Introduction

> In accordance with the good character you gave the gentleman in Youghal, I expect him, if he undertakes to write the history of that town, not to be prejudiced for or against either the Gael or the Gall, nor to praise or discredit unwarrentedly, nor to take sides against either rich or poor, but to give an account of all – good and bad – as they deserve, so far as he is able to ascertain the facts. Any historian who does not hold to this rule in his writing deserves not the name of historian but that of idle roller, a prating liar who makes a fool of others as well as of himself.[1]

William Fee was a young Irishman indentured to the Potomac Company of Virginia. Disliking the demanding work of lock making and river improvement, or perhaps resenting his bondage, he ran away from the canal in 1786, only to be recaptured. The company shaved off Fee's eyebrows and sheared two streaks in his hair, intersecting to form a cross, as punishment and to mark him as a miscreant. Francis Murray, another absconding servant who lost his eyebrows when apprehended, also had an iron collar forged around his neck, the mark of the incorrigible fugitive. Company policy was that shaving should continue every week "until their behaviour evinces that they are brought to a sense of their duty." Many of the Potomac's servants, bought from European ships in Philadelphia and Baltimore, refused to be complaisant beasts of burden, and absconding was rife on company works, as it was wherever indentured servitude was practiced. Those recaptured were literally stigmatized for their past conduct and as a hedge against future light-footedness. Less brutal than the branding or ear cropping often inflicted on bonded labour, head shaving

1 Pádraig Cúndún to Tomás Stac, 18 Oct. 1851, in *Pádraig Phiarais Cúndún, 1777–1856*, ed. Risteárd Ó Foghludha (Baile Atha Cliath: Oifig Díolta Foillseacháin Rialtais, 1932). I would like to thank Dr. Bruce D. Boling of the University of New Mexico for translating this letter from the Irish, and his courteous permission to allow me to quote from it. Cúndún was an Irishman who emigrated in the 1820s to the United States, where he worked temporarily on the Erie Canal before settling on a farm near Utica, New York. The above-cited letter, written to an acquaintance in Ireland, discusses a third party who was planning to write a history of Youghal, a town near Cúndún's birthplace.

was a scarlet letter meant to shame its wearers into moral conduct. For shaming to be effective, however, the culprit must accept the essential justice of the system. This seemed to elude Fee and Murray, as both absconded again at the earliest opportunity.[2]

Over fifty years later in June 1843, Irish workers on Quebec's Beauharnois Canal mounted a general strike. They were tired of working days that were too long for wages that were too short and resented having to buy provisions at their employers' stores, which left them little cash and sometimes even a debt to show for a month's hard labour. For almost two weeks the workers stood united against contractors who refused their wage and hour demands. Violent demonstrations involving hundreds of strikers affirmed this unity until in the midst of one such protest they were confronted by British troops called out by their employers. The men stood firm, refusing to disperse at the reading of the Riot Act, though offering no real threat of violence. Finally, a harried magistrate gave the order and a volley was fired into the workers' ranks. Five died on the spot, and more were swept away by the river in which they sought refuge from the cavalry. Peace was restored and the strike broken.[3]

Between 1786 and 1843 significant shifts had occurred in the experiences of "canallers."[4] Theirs is a tale of great relevance to the general labour experience. Individuals faced a powerful master on the Potomac in the 1780s, while hundreds of combined workers confronted employers, magistrates and the military on the Beauharnois in 1843. The axis of labour relations had shifted from an individual to a collective level in the intervening years. The Potomac workers were unfree (although they worked alongside free labourers as well as slaves), bonded to whoever owned their indenture, pledged to yield up their labour and obedience. The Beauharnois workers were free, able to sell their labour where and to whom they would. Most canallers in the interim had thus been liberated from any form of servitude, with mixed blessings. Servants ran away on their own or in small groups when they did not like the way they were treated, while workers rioted and went on strike to improve their lot. Protest had shifted from the small to the large scale and from personal to collective concerns and tactics. Capital's response mirrored this change: the Potomac Company

2 [Alexandria] *Virginia Gazette*, 22 June, 27 July 1786; [Annapolis] *Maryland Chronicle*, 16 Feb. 1786. See also Cora Bacon-Foster, "Early Chapters in the Development of the Potomac Route to the West," *Proceedings of the Columbia Historical Society*, v. 15 (1911), 162–64; Ulrich B. Phillips, ed., *Plantation and Frontier 1649–1863* (orig. ed. 1910; New York: Burt Franklin, 1969), v. 2, 178.

3 "Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Disturbances upon the line of the Beauharnois Canal, during the summer of 1843 . . . ," *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 1843, Appendix T (hereafter "Beauharnois Report").

4 I will be using the term "canallers" to apply to all workers engaged in canal construction, for whom (excluding skilled workers) there was not a specific title at the time except the generic "labourers" or "hands." They were sometimes called canallers (or canalers or "canawlers," a play at Irish brogue), and very infrequently "navvies" (a British term stemming from "navigators" or those who built the navigation works), which I will be using as well for the sake of variety.

punished and shamed individual culprits for their bad conduct, while the state violently repressed the Beauharnois general strike. The status and organization of labour had altered, while capital had grown in scale and strength. What unites the two examples is that in both cases the labourers were relatively powerless, able to resist by flight or strike but unable fundamentally to alter their condition. Still, the stakes of class conflict had become higher. Already a harlequin mask in the late eighteenth century, bald pate and brows disguising the individual beneath, the visage of labour by the 1840s could be somehow rendered grotesque and faceless; a mass unrecognizable to capital as human thus became subject to the most extreme form of discipline. This transformation had been a complex one.

These years encompassed the seminal period in the rise of the industrial-capitalist order and the modern class system in North America. Significant capital and labour accumulation had to occur both before and during this prolonged process, which was international in dimension and entailed the breakdown of a hierarchical agrarian society and the creation of an industrial, market-directed system that ultimately co-opted the state as caretaker. This transformation, the subject of much debate, matured in Britain during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Lands were enclosed and converted to commercial production, factories emerged and the market was extended. In the process people were torn from the land and artisans separated from the small workshop, both ultimately to be pushed into wage labour. Marx called this preliminary stage to capitalism "primitive accumulation."[5] The timing of this transformation in North America (and in fact its very existence) is a matter of much controversy. One group of historians, influenced by the classical economics of Adam Smith, argues for the existence of capitalism from early in the colonial period, if not the beginning, while another, drawing on Marx, maintains the shift to capitalism was delayed and piecemeal, traditional, non-commercial cultural patterns buffering and retarding the impact of the market.[6]

The experience on canals supports the contention that the years spanning

5 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (orig. ed. 1867; New York: Modern Library, 1906), Part VIII.

6 This debate has been nicely summed up by Allan Kulikoff in "The Transition to Capitalism in Rural America," *William & Mary Quarterly*, v. 44 (Jan. 1989), 120–44. See Winifred B. Rothenberg, "The Emergence of Farm Labor Markets and the Transformation of the Rural Economy, 1750–1855," *Journal of Economic History*, v. 48 (Sept. 1988), 537–66; James A. Henretta, "Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in Pre-Industrial America," *William & Mary Quarterly*, v. 35 (Jan. 1978), 3–32; Christopher Clark, "Household Economy, Market Exchange and the Rise of Capitalism in the Connecticut Valley, 1800–1860, *Journal of Social History*, v. 13 (Winter 1979), 169–90; Marcus Rediker, "'Good Hands, Stout Heart, and Fast Feet': The History and Culture of Working People in Early America," *Labour/Le Travail*, v. 10 (Autumn 1982), 123–44; Rediker, "Toward a 'real, profane history' of early American society," *Social History*, v. 10 (Oct. 1985), 367–81; Bryan Palmer, "Social Formation and Class Formation in North America, 1800–1900," in *Proletarianization and Family History*, ed. David Levine (Orlando: Academic Press, 1984), 229–309.

the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries constituted an era of transition, in which industrial capitalism spread in the form of business organization and labour relations and many traditional social and economic forms persisted. An older world of work was breaking down, characterized by petty agricultural production or a personal relationship between journeyman and master based on an exchange of labour for the provision of worldly needs. A new complex of social and economic relations was being woven by an interrelated process of social change, which incorporated the growth of large-scale enterprise, increasing competition of market-oriented production, and the development of a labour market awash with individuals either uprooted from the soil or with one foot on land and the other wavering over the abyss of wage work. In effect, the modern industrial class system had all but appeared in this short span of time where once traditional forms of production and social relations prevailed.

Canal construction played a significant role in this transformation by opening up new markets, mobilizing an army of workers, creating new consumers, developing business strategies and initiating the state–capital ties so important in later years. As a result of having to mount a massive production process, the industry also charted a new course in labour relations from unfree through free labour; at the same time the canal builders invented innovative forms of industrial discipline, spanning regulation to military repression, which became a blueprint for the future. That canals were but a temporary stage in the technology of transportation and eventually yielded to railroads does not belie the key role they played in sparking change.

Given the industry's vanguard status, the experience of canallers assumes an added importance, providing insight into the leading edge of class formation. Marx called England's railway navvies "the light cavalry of capitalism," skirmishers at the forefront of both economic development and class struggle.[7] In much the same way, canallers were miners and sappers digging the earthworks of North American capitalism, agents of change burying the past and digging the trenches of a future world of industrial production with every spadeful of earth removed.

Most of what has been written on the rise of industrial capitalism in North America comes from one perspective: the breakdown of an artisanal world and the gradual emergence of working-class culture and class politics from the ashes of the craft experience. This history charts the rise of the factory system and the concomitant decline in the fortunes of the skilled worker. Yet this is only one pathway through to the present. There have been others, arguably much rockier, that trace out a variant experience of class formation. The rough labour that dug canals trod such a trail.

7 Marx quoted in Nicholas Faith, *The World the Railways Made* (London: Bodley Head, 1990), 193.

While accepting the severe limitations placed on their subjects by the material realities of industrial capitalism, labour historians have chosen to focus on people's collective control over their experience, with class consciousness and working-class culture being the ultimate expressions of this human agency.[8] The rough synthesis of labour experience that emerges is of the breakdown of an older, more traditional form of production based on the household and the craft shop. Master and journeymen were coproducers who both worked and lived in close personal contact, imbibing an artisanal republicanism that vaunted independence, equality and opportunity. If not an egalitarian era, it was traditional, familiar and more humane. This world began to crumble under pressure from the burgeoning market; masters or the local merchant became manufacturers, while most masters and journeymen made a protracted descent to wage worker status through a process of specialization of task, deskilling and destruction of craft. Throughout this transformation they still held to their republican ideology, but with independence a mixed blessing under capitalism, equality visibly receding and opportunity moving beyond their grasp, republicanism became the basis of a new, emergent class consciousness. The first union movements and strikes of the 1820s–1830s punctuate this development, and by mid-century the class forces were in place. Artisans had become workers, crafting from the fragments of the past a new sense of being that would allow them to wage the class battle. It is a near-linear model of declining status and rising class consciousness.[9]

This is a compelling and convincing portrayal of proletarianization and class conflict. But for all its detail, it is flawed. The model does not embrace the experience of all, nor even a majority of workers, being based primarily on the experiences of only one element of the working class, the skilled and organized, who, for the first part of the nineteenth century at

8 In British labour history, E. P. Thompson's case for working-class culture and the primacy of agency was promptly taken to task and has been a source of heated debate ever since. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1968); Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980); John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution: Early Industrial Capitalism in Three English Towns* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974); Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980); Richard Price, *Labour in British Society: An Interpretive History* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 4–5. This debate has had little impact in North America, where Thompson's message, popularized by Herbert Gutman and elaborated by such historians as Alan Dawley and Sean Wilentz, has been left virtually untouched. David Montgomery breaks with this model by emphasizing struggles for control of the point of production, but his emphasis is still primarily on the trades, the cult of skill and militant political action. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Vintage, 1977); Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976); Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor; The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism: 1865–1925* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

9 The unilinearity of this trajectory is captured in the title of Bruce Laurie's labour history text, one of the first syntheses to emerge from the field: *Artisan into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Noonday Books, 1989).

least, tended to be white native males. This orientation colours the entire picture. Skill imparts power, and the craftsman utilized this to assert both control within the workplace and independence in the community. Labour historians are thus able to paint the past impressionistically as a world where workers combined against and combatted capital, drawing strength from their burgeoning working-class culture. But by crafting an essentially benign view of this culture and empowering workers with control over their world, these scholars have underestimated the destructive effects of the rise of industrial capitalism on the individual and group. Other realms of working-class experience are undervalued. New worker protagonists are needed, and manual workers have yet to find their voice.

Common labourers' experience differed because their struggle as members of a class did not pivot on skill and control of production but on material conditions. During the early nineteenth century developing capitalism moulded an army of wage workers in North America, not out of thin air or solely from a declining artisanate, but by impressing immigrants, redundant agricultural labour, slaves, free blacks, women and children. The labour force, as a result, was divided by lines of skill, gender, race and ethnicity. Theirs was a history of movement from the land into the lower reaches of wage work propelled by forces beyond their control, and, once on the labour market, they were wholly alienated, mere animal power to prepare the ground for industrial production.[10] While sharing many general experiences with skilled workers – a breakdown of paternalistic labour relations, tightening industrial discipline, falling wages and resulting labour conflict – their tale was not one of lost craft and robbed skill filtered through a republican world view. Common labourers were more fully exploited, worse off economically, socially fragmented, and, as a result, with a culture (or, more accurately, cultures) that reflected their alienation as much as a sense of community. Class conflict for them thus did not entail rear-guard actions to strengthen their loosening grasp on the means of production, but uncoordinated efforts to secure and maintain employment, and, less often, to better conditions once they had a job. This meant frequent moving to find work and occasionally fighting, both with bosses and other workers, to keep it. It was a situation that promoted so-called anti-social behaviour such as excessive drinking and interpersonal violence, unsurprising given the raw materials of their lifestyle. Worker culture's rough dimension has received far less attention from historians, but was equally important, being the negative side of class struggle in which class antagonisms were submerged and sublimated by labourers, to be vented on themselves and co-workers. In the process, consciousness was inhibited at

10 Andrea Graziosi suggested that different dynamics pertained to common labourers in the steel mills and machine shops in the late nineteenth century because of their marginal role in the production process. "Common Laborers, Unskilled Workers: 1880–1915," *Labor History*, v. 22 (Fall 1981), 512–44.

the same time as a culture was being built, and material forces were the determining factors. The exploitation inherent in the capitalist wage relationship exacted real costs and engendered long-term harm for labourers.

In many ways then, unskilled workers stand outside the craftsman-to-worker model, providing an alternative view of labour's confrontation with industrial capitalism that is less pleasing but arguably more representative. Their experience remained roughly similar from industry to industry and over time, while there was little in the way of mounting class conflict or increasingly sophisticated worker organization. Instead, it was more of the same, as common labourers were exploited to a higher degree than skilled workers. While similar at its roots – the scraping away of surplus value from their toil – it left less behind and offered fewer options. The social and economic marginality of workers like canallers also meant their cultural adaptation to industrial capitalism was made more difficult, as the goal of a stable community and an institutional base with which to parry the thrust of history proved elusive. Without the power that skill brought, lacking the status of independent craftsmen and bereft of the ideological framework to absorb and resist unwanted change that republicanism seemingly offered artisans, common labourers were more fully exposed to the ravages of the market and less able to posit an alternative world view to that of the emerging industrial-capitalist order. In sum, persisting powerlessness and social dislocation was the lot of common labourers, not ongoing contests of strength with their employers and the development of a vibrant oppositional culture. The experiences of this emerging manual labour force, different yet akin to its artisanal cousins, is crucial to an understanding of industrial development, as the majority of the workforce has always been composed of the unskilled and non-unionized. Canallers provide an example of this alternative labour experience, of this parallel but distinct pathway into the working class.[11]

Canal, lockage and river improvement schemes were first implemented in the 1780s. These ventures were small in scale relative to later projects, yet

11 The main studies on canal workers are H. C. Pentland, "The Lachine Strike of 1843," *Canadian Historical Review*, v. 29, no. 3 (1948), 255–77; Richard B. Morris, "Andrew Jackson, Strikebreaker," *American Historical Review*, v. 55 (Oct. 1949), 54–68; W. David Baird, "Violence Along the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal: 1839," *Maryland Historical Magazine*, v. 66 (Summer 1971), 121–34; Ruth Bleasdale, "Class Conflict on the Canals of Upper Canada in the 1840's," in *Pre-Industrial Canada 1760–1849*, ed. Michael S. Cross and Gregory S. Kealey (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), 100–38; Bleasdale, "Irish Labourers on the Cornwall, Welland and Williamsburg Canals in the 1840's," M.A. thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1975; Bleasdale, "Unskilled Labourers on the Public Works of Canada, 1840–1880," Ph.D. diss., University of Western Ontario, 1983; Raymond Boily, *Les Irlandais et le canal de Lachine: La grève de 1843* (Ottawa: Lemeac, 1980); William N. T. Wylie, "Poverty, Distress, and Disease: Labour and the Construction of the Rideau Canal, 1826–32," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, v. 11 (Spring 1983), 7–30; and Catherine Teresa Tobin, "The Lowly Muscular Digger: Irish Canal Workers in Nineteenth Century America," Ph.D. diss., Notre Dame University, 1987.

they were still hampered by capital and labour shortages. Consequently, there were only 100 miles of canals in the United States by 1816. A second wave of construction followed in the wake of the Erie Canal (1817–25), with 1,277 miles completed by 1830, more than doubling to 3,326 miles in the ensuing ten years. These figures do not include Canadian public works, such as the first Welland Canal (27 miles) and Rideau (120 miles), which were completed at this time. The panic of 1837 and the ensuing depression took the bloom off canals in the States, as companies and boards of works were forced by lack of funds to scale back or shut down construction. By comparison, the Canadian government committed itself to a comprehensive building program, taking advantage of the now-flooded labour market to push through such projects as the Cornwall and Beauharnois canals, as well as the Lachine and Welland improvements. Still, these only amounted to a few hundred miles, and even when the depression lifted in the mid-1840s, the residual wariness of canal investment and the increasing competition of railroads meant the virtual death-knell of artificial water transportation. Less than 400 miles had been built in the States during the 1840s, and by 1850 abandonment of existing lines exceeded new canal mileage. By 1860, there was a total of 4,254 miles of canals in the United States.[12] The Canal Era had drawn to a close by the end of the fifties. Although there would be later canals, these would be large ship navigation systems strategically placed where they could compete efficiently with railways, such as the New York barge canal and the St. Lawrence Seaway system.

This is the familiar framework for studying canals, marking the peaks and valleys of the industry. Yet behind these bland business realities (and lost in much of the historical literature) lies a more intriguing story of a changing world of work, erected upon innovations in the organization of production and a burgeoning state role in the economy, which pioneered new forms of labour relations and altered forever the lives of canal workers and promoters alike.

The projects of the late eighteenth century, while small relative to what was to come later, were considerable business ventures for their time, requiring thousands of dollars in investment and hundreds of workers. They were carried on by joint-stock companies that always felt a strain in meeting these demands. Canals unsuccessfully turned to the state to bring in capital and utilized whatever labour they could lay their hands on, but still most ventures failed, as both were in short supply. Early canals

12 Mileage figures have been drawn from George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815–1860* (New York: Rinehart, 1951), 52–53; Christopher Baer, *The Canals and Railroads of the Mid-Atlantic States, 1800–1860* (Wilmington, Del.: Regional Economic History Research Center, Eleutherian Mills-Hagley Foundation, 1981), Appendix tables "Canals Miles Added 1801–1862" and "Canals Total Miles 1800–1862"; and Ronald E. Shaw, *Canals for a Nation: The Canal Era in the United States, 1790–1860* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1990), 228.

experienced the demands of industry in an essentially commercial, pre-industrial world. Problems of capital and labour supply persisted throughout the Canal Era, although by the second wave of construction, beginning in 1817 with the Erie, the state played an increasing role in funding and directing what were now termed "public works." This relationship, expressed in government support of private companies or by the creation of public agencies to implement a state policy of internal improvements – canal commissions or boards of works – anticipated the interpenetration of state and capital that would bear great fruits for industry later in the nineteenth century. Canal projects at the same time became swollen bureaucracies, complex management structures of directors, engineers, surveyors, maintenance superintendents and locktenders needed to build transportation networks, which now could measure hundreds of miles in length and require thousands of workers and millions of dollars. A great distance had been travelled with speed from the first small endeavours, just a series of locks or a few miles of canal, to the creation of such leviathans as Indiana's Wabash & Erie, the longest of all canals at almost 400 miles. The age of big industry arrived early in canal construction.

The contractor was a key figure in this development. As the production process grew more distended and companies tired of direct responsibility for the funding, staffing and disciplining of a labour force, they turned to these independent builders. Contractors put up initial capital, mobilized and provided for their workforce, and were contractually bound to complete their "section" of the line to specifications laid down by the engineer. In return, they were paid according to a set scale for types of work done, minus a retained percentage to ensure their good faith to management. The small scale of their job meant that the contractor forged close ties to his hands, often providing food and shelter, while working and living alongside them. A form of paternalism developed, mutual but unequal, and born of the limitations imposed by the undeveloped capitalist marketplace. These ties were always tenuous and were soon severed when a builder proved unable to provide for his men, a situation that became more common over the years. The competitive nature of the bidding process by which contracts were won and the continuing financial problems of the industry meant that these builders walked a tightrope between profit and bankruptcy, a balancing act that became near-impossible as the depression of the late 1830s undercut funds and construction. To survive in the new, financially restrained environment, contractors had to grow, to become businesses in their own right. They also had to cut costs, which meant the paternalistic overtones of the labour relationship would be stripped away and most work carried on strictly according to market forces. Class conflict was the natural consequence. Contracting had been a stratagem to overcome the problems of capital and labour supply. This contractors were never entirely able to do, but they did manage to localize the difficulties and

allow construction to continue, failed builders quickly being replaced. It was these individuals in their thousands that were largely responsible for the prosecution of canal building.

As the business organization shifted within the industry in the eighty years under study, so did the social relations in which the workers participated. Broadly, the movement was from an unfree, or dependent, labour relationship to free labour, and from the small-scale and personal to the giant and anonymous. Slaves, indentured servants and wage labourers could work alongside each other in the early years, often sharing the same accommodation, food and clothing provided by the company. Free labour soon came to predominate (outside the South), now with contractors acting as patrons. While labour shortages persisted, free canallers received fairly good wages as well as food and shelter. Still, theirs was a near-subsistence existence, and the depression and ensuing contraction of the industry undercut canallers' tenuous grasp on solvency. Labour surplus drove down wages and freed contractors from providing for their employees, as the labour relationship was completely commercialized. Unemployment, underemployment, misery and want resulted for most navvies and their families. The situation would improve as the depression eased, but the relatively better conditions of earlier years never reappeared. In a continuing process of class formation, most canallers became workers in the modern sense: wholly separated from the control of the means of production, only partially rewarded for their toil and at the whim of the market for the means of their survival.

The work itself was unlike the increasingly mechanized manufactories. It remained largely the same throughout the period, powered by human and beast using traditional tools, shovels, picks, wheelbarrows and carts. Canallers laboured twelve to fifteen hours a day in all kinds of weather. They were exposed to many health-threatening illnesses, including malaria, yellow fever and cholera, as well as work-related injuries. Most lived in all-male barracks or family shanties on the worksite or in nearby towns. Their accommodations were meant to be temporary and were limited in comfort. These shanty towns, the setting for much drinking, criminality and bloody violence, were looked upon by local residents as sinks of iniquity to be avoided. Canallers were set off from society by the type of work they did and where they lived, as well as by their lifestyle, a marginal existence reinforced by their ethnic or racial background. Increasingly, the work became stigmatized as the roughest of rough labour performed by the lowest of the low, Irish immigrants and slaves. These two pariah groups, pushed into the worst kinds of work as the most disadvantaged of labourers, pulled canal construction further down in the estimation of potential workers from the late 1820s. Republican freemen soon lost their appetite for canalling, making it one of the first truly lumpen proletarian professions