

# Toronto's Workers In the 1850s

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A Lecture at the Enoch Turner Schoolhouse

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The doors of the Enoch Turner Schoolhouse opened in 1848 and closed in 1859. The decade during which this place was a functioning school was a momentous one in Toronto, especially for the families of working people who sent their children here during those years. There were important changes sweeping through the worlds of work, family, and community.

What kind of city was Toronto in the 1850s? More than half a century earlier, in 1793, Governor John Graves Simcoe had chosen the site within Toronto's protected harbour as a military base and a capital city for the province of Upper Canada. He decided that the settled area should be clustered just west of the mouth of the Don River, and that would be the focus of the town's development for many years.

The town of York, as it was known till 1834, was not much more than an overgrown village for the first couple of decades, but it started to grow rapidly in the 1820s, as large numbers of immigrants began arriving from the British Isles. That wave of newcomers would continue to increase by leaps and bounds. Toronto's population jumped from under 700 in 1814 to over 9,000 when it was incorporated as a city in 1834 and had reached nearly 31,000 by 1851 and just under 45,000 in 1861.



Who were all these people? Where did they come from? Overwhelmingly from the British Isles. Many came from England (or traced their ancestry back there),

but there was a rising tide of immigrants from Ireland that swept over the city. By 1842 roughly a quarter of those counted by census-takers were born in Ireland or were of Irish parentage, twice the proportion of those with connections to either England or Scotland. And then, of course, the Irish population here in Canada



West mushroomed fast between 1846 and 1854 as a result of the great Irish Famine, which led hundreds of thousands of Irish people to migrate out of their country. In the year 1847 alone, roughly 105,000 travelled to British North America. By September 1847 30,000 of those had reached Toronto, more than twice the number of the previous year. By 1851 37 per cent of those counted in the census claimed Irish ethnicity, compared to only 16 per cent English and 7 per cent Scottish. The city was becoming decidedly more Irish in the 1850s.



Meanwhile, the Underground Railway brought in many more blacks from the United States escaping southern slavery and northern racism in the form of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. The Anti-Slavery Society of Canada (which was basically a Toronto operation) was set up in 1851 to help them get settled. Their numbers reached about a thousand in the 1850s.



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Many of these newcomers simply passed through Toronto, but many settled down. Working people often found accommodation in small wooden houses tucked in on side streets and in growing numbers on the northwest edge of the city in St John's Ward in what was becoming known as Macaulaytown. This was

part of one of the so-called “park lots” that Simcoe had doled out to the elite of the colony stretching north from Queen to Bloor. This one was on the west side of Yonge. The Macaulay family that owned it decided to sell off lots at the south end of their estate starting in the 1830s, and a jumble of small, cheaply built houses



began to appear. Like other more scattered housing on the periphery of the city, these dwellings attracted those with low-paying jobs. By the 1850s Macaulaytown had a large number of Irish immigrants and the largest number of black newcomers in the city. Decades later this area would be characterized as a slum and was called simply “The Ward.”

People weren’t flocking to this city in such large numbers to look for jobs as civil servants or soldiers, as part of Simcoe’s early vision. Indeed, Toronto ceased to be a capital city in 1841 when the new Province of Canada was created, and, in the whole period before the creation of the new province of Ontario in 1867, it got back that role of capital city for only a few years (1849 to 1851 and 1855 to 1859). Rather Toronto expanded rapidly (and faster than competitors like Kingston and Hamilton) because the city was a centre of commerce. In the hinterland beyond



the city were thousands of new farms, where families were growing and shipping out wheat to be sold in the British market. They also needed goods to sustain their farm lives – agricultural implements, hand tools, household implements, cloth, and much more, all of which were being shipped inland. A new wealthy class of wholesale merchants emerged to carry on all this trade and to create new banks, railways, and countless other investments, as well as the first Board of Trade, founded in 1844, and the Toronto Stock Exchange, founded in 1854.

So Toronto was starting to become a metropolis. But that was only part of the story. As the city's population grew, there was a growing urban market. In fact, it was probably more important than the import-export markets. The people of the city needed housing, transportation, and a huge variety of goods.



Charles Dickens noticed this commercial bustle when he visited Toronto in 1842:

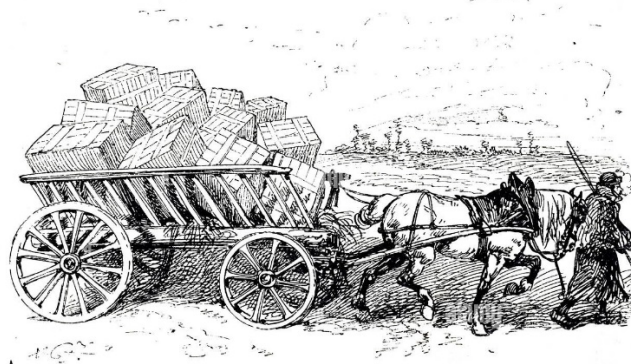
The town itself is full of life and motion, bustle, business, and improvement. The streets are well paved, and lighted with gas; the houses are large and good, the shops excellent. Many of them have a display of goods in their windows, such as may be seen in thriving country towns in England; and there are some which would do no discredit to the metropolis itself.



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So not surprisingly the census-takers in 1851 found nearly 600 people they identified as merchants and shopkeepers. Much of what these merchants sold was imported from Britain, but increasingly it was made right here in Toronto. The commercial city also had a booming industrial component.

What does all this tell us about the kind of work that was available here in the 1850s? People worked for wages in many different jobs across all the economic sectors – transportation, construction, manufacturing, and service. There were



hundreds of jobs in moving goods - on the many boats that arrived at the port and in the many, many carts and wagons needed for moving goods and supplies around the city. As the city grew, there was a pressing need for construction



workers to put up new administrative, commercial, and industrial buildings and to build the hundreds of new homes that were needed to house the newcomers. The 1851 census identified more than a thousand men working in the building trades – roughly one in nine of the gainfully employed. A huge number of





producers turned out the goods that city dwellers wanted to consume – food, clothing, shoes, furniture, pots and pans, stoves, soap, beer and whiskey, newspapers, and so much more – as well as some of the machinery that was needed in some of the newer industries, including steam engines and printing presses. And upper-class households created a large demand for servants of



various kinds to maintain their households, as did the many taverns and lodging houses. Some 1,600 people in the city worked as servants in 1851 – close to one in five of the gainfully employed. And three-quarters of those were women. That

was far and away the most common form of employment outside the home for women.

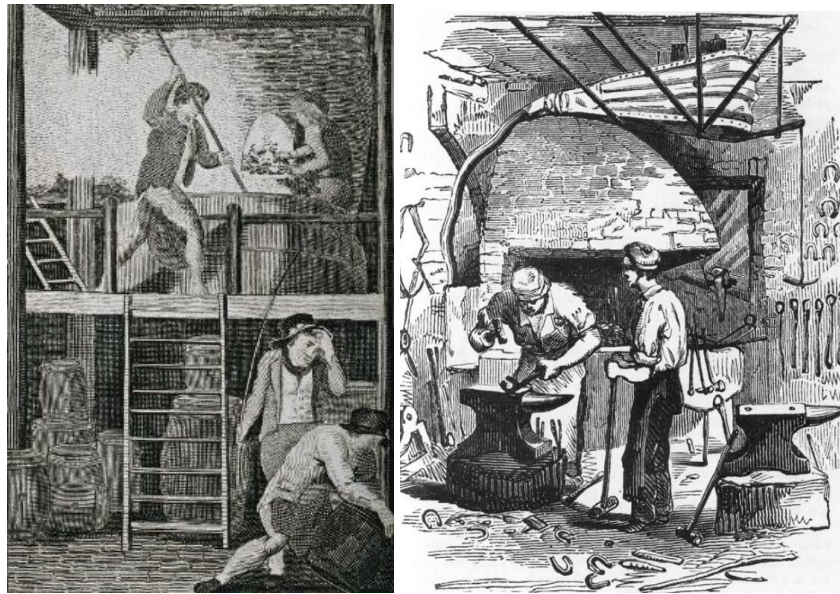
What is striking about all this work by 1850 is how much of it was manual and unmechanized, both skilled and unskilled. Even though steamboats were plying the waves of Lake Ontario, most shipping was still done in sailing vessels and needed the skilled hands of sailors. Carters and teamsters still had to handle horses pulling their vehicles through city streets. And right across the city were hundreds of artisans - craft workers - who constructed the houses, baked the bread, butchered the meat, built the furniture, made the cast-iron stoves, brewed the beer, made the barrels, stitched together the shoes, and so much more. We should remember that much of what families consumed was produced in the home – housewives grew and prepared food, made clothing, concocted



medicines, and so on, and husband-fathers often built or renovated their own houses and maintained them – but, outside the household, production was based in the workshops of hundreds of male artisans – actually nearly 2,400 of them in

the 1851 census, roughly a quarter of the gainfully employed. Toronto in the 1850s was unquestionably a city of artisans.

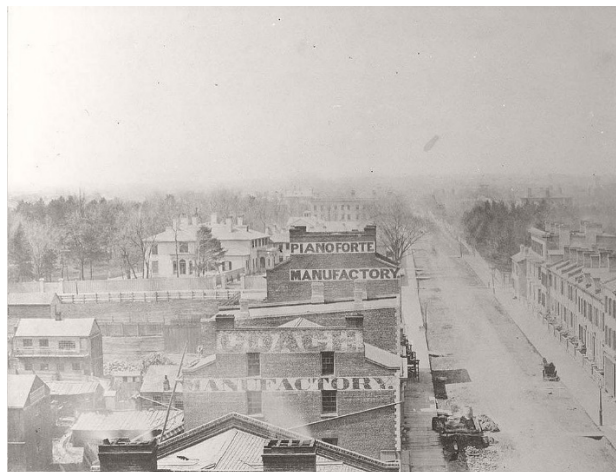
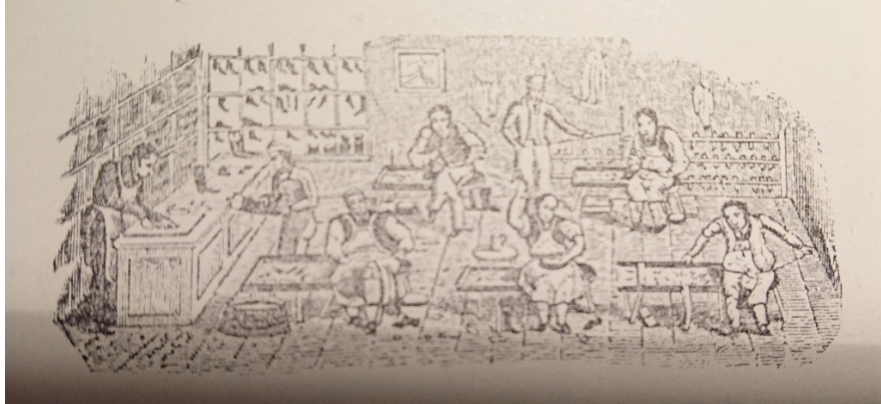
The quality of the product depended heavily on the manual skills that these craft workers practised. A brewer knew what ingredients had to be combined and how to judge the timing and the quality of the production. The blacksmith carefully heated and hammered iron into useful products. The printer loaded type into a rack by hand and then turned the crank on the printing press. The tailor measured and cut the cloth and then stitched it together by hand. And so on.





Artisans followed old traditions of training. They started in their early teens as apprentices. Many no doubt found their way to these positions through family connections. Some employers posted ads in the local newspapers to find boys ready to start an apprenticeship. Then, after four to six years, they became fully trained journeymen who worked for wages, and finally, when and if they were able, set up shop on their own, perhaps with an apprentice and journeyman or two under their own roof. In Toronto large numbers of the artisans working in the city would have learned their trade back home in Britain or less often in the United States. The learning of crafts tended to work somewhat more loosely in this colony, without the rigid seven-year apprenticeship enforced by the master-and-servant law that prevailed in Britain. By the middle of the century many apprenticeships seemed to be a trade-off between, on the one hand, care for children and youths whose parents wanted to hand over responsibilities for child-rearing to someone else and, on the other, a good economic arrangement for an employer to get trained labour.

Hardly any of these craft workshops were large. Many artisans worked alone, perhaps with some help from family members and/or some additional help on a short-term basis. Men producing products with a heavy demand like beer or



whiskey, or shoes, or newspapers, or furniture, were among the first to add some extra hands. By the 1850s some workshops had added enough wage-earners that they were calling themselves “manufactories,” where skilled workers were just performing their traditional tasks under one roof. These craftworkers, both bosses and workmen, produced much of the technological innovation in the period, since no employers had engineering departments and all relied on the know-how of highly skilled men. These places were not large at first - even the big whiskey enterprise, Gooderham and Worts, had only 31 employees by the early 1850s.

What this picture often misses is the voracious need for unskilled labourers to lift and heave, haul and carry, load and unload, and perform all manner of grunt labour. There were no conveyor belts, no fork-lift trucks, and hardly any cranes or winches. In 1851 there were 1,600 men identified as labourers – one in six of the gainfully employed.



So it would be hard to argue that a full-scale Industrial Revolution was underway in Toronto in the 1850s. Technologically artisanal production actually incorporated relatively little machinery. But there were changes afoot by the 1850s that certainly pointed towards a new future. More and more work was taking place beneath a belching smokestack or chimney connected to a steam engine. These new machines had arrived in the new steamboats back in the 1830s and gradually appeared in a few industrial operations, especially sawmills. When Messrs Gooderham and Worts opened their flour mill on the waterfront in 1832, they put up a huge windmill to power the grinding of grain (a landmark on the waterfront that was equivalent to the CN Tower in our day). But then within a year they added a small steam engine (only the third such piece of such



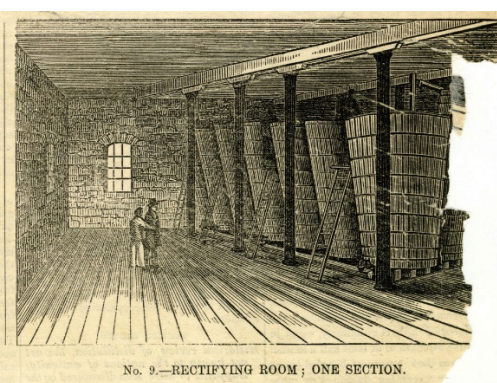
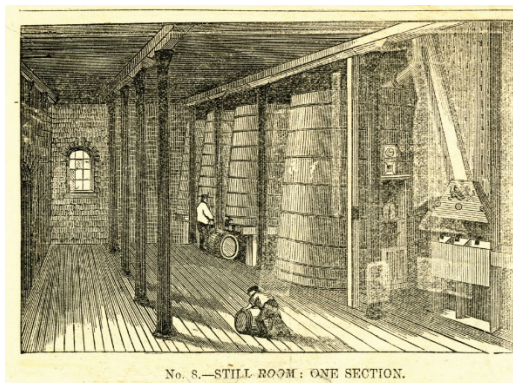
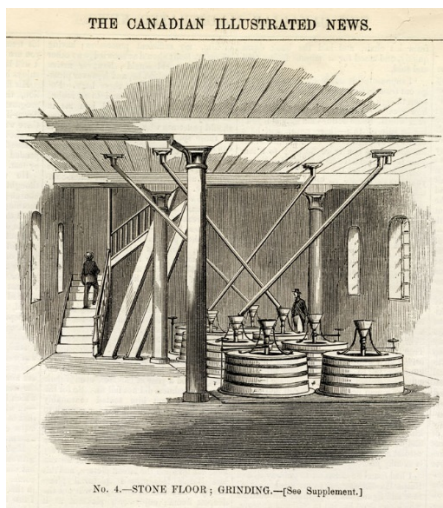
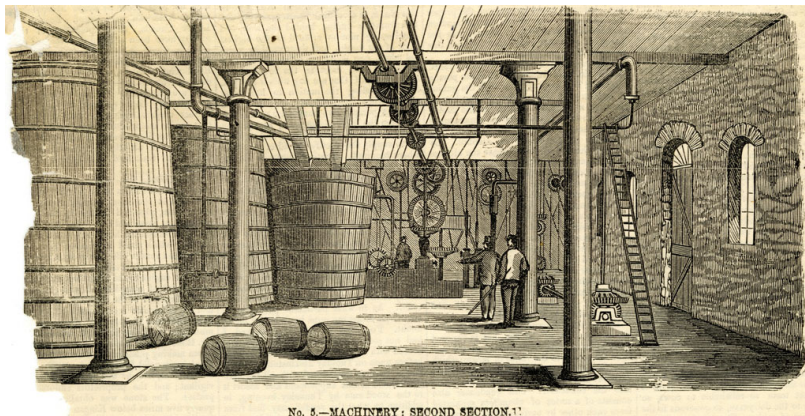
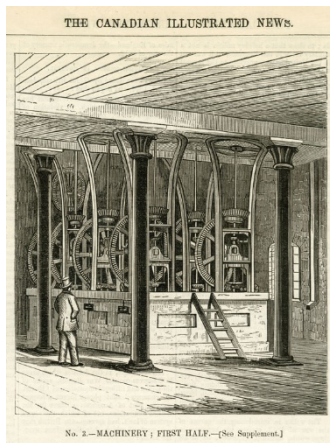


machinery made in Upper Canada). They would transfer completely away from wind power in 1841. After 1837, they were also making whiskey, which gradually became the company's sole product. The great change in production methods in that firm began the year this schoolhouse closed when Gooderham and Worts started construction on the massive stone distillery, which would soon be the



largest in British North America. A *Globe* reporter who visited the new distillery in 1862 wrote: "in scarcely any other establishments in Canada is there so much accomplished without the aid of manual labour. From the time the corn is

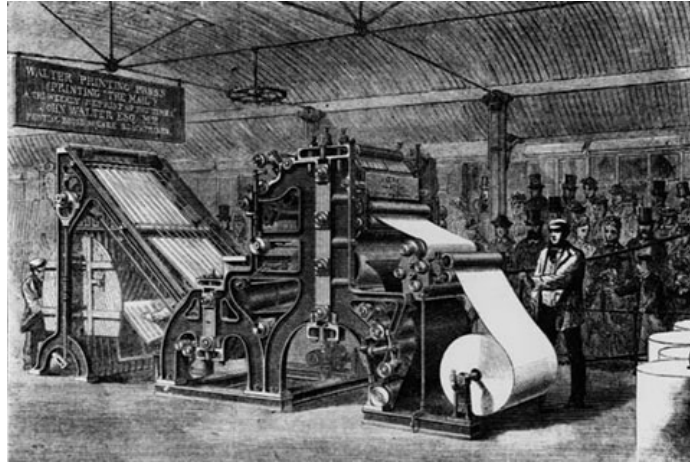
received at the door until it is 'racked' or drawn off in barrels, as whiskey or spirits, it is not touched by human hands."



The newspaper business was moving in a similar direction. In 1851 the *Christian Guardian* newspaper introduced the first steam-powered printing press in Toronto. Two years later George Brown installed the city's first rotary presses at the *Globe*, which allowed newspapers to be turned out daily rather than simply



one, two, or three times a week. The printers' craft was thus fundamentally divided between the skilled compositors who still set type by hand and the semi-skilled pressmen who ran the printing machinery.



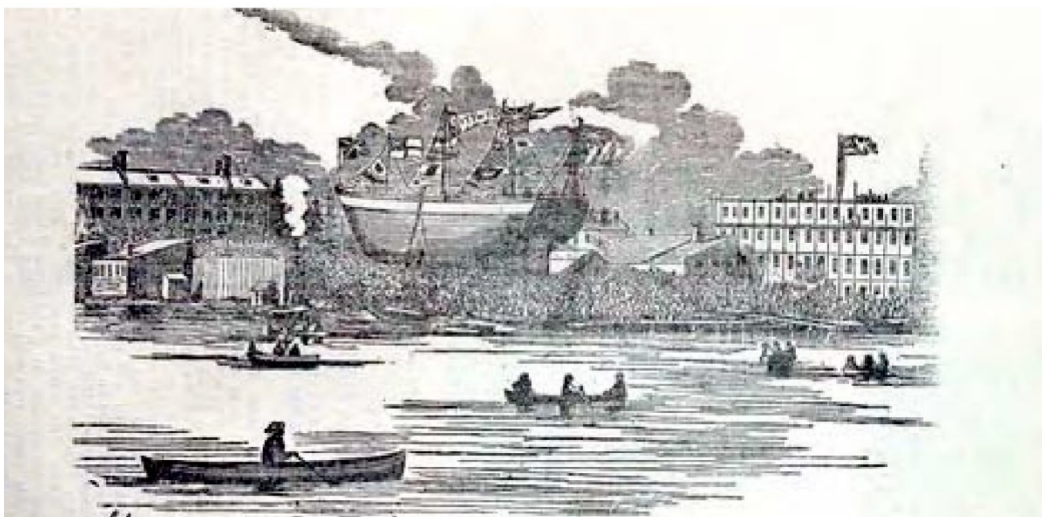
The tailoring trade went through a different, but equally disruptive transformation when, in 1852, a clothing producer named Hutchieson brought the city's first brand-new sewing machine from New York, along with a female



worker to run it. The newly minted Journeyman Tailors Operative Society promptly went on strike and convinced the company to get rid of this pernicious intrusion on their manual craft. They celebrated their victory with a parade along King St in which a sewing machine was carried like a corpse to be buried. They also held a banquet in the company's honour to celebrate the goodwill between masters and men. But soon after another shop in Yorkville installed the dreaded machine, and in 1854 Hutchieson rejected the union and forced the tailors out on strike again. Their boss proceeded to bring in women to replace them and took the tailors to court. The sewing machines were here to stay and would of course eventually be connected to a steam engine. They were also introduced into the boot and shoe industry in the 1850s, which had some big shops in the city by the end of the decade.



An even more dramatic change took place in woodworking, specifically furniture production. In 1835 two British-born cabinetmakers, John Jacques from England and Robert Hay from Scotland, set up a workshop on King St with a couple of apprentices to make fine furniture. By 1844, when they had a fire on the premises, they had installed a steam engine. The city recommended that such a fire-prone enterprise move out of the centre of the city. So the owners bought some land on the waterfront at Bay and Front and built a much bigger building



(topped with a huge flag) where they used steam power to run saws, lathes, and planing machines and by the early 1860s an elevator to hoist material between the five floors of the factory. They produced elegant furniture for affluent homes,

but also cheaper lines for mass consumption in city and countryside across the province, both in homes and in public buildings like offices, schools, and hospitals. These could be turned out quickly with all the new machinery and subdivision of labour, so that each worker did only one part of the work, as a reporter said, with “little brain.” By 1851 they employed 100 workers in what must have been the most modern workplace in the city (indeed in the whole colony). By 1854 and 1856, when fires again devastated their premises, 200 workers were on the payroll. They had also opened a large lumber mill outside the city at New Lowell, where hundreds of more workers were employed.

Of course, nothing shook up the world of work as much as the steam-powered railways that began to arrive in the 1850s. The first was the Ontario, Simcoe, and Huron Railway (later renamed the Northern Railway). At the sod-turning for that project in 1851, an estimated 20,000 people turned out to watch a huge parade (out of about 31,000 people in the city in total), followed by a grand party at the brand-new St Lawrence Hall where the famous Jenny Lind performed. In 1853 the



company commissioned the construction of the first locomotive produced in any British colony and later that year began service north of the city. In 1855 the Great Western started running trains into Toronto from Hamilton, and a year later

students in this schoolhouse would have heard the arrival of the mighty Grand Trunk Railway along Toronto's eastern waterfront, connecting the city to Montreal. The railway industry created a whole new set of occupations to run the trains and service them in urban stations – locomotive engineers, firemen, brakemen, conductors, machinists, and so on.

The growth of railways prompted the opening of a large new factory near this school, on the east side of Cherry St, the Toronto Rolling Mills. The Grand Trunk had originally had its engine house on this site, but in 1858 work began on renovating it into a factory where used iron rails could be re-worked into new rails needed on the new railway lines. Production began in June 1860 (so the students in this school would not have been able to hear the loud whistle that the *Globe* claimed could be heard fifteen miles away). As William Armstrong's famous painting made clear, men worked inside this place alongside huge steam-powered forges and rolling mills. At the outset there were over 200 workers here working two shifts. Most of them had been brought from New England along with the machinery. By 1867 there would be 300.



Clearly this was a far cry from an artisanal blacksmith shop. But it is worth lingering over this picture for a moment to assess just how much had changed and how much remained the same. In spite of all the mechanical innovations of the 1850s, we are a far cry from Henry Ford's assembly line of the early twentieth century. First of all, most of the machinery introduced in the mid nineteenth century was not automatic and required the careful attention by the workers operating it. The rolling mill equipment pictured here required men to heat the



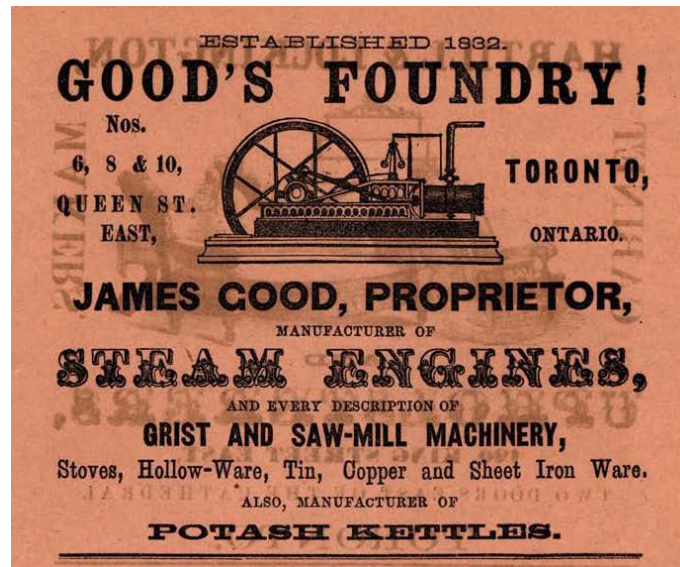
iron to the appropriate temperature and then pass it back and forth through the rolls to get the right shape and texture. This required strength but also a high level of judgment about when the product has actually ready. These were new jobs, but they involved new skills. The fact that the company had to import labour to operate this machinery was significant. The same was obviously true of driving a locomotive or working as a machinist in one of the railway shops maintaining and fixing the trains. Sewing machines changed the work practices of tailors but required that they exercise new skills in stitching up garments. In their big new distillery after 1860, Gooderham and Worts relied on the critical skills of the millers to gauge how the millstones were working and to adjust them regularly and on other workers around the still who guaranteed quality control. Even in Jacques and Hay's giant factory, the workers were still apprenticed and taught all aspects of woodworking, to ensure that they could handle the complexities of making wooden furniture and turn out the highest quality product. Carvers,

polishers, upholsterers, and others were new highly skilled occupational groups within the factory. So technological change involved plenty of reskilling within the expanding workforce.

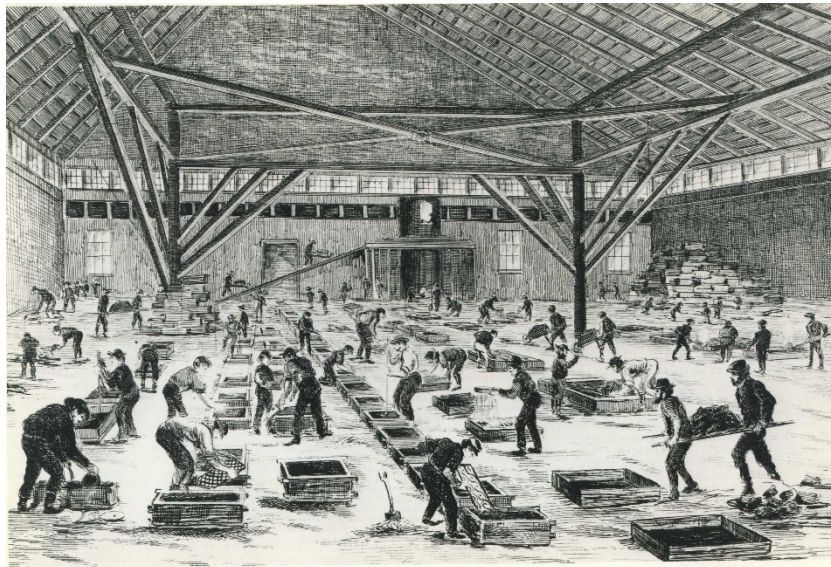
The rolling-mill painting can also tell us something else. Despite all the mechanization, employers still needed men to lift and carry and load and unload and so on. Labourers might now be working in a new setting, but their strong bodies were still crucial to work in the production process.



Some industries expanded with little mechanical change at all. They simply brought together many more skilled workers under one roof to perform traditional manual tasks. Foundries were probably the best example of that. In places like the large St Lawrence Foundry at Front and Parliament or James



Good's foundry on Queen St East, which had 200 men by 1854, the metalworking went on much as in the past, though under the managerial supervision of the owners. We have no images from a Toronto foundry in that period, but we do have one from one of the largest foundries in Montreal in 1872, the Clendinning Foundry. Note that there is no machinery here. Moulders are handling the iron and shaping it into products like stoves all by hand. And once again labourers are at work moving stuff around.



Perhaps most important, we should never forget that the big employers that caught so much attention existed alongside the hundreds of artisans who still ran their small workshops in the old manual ways. The 1850s were years of transition,



but the change was uneven and slow, and by the time this schoolhouse closed at the end of the decade, the parents of many of the children enrolled here were undoubtedly doing much the same kind of work that they had always done.

Three more features of all this work need to be emphasized. First, almost all industries were seasonal. The production cycle in some industries had distinct seasons. Construction of course mostly wound up for the winter. Before the age of refrigeration, brewing had to be concentrated in the winter and early spring. Clothing production also had its seasons. So did foundry work. So, most wage-earners had to get used to being laid off for big chunks of time each year. The annual winter freeze-up also meant that many goods could not be imported or shipped out, and many seamen, longshoremen, and carters thus had no work. For the city's many labourers, the uncertainty was even greater. They were typically hired only by the day and let go when they were no longer needed. So, they could be desperately trying to piece together enough work to maintain themselves and their families. Winters were particularly hard when production slowed down, road work was curtailed, almost all building stopped, and transportation and work around the docks ground to a halt. Prices of all necessities went up in the winter, including firewood for cooking and heating (the *Montreal Gazette* estimated that in the 1850s factory workers in that city spent about 20 per cent of their income on firewood). At the same time, the severe competition for the few jobs available led employers to cut wages drastically. The seasonality of work was hard to cope with. The arrival of the railways may have made some difference. The fact that they could run year-round probably changed occupational rhythms for other groups of workers. Some might have been able to look forward to more employment every year. But seasonality would last for many working people till at least the end of the nineteenth century.

Of course, the problem of unemployment deepened every time the economy went into a longer-term slump (as it did massively starting in 1857). The mayor claimed that half the mechanics, labourers, and clerks were out of work in 1859.

The second noteworthy feature of the work world, and in contrast to the first, was that working days were long. Ten to twelve hours a day was the most common shift, and fourteen-hour shifts were not unknown, especially in construction. Six days a week. So the cycle of work was intense bouts of somewhat irregular work



time away from the job was under just as much scrutiny as at work, whether it was slipping into a pew at Little Trinity, where Enoch Turner, William Gooderham, and James Worts were pillars of the church, or standing by the bar in one of the many taverns in the area.

These patriarchal relations between employer and employee can conjure up an image of a kindly master patting the head of a young worker and gently guiding his work. That may have happened, but there was a much harsher disciplinary



dimension as well. There is evidence that employers beat boys working for them who didn't do what they were told. But there was an even more serious weapon in the hand of masters. Many youngsters who began work for a master were bound to him legally by an indenture of apprenticeship, which their parents or guardian and the employer had to sign. In return for regular meals, clothing, and shelter under the master's roof, and perhaps a smidgeon of schooling, they were bound to serve their master in any way he demanded. By the 1850s many cases of runaway apprentices were heard in the local police court, where the boys might be fined or jailed for failing to obey their masters or leaving without permission.



In the first few decades of Upper Canada's existence, local magistrates had been paying little or no attention to the English laws of master and servant that might have transferred across the Atlantic, but apparently were generally ignored. But in 1847 the Province of Canada passed its own Masters and Servants Act that could be used more effectively to restrain workers' behaviour. In 1851 the legislature passed a similar law governing apprentices. Even without a formal

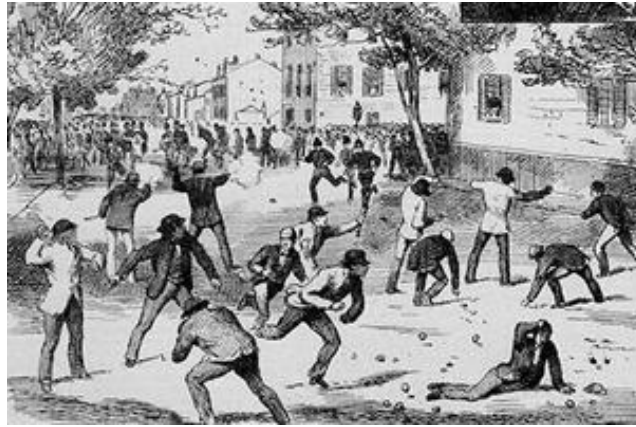


contract, all workers fell under the terms of this new act, which assumed workers owed their masters loyal and obedient service. It was common for adult workers with a skill to be hired for a week, a month, or even a year at a time. Employers wanted to be sure to hold onto valuable workers, to keep them from drifting between jobs, and to make sure that they were obedient on the job. Failure to stay put and tug the forelock to the boss could (and often did) land you before the police magistrate, who had the power to impose a heavy fine and/or up to a month in prison (in practice, very few actually ended up in jail). Over the next thirty years, 679 cases involving desertion or disobedience were heard in Toronto. Just over half of those were found guilty, and 60 per cent of those had to pay fines. The leading historian on this legislation says that the deterrent effect on workers was much greater than these numbers might suggest (much like the number of whippings of slaves on southern plantations). Moreover, when legislatures passed laws incorporating the first railways, they included clauses that allowed companies to take employees to court if they broke the rules set down in the company rule books. Numerous prosecutions occurred. The same tight legal

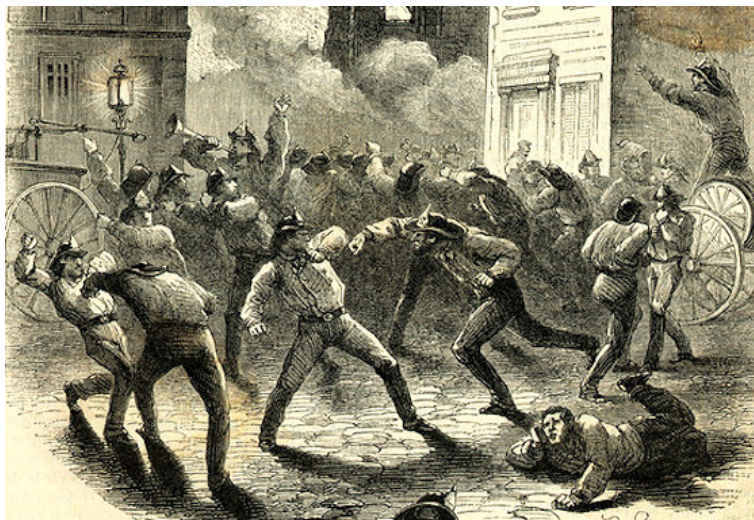
straight jacket applied to sailors, many of whom ended up jail for disobeying their ships' masters.

At mid century, then, a transition was underway away from an employment relationship that assumed an employer would take care of his workers in some way towards a greater emphasis on authoritarian control over the work force. The government had stepped in to impose some discipline on this allegedly growing threat in the urban labour market. Letting an employer use the law to enforce discipline in his workplace would only be repealed when a law was passed in 1877 to amend the master and servant legislation making it no longer illegal to breach your contract of employment. Up to that point, a disobedient worker was a criminal.

What seemed to be going on here was a new concern with order in this colonial society. There was a rising crescendo of fear, stoked in part by rumours of riots and revolutions in Europe starting in 1848, where the term "the dangerous classes" had been born. The elites in the colony began to notice that something new was happening. For half a century people had been arriving in Toronto as a waystation on their way to setting up their own farm, but now it seemed that many newcomers were getting stuck in the city, unable to get free or affordable land, and having to settle into more or less permanent wage-earning work to survive. And this growing mass of working people in the city, so many of them Irish, seemed to bring disorder and danger in various forms. Let me focus on four forms of disorder.

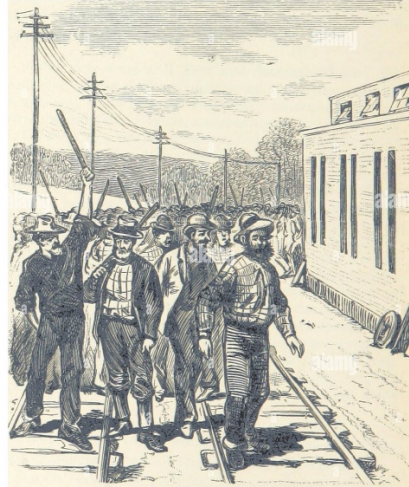


**Rowdiness and crime:** crowds surged through the streets at election times to intimidate voters. The violent factions of the Orange and the Green confronted other in huge riots – there were six of these between 1852 and 1858. Volunteer fire brigades, which were also working-class social clubs, battled with each other



in the street over who had priority at a fire (at one fire on Church St in 1855 they were brawling while the fire blazed on and then turned on the police who tried to

break them up). A few weeks after that incident a group of firefighters got into a confrontation with some circus clowns and another riot broke out. Outside the city, on the large construction projects to build canals and then, in the 1850s, railways, rowdy labourers were rioting to gain work and wages. The existing



police force in Toronto was small and too closely tied to the Orange Order, the popular wing of local Conservatism. So in 1858 a new board of police commissioners was created to oversee a new, larger force of 58 men, who were more carefully screened to ensure some minimal level of professionalism.



**Drunkenness and immorality:** the number of licensed taverns and illicit shebeens increased and public drunkenness was widespread. In 1850 the chief constable reported that the city had 206 beer shops and 152 taverns – one for every fifteen



houses. In the 1850s the local temperance movement began to demand not simply abstinence but outright legal prohibition. In 1855 a prohibition measure actually had solid support in the Assembly of the Province of Canada, but the speaker of the house rejected it on a technicality. Cases of drunkenness continued to make up about half the cases before the police magistrate. In the same vein, in 1845 the Province of Canada had also passed a Sabbatarian law to shut down most activities on Sunday. In 1850 a Sabbath Protection Alliance was formed to try



to get the law enforced. Six years later, the province passed a total ban on gambling. The police, in fact, were becoming the main instrument of moral reform in its many manifestations – attempting to suppress drunkenness, gambling, illicit sex, youthful rowdiness, Sunday pleasures, and so much more. And most of those charged under this new legal regime were working people.



**Disease:** typhus struck in 1847 and 1849, cholera again in 1854. Hospitals were overwhelmed, and there were many deaths. Public-health interventions were minimal. In 1855 a new General Hospital opened, intended only for the poor (as all public hospitals in the mid nineteenth century were).



**And abject poverty.** The numbers of impoverished people struggling to get by were rising noticeably. In response, there was a sudden growth of new charities to deal with them. The city had already established a House of Industry in 1837 to provide outdoor relief and accommodation for the poor without a home. But in 1848 a much larger building was opened at Elm and Elizabeth (which is still

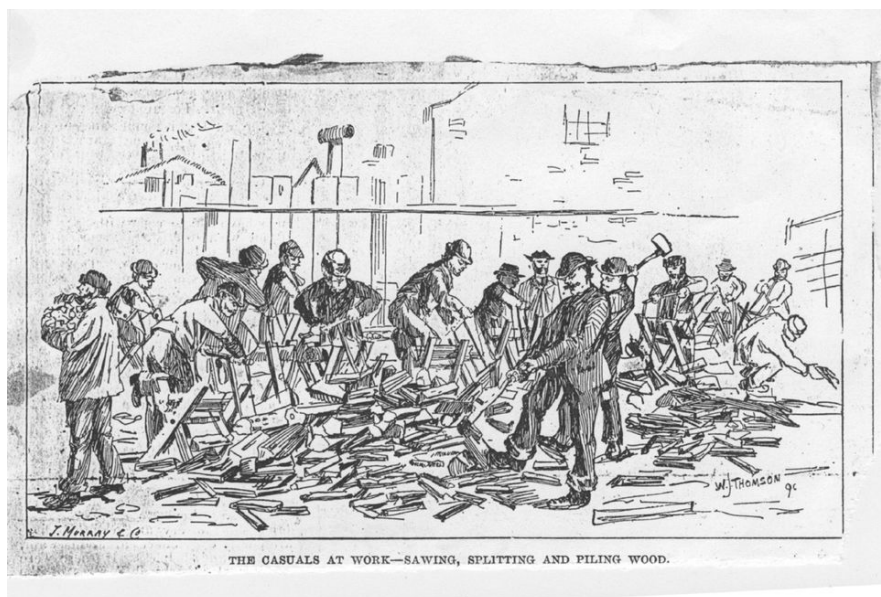


standing). In 1851 a group of elite women founded the Orphans' Home and Female Aid Society. In 1855 the Roman Catholic Church began construction of a

large new charitable institution known as the House of Providence on the land behind St Paul's Roman Catholic Church on Queen St. These new institutions did



far more than simply hand out groceries. They wanted to discipline the poor to learn how to take care of themselves. Often they required some hard physical work from applicants, like breaking stones or chopping firewood, before they



provided any material help. And those who were allowed to move inside were subjected to rigid rules and controls on their behaviour. It was a house of refuge but also a house of correction. All the new charities developed a new stern

concern about the “underserving” poor – the ones who allegedly could take care of themselves or had family members who should be able to look after them and therefore shouldn’t get any charitable help.



It is in this context that we should see the rise of formal schooling in the late 1840s. To be sure, the school promoters wanted children to learn the basics of literacy and numeracy so that they could be productive workers in the evolving society, but they also wanted to instill values of industriousness, orderliness, and sobriety in behaviour as well as in thinking. The same elite thinking had brought the Mechanics’ Institute into being, a project in adult education that was intended



to promote the disciplined, rational, scientific thinking that could benefit individual workers' social and economic mobility and the broader society more generally. Some of the same voices were promoting temperance as part of a general moral self-discipline. This was the Age of Improvement.

This tougher attitude toward workers by employers, the state, and private institutions undoubtedly helps to explain why we find more unions appearing in the 1850s, many for the first time, and a wave of strikes in 1853-54. There had been a handful of unions in the city since the early 1830s, organized by individual crafts. They had been primarily benevolent organizations of journeymen intended to help them get through crises like sickness, death, or unemployment, but they also used the rituals of their unions to celebrate the traditions of their crafts and what was expected from a craftworker. Some evidently thought that their employers were not respecting the craft traditions and practices sufficiently well and insisted on better terms of employment. When the printers formed a craft union in 1832, the preamble of their constitution read:

Owing to the many innovations which have been made upon the long-established usages of the professors of the art of printing, and those of a kind highly detrimental to their interests, it is deemed expedient by the journeymen printers of York that they should form themselves into a body similar to societies in other parts of the world, in order to obtain that honorable station and respectability that belongs to the profession.



Those printers under the banner of the Toronto Typographical Society were the most aggressive of the early craft unions and in 1836 went on strike for higher wages. The great revolutionary of the period, William Lyon Mackenzie, led the employing printers in opposing the strike, which they managed to break quickly. The union lingered on for a while but had to be reorganized in 1844. That move was prompted by an effort by the employing printers to cut wages. The journeymen printers were concerned that the print shops were being flooded with poorly paid apprentices. Leading the charge of the employers were Messrs Peter and George Brown, father and son, recently arrived in Toronto and proprietors of the new *Globe* newspaper. The son, of course, was the George Brown, future father of Confederation, who would be fighting the union for the next thirty-odd years. He added insult to injury in 1845 by firing members of the



union working at the *Globe*. In 1853 and 1854 the union led all the city's printers out on strike for higher wages. It was clear that they were no longer relying on informal customary practices but now wanted to nail down terms of employment in writing for all practitioners of the craft in the city. Brown was once again their main opponent. He hired more boys and (perish the thought) women as strike-breakers.

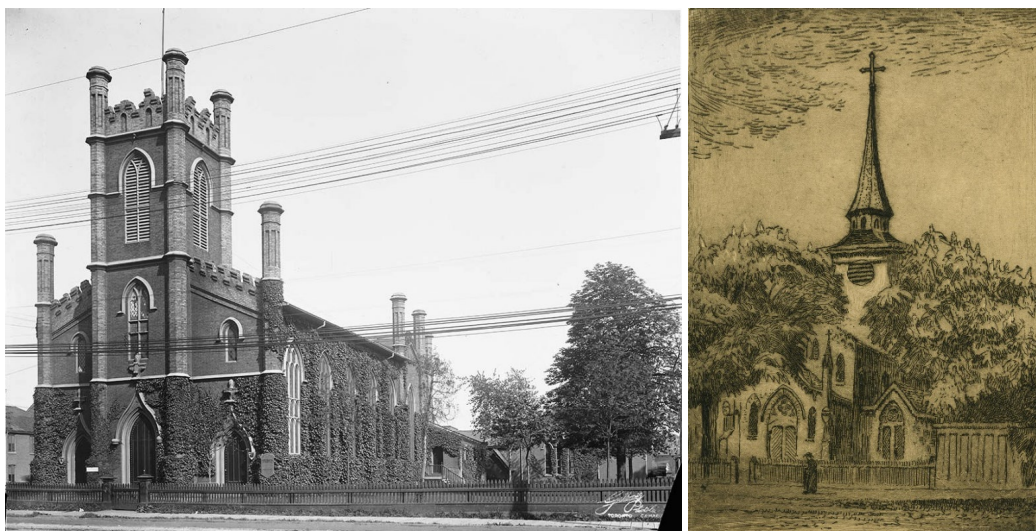
He didn't stop there. He turned to another feature of master-and-servant labour law buried in the common law, namely, the charge that using their craft societies to run a strike was a violation of the law against criminal conspiracies in restraint of trade. He took the leaders of the union to court and got them convicted and fined. In the end the striking printers got their wage increase in all the print shops except Brown's.

The printers were not alone by 1853-54. There were new unions of carpenters, tailors, stonecutters, bricklayers and masons, private coachmen, teamsters, and

shoemakers, several of which went on strike for higher wages in the spring of those years. What this suggests is that workers' relationships with some of their employers were changing. Some bosses were evidently trying to run their little businesses with a more capitalist spirit, keeping labour costs down and treating their help with less of the paternalism of the past and with less commitment to the traditions of the craft. For their part some journeymen workers were looking for more formal, negotiated regulation of their terms of employment. They saw their unions as the new defence of their crafts.

One final word about the public life of Toronto's workers. The few unions that appeared should not lead us to believe that there was a vigorous rising class consciousness among the city's working people. Rather they were regularly mobilized by the middle and upper classes to support various agendas. In electoral politics, few wage-earners could vote or hold elected office, because there were high property qualifications to allow the well-to-do to control the government. But this was an era of open voting, where men had to stand up and publicly declare whom they were voting for. This process stretched over several days. Workers were often recruited by candidates to put on shows of support or to intimidate voters for other candidates.

The churches also rallied workers around different belief structures. By far the largest Protestant group were the Anglicans, and in this neighbourhood, the leading businessmen made sure that the wage-earners and their families were kept within the fold by building Little Trinity Church with its free pews. A few



blocks north the Roman Catholic Church founded St Paul's Church to rally the growing numbers of Irish Catholics who were arriving in the city and settling in the east end. In 1845 roughly 20 per cent of Torontonians were Catholic; by 1861 the figure had reached 27 per cent. The Catholics also had a school for workers' children attached to St Paul's that paralleled the Enoch Turner Schoolhouse.

Those religious divisions got deeper as workers were rallied into two main ethnic camps – the Protestant Orange Order and the Irish Catholics. Members of these groups regularly bashed each others' heads as they paraded through Toronto streets. Anti-Catholic sentiment was rising in the 1850s, spurred on by men like George Brown, who seemed to despise the so-called "papists." At the *Globe*, he thundered: "Irish beggars are to be met everywhere, and they are as ignorant and vicious as they are poor. They are lazy, improvident and unthankful; they fill our poorhouses and our prisons and are as brutish in their superstition as Hindus." He meant, of course, the Irish Catholics.

So for Toronto's working people, the 1850s were a time of continuities but also of some disturbing changes. More of them were settling into longer-term wage-earning, although a good number would still be looking for self-employment as artisans. For many their daily existence was getting more insecure as a result of disease, unemployment, and poverty. The weight of the law and public campaigns was coming down harder on workers to change their behaviour in the workplace and in public. And ethnic and religious differences were driving a deep wedge into their ranks. But as this new industrial world unfolded in Toronto, some voices wanted to remind the public that workers deserved respect. Just a decade after this school closed, a speaker got up in a meeting of shoemakers and recited this poem:

Whom shall we honour as heroes?  
 To whom our praises sing?  
 The pampered child of fortune?  
 The titled lord or king?  
 They live by others' labour,  
 Take all and nothing give.  
 The noblest types of mankind  
 Are they that work to live.



Who spans the earth with iron?  
Who rears the palace dome?  
Who creates for the rich man  
The comforts of his home?  
It is the patient toiler  
All honour to him then.  
The truth wealth of a nation  
Is in her workingmen!

