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The Relief of the Unemployed Poor in Saint John, Halifax, and St. John's, 1815 - 1860*

As the leading commercial centres in eastern British America, Saint John, Halifax, and St. John's sheltered within their environs a significant proportion of the region's meagre population. This included not only the most comfortable and affluent colonists, but also three categories of poor inhabitants whose problems were never far from the minds of public-spirited citizens. Prominent among the disadvantaged were the permanent or disabled poor — a motley collection that embraced the helpless aged, the physically and mentally infirm, as well as destitute widows and orphans, those unproductive elements in the community without kith or kin to act as providers. The plight of these unfortunates aroused the greatest outward display of local sympathy, though their inescapable presence was largely taken for granted and their welfare sadly neglected. A second group consisted of immigrants who annually swelled the ranks of the poor that infested these major Atlantic ports. These included refugee blacks from the United States, settled near Halifax and Saint John after the War of 1812, who became a special class of permanent poor in town and suburb, as well as the meanest of the urban labourers. Most significant in point of numbers was the incessant flow of poverty-stricken Irish who, on arrival, crowded into the poorhouses of Saint John and Halifax and augmented the paupers of St. John's.¹ Subsequently, as resident

1 Minutes, 10 November 1847, Saint John Common Clerk, MSJ, Provincial Archives of New Brunswick [hereafter PANB]; Letter from A, *Public Ledger* (St. John's), 6 March 1838.

Residence Indicated for Inmates of Halifax Poorhouse, 1833-7

	Halifax*	N.S.	England	Scotland	Ireland	NFLD.	N.B.	U.S.	Other
1833	300	99	94	27	299	17	17	12	32
1834	339	79	80	27	330	27	20	22	41
1835	298	64	77	27	248	10	10	10	47
1836	280	98	71	23	243	9	12	8	62
1837	350	74	53	25	270	10	20	8	45

* With no orphanage or lying-in-hospital in Halifax more than half of the town inmates were children.

Source: *Journals of the Legislative Assembly*, Nova Scotia [hereafter JLA], 1834-8.

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labourers, the Irish frequently re-emerged as members of the third category — the casual poor.² Found amongst these casual poor were individuals or families dependent on a hand-to-mouth existence, who became temporarily incapacitated through sickness or misfortune, and the seasonally unemployed, those perennial casualties who formed the most intractable problem for the commercial towns. While the majority of this latter group consisted of common labourers, they were often joined in penury by skilled journeymen thrown out of work or underpaid in wintertime. In St. John's the whole operative class of resident fishermen habitually found themselves idle and destitute for seven months out of twelve, a situation which gave the colony "a larger proportion of poor than in other British settlements."³ Each of these categories — permanent, immigrant, and casual poor — posed its special difficulties for the community, but as constituent elements of society, each was thought by benevolent and judicious townsmen to be entitled to some form of assistance during the period of privation. In the fluid, uncertain conditions of colonial society, prosperous inhabitants were chastened by the possibility "that the calamities which have befallen others may soon overtake ourselves, and that their distressing lot may soon become our own."⁴

When a conjunction of diverse circumstances, including overseas immigration and economic recession, forced urban poverty to the forefront of public attention in the period after the Napoleonic Wars, the towns of the Atlantic colonies, in contrast to those of the Canadas, could draw on a tradition of state poor relief. This government involvement took the forms of locally enacted poor laws providing for municipal assessments in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and of executive initiative for appropriating colonial revenue in Newfoundland. The methods of dispensing these funds in Saint John, and eventually in St. John's, involved a mixture of both indoor and outdoor relief, whereas in Halifax public assistance was confined to the poorhouse.⁵ But the existence of facilities for public relief did not preclude individual involvement in civic welfare measures. Citizens continued to feel that they had a direct role to play both in aiding the poor and in determining the guises that public and voluntary assistance assumed. For one thing, they were well aware that the scale of public relief was inadequate to meet emergencies, a

2 Petition of JPs, Saint John, 1839, RLE/839/pe/3, No. 61, PANB.

3 *Free Press* (Halifax), 23 December 1827.

4 17th Annual Report of Saint Andrew's Church Female Benevolent Society, *Guardian* (Halifax), 22 January 1847.

5 In St. John's the piecemeal organization of indoor relief began in 1846 with the erection of the relief sheds or 'Camps', notorious hovels designed to house the fire victims of that year. These were not replaced until a poorhouse was opened in 1861, followed by the discontinuance of relief for the able-bodied for the first time in 1868.

deficiency starkly demonstrated every time fires, crop failures, business recessions, heavy immigration, or ineluctable winter exacted their toll. Haligonians experienced these harsh circumstances in the decade after 1815, when large numbers of poor immigrants and unemployed labourers were thrown on the mercy of a town that had abandoned outdoor relief under public auspices and that had, therefore, to rely on voluntary efforts to ward off the threat of starvation and social disorder.⁶

Moreover, goaded by tender consciences and insistent churches, some colonists regarded benevolence as a christian duty. Within a society that prided itself on its christian ethos, the laws of God and humanity dictated that the poor could not be permitted to starve; the sick and aged poor must be cared for. But starvation did occur, and the numerous sick and aged poor in the towns necessitated the erection of institutions to minister to their afflictions. In the absence of this kind of large-scale capital expenditure which city councils or provincial legislatures were reluctant to undertake, privately organized dispensaries and societies for the relief of the indigent sick played a vital role in treating accidents and common illnesses.⁷ For the chronically ill, however, circumstances were different. Halifax, for example, possessed no specialized institution for dealing with any category of sick poor until the opening of the lunatic asylum in 1859.⁸ The failure "to ameliorate the condition of suffering humanity" offended christians who witnessed ample investment in facilities for transportation and commerce; the neglect of social amelioration seemed to be at odds with mid-Victorian notions of progress.⁹

In these circumstances townspeople responded sympathetically to acute destitution because they considered the existing forms of poor relief outdated and unprogressive. The purely custodial care of destitute lunatics in the temporary asylum established in St. John's in 1846, for example, was said to be

6 *Free Press*, 4, 11, 25 February, 4 March 1817; G. E. Hart, "The Halifax Poor Man's Friend Society, 1820-27: An Early Social Experiment, *Canadian Historical Review*, XXXIV (1953), 109-23. The Poor Man's Friend Society (admittedly helped by the legislature) aided as many as one-tenth of Halifax's inhabitants during the winters of the early 1820s. *Annual Reports of the Halifax Poor Man's Friend Society*. Similarly in St. John's the Poor Relief Association of 1867, a voluntary organization, aided one-fifth of the inhabitants during a winter of great distress when government relief was insufficient. *Newfoundlander* (St. John's), 10 May 1867.

7 *Public Ledger*, 5 March 1847; Editorial, *Times* (St. John's), 7 July 1849; 'Death from Starvation!', *Patriot* (St. John's), 5 February 1853; Letter from J. Slayter, M.D., *Acadian Recorder* (Halifax), 20 January 1855; 'The Poor,' *Morning Journal* (Halifax), 28 December 1855; Editorial, *Newfoundlander*, 11 February 1856; Speech by Dr. Grigor, Legislative Council Debate, 3 March 1857, *Acadian Recorder*, 7 March 1857.

8 G. Andrews, "The Establishment of Institutional Care in Halifax in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," (honours essay, Dalhousie University, 1974).

9 Editorial, *Christian Messenger* (Halifax), 10 January 1851; 'Lunatic Asylum and General Hospital,' *Acadian Recorder*, 21 May 1853.

inconsistent with the age of improvement.¹⁰ Citizens were particularly outspoken when their local pride was offended. To lag behind other towns in the provision of specialized facilities for the poor seemed unpatriotic as well as undesirable. The example of Saint John, where a lunatic asylum was opened in 1836 and firmly established in a permanent edifice in 1848, was constantly paraded by social critics before the lethargic citizenry of Halifax and St. John's.¹¹ This call for imitation grew out of a search for self-esteem, since colonial towns aspired to social responsibility and an acknowledgment of their benevolence and modernity.¹²

In an age that witnessed both the heyday of the philanthropic society and in North America the 'discovery of the asylum', the custom of fostering benevolence by means of association also encouraged citizen involvement in directing local poor relief. The bewildering variety of associations, both ephemeral and permanent, that emerged for the social, physical, and moral improvement of the poor fulfilled a basic middle-class instinct for collective efforts as well as for emulating the fashionable course. While few of the large-scale societies and the asylums they sometimes sponsored could exist without some government aid to augment charitable donations, voluntary management provided communities with excellent experience in organization, fund-raising, and social investigation. At the same time, however, voluntary associative benevolence underwent a fragmentation which meant that by mid-century every church and every ethnic and interest group had its own charitable society or charitable function. This occurred despite attempts throughout the period by the most public-spirited citizens to promote the comprehensive, non-partisan relief of the urban poor, on the ground that "we are but a part of one great human family".¹³

Particularly significant was the bifurcation of urban society between Catholics and Protestants, which emerged most graphically in the 1840's, when Irish immigration, the introduction of unfamiliar religious orders, the ravages of

10 Letter from Aqua, *Public Ledger*, 15 December 1846.

11 J. M. Whalen, 'Social Welfare in New Brunswick, 1784-1900,' *Acadiensis*, Vol. II, No. 1, (Autumn 1972), p. 61; *Sun* (Halifax), 8 January 1851; New Brunswick Lunatic Asylum,' *ibid.*, 15 October 1851.

12 'Benevolent Enterprise', *Morning Post* (Halifax), 10 March 1845; 'Fancy Balls versus Hospitals and Asylums,' *Presbyterian Witness* (Halifax), 16 March 1850; Speech by Dr. Grigor, Legislative Council Debate, 12 March 1851, *Sun*, 17 March 1851; 'Public Hospital,' *Morning News* (Saint John), 17 October 1856.

13 Editorial, *Public Ledger*, 7 March 1837; The Poor — God Help Them! Let Man think of them too! Great Suffering in consequence of Scarcity of Fuel," *Morning Post*, 10 March 1846; *Morning News*, 31 July 1846; Address to the Public by the Halifax Poor Man's Friend Society, *Acadian Recorder*, 19 February 1820; Report of Indigent Sick Society, St. John's, *Public Ledger*, 5 May 1840; Appeal of Committee of Ladies' Benevolent Society, Halifax, *Morning Post*, 7 October 1844.

epidemics, and the cry of 'papal aggression' led colonial Protestants to resent the indisputable fact that the larger proportion of poor rates and voluntary contributions went towards the relief of poor Catholics. Piqued Protestants did not tire of reminding their Roman Catholic neighbours that nine-tenths of the inmates of the poorhouse in Halifax were Catholics, or that it was the Protestant citizenry in St. John's who supported the Catholic poor.¹⁴ To such an extent did the Catholics constitute the labouring and disabled poor in the towns that the more bigoted Protestants began to pronounce publicly that the Roman Catholics were impoverished because they were Catholics.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, a host of 'separate' charitable societies and institutions resulted. Consequently, vertical divisions in the population of the towns, not only between Catholics and Protestants, but also between Methodists and Anglicans, Irish and native-born, loyalists and non-loyalists, took precedence over the fledgling regard for the corporate well-being.

Finally, the colonist became concerned about poor relief in his capacity as a citizen of a town in which he had a vested interest, and protection of that stake demanded that the community should reflect his own particular values. When he talked therefore about subordinating the relief of the poor to the good of the community, he meant subordinating it to his own purposes. It is these underlying values, shared by contemporaries in three pre-industrial towns of Atlantic Canada, and the various schemes they spawned, that provide the focus of the ensuing discussion. Amongst the townsman's preconceptions, it was his reverence for the family, his regard for the dignity of labour, his preoccupation with good order, and his search for economy which led him to the fundamental conclusion "That the truest charity is to find employment that will give food; and not food without employment."¹⁶

Those citizens who viewed the relief of the poor within the wider context of the welfare of urban society at large undoubtedly represented the most respectable, dependable, moderately reformist, and middle-class elements in the towns. Whether they paraded as newspaper proprietors, clergymen, assemblymen, or aldermen, they were motivated by a concept of responsibility to the public, the congregation, or the electorate. They expected other men in positions of leadership and authority to take their civic duty as conscientiously as they did themselves. At the base of urban society the leadership they discerned was that of the male head of the organic unit, the family. Since the interests of the family in society received priority over those of the individual, the claims of the poor were likely to elicit a more sympathetic response if they could be fitted into the familial framework. In this respect a

14 Letter from P. Power's Friend, *Guardian*, 19 March 1847; Editorials, *Public Ledger*, 18 April 1834, 8 December 1835, 6 May 1842.

15 'Popery in Newfoundland', *Public Ledger*, 25 September 1855.

16 *Free Press*, 21 October 1817.

special sanctity was accorded the interdependent relationship between the provider and his spouse and offspring. Only sickness and unexpected unemployment were thought to constitute legitimate excuses for the failure of bread-winners to take seriously their duty as providers.¹⁷ Drunkenness, improvidence, low wages, laziness, and fecundity were problems with which the wretched family had to contend alone, though the editor of the *Morning News* wondered whether, in cases of drunkenness as the cause of family poverty, the state should not be vested with the right to intervene and regulate employment and expenditure of wages.¹⁸

When it came to the vital circumstance of sickness, public health officers recognized that unless the labourer was retained in health, "the family of the victim becomes a charge upon the town for a much longer time" than the duration of his illness.¹⁹ Where sickness of a poor or struggling head of the family led to his death, the citizenry displayed an appropriate concern for the widow and children, as it did for the orphan in the case of double bereavement.²⁰ Nevertheless, talk about society's responsibilities towards widows and orphans was considerably more energetic than the framing of humane measures to provide for their sustenance. Admittedly, concerted efforts for temporary assistance to widows and orphans sometimes followed severe epidemics or summers of excessive immigration, but attention to the welfare of the fatherless remnant of the family was haphazard and ephemeral.²¹ In a society based on commerce, hard physical labour, and male political power, women were utterly expendable. Children, on the other hand, were exploitable as cheap labour. Orphans and foundlings were greatly in demand in the pre-industrial period as apprentices by farmers, householders, and craftsmen, apprenticeships secured by indentures that again tended to emphasize the family ambience.²²

17 Editorial, *Public Ledger*, 9 December 1828.

18 Editorial, *Times* (St. John's), 29 July 1848; Investigator, No. III, *ibid.*, 4 November 1854; 'Drunkenness, Poverty and Suffering,' *Morning News*, 11 January 1860.

19 Board of Health, Saint John. Report for 1858, p. iv, New Brunswick. *JLA* (1857-58), Appendix.

20 Letter from RP, 'Queen's National Fund,' *New Brunswick Courier* (Saint John) 13 June 1840; 'Bazaar,' *Morning News*, 12 November 1855.

21 An example is provided by the Emigrant Orphan Asylum established in Saint John in 1847. J. M. Whalen, 'New Brunswick Poor Law Policy in the Nineteenth Century,' (M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1968), pp. 32, 35-36; also the Church of England Asylum for Widows and Orphans founded in St. John's after a cholera epidemic. *Times* (St. John's) 27 December 1854, 20 January 1855; *Newfoundland Express* (St. John's), 20 February 1858, 19 February 1859.

22 Abstract of R. J. Uniacke's Evidence before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Emigration, 22 March 1826, *Novascotian* (Halifax), 19 October 1826. Arranging such places for orphans was the principal aim of the Orphan Benevolent Society of Saint John which dissolved only after the city's orphanages were well established. *New Brunswick Courier*, 8 August 1840, 23 January 1858.

Society showed its greatest concerted anxiety about family welfare when large numbers of heads of families were thrown out of work. While this concern might sometimes extend to female bread-winners, it was the men as labourers and mechanics who commanded the most attention. In those instances where public measures were taken to meet the temporary emergency of seasonal unemployment, preference was given to family men. In fact the work itself, never sufficient to satisfy the demand, was usually confined to heads of families.²³ About 600 of these employed on civic works in Saint John in 1842 received from 1s. to 3s. a day according to the number of their dependents.²⁴ Coincident with family considerations, this preoccupation with the labouring poor stemmed from the emphasis placed by the well-to-do on the material progress of the town. As the basis of the socio-economic pyramid, the very fabric of urban society was thought to depend on the labourers' contributions, not only as hewers of wood and drawers of water, but as "the bone and marrow of the country."²⁵ When 'honest' working men faced starvation, self-interested leaders of society invariably urged the expeditious relief of "that most indispensably useful part of the community," preferably through employment, but if necessary through relief without labour.²⁶

Citizens' attitudes towards poor relief were also influenced by the need to distinguish between the honest, deserving, labouring poor and those who were undeserving, profligate, or even criminal. For the public remained anxious that the poor should not endanger the social order of the towns and that relief should preserve a properly balanced relationship between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots.' This determination to ensure that the 'haves' maintained the upper hand goes far to explain the universal abhorrence of mendicancy; begging transferred the initiative to the poor when it ought to remain with their economic betters. Mendicancy was a form of free enterprise, an activity not to be encouraged in the poor who were certain to misuse it. A successful beggar might see in crime his road to further advancement. Beggars were,

23 'Stonebreaking,' *Novascotian*, 20 December 1832; Matthew to Mayor, 3 January 1842 and Communication from Chamberlain upon the subject of distress of labouring poor, 3 January 1842, RLE/842/22/2, PANB. The use of the very cheap labour of British soldiers and incarcerated criminals on public works sometimes reduced the opportunities for the unemployed poor. W. Moorsom, *Letters from Nova Scotia: comprising Sketches of a Young Country* (London, 1830), p. 34; Letter from Clerk of the Peace to Commissioners of Streets for Halifax, Special Sessions, September 1837, RG 34, Vol. 10, Public Archives of Nova Scotia (hereafter PANS).

24 'Employment of the Poor,' *New Brunswick Courier*, 4 December 1841; 'Frightful Extent of Pauperism in the City,' *ibid.*, 5 March 1842.

25 Editorial, *Patriot*, 9 November 1839.

26 Letter from An Inhabitant of Halifax, *Acadian Recorder*, 14 December 1816; Letter from Beneficus, *ibid.*, 1 February 1817.

therefore, not only an expensive nuisance,²⁷ but a threat to society, whose guardians through their beneficence in furnishing food and clothing might unwittingly admit to their houses imposters or thieves. Such unbecoming and potentially subversive behaviour in the poor might be avoided if the rich took it upon themselves to seek out poor families in their dwellings and investigate their degree of penury and deservedness. The efficacy of social investigation was reiterated as often as hordes of beggars descended on the towns and it became the standard practice of voluntary associations and government agencies.²⁸

Despite the need for precautionary measures to safeguard the interests of the town and the welfare of the honest poor, it was often that same apprehension for the good order of society that stimulated citizens to urge generous public relief in times of severest want. In the winter of 1816-17 the first voluntary relief committee in Halifax feared that if the sufferers were “abandoned to the horrors of starvation . . . they may be induced by despair to commit depredations.”²⁹ Thereafter the preference given to civic employment schemes as the most propitious form of assistance pinpointed unemployed labourers as the element in the population most likely to threaten the good order of the city. The spectre of hungry mobs of workers conjured up in the mind of the authorities frightening thoughts of uncontrollable outrage and seething insubordination. Poverty was regarded as a ‘evil’ which could not be allowed to reach “that stage where it is not stopped by stone walls, or locks, bolts, or bars.”³⁰

27 Letter from A Friend to the Deserving Poor, ‘Beggars,’ *Acadian Recorder*, 29 March 1834; ‘Charity,’ *Novascotian*, 25 December 1844; ‘Pauperism in Saint John,’ *Morning News*, 17 November 1847.

28 (Halifax Poor Man’s Friend Society) Address to the Public, *Acadian Recorder*, 19 February 1820; (St. John’s Dorcas Society) Letter from Clericus, *Public Ledger*, 5 February 1833; (St. John’s Indigent Sick Society) *ibid.*, 27 February 1835; *Times* (Halifax), 20 December 1836; (Government relief, St. John’s) Resolution of the commissioners for the distribution of 300 for relief of the destitute poor, *Newfoundlander*, 27 February 1840; (St. George’s District Visiting Society, Halifax) *Morning Post*, 27 January 1842; (Samaritan Society, Saint John) *New Brunswick Courier*, 2 January 1847, *Morning News*, 8 March 1847; (St. John’s Fire Relief Committee) *Public Ledger*, 30 March 1847; (Outdoor relief, St. John’s) Speeches by Little and the Speaker, Assembly Debate, 22 March 1853, *Newfoundland Express*, 2 April 1853; (St. Vincent de Paul Society, St. John’s) Editorial, *Newfoundlander*, 9 February 1854, Letter from A Clergyman, ‘How the Poor may be Relieved,’ *ibid.*, 28 January 1858; (St. Vincent de Paul Society, Saint John) *Morning Freeman* (Saint John), 22 November 1859.

29 Memorial of the Committee for distributing relief to the labouring poor in Halifax, 14 March 1817, RG 5, Series P, Vol. 80, PANS.

30 Letter from Civis, ‘Feed the Hungry and the Poor — Clothe the Naked,’ *Morning News*, 30 November 1857; ‘Employment of the Poor,’ *Novascotian*, 5 January 1832; Gilbert and Develier to Odell, 30 March 1842, RLE/842/22/2, PANB.

Self-interest also demanded economical relief. The search for economy encouraged attempts to eliminate some forms of poverty amongst labourers by the prevention and treatment of diseases and accidents. On its establishment in 1857 the Saint John Public Dispensary for outpatients undertook to diminish the number of inmates accommodated in the tax-supported almshouse. Its managers therefore appealed to the public not solely as a benevolent institution “but a *money saving one to our citizens*.”³¹ Similarly, the need for welfare might be reduced by the more rigorous enforcement of the board of health regulations in the city. Otherwise, the health officer argued, “Sickness, debility, death, widowhood and orphanage, connected with pauperism, are expensive contingencies” which the town must sustain.³² Financial considerations were also prominent in the discussion of the relative merits of indoor and outdoor relief. It was popularly but by no means universally maintained that institutional care was cheaper than outdoor measures. This assumption led to the repeated advocacy of various types of asylums which would offer both centralized and more economical relief. Enthusiasts for the erection of a poorhouse in St. John’s claimed that such an institution in Halifax housed more paupers than were then supported in St. John’s and did so at less expense.³³ Where outdoor relief was essential, the economy-minded suggested that food, fuel, and clothing should be provided at reduced rates or at cost rather than given away gratuitously to the poor. Not only would the available charitable funds then be less liable to misuse and made to go further, but those suffering from a state of temporary destitution would be retained in their constructive role as colonial consumers.³⁴ Interest in the poor man as a consumer also afforded a major reason why citizens preferred employment relief to charitable relief in the form of cheap food and old clothes. If he earned subsistence wages, the poor man would still continue to participate in the retail trade of the town at full market prices.³⁵

A mindfulness of both economy and order led the benevolent to expect a return on their investment in alms-giving, charitable subscriptions, and poor rates. Gratuitous charity represented the worst sort of investment for an enterprising community. It precluded a productive return on welfare expenditure and did nothing to foster the virtues of thrift and self-reliance amongst the labouring poor, whereas labour extracted from the recipient of relief constituted the ideal recompense, the favoured *quid pro quo*.³⁶ As a correspon-

31 ‘St. John Public Dispensary.’ *New Brunswick Courier*, 4 April 1857. Similarly *Report of the Governors of Halifax Visiting Dispensary for 1860* (Halifax, 1861), p. 6.

32 Board of Health, Saint John, Report for 1858, p. iv, *New Brunswick, JLA*, (1857-8), Appendix.

33 Speech by Barnes, Assembly Debate, 8 April 1845, *Times* (St. John’s), 12 April 1845.

34 ‘The Season,’ *Morning Post*, 19 February 1845.

35 ‘Relief of the Poor,’ *Patriot*, 30 March 1839.

36 Editorial, *Times*, (St. John’s), 29 September 1847.

dent to the *Acadian Recorder* explained, “every penny given in charity to a healthy person, able to work, is a serious injury to society at large, unless that penny produces its own value by some mode of industry.”³⁷ The guarantee that a poor person or family relieved through charity or employment was in fact deserving formed another precautionary, money-saving consideration. Most public relief schemes or welfare services — voluntary or government sponsored — required a means test in the form of a certificate of genuine destitution from a respectable citizen or designated official.³⁸ Poor youths supplied their *quid pro quo* in another form. All towns and many churches within them organized clothing societies which aimed primarily at sheltering poor children against the inclemency of winter weather. But in return for free clothing, the children were expected to attend Sunday school or catechism classes where proper ideas of christian citizenship were carefully inculcated.³⁹

With their interest in economy, good order, and the wider welfare of the town, social commentators of every description urged consistently from the 1810's until the 1860's and beyond that the able-bodied poor should be relieved only in return for an equivalent in labour. Work was seen as the great panacea for the prevailing urban malaise produced by seasonal unemployment, dangerous mendicancy, and exorbitant, gratuitous aid. Effective employment relief would benefit both the poor and the town. For individual recipients, employment would supply what the majority professedly preferred — the means of obtaining the necessaries of life without sacrificing completely their independence by becoming degraded objects of charity.⁴⁰ Provision of work would eliminate reliance on charity which was both demoralizing and induced wasteful habits of idleness, intemperance, improvidence, and even worse forms of anti-social behaviour.⁴¹ As far as the town itself was concerned, or more specifically its leading citizens, employment

37 Letter from Agenoria, *Acadian Recorder*, 29 November 1823.

38 *Morning News*, 11 September 1846; Notice of Commissioners for the Relief of the Poor, *Newfoundland Express*, 23 January 1861.

39 Catechistical Society, *Cross* (Halifax), 7 August 1847. The Saint John and Portland Ladies' Benevolent Society loaned clothing to the sick poor and if it was returned in good order, the party received a gift of some of the articles. *New Brunswick Courier*, 22 June 1844.

40 Editorial, *Acadian Recorder*, 6 February 1836; 'Relief of the Poor', *Patriot*, 30 March 1839; Letter from Observer, *Newfoundland*, 9 March 1848; Petition of Irish labourers (Halifax) to Sir John Harvey, 25 April 1848, RG 5, Series GP, Vol. 7, PANS; Speech by Shea, Assembly Debate, 14 December 1848; *Newfoundlander*, 21 December 1848; Speech by Hayward, Assembly Debate, 10 February 1854, *Newfoundland Express*, 18 February 1854; Speech by Surveyor General Hanrahan, Assembly Debate, 12 March 1856, *ibid.*, 31 May 1856.

41 Letter from Humanus, *New Brunswick Courier*, 2 February 1833; Editorial, *Newfoundlander*, 30 September 1847; Report of Committee of HM Council upon the expenditure on account of paupers in the district of St. John's, *Public Ledger*, 3 July 1849.

relief was designed to “subserve the Public interest.”⁴² In the first place, work was favoured as a security measure, the object being to avoid public mischief by keeping the labouring poor busily occupied.⁴³ Secondly, from the 1840s onwards, when middle-class faith in progress and improvement clearly emerged in debates on social welfare, as it did in the matter of education, relief in the shape of employment was valued as a means by which the poor could contribute significantly to the economy and development of the town and colony. The editor of the *New Brunswick Courier* aptly referred to it as a way “in which the necessities of the labouring poor could be made to dovetail with the general interest of the whole community, so that they might be benefited by receiving work, while those who pay for it might be equally benefited by having it done.”⁴⁴ As one Halifax paper put it, “the poor might earn a loaf, and at the same time benefit the city.”⁴⁵ Such a mutually beneficial situation obtained in Saint John in 1842 when the city council spent a grant of £2500 from the executive on the employment of the poor in winter. With the consequent removal of rock from the town squares, “the City was improved and the poor people were relieved at the same time.”⁴⁶ Similarly in St. John’s, the editor of the *Times* applauded the insistence of the governor in 1847 that the able-bodied must work for their relief and favoured the ubiquitous resort in Newfoundland to road works as the method by which the poor could secure their subsistence while “the country at large is benefited.”⁴⁷

The public interest would equally be served if such employment reduced the number of those supported by government and voluntary charity. Stephen March, an assemblyman in Newfoundland, was typical of those colonists who believed that poverty was synonymous with unemployment, and therefore that the availability of sufficient work would materially diminish the legislature’s staggering appropriation for relief of the poor.⁴⁸ In 1829 the editor of the *New Brunswick Courier* claimed that the programme of street building undoubtedly relieved Saint John of potential parish burdens.⁴⁹ This interest in economy also motivated those who were less sympathetic towards the poor, and who argued that relief for the able-bodied in the form of com-

42 ‘Employment for the Poor,’ *Morning News*, 29 January 1858; also *New Brunswick Courier*, 30 January 1858.

43 ‘Employment of the Poor,’ and editorial comment, *Novascotian*, 12 January 1831.

44 ‘Winter Employment for Outdoor Labourers,’ *New Brunswick Courier*, 30 January 1858.

45 *Novascotian*, 11 January 1858.

46 ‘Employment for the Poor,’ *Morning News*, 29 January 1858; 500 not used in 1842 was used in 1858, Common Council, *ibid.*, 19 February, 5 March 1858; ‘Employment of the Poor,’ *New Brunswick Courier*, 4 December 1841.

47 Editorial, *Times* (St. John’s), 9 October 1847.

48 Speech by March, Assembly Debate, 3 February 1853, *Patriot*, 12 February 1853.

49 *New Brunswick Courier*, 19 September 1829.

pulsory labour would soon send idlers and imposters scurrying to their own resources, or better still, as far as commentators in St. John's were concerned, encourage them to emigrate.⁵⁰ A similarly rigorous attitude can be discerned in the workhouse ethic that emerged in the management of the almshouse in Saint John, an institution which, unlike the Halifax poorhouse, catered to the able-bodied as well as to the disabled poor.⁵¹ Anxious to reduce the burden of the poor rate on its citizens, the grand jury of Saint John suggested in its review of the almshouse in 1842 that "even nursing mothers should be required when in health to earn their living."⁵² Faced with overwhelming numbers of applicants, the administrators of the almshouse advocated the enforcement of labour to render the institution unattractive to the able-bodied poor. In 1849, the lieutenant-governor of New Brunswick pointed out that "the immediate profit of the work, is not the object of main importance. The able-bodied men, as a class, may earn much less than their maintenance costs the public, but if the knowledge that hard work is required acts so as to deter others from entering the Alms House, a saving to the ratepayers will be effected, and the industry of individuals will be promoted out of its precincts."⁵³

Finally, employment relief was singularly attractive to colonial capitalists and ratepayers who relished the existence of a cheap, exploitable labour force. A report of a committee of the Newfoundland legislative council in 1849 clearly delineated how the interests of employers could be served by replacing gratuitous assistance with employment relief. It proposed that the St. John's poor commissioner's office should act as a labour bureau where "artisans and labourers might at the time be had at rates a degree lower than their ordinary rate of wages."⁵⁴ In Saint John, a city which in contrast to St. John's was keen to retain its highly mobile labourers, the inhabitants felt a particular urgency to afford employment relief for the seasonally destitute and portrayed with complacent satisfaction those "starving for want of work" as a potentially cheap labour force.⁵⁵ For this reason, G. E. Fenety, the civic-conscious editor of the *Morning News*, proposed that the prosecution of

50 *Newfoundlander*, 7 June 1855.

51 Letter from an Inhabitant of Halifax, *Acadian Recorder*, 14 December 1816; Letter from An Old Tax Payer, 'Poor House,' *Morning News*, 16 March 1842.

52 Grand Jury Presentment, March 1842, RMU, Csj, 1/10, PANB; see also 'The Almshouse &c. &c', *Morning News*, 27 September 1850.

53 J. R. Partelow, Provincial Secretary, to the Commissioners of the Alms House and Work House, Saint John, *New Brunswick Courier*, 29 September 1849. Work was not consistently provided, see Charges against the Alms House Commissioners, October 1860, RMU, Csj, 1/15, PANB.

54 Report of Committee of HM Council upon the expenditure on account of paupers in the district of St. John's, *Public Ledger*, 3 July 1849.

55 Letter from The Poor Man's Friend, 'How to Employ the Poor,' *Morning News*, 19 February 1858; 'Employment for the Poor,' *ibid.*, 29 January 1858; Letter from Citizen, *Morning Freeman*, 26 March 1859.

public works should be reserved for seasons of scarcity and depression when they would not only benefit the poor by supplying work but the urban authorities would obtain the best return on the expenditure of the citizen's money in the form of useful labour, cheaply done.⁵⁶

The range of proposals for furnishing socially-useful employment for the poor was far greater than the number of schemes actually undertaken. Initially, contemporaries viewed work as a palliative for distress in a very pessimistic light. One sceptical correspondent in Saint John in 1832 urged the citizens to consider whether they had in fact any responsibility in the matter, and if so, whether such a programme of work was feasible. They should determine, the correspondent suggested without expectation of a favourable response, "Either that it is not our duty as members of a Christian community to endeavour to provide for the employment of the poor as well as their relief. Or, that it is an object which we cannot reasonably expect to attain by any united efforts in this place."⁵⁷ Part of the trouble was that the people who took it upon themselves to advise the community on this issue tended to be men given to idle talk or theorizing, not practical men of business — newspaper editors, politicians, and bureaucrats rather than merchants, contractors, builders, and entrepreneurs. Moreover, with very few exceptions, the schemes implemented were not placed on a systematic footing, despite the necessity for regularizing employment relief advocated by the amateur political economists of the day. The projects themselves, both in conception and in practice, were of two varieties: heavy outdoor labour and indoor factory work. Public efforts were concentrated chiefly on the former because society was male-oriented and reflected the outlook of a pre-industrial age.

The most widely discussed forms of employment and the jobs most frequently organized can both be subsumed under the general heading of public works. These differed more in time, location, and sponsorship than in form or variety. In Halifax the urgent need for outdoor relief in the years following the Napoleonic Wars forced citizens' committees, in the absence of government measures, to address themselves to the question of providing employment. Much to the disappointment of its energetic proponents and the satisfaction of its critics, the Poor Man's Friend Society in the 1820s failed in its persevering endeavours to find work for the poor, being unable to do more than serve as a labour bureau.⁵⁸ Its successors, however, were determined to base their schemes for relieving the labouring poor on employment. Accordingly, a long tradition of outdoor relief for able-bodied men through stone breaking for the metalling or macadamizing of the roads began in the winter of 1830-1 and was revived for the benefit of at least 200 family men according

56 'A Word in Season — or, a Practical Lesson for the Times,' *Morning News*, 3 January 1855; 'Work for Labourers,' *ibid.*, 21 September 1857.

57 Letter from Homo, 'Employment of the Poor,' *New Brunswick Courier*, 14 January 1832.

58 Editorial, *Free Press*, 5 March 1822; *Acadian Recorder*, 7 February 1824.

to need over the next three decades.⁵⁹ While the sponsorship of this menial, degrading enterprise passed from the voluntary citizens' committees to the city corporation in the 1840s, it continued to be funded largely by private charity with the mayor still appealing to the inhabitants for subscriptions or contributions in stone.

Meanwhile in Saint John and St. John's stone breaking was also promoted, and requests for financing it, as well as more sophisticated activities like pipe laying and rubbish removal, were often directed to the respective executive governments by hard-pressed civic-leaders.⁶⁰ But road works remained the ideal form of public works in St. John's and the outports. Initiated principally through the efforts of Sir Thomas Cochrane in the 1820s, road making and repairing became a perennial resort as relief for the able-bodied and for seasonally unemployed fishermen. To such an extent was this enterprise popularly believed to mitigate distress, that until reforms of the late 1860s the road bill came to be associated with other appropriations for eleemosynary aid and therefore considered as little more than a euphemism for a poor relief bill.⁶¹ Indeed, despite approval for the 'dovetailing' nature of this work — that it secured "real value to the country while relieving the necessities of the industrious poor" — the amount of labour provided on the roads was apparently determined by the degree of distress rather than by a comprehensive transportation policy.⁶² That some contemporaries were prone to criticize this tendency can be attributed to their preference for a systematic approach to employment relief which would supplant the 'make work' nature of the existing enterprise.

59 'Employment of the Poor,' *Novascotian*, 12 January 1831; 'Employment of the Poor,' *Acadian Recorder*, 15 January, 31 December 1831; *Weekly Observer* (Saint John), 3 January 1832; 'Employment of the Poor,' *Novascotian*, 12 January 1832; 'Stone Breaking,' *ibid.*, 20 December 1832; 'The Employment of the Industrious Poor,' *ibid.*, 3 January 1833; 'Stonebreaking,' *ibid.*, 21 February 1833; *Guardian*, 4 January 1843; *Sun*, 4 February 1848.

60 Letter from Homo, 'Employment of the Poor,' *New Brunswick Courier*, 14 January 1832; *ibid.*, 10 February 1838; Editorial, *Public Ledger*, 23 March 1838; Common Council resolutions, *New Brunswick Courier*, 27 November 1841; Letter from Civis, 'Feed the Hungry and the Poor — Clothe the Naked,' *Morning News*, 27 November 1857; 'Winter Employment for Outdoor Labourers,' *New Brunswick Courier*, 30 January 1858.

61 Speech by Hogsett, Assembly Debate, 22 March 1853, *Newfoundland Express*, 2 April 1853; Speech by Hayward, Assembly Debate, 10 February 1854, *ibid.*, 18 February 1854; Speech by Hanrahan, Assembly Debate, 11 April 1854, *ibid.*, 29 April 1854; Editorial, *Public Ledger*, 24 August 1855; Speech by Prendergast, Assembly Debate, 21 January 1856, *Newfoundland Express*, 30 January 1856; Speech by Surveyor General Hanrahan, Assembly Debate, 12 March 1856, *ibid.*, 31 May 1856; Editorial, *Newfoundlander*, 12 October 1857.

62 'State of the Poor — Its Causes,' *Newfoundlander*, 10 October 1853. Moreover by the sixties road money was occasionally granted without a strict adherence to the exaction of labour on the ground that poor men "could not, on their spare diet, be sent four or five miles out of town to work on the roads." Assembly Debate, 22 February 1866, *ibid.*, 19 March 1866.

At the opposite extreme to such 'make work' arrangements stood the entirely fortuitous opportunities for employment of the able-bodied poor created by the march of progress in the Atlantic colonies. By the middle of the century skilled and semi-skilled labourers in substantial numbers, sometimes large enough to siphon off the burdensome surplus of the towns, were engaged on railway works in the environs of Saint John and Halifax, on road building for the overseas telegraphic cable in Newfoundland, and on the construction of a variety of impressive civic buildings, such as the city hospital, provincial lunatic asylum, and city prison in the Halifax area.⁶³ For the private contractors a pool of unemployed poor supplied cheap labour at the termination of the shipping season; for the public authorities the works saved them the trouble of devising, and more important, financing an alternative employment scheme; for the community, large-scale productive labour meant a positive boon as a result of the exchange of wages for local services. As Fenety pointed out in 1858, railway construction during the depression involved "something like a thousand pounds *distributed*, as it were, among the labouring classes every week, which in turn finds its way into the stores, and thus keeps business moving."⁶⁴ But by its nature the work was short term and often interrupted by undercapitalization. Moreover, the climatic limitation imposed on the work when it was most needed meant that rail lines laid on frozen mud near Saint John sank in the spring thaw; that autumnal road building in Newfoundland was inefficient and could not be pursued at all in winter; and that ambitious building operations had to be halted in Halifax when frost attacked new masonry.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, such enterprises did not lay the basis of a sustained and systematic employment policy. The jobs tended to terminate with the completion of the railway, the telegraphic communications, or the public buildings concerned.

Those colonists with sufficient foresight to suggest projects, that were neither wholly 'make work', nor fortuitous, nor seasonal in character, appear from the perspective of the 1970s to have had common sense to their credit.

63 Speeches by Parsons and Hanrahan, Assembly Debate, 11 April 1854, *Newfoundland Express*, 29 April 1854; 'Winter Work for the Industrious,' *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 27 January 1855; 'Remember the Poor,' *Morning News*, 27 November 1857; *Morning Journal*, 28 April 1858; *Evening Express* (Halifax), 26 May 1858; 'Business and Prospects,' *Morning News*, 29 September 1858.

64 'Ship Building and Saw Mills about St. John — Hard Times — The Way to Relieve Distress,' *Morning News*, 10 December 1858.

65 'Employment for the Poor,' *Morning News*, 29 January 1858; Evidence of James Douglas before the Select Committee appointed to inquire into the Appropriation of Monies voted by the Legislature for the Relief of the Poor, *JLA*, Newfoundland, 1848-9, Appendix, p. 691; *Patriot*, 27 December 1852; Editorial, *Newfoundlander*, 12 October 1857; Speech by Surveyor General Hanrahan, Assembly Debate, 10 March 1858, *ibid.*, 18 March 1858, 'The Weather vs House Building,' *Morning Journal*, 12 December 1859.

Shrewd commentators flourished most noticeably in Saint John's, the town amongst the three which suffered most relentlessly from chronic poverty. While the distress of the inhabitants was undoubtedly complicated by the supply system practised by the merchants, contemporaries ascribed it more generally to the predominance of a single economic activity that was seasonal in nature and underdeveloped in scope. In such circumstances alternative forms of employment could be fruitfully designed to meet the demands of the local consumer market or to act as ancillary pursuits to the primary business of the fishery. Several newspaper editors and government reports recommended that both unemployment in winter and one persistent deficiency of supply in the local market might be overcome by setting the able-bodied poor to work in the woods producing lumber on a systematic basis. While many of the seasonally unemployed resorted to the woods on their own initiative, they functioned as independent, small-scale producers without the stimulus of attractive marketing facilities in town. The press suggested several times that the government ought to open a wood yard or depot in St. John's on a cash basis where the poor could be sure of an equitable return for their labour and the sale of all manner of wood and primary wood products on terms advantageous both to themselves and to the public treasury.⁶⁶ A perceptive government inquiry in 1856 went a step further by advocating that the poor should be organized in supervised gangs for a more comprehensive and profitable system of employment relief in the woods.⁶⁷ Other proposals regarded employment schemes as a means of augmenting the fishery. The government report of 1856 strongly favoured the promotion of shipbuilding through tonnage bounties paid to those shipbuilders who employed a required proportion of government paupers. Not only was this a labour-intensive industry and directly related to the staple export business of the colony, but it would create many additional jobs in auxiliary areas.⁶⁸

Alternative projects for supplementing the fishery depended on the facilities for indoor work, the other variety of employment advocated in the towns as a means of relief. The forward-looking government report of 1856, for example, claimed that publicly-sponsored factories might offer employment, in lines of work suited to the country — principally the manufacture of nets and

66 Editorial, *Public Ledger*, 29 March 1839; 'Relief of the Poor,' *Patriot*, 30 March 1839; Editorial, *Public Ledger*, 30 September 1853.

67 Report of Committee of Enquiry into the State of the Poor, 26 March 1856, *Newfoundland Express*, 23 April 1856. Another winter activity which was urged in Saint John and Halifax was the ice trade. *Saint John Herald*, 10 December 1845; *Morning Journal*, 26 January 1857.

68 Report of Committee of Enquiry into the State of the Poor, 26 March 1856, *Newfoundland Express*, 23 April 1856; also Speech by March, Assembly Debate, 10 December 1860, *ibid.*, 25 December 1860.

seines (imported from Britain at a cost of over £30,000 in 1860,⁶⁹ as well as small-scale wooden products such as staves and shingles, the picking of oakum (25 tons of which was imported every year, according to the *Public Ledger* in 1839),⁷⁰ and the production of domestic clothing. That report, however, was published almost twenty-five years after a factory for the relief of the able-bodied had been established in St. John's, an institution which had served as an inspiration for the government report and a point of departure for many other suggestions that emanated from St. John's. It was a quite unique institution which in terms of longevity, popularity, non-partisanship, and 'dovetailing' was the most successful of the few sustained ventures in the Atlantic towns for employing the labouring poor in this period.

The St. John's factory, a non-resident and therefore non-correctional institutional, was begun in December 1832 by a group of community-conscious women who aimed primarily to teach "carding, spinning, net making" to the children of the poor and to afford useful employment to the indigent of St. John's.⁷¹ Like any new institution, however, the managers of the factory initially encountered difficulties in obtaining appropriate raw materials to be worked into consumer goods and in raising sufficient funds to subsidize its activities.⁷² Subscriptions and charity balls raised enough money to finance the construction of a permanent building in 1834 and subsequently financial assistance came from a variety of sources: bazaars, balls, benefit performances by the local theatrical group, public subscription campaigns, and fairly regular aid from the legislature.⁷³

Since the factory suffered its share of vicissitudes and never achieved self-sufficiency, its community-conscious efforts were more noteworthy than its long-term accomplishments. In the first place, the factory undertook to promote industry in place of charity as a means of poor relief. This emphasis, it was popularly believed, would foster all the appropriate virtues and habits in the poor. In a community where dire poverty was endemic and the expense of

69 Speech by March, Assembly Debate, 10 December 1860, *Newfoundland Express*, 25 December 1860.

70 Editorial, *Public Ledger*, 29 March 1839.

71 Editorial and Report of the Meeting of Committee of Ladies for establishing a Factory for the purpose of giving useful Employment to the Poor of the Town, *Newfoundlander*, 13 December 1832.

72 *Public Ledger*, 26 February 1833; *Newfoundlander*, 18 April 1833; Letter from A Friend, *Public Ledger*, 28 March 1834; Report of St. John's Factory, *ibid.*, 27 November 1835.

73 St. John's Factory, *Newfoundlander*, 4 September 1834; *ibid.*, 18 September 1834; St. John's Factory, *Public Ledger*, 16 January 1835; *ibid.*, 27 February 1835; Report of St. John's Factory, *ibid.*, 16 August 1836; *Newfoundlander*, 23 March 1837; *ibid.*, 15 June 1837; Assembly Debate, 1 October 1838, *Patriot*, 6 October 1838; *Public Ledger*, 28 February 1840, 28 February 1851; *Newfoundland Express*, 22 October 1853; R. H. Bonnycastle, *Newfoundland in 1842* (London, 1842), Vol. 2, p. 232.

poor relief crippling, the encouragement of self-reliance, independence, and self-respect amongst the poor was enthusiastically endorsed by the articulate.⁷⁴ By supplying work and useful industrial training as well as wages, the managers of the factory hoped "to improve and elevate the mind and feeling of the poor and needy, above relying on eleemosynary aid" from other sources.⁷⁵ This was a vital consideration in St. John's where the accustomed rhythm of summer fishing followed by winter distress discernibly undermined the morale and spirit of the working class and disposed them "to lean altogether on public charity for support."⁷⁶ The factory also undertook to supply much of its work in the slack commercial season when unemployment was at its height.⁷⁷ To those who contributed to its operations, the system pursued by the factory assured the desirable *quid pro quo* in labour. Not only did this ease the qualms of the benevolent about fostering idleness, but it stressed employment as "the panacea for the amelioration" of the condition of the St. John's poor.⁷⁸ It was also no mean consideration that the factory might reduce the burden of poor relief on the community since "every shilling earned here is so much withdrawn from the demands on the public which pauperism engenders."⁷⁹

In the second place, the factory endeavoured both to employ those elements in the town population most in need of work and to extend its operations to meet emergencies that arose. Initially the institution catered to the most destitute poor of St. John's, employing some 30 work people.⁸⁰ Its normal complement of workers had risen to about 60 by the severe winter of 1837-8.⁸¹ With financial aid from the executive during the famine year of 1847-8, the factory was able to employ between 100 and 150 a day.⁸² Within a few years of its foundation experience had shown that indoor employment relief was most eagerly sought by women and children, who constituted two segments of society usually neglected in the pre-industrial period but most in

74 Speech by Carson, Assembly Debate, 21 March 1835, *Public Ledger*, 24 March 1835; Editorial, *Newfoundlander*, 28 March 1839.

75 Letter from R. Prowse, *Public Ledger*, 26 February 1847; Report of St. John's Factory, *ibid.*, 16 August 1836.

76 Annual Report of Committee of Factory, *Public Ledger*, 3 August 1849.

77 Report of Factory Committee, *Newfoundlander*, 3 August 1837; Report of St. John's Factory, *Times* (St. John's), 3 August 1842.

78 Editorial, *Newfoundlander*, 28 March 1839.

79 Report of Committee of St. John's Factory, *Newfoundlander*, 14 September 1843; Annual Report of Committee of Factory, *Public Ledger*, 3 August 1849.

80 Report of St. John's Factory, *Public Ledger*, 27 November 1835.

81 Editorial, *Newfoundlander*, 5 July 1838; Report of St. John's Factory Committee, *Public Ledger*, 27 July 1838.

82 Report of St. John's Factory, *Newfoundlander*, 10 August 1848; *Times* (St. John's) 23 March 1849.

need of work since they comprised the majority of the year-round, as opposed to the seasonally, unemployed.⁸³ Its essential service as an employer of women and children was noted by the attorney general in 1856 when he asserted that “from the effects of disease and shipwreck” St. John’s had more widows and orphans “than in any other city or town of the same size.”⁸⁴ Priority of employment was given to females of every creed between the ages of 12 and 60. They laboured daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and were paid on a piece-work rate. Although the actual rate is unknown, contemporaries claimed that workers usually earned between 1s. and 1s.6d. a day, a typical relief wage. One hard-working female was reputed in 1849 to be earning as much as 12s. a week making nets. But on the basis of detailed figures for two months in 1838, the averages of the women and children fell between 3s.6d. per week, starvation wages at best. On the assumption that the adolescents were less productive and paid at a lower rate than the mature women, it is not surprising that commentators declared that it was the “industrious” female who could earn her support at the factory. Advocates of the establishment also proudly boasted that the factory was the agency through which whole families of widows and their children could work together and earn a complete livelihood.⁸⁵ One wage packet was clearly inadequate to maintain a family.

Finally, the factory offered specialized training and concentrated on manufactures that were most needed in the community and therefore presumably guaranteed a ready, local market. Two types of manufactures were undertaken: fishing nets for the primary industry of the colony and domestic textiles required by local merchants for sale in their stores. The factory committee was proud of the quality of the nets and publicized them as being superior or at least comparable to the imported commodity.⁸⁶ Moreover, the preoccupation with net-making as an activity beneficial to the family and the community at large was frequently celebrated.

The advantages to the colony by this branch of industry are incalculable — the women and children are taught to make nets for their husbands and

83 Letter from Malthus, Poor Man’s Friend Society, No. 5, ‘Answer to My Opponents.’ *Nova-Scotian*, 16 February 1825.

84 Speech by Attorney General Little, Assembly Debate, 8 April 1856, *Newfoundlander*, 10 April 1856.

85 Account of persons employed at Factory, *Newfoundlander*, 5 July 1838; Letter from R. Prowse, *Public Ledger*, 26 February 1847; Editorial, *Newfoundlander* 11 March 1847; ‘The Factory,’ *Times* (St. John’s), 8 September 1847; *ibid.*, 23 March 1849; Speech by Warren, Assembly Debate, 8 April 1853, *Newfoundland Express*, 28 April 1853; Speech by Prowse, Assembly Debate, 8 April 1856, *Newfoundlander*, 10 April 1856.

86 Report of St. John’s Factory, *Public Ledger*, 16 August 1836; Annual Report of Committee of Factory, *ibid.*, 3 August 1849.

fathers, and thus to employ the hitherto unprofitable season of winter — while the fisherman has only to provide the twine instead of the more expensive article, the net or seine, which latter is often beyond his means, and the want of it is not unfrequently a serious hindrance to his getting on in the world.⁸⁷

Money otherwise sent outside the colony could thereby be kept in circulation, generating employment which would result in “an immense saving” to the colony.⁸⁸ At the same time, the training in net-making was thought to promote “an exceedingly useful art” in the economic circumstances of Newfoundland.⁸⁹ The needlework, always a supplementary activity, was aimed at producing necessary items of wearing apparel for local consumption. This textile branch, originally of a finishing nature, blossomed into the manufacture of textiles in 1850 when Lieutenant Governor LeMarchant provided several looms for the weaving of homespun, a fabric well suited to ordinary domestic wear and hitherto not produced in the colony. This had the advantage of adding another type of industrial training to the factory’s regimen, though the institution’s inability to find a qualified weaver in St. John’s by 1868 casts doubt on the success of the undertaking.⁹⁰

Despite support from the legislature, endorsement by select committees, and the intermittent interest of governors, official attempts to exploit factory production as an extensive system of poor relief amounted to little more than brief enthusiasm.⁹¹ Whatever their reasons, many prominent citizens were critical both of the management of the factory and of the quality and cost of the nets it produced. Moreover, the retail merchants of St. John’s did not absorb all the ready-to-wear clothing made at the factory. If the institution had been designed to employ men in winter rather than women the year round, it might have excited a more lively public concern. It is also possible that prospective workers did not always take advantage of the factory’s facilities for voluntary employment. Ultimately, by the 1860’s, the management of the institution came to devolve, not on a general committee of citizens as formerly, but on the Catholic St. Vincent de Paul Society, a change that was accompanied by a concentration on purely hibernal operations.⁹² Nonetheless, the St. John’s factory was the one genuine house of industry in

87 Report of Factory Committee, *Newfoundlander*, 3 August 1837.

88 Report of St. John’s Factory, *Newfoundlander*, 10 August 1848.

89 *Times* (St. John’s), 23 March 1849.

90 Editorial, *Public Ledger*, 22 January 1850; *Times* (St. John’s), 23 January 1850; Speech by Emerson, Assembly Debate, 22 March 1850, *Public Ledger*, 26 March 1850. See criticism voiced by Prendergast, Assembly Debate, 31 May 1852, *Newfoundland Express*, 4 June 1852; Report of Proceedings of St. Vincent de Paul Society, *Newfoundlander*, 22 December 1868.

91 Report of Committee of HM Council upon the expenditure on account of paupers in the district of St. John’s, *Public Ledger*, 3 July 1849; Editorial, *Newfoundland Express*, 3 May 1856.

92 Report of Society of St. Vincent de Paul, *Newfoundlander*, 20 December 1867.

the Atlantic region. In spite of musings about a house of industry as a palliative for poverty, Haligonians did no more than toy with the idea of providing indoor employment relief and seemed unable to devise forms of work that would fit in with the wider interests of the city and thereby appeal to the philanthropy of the townspeople.⁹³ After public agitation a residential house of industry for women and children was opened briefly through voluntary assistance in Saint John in 1834, but it was intended mainly as a self-supporting school of domestic industry which also trained household servants for the city.⁹⁴

Indoor employment, therefore, did not prosper more noticeably than outdoor measures of relief. It is not difficult to discern why employment schemes foundered. For one thing, colonists believed that the conditions which caused unemployment were beyond their control and could neither be anticipated nor rectified in towns whose economies were subject to fluctuating external and international trends.⁹⁵ The sudden influxes of immigrants and erratic business depressions made the colonists feel singularly helpless. If leading townsmen felt helpless in the face of such circumstances, they would hardly be capable of helping others to help themselves. Moreover, the launching of extensive schemes for employment required capital, and no agency in the towns appeared willing to sustain a socially useful experiment in the early stages before it could become a self-supporting or even profitable operation. Despite, or perhaps because of, the amazing array of enterprises partially subsidized by government, the provincial legislatures refused to risk their revenues on long-term employment schemes or to favour leading towns at the expense of the other inhabitants in the colony.⁹⁶ For their part, the corporations of Saint John and Halifax were not wealthy enough to embark on ambitious projects and were reluctant to resort to unpopular taxation. Nor were colonists agreed how far the various levels of government should involve

93 "Proposal for the Establishment of a House of Industry in connexion with an Orphan Asylum," *Nova Scotian*, 10 February 1836; "An Appeal to the Public on behalf of the Establishment of a House of Industry in connexion with Orphan Asylum," *ibid.*, 28 March 1839; Letter from One of the Society, 'House of Industry, Hints to the Benevolent,' *Morning Chronicle*, 11 March 1845; 'House of Industry,' *Guardian*, 14 March 1845; 'House of Industry,' *Morning Post*, 26 March 1845; Letter from a Friend to the Poor, 'Help for the Poor,' *Sun*, 19 January 1846; 'The Reclamation of Vagrants,' *Morning Journal*, 22 February 1856.

94 Letter from Homo, 'Employment of the Poor,' *New Brunswick Courier*, 14 January 1832; Letter from Humanus, 'Employment of the Poor,' *ibid.*, 2 February 1833; 1st Report of the House of Industry, *ibid.*, 26 July 1834; Petition of Managing Committee of Female House of Industry in City of Saint John, 2 February 1835, RLE/835/pe/4, No. 82, PANB. It also provided home employment relief for women on a piece-work basis. Report of St. John Female House of Industry, *New Brunswick Courier*, 17 January 1835.

95 Letter from a Sympathizer, 'The Present and Former Government,' *Morning News*, 1 February 1856.

96 'Who are the Suffering Poor?,' *Morning News*, 22 February 1858.

themselves in manipulation of the labour market. The editor of the *Newfoundland Express*, for example, pointed out that the government report of 1856 on employment for the poor “proceeds upon an assumption which has proved a failure wherever it has been attempted to give practical effect to it — the assumption that the *organization of labour* can be effected by the state.”⁹⁷

Left to private capitalists, however, the pauperizing patterns of unemployment were reinforced and exploited because merchants were content to employ town labourers in summer and abandon them to the mercy of government, charity, occasional public works, or sharply reduced wages in the private sector during winter.⁹⁸ With the notable exception of shipbuilders in Saint John, entrepreneurs were as yet unwilling to invest in industry and thereby ease some of the seasonal fluctuations, and this despite a general conviction by mid-century that sufficient wealth and tradition of prudence existed to sustain “promising and well-considered commercial speculation” in local manufactures.⁹⁹ In these circumstances, voluntary, non-profit-making agencies did what they could. Such denominational societies as the St. Vincent de Paul in St. John’s and the visiting societies attached to St. Matthew’s and St. George’s churches in Halifax went unpretentiously about the business of providing essential, if token, indoor work for women and children.¹⁰⁰ But more generally, associations found it easier to dispense discriminating charity without labour and thereby salve their consciences rather than campaign for effective employment relief. In fact society’s inability to attack pre-industrial poverty at its source, which was unemployment, led by the 1850s to a marked preoccupation with the symptoms of poverty, especially intemperance, and a corresponding interest in social amelioration as moral rather than economic reform.¹⁰¹

97 Editorial, *Newfoundland Express*, 23 April 1856; Speech by Attorney General, Assembly Debate, 21 February 1866, *Newfoundlander*, 15 March 1866; Speech by Receiver General, Assembly Debate, 6 March 1868, *ibid.*, 11 March 1868.

98 Speech by Hogsett, Assembly Debate, 3 April 1854, *Newfoundland Express*, 11 April 1854; ‘Our Trade System,’ *Newfoundlander*, 1 February 1855; J. Fingard, ‘The Winter’s Tale: The Seasonal Contours of Pre-Industrial Poverty in British North America,’ *Canadian Historical Association, Historical Papers* (1974), pp. 65-94.

99 Editorial, *Sun*, 24 December 1853.

100 St. Vincent de Paul Society, *Newfoundlander*, 2 April 1857; *Newfoundland Express*, 10 December 1861; St. Matthew’s Church District Society, *Guardian*, 15 November 1850; St. George’s Ladies’ Benevolent Society, *Colonial Churchman* (Lunenburg), 15 June 1837; *Morning Post*, 15 January 1842; St. George’s District Visiting Society, *Church Times* (Halifax), 3 December 1853.

101 For example, ‘Providing for the Poor,’ *Morning News*, 18 January 1860.