



The Brief

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What the Mount Polley tailings disaster has to teach us to protect the Nashwaak from the Sisson mine

By TRACY GLYNN



Locals affected by the Mount Polley tailings spill say it devastated their watershed. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

One of the world’s largest tailing dams is proposed to be constructed in the upper Nashwaak River Valley as part of the proposed Sisson mine operation. With catastrophic mine waste spills on the rise and the fact that the Sisson mine’s permitting process did not adequately examine the possibility of a tailings breach, there is reason to worry about the future of the Nashwaak Watershed.

Jacinda Mack says that the lives and landscape of the Secwepemc territory in the heart of British Columbia forever changed on August 4, 2014, the day the Mount Polley tailings dam breached. Mack was the Natural Resources Manager for the Xat’sull First Nation when 25 million cubic metres (10,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools) of contaminated process water and tailings poured into Polley Lake, Quesnel Lake and, eventually, the Fraser River Basin.

Before the Mount Polley disaster, Xat’sull families harvested and processed up to 200 salmon per family. The Quesnel Lake watershed supported a lucrative sport and commercial fisheries and a tourism industry while also being home to resource extraction in the form of mining and logging.

For the losses suffered by the worst mine waste spill in North America’s history, the Xat’sull First Nation at one point received tins of salmon to compensate for the loss of wild salmon contaminated by the spill. The company that operates the Mount Polley mine and tailings dam, Imperial Metals, was never fined by the B.C. government.

“Tons of toxic substances were dumped into waterways. Fish habitats were destroyed. People’s drinking water was affected. Yet, nearly three years after the disaster, and despite clear evidence of violations of Canadian laws, no charges have been brought forward by any level of government. This is wrong, simply wrong. It sets a terrible precedent for other mines across the country, let alone internationally,” said Ugo Lapointe, Canada Program Coordinator for MiningWatch Canada. The organization is taking the B.C. government and Mount Polley Mining Corporation to court for violations of the *Fisheries Act* in relation to the disaster.

B.C. made some amendments to its mining code in response to recommendations resulting from an inquiry into the Mount Polley disaster but Mack, now the coordinator of the First Nations Women Advocating Responsible Mining, argues that the changes are not strong enough to prevent another disaster.

David Chambers, a mining technical specialist with the U.S.-based Center for Science in Public Participation, maintains tailings disasters are on the rise and advocates against the construction of new tailing dams. According to the report he co-authored, “The Risk, Public Liability, and Economics of Tailings Storage Facility Failures,” half of serious tailings dam failures in the last 70 years (33 of 67) occurred between 1990 and 2009. Eleven catastrophic failures were predicted globally from 2010 to 2019. The average cost of these catastrophic tailings dam failures is \$543 million, according to Chambers’ report.

While the industry says that they are working on best practices for tailings dams, catastrophic mine waste spills are increasing in frequency, severity and cost because of, and not in spite of, modern mining techniques. Tailings dams are getting larger and are not subjected to effective regulations.

Mining is essentially a waste management industry, says Joan Kuyek, founder of MiningWatch Canada. Kuyek

argues that mining has short-term benefits and long-term consequences. What to do with the large amounts of waste generated from the mining of ore has always been a problem. The problem is getting worse with the mining of low grade ores that generate more waste and require even larger dams or storage facilities. The increasing rate of tailings dam failures is directly related to the increasing number of larger tailings dams.

Mining companies dump tailings, the waste left over after ore has been mined and processed, into dams for permanent storage because it is cheaper than other methods that are considered less risky to the environment such as the dry-stack tailings method.

Knowing all we know about the risks associated with today’s tailings dams, one has to wonder whether we will be telling stories of the day the Sisson tailings dam breached and devastated the Nashwaak River?

Lawrence Wuest, a resident of Stanley, has worked diligently to reveal the impacts of what could be one the world’s largest open-pit tungsten and molybdenum mines. The Sisson mine, owned by Northcliff Resources and Todd Minerals, is located about 30 km from Stanley and 60 km northwest from Fredericton. The operation would have a footprint of approximately 1,250 ha, including a 145 ha open-pit that is 370 m deep and a tailings dam estimated to be 87 m in height at its deepest point and 8 km in length. In comparison, the Mactaquac dam is about 40 to 50 m in height and 0.5 km long.

According to Wuest, if a tailings breach were to occur at the Sisson mine, the volume could be four times more than that spilled at the Mount Polley site. If the tailings dam did fail, according to Wuest, the tailings would travel down the Nashwaak River and reach Stanley in 17 to 18 hours and Fredericton in three days.

The Conservation Council of New Brunswick brought together experts to examine and comment on the mine’s environmental assessment reports. Based on the experts’ assessment of the project and environmental assessment, the Conservation Council argues that the Sisson mine should not be approved. Important questions about the mine’s impact on the natural environment remain unanswered.

The Canadian government announced approval of the mine’s environmental assessment based on the company meeting conditions on June 23. Previously, in 2016, the New Brunswick government approval of the mine’s environmental assessment based on the company meeting 40 conditions. However, information on how the mining company is going to address those 40 conditions has not been made public, forcing the Conservation Council to file a Right to Information request.

When Ministers responsible for mining from provinces and territories across Canada meet in St. Andrews, New Brunswick, this August 13-15, it will be a time for us all to demand that our watersheds be protected from being forever devastated by a mine’s waste.

This story was first published in the Conservation Council’s EcoAlert magazine.

Lessons from Mount Polley to Protect the Nashwaak. With Jacinda Mack, Joan Kuyek and Ugo Lapointe on August 14 at 7:00pm at St. Mary’s First Nation Cultural Centre, 25 Dedham St. All welcome.

St. Mary’s students win inaugural indigenous youth writing award

By SOPHIE M. LAVOIE

Two Devon Middle School students were awarded the first Indigenous Youth Writing Award on June 9 in Fredericton. The Indigenous Youth Writing Award was created by the Canadian Creative Writers and Writing Programs (CCWWP/PPCCL) as a way to give back to the communities where the conference comes together in the wake of the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and of the recent scandals that have rocked the Canadian literary establishment.

Devon Middle School students Kayla Paul and Kyler Paul and their teacher received the foundational award at the opening ceremony of the conference, in the presence of conference attendees as well as distinguished guest writers and featured speakers El Jones and Herménégilde Chiasson.

The Devon Middle School students, representatives of their entire class, received recognition for their classwork in learning about Canada’s notorious Residential Schools. The project was conceived by Ginger Carson, a First Nations Literacy Teacher, and Perry Constantine, a Social Studies teacher. Students read two books by Residential School survivors, Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton: *Fatty Legs* and *When I Was Eight*.

After reading the novels, the Grade 8 students from St. Mary’s First Nation were curious to know more about the outcomes of the characters’ lives.

“They were left wondering how Olemaun’s (the main character’s) life unfolded with her siblings, her parents and friends and if there would be a third book. At this point students were inspired to write Margaret Pokiak-Fenton letters to ask her questions that their teachers could not answer,” said Robert Budde, Chair of the Board of Directors of the CCWWP/PPCCL. Speaking of this student-driven initiative, he said that the association “loves what the class did and felt they should be recognized.”

The students accepted a cheque for the establishment of an indigenous student writing prize, something Budde called: “a collaborative effort by CCWWP and Tracey Lindberg and a growing number of donors.” From the Kelly Lake Cree Nation in BC, Lindberg is a renowned author of *Birdie* and an indigenous rights activist. She was also a keynote speaker at the CCWWP conference.

El Jones, spoken word poet and social justice activist, is based in Halifax where she was the 2013-15 Halifax Regional Municipality’s Poet Laureate. At the event she declaimed poems denouncing the hypocrisy of Canada’s 150th anniversary, the treatment of prison inmates, and against racism and sexism. Former Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick and noted Acadian intellectual, Herménégilde Chiasson, gave a formal bilingual speech entitled “Contraintes/Constraints,” a retrospective look at the self-imposed obstructions and difficulties he inflicts on himself as a writer and artist.

The CCWWP/PPCCL gathered at the University of New Brunswick’s Fredericton campus for their annual meeting. Included in the CCWWP’s mandate is “to advance and discuss the social practice of creative writing and its role in social justice.” The Fredericton CCWWP/PPCCL Conference was organized by Sue Sinclair, of the UNB Department of English’s Creative Writing Program and Associate Editor of *The Fiddlehead* literary journal.



Ginger Carson, Kayla Paul and Kyler Paul (left to right) accepting the Indigenous Youth Writing Award.

“Hands Across the Bay of Fundy” for the future we want

By MARK D’ARCY



About 80 people lined up along the shore of the Bay of Fundy at Red Head on June 17 to draw attention to the opposition to the proposed Energy East pipeline. Photo by Mark D’Arcy.

Heavy rains and winds did not dampen the commitment of the approximately 80 people gathered to protect their communities and the Bay of Fundy from the proposed Energy East pipeline on June 17 in Red Head, New Brunswick. The rally and picnic, organized by the Red Head Anthony’s Cove Preservation Association, was the final “Hands Across The Water” event held in the province in June.

“This gathering is about the future of our communities and the future of our young people,” said Lynaya Astephen, spokesperson for the Association. “We want to live in a safe, healthy community and we want to prevent runaway climate change. A rapid transition to clean energy and efficiency will create more jobs and local prosperity than oil and gas.”

Red Head is the terminal point for the proposed Energy East tar sands bitumen pipeline. Up to 13.2 million barrels would be stored in the middle of this rural community at the shore of the Bay of Fundy, and over 280 supertanker exports would cross the Bay of Fundy and Gulf of Maine on their way to U.S. refineries in New Jersey, Louisiana, and Texas.

The rally and picnic on the beach took place beside Anthony’s Cove Road, near the location for the proposed tank farm. TransCanada is proposing to level the hill and forest adjacent to the road. A total of 22 storage tanks is proposed to be built for the tank farm, each one approximately 18 m high and 62 m in diameter. This industrial landscape would dramatically alter the quiet, picturesque neighbourhood of homeowners and threaten their safety.

“I’m worried about the prospect of a spill or fire at the tank storage farm,” said Astephen. “The deputy fire chief in Burnaby, B.C., has issued a scathing report on the risks presented by a similar oil tank storage facility on the West Coast. The chief warned that a fire at the expanded tank farm could create a ‘nightmare scenario’ resulting in a massive urban evacuation.”

In solidarity with the local lobster fishermen, there was a maritime lobster boil on the beach to remind everyone of the importance of the Bay of Fundy that supports thousands of fishery jobs. Both fishery and tourism jobs would be in jeopardy if there was a spill of tar sands bitumen in the Bay of Fundy, waters which have the highest and fastest tides in the world.

Well water from Red Head was served at the picnic to

highlight concerns over the safety of the water supply. Unlike conventional oil, tar sands bitumen in a water spill will form tar balls that sink to the bottom. Montreal Mayor Denis Coderre stressed that the cost of a major spill in the Metropolitan Montreal region could reach \$10 billion. A 2013 consultant’s report for the BC Ministry of Environment estimated that a bitumen spill on the salt-water ocean would leave more than 50% of the volume of oil in the water, due to viscosity, sinking and submergence of the tar.

The critically endangered North Atlantic right whale would also be in jeopardy if the Energy East project was approved. These and the other magnificent whales in the Bay of Fundy and Gulf of Maine would suffer the fate of increased noise/disturbances, ship strikes, and whale entanglement from fishery gear loss. Entanglement in lost fishing gear is a major mortality factor to whales in the Bay of Fundy and Gulf of Maine since pieces of fishing gear silently move through the water and can travel for large distances.

The participants stood in solidarity with Quebec organizations such as Coule pas chez nous! and other communities opposing the Energy East pipeline, as well as the rail transport of tar sands bitumen, including the proposed oil-by-rail marine export project ending in Belledune, New Brunswick.

Clan mother Alma Brooks read the Water Declaration on behalf of Wolastoq Grand Chief Ron Tremblay. The Energy East pipeline would cut across the entire length of their ancestral territory, a territory based on the watershed boundaries of the Wolastoq.

“We call on Canadian federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments to change their laws and regulations to accommodate the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” said Brooks. “These laws and regulations must take into account sovereign Indigenous title—absolute title—of the Wolastoqiyik, involving our inherent and inalienable rights, including among others their right to exercise free, prior, and informed consent and our right to participate in economic development that affects the water.”

“We will stand shoulder to shoulder to protect the water to secure a future for our children and our grandchildren that is healthy,” said Brooks.

Mark D’Arcy is the Energy East Campaigner for the Council of Canadians.

Lives Lived: Saint John’s working-class heroes

By DAVID FRANK

Almost all of them were born before the end of the First World War, several as early as the 1870s and 1880s. Their formal education was limited, and they entered the workforce well before they were out of their teens.

None of them started out to become leaders or win a place in history, but here they are – more than a dozen of the often anonymous local heroes who worked long and hard for the social reforms and citizenship rights that are now considered part of the Canadian way of life.

Their names? Percy Clark. Bill Craig. Frank Crilley. Fred Hodges. Angus MacLeod. Lofty MacMillan. George Melvin. Jimmy Orr. John Simonds. Art Skaling. Harold Stafford. James Sugrue. James Tighe. James Whitebone.

Most of these names are not well-known in Saint John today, but a new booklet published by the Frank and Ella Hatheway Labour Exhibit Centre makes it possible to learn about some of the people who earned public respect for their part in the long struggle to improve conditions and raise standards for working people.

Whatever their background and wherever they were employed, they came to prominence because fellow workers pushed them forward to take on leadership responsibilities. They were often chosen as local union officers, and many went on to serve on the labour council and at the provincial federation of labour.

Some later worked at the national and international levels. Some were elected to represent labour on common council. One even became the province’s Minister of Labour. Meanwhile, as their stories also show, they were active in many other ways in the social movements and institutions that make for a strong community.

It is notable that all of them are men – not surprising given the dominant male breadwinner ideology of their time. And, although a number of them were immigrants to Saint John, almost all of them share the dominant anglo-celtic background of the city. Today’s working class is more diverse, most notably in the much more equal numbers of women and men in the workforce.

Taken together, these stories demonstrate the energy, confidence and intelligence that have made Saint John one of Canada’s most resilient working-class communities. We still have great inequalities in our society and that our own times present continuing challenges. But there is much to learn from the achievements of the people presented in the booklet, especially for those who wish to defend and extend the achievements of the past.

The man behind the booklet is George Vair, a former president of the Saint John and District Labour Council, who has made it his mission to preserve and share local labour history. For several years now, he has been gathering these *Lives Lived* and posting them on the website of the Hatheway Centre.

After ten years of operation, the Hatheway Centre’s impressive display of artefacts, documents and photographs, among which includes the new booklet, continues to grow and attract attention.

In the past month alone, the Centre has seen visitors from as far away as Vancouver, Chile and Scotland. Like them, you may want to make the pleasant visit to Rockwood Park and pause for a few moments before the portraits of Frank and Ella Hatheway, two more of the city’s early social reformers, whose lives also helped inspire one of the city’s hidden heritage treasures.

Lives Lived is available at the Frank and Ella Hatheway Labour Exhibit Centre. Admission is free, and the Centre is open for visitors all summer Monday through Friday, from 10 to 4.

David Frank is the author of *Provincial Solidarities: A History of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2013). This article is based on his preface to George Vair’s *Lives Lived: Short Biographies of Former Saint John Labour Leaders*.



Author George Vair examines a new exhibit at the Frank and Ella Hatheway Labour Exhibit Centre. Photo by David Frank.

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Community Calendar

To list your community event, email info@nbmediacoop.org. For an updated listing of events, check nbmediacoop.org.

NB Media Co-op’s 8th Annual General Meeting & Keynote Speaker Bruce Livesey

Join the NB Media Co-op on Thursday, Sept. 21 at 5:00 pm to review milestones of the past year and plans for the future. Bruce Livesey, award-winning journalist for *The National Observer*, will deliver the keynote on the need for investigative journalism at 7:00 pm at Kinsella Auditorium, McCain Hall, St. Thomas University. All are welcome but you must be a member to vote at the meeting. Contact: info@nbmediacoop.org.