THE ROAD TO RESISTANCE:
THE STORIES OF FOUR CAPE BRETON WOMEN

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by

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Abstract

Through the vehicle of personal narrative, four women from the coalmining town of Glace Bay tell their story of the closure of Cape Breton's mining industry. With the end of this traditional occupation the women, all married to coalminers, confront both a community challenge and personal challenge with the loss of the major family income. Considered within the parameters of Thomas McLaughlin's vernacular theory, the narratives point to the women's ability to articulate their own reality and to question those who hold power. The narratives reveal that contrary to seeing themselves as powerless, and notwithstanding that the course of action taken by two of the women is distinctive, each finds the courage and capacity to search for a new future. Finally, the issues of "care" as a gendered concept, and the notion of "empowerment" as a consequence of resistance are the key themes revealed through the stories collected. With the power that comes from choosing not to be a victim, the four women demonstrate that caring for and caring about others is life sustaining and profoundly productive work.

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I thank Bev, Debbie, Diane and Edna. These women opened their hearts and homes to me in the midst of great turmoil in their lives. Without their assistance this thesis could not have been. Their contribution was immeasurable and I sincerely thank each of them.

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Table of Contents

Abstract ii
Acknowledgements iii

1. **Women's Stories and the Study of Folklore** 1
Introduction 1
My Connections 3
Folklore in the Women's Lives 5
Folklore as Communication 9
Narrative Research 9
Sandra Stahl's Personal Experience Narrative 12
Jeff Todd Titon's Life Story 15
Feminist Folkloristics 17
Narrative and Social Change 19
Vernacular Theory 20
Methodology 25
Interview Participants 26
The Interview Format 28
Fieldnotes and Transcriptions 30

2. **A Brief History of the Political and Economic Circumstances Pertinent to the Coalfields in Industrial Cape Breton** 32
Introduction 32
The Political and Economic Events Characterizing the Development and Underdevelopment of Cape Breton Island 32
Annexation 34
Central Canadian Hegemony 36
Coal and Steel 36
The Men Versus the Company: The Development of the Trade Union Movement in the Coal Fields 39

3. **The Road to Resistance: The Stories of Four Women** 49
Introduction 50
Quiet Forms of Resistance 53
Public Forms of Resistance 63

4. **Caring for Family and Community Resistance** 73
Introduction 73
A Feminist Perspective on Care 73
The Caring Work of Four Cape Breton Women 77
Private Acts of Resistance 80
Public Acts of Resistance 84
A Journey of Faith 84
Summary and Conclusions 89

5. **Summary and Conclusions** 91
Implications for Further Research 93
A Final Reflection 94

Appendix 96

Works Cited 97

Chapter 1

Women's Stories and the Study of Folklore

Introduction

In the autumn of 1998 I drove across the province of Newfoundland to my home in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. As I drove I listened to an interview between Avril Benoit, then co-host of the radio program, This Morning, and her two guests – novelist, the late Carol Shields and psychologist Dr. Allister Cunningham. They were discussing the 'Healing Journey Program'. This program is designed to help cancer patients deal with their illness. The program is premised on the notion that through group discussions of their cancer experience, patients tell their story. Sheilds and Cunningham maintained that telling one's story enables a person to connect with the emotions underlying the experience and to ultimately recognize and name those feelings.[1] This, they contended, is the first step in the healing journey. Because I was still dealing with the pain of the sudden loss of a loved-one to cancer, this contemporary example of the importance and value of story-telling had special meaning for me. Further, because I had just completed a research paper on narrative genres and the role narrative serves in our lives, the interview brought immediate relevancy to the educational and validating functions of folklore (see Bascom), and it reinforced for me in a personal way the power of the story. This new appreciation of story, and the role it can play in a time of crisis led me to

[1] See Bruner, pp 109-120, who also suggests that narrative reflects an effort to restore a sense of meaning and order to experience.

personal narrative as the approach to this thesis that focuses on a different kind of loss.

In this study four women tell their stories of coping with a decision that results in the loss of work in a community where every job is precious. Their stories are tied to coal mining and the government's announcement that an industry that had been part of Cape Breton culture for more than a hundred years was closing. While initially owned by off-island business interests, Cape Breton's coal mines came under the control of the Government of Canada in 1967. However, in 1999, following years of decline, the government announced that the industry would be privatized, and if a buyer could not be found, the mines would be closed. By 2001 the mines had closed resulting in more than sixteen hundred people from one of the most economically depressed regions of Canada losing their sole means of employment. In a region of high unemployment like Cape Breton, the loss of one job is significant; losing sixteen hundred jobs in the span of twenty-four months was catastrophic. This study considers what this announcement and the subsequent closure of the coal mines means to four Cape Breton families through an exploration of the narratives of four women finding their way through a major life change. All the women are from the mining town of Glace Bay Allowing that work is a defining feature of life for working class people (Dunk 142, 153), this thesis reflects on how the end of a traditional occupation and way of life for this coalmining community calls into question the very identity of those affected.

My Connections

I was reared in Glace Bay. As the granddaughter of a coal miner, my upbringing was steeped in the life and lore of the coal fields. As a child I listened to my grandfather's stories about digging coal on his hands and knees and about how the men looked out for each other at work. I heard about the rats that gathered round as the men ate their lunch in the pit. They were never spoken of in fear though, but rather as friendly creatures my grandfather was somewhat fond of. My grandmother outlived my grandfather by almost forty years, but she made sure we continued to hear the stories. She often spoke about the evening wait for the whistle that signaled whether there would be work or no work the next day. She talked about how the neighbourhood women would share what they could to ensure a good meal for each family. My mother also continued the tradition, regularly reminiscing about her father bringing home bits of his lunch as a treat for her, or in turn, one of the other children.

However, not all my memories are pleasant. With sadness I recall the accidents my grandfather endured, and how at age sixty he was no longer able to mine coal. Because his coal-mining pension was insufficient to support them, at my grandmother's urging they and their youngest child then moved to Toronto where all three found work. My grandparents built a new life in the city where my grandfather died seven years later. These stories and the memories associated with them afford me insights into my grandfather's life as a coal miner, but as well, they provide me with connections to my past and an appreciation of my heritage.

Coal-mining stories are part of me, and part of my family history and

folklore. Thus my special interest in the demise of Cape Breton's coal industry is not surprising. Nor is my commitment to explore the closure of the coal mines from the female perspective, given my recognition of the impact coal mining has had on women in my family, like my grandmother and my mother. However, the role of the coal miner's wife is one I neglected when I conducted coal mining research in the past and it appears that such an oversight is common. Rusty Neal points out that although women played a key role in the Antigonish Movement[2], one rarely hears about their behind-the-scenes work in that social movement. She observes that the public/private model of gender roles "is evident in the few documents which discuss the role of women in Atlantic co-operatives" (16). These observations build on the works of other scholars (Jordan and Kalčik, Kodish, Kwolek-Folland) who have pointed out that in western culture as a whole, women's speech and narratives are traditionally less valued than the stories of men. This study is my attempt to create a place for the voice of women at this critical time in Cape Breton's coal mining history. In particular this thesis will privilege the voice of four women affected by the government's decision to withdraw from the coal industry.

Folklore in the Women's Lives

In 1846 William J. Thoms coined the word folklore.[3] As conceived by

[2] An internationally known self-help movement instrumental in the development of co-operatives in rural Nova Scotia and Cape Breton in the 1930's and 1940's and which lives to this day in various guises.

[3] For discussion see William Thoms, "Folklore," in The Study of Folklore, ed. Alan Dundas (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall,) 4.

Thoms, the term referred to "the lore of the people". In the years since, folklore scholars have argued over whether the emphasis should be on the lore or the folk. For example, Archer Taylor in 1965 defined folklore as "the material that is handed down by tradition, either by word of mouth or by custom or practice" (34). Focusing on the "lore" component of the word, this definition encompasses all manner of oral narrative, folk customs and belief, as well as material culture, with the concept of tradition being paramount. Throughout most of the twentieth century scholars (see Brunvand and Utley) have built on these definitions.

I argue here that coal mining in Cape Breton, with its related lore, is in keeping with Taylor's interpretation of folklore. For more than a hundred years sons followed fathers into the pit. Mining skills were not formally acquired; rather, each generation of miners learned from their elders. The shared community experience of mining coal, however, represents but one element of the traditional nature of this work. In his study of Copper County miners, Richard Dorson, concluded that a shared occupation within a specific geographical region creates a sense of common traditions and group lore, and a community sense of shared experience (214-215). In their interviews the women I talked to described many facets of traditional life including rites of passage, belief, narrative, and material cultural forms. All are married to coal miners; each of them also has a history of coal mining in their maiden family.

As previously noted, the four women whose stories are told in this thesis live in the town of Glace Bay, on the island of Cape Breton, in the province of Nova Scotia, Canada. The town was incorporated by an act of the Nova Scotia

Legislature in 1901. Once known as Canada's second largest town, Glace Bay currently has a population of 21,000. Like other mining communities, the town was built around the coal mines that were part of the community landscape.

Throughout the telling of their stories the women referred to traditional events in their lives. These events included weddings, the birth of children, school graduations, even the deaths of family members. As well, most spoke of how they recognize or celebrate calendar events, holidays, and annual vacations. Van Gennep refers to traditional or regularly occurring events in people's lives as rites of passage. He writes:

> Wherever there are fine distinctions among age or occupational groups, progression from one group to the next is accompanied by special acts ... enveloped in ceremonies ..... every change in a person's life involves actions and reactions ... to be regulated and guarded so that society as a whole will suffer no discomfort or injury. Transitions from group to group and from one social situation to the next are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence, so that a man's life comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings: birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to a higher class, occupational specialization, and death. For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the person to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined (2).

The women whose voices are heard in this work, spoke about the ceremonies of passage that characterize their lives and have become family traditions. One such passage is graduation from high school.

High School Graduation is one of the most notable annual events in Glace Bay. On the basis of my own comparative experience, both as a resident in a variety

of other communities in Canada, and as a person who is privileged to have friends and relatives in numerous locations in North America, I have not witnessed, nor have I heard of, any other community that acknowledges the completion of high school as it is recognized and celebrated in the community of Glace Bay. Houses are renovated, new wardrobes are purchased, food is prepared and stored months in advance. Major family purchases such as holidays or new automobiles are deferred, for no expense is spared on the celebration of the high school graduation event. For the graduation prom the finest of gowns are purchased for female graduates and tuxedos are rented for their male counterparts. Parents of graduates attend the first activities of the evening on prom night. After the Grand March daughters and sons share the first dance of the evening with the parent of the opposite sex. On the Sunday closest to prom night the family of the graduate hosts a party where the new clothes are worn, the prepared food is eaten, and the honouree is showered with gifts that signify her or his new status in life. For months afterward photographs are distributed among family members ensuring the event is recalled until the next family graduation.

The four women of this study further confirm the importance placed on this life moment. It is notable that graduation photographs were prominently placed in the homes of each of these women whose children had navigated this rite of passage. While Lucas found in his analysis of the link between industrial structures, economic resources, and social patterns, that working class people cope with the limitations of their life by lowering their expectations, the women of this study, and

it would appear, the people of Glace Bay generally, do not lower their expectations with respect to education.[4]

The women's lively and active faith also permeated the interviews. This is perhaps not surprising given that Glace Bay is a community of churches and the landscape is dotted with church steeples. The local telephone directory lists sixteen churches of a variety of denominations serving a population of twenty-one thousand. Church events and the liturgical calendar tend to characterize the daily lives of many Glace Bay residents and the four women who participated in this study displayed an attitude and a perspective consistent with a faith-based orientation. One women reported that prayers to her deceased coal-mining father often gave her the courage to follow through on the course of action she had undertaken after the downsizing/closure announcement (Brown). As will be seen in chapter three, another woman discussed her role in the building of a new church in her parish. All indicated that it was faith in a Higher Power that enabled them to deal with the uncertainty of their daily lives. Phrases such as "with God's help" and "only God knows" peppered the interviews.

[4] Reporting it as the exception, not the rule, Lucas made note of one mining community where parents and children alike were reluctant for youth to enter mining. Consequently, many of the young stayed longer in school than the youth of most single-industry towns (363).

Folklore as Communication

While Taylor argues that the traditions and practices particular to a people and their community are the critical measure of understanding, Dan Ben-Amos holds to a contrary point of view. While acknowledging that tradition may have served as the vehicle through which new ideas were introduced into past cultures, Ben-Amos argues that the context in which a folkloric event takes place is a more important measure of understanding people. He writes: "the traditional character of folklore is an accidental quality, associated with it in some cases, rather than an objectively intrinsic feature of it" (13). Viewing folklore more as *process* as opposed to *item*, Ben-Amos thus advances a more "folk" oriented definition of folklore; particularly, what people do, why and how they do it, and the context in which they do it. Representing a second generation of folklore scholars, Ben-Amos writes: "To define folklore, it is necessary to examine the phenomena as they exist. In its cultural context, folklore is not an aggregate of things, but a process - a communicative process to be exact" (9). In that narrative is a communicative process, it represents one approach to folklore. However, this thesis lies at the intersection of several different, but related approaches to the discipline: narrative research; feminist folkloristics; and vernacular theory.

Narrative Research

Acclaimed folklorist, Linda Dégh calls storytelling the natural companion of man (Folk Narrative 53). During a twelve year period (1948 to 1960) Dégh investigated traditional storytelling in the Hungarian village of Kakasd. A time of

turmoil and uncertainty for the villagers, eighty percent of them had been resettled from the Bucovina community of Andrasfalva at the end of the Second World War. Years later, Dégh reports that during her research period she came to know the villagers as a people with a strong sense of history, identity, and ethnic pride, offset by a feeling of insecurity in their new world (Folktales and Society 288). Storytelling, however, was one facet of life wherein all villagers felt comfortable and at ease. As a tradition that could be traced back three generations, storytelling, according to Dégh, served an important social function for villagers and afforded the teller recognition and prestige. Her exploration into the social and cultural value of traditional narrative resulted in Dégh's classic work Folktales and Society: Story-telling in a Hungarian Peasant Community.

Dégh returned to her research community in 1981, some twenty years after her earlier work. She wanted to see if the story telling tradition had survived into a new generation. This time Dégh found a Kakasd that was different in many ways from the community she had first come to know. Kakasd was a modernized, relatively affluent village, that was politically, economically and socially changed from the time of her earlier research. Large-scale state farms had replaced subsistence farming. A mobile citizenry traveled to neighbouring centers for work on the railroad, in factories, or in coalmines. Women had moved out of the home into the teaching or nursing professions or worked as clerics in urban offices. There was one practicing traditional storyteller to be found, whereas during her first round of research Dégh found that most adults had at least a small repertoire of community stories (ix). However, this time Dégh located many women who were willing to talk

with her about their everyday lives. This work resulted in an expanded edition of her earlier work.

In the Afterword of that second edition of Folktales and Society, Dégh reports her surprise at how freely the women of the community spoke about intimate aspects of their lives. From their personal experience stories she gained an awareness of family life that had been missed during her earlier research. She writes:

> At the time of my first research people saw me as a city girl, ignorant and inexperienced in village life, and assisted me as much as they could. But I was interested in folktales and their tellers and occasional gatherings – wakes, weddings, mumming – to find more tellers. People helped me understand folktales as reflections of social reality in Kakasd. But many things remained hidden from me. This time, women took me into their confidence more as an equal, as well as an old acquaintance who came from far away to visit and to remember old times and old people who are not with us anymore. They were very open and sincere. They spoke of human weaknesses, family feuds, intrigues. They told me secrets. "I will kill you if you tell this to anyone," warned one woman jokingly, but not laughing. I had heard gossips in Kakasd before, but none treated sensitive themes. This time, without my asking, personal stories about sexual abuse and extramarital adventures were disclosed to me. These stories opened an entirely new view of family relations, sex roles, and sexual politics in Kakasd (299).

Notwithstanding that much of her work focused on traditional storytelling, Dégh had come to appreciate that personal narrative contributes to an understanding of the family and how the family functions in society. Suggesting that folklorists consider new ways of looking at narrative, she writes: "As folklorists leave behind the old confines of traditional society and pursue folk narrative as it steps out of the

straitjacket of genre categories, they realize how narration can be an immediate reflection of culture. Modern life changes the picture all around ..." (Folk Narrative 78).

William M. Clements also argues that personal narrative warrants study by folklorists. He writes: "Interest ... in personal narrative as a folklore genre has been in many ways as dramatic a development as the acceptance of the 'performance' model in folklore analysis" (106). He observes that personal narrative has certain advantages over what he refers to as the more traditional and exotic folklore forms in that personal stories are easy to collect and they speak to the reality that everyone performs folklore. As well, in keeping with Dégh's observation that narrative is an immediate reflection of culture, Clements also notes that personal narrative mirrors the everyday events of life and the culture of a community.

Sandra Stahl's Personal Experience Narrative

The narratives of the four women who are the focus of this study do not constitute those traditional narrative forms such as folktales, legends, myths, proverbs, riddles, and ballads that would be in keeping with Archer Taylor's understanding of narrative. Nor are the stories told by these women urban legends (Brunvand) or memorates (von Sydow[5]), which speak to a personal experience of the supernatural. However, the narratives that are the focus of this thesis can, in some respects, be likened to Sandra Stahl's personal experience narrative, which she

[5] For discussion see Stahl, "Personal Experience Stories" in Handbook of American Folklore, ed Richard Dorson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press) 269.

defines as " ... first-person narratives usually composed orally by the tellers and based on real incidents in their lives" (Personal Experience Stories, 268). In this section the narratives that are the focus of this study will be discussed in light of Stahl's view of personal experience narrative.

Over the last twenty-five years Sandra Stahl has written extensively about personal experience stories. Stressing the varied content of such stories, Stahl explains that the subject matter is generally non-traditional in that known motifs or story plots are not found in these accounts. She observes that such narratives are told in the first person and deal with an actual event in the life of the teller. Stahl also suggests that personal experience stories serve various functions for those who tell them, but primarily the telling of the story allows the teller to communicate the values she or he holds (Personal Experience Stories, 275).

Challenging those who contend that personal experience narratives are not within the rubric of folklore, Stahl argues that such stories have been part of oral tradition for some time. She cites the popularity of first-person tall tales, jokes, anecdotes, gossip, and family stories as evidence of a familiarity among audiences with personal experience stories as a narrative form. She allows that personal experience narratives reveal much about the values and belief systems of those who tell them. In other words, "they express a part of the inner life of the story teller ..." (Meaning in Personal Narrative 47).

Although Stahl's commentary is focused on American society, her point of view is applicable to all people. She writes:

> Studies of personal narratives could help in the exploration of American beliefs and values. ... Ethical

> values, personal goals and hopes, dominant themes and guiding principles – all of these covert but dynamic forces are hidden in these unassuming, everyday tales. ... Obviously there are many reasons why we tell such stories. One outstanding reason is that through personal stories we articulate and then test the values that identify our selves (Personal Experience Stories 275).

The narratives that are presented in this work differ however from Stahl's description of personal experience narrative in one respect. Stahl is especially interested in personal experience stories that are told spontaneously and repeatedly to amuse, to educate, or to illustrate a point[6], stories that are fine-tuned and further perfected with each rendition, and which are often modified to suit the context or story telling situation.

The narratives that are the focus of this work, however, are personal and factual accounts that may or may not be told repeatedly with or without prompting. These narratives may or may not be part of what Stahl refers to as the average person's repertoire of three or four personal experience stories (Personal Experience Stories, 268). These stories were related to me as a direct result of my inquiry. I approached these women to ask how they were dealing with a particular problem in their lives, and to hear how they were reacting to this predicament. Consequently, the stories were not told to me in an unselfconscious manner to primarily entertain. Rather, these narratives were purposefully and specifically solicited, and therefore do deviate from Stahl's description of personal experience narrative. Nevertheless, there are similarities between the stories these women tell and Stahl's personal

[6] These characteristics are in keeping with Bascom's four functions of folklore: to educate, to entertain, to validate culture, and to maintain conformity to accepted patterns of behaviour.

experience narrative. Namely, these stories are first person accounts that reflect the personal experiences of four women who are coping with an actual event in each of their lives.

Jeff Todd Titon's Life Story

Just as the stories collected for this thesis are similar to Stahl's "personal experience narrative", there are also similarities between these narratives and Jeff Todd Titon's concept of 'life story'. Like Stahl, Titon contends that life story is a personal narrative that speaks to a particular event in the life of the story teller. He further argues that life story reflects how the story teller sees herself or himself. The life story reveals that which the teller values. Titon writes:

> A life story is, simply, a person's story of his or her life, or of what he or she thinks is a significant part of that life. It is therefore a personal narrative, a story of personal experience, and, as it emerges from conversation, its ontological status is the spoken word, even if the story is transcribed and edited for the printed page (276).

But for Titon life story is more than Stahl's concept of personal experience narrative. It is more than a story about a significant event in one's life. It is more than an awareness into who the teller is. It is more than an indicator of the values and beliefs held by the story teller. For Titon, life story is an expression of the very personality of the story teller. And while this personality permeates the life story, Titon reminds us, that the personality is shaped and reshaped by all that one experiences and incorporates into one's consciousness. Consequently, the life story is always being recreated, notwithstanding that the narrative speaks to the same

event in the teller's life. Because the life story reflects the recreated personality of the teller, Titon believes the life story to be a self-contained fiction. To articulate his position Titon draws on poet Charles Olson's concept of stance. He states:

> Olson identified two complementary stances toward life: fiction (story, including poetry); and history. In its root sense, *facio*, fiction is not a lie but a "making"; whereas history, *istorin*, is "found out." ... A story is made, but history is found. Story is language at play; history is language at work. The language of story is charged with power; it creates. The language of history is charged with knowledge; it discovers. Story is literature of the imagination; history, though it be imaginative, drives toward fact (278).

Given Titon's understanding that " ... life storytelling is a fiction, a making, an ordered past posed by a present personality upon a disordered life" (290), the narratives that are at the center of this work do not exactly fit Titon's concept of life story, just as they do not exactly fit Sandra Stahl's notion of personal experience narrative. Although there are similarities, the narratives collected for this thesis could not be allocated to either of the narrative categories described by Sandra Stahl or Jeff Todd Titon. Nevertheless, the stories here are narrative creations of each teller. They exhibit what Stahl would call the tellers' cultural and personal stylization (Personal Experience Stories 268) and what Titon would refer to as a story of personal experience, a significant piece of a person's life (276). Without question each narrative embodies the values, aspects of the belief system, and the particular world view of each woman. In other words, all facets of the person that speak to one's individual folklore are included in the narratives of each of these women.

Feminist Folkloristics

Women contributed in a crucial way to the evolution of the Cape Breton community and to mining life. But as already noted, too often their stories are mere footnotes to significant community events. However, the bias against women's viewpoint has been changing in the wake of a call for a gendered analysis of social issues. And a number of feminists and folklorists are leading that call. The work of several inform this thesis.

In her introduction to Women And Folklore, Claire Farrer observes that throughout much of the twentieth century little attention was paid to the expressive forms of women. She was an early proponent of the observation that women's expression generally occurs in the private sphere of home and is therefore less readily observed than the more public expression of men's activity. This means that theories, hypothesis, and models are based on half the data, resulting in a distorted view of society. She states:

> ... at least half of the expressive repertoire of a society is overlooked by investigating only the verbal or expressive behavior of one sex or those areas where one sex performs. The folk are not at fault for suppression of half the relevant data; folklorists, and other collectors, must accept the responsibility for bias (xv).

Jordan and Kalčik followed Farrer's work with their Women's Folklore, Women's Culture, a collection of essays by women about women and their folklore. They note that the bias toward male collectors and male lore has made light of the genres in which women have traditionally expressed themselves. They write:

> ... such genres as personal experience narratives, popular beliefs, and various kinds of humor have

> often been dismissed as "minor genres" or, less formally , "old wives' tales" or "just gossip." In other words, genres and performance contexts that are especially characteristic of men have most interested folklorists as worthy of study, while folklore that flourishes within the private domain of women has been underrated and ignored (ix).

Jordan and Kalčik contend that a thoughtful examination of women's folklore will "enlarge our view of the world, enabling us to appreciate more fully the complexities of human culture as seen from multiple perspectives" (xiv).

Finally, Greenhill and Tye, Canadian folklorists and feminists, also speak to this lopsided worldview. They note that: "... academics have too often simply researched men and assumed that their results applied equally well to women" (7). Greenhill and Tye argue that the attitudes that cause and perpetuate important social problems such as sexual harassment, control over one's body - or lack thereof, and inadequate daycare, find expression in folklore. Seeing folklore as an "active agent for social change" (9) they note that:

> Women's experiences ... show that what has remained (publicly) unspoken and unnoticed is very powerful, and that speaking out, which often involves the traditional act of telling one's own story, is usually the first step toward action (4).

This study is a personal attempt toward gender balance in the exploration of a Cape Breton community issue. Specifically, this work considers the links between women's experiences, women's stories, and women's actions in one community during a time of catastrophic change.

Narrative and Social Change

Building on the work of Farrer and others, in this study I argue that personal narrative is not only a reflection of culture, but that it can enable social change. Zeitlin et al. report that stories mark turning points in the life of the teller and that they help bring clarity to incidents of upheaval and change. Bruner argues that narrative reflects an effort to restore a sense of order and meaning to experience. Donald Ward credits narrative as the vehicle by which three different groups of people - American prisoners in Vietnam, the inhabitants of American slum ghettos, and abused women - maintain their threatened cultural identity. Ward contends that in the act of repeating their stories people from each of these groups take the first step in liberating themselves from tormented lives. He writes:

> The members of these three highly disparate groups whose plights I have described here ..., all shared the need to assert their cultural and individual identities under circumstances that threatened their last vestige of human dignity. That, in each case, they were able to maintain this dignity, can be attributed to the competency in narrating that they acquired. ... The ability to tell a good story ...is perhaps the most important element in the triumph of the individual over adversity. Social change and human progress owes much to the abilities acquired by *homo narrans (62-63).*

In her study of Ecuadorian peasant women, Mary M. Crain discovers the relationship between narrative and social change in the women's stories of death and devil possession. Suggesting that the stories reflect the women's attempts to register their disapproval and resistance toward the new commercial farming practices, Crain writes: " ... women's narratives constitute a form of politics, provided we expand our understanding of "the political" to include various modes of resistance occurring in informal domestic domains "(68). She further notes: "The

women's stories provide us with an opportunity to examine peasant attitudes towards self, work, the natural world, and society ..." (68).

Feminist scholar Sherene Razack also recognizes the value of personal narrative as a vehicle for change. She contends that story telling is at the heart of the pedagogy of those who teach for social change. Razack writes:

> In the context of social change storytelling refers to an opposition to established knowledge, to Foucault's suppressed knowledge, to the experience of the world that is not admitted into dominant knowledge paradigms. I have found storytelling to be central to ... critical pedagogy or popular education (100).

This process of making the implicit explicit through storytelling constitutes what some scholars have named vernacular theory.

Vernacular Theory

In the headnotes to Thomas A. Burns "Folkloristics: A Conception of Theory" (Oring), the observation is made that a variety of theoretical perspectives influence the study of folklore. For example, the discipline is informed by theory from fields such as the social sciences, history, and linguistics. In that article, however, there is no mention of vernacular theory. The reason for the omission could be that 'vernacular' is not generally considered a theoretical perspective or paradigm like, for example, structuralism or functionalism. However, the term has been used for some time in reference to community-based forms of cultural expression. The dictionary (Random House Webster's) defines "vernacular" as native or indigenous (2114). It refers to that which is local or personal. Within the discipline of folklore the local, the native, the personal, finds expression in all

genres, including medicine, architecture, and religion. This thesis, examining how four women deal with a major life change, takes place within the framework of the vernacular, and draws on the work of several folklorists as well as cultural theorist, Thomas McLaughlin.

For folklorist Bonnie Blair O'Connor, vernacular is "the mode of expression of a group or class, as contrasted with an official sanctioned, formal, or idealize mode of expression" (234). In the pursuit of identifying the best possible care for patients, O'Connor explores the relationships between conventional medicine and what she refers to as nonconventional health belief systems. Working from the perspective that one's values and belief system significantly impact the choices one makes with respect to health care practices, O'Connor is keen to identify ways of decreasing conflicts between conventional and nonconventional medicine. For her, conventional medicine is that which is sanctioned by modern Western societies as opposed to folk and popular medicine which she categorizes under the term nonconventional medicine. O'Connor writes:

> For general descriptive purposes, all of the nonconventional or unofficial health belief systems and their local, familial, and personal variations can be classed together, in contradistinction to conventional medicine, as constituting a discrete domain in which health care actions occur. I designate them collectively as "vernacular health belief (or healing) systems," taking vernacular to mean native to or firmly held by the people who use the system (6).

Ennals and Holdsworth also use the term vernacular when identifying a house form that falls between the "folk" and the "polite" style.[7] In their study, the

[7] Folk refers to the pattern of the dwelling form that immigrants brought with them from their ancestral homes, while polite refers to the high style homes of the social elite.

authors survey Canada's built landscape from an historic geographic perspective. Tracking settlement patterns, they trace the type of dwelling fabricated throughout the colonization process. What they refer to as the self-conscious, or polite house, sheltered a select few, ranging from colonial officials to the mercantile elite. They found that while the majority of immigrants erected structures that replicated the simple, traditional dwellings of their respective homelands, over time the cross-fertilization of cultures combined with the influences of the polite style gave way to the vernacular form. They point out, however, that the vernacular was distinct from region to region depending on the folk traditions, the utilization of local materials, the incorporation of new building processes, and on the prosperity of each region, which differed depending on levels of mercantile or land-based activity. Ennals and Holdsworth state:

> ...in the hands of a new class, different regions, or indeed countries, different elements were absorbed or distinctive national variants evolved. As local builders grappled in their own way to interpret and adapt these notions, regionally distinctive vernaculars emerged ... (92).

Leonard Norman Primiano writes about the vernacular as well, particularly as the term applies to religion. He believes that by categorizing religion as "folk" or "popular", folklorists perpetuate a two-tiered model of religion, a model wherein institutionalized religion is held as the standard against which other religious beliefs are measured. For Primiano, this represents a devaluing of religious beliefs, when those opinions run contrary to the principles of organized religion. Of the two-tiered model, he notes: "This practice both residualizes the religious lives of believers and at the same time reifies the authenticity of religious institutions as the

exemplar of human religiosity" (39). Primiano nevertheless believes that folklorists are more sensitive to the concept of belief and lived experience than other scholars and as an alternative to the words "folk" or "popular", he advocates the term "vernacular religion". Primiano writes:

> Since 1984, I have been using the term "vernacular religion", first as a cautionary alternative to "folk" and "popular" religion, and then as a term representing my own understanding of lived religion in both publications and public presentations (note 4: p. 41).

For him vernacular religion is religion as it is lived, encountered, understood, interpreted, and practiced (44). It is personal; it is private; and like health belief systems, religious beliefs systems are held firmly and dearly. At the same time, like the vernacular house form that is an amalgam of different elements depending on locale, materials, and socio-economics, religious belief systems differ according to one's personal value system, culture, traditions, and experience.

Thomas McLaughlin is an educator and theorist who considers the notion of community-based theory to be as important and as relevant a concept as academic theories. Arguing that academics and knowledge-elites are not the only people who can understand and theorize their own reality, he contends that reflection and theorizing occurs outside of, as well as within, the realm of academic disciplines. He further maintains that contrary to being an elite activity, theorizing is widespread, a vital element in daily life, and critical to cultural and personal survival. He writes:

> Groups defined by demeaning and dehumanizing mainstream values either do theory or die in spirit. That is, either they internalize those definitions and accept self-hatred, or they recognize that the official version is not the only way of looking at the world. When definitions imposed from above simply don't

> match daily social experience, there are two choices: either deny yourself or learn to question authorized versions (21).

For McLaughlin, personal experience is the tool through which those who lack cultural power question established institutions and procedures. He calls this practice of community questioning vernacular theory. He writes:

> I claim that individuals who *do not* come out of a tradition of philosophical critique are capable of raising questions about the dominant cultural assumptions. They do so in ordinary language, and they often suffer from the blindness that unself-conscious language creates. But the fact that vernacular theories therefore do not completely transcend ideologies does not make them different in kind from academic theories. They manage in spite of their complicity to ask fundamental questions about culture (5).

The women whose stories are presented in this study are not academic theorists. They can, however, name their practice and question the assumptions that are operative within their coal mining community. They know their husbands were engaged in one of the most dangerous occupations known to man. They have lived with the daily uncertainty of whether their husbands will return home at the end of the shift. They know that many government employees who retire early are awarded substantial retirement packages, and therefore they are not afraid to ask why their federally employed husbands were offered small pensions or meager severance allowances. Faced with the knowledge that mine closures will affect their present way of life, as well as their hopes and dreams for the future, each of them question their new reality and extend themselves into realms they would never have imagined.

Methodology

This thesis draws on material from tape-recorded interviews I conducted with four women who are married to Cape Breton coal miners. Interviews were also held with the husbands of two of the aforementioned women, men who were working in the industry at the time of the downsizing/closing announcement. This fieldwork was carried out during the summer of 1999. My interviews were supplemented by a collection of audio tapes housed at the Beaton Institute Archives. This collection focuses on the life histories of several long-retired Cape Breton coal miners.

In an effort to contextualize my study, I also incorporated here studies about Cape Breton's coal mining history, folklore and the mining industry, gender and folklore, and narrative and its role in our lives. As well, I draw on the works of local collectors who have recorded and documented the folklore and oral history of Cape Breton. These materials are in the form of archival records and unpublished manuscripts which are housed at the Beaton Institute Archives at the University College of Cape Breton. Local and provincial newspapers also served as a valuable source of information. On a regular basis the Cape Breton Post and the Halifax Herald covered the downsizing/closure process. From time to time one or the other of those newspapers printed articles about retraining programs, graduations, and fresh starts that individual or groups of laid-off miners had embarked on. For example in the spring of 2001 the local Cape Breton Post printed a photograph of one laid-off miner who graduated with a Bachelor Degree in Education (Cape

Breton Post 15). This new schoolteacher is married to one of the four women who are the focus of this project.

Interview Participants

In search of a female perspective on what the loss of a mining income means to a family, I turned first to my sister, Diane. When interviewed Diane was fifty-two years old and had been married to Glen for almost thirty-five years. During our interview she shared a side of her life she had not discussed with me before. Diane spoke about the danger associated with Glen's work, and how she met the challenge of coping daily with that reality. For the first time she talked with me about their finances and the challenge of providing their family with the best possible life-style a miner's income could accommodate. Speaking about the financial implications of the government announcement, Diane told me that the loss of Glen's income meant a restructuring of their lives. And she talked about the role she would play in that reconfigured life.

When I requested of Diane some suggestions as to other wives I might meet and possibly interview, she suggested Debbie, one of the other women whose voice is heard in this work. Debbie is a third generation Glace Bay resident, and is married to Albert. Like Diane, Debbie also talked about the stress of being married to a coal miner. She noted however that she had to proceed as if Albert would return home at the end of each shift because to dwell on the alternative would immobilize her. Disappointed and challenged by the pending change in her family's circumstances, Debbie explained how she was preparing for a future she had not expected.

The other two women, Edna Budden and Bev Brown, were selected on the basis of the public activities they initiated following the downsizing/closure announcement. Neither Diane nor Glen knew these women so my initial calls to them were "cold calls". I contacted Edna first. She in turn arranged for Bev to be at her house on the day of the interview. Because of previously arranged engagements in what was a busy summer for them, this interview was difficult to organize. Ultimately, however, Edna and Bev shared their stories eloquently and without restraint. The stories of these women are presented in the following chapter .

Notwithstanding that this study focuses on how coal miners' wives manage a major life change, as previously noted, I also interviewed two coal miners. The men are married to two of the women whose stories are told here. The first of them is my brother-in-law, Glen, who worked all his adult life as a coalminer, although in the later years he worked as an underground electrician . Once this study was explained to him, Glen, a man of few words, graciously agreed to be interviewed. Moreover, he offered to speak to a few of his "buddies" thus paving the way for a telephone call to them from me. Consistent with the general reciprocity among group members that Thomas Dunk found in his study on Canadian working-class culture, the three contacts Glen provided indicated a willingness to speak with me. However, in the end I interviewed only Glen and his friend Albert.

Albert is a robust man whose energy fills the room. He made no attempt to conceal his disappointment and frustration about the government's withdrawal from Cape Breton's coal industry. Unlike Glen, who spent most of his adult life in the mines, Albert worked as a meat-cutter in his early adult life. Faced with a new

career choice some twenty years earlier he had accepted an offer to work in the coal mines over the police force believing mining offered security for the rest of his working life. Albert was not interested in hiding his disenchantment or his feeling of having been let down.

The Interview Format

The interviews were conducted over one week, and followed the guidelines for folklore interviews described by Bruce Jackson. Jackson points out that:

> *Directive interviews* involve specific questions posed by the researcher; the interviewee's comments are welcome only insofar as they are part of the answers to those specific questions. *Nondirective interviews* are totally open: the researcher listens, the subject talks. ... Folklore interviews tend to be a mixture of these two styles. Fieldworkers have specific things they want to know about ... , but they want to know about those things as they function and have meaning in the informants' world. The fieldworker *wants* the informant's opinions, biases, attitudes, beliefs, phrasings. The investigation should be as objective as possible, but the information gathered is more useful the more subjective it is (96-97).

Jackson's *directive* and *nondirective* interviewing styles would be analogous to feminist researcher, Dana Jack's structured or unstructured interviewing process. Jack suggests that within the interview context women are more comfortable with less structure. In her work, Jack strives to let the subject be in charge of the interview so as to allow a full exploration of how women define and evaluate their experiences. She notes: "An oral interview, when structured by the narrator instead of the researcher, allows each woman to express her uniqueness in its full class, racial, and ethnic richness" (22). This seems similar to Jackson's description of the

folklorist's desire to not only know about certain things, but to know how these things function and have meaning.

While conscious of Jackson's and Jack's caution, I nevertheless used a list of prepared questions as a frame of reference for each interview. In each instance, however, the session took on a life of its own. Most of the time the list was more intrusive than helpful, although before each wrap-up I quickly scanned the questions to ensure I had not forgotten what I considered at the time a 'critically important item'. As well, the list gave me the comfort of knowing I had something to fall back on if the flow of each person's story was unable to emerge. This is not to say that I did not ask questions, but rather that much of the time the questions emanated from the discourse generated. Consistent with Jack's observations, I believe this format afforded the narrator control over the interview session. For example, in the case of Diane, I feared she might consider it forward of me to ask about her family finances. However, as we began to talk about her life as a miner's wife, the issue of finances simply unfolded as part of the discussion.

The interviews were completed in three two person sessions. I interviewed Diane and Glen in their home, Debbie and Albert in theirs, and talked to Edna and Bev at Edna's home. Meis reports that the small group format facilitates women's speech and communication. For Diane and Debbie this process meant they were able to turn to their husbands when requiring clarification on some technical aspect of his work. Also there were instances when one or the other would share a feeling or an insight, or express a concern, that would be reinforced or corroborated by the spouse. Although Diane and Debbie both stayed in the room while their husbands

were interviewed, the men left the room frequently while their wives told their stories. At one point Albert returned with a graduation picture of his youngest daughter, saying with tenderness and affection "this is what it's all about".

With respect to Edna and Bev, the small group format similarly facilitated the support or corroboration of one or the other's point of view in many instances. Additionally with these two women however, the format served to highlight the use of the *kernal story.* Kalčik describes the *kernal story* as a narrative form often used by women, but possibly by any group of people who regularly interact with each other (7). Best understood as a story within a story, such narratives embody catch phrases or pieces of dialogue that refer to the subject of a longer story. When everyone present is aware of the story, the phrase is all that is required for the recall of the second event and thus the second story does not have to be retold. From time to time either Edna or Bev would be discussing one issue and the other would say, for example, "like that meeting in Halifax ..." or "the rally..." . Because they both knew the story they needed to go no further. When this happened I did not interrupt, but let the discussion continue. Later if a more appropriate moment presented itself, I would ask and Edna or Bev would inform me about the subject to which the interjection had referred.

Fieldnotes and Transcriptions

As a student of folklore I am well aware of the value of good fieldnotes and of the merit of transcribing the tapes as soon as possible after the interviews (Ives, 75). While I made outlines after each session indicating the name of the informant,

a brief summary of the tape, the date, and the location of the interview, I did not attempt the transcriptions until much later. Prior to the first interview session I had not anticipated the degree to which I would be moved by these narratives. I found that at the end of each session I was emotionally exhausted. I was torn by anger about the predicament of these families. I was awed by the courage in the face of adversity that each woman displayed. And I was overwhelmed by the resolve of one woman to not "sit back and let it all go" (Diane Parsons). Conscious that save for circumstances each story could have been my own, I needed to put some time between myself and the story-telling experience. I did not attend to transcriptions until several weeks later. That was unfortunate because the quality of two tapes from the same session with Edna and Bev was poor, leaving me with sections on each tape that are barely discernable. Had I listened to the tapes immediately following the interviews, and realized there was a problem, I could have begun transcription while the material was still sufficiently fresh in my mind that memory would have helped me make sense of those particularly unclear passages. Because of the time lapse, I lost some valuable material and I created a transcription process that was more tedious than it should have been. Notwithstanding, I ended the research stage with important stories told by the women who lived them. To begin to understand these narratives, however, they must be situated within the context of Cape Breton's coalmining history.

In the next chapter I offer a historical profile of the political and economic circumstances of the Cape Breton coal fields.

Chapter Two

A Brief History of the Political and Economic Circumstances Pertinent to the Coal Fields in Industrial Cape Breton

Introduction

In this chapter I outline the political and economic history of the Cape Breton coal fields. Specifically, I review key political events pertinent to the development of the coal industry, including early European jurisdiction over the Island, Cape Breton's annexation to mainland Nova Scotia, and the impact of Confederation on the Island. As well, I highlight the economic initiatives that served to trigger both the development and demise of the Cape Breton coal fields. I especially attend to a description of the Island's industrialization, the practice of off-Island economic control, the development of the trade union movement in the coal fields and the violent struggle between the corporations that operated the coal fields and the men who mined the coal. Finally, I describe the circumstances leading to the acquisition of the coal fields by the government of Canada and their rationale for abandoning this assumed responsibility.

The Political and Economic Events Characterizing the Development and Underdevelopment of Cape Breton Island

Cape Breton Island is the most eastern part of the province of Nova Scotia. Populated initially by the Mi'kmaq, Cape Breton first experienced European settlement when the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht provided for French sovereignty. During the five decades that the French held the Island, they developed a vital "cod

fish" economy. Operating predominantly from the Louisbourg Fortress, the French traded Cape Breton cod throughout Europe and New England. Christopher Moore notes that this was a significant economic moment. It stands as the single instance wherein the Island's economy was locally controlled. He states:

> When the degree of development of Cape Breton during the French regime is reappraised, the eighteenth century stands out as a short period in which the Island established local control of an efficiently produced and marketed resource which competed successfully in a global market. Local control appears to have been an important factor in this success (48).

In 1758 Cape Breton was again conquered by the English. While the fishery was important to the English, they lacked the markets available to the French. The Island, however, served as an important land resource for the British. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Cape Breton Island became the destination for a wave of immigrants from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. The majority of Highlanders who settled on the Island were dispossessed, intent on creating a new life. They arrived with little but the clothes on their backs and their culture, which included their Gaelic language. In fact, Charles Dunn reminds us that throughout the nineteenth century and continuing into the mid-twentieth century, Gaelic was the first language in most Cape Breton homes (138-139). Unfortunately, language served as a barrier to their participation in the political affairs of the colony because English was the language of the ruling class in nineteenth century Cape Breton.

Industrialization, at the dawn of the twentieth century, brought the next large wave of European immigrants to Cape Breton. By the early decades of the twentieth century, the coal fields in Cape Breton County and the steel mill in Sydney were in full production and required labourers by the thousands. The

possibility of employment drew migrants from every western European nation. Today, in addition to a large native (Mi'Kmaq) community and the descendants of the Highland settlers who comprise the major portion of the population, Cape Breton Island and especially the Cape Breton Regional Municipality (previously known as Industrial Cape Breton) represent a tapestry of cultures that are part of the Island's industrial legacy.

Annexation

As Jane Jacobs points out economies are shaped by the political structures to which they are subject. The economy of Cape Breton has not been an exception to this practice. The Island's economic circumstances are in large measure an outcome of a series of political events. A particularly notable instance was the annexation of the Island to mainland Nova Scotia. The English had initially operated Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick as separate colonies. That changed when Cape Breton was annexed to Nova Scotia in 1820.

W.S. MacNutt provides the background for this event. He reports that in 1815 two Cape Breton residents challenged the tax on imported rum. They argued that on the basis of earlier proclamations only an elected assembly could approve import duties, whereas in Cape Breton political authority rested with an appointed governor. Their claim that the governor was unable to authorize the tax was confirmed by the Supreme Court and was further upheld by the Law Officers of the Crown in London. This provoked local British authorities who, according to McNutt, considered, "....putting into effect the royal instructions for the calling of

an assembly but decided against it on the ground that the island did not have sufficient men of competence" (182). In other words, British authorities determined the Island lacked sufficiently qualified people to operate as a separate colony. Cape Breton's status as a colony was lost and on becoming part of the province of Nova Scotia the Island was assigned two seats in the Provincial Assembly in Halifax. The reference to the lack of men of competence may well have been in reference to the inability of the Highland settlers to converse in the language of the ruling class.

It is notable that opposition to being part of Nova Scotia persists among Cape Bretoners to this day. In 1993 John Hanratty, then editor of a local publication, The Cape Bretoner, raised the question of Cape Breton renegotiating its political status within Canada. The notion generated interest which ultimately dissipated. In February 2000, an Island-wide meeting was held in the village of Baddeck, again to explore the possibility of political separation from Nova Scotia (Cape Breton Post A1). The dialogue from that session continues, but generally the sentiment appears, gathers some momentum, settles out, and resurfaces at a later time.

Nevertheless, perhaps the most important consequence of annexation was to shift Cape Breton's economic focus from the east and the sea to the west and the land. Confederation in 1867 had meant furthering the inward and westward focus. Economic historians C.R. Fay and Harold A. Innis observed that for Maritimers prosperity was a possibility while people kept their face was towards the sea, while the pull of the land and subsequent industrialization meant a continued struggle against adversity (670).

Central Canadian Hegemony

David Frank agrees with Fay and Innis. He argues that Maritime underdevelopment may be linked to industrialization. Frank, however, is more specific, viewing the underdevelopment of the Maritimes as a natural feature of capitalistic growth. He explains that the "Canadianization" of the region enabled industrial capitalism, which was entrenched in central Canada, to increase its hegemony over regions where it was less advanced (111). Noting that the trend toward the concentration and centralization of capital had dramatic and negative consequences for economic development in the weaker regions, he cites numerous ways in which the Maritimes were adversely affected, including the promotion of central Canadian goals to the detriment of regional interests especially in the areas of tariffs, trade, railway, marine, and fisheries matters. Speaking to these effects on Cape Breton specifically, Frank states:

> Nowhere can the results of these developments be seen more clearly than in Industrial Cape Breton, where the process of national economic integration was of decisive importance in the exploitation of one of the region's richest natural resources, the coal-fields (111).

Coal and Steel

The French at Louisbourg were the first to mine coal in Cape Breton. For seventy-five years after their departure mining activity on the Island was carried out either by the colonial government or by private individuals. In 1826 a royal charter granted the General Mining Association of London (GMA) exclusive control over Nova Scotia's mineral rights. The colony regained control of mineral rights in 1858,

when local advocates of colonial economic development led a strong campaign against the Association's monopoly. David Frank writes:

> This successful revolt against colonial underdevelopment opened the way for expansion of the coal industry. Numerous mining companies were formed and a brief boom followed. Under the unusual conditions of the 1854 Reciprocity Treaty and the high demand for coal during the American Civil War, Cape Breton coal entered the long-coveted United States market on a large scale (112-113).

Over the next several years various local and colonial-based mining operations were established in Nova Scotia, the most substantial of which were on Cape Breton Island. In 1901, provincial revenues from coal exceeded one million dollars. Beck notes that at the beginning of the twentieth century royalties from Cape Breton coal provided "the largest single source of provincial revenue" (15). The continued success of the coal industry however, depended on factors over which Cape Breton had little control.

Success for the Cape Breton coal industry depended on access to the American and Quebec markets. The degree of access was ever-changing, depending on the level of protectionist sentiment in the United States and the amount of import duty set by the Dominion. In 1879, national policy established a $.50 per ton duty on imported coal. The next year it was raised to $.60 per ton, a development which substantially increased Cape Breton's domestic coal sales. In 1897, however, the duty was reduced to $.53, where it remained until 1925. During those years, that is 1879 to 1925, the world market for coal doubled. Regretfully, Cape Breton's portion of the market decreased. As David Frank previously

suggested, national policy did not work to the advantage of the peripheral regions of the country. He further explains:

> National economic policies encouraged the expansion of the coal industry, but did not promote stability or prosperity for the hinterland resource area. The creation of national markets led to a division of labour between regions, which established the Cape Breton coal industry as a source of industrial energy filling the needs of the central Canadian market. ... under a national policy that was never truly national, the coal trade occupied a vulnerable position in the Canadian market (113-114).

Cape Breton coal provided the impetus for the 1901 construction of a steel plant in Sydney. Henry Melville Whitney, a Boston industrialist who had arrived in Cape Breton in 1893, initially convinced local industrialists and politicians that Cape Breton coal could provide a cheap source of fuel for the New England market, including his Boston-based companies. Whitney acquired control of most of the mining operations on the Island and formed a new company called the Dominion Coal Company.

When his plans for coal exports to New England fell through, he and his Canadian backers turned their sights to the building of a steel plant. Two years later Whitney sold his interests in the coal and steel operations to his Canadian partners. It is interesting to note that Whitney's Canadian associates were Montreal and Toronto based financiers. Their respective purchases of the Cape Breton coal and steel corporations served to solidify control of the Cape Breton economy in central Canada.

Over the next two decades ownership of the steel and coal companies changed numerous times, but ownership and control continued to remain off-Island.

Again in 1920 the coal fields and the steel plant were sold. In this instance, however, the Montreal-based conglomerate, the British Empire Steel Corporation (BESCO), consolidated all the mining activities in Cape Breton and across the province. Furthermore, in 1928 a corporate reorganization triggered the merger of the coal fields and the steel production facilities under the name, Dominion Steel and Coal Company (Dosco). Dosco operated until the mid 1960s, at which time company officials declared their intention to close the Cape Breton coal mines and the Sydney steel plant. In the mid 1960s these industries taken together employed approximately ten thousand men. The prospect of industry closure presented severe economic and political consequences. In response to this crisis, the Province of Nova Scotia assumed responsibility for the operation of the steel plant and the federal government assumed control of the coal mines.

The Men Versus the Company: The Development of the Trade Union Movement in the Coal Fields

The Provincial Workmen's Association (PWA) was formed in 1879 with a mandate to ensure decent wages, a shorter work day and an accurate record of production in Cape Breton coal mines. It was further mandated to secure compensation for work-related injuries and to advance the cause of workers who were forced to cease work for any unjust cause. In spite of its stated mission, the PWA did not enjoy the support of all coal miners. In 1984 I interviewed a number of retired miners, including J.J. Chaisson, who first went underground in 1901. Chaisson spoke of his disenchantment with the PWA. He recalled:

> ...I didn't want to bother with the darn union ... the headquarters

> of the mines were run by gangsters ... all they wanted to do was get their cheque ... they didn't care about working ... or helping the people, they just wanted to get paid and do nothing ... their mind wasn't to help the miners at all ... I knew most of them to be crooked. I had no use, although I was a member of the union, I had to be ... but I didn't think much of the people ... they didn't care about helping the miners.

Throughout Chaisson's mining career the PWA leader was John Moffatt, a man who sympathized more with the coal company than the Association membership. In 1902 he went so far as to publicly declare his opposition to strikes. John Mellor writes:

> In truth, Moffatt and his top executives had adopted a passive attitude to the coal and steel companies because they were out of their depth. The Provincial Workmen's Association could, and did, deal very successfully with individual small companies, but a provincial association with its limited budget was completely ineffectual in attempting to enforce its will on a rich, powerful organization such as the Dominion Coal Company or Dominion Iron and Steel Company (17).

It was Moffatt's inability to challenge operators of the coal company that James Bryson McLachlan recognized when he arrived in Cape Breton in 1902 from his native Scotland. J.B. McLachlan is a name synonymous with the labour struggle in Cape Breton. Recruited from Scotland by agents of the coal company to work in Cape Breton's coal fields, McLachlan was well versed in the politics of the Scottish trade unionists. On his arrival in Cape Breton, he initially became a leader in the reform movement of the PWA. His efforts later focused on attempting to secure United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) representation for Cape Breton coal miners. While McLachlan believed association with the UMWA would provide the men with the benefit of representation from a large international trade union, coal company officials in Cape Breton denounced the UMWA as a foreign entity

incapable of adequately representing the interests of Canadian workers. In 1915, in response to this criticism, McLachlan organized the United Mine Workers of Nova Scotia (UMWNS). The UMWNS could present itself as a provincially based union that could represent the Cape Breton miner and speak to the shortcomings of the PWA. The two provincial unions clashed in 1917 over wage and cost of living issues. A Nova Scotia royal commission, established in response to this conflict recommended that, in the interest of the war effort and the escalating demand for coal, the unions merge.[8] This turn of events set the stage for the demise of the PWA. McLachlan's perseverance meant that the UMWA would prevail. Notwithstanding eventual success, it is important to understand that the road to victory was often characterized by setbacks and disappointments. A strike in 1909 serves to exemplify the extent of the challenge that McLachlan and his followers faced.

The strike of 1909 was the first strike that served to nationally distinguish Cape Breton labour relations. Wages and working conditions were two of the central issues in that strike. Paul MacEwan summarizes:

> From 1905 to the time of the strike ... the men working on the face and extracting the coal, had received no wage increase ... while during that period the cost of living had climbed steadily. In 1910 it was about 22 percent above 1905. And while real wages were declining and other workers were gaining the eight-hour day, the Nova Scotia coal miner still worked ten or twelve hours a day. There was no written contract ... in some cases the men did not know the rate at which they were going to be paid, as rates were not posted (23).

As previously mentioned, under the leadership of J.B. McLachlan, the UMWA had established a presence in Cape Breton prior to the 1909 strike.

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[8] The Commission was chaired by Mr. Justice A. Chisholm of the Nova Scotia Supreme Court. For discussion see MacEwan 44-45.

Consequently, the rights of Cape Breton miners to be represented by the union of their choice was also an integral part of the 1909 negotiations. In every instance, however, the Dominion Coal Company refused to meet with representatives of the union. When the strike was called, coal company officials declared that each man on strike would be fined ten to fifty dollars per day (when the daily wage was less than five dollars) and would lose all privileges pertaining to housing, coal and company store credit, and that PWA workers who remained on the job would be well looked after during and following the strike. The company further indicated that special constables (PWA workers who remained loyal to the coal Company) would police the actions of the strikers and that the military would be called in to ensure the safety of imported strikebreakers and the PWA men who chose to work.

The ten month strike was bitter, with striking miners and their families huddled together in tents through a cold Cape Breton winter. Cholera, typhoid, diphtheria, and tuberculoses touched almost every home in the town of Glace Bay, but miners and their families were shown no mercy by the Dominion Coal Company. John Mellor writes:

> A reign of terror was instituted against strikers and their families. Evictions from company-owned houses continued at a great pace. Hundreds of families were forced from their homes and their few sticks of furniture dumped in the backyard or on the street at the mercy of the elements. ... sick or dying, young or old, it made no difference ...Credit at the company stores had been immediately cut off for striking miners and their families on the first day of the strike (49-53).

Ten months after the strike began the UMWA acknowledged defeat. The miners were forced back to work by hunger and deprivation, without an official wage increase. Many who had joined the UMWA, including James McLachlan,

were never rehired by the company. Those UMWA workers who were allowed back into the mines were assigned the least productive coal seams, ensuring wages at or below pre-strike levels. On the other hand, the PWA men who had worked throughout the strike were provided with an opportunity to work the more productive seams and thus to increase their wages.

The strike did not change life for the miners. During the first half of the twentieth century, wages for Cape Breton coal miners were consistently below the cost of living. Between 1905 and 1919 Cape Breton coal miners received wage increases in the range of 35%, while the cost of living had grown by 70% (Mellor 106). Even during the war years when the price of coal rose from .93 to $28.00 per ton (Mellor 77), wages bore no relationship to the price of coal. When the war ended, the markets for Cape Breton coal was greatly reduced and the task of bringing salaries in line with the cost of living was all but impossible. Nevertheless, the miners secured a wage increase in 1920, just before Roy Mitchell Wolvin arrived to make his mark on Cape Breton labour history.

Roy Mitchell Wolvin was an American by birth. Operating from Montreal, he assumed the presidency of Besco, the company that took over operations of the Cape Breton coal and steel industries in 1920. To offset the diminished demand for coal on the North American markets, Wolvin's strategy to achieve profitability was to reduce wages. Consequently, miners who had earned $5.00 a day in 1920 were earning $3.93 per day in 1922 (MacEwan 128), and working no more than two or three days per week. In his pursuit of wage reductions, the coal company president

was not above appealing for state intervention. David Frank summarizes Wolvin's conduct in this regard:

> In 1920 Wolvin reluctantly signed an agreement for substantial increases for the coal miners. When this contract ended, Besco began its campaign to reduce wages. In 1922 the corporation sought a reduction of about one-third, but after a dramatic struggle was able to win only half this amount. In 1924 and 1925 Besco sought 20 per cent reductions; in 1924 the coal miners won a small increase and in 1925, after a long and bitter strike, a royal commission allowed the corporation a ten per cent reduction (123).

Violence was often a feature of the struggle between labour and management in Cape Breton. In the 1920s the Dominion Coal Company controlled the electricity and water supplies for the town of New Waterford. At the height of a heat wave during the 1925 strike the coal company cut off those services to the town. A bucket brigade of strikers maintained a trickle of water from a nearby well to the town until overcome by hunger and exhaustion. Repeated calls from the mayor of the town for mercy on the sick, hungry, and tired townspeople went unheeded. Mellor points out the provincial and federal governments "studiously ignored the plight of innocent citizens while condoning or turning a blind eye to the high-handed actions of a feudal coal baron" (295).

Before the strike was over, an unarmed coal miner had been killed by company police. Furthermore the company stores in Cape Breton's mining communities were ransacked and burned by hungry, frustrated, and beaten coal miners. A provincial election that summer saw the Conservatives take power for the first time in forty years. Six months later a provincial royal commission[9] recommended approval of the Dominion Coal Company's original request for a ten

percent reduction in wages. State intervention for the coal industry, however, would not end with the 1920s.

Throughout the depression years tariffs for imported coal had been raised and the federal government offered bonuses to Canadian industries that used Canadian coal. Consequently, the Dominion Coal Company modestly increased its share of the Quebec and Ontario markets during the 1930s (Bickerton 67). The market, however, was not sufficient to warrant the thousands of men the coal company employed during the depression. Bickerton suggests that the company was able to retain this redundant reserve labour by its strategy of "spreading the work around" (67), or working the mines only a few days per week.

Several of the retired coal miners I interviewed in 1984 confirm Bickerton's claim. Barney Pastuck, for example, reports that throughout the 1930s miners' lives were governed by the six o'clock whistle from the pit head. He notes: "one whistle meant work and two whistles meant no work and no pay ... you wouldn't know until ... the whistle blew in the evening". Henry MacKay and Harry Porter agree with him suggesting: "... there were more two whistle days than one ..." . Most Cape Breton miners worked an average of one to three days per week throughout the depression years.

Throughout the Second World War 13,000 men were employed in the Cape Breton coal industry (Bickerton 105). At least seven hundred of these workers were over the age of sixty-five. A pension plan had been created by the coal company in the 1920s but it could support only a small percentage of workers. The only way an

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[9] This 1925 Duncan Commission was mandated to investigate all aspects of Nova Scotia'a coal industry. See Beck 116, Bickerton 77, MacEwan 147-150, and Mellor 315-317.

older miner could collect from the plan was if a current recipient died (MacEwan 269). Thus, a contributory pension plan was one of the key issues when the miners walked off the job in 1947.

During the 1947 strike the Dominion Coal Company once again received support from both levels of government. The federal government had agreed to subsidize the losses of the coal company for a two year period, while the province of Nova Scotia announced its intention to import American coal for industrial use for the duration of the strike (MacEwan 271-273). At the time, even the UMWA was of no help to Cape Breton's coal miners. The strike ended after three months with nothing to show for the effort beyond the realization the miners would never triumph over private ownership. Of the last strike under private ownership, Bickerton observes that it was :

> Poorly planned and executed, with little in the way of support from International headquarters or other unions in Canada, the strike was a dismal failure. ... The 1947 strike certainly shattered whatever belief had ever existed that the union could beat DOSCO in a strike confrontation (105).

Following the war and throughout the 1950s coal production in Cape Breton decreased dramatically. Production costs had risen and competition from other fuel sources had grown. Cape Breton's mining methods had become outdated, and there was little support from either level of government for the industry. The cry for public ownership that had begun in the 1940s was ever-present. By 1965 there were only four coal mines operating and an industry that had once employed 13,000 now employed 6,000. The resulting high level of unemployment triggered the establishment of a federal inquiry for the purpose of examining the prospects for the

mining industry in Industrial Cape Breton.[10] J.R. Donald led the investigation and recommended the creation of a crown corporation to phase out the coal industry, noting that "no constructive solution to unemployment and the social needs of Cape Breton can be based upon coal mining" (Bickerton 199).

The Canadian government responded to the Donald Commission by establishing the Cape Breton Development Corporation (DEVCO), which took over the operation of the Cape Breton coal fields in March 1968. DEVCO was comprised of two divisions, the industrial development division (IDD) and the coal division. IDD was mandated to diversify and strengthen the Island's economy through the establishment and promotion of new enterprises. The coal division, on the other hand, was charged with the responsibility of gradually phasing out coal mining activity in the community. Notwithstanding these formally declared intentions, Bickerton argues that the creation and operation of DEVCO is best understood as a social intervention rather than an economic intervention. He states:

> ...the state's intervention was premised on *welfare* rather than *development*. It was the social and political costs of not acting that provided the rational for state intervention. In any event, the creation of DEVCO simply represented an extension of the subsidies that the federal government had already been providing, a (sic) varying degrees, for a number of decades. DEVCO was a concession won within the parameters of a discourse that viewed the role and purpose of

[10] The Donald Commission produced a report called The Cape Breton Coal Problem. For discussion see Beck 290-291, and Bickerton 198-199.

> such subsidies in welfarist terms. These subsidies were not extended in the context of any development plan or strategy (200).

The oil crisis of the early 1970s dramatically changed part of DEVCO's originally stated purpose. In response to rapidly rising oil prices DEVCO embarked on a program to redevelop the Cape Breton coal fields. DEVCO opened two new mines in Cape Breton and launched a recruitment plan to expand the coal industry. Young men were attracted to the industry by promises of being "set for life" (Albert Dean). Others were encouraged to take advantage of DEVCO's training and education programs.

Michael Mullins, another of the retired miners I had interviewed in 1984, reports he spent the last years of his working life teaching mining skills at the College of Cape Breton to young men who had been encouraged by DEVCO to enter the coal industry. In 1982, however, a drop in world oil prices put a halt to DEVCO's expansion plans. From the mid 1980s the corporation tried to find its way back to the original mission to close the coal fields. By the late 1990s DEVCO was operating two coal mines employing just over sixteen hundred people.

On January 27 1999, Natural Resources Minister Ralph Goodale announced that effective January 2001 the government of Canada would no longer operate Cape Breton's coal industry. His announcement brought to an end nearly two hundred years of coal mining in Cape Breton and signaled an end of a way of life for thousands of Cape Breton miners and their families. The stories of four women affected by the closure are the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Three

The Road to Resistance: The Stories of Four Women

Introduction

As noted in the previous chapter, the January 1999 visit of then Natural Resources Minister, Ralph Goodale to Sydney, Cape Breton was not a social call. The message he delivered to the people of Cape Breton was that within a twenty-four month period the Canadian Government would withdraw from the Cape Breton coal industry. Of the two remaining coal mines, one would be closed, the second sold. If a purchaser could not be found, it too would close. The Minister indicated that the government's withdrawal from the industry would be accompanied by an $111M financial package that included a $43M pension and severance package and a $68M community economic development fund that would be dispersed over a four year period.

To be eligible for a retirement package[11] a miner had to have turned forty-eight by December 1998 and therefore be at least fifty years of age at the time of the projected closure and sale. Under this arrangement three hundred and forty miners would qualify for a pension not to exceed $22,000.00 per year to age sixty-five. Another six hundred and fifty men would receive what was referred to as enhanced severance packages of four weeks pay for each year of service with DEVCO, to a maximum of $70,000.00 before taxes and other deductions. To the remaining six hundred and forty-two miners it was suggested that at least half of them would

[11] MacGillivray provides the details in this section regarding the retirement package, implications for the miners, and Cape Breton's *official* unemployment rate at the time of the announcement.

secure employment with the new owners of the mine that would be sold (assuming a purchaser would be found). With or without a severance package, more than thirteen hundred men would be cast unto the labour market in a region that had an official unemployment rate of 20.1 percent as of March 1998, as opposed to a national average of 7.8 percent. It should be noted that while the official unemployment rate was quoted to be 20.1 percent, it was reported that Cape Breton's *unofficial* unemployment rate at the time stood closer to 30 percent (Whalley). No new miners had been hired in approximately fifteen years. Therefore most men were long-term employees with forty-seven being the average age. The prospect for these single-skilled, older, ex-miners finding work defies even the most optimistic forecasts.[12]

As noted in chapter one, in addition to the four women who were interviewed for this study I also spoke with two coalminers. One had worked with the Cape Breton Development Corporation for twenty-three years, the other for thirty-three years. The interviews with these men served as an orientation to the different kinds of work that occurs underground, but as well they provided an opportunity to hear how at least two coalminers were feeling about their futures. These men felt betrayed. When they signed on with the corporation they were advised that their futures were in coal mining, and that they would be "set for life" (Dean). They were now angry, and they were afraid of what the future held. Significantly, they pointed to women in their lives as those who helped them cope. One man indicated that it was his wife's strength that kept him going. Another

[12] It is notable that the local university graduates six to seven hundred people annually, most of whom leave the Island to find employment.

reported that his wife was returning to school because new skills would enable her to work and supplement his pension income.

The vital role played by women in helping miners and families adjust became apparent over the course of the interviews. Mindful of the disappointment and anger they saw in their husbands, each woman was committed to minimizing the impact on her family of government withdrawal from the coal industry. They would not passively accept the new order. Rather each woman had a plan to deal with the changes they saw coming. The strategies they adopted for coping with the impact of their new circumstances, I refer to as acts of resistance. Before moving on to their stories, a brief discussion on resistance will follow.

Here I draw on Delamotte, Meeker, and O'Barr who define resistance as the process of reflecting on, reacting to, and initiating change (1). They suggest that resistance is lived in culturally and historically specific ways and is part of the ongoing process of living in society. Suggesting that for women resistance is embodied in the gendered nature of their lives, Delamotte et al. report that resistance finds expression in a myriad of ways including the different forms of artistic expression, material culture, and otherwise through lived experience. Just as resistance is found in the lived experience of the women who are the focus of this study, resistance was also part of the lived experience of previous generations of Cape Breton coalmining wives.

In The Company Store John Mellor points to women's resistance during Cape Breton's 1925 coal miners' strike. He reports that during the height of that strike, in the middle of a heat wave, the water supply for the town of New

Waterford was turned off by coal company officials. He records that hot, hungry, and thirsty women marched beside their husbands and their children to take back the water supply. Mellor writes:

> At every street corner and crossroads, their numbers increased as long-suffering miners' wives and their children joined the ranks ... women and children were chased into their homes by other "specials" wielding clubs and whips as they shouted obscenities to one and all ... (297).

Steven Penfold also writes about women's resistance toward far-off mine owners during the 1920's:

> When Canadian soldiers were sent into the Cape Breton coalfields in the summer of 1922 to protect company property ... the soldiers encountered extensive ridicule from the women of the coal towns. The wives of striking miners brought their children to the military encampment to see 'the men who were sworn to murder at the command of the ruling class of Canada (21).

Penfold also reports that throughout the twenties miners' wives participated in a variety of educational and social activities. These included rallies, demonstrations, fundraising events and the operation of soup kitchens. The vehicle through which women participated in these activities was the Women's Labour League. This organization first appeared in the Cape Breton colliery communities in 1924. Penfold advises, however, that not all women took a public approach to resistance. He suggests that as the family financier, "making ends meet" was an important, though more quiet, form of resistance. Making ends meet meant turning small plots into vegetable gardens, raising small animal husbandry, and recycling all manner of products from soup bones to sweaters. These quiet acts of resistance will

ring familiar in the stories of two of the women we will meet in the next section, while a more public form of resistance will characterize the narratives of the other two women.

Quiet Forms of Resistance

Debbie's Story - Debbie Dean is forty-six years old. She was born in Glace Bay and lives with Albert, her husband of twenty-five years, and their youngest daughter. They live in the house Debbie's grandfather built more than sixty years ago. She reported that for the first five years of their marriage she and Albert rented the house. He was working at the steel plant in Sydney, but had applications on file with Devco and with the Halifax Police Department. Both called within days of each other. Debbie and Albert happily made the choice of his hiring on with Devco. This meant security and provided the incentive to purchase the house in Glace Bay. Debbie states:

> At no point did I think it was going to be a temporary job. We figured we're all set; our future is here. We weren't really sure where our future was going to be, but once they called, we bought the house. When he got the job at Devco, we bought the home.

A quiet, gentle and articulate woman, Debbie has an arts degree from Mount Allison University. After university she worked with the Bank of Nova Scotia, but after the birth of their third child she left the bank to be at home with the children. When the youngest child went to school, Debbie returned to the paid work force. She entered the retail sector, where she stayed until the business closed several years ago. She later found part-time work at a nearby convenience store. But of her

income Debbie says, "I have nothing to contribute. Fifteen hours a week at the convenience store is nothing to contribute ... it's just pocket change". What she earns by caring for children two days a week also adds to the family income.

Debbie's husband worked with Devco for twenty-three years so he lacks the required time for the enhanced severance package. At forty-six years of age he and Debbie feel they are too old to pull up stakes and start over again in another part of the country. "Who's going to hire me? Our kids are out there now looking for work, and with more education than me," says Albert, who is trained as an industrial surveyor for the mining industry. Debbie agrees that leaving Glace Bay at this point in their lives makes no sense. As keeper of the family finances, Debbie's focus is on getting as many bills paid off as possible before the lay-off. She reported that since the announcement of closure she has gone from month to month, totally focused on paying down whatever she can. She was initially reluctant to burden Albert with her day to day worries, but knew that ultimately she had to share her concerns with him. In her own words:

> It was me who handled all the finances. I wouldn't tell him. You know I was just trying to do it all by myself ... and be assured I'd rob Peter to pay Paul but I wasn't telling him. 'Everything paid? Yeah, fine.' Then I got to the point, oh, oh ... so I told him we have to sit down together to see what can get paid off here.

Thinking it would provide them with an income once it was paid off, Debbie and Albert bought a second house several years back. But at this point, it is more of a concern than something that brings peace of mind. Debbie reports:

> We bought the house down the lane as an investment. We're a year and a half from the end of the mortgage.

> We don't know what to do, sell now or wait. What is the value going to be if the mine closes down"?

Debbie reports that Albert generally does not dwell on the danger of his job. If anything he makes light of that aspect of his work. She says:

> He would tell me that the mine is low and that I'd be great for it because I could just walk right under the beams. But he'd come home with a headache because he'd be banging into the roof and tripping over the tracks. He'd say it was a work pit but he could, if anything happened, walk out of that mine. Then when he got over to the other mine, that's a whole different thing altogether. When you've got to go forty-five minutes in order to get in. Then you can't walk out of that mine. But at no time did I feel threatened because he was a surveyor. He wasn't on the wall face where all the rock falls are. But these last couple of rock fall, I realized that everybody's at risk. It could come in at any point, anywhere in the mine. But it's not something when he goes out the door in the morning, I dwell on. At no time do I figure he's not coming back. Maybe because there's no history in the family … and you're busy with the children.

Debbie and Albert have never had a vacation together. As Debbie puts it:

> There's been no trips or anything, just out to Mira. Like I say, we thought that when the house was paid for, well we'd go on a trip. We thought we were on a straight path. We thought we were all set.

Most of their recreation is with other mining couples and with family at the various celebratory occasions throughout the year such as weddings, graduations, Christmas and other special events that may arise. Until she took her weekend job two years ago, Debbie taught Sunday school at her church. She cooks and bakes for the congregation's monthly fundraiser. A new church had been erected five years before we spoke and Debbie is the treasurer of the finance committee. One of the main responsibilities of the committee has been to pay down the $1.5M mortgage as

quickly as possible. Albert proudly pointed out that his wife played a critical and responsible role in the church during the last several years. While she did not bring it up herself, he advised that she was part of the team that reduced the building debt to under $300,000. Debbie is concerned about the lack of young people in the church, and the community generally. She is one of the younger members of the congregation and much of her spare time is spent on church related activities. She says: "It's important work and I enjoy it".

One option open to Debbie is to return to university for her education degree. She feels she could then get a job teaching, or even substituting. But for the moment is hesitant to take on a student loan. She says:

> I just want to see how our finances work out. Until it actually happens and you've got to call up the bank and say 'look, after twenty-five years of making these payments, what can we work out'. I think we'll be alright, you know, no qualms about it, we'll pick up part-time jobs, him coming and me going. There's always been a strong work ethic in this home.

Diane's Story - Diane Parsons' lived experience echoes Debbie's in many respects, not the least of which is in the role she occupies within the family. Diane manages the household in its fullest sense. She handles all the family finances, has contributed to the family income over the years and is a provider of emotional support to all the family members. Diane's sense of responsibility to her family extends beyond her own children to her grandchildren. When one of her daughters began a new job in the Yukon, Diane's teenage granddaughter was reluctant to make the move. Fearing that she would be unhappy and that her schoolwork would

suffer, Diane agreed to have the granddaughter move in with her and Glen. Carol Gilligan would see this sense of responsibility as part of the nurturing morality of women (19).

Diane lived in Glace Bay for all but three of her fifty-two years. She left school and married Glen at age seventeen. She reported:

> I left school in grade ten and when I was twenty-eight I went back to get my grade ten. And then, about seven years later I went back for my grade eleven and the next year for grade twelve. After that I took a couple of college courses. From then on, I've been doing something, either studying or working, until moving out here to the country two years ago.

Diane and Glen have been married for thirty-five years. She is the mother of four children. The elder three are registered nurses and the youngest is a licensed practical nurse (LPN). Diane and Glen's children came in two stages, first two girls and after an interval of six years, two boys. When the children were young Diane did not work outside the home. She says:

> That was not an option. I wanted to be there for the children. With both of us working and Glen doing shift work, it wouldn't work. No, I had to be home.

However, Diane has worked in paid employment on and off during the last thirty-five years. Early in her marriage she worked as a telephone operator. Later she and Glen purchased the assets of a local convenience store, which Diane operated for several years. And once her children were grown, she opened a small homecare business and provided care for senior citizens. She would have liked if this business had provided sufficient work to keep her children in Cape Breton. She comments however that "it did not work out that way".

It troubles Diane that all of her children have had to leave Cape Breton to find work. She indicates that leaving the Island was not their first choice. "They'd definitely prefer to be here. They would not leave Cape Breton if they had steady work here". However, she is proud of the fact that they left with a good education and in a position to secure employment elsewhere. When asked if there was any chance her sons would have followed their father into the coal mines, Diane replied:

> I always let them know I would never want them to do that. I certainly hoped they would never work in the pit. I would have been terribly disappointed if they had chosen to go underground.

Diane reported that she and Glen were married two years before Glen started work with the coal company. She knew at the time that the work was dangerous, that there was "always the possibility of things going wrong", but she says:

> I was more concerned when he was on the wall, but he only spent seven years there, about seven out of his thirty-three years. I was happy when he left the wall. Sure, it bothered me when there was a major disaster, or when someone was killed, but no matter what job you have, these things are going to happen. ... You just can't think about those things all the time. It was a steady job. It gave us a living. I'm not going to say it was an excellent living but it was a steady income. You knew at least what you were going to have every week. So, it had some positive aspects.

However, Diane feels that in general coal miners are not adequately compensated for their work. She continues:

> I don't mind telling you what Glen brings home, $518.00 a week. That's his take home pay. But for where they have to go and what they have to do, for the conditions they have to work in, that's not a lot. And the danger is always there; the gas build up, the

> severe accidents, the tragedies. You know they work in conditions that a lot of people don't work in. No, I don't really feel that their wages reflect the danger that they work in.

Although she feels that Glen's wage allowed for an acceptable standard of living, a comfortable home, and money to educate the children, Diane notes that there was never money for extras. But there were good times all the same. She tells me:

> We had fun though. I think the most fun we used to have was in the summers. Every Sunday afternoon we had great times. Remember those times, Glen? Matt and Joan, Art and Lillian, and you and I would gather all the kids together, pack a lunch and spend the whole day at the provincial park in Mira. It didn't cost us any money, just gas to get there, and we'd spend the whole day.

Other than these outings Diane says there was rarely money for a holiday. She says they had only two holidays in all the years the children were growing up. She told me how one family holiday came about:

> One summer we bought a tent trailer on time payments. We all went camping and had a great time. When the trip was over we sold the camper and paid off the bill. The vacation cost only what we spent for gas and food.

Their second holiday was to visit family in a neighbouring province. However, as the financial responsibility for their children has declined, there is now more money for non-essentials. Consequently, Diane participates in activities such as line dancing, ceramic classes and craft activities. She appreciates that she can use the products of the ceramic and craft classes for her own decorating purposes or to give as gifts to family members or friends.

Diane reports that most decisions in the home are made jointly by her and Glen. However, she advises that it is she who is familiar with the day to day finances. She offers:

> Glen wouldn' t know the first thing about paying bills. Oh yes, Glen pays all the bills, but only because I tell him they're due ... I write out the cheques and he goes with them. I look after all that. I had to make ends meet. But always, he turned over every penny. He never kept so much as ten dollars in his pocket. Every penny was just turned right over or put into the bank and I looked after everything.

Unlike Debbie, Diane's husband qualifies for early retirement, although retirement was not part of their immediate plans. With their youngest child having just moved out on his own, the Parsons were looking forward to "paying off the bills and saving for retirement" in Diane's words. Although they have no retirement savings, they had purchased several rental properties in Glace Bay over the years. The intention was that in the short term the rental income would pay the mortgages. And when Glen retired the rent from the houses they would then own would serve as a source of retirement income. But Diane murmurs wistfully:

> With no mining industry, who's going to need apartments? We've had one empty for seven months or so already. All the young people are leaving. Older people like us already have their own homes.

At the time of our interview Diane and Glen were living in a home in the country that had been purchased two years earlier. It was a beautiful home on the Mira River, intended as their place of retirement. The plan was to pay off the mortgage in six or so years. But as the keeper of the family finances Diane felt that

plan would have to change. Indicating that Goodale's announcement has had a dramatic effect on their lives she advised:

> It's devastating, that announcement devastated us. We had just bought this house, thinking Glen had until fifty-eight to sixty to work. You know, it wasn't in the plans. And now it meant that I had to start really thinking ... and make some choices and decide what I could do to alleviate what we know is coming. Because we still have the mortgage and all.

The choice Diane made was to return to the paid work force. But before that she would have to return to school. Based on the knowledge gained from her involvement in senior care, she knew that Cape Breton's aging population would require caregivers for some time into the future. She decided to enroll in the Licensed Practical Nursing course, and to finish the yearlong training before Glen retires. She felt that with their training and experience both she and Glen would find work after his retirement. Their earnings combined with Glen's pension income would enable them to maintain the mortgage payments until their house would be paid off. Her resolve however, did not conceal Diane's anxiety. She told me:

> Now I must say, I'm really nervous about this ... it's been years since I've studied and I'm not young, and I'm really scared about this, but if I can get through this - I know I'm healthy. I know I have at least five or six years, good working years left in me ... and that will certainly help ... I'm not afraid of the work, but I am afraid of the course. No it devastated us, it really did. That announcement in January devastated us.

Debbie's and Diane's narratives illustrate similarities and differences in their lives. Both of them live with the stress of being married to men who go miles underground to earn a living. Both women have spent much of their child-rearing years at home, serving as a centre of support for their husband and children. Each

has managed the family finances and was responsible for, in the words of Diane, "making ends meet". For both, vacations would come in better days ahead. For both, recreation consisted of outings and celebrations with family and friends. Now the two women were confronting a challenge that neither had anticipated. Typical of the determination that has characterized their lives, neither is content to just sit back and let the closure of the mining industry render them helpless. Debbie and Diane are actively preparing for the day there will be no pay cheques from Devco. For each, debt reduction is paramount. Diane has embraced skills training as a means of preserving her family's quality of life. In spite of her fears, she comments: "I can't just sit back and let it all go". Debbie considers a return to university, while at the same time she continues to draw a quiet strength from her church work. Nodding towards Debbie, Albert readily acknowledges that he is coping with the uncertainty of the future "with the support of that good woman, that strong woman across the table".

Anxiety and uncertainty are a part of life for miners the world over (Kingsolver, Nash, Seitz). In her discussion of the mining town of Timmins, Ontario, Nancy Forrestell suggests that the stress miners' wives live with instills in them a determination to confront adversity. This resolve is evident in the attitude and approaches of Debbie and Diane. Others (Quinn, Romain and Withers) note the importance of family in making a successful readjustment to life after lay-off. Of mine closures in Elliot Lake, Ontario, Peggy Quinn writes: " ... people who have supportive families ... see major change as a challenge and a learning experience, and move quickly from being in denial and angry about the situation to looking for

options for their future" (39). While I believe that at the time of our interviews Albert and Glen had not yet moved beyond anger, they were proud of and drew comfort from the support of wives whose refusal to dwell on the past freed them to map out a new future for their families.

As Jordan and Kalčik argue in their introduction to Women's Folklore, Women's Culture, women are not always victims. They suggest: "One assumption that a thoughtful examination of women's culture disproves is that women are necessarily powerless ... that many women communicate a sense of control over their worlds ... " (xii). In the face of the hegemonic processes that threaten to disrupt their environments, and working within the parameters of their private domains, Debbie and Diane register their resistance by reorganizing their lives, restructuring their priorities, and proceeding with the business of their daily lives.

Public Forms of Resistance

Bev's and Edna's Story - The other two women I interviewed have taken a more public line of resistance to the federal withdrawal from the coal industry. Because of constraints on their time Edna Budden and Bev Brown participated in a joint interview at Edna's home in Glace Bay. As well, previous commitments meant that Bev had to leave half way through the two hour interview.

Bev and Edna did not know each another prior to Ralph Goodale's announcement. Independently of one another, each had called the union office. Edna relates:

> I went to the Delta thinking it was going to be good news and I was totally devastated by what Ralph

> Goodale had to say. In my heart I was devastated. I called the union, and so did Bev. They gave me her number and we met the next day. That was the start of it.

Both women contend they found strength in one another to follow through on what each felt to be a bad deal for coal miners. Each indicated that speaking to a crowd is not part of their experience, that it would not generally be an easy task. But fear was overtaken this time by a stronger emotion. Bev states:

> I could not stand by and let this happen to my family ... I met up with Edna who had the same maternal instinct to protect her family ... we knew it was right to fight for this. All we needed was the support of each other to go as co-founders of United Families.

Bev and Edna share a common history in that not only are they married to coal miners, but each is the daughter and granddaughter of a coal miner. Each of these women told me they were "born into it, coal mining is in our blood". Bev's father began work underground at age twelve, and worked forty-eight years as a coal miner. He died with silicosis, often referred to as 'miners' lung' or 'black lung', a few years before this most recent coal industry crisis.

Edna's grandfather went underground at age ten. She grew up in a company house and walked to school through the pit yard. She says "pit talk" has always been part of her life, at home, at play, and even today "when all the family is together, it's pit talk". Besides their coalmining husbands, both women have other family members who are also coal miners. Edna says this is "not just for ourselves. We're doing this for the all miners and their families".

Bev's husband Rick and Edna's husband James are not eligible for retirement pensions. At age forty-six, Edna's husband worked twenty-one years as a coal

miner, while Bev's husband worked twenty-three years underground. However, James and Rick do qualify for the enhanced severance package. This package is based on a formula of four weeks pay for each year with Devco. Bev and Edna anticipate that after taxes are paid their husbands will have approximately $30,000. with which to start a new life. Bev spoke for both of them when she said: "It is a package of no jobs, no future, no dignity ... it is unjust, morally wrong, and unacceptable."

Bev and Edna are mothers to two children. At the time of the interviews Edna was not employed outside the home, while Bev worked for a local community service agency. Less concerned with talking about the day to day roles within their families, Edna and Bev immediately moved the conversation to their involvement with United Families, the group they founded in the weeks following Goodale's announcement. The first order of business for United Families was the organization of a rally to demonstrate support for miners and their families. They reported that seventeen days after the January announcement more than two thousand people turned out for the Valentine's Day rally. Among the attendees, a host of people including union officials, clergy, and local musicians expressed their support of, and appreciation to, coal miners and their families. Those who spoke expressed rage at Goodale's announcement and denounced the federal government's actions as cruel and inhumane.

Since its inception, Bev and Edna worked tirelessly under the banner of United Families. By the time of our meeting, some seven months after the announcement, rarely a day passed that they did not meet or speak with one another.

They were relentless about driving home the message that they spoke for Cape Breton families. They were proud to know that the community backed their efforts. In Edna's words they had "a tremendous level of community support". She states:

> People will come up and tap you on the arm ... I've had calls from miners in Cheticamp ... No, it's out there on the street and people will stop you and they'll say, 'look, you're doing a great job. Keep it up. We're very supportive'. And of course, like Bev and I and the other women, particularly Bev and I because we're so close, we're a constant source of support for one another. Like if one is down the other will pick them up.

The two women travel to Halifax and to Ottawa to meet with anyone they feel to be in a position to advance their cause. They indicated that their numerous trips to the provincial and federal capitals are financed, for the most part, by donations from private individuals and the local business community. Over the course of seven months Edna and Bev met with the Premier of Nova Scotia, the Minister responsible for Nova Scotia, (at the time Nova Scotia did not have an elected federal member and Senator Al Graham was designated the federally responsible person); the Natural Resources Minister, the Finance Minister, and Prime Minister Jean Chretien. But one of the most memorable meetings was with the National Women's Caucus in Halifax. They had taken the book that contained all their notes and information. Edna spoke about it first:

> It was really funny what happened because we have this book. Usually all our meetings have been private, you know, sit with them, go through everything with them and whatnot. We were told this was going to be a round table discussion, so of course, I pictured the same thing. And we got there, and all the women, you know, the Cabinet Ministers were present, and all the Senators, the room was full. And there were

> professors, and the heads of organizations. I mean you're talking **very, very**, well educated people. And I'm sitting there, and they of course have done this before. And they have their paper, you know, just prepared just so, in their hand … . and I'm sitting there thinking, Lord, what am I going to do? And there's two mikes set up in the middle of the floor. … Now I don't usually get rattled. I'm sitting there looking at my book saying to myself, now I can't flip through the pages because that'll look silly. What am I going to do? How am I going to get my name off this list? Right. So anyway, I'm sitting there and she's laughing (nodding to Bev) and she says, you'll be alright. So anyway, I got up.

Bev continues:

> I said, Edna, I can't believe you're nervous because you're never nervous. I'm the nervous one. … And she said to me, yeah, but … and I said, but Edna, you know it all. You know it all. Look, you don't even have to look in the book. You know it all. You know it all. That was **some** wicked. I mean, her best speech … it was just, I'm telling you, it would blow you away. It was about the families. … she gave it right from the heart. It was about the children. I remember one thing she said, you know. … it comes down to who's going to suffer the most. It was about the children; they don't have a voice; they don't have a vote. I mean, this is why we're here. We're fighting not just, it's not us. It's about our children … it's about the community. She just hit it right on and it was right from the heart. … I had goose bumps because it was right from the heart. I could see there was people in the room who teared up.

After the meeting Budden was approached by one of the Caucus members who reported that the presentation was one of the most moving the Caucus member had ever heard. The more involved in the issue they became, the more Edna and Bev realized they needed to know. Bev advised they did all their own research. A

matter of prime importance to them was to identify ways in which the $111 million adjustment package could be more equitably distributed. Edna explained one option:

> The Public Service Superannuation Plan is a retirement plan that most government employees pay into. So Devco is an eligible corporation under the Public Servants Superannuation Act. There are a handful of people in Devco who have this plan. It is the Cadillac of plans, right. So looking and researching into that, when I looked in the book and whatnot, I saw whereby if you were employed with a corporation that was listed as an eligible corporation under the Act, you could elect to buy back service ... what we call a reciprocal transfer agreement whereby Treasury Board will allow you to take an existing pension plan from the company you're with and transfer pension credits over towards buying back services in the Public Service Plan which Devco has in place. ... how much money it would take to buy back the rest of their service, I don't know what the figure would be. I asked them to provide the actuaries to figure it out.

The next step of the plan was to create a bridge program that would benefit those workers who fell short of a retirement package by a few years only. Edna continues:

> So then what I suggested was the possibility of creating a bridge program to bridge the rest of the workers to age fifty, you see? What they would get at the end of the day would be a retirement that would be life time because the one they have is only to age sixty-five. ... So I said they would have medical benefits. They would have spousal benefits. ... it was a vision of a possibility. I don't know if it's going to be feasible but I asked them to do the work and they agreed to do it. So that was another option. So I guess basically it was doing research and grasping at everything you could come up with as a solution for these families. And not forgetting the fact too, that we need to keep jobs here also.

Both women fear for the future of Cape Breton. On the one hand they acknowledge the need for jobs, but on the other hand they question the intent of non-Islanders who may purchase the mine earmarked for sale. Edna observes:

> We have to stop people from coming in and reaping the benefits and then leaving. I think we have to help ourselves too, and take a different outlook here and start looking to get our piece of the pie and build something here, build a future for our children … because we've got huge resources … We have to take a whole turn around here in Cape Breton. We've been too complacent. We need to be more vocal, to push for more … for our children, for our families.

Edna and Bev were convinced of the immorality of the Devco financial package. And while they admit they were novices with much to learn, neither of them would allow inexperience to keep them from doing what they felt compelled to do. Brown noted:

> You know, it's a big thing just to come from Cape Breton, to go into Ottawa to deal with politicians, we didn't know anything about these people, but we always start off by saying - we're two miners wives, we're not professionals, just two people who need help … this is only about our families, it's about our lives, it's about the economy of Cape Breton.

When asked what drives her, Edna Budden responded:

> In my heart I was devastated, and it started when I looked at my husband. I watched him for twenty-one years going underground. It's a dangerous job, and uh, he did it to provide for his family and always looked forward to the day of his retirement and when it was only four years away, all of a sudden they're going to take that away from him, the ability to provide for his family. And when they hurt him, they hurt me.

Wiping tears from her eyes and in a voice breaking with emotion, Edna told me about losing a dear friend in the number twenty-six mine disaster. She stated:

> I've lived through the number twenty-six mine explosion. I lost someone very, very dear to me. He was only two years older than me. You know, he stood for me when I got married. We went out together. We played together. And then we all went to the burn unit in Halifax and I didn't recognize him. You know, he lost his life in a coal mine and I think that's had just a tremendous effect on me. It's something you never, ever forget. So you live with that and even after, like, even my own husband, if he's late ... I panic. So that just gives you all the more ... And then your children are the big thing.

Bev agrees that the suffering of family members is part of what gives her strength. She advises:

> Sometimes I get down, but I'll see my husband's face. And I'll think of my father who's gone, and of his sons, all coal miners, and all of the families, and I know why I'm doing this.

Of the social costs of the job losses Budden notes:

> There's a whole lot involved. There's dignity, when your job is gone and your income is gone, your dignity is gone. There'll be all kinds of problems within the family unit, an increase in the problem of alcoholism, maybe violence, homes breaking up, a whole multitude of problems. The government is going to end up paying the cost of that anyway. We're going to lose everything if we don't win this battle.

Others would agree with Budden on the social impact and costs of this government initiative (Dail, Seitz). Without doubt, Bev and Edna have good reason to be concerned about the wider implications of the end of an industry that sustained their community for almost a hundred years. Of mine closures in Elliot Lake, Ontario, Mawhiney and Pitblado found that: " ... mass layoffs directly or indirectly affected every person in the city in one way or another, and undermined the viability of the community as well" (16).

In the traditional act of telling their stories, Edna Budden and Bev Brown's acts of resistance have been public and political. They represent a departure from the more quiet forms of resistance undertaken by Debbie and Diane. Edna and Bev were convinced, when I spoke with them, that their message to the power brokers in Ottawa had been heard. That did not happen. Two years after the original announcement of privatization and/or closure the federal government proceeded as planned. One mine closed in late 1999. Having failed to secure a buyer, the second mine closed in the fall of 2001.

Their efforts were not wasted, however. In June 2000 a federal arbitrator ruled that years of service, not age (as noted earlier, regardless of years of service a miner had to be at least fifty years of age to be eligible for a pension) would be the determinant of eligibility. Any miner with twenty-five years of service would qualify for a pension to age sixty-five. This ruling awarded pensions to an additional two hundred and forty-six miners. The arbitrator also established that all other miners be awarded severance packages of one month's pay for each year of service with the corporation. Much of the credit for securing the enhanced settlement package goes to United Families. An opposition Member of the Legislative Assembly applauded them saying:

> The workers and their families should be proud of themselves for achieving this victory through hard work and determination ... their achievement came despite great odds ... they were put through eighteen months of inexcusable agony to end up back where they should have started ... these families owe no debt of gratitude to anybody but themselves (Cape Breton Post 19).

Of the arbitration ruling Budden declared: "We fought the good battle with our hearts and souls and we're not through ... we're disappointed that there's still so many left out" (Halifax Herald A1). The arbitrator's decision made little difference for the families of the women profiled in this chapter. Diane's husband, Glen took his retirement package with the closure of the first mine in 1999. Debbie's husband, Albert, Edna's husband, James and Bev's husband, Rick were all awarded severance packages.

Although each woman experienced the announcement of mine closure in a way that was unique to her family's situation, their narratives nevertheless reflect some commonalities. In the next chapter I offer a closer analysis of the women's narratives, identifying emerging themes in their stories.

Chapter Four

Caring for Family and Community Resistance

Introduction

On reviewing the narratives of the women who participated in this study two issues stand out. The first is care. The study participants cared not only about how their families would be affected by the loss of the major family income, but as well, they cared about how the government's withdrawal from the coal industry would impact the whole community. Here I will look at their concern for others within the context of feminist writing on women's ethic of care.

The second theme is that of resistance/empowerment. The experiences of two scholars, Thomas Dunk and Angela Trethewey, illustrate that empowerment is often the result of value-based resistance. In this chapter I will examine the views of these authors and the actions of the women I interviewed. I will also explore the issue of resistance that is public and political. And finally, in this chapter I will consider Paulo Friere's notion of the transforming power of the word.

A Feminist Perspective on Care

As illustrated in chapter two, from beginning to end, the operation of Cape Breton's coalmines was motivated by the Company's emphasis on profit over people. Feminist Angela Miles refers to such an approach as 'bottom-line thinking', which she says is reflective of a neo-liberal agenda. Miles argues that a neo-liberal agenda is anathema to a female concept of humanity that focuses on nurturance and care. In this section, the concept of care will be considered in light of

work of two writers, Marjorie DeVault and Mechthild Hart.

In her study Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work, Marjorie DeVault argues that the family, as a social construct, is maintained by the caring work of women. She reminds the reader that the family, as it is presently known, is the result of nineteenth century industrialization which assigned men to the public role of breadwinner and women to the private space of home. Within the home women turned wages into the goods and services needed to maintain the household. DeVault examines women's caring work within the context of family feeding.

She identifies two separate, yet indivisible, components that make up feeding work. The first component refers to 'caring for, or tending' which consists of the physical activities associated with the creation of the meal. For example, purchasing the ingredients, cooking, serving the meal, and cleaning up. She reports that the second component of feeding work is not visible to the observer because it is the 'thought work' that goes into providing family meals (228). Thought work implies 'caring about', and speaks to the emotional and personal aspect of the activity. Thought work takes into consideration the food preferences of individual family members, monitoring of food supplies, awareness of product availability at the supermarkets, and ensuring that the schedules of all family members intersect at meal time.

Like others before her (Chodorow, Gilligan, Belenky), DeVault advises that from an early age women are encouraged to attend to others and care for them. She writes:

> ... children observe their mothers at work in the household, and girls are often recruited into womanly activities based on the principles of responsibility and attention; when they become mothers themselves these lessons are reinforced through the urgency and immediacy of infants' needs, as well as through textual instructions for mothers (citing Griffith and Smith 1987) (119).

Care, however, is not only confined to feeding work. DeVault defines care as 'doing for others' and includes all the household activities contributing to the creation of family. The author comments that for generations women's caring work has sustained life and community and has been a source of pride and satisfaction for women. Believing that caring has less to do with nature (Gilligan), DeVault argues that women's caring work results from the gendered structure of society. She states:

> Women learn to "care" because the production of a "family" as a socially organized material setting requires particular kinds of coordinative and maintenance activities. Women are not the only ones who can perform these activities, but the concept of "family" (maintained over time in its shifting forms by a variety of interlocking social discourses) incorporates a strong and relatively enduring association of caring activity with the woman's position in the household ("wife" or "mother") (12).

Mechthild Hart also writes about women's caring work. Writing as an adult educator, Hart focuses on learning and work situations that represent women's reality. Her discussion is framed within the context of the "systems versus the lifeworld". She points out that the systems world refers to Habermas' concept of the socio-economic system, wherein employment and wages are provided in exchange for being a loyal and productive employee. The lifeworld, on the other hand, values reflective discourse, responsibility, and interpersonal relationships and

provides an environment conducive to the holistic development of the whole person. In the lifeworld loyalty and reward are replaced by responsibility and thoughtful action.

Hart locates the caring work of women, which she calls "motherwork", in the lifeworld. She advises, however, that as workplaces move from an industrial to an information services model the interactive and facilitative leadership style of women are increasingly valued. She states:

> Feminine qualities are described as being useful for new approaches to management, where workers' feelings are now being taken into consideration as well, and where women's special training in tact, empathy, and emotional expressiveness can be harnessed for successful management (116).

The special training Hart refers to is likely that aspect of care, which DeVault calls 'thought work', and which Hart would subsume under 'motherwork'. Viewing motherwork as "profoundly productive" in that it sustains and preserves life, Hart fears that the empathetic and caring approach of women will be compromised when tied to the bottom line thinking of the corporate world. As a way of countering that possibility Hart proposes to redefine work so that it is organized around a lifeworld model wherein nurturance and care become the prime focus for all workers (119). She argues that motherwork would then be equally valued by women and men, and the burden of care for others will cease to be a solely female responsibility. While her approach differs from DeVault's, Hart's argument stresses that caring is gendered and is women's work.

The Caring Work of Four Cape Breton Women

The narratives of the women I interviewed are shot through with language that embodies care as 'thought work' or 'motherwork'. For example, when I questioned Debbie about her future, she advised she would love to be a schoolteacher and work with children but would first have to finish her education degree. However, her children's need for nurturance and care took precedence over her own needs. Debbie states: "Mainly my concern is always toward the children. I've still got that one daughter there. It's going to be a six-year road ahead of her. She wants physiotherapy. So I can't even think of myself". Working from a lifeworld perspective, Debbie's first priority is her children. With her two older children working in Alberta, her present focus is to see the youngest child through university.

Debbie is proud of the home she and Albert have made for their family. It radiates warmth and security. Built by her grandfather, the house provides a physical connection to her roots. As we looked at graduation pictures of her three children and a family portrait Debbie advises that the youngest girl has told her: "Don't ever sell this house. I may move away, but this is my house, you know". Recognizing that: "they still want their roots here", Debbie's desire to keep their Cape Breton home is strong. The following comment illustrates how her lifeworld perspective conditions her thoughts, her words, and her actions: "You're trying to keep it together because you don't want to let the kids know you're a wreck. ... We'll just have to work something out". Working something out is what Debbie has always done.

Like Debbie, Diane's attitude also speaks to the personal and emotional aspect of care. Operating from a lifeworld perspective she lived with the hope that her sons would never work in the coal mines. While she had grown accustomed to not dwelling on the danger associated with Glen's work, Diane says that would not be the case with her sons. She advises: "I would have been terribly disappointed if they had chosen to go underground. "I tell you … I'd be thinking about it all the time. The danger is always there, the gas build up, the severe accidents, tragedies … ".

Diane's lifeworld perspective is not confined to her immediate family. Her attitude of nurturance and care is also demonstrated in the role she plays in the lives of her grandchildren. On various occasions, depending on the circumstances of their parents, all their grandchildren have spent blocks of time with Diane and Glen. The most recent instance occurred when she opened her home to her granddaughter, when the girl's mother accepted temporary out-of-province employment. That this offer meant relinquishing independence acquired after many years of childrearing was not an issue. Diane's orientation to life is the well-being of her family and just as she was "there for her children", she also feels the need to "be there" for her grandchildren.

As earlier noted, the interview with Bev and Edna focused less on their home life and more on their work with the group they founded shortly after Ralph Goodale's announcement. Even within that context however there is no doubt that care and responsibility toward family (and community) were the attitudes that directed their actions. Both women expressed an inability to "stand by and let this

happen to my family". Notwithstanding that the notion of taking the stage and speaking publicly was foreign to their experience, the two women did so because they felt compelled to do it "for the children, for the families". Bev's comment: "The yearning to go out and do something was so strong, something I never felt in my life", speaks to an orientation of care that dictates she do whatever is required to protect her family. It is notable that Edna talks about her own mother as "a strong women who worked her fingers to the bone and fought tooth and nail for her kids". It thus seems to be that Edna's caring work is in keeping with what DeVault tells us about girls learning from their mothers and being recruited at a young age into womanly activities based on the principles of responsibility and attention (119).

On numerous occasions during their interview Bev and Edna spoke with sadness and regret about the effect of the closure announcement on their husbands. Neither man was actively planning retirement at the time of the decision to downsize/close the mines. According to the terms and conditions of the federal package neither man was eligible for retirement benefits. With no prospects, the future looked bleak to both men. As she spoke about her husband's predicament Edna's discourse is the embodiment of care: "I was devastated and it started when I looked at my husband. I watched him for twenty-one years … he … always looked forward to the day of his retirement, and all of a sudden they're going to take that away from him … when they hurt him, they hurt me". Bev, as well, comments: "Sometimes I get down, but I'll see my husband's face … and I know why I'm doing this". She is clearly speaking to a motivation that is reflective of women's caring work.

Gripped by concern for the men they love and care for the well being of their families Bev and Edna moved beyond their fear of the public arena and brought the Devco issue to the national stage. In the months following the closure announcement they demonstrated the effort and skill that caring work requires (DeVault 228). Their challenge was to find ways of publicly proclaiming that the Devco package was in Bev's words: "...a package of no jobs, no future, no dignity ... unjust, morally wrong, and unacceptable". Working from an ethic of care, the women found the strength to resist.

Private Acts of Resistance

Control over the conditions of one's life is something to which most individuals aspire. It is an aspiration, however, that is not easily achieved. Nevertheless, as Thomas Dunk points out in his study of male working class culture in Northern Ontario, people are rarely duped into thinking they possess more power than they do. He suggests that people understand their position within the existing social structure but at the same time, they find ways of registering their resistance to their subordination (152). This, Dunk claims, enables them to create a meaningful world for themselves.

Dunk's study focuses on twenty-one young men, referred to as "The Boys". He follows their lives, particularly their recreational lives, over a two-year period. He came to see that, for The Boys, the game of lob-ball is a signifying practice[13] through which they express their resistance to the values of the dominant culture.

[13] Scott would refer to lob-ball as a form of disguised resistance or 'infrapolitics' (19).

Dunk identifies those values as individualism, self-control, competition, and intellectualism. Through lob-ball, however, The Boys celebrate the values of group activity, equality, reciprocity, friendship and fun, and common sense. By celebrating the values central to their identity The Boys resist their subordination and fuel their own empowerment. Dunk writes: "The Boys actively resist their subordination by creating another system of meaning. In this sense, they become cultural "bricoleurs", creating a meaningful universe in which they are morally and intellectually dominant" (159).

Like Dunk, Angela Trethewey also suggests that empowerment through resistance can contribute to a sense of control over the conditions of one's life (152). In her article "Resistance, Identity, and Empowerment: A Postmodern Feminist Analysis of Clients in a Human Services Organization", Angela Trethewey reports on her study of a Women's Social Service Organization. In particular, Trethewey observes the interactions of Fern, a social worker, and her female clients. The clients are low-income single mothers, who are receiving education and job training. One client, Allyson, refuses to comply with organizational practices she feels have no bearing on her social service entitlement. Allyson ultimately succeeds in convincing Fern that certain areas of inquiry are intrusive and unnecessary. Trethewey writes:

> Allyson's resistance had the effect of shifting the power dynamics to reflect the client's own need for privacy, respect, and dignity. Allyson let her social worker know that, despite her dependence on Fern for social and material support, she still maintained control over most areas of her own life. In this instance, Allyson leveled the playing field by relating to Fern not as a subordinate or as a pathologized

> client, but as an equal. She did not allow her social worker to create the rules for interaction. Allyson made and played by her own discursive rules. She did not treat her social worker with disdain or disrespect; rather, she demanded from Fern the kind of behavior that she would expect from friends and peers. Allyson's resistance helped redefine the client-social worker relationship as one that was more egalitarian (297).

Trethewey points out that, as a result of Allyson's resistance strategies, Fern's behavior with all her clients was transformed. Subsequent to the change, clients were sufficiently empowered to voice their desire for an organizationally-sponsored, client-operated mentoring program that would enable clients to serve as a source of information and support for one another. Such a program was eventually put in place. Contending that acts of resistance empower people, Trethewey states:

> Engaging in various forms of resistance enabled individual clients to transform organizational practices, organizational relationships, and their identities. Individual acts of resistance, … empower individual actors (299).

After challenging the practices at the women's organization and after effecting significant change within the organization, clients reported an increased self-esteem and a greater sense of personal power. Further, clients indicated that their acts of resistance at the Centre allowed them to function more effectively in most aspects of their daily life. Trethewey concludes that resistance leads to empowerment, and that empowerment "involves … one's demonstrated power to influence … the conditions and contexts of daily existence" (299).

It was noted in chapter three that Debbie's and Diane's empowerment resulted from acts of resistance that were private and family-focused. In keeping

with Dunk's and Trethewey's findings, I believe both women understood their place within Cape Breton's social and political structure. That is, they understood that they and their families were at the mercy of the federal government. They had no choice but to live with the decision that the coal mines would close. However, their acceptance of the situation was tempered by their 'take charge' attitude. That attitude enabled Debbie, for example, to focus on eliminating as much debt as possible while Albert still had his Devco income. That attitude ensured that, with or without a coal mining job, Debbie was determined that the youngest child would secure a university education. That attitude allowed her to try to hide the turmoil of her emotions from her children and to attempt to shield them from her personal anxiety. Finally Debbie's 'take charge' attitude gave her the confidence to say: " We'll be alright ... we'll pick up part-time jobs; we'll ... work something out; there's a strong work ethic in this home".

Diane's 'take charge' attitude also enabled her to plan for a future beyond Devco. Faced with the possibility of losing all they had worked for, Diane refused to "sit back and let it all go". In spite of much apprehension, she embarked on a retraining program with the hope of supplementing the family income. Acting, despite her fear, she admitted: "I wouldn't have done it if this announcement hadn't come down. I would not have done it". Drawing on values of courage, determination, hard work, and commitment to family, Diane too operated from a position of strength as she and Glen planned their life after Devco. By refusing to see themselves as powerless in the face of changes imposed on them, Debbie and

Diane were able to make every effort to maintain control over the conditions of their lives.

Public Acts of Resistance

Debbie and Diane worked within the parameters of their personal lives to effect the changes that would see them through life after Devco. Bev and Edna, on the other hand, moved beyond the confines of family and used the political process as the means through which they expressed their resistance to downsizing/closure of the coal mines.

In the months following Goodale's announcement, they questioned the morality of the government's financial package. Challenging politicians to be more just in their treatment of the miners, Bev and Edna researched the options and put forth several suggestions for developing a more equitable severance package. At the time of our meeting Bev and Edna were convinced that they had been heard by the politicians. However, in the weeks and months to follow they would realize a different conclusion as their pursuit of justice for Cape Breton coal miners forced them to confront a host of political, technocratic, and educational issues.

A Journey of Faith

Bev and Edna started their journey with a faith in the political process. They believed that once politicians understood the impact mass lay-offs would have on families and the community, they would be willing to reconsider the financial package offered to coal miners. During my interview with them, Edna

enthusiastically reported that in their meeting with then Finance Minister Paul Martin, he stated: "I know who you are and I think you are just wonderful, what you're doing and how you're doing it". He promised them that although Ralph Goodale held the Natural Resources portfolio, he would speak with Goodale the following week. Edna continued: "It was a sense of support I got from Paul Martin. It's something I'll always remember, his attitude, his demeanor – very caring. It just lifted some of the stress from our shoulders". Both women reported an equally satisfying rapport with most of the elected officials they met. Bev informed me: "You could feel it this time. There was a will to help us".

However, as Doug House advises it takes more than political will to change government decisions and policies. Making Newfoundlanders more aware of the power dynamics within government is one of the reasons Doug House wrote Against The Tide: Battling For Economic Renewal in Newfoundland and Labrador. Having served as the chair of Newfoundland and Labrador's Economic Recovery Commission for all of its seven years (1989-1996), House states one of the objectives of his book as being: "to provide an "inside story" about the workings of one Canadian provincial government" (x). Anxious that the economy of his province be renewed, House had, at the request of (then) Premier Brian Peckford, headed the 1985 Royal Commission on Employment and Unemployment. The final report of that Royal Commission entitled, Building On Our Strengths, called for a new future for post-industrial Newfoundland and Labrador. That future would include information technology, small scale enterprises, decentralized decision making, and a new role for government in the area of economic development. The

report was well received by both the community and by elected officials. It was not, however, favourably received by the bureaucrats within Peckford's Conservative government. Shortly after the release of the report in 1986 the Liberals came to power in Newfoundland and Labrador. At the invitation of the new Premier, Clyde Wells, House was seconded from Memorial University of Newfoundland to head the Economic Recovery Commission, the outgrowth of Building On Our Strengths.

Against The Tide documents the frustrations encountered as House and his fellow members on the Recovery Commission tried to implement those recommendations of the 1985 Royal Commission that had been approved by the government. Their efforts were thwarted over and over again by the provincial bureaucracy, a powerful group of senior public servants who House referred to as the "Old Guard" (x). He reported that the bureaucracy zapped one's energy and diverted one's focus from the task at hand (59). House reports:

> The provincial bureaucracy ... is a control apparatus that systematically resists change, undermines the innovative efforts of agencies such as the ERC, and is highly successful at inducing successive political elites (premiers and ministers), mainly unwittingly, to support its approach ... the Old Guard is a powerful conservative force that perpetuates dependency (x).

Although House grants that he came to respect many of the provincial public servants he worked with during his seven years with the Economy Recovery Commission, he is nevertheless, emphatic that the bureaucratic system must change. He writes: "Many of the changes that the commission advocated threatened to upset the established order and control system within the bureaucracy" (93). He further notes: "It is my view ... that the bureaucratic control system that they operate, and

the key role that the Old Guard play in perpetuating that system, are serious impediments to economic development in Newfoundland and Labrador. They have to be changed" (xi).

While Doug House's story is a story about the command and control system that is operative within one provincial government, it is unlikely that such a story is peculiar to Newfoundland and Labrador. While the politicians Bev and Edna spoke with were moved by their story, they are but one piece of the political process. It is possible that other pieces of the political process included other versions of the "old guard" which were destined to mitigate against anything but further economic dependency and oppression.

Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, suggests that the fundamental struggle which characterizes history is the humanization and dehumanization of the person. He notes that humanization is the vocation and the destiny of the person and dehumanization results from oppression. Seeing oppression as the treatment of one person by another as an object, Freire writes:

> The oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination. The earth, property, production, the creations of people, people themselves, time – everything is reduced to the status of objects at its disposal (44).

Freire identifies the key process underlying oppression as prescription, that process wherein the thoughts, behaviour, and attitudes appropriate for one person are decided by another. He observes:

> Every prescription represents the imposition of one individual's choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed into one that

> transforms with the prescriber's consciousness. Thus, the behaviour of the oppressed is a prescribed behaviour, following as it does the guidelines of the oppressor (31).

Through prescription, an oppressed way of being becomes part of the consciousness of the oppressed. The notion of freedom or the prospect of assuming personal responsibility becomes something to be feared. Freire states: "The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and to replace it with autonomy and responsibility" (31). The process by which freedom is gained, according to Freire, is through consciousness raising, or what he calls *conscientizacao*, within which is embodied the notion of dialogue. For him the essence of dialogue is the *word,* which consists of two components, reflection and action. Freire writes:

> But the word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible; accordingly we must seek its constitutive elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis.[14] Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world (75).[15]

For Freire, without reflection, or alternately without action, the word is inauthentic and anathema to dialogue (76-77). Of the significance of dialogue, Freire states:

> Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence, dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this

[14] Friere includes a footnote here which I have added in an appendix.
[15] ibid.

> naming - between those who deny other men the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak their word has been denied them. ... If it is in speaking their word that men, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as men (75-76).

Based on the above noted features of Freire's thought, in naming the problems inherent in the financial package for the Cape Breton coal miners as "unjust, morally wrong, and unacceptable", Bev and Edna refused to be objectified. They named their world and they sought to transform it through the process of dialogue. Freire identifies five elements that are essential for authentic dialogue. These elements include a profound love for the world and for people, humility, an intense faith in humankind, hope, and critical thinking (77-81). The dialogue in which Bev and Edna engaged embody these characteristics in that their message was one of commitment to their husbands, their families, and to their communities; their message was delivered in a spirit of humility and on their faith that there was a heart in Ottawa; and they lived in the hope that the fruits of their critical thought would lead to a just ending to the Cape Breton coal miners' way of life.

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the two notable themes that emerged from the narratives of the participants. These themes were the concept of care, and the notion of resistance/empowerment. Although they write about care from a different perspective, Marjorie DeVault and Mechthild Hart each argue that caring work is women's work. Both authors agree that women's work is life sustaining and profoundly productive. Consistent with the theories of DeVault and

Hart, the narratives collected for this thesis exemplify a caring perspective. It is evident from the narratives that for the participants, families came first.

The second theme considered is the concept of resistance/empowerment. Thomas Dunk suggests that marginalized people understand their place in the social hierarchy, but that they resist their subordination by creating new systems of meaning. Angela Trethewey illustrates how the resistance of one group of marginalized women secured organizational change. The narratives in this study provide a portrait of four women who are attempting to establish a course of action that minimizes the effect of mine closure on their families. Essentially they are resisting subordination and creating a system of meaning that infers new possibilities.

In the final chapter I present the conclusions of this study, propose suggestions for future research, and present some final observations.

Chapter Five

Summary and Conclusions

Three major conclusions emerge from this research project. In this concluding chapter I reflect on these and I propose some possibilities for future research.

The three conclusions I identify as emerging from this study include: 1. Contrary to the expectations of the dominant culture the working people directly affected by the closure of the coalmines have a deep and intelligent understanding about their new economic circumstances and challenges. 2. Narrative provides an appropriate means to honour the understandings and insights of working people and vernacular theorists, and 3. This research was biased and strengthened by a trinity of femininity that characterized the study.

This research project identifies a number of scholars who enable us to discover and reevaluate the validity of the theoretical understanding and perspective of people outside the traditional academy. McLaughin, for example, persuasively argues that if touched by an intensely local issue, individuals may begin the process of constructing fundamental theoretical questions. He points out that the process Paulo Freire calls 'Praxis' serves to create not academic theorists but rather vernacular theorists and that the distinction between the two has more to do with status and style than with validity.

Edna Budden most obviously presented herself as a vernacular theorist. Her comments and reflections served to describe the intense nature of this local issue, an

issue that touches her family and her community. And these are two institutions for which she deeply cares. Thus motivated by her caring, her resistance, or journey, or Praxis is then fueled by her growing understanding about the unfair prescription prescribed for her family and community by the Government of Canada. For this author, Budden's ever growing intellectual understanding was as compelling as was her courage inspiring.

As has been noted earlier in this research project, our purpose was to better understand the issues and outcomes pertinent to the closure of the coal fields on Cape Breton Island. Furthermore, my particular interest was the experiences and perspectives of people directly affected by the decision to close the coal fields, most particularly the experiences of four women married to coalminers. A major challenge underlying this particular research interest is that of how to gather and present data relevant to this perspective. In the world of academia, academics have at their disposal an array of practices that enable them to present their findings and their claims. For example, economists write and publish theories relevant to economic issues. Sociologists write and publish papers relevant to social concerns. But these practices are not available to the individuals who are the focus of this paper. The practice of narrative, however, as described by, among others noted in this work, Degh, Ward, Stahl, and Crain did provide both a useful and valid tool for uncovering and presenting the data. Furthermore, and congruent with McLaughlin's description of the reliability and the validity of vernacular theory, narrative proved to be a useful instrument for uncovering the insights, reflections, and conclusions of some of these Glace Bay based vernacular theorists.

The fact of gender pervades most of the work of this research project. I am a woman, the research participants were all women, and finally the element, the foundation, or the primary motive driving the participants on their respective journeys was that particularly feminine issue of caring. These three factors are fundamental to the texture and the structure of this entire research project. Undoubtedly this research project is shaped by a female-centred perspective.

Implications For Future Research

This work, like any research effort, invariably leads to a host of other questions and research possibilities. For example, it would be interesting to have the same research project undertaken by someone who has no connection to Cape Breton. It would be valuable, as well, to have this topic examined from the point of view of the men involved in this event. I would also be curious to know how the children of these couples have been impacted by the closure of the coal industry. And it would be intriguing to know, perhaps five years after the fact of mine closure, the particular ways in which the lives of these women have changed.

Another area that begs inquiry relates to a particular characteristic of this Cape Breton community. As the research for this study proceeded, and the writing of the thesis unfolded, I became more intrigued by the continuing courage and perseverance of this community. This spirit was particularly strong during the most recent crisis: the closure of the coalmines. An intellectual pursuit into the factors underlying this historic practice of resiliency could lead to a deeper understanding of the Cape Breton community.

These suggestions by no means exhaust the possibilities for inquiry, but rather are examples of issues that await exploration.

A Final Reflection

Before completing this research project, and in spite of many courses undertaken, I still had a somewhat limited understanding about the discipline of folklore. At some level I had internalized the notion that folklore was the study of people, what they did and how they did it, that was passed down through word of mouth. Folklore was about tradition. It was about group communication. At the same time there was this sense of folklore as being a marginalized field of focus and study that required on-going explanation. Thus at the outset of this thesis I devoted much time and attention to the exercise of justifying this research endeavor within the framework of the folklore discipline. At the conclusion of this paper it is now clear that folklore is all of the above, but as well, it is much more. Folklore is within all of us. Folklore is all around us. Folklore is what we think. Folklore is what we feel. Folklore is what we know. Folklore is what we believe. Folklore is what we communicate to others, and it is what others communicate to us. Folklore is that which makes us who we are.

As noted in Chapter One, the decision to focus this study on the stories of coalminers' wives was deliberate and purposeful. However, as I listened to the stories of these four women, and as I worked through the thesis, I was ever conscious that their stories could have been my story. Therefore at the risk of over-

identifying with each of the women, I am nevertheless confident that making this a research project about women by a woman was a good decision.

As a woman and as a researcher, I have been humbled and touched by the spirit of the women whose stories are told here. It has been affirming to discover their strength and determination. It has been a privilege to witness their courage. I am proud to be part of the community that created them.

Appendix

The following footnote was part of the Freire passage quoted on page 89 of this work.

1. Action

   Word=work=praxis

   Reflection

   Sacrifice of action=verbalism

   Sacrifice of reflection=activism

2. Some of these reflections emerged as a result of conversations with Professor Fiori.

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