VANISHING INDUSTRIES
Rusted Landscapes

BY Steven High

THE COUNTRY IS STREWN WITH COME BY CHANCE-LIKE MONOLITHS, THE MASTERPIECES OF SOME SCULPTOR WHO WORKED ON A GRAND SCALE AND WHOSE MEDIUM WAS RUST. QUARRIES, MINES, MILLS, PLANTS, SMELTERS, AIRPORTS, SHIPYARDS, REFINERIES AND FACTORIES, TO ALL OF WHICH PAVED ROADS STILL LEAD, THOUGH NO ONE TRAVELS ON THEM ANY MORE.

- WAYNE JOHNSTON,
THE COLONY OF UNREQUITED DREAMS



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There is a widespread belief that economic decline is geographically contained to inner cities and isolated rural areas and restricted to the "vanishing" resource and manufacturing industries associated with the "old" economy. This supposition sometimes results in the claim that the people living in economically disadvantaged areas are themselves to blame for this decline. This author suggests instead that the creation of new economic spaces and the destruction of old ones is endemic to capitalism. One influential explanation for this transformation has been Joseph Schumpeter's characterization of capitalism as a "gale" of "creative destruction" that sweeps the globe devouring the "old" in order to create the "new." Simultaneous growth and decline thus produces spatially uneven development, even as the creative rather than the destructive traits of capitalism are emphasized in the nation's media.

The debate over the meaning of economic transformation is fundamentally one about who is going to control the future. Economic decline has typically been set against an ascendant other: "sunset" versus "sunrise" industries; "industrial" versus "post-industrial" eras; and the "old" versus "new" economy. Each dual-metaphor encloses and structures our understanding of economic change. The deindustrialization/post-industrialism debate of the 1970s and 1980s, for example, revealed the ideological struggle over the meaning of industrial transformation. The "deindustrialization thesis" was first proposed by economic nationalists such as Robert Laxer in the early 1970s to explain the high "price" apparently paid by Canadian workers for this country's "dependent status" on the United States. It was subsequently adopted in a revised form by plant closing opponents in the United States who blamed deindustrialization on the "widespread, systematic disinvestment" of multinational cor-

porations in the "nation's basic productive capacity." For them, deindustrialization "does not just happen." Rather, "conscious decisions" have been made by corporate managers to shift production from one location to another or to diversify out of certain industries. In both formulations of this thesis, the constant movement of capital leaves deindustrialized spaces behind.

By contrast, political conservatives took their cue from sociologist Daniel Bell who wrote *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* in 1973. Bell interpreted the vast changes sweeping the industrialized world as evidence of an emerging knowledge-based economy of computers and telecommunications. While both sides of the debate could be blamed for selective vision, it has been post-industrialism which has proven to be the most influential. In fact, Bell's thesis underpins today's popular distinction between the "old" (industrial) economy and "new" (post-industrial) economy.

These binary-oppositions have a spatial fix as "old" and "new" geographic areas take shape; thereby producing a feeling that entire geographic areas are redundant to the needs of capitalism. For those living inside these blighted areas, discourses of rise-and-decline convey a sense of collective powerlessness and inevitability that makes this future appear unavoidable if not always desirable. It is precisely this disillusionment over the unrequited hopes and dreams of industrialism and modernization that forms the basis of Wayne Johnston's lament.

Anthropologists have long been immersed in the "vanishing ways of life" of those people caught on the "wrong side" of history. The intensive field study of what were once thought of as "disappearing" cultures made the "vanishing indian" appear indubitable. Increasingly, however, anthropologists have turned their attention to another "vanishing" group living amongst us: industrial workers. In an insightful study of deindustrializing, Kenosha, Wisconsin, anthropologist Kathryn Marie Dudley discovers that a cultural transformation accompanied the closing of the American Motors auto assembly plant in 1988. Displaced auto assembly workers stood to lose much more than their jobs; they lost a social structure on which their "collective integrity" depended. In other words, the workplace culture that had sustained (even legitimated) individual pride and dignity was replaced by a postindustrial culture where hard work was measured by educational credentials rather than seniority and physical prowess. Autoworkers who once stood at the centre of local life, now seemed out of place.

American workers are obviously not the only ones being shunted aside by deindustrialization. Canadian industrial workers have also faced widespread displacement. Fully 338,000 jobs in manufacturing – representing 16% of the jobs in the sector – disappeared in one four year period from 1989 to 1992. This massive loss of jobs, combined with the other waves of plant closings, have rocked many industrial towns and cities. The shutdown of the steel mill in Sydney, Nova Scotia, is just the most recent example. Other former industrial cities such as Toronto and Montreal have been reborn as post-industrial spaces. In the process, office towers have replaced mills and factories as the pre-eminent symbol of economic power and progress.

The tarnished image of industrialism in recent decades was such that local elites did not wait for plants to close to re-engineer their city's image as post-industrial. In Hamilton, Ontario, the city's longstanding association with the steel industry became a matter of intense embarrassment to civic leaders during the 1970s and 1980s. The city's reputation as a "lunch bucket town" – a label that was apologized for in David Proulx's 1971 coffee table book *Pardon My Lunch Bucket: A Look at the New Hamilton* – was downplayed by urban boosters such as Mayor Victor Copps: "I don't particularly mind Hamilton being called a lunch-bucket city. It's no crime to take your lunch to work. There's nothing indecent in getting your hands dirty in the foundry or rolling mill, making a decent living so you can bring up one of those large families that steelworkers are so fond of." In the "new" Hamilton, then, we see how a set of post-industrial values and images displaced the pride of place that industrialism once engendered.

The precariousness of life in Canada's industrial towns and cities, combined with an ascendant post-industrial economy, worked to undermine people's self-worth. A 1982 survey of three hundred Windsor, Ontario residents, and a focus group of thirty-five "opinion leaders," uncovered many people's embarrassment at living in a "Blue Collar Town." Even though seven thousand area autoworkers had just been laid off, more residents pointed to this working-class image than to the unemployment problem then plaguing the city as the main reason for Windsor's poor image. Fully 67% of respondents believed that the city had developed a negative reputation in the rest of Canada. Blue collar workers thus faced the problem of diminishing status and prestige. As one scholar observed, a "factory job is not a station that is often aspired to."

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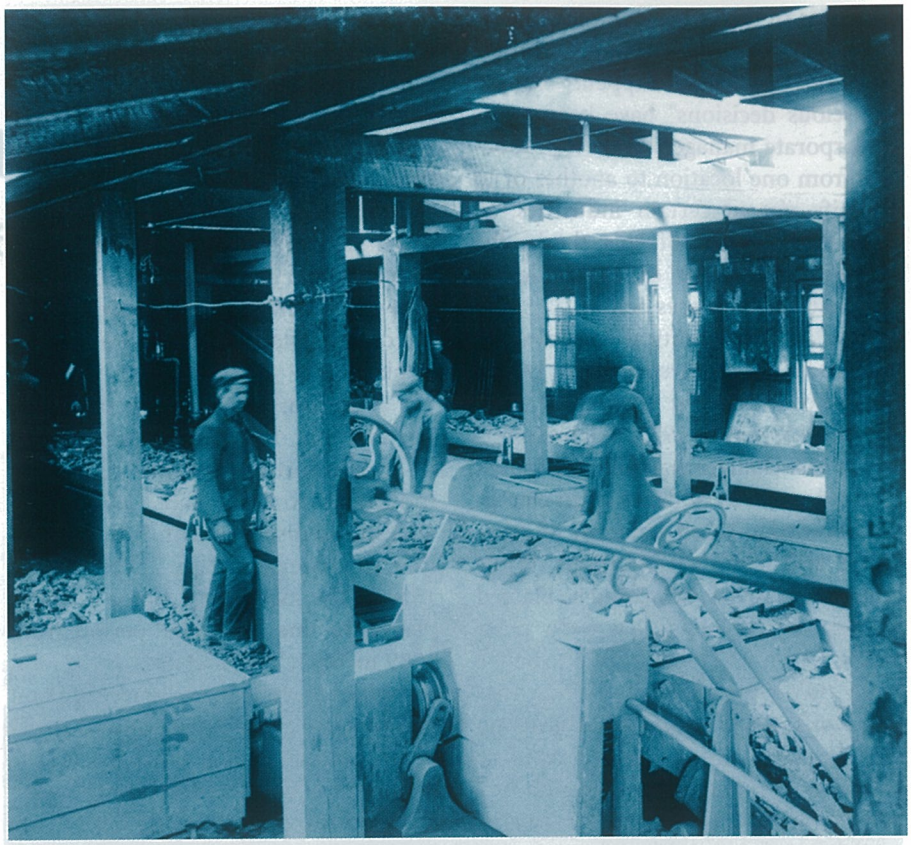
While deindustrialization has attracted considerable scholarly interest, most of the attention has been paid to cities south of the 49th parallel. In Canada, vanishing industries have been more commonly associated with the troubled resource sector. Mining, forestry, fishing, and farming have traditionally provided most of the employment in rural Canada. Whereas primary resource industries employed 1.1 million Canadians in 1951, that number had declined to just 868,000 in 1991. In terms of overall employment, the percentage of Canadians making their living in the primary sector fell from 21.3% to 6.1% during this forty year period. Rural depopulation and the accompanying termination of rural services (commercial, postal, banking, schooling and hospital) have reached crisis proportions in some areas. One United States study, for example, estimates that for every six rural families

that lose their farms to consolidation or foreclosure in a small town's hinterland, one small business closes as well.

Single-industry towns have been especially vulnerable to abandonment. The countless ghost towns scattered across the country attest to the "extreme dependence" of Canadian resource towns on a single enterprise and on nearby natural resources. In his classic study of Canadian communities of single industry, sociologist Rex Lucas calculated that there were 636 such communities. Isolated mining towns locked into a destructive cycle of boom and bust were most at-risk. The list of "one job" towns that have faced the closure of local mines continues to grow: Uranium City, Saskatchewan (1982); Schefferville, Quebec (1983); Pine Point, Northwest Territories (1987); Faro, Yukon (1990s) and Elliot Lake, Ontario (1990s) to name just a few.

Many forestry and fishing communities have also experienced the disastrous consequences of resource exhaustion. The closure of anything as large as a pulp and paper mill is a "disaster", advised the Canadian Pulp and Paper Association in 1972. Since then, British Columbia's 103 forestry-dependent communities have been hard hit by mill closings and mass layoffs. Numerous British Columbia salmon canneries have ended production as well. On the East Coast, fish plant closures and the cod moratorium declared in 1992 after several years of poor landings have had a similarly devastating affect on Newfoundland's coastal communities. Upwards of thirty thousand fishers and fish plant workers lost their jobs and thousands of others felt the ripple effects. In a recent study of the origins of this crisis, historian Miriam Wright shows that new technologies and harvesting techniques developed in the 1940s and 1950s could very well be responsible for the collapse of cod stocks.

There is clearly a gendered dimension to the changes sweeping the Canadian economy. With the exception of fish plants and textile mills, many of the "vanishing" sectors of the economy employed the "classic male proletarians" that formed the centre of traditional working-class identity. In the late 1980s,



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anthropologist Tom Dunk asked working class men in Thunder Bay, Ontario what made their city different? In response, he was told that it was a place where "men go to work in work clothes, work boots, and hard hats, and carry a lunch box." But as male breadwinners lost their jobs, this perspective began to change. This was particularly true as the new jobs being created were mainly in the service and public sectors, two areas in which women have traditionally found employment.

Canada's manufacturing and resource towns have grown old since their heyday during the 1940s and 1950s. The end of this aging process – the death of towns or industries – has been communicated in both spatial and linear terms. The most common, perhaps, are visual and textual representations of derelict buildings. A flurry of pictorial books published in Canada during the last few years have celebrated everything from the "vanishing" grain elevators of the Prairies ("Wheat Kings") to the abandoned mine shafts of Northern Ontario ("Industrial Cathedrals of the North"). Alternatively, the local library is sure to have a helpful guide of the "ghost town" nearest you. The transformation of derelict landscapes into popular tourist sites and the nostalgia for vanishing landmarks is further evidence that there is a widely-held belief that an era is coming to an end.

In many instances, the economic decline of a region has caused it to be re-envisioned. In the United States, the "Rust Belt" became a no man's land between fading smokestack industries and the ascendant post-industrial economy. While Canada has not yet developed a "Rust Belt," it does have other perceived landscapes of failure. Atlantic Canada, for example, has long been viewed by Central Canadians as a "have-not" region. Historian Ian McKay, for example, found that the popular conception of archetypical Nova Scotians as a "purer, simpler, and more idyllic people" was, in fact, an invention of the province's tourism industry in the wake of the deindustrialization of the area in the early twentieth century. Some tourists' search for the simpler life has lead them to other marginal towns and areas which have seemingly been left behind. Romantic and picturesque images of rural Newfoundland have thus reconstituted declining fishing villages in terms of a tourist aesthetic of the "real" Newfoundland.

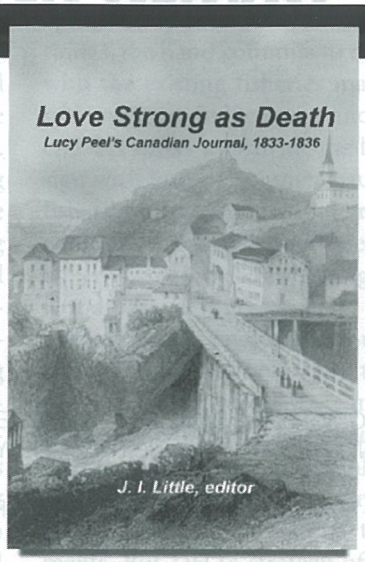
The end of an era is frequently marked by the ritualized toppling of the symbolic markers of the old regime. One example that comes readily to mind is the enthusiasm with which Eastern Europeans knocked down the statues of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin during the early 1990s. Having lived through that time, there was no mistaking that a new political era had dawned. Less obviously, perhaps, the end of the industrial era has been similarly dramatized in North America. In Kenosha, Wisconsin, hundreds gathered to watch the demolition of the assembly plant's 250 foot smokestack. Similar public spectacles have been re-enacted throughout Canada.

Images of falling grain elevators – both the wooden Prairie and concrete Great Lakes varieties – have likewise made their appearance in the print and electronic media. In 2000, for example, thousands gathered early one morning on the waterfront and roof-tops of Thunder Bay, Ontario, to observe the demolition of the giant Saskatchewan Wheat Pool elevator. As is often the case, the local authorities responded to uncertainty with order. The public spectacle was well publicized in advance and timed to occur at a precise moment. In the seconds that it took the building to crumble and fall to the ground, hundreds of local residents took photographs or filmed the event on their video-cameras. While observers viewed that morning's event in any number of ways, there was no mistaking that it provided further evidence of the declining importance of the port. Thunder Bay had been one of the largest grain ports in the world for more than a century; but, today, most of Canada's grain is exported via West Coast ports.

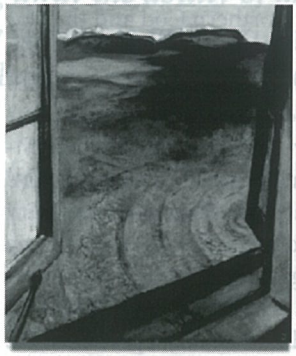
In part, these public demonstrations communicate to us that North America is changing in "new and important ways." While many onlookers might lament these changes, the orderly destruction of old economic landmarks are carefully choreographed to engineer consent and legitimate the economic changes underway. The ritualized nature of these public spectacles act as a rite-of-passage for Canadians into the new era of service and high technology. The repetition of this secular ritual – and the diffusion of the images that are produced through the media – reinforces the sense that older industries are literally vanishing before our eyes.

When analyzing economic transformation we need to avoid what historian Michael Frisch has called the "unhelpful scripts" of abstract labels such as "post-industrialism" that homogenize, essentialize and sanitize history. It is nonetheless important to take a closer look at how these "scripts" took hold and how they have informed our understanding of job loss. This paper has shown that rusted and derelict landscapes can be found in virtually every corner of Canada. As the physical stature of factory chimneys, mine surface works, and grain elevators made them stand tall in people's minds, the fall of resource and manufacturing industries from their privileged position in the Canadian economy played itself out in their ritualistic demolition. Dramatic images of falling landmarks, in turn, lent authority to those who claimed that these industries were "vanishing." To vanish is to pass out of sight, to disappear or to pass out of existence. But for many displaced workers, there is no forgetting. Having just witnessed the demolition of the blast furnaces that he had fed for thirty-two years, ex-steelworker Clem Smereck sadly acknowledged that he "had a lot of memories, a lot of good friends, in that dust there." The meaning of economic transformation is thus a matter of perspective and class interest.

Steven High is a post-doctoral fellow at Memorial University. His dissertation examined the economic and cultural destruction of North America's industrial heartland. He is currently working with Greg Kealey on the socio-economic consequences of military base openings and closings in twentieth century Newfoundland and Labrador.



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