Review of *The Limits of Labour: Class Formation and the Labour Movement in Calgary, 1883-1929* by David Bright

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This book makes an important contribution to our understanding of the history of both Canadian labor and the Canadian West. It weaves together both a wealth of primary documents and secondary sources to fashion a forceful argument about the character of the working class in early Calgary.

Bright’s study of the evolution of Calgary’s working class concludes that Calgary workers, on the whole, did not privilege their working-class identities over other aspects of their identity, including ethnicity, gender, and citizenship in the larger society. Even those who largely identified with their status as workers did not always put class before craft. Workers were divided along craft lines, between so-called skilled and so-called unskilled workers, and between the employed and unemployed. Bright looks at much the same kind of evidence that Greg Kealey and Bryan Palmer used in their studies of Toronto and Hamilton respectively and comes to rather different conclusions. Although he is studying a different city in a different time period, it is fair to say that he challenges the reading of evidence of working-class behavior that has become the norm for labor history in Canada. While the work of Kealey and Palmer and those who have following their approach to labor history—sometimes including myself—has broadened the scope of labor history from the old institutional approach, it has been somewhat marred by a degree of romanticization of the working class. In particular,
the craftworkers are presented as a working class vanguard, at odds with both the ruling class and the middle class and in sympathy, if sometimes in paternal ways, with unskilled, non-unionized workers. Workers in Orange societies are presented as not so very anti-Catholic after all, and retrograde attitudes about women and non-white workers are underplayed. Bright’s approach offers a corrective. I suspect that while many established labor historians will criticize his work as conservative and based on selected evidence, he will have an impact on future labor historians. On the whole, his argument is that the working class exists objectively, as Marx would put it, as a “class-in-itself” but that its subjective behavior is not that of a “class-for-itself”—that is, it does not behave as a self-conscious working class submerging its other identities in the name of the larger struggle. Or at least that was the case for Calgary by the inter-war period. In the period before World War One, Bright suggests there was a fair bit of both class consciousness and working-class radicalism in Cowtown.

In terms of western Canadian history, Bright’s work probably explains better than anything currently available why Calgary workers were susceptible to being convinced by William Aberhart’s loony Social Credit monetary theories. The period in which the local labor party proved able to attract the largest section of the working-class vote was not marked by significant labor solidarity, and there was no overarching labor ideology that could act as a shield against Aberhart’s campaign of money for nothing. The unemployed, in particular, became disillusioned with the aloofness of the labor elite from their problems and their organized efforts to force the authorities to provide them work or decent levels of relief.

There are some limitations to the book. More could be said about the range of living conditions of Calgary workers. Were they residentially segregated? What were their lives like? Bright is clear enough about their low incomes, but this is not, in itself, evocative enough. What about working-class housewives? Did they have organizations outside the mainstream middle-class ones? Were working-class kids generally in mixed-class schools? Sometimes I think that Bright is so keen on proving his thesis and participating in the larger debate on the historical character of working-class consciousness in Canada that he fails to provide enough narrative to interest a general reader who wants to know about Calgary workers and is not that interested in debates among historians. Still, for the academic reader interested in class formation in western Canada, this is a must-read book. Alvin Finkel, Centre for State and Legal Studies, Athabasca University.