC.

<sup>118</sup>Donald Campbell to [a relative in Lewis], 7 October 1830, reprinted in the *Stornaway Gazette*, 30 September 1972, MG 100, vol. 115, #33, PANS.

<sup>119</sup>Rusty Bittermann, "Agrarian Alternatives: The Ideas of the Escheat Movement on Prince Edward Island, 1832-42," *Acadiensis* (forthcoming).

<sup>120</sup>Cited in Peter H. Argersinger and Jo Ann Argersinger, "The Machine Breakers: Farmworkers and Social Change in the Rural Mid West of the 1870s," *Agricultural History*, 58 (July 1983), 401.

<sup>121</sup>Ewa Morawska, "'For Bread with Butter': Life-Worlds of Peasant Immigrants from East Central Europe, 1880-1914," *Journal of Social History*, 17:3 (Spring 1984), 392.

<sup>122</sup>Theodore von Laue, "Russian Peasants in the Factory, 1892-1904," *Journal of Economic History*, 21 (1961), 80.

<sup>123</sup>Douglas R. Holmes and Jean H. Quataert, "An Approach to Modern Labor: Worker Peasantries in Historic Saxony and the Friuli Region over Three Centuries," *Comparative Studies in Society And History*, 28:2 (April 1986), 202.

Other farm-based workers in the northeast Maritimes, of course, may have resigned themselves to the necessity of perpetually maintaining the dual commitments of self-employment and working for others, or may indeed have embraced wage work never seeking to attain a degree of choice over their involvement in the labour market.<sup>124</sup> Given the sporadic and uneven nature of the demand for labour in the region in the early 19th century, life without the fall-back of an agricultural holding could be precarious.<sup>125</sup> Rather than working so that they might farm, some, no doubt, farmed so that they might live to work. For many, however, access to the soil held out the hope of achieving control over their time and their labour, and persistence in straddling two worlds constituted a way of resisting the imperatives and dependence of wage work.<sup>126</sup>

We need to look more closely at the transformation of these dreams, which had been closely associated with the myth of the independent yeoman, and at changes in the strategies adopted by working people. Few still maintain that true independence is to be gained by eschewing wage work for agricultural pursuits and by struggling to gain a toehold on the soil. The goal of a "propertied independence" that was embedded in the mythology and once held such an important position in the aspirations of working people of the North Atlantic world has long since lost its lustre. And though many rural residents in the region continue to engage in seasonal work at near and distant job sites, fewer and fewer rely on farming as a means to survive periods when they are not engaged in wage work.<sup>127</sup> Surely these

<sup>124</sup>Many emigrants had experience with similar work patterns before they migrated. See Barbara M. Kerr, "Irish Seasonal Migration to Great Britain, 1800-38," *Irish Historical Studies*, 3 (1942-3), 365-80; A.J. Youngson, *After the Forty-Five: The Economic Impact on the Scottish Highlands* (Edinburgh 1973), 182-4; T.M. Devine, "Temporary Migration and the Scottish Highlands in the Nineteenth Century," *Economic History Review*, 32 (1979), 344-59; William Howatson, "The Scottish Hairst and Seasonal Labour 1600-1870," *Scottish Studies*, 26 (1982), 13-36; E.J.T. Collins, "Migrant Labour in British Agriculture in the Nineteenth Century," *Economic History Review*, 29 (1976), 38-59. As Maritimers moved on, some carried these patterns of work to new locales. See Aeneas McCharles, *Bemocked of Destiny*, 28; Neil Robinson, *Lion of Scotland* (Auckland 1952, 1974), 28, 80, 99.

<sup>125</sup>Judith Fingard, "A Winter's Tale: The Seasonal Contours of Pre-Industrial Poverty in British North America, 1815-1860," *Historical Papers*, (1974), 65-94; D.B. MacNab to Uniacke, 3 January 1857, Nova Scotia House of Assembly, *Journals*, 1857, app. 71, 421.

<sup>126</sup>On the significance of agrarian strategies to working-class struggles in Great Britain and the United States in this period see Malcolm Chase, *'The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism, 1775-1840* (Oxford 1988); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York 1984), 164-216, 335-43; Paul Conkin, *Prophets of Prosperity: America's First Political Economists* (Bloomington 1980), 222-58.

<sup>127</sup>The terms of eligibility for unemployment benefits have played a role here in forcing some to choose between a state-based or land-based safety net and/or to define themselves as workers rather than farmers.

will be key themes for those who would write the environmental history of the region. The decline of the belief that the labourer's salvation was to be found on the land and the decline of agriculture as a safety net have profoundly affected our perception of the significance of arable soil, and of land more generally. For increasing numbers, even of rural residents, it is no longer a matter of importance.

*The author wishes to gratefully acknowledge the assistance received from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, whose financial support aided this research. I am also grateful to Carmen Bickerton, Michael Cross, Margaret McCallum, Danny Samson and the participants in the Atlantic Canada Workshop (Lunenburg, September, 1990) and the Rural Workers in Atlantic Canada Conference (Saint Mary's University, October, 1990) for their comments on an earlier version of this paper. By "northeastern Maritimes" I mean Prince Edward Island, Cape Breton Island and the northern-most section of peninsular Nova Scotia. I take some liberties with the time frame indicated, occasionally drawing evidence from the late 18th century and beyond 1850. Nonetheless this essay is primarily about farm-based wage work in the first half of the 19th century.*

**ANNOUNCING A NEW JOURNAL ...**

**BROCK REVIEW**

**Editorial Policy:**

The journal welcomes contemplative essays on a broad range of topics dealing with the liberal arts, social and human sciences with an interdisciplinary perspective. It includes historical as well as methodological concerns that transcend the boundaries of existing disciplines, especially when the inquiry raises unresolved questions in one discipline that may be of interest to another. Existing disciplines carve out a segment of inquiry that is amenable to a particular set of tools. This segmentation in turn restricts those who read and develop the subject. While not necessarily challenging the legitimacy of these domains of inquiry, we hope that authors of this Journal will seek a synthesis of knowledge as a long term objective through exposure and debate across the established lines. We believe that one can work towards this objective if authors avoid jargon that is too specific to a particular discipline.

In order to further the above stated objective, each issue will carry at least one review essay (under the section *Frontiers*) of a topic that may conceivably have implications that transcend its origins. There may also be symposia on important topics or books. All articles will be refereed anonymously. Finally the *Review* will also carry a few conventional book reviews.

**Contents of the Inaugural Issue (abbreviated titles):**

Kuhnian Paradigm and Political Science  
Comparison of U.S. and Canadian Health Care System  
Robert Gourlay and Political Protest in Upper Canada (1800s)  
Aristotle's Theory of Art  
Mini-Symposium on Fukuyama's 'End of History'  
Frontiers Essay: Semiotics and Language  
Book Reviews of Nozick's *The Examined Life*, and Bly's *Iron John*

**CALL FOR PAPERS**

Articles within the general purview of the Editorial Policy are invited. Please send three copies, double-spaced to the Editor at the address given below. Style sheet available on request. Accepted articles can be sent on WordPerfect 5.1 diskettes or by anonymous - ftp, to: adam.econ.brocku.ca. If ftp is used, please send an E-Mail message as well to dore@adam.econ.brocku.ca, informing the editor that a file has been transmitted.

Mohammed Dore  
Editor, Brock Review  
Brock University,  
St. Catharines, Ontario  
Canada L2S 3A1

Fax #: (416) 988-9388  
E-Mail: dore@adam.econ.brocku.ca