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Leslie Shedden CONTINUED FROM INSIDE FRONT COVER This is Leslie Shedden speaking. "I merely took pictures that they wanted. I never went down and took anything that I wanted to take. Actually • I shouldn't say it • I wasn't really interested for myself • what did I want them for? I had no use for the pictures." "You didn't see yourself as, perhaps, collecting history?" "Oh, no. I was merely working for the Dominion Coal Company, that was all. It was a job. Every picture I took was on order. They'd call me in and say, 'We want pictures of this, that, and the next thing.' Fine, that was it. I never went and took pictures on my own. I was only there for the job and for the nibney." But I wanted to argue with him, pointed out the photograph of men pulling a tarpaulin over a coal car: "Maybe it's only my eye of today that makes of that picture something more than what it was at the time you took it. And maybe what I see, in a certain sense, has nothing at all to do with reality. But I experienced a kind of sombre remorselessness, almost like drawing a cover over a coffin, almost like a storm coming up. Any sense of that when you were taking the picture?" "No. But the atmosphere that you get actually exists, because that was an overcast day. And it was kind of a grey sky. And they were pulling that over. And of course the reason for that hanging down is to show the expanse of it, the three men pulling it. And they have to take that right over and that is attached either side, in place. And there was a reason for that. When they're going any distance, especially if the coal is quite dry when it goes on, vibration and everything and the wind blowing • they lose an awful lot of weight out of there." "Okay. So it's all very practical." "Yes." "And I come with an eye of today and I'm moved • by that picture and by others • and in a sense you don't feel responsible for that. And in another sense, you were there and did it." "There's a reason behind every picture that was taken. Why was it taken? They wanted it. And why did they want it? To show something." "But what I feel today, experiences I can have off of those pictures today • do they have anything to do with what you had in mind?" "Hmmm. Something, but not completely. But I think what you're talking about happens with any picture at any time. Say, if you take a picture from 1910-- it doesn't matter what it is of • then you look at it in 1982 • your 1982 reaction is going to be far different from any relative of yours looking at it in 1910. Even a different attitude of a coal mine." And so, according to Leslie Shedden, it's nuts and bolts, meat and potatoes. And yet some of his photographs (at least to me) stand out in a space surrounded by possibility, offer up experience and suggest considerations beyond the obvious subject matter of the picture. If it is not a conscious endeavour, if it's not Leslie Shedden deliberately expressing himself • it doesn't matter. The quality of his work, his eye and assumptions, have created certain photographs that work for me in this way • and we need that. We need to see Cape Breton Island as the source of work that reveals, causes questions, disturbs, reminds, shocks, and makes us swoon. These photos don't do all that, but some, certainly are a start in that direction • and we need more intentional artwork. We have to have the courage to record Cape Breton as very few have yet to record



it, with a personal presence that demands, tests, chews up, and enlivens us. Without this, we have only a touristic portrait: wild enough, perhaps, but distant and safe. And besides, a touristic portrait • lovely as that scenery or kindly fisherman might be • is just not enough for those of us who stay here, those of us upon whose growth and perceptions the future of the island depends. Shedden's combination of mining photographs and the other element of this book, the social record (weddings, store interiors, award nights, high school annual photographs) is in itself of extreme value and suggestive to those who might do further work. Where it works as art, it affirms what is possible, and is thus encouragement. What it means remains the work of the conscientious observer. And while this is just myself saddling up the occasion of this book as an excuse to ride out these ideas, it should be clear that Mr. Shedden's reluctance to see himself as "artist" takes nothing from the book. This book is of real value for us in exactly what it is • carefully made documents of mining life and of daily life on the surface that the mining life supports. I should think it a book a lot of readers will want to own and spend time with. I know of no better photographic portrait of daily working life and machinery in Cape Breton coal mines than what is offered here. It is information we need to have to set against the popular mythology of coal mining as well as the emerging academic work being done by David Frank, Don MacGillivray, and others, detailing corporate history and the labour towns in Cape Breton. And the daily life that goes on aboveground • weddings, awards, sitting for a portrait • all participate in the larger- CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE

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