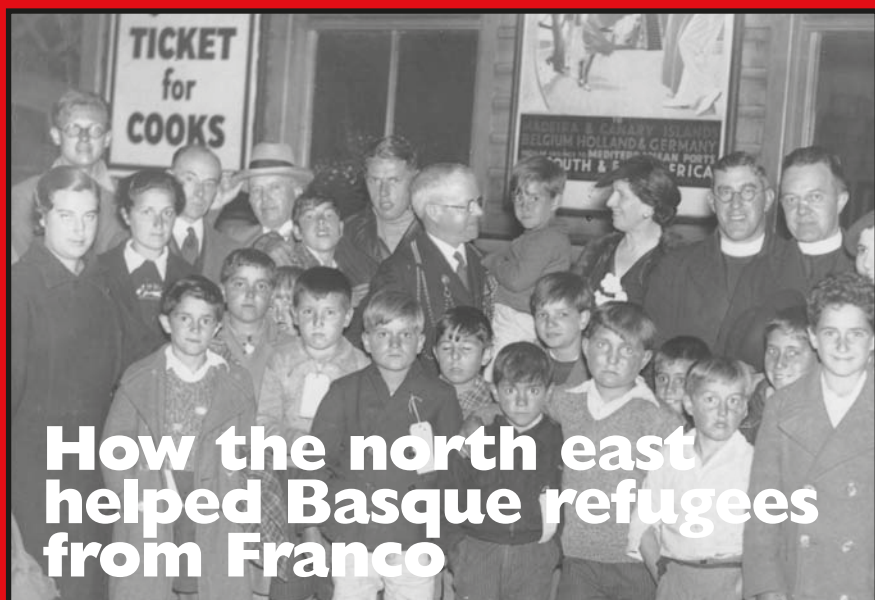


# north east history

Volume 36 2005



## How the north east helped Basque refugees from Franco

- **CLASS WAR ON THE TYNE: INDUSTRIAL ACTION 1939-1945**
- **RED ELLEN: JARROW'S SOCIALIST MP**
- **RACE RELATIONS ON 'SIXTIES TYNESIDE**
- **BOWES & BEAMISH: WHOSE HERITAGE?**
- **REVIEWS, ARCHIVE REPORT & NOTEBOOK**

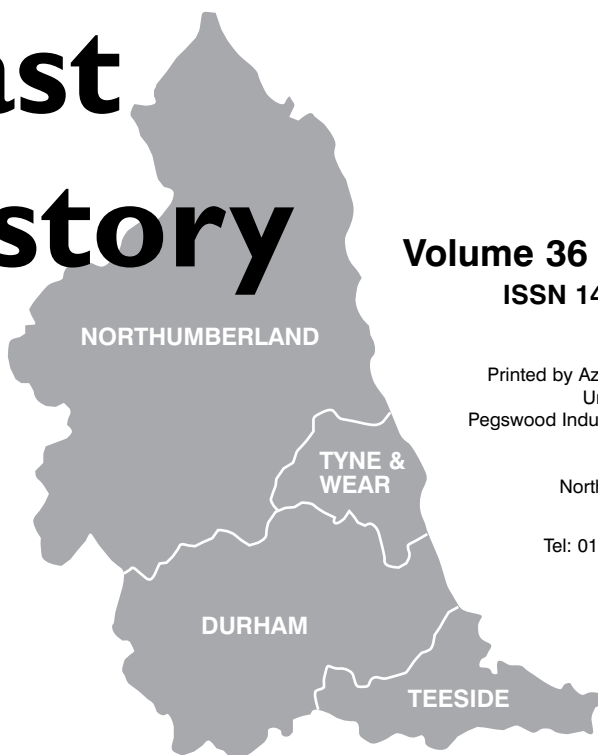
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**journal of the north east labour history society**



*north east history*

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Ben Sellars, Win Stokes, Willie Thompson & Don Watson.**

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## **Editorial**

No. 36 of the North East History Journal marks a stage in the growth of the North East Labour History Society's activities, which include not only regular and well-attended meetings but a range of additional activities such as radical walks, boat trips, visits to historical sites and other projects. The contents of this issue reflect the wide range of interests pursued by readers of NEH, its contributors and members of the Society. The main section consists of researched articles and essays covering a range of themes. Don Watson's, examines the reception in the north east and Cumbria of Basque refugee children during the Spanish Civil War, dealing with the nature of their reception and attitudes both of the local community and the organisations involved in this humanitarian enterprise.

Craig Armstrong explores industrial relations on Tyneside during the Second World War, demonstrating with detailed research and analysis that these were overall a much more complex phenomenon than has been commonly believed. David Renton brings a skilled eye to the troubled waters of race relations in late sixties Newcastle. Stuart Howard's article concerns the Bowes and Beamish museums, examining both the ideas which inspired these institutions and the character of the relations between the founders and the local communities in which they were embedded. John Mapplebeck's sparkling essay on Ellen Wilkinson, 'Red Ellen,' follows and Billy Vincent, a retired shipyard worker from Sunderland writes on the 1825 strike of seamen on the Wear completes this section.

Our strong commitment to oral history is shown in Jacqueline Apperley's interview with Harriet Vyse from Sunderland and Keith Armstrong's interviews with Peter Common and John Burke. The Reviews, Archives and Sources section cover

a variety of themes from the forgotten shipyards of the Tyne to the practice of history, Win Stokes list some of the richness of the Northumberland County Archives and Gill Cookson reports on the new County History of Durham. In the final section there is news of the Society, its meetings and projects.

Readers of the journal will note that this number is produced by an editorial collective. Owing to differences in viewpoint within the Society committee regarding the orientation of the journal the editors Joan Allen and Richard Allen felt unable to continue and indicated their wish to resign. They had, however, laid the groundwork for this issue and we have to record our appreciation of that and all that they have done for the Society over many years, Joan, for two decades.

The NELH committee appointed a sub-committee to draw up a remit for the journal and to nominate an editor. The remit was agreed at our AGM in May, with the central conception that:

*The collective has the responsibility to commission for publication (or to receive submitted) historical material relating to aspects of working people's experience in the North East, a remit which it interprets broadly. It draws upon the work both of experienced historians and contributors less familiar with the conventions of historical writing, whose development as historians it encourages and assists. A balance between different types of items for each issue is among the collective's responsibilities.*

We have every expectation of developing a journal which will attract a growing readership and form an indispensable part of the Society's endeavours to promote the study and understanding of the working people's and radical movements in the North East and to preserve and record the achievements of individuals connected with them.

Following the AGM the Committee elected Don Watson to be the editor of NEH No. 37.

## Notes on Contributors

**Jacqueline Apperley,**

is currently employed as a parliamentary research assistant. She is one of the co-ordinators for the Northern Labour Womens Network and also actively involved in several other community/national and health organisations.

**Craig Armstrong,**

was born and raised in North Shields and is currently working at Northumbria University and is busy developing a research proposal on the experiences of the North East during the Second World War.

**Keith Armstrong,**

‘has more aliases than a man on the run...his poetry is different, original and politically exhilarating.’

**Gillian Cookson,**

is editor of the Victoria County History of Durham and currently working on a major history of Sunderland. She specialises in 19th-century industrial history.

**Stuart Howard,**

teaches modern industrial and labour history at the University of Sunderland. Is presently working on a general history of north east England.

**William (Billy) Hunt-Vincent,**

is a retired Sunderland shipyard worker who is active in the Sunderland Historical Society.

**John Mapplebeck,**

is an independent television producer who was formerly Features Editor for the BBC in the North East and Cumbria. Before joining the BBC he was a reporter and feature writer for *The Guardian* in Manchester.

**David Renton,**

was employed between 2001 and 2003 as a research fellow at Sunderland University. There he began a book-length history of black struggles in the North East, which he hopes to have completed by 2007.



**John Spence,**

ex-reporter, customs officer and lecturer, he wrote his thesis on industrial relations in the shipyards & the new motor car industry in the north east.

**Win Stokes,**

is Chair of the Durham Local History Society and researches coal, ship building and primitive methodism

**Don Watson,**

has published on a variety of labour history topics, including theatre, the North East and the Spanish Civil War, sport, and bye-elections. He works in local government in the region.



Courtesy of Tyne and Wear Archive Service

Basque children and their teachers arrive in Newcastle in July 1937 and are received by the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress.

## ARTICLES & ESSAYS

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### **Politics and humanitarian aid: Basque refugees in the North East and Cumbria during the Spanish Civil War**

*Don Watson*

*May 1937 saw the biggest single arrival of refugees Britain had seen in modern times, and the only one in our history to be almost entirely made up of children. They were 4,000 children and a number of adults from the Basque regions of Spain, refugees from the Civil War that had seen their regional capital Guernika destroyed by aerial bombardment the previous month. Around four hundred of the children were looked after in this region for almost two years. They were at no.40 Percy Park in Tynemouth, 'The Larches' on the Allendale Road in Hexham, in a converted Poor Law Institution in Brampton, and at Hutton Hall near Guisborough. The Catholic Church looked after about half of the total in children's homes and convents in Newcastle, Carlisle, Darlington and Spennymoor. The episode is of interest for three reasons. Firstly, how so many child refugees were looked after entirely by the efforts of the local labour movements, churches and voluntary organisations is an interesting story in itself. But it also provides an angle on the politics of support for Republican Spain and the campaigns around it. Finally, any modern history involving the reception of refugees in the region may have some contemporary relevance, even taking account of a unique set of circumstances.*

### *Arrival*

The Basque provinces of Spain had been granted political autonomy by the Republican government and for this reason a traditionally Catholic and conservative area of the country supported the Republic against Franco's army revolt. The Basque Church hierarchy, for similar reasons, was the only one in Spain to support the Republic. The industrial wealth and strategic position of their ports also made the Basque areas an important target for the military rebel forces. By the spring of 1937 Franco had the provinces surrounded, the ports blockaded from the sea, and the towns and cities under constant bombardment from German and Italian aircraft; the most notorious example was the destruction of Guernika. Conditions for the civilian populations were desperate: daily air raids, acute shortages of food and all essentials.

Leah Manning, President of the National Union of Teachers and a prominent Labour Party figure, was in Bilbao at the time. She represented the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJCSR), a coalition of the organisations raising humanitarian aid for the Republic. She had also, alongside her NJCSR colleagues Wilf Roberts, Liberal M.P. for North Cumberland and the Independent M.P. Eleanor Rathbone, been actively helping with the evacuation of refugees from the Bilbao area to France<sup>1</sup>. As Basque children were being evacuated in accompanied groups to France, Belgium, Mexico and the Soviet Union, Leah Manning lobbied the British government to permit an entry of children to Britain. She enlisted the support of the TUC, where Sir Walter Citrine believed that this cause could be presented as single-issue, non-political, and thus of a different order from other Aid Spain campaigns the TUC leadership were reluctant to support<sup>2</sup>. The Basque government insisted that Catholic organisations be

involved, and for nine months, and with reluctance, they were. The NJCSR could not act as the umbrella body for the campaign because neither the TUC nor the Catholic Church would participate in an organisation that was prepared to work with Communists. Therefore a separate organisation, the Basque Children's Committee was formed, although its leadership contained much the same people as the NJCSR: Roberts, Rathbone, and the maverick Tory Duchess of Atholl.

The British government finally agreed to permit up to 4,000 children to enter, on the strict understanding that absolutely no public spending was to be involved in their maintenance.

On 23 May 1937 4,000 children whose parents had applied for their evacuation, and selected according to a quota system based on the representation of the political parties in the Basque parliament, sailed for Southampton under the protection of a British destroyer. Fifteen priests and about two hundred women teachers and assistants accompanied the children. One of the assistants, Carmen Gil, had survived the bombing of Guernika and eventually worked at Percy Park. She had volunteered to come after discussion within her staunchly Republican family:

I remember my brother, he said I know a lot of people who want their children to go to England. They are my friends, some are going to the front. They will always be grateful to you for taking their children to England where they know they will be safe. He said, I was not running away, I was doing the best job <sup>3</sup>.

This suggests that to accompany the children was seen as war work in the Republican cause. The refugees were initially accom-

modated in a tent camp at North Stoneham provided by Southampton Trades Council and local churches, and staffed by volunteers. One of those involved recorded that, to keep the peace, it was necessary to divide the camp into political sections: Basque nationalist, Socialist, Communist and Anarchist. Once in the camp the children painted the initials of their parents' political party or trade union on their belongings, or decorated tents with the hammer and sickle, illustrating the politicised environment they had come from <sup>4</sup>. The plan was to disperse the refugees to group accommodation around the country organised by local Basque Children's Committees, and this had been done by September 1937. But before that took place came some incidents that were to cause some public relations difficulties for the Basque Children's Committees and the local efforts for the duration of the Spanish war.

Firstly, the early days at the camp were chaotic and revealed problems in the organisation. Some of the children were discovered to have typhoid, and a few to have tuberculosis. When Franco's forces captured Bilbao – the area many of the children came from – the news was announced to the children over loudspeakers and with no understanding of what it would mean to them. This resulted in scenes of disorder inside and outside the camp brought on by fear, grief and uncertainty. This was soon calmed down, but for several right-wing newspapers, far more sympathetic to Franco than to the 'Reds' of the Republic, the Basque children could now be presented in terms of a xenophobic panic. Headlines included: 'Unruly Mob of Basque Children', 'Reared in Habits of Violence', 'Spain's Red Children', and 'Basque Children Stampede'. Although their arrival in Southampton had attracted news media sympathy, from now on any allegations

received national coverage, generally with little effort to establish the facts <sup>5</sup>.

This coverage damaged the national fund raising for the Basque children, from trade union branches as well as from the general public<sup>6</sup>, and there is certainly evidence that it put the North East campaign on the defensive. Activists in the local committees felt it necessary to counter the distortions and exaggerations circulating about the children at major public meetings in Carlisle. Nell Badsey, in charge of the Tynemouth hostel, had to do the same during press interviews. The same was the case at a public campaign meeting in Hexham. At a Hutton Hall ‘open day’ it was reported that ‘there is not the slightest suggestion of any of the untoward incidents reported elsewhere in the country’, especially welcome publicity since the alleged incidents had attracted editorial discussion in the local press<sup>7</sup>. Even a serving International Brigade soldier was quoted in a letter to his old National Unemployed Workers’ Movement branch in South Shields as:

...expressing astonishment at having read in English newspapers that Spanish Refugee children are said to be bad tempered...People who say that should go through their experiences in Spain, I wonder how they would react? <sup>8</sup>.

The local support committees clearly believed that they had a public relations issue on hand.

### *The Local Committees*

Apart from the Catholic Church several of those supporting the local hostels were active in other aspects of Spanish Aid, and campaigning for the refugees was an extension of their existing work. For

example in Hexham, the Committee included Jim Atkinson, who on behalf of Voluntary Industrial Aid for Spain had, with the help of Corbridge Boys' Club, constructed a 'motor cycle ambulance' and ridden it from Hexham to Valencia for the Republican army medical services <sup>9</sup>. At Brampton Alastair Morton, chairman of the Spanish Relief Committee was very involved, as was Carlisle Trades Council, and in Tynemouth the Reverend John Patten of the Northumberland Street Mission to Seamen and a hostel committee member was involved in other activity for the Spanish cause. Support and fund raising for Tynemouth was also organised in Gateshead by the Labour Party and the Independent Labour Party, and G.C. Esther of the Gateshead Spanish Relief Committee. Ruth Pennyman, chair of the Teeside Spanish Relief Committee, organised collection branches and fund raising for Hutton Hall throughout the county <sup>10</sup>.

As well as the Catholic Church there was a significant involvement by the local Protestant and Nonconformist churches. Another Tynemouth committee member was a Baptist minister; the Newcastle Presbytery agreed to raise funds through its congregations; the Bishops and a number of clergy in Cumberland and Westmorland signed the public appeal for the Brampton hostel. The Rector of Hexham supported the hostel at 'The Larches' as did Corbridge Parochial Church Council, who placed collection boxes in the church and held collections at its meetings. The chairman of the Newcastle Basque Children's Committee was the Archdeacon of Northumberland <sup>11</sup>. Finally the range of political party support was wide enough to include, in Tynemouth for example, the Liberal Borough Councillor R.E. Jackson and the hostel manager, Nell Badsey, who seems to have been the only Communist in the region to have been involved with the Basque refugees virtually full-time <sup>12</sup>.

### *Finance and Fund Raising*



The Basque government had insisted that the children be looked after in groups, as opposed to being temporarily fostered in single households, believing that this would help to preserve their cultural identity. This also meant that the responsibility for the costs could not be met by one host family or individual for one child; the costs of a large group of children could only be met by organisations. Although the leadership of the NJCSR always chose to campaign in a 'broad' way, seeking single-issue alliances regardless of any other differences, in this case the motive was also the only practical one: no single organisation could meet the expense of looking after a large number of children. It was, too, an open ended commitment. After the capture of Bilbao and the exodus of adult refugees around Spain and into France, it could not be predicted when the children would return.

Sympathetic owners lent the properties in Tynemouth and Hexham to the BCC, and similarly Sir Alfred and Lady Pease lent Hutton Hall to the Committee. In Brampton the former Workhouse – rapidly renamed as 'The Children's Hostel' – had been empty for some time but seemed to be the best available building in the county. The costs of the refurbishment were 'heavy' but 'met privately' and were not a call on the funds being raised for the support of the children. Beds and other essentials were obtained at cost, the cleaning and refitting of the hostel carried out by volunteers, including craftsmen and electricians from local factories and Naworth Colliery. At Hutton Hall that work was carried out by volunteers from the Middlesbrough Settlement <sup>13</sup>.

Support for three of the four hostels was widespread and its sources various. South Shields Left Book Club held a film show of Pudofkin's *Storm Over Asia* to buy blankets for Percy Park, while

North Shields Methodist Sisterhood performed two one-act plays to raise funds at Howard Street Baptist Church. A group of teachers or a trade union branch, for example, would agree to 'sponsor' a particular child by donating a fixed sum each week, and the regularity made this a preferred source of income. Donations of money, food and clothing came from Co-op stores, individual shopkeepers or from collections at workplaces. Collections in Westmorland and Cumberland found good responses in Wigton, classed at the time as a 'distressed area'. Knitting parties supplied woollens, gifts of money and food were known to arrive anonymously and for a while in Tynemouth the very appearance of the refugees was enough to start impromptu collections among complete strangers <sup>14</sup>.

One obvious route to raising funds was through the visual presence the children could provide. The Brampton 'colony' mounted evenings of traditional music, song and dance at the Queen's Hall in Carlisle, at the opening of the town playground in Brampton and around the local villages. At Spennymoor too the children from the Catholic home performed in national dress at village occasions <sup>15</sup>.

A crucial factor in financing the campaign was the support it attracted from the local labour movements. In Cumbria although the Brampton hostel clearly attracted a high level of middle class support it was also gaining practical help from miners and factory workers. At Tynemouth Nell Badsey drew attention to the generous and consistent support 40 Percy Park received from the Northumberland and Durham Miners' Lodges – '...[which] have responded magnificently to appeals for assistance and not one of them has turned them down' <sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless she still had to

appeal regularly for funds; absolutely everything had to be raised from donations and for an indeterminate length of time.

But in Hexham there seems to have been little, if any, labour movement involvement, probably due to the nature of the locality in 1937 and, as will be seen this was to pose problems.

*Life in the North East 'Colonies'*

Reading between the lines of speeches and articles it can be said that whereas the Basque children were certainly not 'out of control', they could be hard work. Nor was this surprising, given that they were suddenly in a strange land where they couldn't understand the language and without their families, whom they knew to be at risk. There was also of course what they had gone through, as was explained to the local press at least once:

One twelve year old said that his uncle and cousin had been killed in an air raid in Durango. Artillery in the mountains were trained on the principal streets of the town and kept up an almost ceaseless bombardment. The death and destruction they have witnessed at such a young age is appalling <sup>17</sup>.

Some problems were immediate, such as children hoarding food, and at first in Tynemouth boys were terrified by an artillery display at the Castle and hid under beds in panic whenever an aircraft approached <sup>18</sup>. Dealing with all this as well as the daily round of cooking, cleaning, washing and providing education were the small number of the older refugees and local volunteers. A young Spanish teacher and assistant were assigned to groups of around twenty children and in addition volunteers organised by the local committees carried out a lot of the practical work.

Spanish speakers were obviously in demand because they were crucial to the children's understanding of and participation in the life around them. So at Hutton Hall two local English teachers fluent in Spanish came forward, Spanish speakers living in the Tynemouth and Carlisle areas became involved, as they did in Hexham. In the Catholic homes there are reports that a number of the clergy and nuns were bilingual. Education was provided in the hostels themselves because language barriers ruled out local schools. At Percy Park for example Tynemouth Borough Council donated schoolroom equipment, as did Cumberland County Council for Brampton <sup>19</sup>.

It is evident that efforts were made by the Basque Children's and Spanish Relief Committees to include the children in their local communities. In Tynemouth the local boy scouts frequently made up the opposing football team, and local families with boys the same age would take them out. Basque children took part in the sports at Boldon Colliery and District's Field Day, and five boys from Percy Park were in the team representing North Shields YMCA at the North East Boys Clubs Games in 1938. The Hutton Hall children were included in the Middlesbrough Unemployed Association's annual Christmas Treat in 1938 <sup>20</sup>.

Nevertheless there are clues that what was provided for the children varied from place to place. The BCC national inspector, charged with monitoring standards of care at the hostels, described the refugees at Hutton Hall as 'living in surroundings that any child might envy...it is probably the finest centre in the country of the accommodation of Basque refugee children' <sup>21</sup>. Percy Park too was in a premier residential area by the sea, but

other hostels seem to have been in more difficult circumstances. Although the Catholics raised funds through their own networks, a public appeal was made for their Scotswood hostel because the parish was 'not blessed with much of the wealth of this world'. Appeals for 'The Larches' in Hexham stated that it needed carpets and coal, and later toys, games, balls and gardening equipment <sup>22</sup>. Later too public appeals for 'The Larches' revealed that the hostel was having serious problems in gaining support locally, receiving a low response to requests for furniture, cutlery, and kitchen utensils that would normally go to jumble sales. In December 1937, after barely four months, the Hexham hostel closed due to the lack of financial support and the children were dispersed to other parts of the country <sup>23</sup>. Unlike the other 'colonies' in the region it could not attract the broad range of support that financial viability required.

There was a further political element to the quality of care the young refugees received. It has been said already how it was clear at the Southampton camp that the children had come from highly political environments. There is evidence that this was true of those dispersed to the North East and Cumbria. For example, a teacher bound for Brampton explained how some of the children could tell which English newspapers were 'fascist' ones, that the Republic was not being aided by other countries in the way Franco was, and that the Basques 'were Catholics once but since the war have taken other views'. At 'The Larches' a reporter was told that 'Most of the children have lost relatives or friends during the war. They all hate General Franco' <sup>24</sup>. The observer at Southampton had concluded that the emotional reassurance the children needed was therefore best expressed politically, through a shared bond of anti-fascism and support for the Republic, even something as simple as a *Salud!* <sup>25</sup>. Interviews with former Basque refugees in Britain suggest that this

was right; where a hostel had a good level of labour movement participation there was a political community of support which the children appreciated greatly <sup>26</sup>. At Percy Park under Nell Badsey this would have been the case, and at Brampton too through the involvement of Carlisle Trades Council and the local unions.

### *Opposing Voices*

There was some opposition to the proposal to bring the children to the region even among sympathisers. One objection was that the estimated cost of ten shillings a week to maintain a refugee was considerably more than the three shillings paid for a child of local unemployed parents by the Public Assistance Committee. Also, that raising funds for the Basques would compete with the range of local children's charities that also had to appeal regularly for money. For example before the children arrived in the region the Lord Mayor of Newcastle, speaking at a meeting of the Poor Children's Holiday Association, expressed this concern at the effect fund raising for the refugees might have on the finances of local children's charities, concluding that 'we must look after our own first'. This drew an angry reaction from two local clergymen, one of whom pointed out the sum of three shillings was more a comment on the attitudes of the PAC than on the refugee campaign <sup>27</sup>. Nevertheless this apparent discrepancy between money for a foreign refugee child in the area and that for a local child in need did surface at public meetings, where it had to be explained that ten shillings included the overheads involved in running a group home <sup>28</sup>.

Some residents of Percy Park objected to the establishment of the hostel on the grounds that the covenants governing the property stipulated that it had to be maintained as a private residence. Within two days of the refugees' arrival some neighbours were

quoted in the local press as saying that they felt sorry for the boys, but that they should have been consulted before the hostel was established, that the children would be disorderly, or that it would destroy the amenities of the area, or that it would be the beginning of turning Percy Park into a street of flats and hotels. Four days after the children arrived, a notice to quit was served by agents of the Duke of Northumberland, on whose estate Percy Park was; some residents had persuaded him to enforce the covenants. But when the boys left over a year later some of the residents admitted that their objections were really different: 'we contend that the Basque scheme was a purely political one and run by people of the extreme Left' <sup>29</sup> – possibly a reference to Nell Badsey's Communist Party membership. In any event the notice to quit was not enforced.

The middle class opposition in Hexham seems to have been more formidable, and there is some evidence that it too had a political element. A press editorial was generally sympathetic to the refugees, but also 'found it difficult to understand the opposition aroused in some quarters by the Hexham hostel...it seems to be believed that them coming here is part of a political stunt...' Allegations that the children had damaged the fencing around 'The Larches' were put to the Urban District Council, and the Council was also quick to clarify that it would not be under any expense should an epidemic break out at the hostel. But the point is that in contrast to the other three hostels the Hexham Committee could not raise enough support locally to make theirs viable, which suggests that the opposition there was successful <sup>30</sup>.

Carmen Walker has recalled that there was some, although not much, antipathy in Percy Park:

They were very good, the people, except the next-door neigh-

bour on one side. There was one neighbour, she was very, very, good. They had long gardens, allotments almost, and they used to send rhubarb, which we'd never had in Spain. And then on the other side it was the opposite. She was horrible. Whatever the children did, it was always wrong. If they played in the back garden, or in the front. They would play football in the garden, and going in for the ball, as boys would, you know. I don't think it was politics with her, she just didn't like foreigners, the English had to be best <sup>31</sup>.

She remembers too that 'some people were good, very kind', and this is certainly the impression given by accounts in the local press. One of the very few hostile letters printed was quickly exposed as part of a national letter-writing campaign organised by the British Union of Fascists <sup>32</sup>. It is important not to make too much of the negative reactions, at least outside Hexham. The communities in the region responded well to the children and to the efforts to include them in local activities. After one year the local press described the Basque boys in one area as 'as much a part of Tynemouth as Percy Park itself' <sup>33</sup>.

### *The Role of the Catholic Church*

The Catholic Church in England, certainly its newspapers, regarded the Spanish war as one for civilisation, in which the institutions and values of Catholic Christianity had to be defended against the forces of atheism and Communism. As a natural sympathiser with Franco the Church was a reluctant and comparatively short-lived partner in the refugees' cause. But paradoxically in the North East and Cumbria, as in the rest of the country, the Catholic Church made the greatest single contribution to the care of the Basque refugees. The numbers quoted in contemporary



publications vary greatly, but at the end of the Church participation in 1938 Joseph McCormack, the Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle, reported that 227 had been supported over the year <sup>34</sup>. These were St. Vincent's Home in Brunel Terrace in Scotswood, the Convent of Mercy in Wigton and the convent at Nazareth House in Carlisle, St. Peter's children's home (or 'Poor Law School') in Gainford near Darlington; St. Mary's Home near Spennymoor and St. Joseph's Home in Milbank Road, Darlington. The numbers in each could vary from six girls in a convent to one hundred and forty boys in a home.

The Northern Catholic Calendar set out the Church's position on the Spanish war and the refugees very clearly.

An unfortunate sequel to this struggle for Christianity in Spain has been the arrival of Spanish refugees in England; many of them should prove an excellent object lesson to our fellow countrymen of the evils of Red propaganda and teaching. Some 350 of these refugees have found a home in the diocesan orphanages and the cost of their upkeep must be found by the diocese. It is wrong that they should have been brought here, but now that they are in our midst we must do what we can for them. Generous benefactors have helped, but, even so, the cost of their keep far exceeds the donations. <sup>35</sup>.

Thus the local Church was quick to invoke the press allegations and take the opportunity to score political points. Bishop McCormack had already summed up the Church's position in his Pastoral Letter to the Hexham and Newcastle Diocese in June 1937. Here the Bishop stated that his motive in originally offering to support up to 325 children was that he 'feared that their faith

might be endangered' – presumably meaning that they could be looked after by non-Catholic agencies. He continued that, 'We did not bring them and many of us think they ought never to have been brought. However, they are here now. Not one of us, surely, can dare to turn them away' <sup>36</sup>. But this less than enthusiastic position did not impede the local Catholic relief effort.

Bishop McCormack outlined the financial arrangements needed to support the children in his Pastoral Letter. When a Catholic child was placed in a Diocesan Poor Law Home by public authorities that child was partly maintained by those authorities and partly by the voluntary contributions the Homes could raise. But children who were 'voluntary cases' – and the Basque children were classed as such – had to be entirely maintained by voluntary contributions with no assistance from the state. Again this was estimated at ten shillings per week. This was achieved in several different ways. One was by a form of 'adoption', whereby one or more families, streets or individuals paid for an individual named child – very similar to the systems used for the non-Church hostels. Collection boxes were a regular feature at services and Church functions, and fundraising events were included in the usual round of Church affairs. The project was managed by a diocesan 'Basque Children's Refugee Fund Committee,' chaired by Father Parker, Secretary to the Diocesan Homes.

In some respects the Church was well placed to help the Basques since it already had a network of children's homes – the 'diocesan orphanages'- and convents around which the young refugees could be dispersed. Unlike the trades union and voluntary groups, it did not need to find and maintain new premises. But it did share the problems of raising funds to support the children

once they had been housed in the homes. There was an added complication since the Church chose to remain aloof from other fundraising efforts for the Basques. For example in Newcastle, although there is evidence that the Trades Council made an approach to the Catholic Committee it decided to raise funds for the care and maintenance of the children in the Catholic homes only <sup>37</sup>. Each diocese had to rely on its own efforts, although some official help was received. Darlington Education Committee furnished additional classrooms at the Homes and the local Public Assistance Committee lent beds, bedding and other essential equipment to the homes in its area.

The efforts in the Newcastle and Hexham Diocese were a success. The Bishop's Pastoral Letter of June 1938, circulated two months after the last of the children who had been looked after by the Church had been repatriated, recorded that the funds raised had exceeded the sum required <sup>38</sup>.

It is not clear how much the Church and non-Church 'colonies' had to do with each other; Carmen Walker recalls visits between Brampton and Percy Park, but definitely not with Scotswood <sup>39</sup>. Probably the mutual suspicion with which the two camps would have regarded each other, as will be seen, ruled out any contact between them.

### *The Repatriation Conflict*

The Vatican sent an Apostolic Delegate to Bilbao in August 1937, barely two months after the fall of the city. This was widely interpreted as an implicit endorsement of Franco's authority, against that of the elected government <sup>40</sup>. The Pope charged the Delegate with the task of enquiring about the evacuated children, and Vatican

lobbying of both the British government and the English Church hierarchy began. Within days, in Newcastle, and before many of the children allocated to the region had actually arrived, Father Parker suggested that it was time to start sending groups of the children back. His argument was that the Catholic homes were receiving letters from parents saying that conditions were now better, with the fighting over in Bilbao and plenty of food available. He also believed that as time went on it would be increasingly difficult to look after so many children. The Spanish Embassy brought the press cutting to the attention of the BCC, which suggests that this was an early indication of the imminent political controversy.<sup>41</sup>

Father Parker's intervention drew a robust response from G.C.Esther, a Labour Party activist and Secretary of the Gateshead Spanish Relief Committee. He put forward what was to be the national position of the BCC, that they suspected that many of the letters being received from parents had been written under duress, the result of pressure exerted by the Francoist authorities. The BCC and its local hostels, by contrast, were receiving letters from parents requesting that their children stayed where they were. Esther was obviously aware of Bishop McCormack's position that the children should not have been permitted to come, and cited this as evidence that Father Parker had taken the Bishop's position to its logical conclusion. He received some support from a local press editorial, which expressed surprise that a priest who had been so active in arranging support for the children should advocate returning them to a country still racked by war<sup>42</sup>.

During the next three months the Catholic Church continued to argue within the BCC that it must be a priority to return children to their parents where they could be contacted and requested

it, and to express alarm at the huge and open-ended financial commitment that was involved, especially since the end of the fighting in the Basque country had removed the need for it <sup>43</sup>. The view of the BCC was that it had plenty of evidence that 'requests' from parents were not authentic and that each should be verified; that many of the children were now orphaned, or that their parents were refugees and could not yet be contacted. The fighting around Bilbao might have been over but there were still thousands of adult refugees on the roads and the country was suffering desperate poverty. As 1937 drew to a close it was clear that the two sides of the repatriation debate were simply the two sides of support for or hostility to the Spanish Republic.

The British representative of the Apostolic Delegate in Bilbao was Father Gabana, a Spanish priest who had earlier had his 'the truth about Spain' lecture tour of Britain curtailed after protests by the Communist M.P. Willie Gallacher. The Home Office decided that the priest's conditions of residence precluded him from political activity, thus preventing him, according to the Catholic press, from 'unmasking the lies of Sovietism' <sup>44</sup>. Father Gabana took the lead on pressing the BCC on repatriation but without the results the Church desired. In October 1937, amidst mutual accusations of political motivation, the English Cardinal Hinsley withdrew his representative, Canon Craven, from the BCC. Cardinal Hinsley now dealt directly with the Franco regime to organise the repatriation of the children in the Catholic homes, which was largely complete by May 1938 <sup>45</sup>.

The Church also supported the Spanish Children's Repatriation Committee, which lobbied the government and sympathetic M.P.s for immediate repatriation. Members included the Duke of Wellington, a major landowner in Spain, and Edith Londonderry; after one of their

interventions following a local public meeting a press report called them 'Franco's Friends'. Bishop McCormack similarly encouraged the diocese to lobby for repatriation <sup>46</sup>.

This split seems to have encouraged a more politically articulate stand by the BCC, including the groups in this region. A national press release published locally stated that:

The BCC considers that the bombing of open towns in Spain by General Franco makes it impossible for the Basque children in England to be sent back to eastern Spain. The effect of returning these children to Bilbao would be that they would all be brought up in Fascist reformatories or in Catholic seminaries against the wishes of their parents and alienating them entirely <sup>47</sup>.

The chairman of the Carlisle Spanish Relief Committee justified the children's extended stay in the country with 'As soon as the Fascist forces cease bombing the civilian population in Catalonia, and destroying food convoys...it will be possible to send the children back to their parents or to institutions there' <sup>48</sup>. When Nell Badsey was interviewed on her return from the Spanish border, where she had been a member of a national group escorting 106 repatriated children, her readers should have been clear whose side she was on:

When we got to the frontier Spanish Fascist officers and soldiers struck me with fear so far as the children's future is concerned. They treated the children in a cold way, with studied contempt...referred to them among themselves as rojos, reds... some of the children had previously run over the bridge with machine guns on them when General Franco took Bilbao.

She went on to state that reports that the repatriated children were happy to be returning to Spain were ‘unfounded lies’, presumably a response to the letters to that effect being published by local priests <sup>49</sup>. These are examples of how the local campaigns were able to present the children as victims of fascism, not just war, and of Franco’s calculated strategy of waging war against civilian populations.

Repatriation was not the only source of conflict in this region. An exchange took place in the local press between Father Parker and the Spanish Consul in Newcastle. According to the Consul he was being denied access to the children in Catholic homes in the diocese. According to Father Parker he had been invited to St.Vincent’s but had caused a scene there, had been asked to leave, and had subsequently written ‘an unpleasant’ letter to the priest, and the decision had been taken that he was not a suitable person to be admitted to the homes. What was not said in the press was that the Consul had accused Parker’s committee of using ‘fascist propaganda’ in the homes. Instead Father Parker insisted that the Church ‘abhorred politics’ where the children were concerned <sup>50</sup>. This episode illustrates that, given the fundamentally different attitudes to the Spanish Republic, any alliance with the Catholic Church was bound to be fragile.

### *Exile*

For the twelve priests and other adults, mainly young women, who had accompanied the children to Britain to help with their care and education, repatriation was even more problematic. Franco had passed a Law of Political Responsibilities as a vehicle for the wholesale imprisonment or execution of Republican supporters, and this remained a statute until 1965. Within a month of

the fall of Bilbao in June 1937 1,000 left-wingers and Basque nationalists there had been executed and 16,000 gaoled; a year later the picture was similar. The new Falangist mayor of the city boasted that Bilbao was 'redeemed for ever from the red scum in the service of Moscow and the Vizcayon scum in the service of separatism' <sup>51</sup>. October 1937 the Bishop of Vitoria had circulated a Bulletin in which he stated that those responsible for the evacuation of the children had committed 'un crimen espantoso', an appalling crime, and those who had helped 'contubernio con los enemigos de Dios y de la patria'.- had conspired with the enemies of God and of their country <sup>52</sup>. Clearly those who had accompanied the children could be in danger. Carmen Walker recalls:

My father in Spain was in what would have been the Labour Party here, and he was in prison. He was released before the war ended. When there was talk about me going back, they wrote to say they would be very pleased to see me, but we haven't very much room in the house, and if you are coming you will have to go and live with Pilar. Now I knew Pilar was in prison, so this was a way of telling me it was dangerous for me to go back <sup>53</sup>.

She did not visit Spain again until 1966, when Franco finally declared an amnesty for his civil war opponents. Similarly the teacher at the Catholic Nazareth House in Carlisle had to emigrate to America when the children there were repatriated <sup>54</sup>.

The Basque priests faced the same problems. In December 1937 Bishop McCormack received a letter from the Papal envoy in London, on behalf of the Secretariat of State of the Vatican. This seems to have been sent to all Bishops who had Basque priests in their dioceses; two, Father Orbegoza and Father Gorosarri, were



at St. Joseph's in Darlington. It seemed that the Secretariat had recently received information that the 'refugee Basque priests' were continuing 'their well-known political propaganda, and even co-operating with the committees which are hostile to the return of the Basque children, to prevent their return home'. The Secretariat believed that the attitude of these priests was causing 'grave moral harm to so many poor children' and it urged the English Bishops 'to make these priests desist from such co-operation', presumably with the non-Church Basque Children's Committees <sup>55</sup>. No evidence was offered for any of these allegations, but they do indicate the pressures the Basque refugee priests were under. Father Orbegozo was still at St. Joseph's in Darlington in early 1940, and correspondence shows that he was desperately trying to avoid going back to Spain. He informed Bishop McCormack:

With sorrow I let your Lordship know that I cannot go to France because the French military authorities have denied Basque priests admission at France: so they let me know today from London. I have lately received suggestions from my native country that I must not return there yet; therefore I myself command to the kindness of your Lordship, and ask humbly that I may continue at St. Joseph's until I can return to Spain, or your Lordship deign occupy me in any humble priestly business at any place of your diocese.

I cannot yet understand well especially quick English talk and I have also difficulty to talk fast, but in two months I think will progress so that I may hear confession and instruction. I do not ask any money I shall be satisfied with maintenance <sup>56</sup>.

The Bishop replied that there was ‘no hope of priestly work here’ and that Father Orbegozo should ‘go to Spain where priests are needed’. The priest replied:

I understand well the advice and desire of your Lordship about my returning...I cannot dare yet to return to Spain according to the information I have lately received; therefore I pray my Lord again and again for God’s sake have mercy on me. After a short time I will be able to do something with children and even with adults.

The Bishop’s note states simply ‘Answered. Go to Spain’. A week later the priest wrote again:

I have written to my own Lord Bishop asking him if I can return, and when I receive his reply I will let your Lordship know. My fear in returning is only from the civil or military authorities, but to write to say this or anything else against them may be very dangerous for me, and it will be better to hold one’s peace <sup>57</sup>.

The fate of Father Orbegozo is unclear; his colleague Father Gorosarri had earlier left Darlington for Belgium. Several of the priests who came with the children went through periods of exile before resuming their work in Spain. A Spanish historian has stated that in France and Britain the Catholic bishops, hostile as they were to the Spanish Republic, shunned the priests who had accompanied the children <sup>58</sup>. This may or may not be an accurate judgement, but on the basis of this correspondence Father Orbegozo does not seem to have had much support from the Hexham and Newcastle Diocese. Nor were the priest’s fears ill founded: during 1937 Franco

had executed sixteen priests and gaoled around three hundred for their Republican or Basque nationalist sympathies, and the executions were only stopped because of protests from his Italian allies <sup>59</sup>.

### *Ending*

By 1940 there were some 470 of the original 4,000 refugees in Britain. The BCC found it increasingly difficult to raise funds during the Second World War; the hostels, including Percy Park and Brampton, had to close and the remaining children were ‘adopted’ by individual families <sup>60</sup>. The BCC worked with international refugee organisations to continue repatriation but in 1951, when the Committee finally stood down, around 270 were still in Britain, including two or three in the North East. The survivors – and now their children and grandchildren – have formed the British branch of the Basque Children of ’37 Association, a lively community dedicated to keeping the story of the 4,000 refugee children alive and to maintaining contact with them.

A number of the repatriated children could not be reunited with their families immediately or even at all. Contemporary research in Spain is beginning to show that, just as the BCC had feared, many were fostered out to other families approved by the authorities, or brought up in fascist reformatories, as the Franco regime attempted to cleanse a generation of left or separatist influences <sup>61</sup>.

### *Political Dimensions*

It has been argued that the campaign in support of the Basque children in this region was ‘consistently couched in humanitarian and not political terms’, and this was why it could build a broad campaign of support among those who were not politically motivated. Also, that the involvement of the local Catholic Church in

accommodating so many of the children helped to 'ensure that the politics of the conflict in Spain were not mentioned' <sup>62</sup>.

As will be seen this is too simplistic a picture of the politics of the national and North East campaigns although there is certainly evidence to support the argument. For example when the Labour Party prospective parliamentary candidate for Stockton addressed a meeting organised by the Townswomen's Guild to raise funds for Hutton Hall, she 'described the atrocities committed in the civil war' without, in the press report at least, attributing them. The public appeal in Cumberland and Westmorland stated that '...no political question of as to the rights and wrongs of the war in Spain can arise when making the appeal on behalf of children, who are innocent sufferers from the war'. A national letter from the BCC published in the *North Mail* as the children were arriving assured readers that '...it is not a question of politics. It is a simple humanitarian issue and one in which we should all welcome the opportunity to co-operate' <sup>63</sup>. Some of the key activists in the campaign to support the Basques in the region undoubtedly were moved by humanitarian over political concerns. Lady Ceilia Roberts (sister-in-law to Wilfred) for instance, argued on several occasions that 'politics and differences should be forgotten' in the cause of the Basque refugees <sup>64</sup>.

But it has already been demonstrated that the repatriation issue caused the local campaigners to put their case politically as well as in humanitarian terms. Eleanor Rathbone, writing in a personal capacity but inevitably associated with the BCC, published a nationally circulated press letter that was directly political, making a direct link with the government's policy of 'non-intervention':

The British and French governments have some responsibility for the sufferings and dangers from which we rescued these children. Whether the Non-Intervention Pact which they initiated was right or wrong, unquestionably it decided the fate of the Basques by making it impossible for them to purchase aircraft or heavy munitions with which to resist the German and Italian planes that bombed them into submission <sup>65</sup>.

There are examples too of the local campaigns associating their work with the Left in the conflict. Basque children were on the platform at the May Day rally on the Town Moor in 1938, organised by Newcastle Labour Party, where two thousand people applauded an AEU resolution deploring the 'fascist foreign policy' of the National Government and declaring the determination of the British labour movement to 'secure arms for the Spanish people'. Basque children were on the platform at the memorial meeting in Blyth Miners Welfare Hall for the Communist Councillor Bob Elliott, killed in action with the International Brigade, when Labour and Communist speakers attacked the policy of non-intervention. Basque children were on the platform with Nell Badsey at a public meeting in Bedlington where the M.P. for Blaydon called for the scrapping of non-intervention so that the Spanish government could buy arms and end the war <sup>66</sup>. Thus in the public campaigns of the labour movement, there were occasions when the Basque children's cause was directly associated with the key demands of the Left over Spain, and not simply as a humanitarian issue. There is some evidence too that the openly political stances did not alienate the presumably non political supporters: after Nell Badsey appeared at the Bedlington meeting with some children North Shields Methodist Sisterhood were still holding fund raising events for the Tynemouth hostel <sup>67</sup>.

Therefore it is too sweeping to conclude that the campaign for the Basque children in this region was ‘consistently’ couched in humanitarian terms so that the politics of the war were downplayed. The coalition of support the campaign generated contained the highly political, where support for the Republic was concerned, as well as the primarily humanitarian, in apparently productive co-existence

### *Conclusion*

It has been said of the Basque children campaign that ‘the whole episode was clearly a grand humanitarian gesture as well as, politically, an affront to Franco’s side in the Civil War’ <sup>68</sup>. Franco’s side were only too aware of the propaganda dangers of the refugee children, which was why they and their supporters and sympathisers were so quick and so tenacious in their counter- campaign for repatriation; it probably also explains the venom with which the Basque priests and the other adults in the evacuation were denounced. It is hard to imagine that the key instigators, Leah Manning, Eleanor Rathbone and Wilfred Roberts, anti-fascists and critics of non-intervention that they were <sup>69</sup>, could not see the symbolic political value of what they began. Given the anti-Republican attitudes of the Catholic Church any co-operation from them was always going to be unstable, and so the repatriation conflict should not be found surprising.

All the instances of the local and national BCC taking an articulate political stance on the Spanish conflict took place after the Catholic Church formally withdrew from the Committee in October 1937. This may be coincidental, but it is more likely that the end of Catholic involvement and the campaign for blanket repatriation meant that those working with the Basque children could more open-

ly associate their cause with public support for the Spanish Republic; indeed, having to explain the problems of the Church's position on repatriation involved taking a stand on the Franco regime and its conduct of the war. The campaigns for the hostels in the North East and Cumbria were coalitions of the political and the humanitarian with neither cancelling the other out. Their achievement in the region was a noteworthy contribution to the Republican cause.

### *Then and Now*

As was said initially, an historical account of the settlement of refugees in the North East may have some implications for the present, despite the major differences and the unique nature of the Basque episode, and so this is worth discussing. In 1937 there was a scare campaign conducted by national newspapers uninterested in presenting the facts of the matter, or indeed in even finding out what they were. There were some reactions from xenophobic elements and from those who believed that 'we should put our own first'. There was a campaign to repatriate refugees that was quite oblivious to the circumstances to which they might return, and which provided a vehicle for the political far right. There was a government whose attitude was at best indifferent. Ranged against this and supporting the refugees were, in varying strengths, church groups, trades union branches and voluntary organisations. All of which may have some contemporary resonance.

In this context comment can be made about the support for the Tynemouth hostel, which was successful on two fronts: it survived financially and seems to have provided a high standard for as long as any, and it rode through a potentially disastrous protest against it. Two noticeable features were the handling of the local press, presumably by Nell Badsey, and some success at including

the children in local activities. Both can be said to have built local positive images to counter the negative ones that had been created by national sources. These two tactics of social inclusion and building a local and positive counter-image are tactics that may bear repetition in a new context.

*I am grateful to Carmen Walker and Natalia Benjamin, Basque Children of '37 Association, and Robin Gard, Newcastle and Hexham Diocesan Archive, for information used here.*

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15. *Carlisle Journal* 23 July 1937 and 4 February 1938; *North Mail* 23 September 1937
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**William Parlett: the man who nearly got away**  
*John Spence*

*William Parlett, from Sunderland, was a fighter in the International Brigade who survived the Spanish Civil War (1936 - 39) but subsequently disappeared into oblivion. Frank Graham, the Newcastle publisher, who became a chronicler of the Civil War, contacted all survivors - there were about 1,500 of them but the only brigader he could not locate was William Parlett. Sixty years later in May 1999 a Sunderland G.P. Dr. Sam Glatt, read Nigel Todd's In Excited Times and noticed that a William Parlett was listed as travelling to Spain. A receptionist in Dr. Glatt's practice was a Mrs. Parlett who, it transpired, was Parlett's daughter-in-law. A meeting with Parlett was arranged at his home in Askern, a village five miles north of Doncaster and a reticent Parlett was persuaded to reveal the last sixty years of his eventful life.*

Since 1939 the members of the Brigades had formed the International Brigades Association, held reunions and eventually after the death of General Franco, in 1975, returned to take part in various ceremonies including the dedication of a memorial to the International Brigaders of Barcelona in 1996. In the 1980's the Imperial War Museum interviewed every surviving Brigader with the exception of Parlett. Why had Parlett failed to contact Frank Graham or any of his former comrades? Perhaps the answer lay in his early experiences, his later adventures or his modest personality.

William Parlett was born in 1911 at 19 Gray Terrace, Hendon, Sunderland, the son of the licensee of the New Shades public house

in Hendon Road. After attending Hendon Road School he left aged 14 years unable to find any proper work. (This entire area no longer exists after re-development in the 1950's). After two miserable years he enlisted in the East Yorkshire Regiment and completed his basic infantry training at Beverley, specialising as a machine gunner. Parlett was sent to India where his battalion faced the unpleasant task of supporting the civil police in its attempt to thwart the growing non-violent demonstrations of Ghandi's Congress Party. Parlett recalls that the army was not coming up to his expectations of world travel and adventure. "I found life in India to be boring and unpleasant," he states "and my short temper meant I did quite a lot of time in the detention camp." On completion of his engagement he returned to Wearside in 1936 to face more unemployment but international events offered an escape; the situation developing in Spain. He contacted Frank Graham, 'an official of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement in Sunderland and Teesside as well as the Communist student organiser in London where he often confronted Mosley's Blackshirts'.<sup>1</sup> In December 1936 Parlett, Graham and a 19 year old Sunderland man, Edgar Wilkinson, set off for Spain to volunteer to fight on the side of the Republic. They travelled by train via Paris and Barcelona to the International Brigades H.Q. at Albacete.<sup>2</sup>

From there it was to Madriqueras a nearby village, where the British battalion was being incorporated into the newly-formed 15'h Brigade. The Brigade consisted of Yugoslavs, Americans and Frenchmen<sup>3</sup> and here scanty military training was given.

On the 7th of February 1937 the Battalion embarked for its first action at the Battle of Jarama. In the first hour of fighting Edgar Wilkinson was killed and Parlett and Graham were allocated to separate companies. They were never to meet again. As Frank Graham

says: 'Bill Parlett dropped out of sight and I never saw him again.'<sup>4</sup> Parlett was in continuous action in the Republicans attempt to prevent the nationalist forces encircling Madrid. The Battle ended on the 24th February 1937.

Parlett joined the Civil War with no political commitment whatsoever and resisted all attempt by the political commissars to educate Non-Communist soldiers. This attitude was unusual as many Brigaders went to Spain for many personal reasons ranging from escaping British justice to escaping unemployment. As Hugh Thomas says, 'About 60% were Communists before volunteering and a further 20% probably became Communists during their experiences in Spain. From all countries (including Great Britain 80% of the Brigaders were members of the working class.'<sup>5</sup> Parlett was firmly in the group that did not join the Communist Party and, to this day, has a strong antipathy to any political opinion. This lack of political belief in no way affected Parlett's view of duty and loyalty to the side he supported. At the end of Jarama his Battalion was sadly depleted - only 225 of the original 600 men were left standing.<sup>6</sup> The British Battalion was named the Saklatvala Battalion after the first communist elected to the House of Commons in the 1920's. <sup>7</sup>

On the 8th March 1937 the continuation of the previous battle began this time entitled the Battle of Guadalajara still with the Franco aim of capturing Madrid. Parlett fought through the fierce ten-day battle which ended in a stalemate that was to last a further two years. Parlett was next in action at the Battle of Brunete (6th – 26th July 1937) which ended with the British Battalion reduced to 80 men.<sup>8</sup> Parlett remembers these battles as a period of unrelenting misery, searing day-time heat, freezing nights, often sleeping in the

open, with horrific casualties. He was also surprised by the casual brutality that was occurring behind the lines saying; 'We, in the Brigade, were shocked to see catholic priests and nuns being led away to be shot by local peasants. The hatred of the clergy by ordinary people was incredible to us. Still as an incomer I was completely ignorant of the bitterness and complex politics that caused the Civil War. I began to understand that the war was much more involved than a straight fight between fascists and communists.'

His most vivid memory of those bitter times was his capture. The battalion was retreating after a savage beating by the Nationalists after the Battle of Teruel when he says: 'We found ourselves walking through a shallow ravine when we heard shouts in Italian and saw standing over us with levelled rifles smiling Italian soldiers. We had no option but to raise our hands and surrender.' Fred Copeman, a hospitalised commander of the Battalion wrote: 'The Battalion, for some unknown reason, and against all military sense, was marching along the road in column. They passed a long line of small tanks when the tank turrets, without warning, opened up and the Italian crews appeared. In the stampede many of our men were taken prisoner.'<sup>9</sup> Another account of this still controversial incident declares, 'that this was criminal lack of expertise. No scouts were sent abroad .... Over 100 British were captured in two minutes.'<sup>10</sup> Parlett was taken to an Italian prison camp where the prisoners were treated with consideration even to the luxury of having comfortable beds. After two months the prisoners were transferred to a Nationalist prison camp where conditions were atrocious. Happily they were returned, after some weeks, to Italian control for they needed them for the exchange of Italian troops in Republican hands. This was one of several small exchanges, negotiated by Field Marshall Philip Chetwode, the head

of a British prisoner-of-war commission, before the Civil War actually ceased.<sup>11</sup>

In August 1937, Parlett found himself back in Dover being met by Communist Party officials who escorted him and his comrades to the Communist H.Q. in King Street, London. There he was given a change of clothing, some pocket money and travel warrant back to Sunderland.

Parlett was back to square one but the economic recovery in the U.K. was underway and he soon found work as a labourer on the completion of the Ford council housing estate. When that job was finished in 1940 he signed-on as a steward, at Southampton, on the liner 'Orcades,' which was shipping troops to Egypt. After two trips he transferred to another liner, the Canadian Pacific Empress of Australia, as a deckhand. The ship was dispatched in an abortive assignment to rescue allied troops trapped in Singapore in 1942. The ship was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine in the Strait of Malacca, but stayed afloat and limped back to Calcutta. On his return to England Parlett joined the freighter 'Dan-Y-Bryn' which was sailing in convoy PQ 14 along with 23 other vessels destined for Murmansk. The convoy left Reykjavik on 8th May 1942 but bad weather forced 16 ships to return to Scotland. One ship was sunk by a U-Boat while seven ships, including the Dan-Y-Bryn was part of PQ 18 and Parlett was to face the worst ordeal of his life. Two months earlier the most disastrous event of Arctic convoys occurred when the PQ 17 was ordered to scatter by the Admiralty in belief that the convoy was to be attacked by the German battleship 'Tirpitz.' The Tirpitz, however, never left its berth in Norway and aircraft and U-Boats picked-off the individual ships. Convoy PQ 17 was composed of 36 vessels. Of Iceland on 27<sup>th</sup> June 1942



after 10 days of constant attack only 11 ships reached Archangel with 23 sunk and only 2 returning to the U.K.

Convoy PQ 18, Western Scotland, left Loch Ewe on 2nd September 1942 bound for Archangel, to face confident German forces. During the 10-day voyage, of the 40 ships in the convoy, 10 were sunk by aircraft and 3 by U-Boat. Parlett's memories of the trip are hazy as he states: 'It was a nightmare, a real struggle for survival in terrible conditions. Lack of sleep, numbing cold and non-stop air attacks.' His clearest memory is witnessing the bombing of the U.S. Liberty ship, 'Mary Luckenbach' loaded with ammunition which exploded in a huge fire-ball. Incredibly, one crewman survived unhurt and was thrown into the sea. The Dan-Y-Bryn was struck by a bomb, which failed to explode, after striking the hatch-boards it fell into the sea. They reached Archangel on 17th September 1942 with no further mishap.<sup>12</sup> The German's lost 41 aircraft in the action proving the value of protection offered for a convoy being escorted by an aircraft carrier.<sup>13</sup> Despite this, success PQ 18 was the second most costly convoy during the whole Arctic campaign. For the rest of the war Parlett sailed on less dangerous convoys and in 1945 he entered the Fleet Auxiliary Service and rose to the rank of Boatswain. His final brush with action was in 1956 when his ship took supplies to Egypt during the Suez Campaign. He retired from the Fleet in 1970 and for a couple of years skippered a pleasure steamer on Lake Windermere.

After marrying his second wife, Norma, Parlett retired to Askern. For the last eleven years of his life he battled cancer but died of a massive heart attack whilst walking through the village on 23rd January 2000.

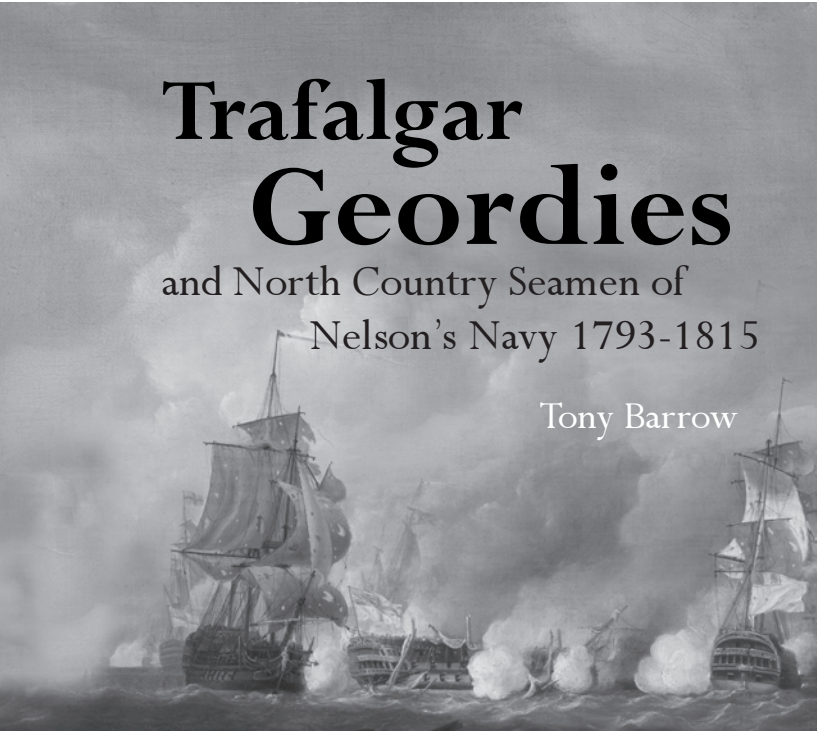
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## **Wartime Industrial Action on the Tyne 1939-1945**

### ***Craig Armstrong***

*As the country once more found itself embroiled in a Total War the government began to place more emphasis on the stabilisation of industrial relations. Most government officials recognised that many of the problems of the past had involved industries that would play a key role in any war effort. Strikes and industrial unrest had plagued the munitions and coal industries, especially on Clydeside and Tyneside, throughout the First World War and the government was determined that there should be no repeat of such events during the Second World War. An important aspect of the myth of Second World War British society is that the people pulled together and stoically accepted the sometimes harsh conditions that could be found in wartime Britain. An important part of society pulling together was the willingness of industrial workers, and indeed employers, to put aside peacetime differences in the interests of the national war effort*

The Tyneside area, or more truthfully the industries present there, was seen as especially important to the national war effort. A 1938 report considering local Air Raid Precaution matters declared that the government had recognised Tyneside ‘as an active “danger spot” due to the nature and importance of its industrial concerns.’<sup>1</sup> Special precautions were taken to protect the most important industrial concerns of the area, including the provision

of advanced warning of any incoming enemy air raids.<sup>2</sup> Official wartime reports defined Tyneside as ‘a compact industrial community of over 800,000 persons.’<sup>3</sup> The area included thirteen towns extending along the River Tyne for some sixteen miles from the mouth of the river and including the towns of Whitley Bay and Monkseaton on the coast to the north of Tynemouth. Out of the total population more than thirty-seven percent lived in the metropolitan city of Newcastle upon Tyne whilst only six percent lived in the residential towns of Gosforth, Whitley Bay, and Monkseaton. The bulk of the outstanding population lived in the remaining ten towns and consisted of “almost exclusively working-class folk engaged in a small number of large heavy industries.”<sup>4</sup> Board of Trade officials concluded that the area could be seen as one whole unit industrially, commercially, and to a large extent socially, and cautioned that the populations of the various areas of Tyneside often had strong regional identities.

#### *Tyneside work force*

As the Board of Trade had identified, the Tyneside workforce was hugely reliant upon a select few key industries, almost all of them within the heavy engineering field. Engineering industries, during 1939, accounted for over twenty-four percent of the total number of insured workers in Newcastle County Borough. A total of 36,220 people were employed in these trades throughout Newcastle (other areas of Tyneside had even higher proportions working in these industries). When the numbers involved in the coal mining and chemical industries are added this number increases to 41,995, over thirty-seven percent of the total number of insured workers.<sup>5</sup> The geographical location of Tyneside with its large port and proximity to important sea routes led to an extensive export / import industry. As a major port Tyneside was

responsible for a majority of the export business on the north-east coast of England as well as the vast majority of imports into the area. The main exports consisted of coal and engineering products with dairy produce and grain being imported through Tyneside. The reasons for Tyneside being a major import centre was that Newcastle, as the regional capital, had the majority of the area's distributive trades and service sector industries.

The importance of Tyneside industry to the national war effort is reflected in the statistic that North East shipyards were responsible for the replacement of over half of the four million tons of shipping lost by Britain during the war. Tyneside was responsible for only 535,800 tons of this merchant shipping, but the Tyneside yards were predominantly working on naval contracts throughout the war. This can be seen by the preponderance of naval contracts, mainly for destroyers, contained within the reports from firms such as the Wallsend Slipway and Engineering Company, a subsidiary of Swan's. This yard was described as working 'solely on Admiralty contracts'.<sup>6</sup> During the course of the Second World War the Tyne yards launched 74 merchant ships whilst Swan's alone launched a total of eighty-three warships, totalling more than 250,000 tons.

Many problems remained in the field of shipbuilding: largely a result of the unnatural boom that the war created. Foremost amongst the problems was the simple fact that the almost constant demand did not lend itself to the upkeep of delicate or old equipment nor did it aid in the replacement of obsolescent items of machinery. This was the greatest problem faced by shipbuilders as they attempted to cope with wartime production demands. Tyneside yards, in common with the industry in general, had 'entered the Second World War ... with a shipbuilding industry

that was a rusting, partially dismantled and partly unmanned hulk of essentially Victorian technology, and, on the whole, no less rusting were its management and workforce and their operational methods.<sup>7</sup> A technological survey of all yards in 1942 by the Controller of Machine Tools described how ‘the technical history of the industry since the 1870s had bequeathed yards and layouts unsuitable to modern methods’.<sup>8</sup> Cecil Bentham, the head of the survey team, reported that the cranes that were in use in the majority of yards were outdated and inadequate, whilst the majority of machine tools exceeded twenty years in age. The field of marine engineering fared little better with Bentham stating that ‘only 25 per cent of the plant in the North-east was modern’.<sup>9</sup> These factors contributed to the perpetually poor industrial relations which plagued both shipbuilding and engineering.

### *Poor industrial relations*

Industrial relations remained poor throughout the 1930s; a situation that was only exacerbated by the war. Due to the importance of the industry during wartime the workers were imbued with a greater degree of negotiating power. Amongst the ways in which this newfound power was experienced was in the demand for better working conditions, despite the pressures of war. As workers were expected to endure longer hours it became a prime concern that they should have greater access to canteen and rest facilities at their places of work. Despite opposition, the majority of shipbuilding firms on Tyneside were coerced by the government, which was afraid of unnecessary and crippling strikes, into accepting the demands of the workforce. At Swan Hunter’s, for example, the company was forced, after complaints from the workforce and advice from the local Factories Inspector, to spend at least £15,000 on a new 600 capacity canteen at Wallsend Slipway.<sup>10</sup>

Whilst mining remained, throughout the war, the greatest source of strikes and industrial unrest (at least in terms of working hours lost), it is clear that the shipbuilding and repair industry on Tyneside, along with the associated engineering trades, was far from untroubled during the period. The earliest stoppage in the local industry that was deemed serious enough to be mentioned in official intelligence reports occurred in the summer of 1941 and involved the stoppage of work by riveters in various yards, concerned over their rates of pay in comparison to other shipyard workers.<sup>11</sup> There had been minor incidents before this date, including the short strike by apprentices, encouraged by their Scots counterparts, at Swan Hunter's in March 1941.<sup>12</sup>

The pacification of the riveters, however, appears to have been an ongoing problem with strikes occurring throughout the war. As late as April 1944 an emergency Joint Committee representing the Tyne and Wear Shipbuilders' Associations respectively was convened to discuss the concerns of the riveters.<sup>13</sup> Once again, pay seems to have been the motivation behind the action taken by the riveters. Demands for a minimum lieu rate of thirty shillings per day (sixty pounds today) were made by the men despite a national agreement for a lesser sum having been reached on 7 March 1944. Once again showing the importance placed by some workers on purely regional bargaining as opposed to a national structure of pay and conditions. A compromise was eventually reached whereby the men would be paid a bonus of between five percent and ten percent depending on the work that they were involved in on that day.<sup>14</sup> The riveters seem to have become a target for allegations from local authorities as it was claimed to an official inquiry that some firms were keeping riveters employed under the Essential Workers Order despite the fact that they had no employment for them for substantial periods of time.<sup>15</sup>



*Reports of 'unrest'*

Throughout 1942 there were reports of 'unrest' within the industry.<sup>16</sup> Then a dispute occurred involving the drillers in the Fitting Out Department of Parsons Marine Steam turbine Company Ltd, at Wallsend, an incident compounded when drillers at William Doxford & Sons Ltd in Sunderland also came out in sympathy. Once again the key issue was rates of pay and after a lack of progress in discussions the matter was referred to the local Conciliation Officer of the Ministry of Labour and National Service. Despite further discussions an agreement could still not be met. To increase the difficulties of the industry the dispute spread to Swan Hunters' Neptune Works.<sup>17</sup> The year 1942 would appear to have been marked by poor relations in the engineering industry on the Tyne, including the Total Time strike. Relations were strained with several unions and worker's organisations including the National Union of Heating and Domestic and General Metal Workers; the National Society of Painters; the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers (Tyne District); the Plumbers, Glaziers and Domestic Engineering Union; and the Amalgamated Slaters and Tilers Provident Society. Locally, the members of all of these organisations had been involved in confrontations with their employers during the year.<sup>18</sup>

These last workers did not come under the umbrella of shipbuilding but under the more widespread definition of engineering. On Tyneside however the majority of engineering work was concerned with the shipbuilding industry or armaments production. The engineering trades were commonly talked of in the same sentence as the shipbuilding workers and it would appear that they had a reputation for even greater levels of industrial discontent. Indeed the first, 'watershed',<sup>19</sup> area-wide strike of the war

occurred in the Tyneside engineering trade in late 1942. The dispute, which became known as the Total Time or Lying-On strike, occurred over what at first appeared to be a relatively minor issue: when the changing of how the working week was calculated, due to demands of office staff. This change, which was supported by the engineering union's national leadership, would mean that the engineers would have been forced to accept a short week when the system initially changed over. Union negotiations came to a settlement whereby the workers would be paid a weekly average for this short week and would pay this sum back over the course of five weekly instalments. The new policy was not appreciated by local engineers and was met with a 'flood of protests from the members.'<sup>20</sup>

Within days at least eight local union branches had written to complain, with South Shields being especially indignant at the manner in which its members had not been consulted. Ironically, many of the workers actually understood the reasoning behind the employers' decision, but their main qualm was that the District Committee had taken a decision affecting them without consultation. The employers attempted to placate the engineering workers by extending the period over which the money would be paid back to twelve weeks. The workers refused to be mollified and, on 5 October, a number of yards came out on strike.<sup>21</sup> The strike was markedly different in that it was one of the first anti-official strikes of the war. Meaning that the majority of the strikers were not particularly vehement in opposition to their employers but felt considerable ire towards the national union officials who, they felt, had betrayed their trust and responsibilities to grass roots members. Within a week there were estimated to be up to 18,000 men on strike in the Tyneside area and a proposal put forward at a meeting

in North Shields for a return to work pending and independent inquiry had been rejected. The opposition to the strikers from both union leadership and the British Communist Party remained strong. Faced with such determined opposition from every official body that could have been expected to support the strike the action was inevitably short-lived and a meeting of the Central Strike Committee at Wallsend Town Hall on 12 October decided by seventy-five votes to twenty-two to back a return to work. Two days later the strikers had all returned to their duties.<sup>22</sup> The strike, whilst officially achieving little, was significant in that it demonstrated the abilities of Tyneside workers once again to organise themselves unofficially. Furthermore, it showed that there was sufficient militancy and unity amongst the Tyneside workforce to fly in the face of criticism from official representative bodies when they believed that their views and local conditions were not being considered.

### *Increasing discontent*

Throughout this period of the war industrial discontent would appear to have been on the increase generally and was not solely limited to the engineering works and shipyards. The importance of the River Tyne as a port was only increased by the war as important materiel was both exported from and imported into the area in even greater amounts. Key to the successful operation of the port was the efficiency of the dock workers. Responsible for unloading and loading ships, they were under increasing pressure to work faster and more effectively than ever before so that the turn-around time of shipping in ports could be reduced. Whilst this led to increasing levels of fatigue and stress it also granted the dockers a degree of power that they had seldom experienced before, despite the poor labour relations that traditionally existed

in the industry. They had suddenly become vital to the national and local war effort and were prepared to make use of their newly acquired powers unperturbed by the illegality of strike action.

As it became necessary to divert imports to the western ports of Britain and to the north, away from London, the importance of the dockers, nationally, had been recognised early in the war. This enforced policy led to subsequent transport difficulties and had forced Bevin to formulate a registration scheme in June 1940 for all dockers so that they could, if it became necessary, be transferred to the west coast ports. This was yet another factor that eroded the ability of a worker to sell his labour in a free market. The measure was defended by the government claiming that the turn around rate of ships was too slow and that this resulted in the amount of imported goods being needlessly, and dangerously, reduced. The dockers of the west coast were to benefit from governmental policy as regional port directors were appointed and dock labourers were registered as a permanent labour force, thus ending the pernicious vagaries of the casual system that had, up until then, applied.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, this scheme at first applied only to the west coast ports of Merseyside and Clydeside, those dock labourers who were still needed in huge numbers on Tyneside gained little or no benefit from the scheme and continued to work, in most respects, as they had before the war, albeit at a much greater pace and in much more dangerous working conditions. The dockworkers of Tyneside had long had a reputation as industrial malcontents and this reputation was to once again surface.

### *Dockers' action*

Since the commencement of the war the Tyneside dockyards had been plagued by limited industrial action. Eleven minor strikes

had occurred at Newcastle Quay and three at the Albert Edward Dock in North Shields.<sup>24</sup> These had been small in scale and short-lasting in nature, despite the disruption they caused. Lack of faith in the local agreements, the national union, and the national arbitration methods combined with the fact that recent illegal strikes, such as that at Betteshanger Colliery in Kent where over 1,000 miners had been summonsed for striking illegally but where prosecution had proven problematic, had gone relatively unpunished had emboldened the attitudes of a majority of the dockers.<sup>25</sup> The resentment between the dockers, nationally, and their employers was both long standing and bitter, a situation that remained at the outset of the war.<sup>26</sup> On Tyneside, distrust had been steadily increasing for sometime and the point had been reached where neither side trusted the other, as can be seen reflected in the comment of one docker to the committee established to officially report into the problems in the area. When asked why the dockers had frequently taken action without even beginning negotiations he admitted that, whilst the question was a common sense one, the men 'were not dealing with common sense employers.'<sup>27</sup> Such strong distrust augured poorly for the future efficiency of the Tyne docks.

Simmering resentment amongst the Tyneside stevedores finally reached boiling point on 14 May 1942. The first major strike, when it came, was sparked by the actions of one firm and revolved around the unloading of a single ship. An American cargo ship, the *SS Winona*, damaged whilst carrying a cargo of munitions to Russia, had put in to the Tyne, docked at Twenty-Two Shed on the Quayside, for unloading and repairs. The dockers of Messrs Tait and Son of Newcastle were engaged to unload the cargo. The standard rate of pay for day work on a cargo such as this was twen-

ty-three shillings per day (approximately forty-six pounds today).<sup>28</sup> Due, however, to the urgency of the cargo it was proposed that the men should work a two shift pattern beginning at six a.m. until two p.m. and then two p.m. until ten p.m. In the words of the official submitted report, 'The afternoon shift had received some payment in the way of an advance and immediately raised objection to the method of computing the amount and refused to continue discharging the ship until more favourable terms were conceded.'<sup>29</sup> Rather than allow the national or local arbitration process to take place the 172 men immediately ceased work at two p.m.

The men involved in the action knew that the strike was illegal but stated when asked that they would not be prosecuted because others had taken similar action.<sup>30</sup> The local Conciliation Officer, the Port Manager, and the Deputy Regional Controller all agreed, after Mr Tarbit of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers (NUGMW) had reported that his efforts to persuade the strikers to return to work had met with a 'point blank refusal',<sup>31</sup> that the strikers should immediately be prosecuted and that the military should be brought in to unload the cargo. Using the military to take over from striking dockers appears to have been a relatively common wartime tactic on the Tyne.<sup>32</sup>

By this time the dangers of a single strike could be seen by the spread of the action to other workers employed on the docks in the form of sympathy strikes. 90 men of James Kirkley and Company who had been employed unloading cargo from the SS Guinan refused to continue work whilst 10 dock employees of the London and North Eastern Railway withdrew their labour and the employees of the Co-operative Wholesale Society's Grain Warehouse followed suit. These sympathetic actions resulted in

severe delays to the unloading and loading of vessels, including the *SS Tahsinia* and the *SS Cortachy*.<sup>33</sup>

Undoubtedly, both local and national authorities were worried by this trend amongst the Tyneside dockyard workers to put their own interests and those of their fellow workers above the national war effort, or the importance of their role in supplying the nation and its allies. The men themselves admitted to an official inquiry that they had disregarded established negotiation procedure and that they had frequently taken illegal industrial action.<sup>34</sup> Government fears were expressed that the strike action could, if wrongly handled, spread to other ports.<sup>35</sup> It was thought that this was especially likely given that the local branch of the union involved, the NUGMW, had 3,422 members involved in the docks, and a total of 70,489 members locally.<sup>36</sup> Indeed it was being rumoured that the strike would spread quickly to the Tyne Dock workers who were said to be in sympathy with the workers from Tait and Son although this feeling seems to have passed by 20 May. The subsequent lack of support from the workers of Tyne Dock is possibly attributable to the strong disciplinary action taken against several Tyne Dock workers who had refused to relocate to Glasgow earlier in the week.<sup>37</sup> Despite the concerns the authorities were willing to hazard using the threat of prosecution to force the dockers to return to work in this instance, at least initially.

Permission was immediately sought by the regional authorities to secure permission to both prosecute the strikers and to use the military to unload the munitions. This was a repeat of First World War action when the Army had often been utilised as make-shift dock workers. Relevant permissions were quickly given by the Ministry of Labour and the army began unloading the *SS Winona*

the next morning at six a.m.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile a ‘very special approach’ was made to the Magistrate’s Clerk to arrange a speedy hearing for the 172 strikers from Tait and Son but not the other workers, despite the protests of Mr J Atkinson, the Port Manager, that all 500 men involved should be prosecuted.<sup>39</sup> This hearing was subsequently arranged for only three days time on 22 May at eleven a.m. at Newcastle City Police Court.<sup>40</sup> The Docks Corporation wanted to summarily dismiss the workers who had come out on strike. This would have resulted in those of military age being eligible for call up to military service. However, the Ministry of Labour discouraged this action as it could complicate the issues of the strike and evoke sympathy for the strikers concerned. Both the Ministry of Labour and the Home Office agreed that an official inquiry should be appointed after the strike had ended so that ways of improving both the discipline and management of the Tyne docks.<sup>41</sup>

The strikers union, the NUGMW (National Union of General & Municipal Workers), ‘entirely dissociated itself’ from the men and assured the government that no support would be forthcoming from the national organisation.<sup>42</sup> Disagreement between the national leadership of the union and the local branch (number nine) was highlighted by the fact that, despite this promise, the men’s solicitor was paid for by their local branch. This distrust that existed between the national union organisation and the local branches on the one hand and the membership on the other was said to have been a major motivational factor behind the persistent industrial disruption that affected the Tyne docks.<sup>43</sup> This was a reflection of the regional attitudes that pervaded the industry and was to remain a key factor in disputes throughout the war.



*Prosecutions*

158 of the men from Tait and Son were prosecuted on 22 May 1942. The remaining fourteen men were said to be “officials and checkers” who were not directly involved in the strike.<sup>44</sup> All of the accused men agreed that they would abide by the judgement imposed upon one of their number as a representative of all of the men involved. The case of Mr James Gilmour was heard and, despite protestations from the solicitor employed by the Union, Fred Lambert, of Messrs Stanford and Lambert of Newcastle upon Tyne, that the case had been brought too quickly (a charge ignored because the speedy resolution of the case was said to be in the national interest), the Magistrate found in favour of the government and imposed a fine of five pounds per man (approximately £200 today) plus two shillings costs (or approximately four pounds today). The men were given just twenty-eight days in which to pay or face a term of thirty days imprisonment. The main thrust of the prosecution argument had been that the strike was clearly illegal, the men knew this, that their actions had an adverse effect on the attempts to assist Russia (an argument clearly designed to erode any public support for the strikers), and that by taking strike action the men were nullifying the bravery of the sailors, many of whom came from this region, who endeavoured to supply cargo in dangerous wartime circumstances.<sup>45</sup> Clearly, the government regarded the actions of the Tyneside dockers as being unpatriotic, if not treacherous.

Despite the imposition of this substantial fine and the subsequent threat of imprisonment, the strike continued unabated. The oft heard argument that many workers during the war were subservient because of the threat of legal action is not upheld by the evidence on Tyneside. The striking workers organised daily meet-

ings to ensure that they could keep up to date with latest developments and to express their feelings. At these meetings they remained resolute, resentful, and defiant of the authorities. Official intelligence reports stated that the striking men had 'come to regard a strike not only as profitable but safe.'<sup>46</sup> The continuation of the action was a growing cause for concern amongst several government departments including the Department of War Transport who expressed their anxiety in several official memorandums.<sup>47</sup> Behind the scenes increasingly efficacious, from the government and employers point of view, negotiations were ongoing. By the 1 June a peace deal had been brokered, largely thanks to the efforts of the National Industry Officer, Captain Mark Hewitson. Captain Hewitson claimed that whilst the men had 'suspected an attempt to evade an old agreement' by their employers and thus had a strong case for arbitration they had placed themselves in a vulnerable position by knowingly embarking on an illegal strike.<sup>48</sup> After accepting the peace deal the men held a meeting early the next morning and voted by a large majority to return immediately and unconditionally to work. Ironically, many of them were employed the next day in loading the original cargo of the *SS Winona* aboard the two replacement vessels.<sup>49</sup>

After the return of the men to work there were requests, from several quarters, for the fines to remain un-enforced by the local authorities. These requests would appear to have been unofficially granted as correspondence indicates that although the Home Secretary could not officially petition for the fines to be left in abeyance, he could, and did, hint that this was the best solution as further action against the men could only lead to a greater level of anger and may have caused more problems than it solved in the local area.<sup>50</sup> The government had quickly come to the conclusion

that 'it was quite impossible to prosecute large numbers of much needed workers.'<sup>51</sup> It was also proving unfeasible to enforce the payment of fines even when workers were successfully prosecuted as the threat of imprisonment was widely known to be ineffective, as was clearly borne out by the experiences of the striking Tyneside dockworkers.

The crux of the persistent problems in the industry on Tyneside was said to be the lack of trust that existed between the men and both their employers and their national union officials. The men fervently believed that the national union was incapable of representing local issues in the manner that was required and, instead of following their union's instructions, workers on Tyneside increasingly viewed the words of their union representatives as simply advice, to be ignored as required.<sup>52</sup> In many cases of industrial action the union's local leadership was forced to admit that not only was it powerless to convince the men to return to work but that in several cases it had not even been notified of a strike in advance.<sup>53</sup> When combined these factors led to significant damage to the reputation of the union, both at a local and national level.

The evidence that representatives of the workers gave to the official committee investigating Tyneside indicated that the majority of problems with the national union stemmed from local resentments. The men wanted local problems to be solved at a purely local level and when any national body became involved the levels of trust subsequently faltered as it had become widely accepted that outsiders would not understand the position of the industry on Tyneside. Much of this distrust stemmed from the problem of the lieu rate issue. The lieu rate was the grade of pay that had been

agreed upon in the 1920s for the handling of certain cargoes, including munitions, and had been established at twenty-three shillings as opposed to the national norm which was significantly lower. This meant that, through extensive use of the lieu rate, the dockers on Tyneside had secured a 'privileged position for themselves' when compared to other areas of the country.<sup>54</sup> From examples such as this, it has become increasingly clear that, far from always pulling together, there were some industries on Tyneside where the workers saw themselves in a purely local context and refused to submit to procedures that would have meant a reduction in wages, despite reassurances that this would be in the national interest.

The unrest within the dock industry proved to be a continual problem on Tyneside with another strike breaking out in the late summer of 1944 over the removal of ship hatch covers. Again, this involved approximately 600 dockyard workers. The military was again used for the loading and unloading of ships whilst the Chief Industrial Officer of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers, Captain Mark Hewitson, alleged that the strike was a deliberate sabotage of the war effort and that Newcastle had been a particularly troublesome spot in the dock industry throughout the war, with a number of strikes, all of which were illegal, and that the dockers in this area were now completely 'out of hand'.<sup>55</sup> The Minister of War Transport, Ernest Bevin, agreed and, in combative mood, stated that 'the services at the docks will be maintained'.<sup>56</sup> As a result of this strike, and further allegations that union officials could no longer control their members, the local branch of the NUGMW was closed down on 4 October 1944. A new branch was opened but members had to firstly swear to abide by the rules of the Union's national leadership.<sup>57</sup> Despite this, the troubles in the docks of Tyneside continued.

The increasing levels of union membership in the shipyards and engineering works, combined with distrust of national union leadership, could also lead to problems. In terms of provoking stoppages and strike action the most problematic effect was the drive for closed shop status, often driven by local shop stewards. In early 1943 the Swan Hunter's Neptune Works rose to national prominence because of a vehemently pursued strike over closed shop status. By January 1943 there were only five men at the works who were refusing to join the union (the AEU) and, when final attempts to persuade them to reconsider failed on 25 January, the workforce presented themselves at the works gates but refused to enter the premises. Local support in other yards was strong and collections were raised to provide aid to the striking men. The acrimonious strike persisted for almost six weeks but by 5 March 1943 the holdouts had agreed to pay their arrears and join the AEU. As a result the strike was terminated and an agreement was reached with the company management that the works would, from that point, be a closed shop.<sup>58</sup> Again, workers important to the war effort, fighting on a local issue had been successful in their demands.

### *Apprentices' strike*

Perhaps the most notorious strike to occur on Tyneside during the war was that of the shipyard apprentices at the end of March 1944. Once again a Communist subversive element was suspected of involvement, as was often the case when apprentices were involved in industrial unrest. This strike was seen as being so significant that it has been described by some socialists as marking 'the high point of industrial militancy during the war'.<sup>59</sup> The strike began as a result of dissatisfaction in the coal mining industry. The severe strikes that had affected this industry were viewed with

a great deal of alarm by the government and with output steadily dropping, whilst wartime demand steadily increased, the issue of nationalisation of the industry in order to give the government more direct control became more important. One result of this was that the Bevin ballot scheme was given greater emphasis. This scheme was designed to summarily direct roughly ten percent of all apprentices to the mines in order to boost production. The measure was hugely unpopular with the apprentices, especially in the shipyards of Tyneside. The apprentices felt that they were being asked unfairly to give up their rights and to leave behind the hope of becoming a skilled worker to go down the mines with no guarantee of being given their old jobs back at the end of hostilities. Whilst apprentices had previously been seen as a largely conservative element in the industrial spectrum, they were not allowed to strike or to join a union in many cases, the war had seen this group emerge as a newly militant group, prepared to fight against perceived injustices.

The apprentices organised themselves into an unofficial union called the 'Tyneside Apprentices' Guild, under the leadership of one of their number, James William Davy, an ex-member of a communist organisation.<sup>60</sup> This organisation was described by one member as being 'the government of the apprentices, by the apprentices, for the apprentices'.<sup>61</sup> Despite this claim it is clear that the TAG was, from its inception, heavily influenced by political parties. Although the apprentices themselves were described as being apolitical, the local branch of the Independent Labour Party (including Dan Smith and Ken Skethaway) along with members of the Workers International League lent much support and advice from the very start.<sup>62</sup> The apprentices appeared to have allowed time for negotiation of their grievances, which were aired well in advance,

but when there was no official reply they declared their intention to strike, allegedly with the backing of their families and workmates.

### *Impasse*

The unions, however, did not support the action and throughout negotiations refused to recognise the Apprentices' Guild as an official body. At the beginning of the strike an open air meeting between the unions and some 5,000 apprentices at Wallsend resulted in an impasse when the unions made it abundantly clear that they would not back the strikers and that they would not negotiate with the representatives of the Apprentices' Guild.<sup>63</sup> Despite this lack of support the Tyneside apprentices were not discouraged, and were described in the national press as being in an 'aggressive mood'.<sup>64</sup> Although the strike, supported in other parts of the country to varying degrees, lasted only a fortnight (by 11 April the Tyne Shipbuilders Association was stating that seventy percent of apprentices had returned to work)<sup>65</sup> and officially did not achieve the demands of the apprentices, it is also true that no Tyneside shipyard apprentice was sent involuntarily to the coal mines.

The government responded to the strike by quickly investigating for subversive elements that possibly lay behind it. Whilst indicating that the apprentices had been duped into striking by these subversive elements the government attempted to distract attention from the real issue: that of dissatisfaction at the erosion of rights and the fact that the apprentices were more concerned with their future economic security than in assisting an industry essential to the national war effort. The paranoia surrounding Trotskyist manipulation had earlier been reflected in the experiences of Swan Hunter's in 1941. A short, only a few hours long, stoppage of work by apprentices after one of their number was sacked for breaking yard rules was

blamed on 'Communist elements' and their attempts to organise the apprentices for the purpose of taking industrial action.<sup>66</sup> The short stoppage was ended when the guilty apprentice agreed to pay a fine and was reinstated in his position.

These were minor incidents that, in peacetime, would have been seen as insignificant but in the spirit of wartime paranoia were blown out of all proportion. The Trotskyists, and especially the Revolutionary Communist Party, were the main focus of this paranoia: Ernest Bevin thought that these agitators were the central motivators of illegal strikes.<sup>67</sup> It is clear that the government, remembering the role played by engineering shop stewards on Clydeside during the First World War, were especially fearful of communist influence.<sup>68</sup> This was especially true in the years before the German invasion of Russia. Local police intelligence reports always included a summation of suspected communist activity ranging from holding workplace meetings to attempting to infiltrate the shop stewards movement.<sup>69</sup> In Newcastle, both the Trotskyists and the striking apprentices were aided by members of the ILP. One member of this party, who later went on to achieve notoriety, was T Dan Smith (1915-1993). Smith, who was also a member of the PPU, had helped with the initial meetings of the apprentices and made speeches in their support. He later went on, in 1960, to become leader of Newcastle City Council as a member of the regular Labour Party. In this capacity he oversaw extensive changes to the structure of the city, at great architectural expense, but was jailed for corruption in the 1970s.<sup>70</sup>

### *Conspiracy charges*

By the summer of 1944 several Trotskyists had been charged with conspiring to incite the apprentices to strike and acting in fur-



therance of an illegal strike. The accused, Lambert Heaton Lee, Rawling Tearse, James Ritchie Haston and Angel Rosalie Keen, were tried at Newcastle assizes and sentences were passed on 19 June. The three men were all found guilty of acting in furtherance of an illegal strike but cleared of conspiracy and of incitement, whilst Mrs Keen was cleared of all charges.<sup>71</sup> Mr Lee, a South African national, and the organiser of the Revolutionary Communist Party, was jailed for a year. He was joined in the same sentence by Mr Tearse, who was the secretary of the Militant Workers' Federation and described as a 'political agitator' by the police. Mr Haston, the national secretary and organiser of the Revolutionary Communist Party, was sent to prison for six months. Mrs Keen was given a nominal sentence and released immediately.<sup>72</sup> The trial only served to increase the 'R.C.P.'s self-importance' and the convictions were subsequently quashed at appeal just three months later.<sup>73</sup> It is clear that the rights of these accused were violated. In an effort to obtain evidence the Newcastle Police had questioned Bill Davy, the leader of the TAG, for a period of 24 hours and had "threatened and cajoled" him into making a statement.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, the authorities had failed to inform Mr Davy of his rights and were holding him without having cautioned him. In addition, thinly veiled threats to black-list, arrest and imprison Mr Davy were made by the police during the interview process.<sup>75</sup>

The trial judge made it clear in his summing up of the case that the striking apprentices knew that the Bevin Ballot would not even affect the vast majority of their number.<sup>76</sup> That they were striking on behalf of the rights of all apprentices, and so this strike was simply being made on a point of principle: that being that the freedom of the apprentice to continue in his chosen profession over-

rode the national need. The fact that the government was seemingly willing to ride roughshod over the rights of the apprentices due to wartime conditions did not mean that the apprentices would accept such measures. Wartime necessities, especially this late in the war, would appear to be taking second place to the established work-place rights of the apprentices.<sup>77</sup>

Obviously, the degree of industrial action on Tyneside during the war would seem to indicate that mythologised views of a working people firmly behind the war effort despite any sacrifices that were required need to be revised. There were few strikes of any importance throughout the crisis period of 1940. As has been made clear, it is incorrect to assume that even when facing the possibility of invasion and being confronted with a common enemy, management and workers buried their hatchets. A Mass Observation report from a group of war factories in the north stressed that 'The most striking feature of the industrial situation here is the survival of strictly peacetime procedure in the conflict between employers and men, which is still today the predominant conflict here.'<sup>78</sup> To balance this somewhat pessimistic view is the evidence that '1940 turned out to be the year in which fewer days were lost to industrial disputes since records began in 1893.'<sup>79</sup>

Even a year later, 'The indubitably bad feeling which existed in industry in 1941 was only partly reflected in an increase in strikes.'<sup>80</sup> From this period onwards, however, the willingness of workers, especially those in industries with traditionally poor industrial relations, to come out on strike was markedly increased. Reasons for striking were varied: from seemingly minor squabbles at regional level combined with distrust of national union leadership (e.g. the dockers strike of 1942); to politically motivated action

against perceived governmental injustice (e.g. the Apprentices Strike of 1944); and communist, or Trotskyist, inspired action (e.g. allegations made against the Apprentices Movement and local shop stewards).

### *New strike actions*

The last two years of the war seem to have been characterised by a reinvigorated willingness on the part of Tyneside workers to take strike action over traditional issues of pay and working conditions. This is in concert with the national trend, with the number of strikes in both 1944 and 1945 being more than double that of 1940. There were a greater number of strikes, nationally, in the five years from 1941 than there had been in the fifteen years from 1926 to 1940. In total some 6,549,000 working days were lost due to strike action in the final two years of the war, whilst the total for the whole war, excluding 1939, was 10,963,940 days. 1944 was the single worst year, in terms of working days lost, since the depression haunted days of 1932.<sup>81</sup> Though the number of strikes, nationally, was greater than during the period after the First World War the majority of strikes were of short duration and, therefore, the number of working days lost was fewer. The vast majority (ninety percent in engineering) of strikes lasted for less than a week and most (sixty percent) were concerned with wages and in particular piece rates.<sup>82</sup> In this respect several of the major strikes to occur on Tyneside are unusual in that they lasted longer than a week and were more concerned with national union or government policies and discrepancies. Distrust of both groups was a prime motivation behind many of the illegal strikes that blighted wartime industry on Tyneside. Government unwillingness to inflame the important workforce on Tyneside also played a part in encouraging some of the striking workers as it led them to believe

that they not only had a favourable negotiating position but were unlikely to face prosecution.

The industrial unrest that was prevalent on Tyneside during the war indicates that, although most employees supported the war effort, the workers could still be fractious, that they remained intolerant of what they viewed as exploitative policies, they continued to mistrust both employers and national union leadership, and that they were prepared to take illegal industrial action to fight these issues.

- 1 [T]yne & [W]ear [A]rchives [S]ervice: MD/NC/276/1. Minutes and reports from the Corporation of Newcastle upon Tyne Watch Committee. Report of the Chief Constable, Newcastle City Police, 29 April 1938, p 57.
- 2 TWAS: PA/NC/5/17. Air Raid Warnings: categories of premises receiving special warnings, 10 September 1939.
- 3 [N]ational [A]rchives: BT 64/3260. Board of Trade: report on Tyneside, general characteristics of the area, 1943.
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 *ibid.*, report on Region I (Northern), Newcastle upon Tyne County Borough, 1943.
- 6 TWAS: DS/SWH/1/7. Minutes from Board meeting, 10 July 1941, p 20.
- 7 Correlli Barnett, *The Audit of War*, (London: Pan, 1996), p 112.
- 8 *ibid.*, p 116.
- 9 *ibid.*, pp 116-117.
- 10 TWAS: DS/SWH/1/7. Swan Hunters & Wigham Richardson, minutes from board meeting, report to the board, July 1941, p 19.
- 11 TWAS: PA/NC/5/55. Summary of reports, Newcastle City Police, 12 September 1941.
- 12 Richard Croucher, *Engineers at War 1939-1945* (London: Merlin Press, 1982), pp 126-127.
- 13 TWAS: 895/10. Tyne Shipbuilders association, minute book, Emergency Joint Committee, 25 April 1944, pp 228-229.

- 14    *ibid.*
- 15    NA: ADM1/15260. Summary of Statements made to the Financial Secretary of the Admiralty about Misuse of Shipyard Labour on Tyneside, July 1943, p 2.
- 16    TWAS: PA/NC/5/55. Summary of Reports, Newcastle City Police, 11 September 1942 - 7 November 1942.
- 17    TWAS: EM/EN1/1/3. North East Coast Engineering Trades Employers Association, minute book, Standing Committee, 15 September 1942.
- 18    *ibid.*
- 19    Croucher, *Engineers*, p 180.
- 20    *ibid*, p 182.
- 21    *ibid.*
- 22    *ibid*, pp 184-187.
- 23    For a more detailed discussion of this subject see: Angus Calder, *The People's War. Britain 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico, 1999 edition), pp 232-233.
- 24    NA: LAB 10/208. Official Report to the Right Honourable Ernest Bevin MP, Minister of Labour, into the problems surrounding dock workers on the Tyne, June 1942, p 1.
- 25    Calder, *The People's War*, p 396. Also Croucher, *Engineers*, p 217.
- 26    For example, see J. Phillips, 'British Dock Workers and the Second World War: the limits of social change', *Scottish Labour History Society Journal*, 30 (1995), 87-103.
- 27    NA: LAB 10/208. Official Report to the Right Honourable Ernest Bevin, MP, Minister of Labour, into the problems surrounding dock workers on the Tyne, June 1942, p 4.
- 28    Figures given for present-day values are arrived at using the method in Donald Thomas, *An Underground at War. Spies, Deserters, Racketeers and Civilians in the Second World War* (London: John Murray, 2003), p 14.
- 29    NA: LAB 10/208. Report of the Ministry of Labour (Industrial Relations Department), No 1 Region, Newcastle upon Tyne to the Ministry of Labour, 14 May 1942.
- 30    *ibid*, 16 May 1942.

- 31 *ibid*, 19 May 1942.
- 32 See: *The Times*, 3 October 1944, p 4. Also 5 October 1944, p 2.
- 33 NA: LAB 10/208. Report of the Ministry of Labour (Industrial Relations Department), No 1 Region, Newcastle upon Tyne to the Ministry of Labour, 19 May 1942.
- 34 *ibid*, official report to the Right Honourable Ernest Bevin MP, Minister of Labour, into the problems surrounding dock workers on the Tyne, June 1942, p 3.
- 35 *ibid*, report of the Northern Regional Officer, 19 May 1942.
- 36 *ibid*, official report to the Right Honourable Ernest Bevin MP, Minister of Labour, into the problems surrounding dock workers on the Tyne, June 1942, p 1.
- 37 *ibid*, report of the Chief Industrial Commissioner, 20 May 1942.
- 38 *ibid*, telegram (13:41 hours) from Ministry of Labour, 16 May 1942.
- 39 *ibid*, report of Northern Regional Officer, 19 May 1942.
- 40 *ibid*, telegram (12:45 hours) from Northern Regional Officer of the Ministry of Labour, 19 May 1942.
- 41 *ibid*, Ministry of Labour reply to request from Newcastle upon Tyne Docks Corporation, 19 May 1942.
- 42 *ibid*, report of the Chief Industrial Commissioner, 20 May 1942.
- 43 *ibid*, official report to the Right Honourable Ernest Bevin MP, Minister of Labour, into the problems surrounding dock workers on the Tyne, June 1942, p 3.
- 44 *ibid*, report of Northern Regional Officer, 26 May 1942.
- 45 *ibid*.
- 46 *ibid*, excerpt from Weekly Intelligence Reports, 30 May 1942.
- 47 *ibid*, memo from Mr S S Wilson of the Ministry of War Transport to the Ministry of Labour, 27 May 1942.
- 48 *ibid*, report of Northern Regional Officer, 3 June 1942.
- 49 *ibid*, 2 June 1942.
- 50 *ibid*, correspondence between Home Office, Ministry of Labour, and NUGMW, 12 June -16 June 1942.

- 51 Calder, *The People's War*, p 396.
- 52 NA: LAB 10/208. Official report to the Right Honourable Ernest Bevin MP, Minister of Labour, into the problems surrounding dock workers on the Tyne, June 1942, p 5.
- 53 ibid.
- 54 ibid, p 7.
- 55 *The Times*, 3 October 1944, p 4.
- 56 ibid.
- 57 *The Times*, 5 October 1944, p 2.
- 58 Croucher, *Engineers*, pp 204-207.
- 59 T. Dabb, 'Official Secrets', *Socialist Review*, 185 (April 1995), 3.
- 60 Sam Bornstein & Al Richardson, *War and the International. A History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain 1937-1949* (London: Socialist Platform, 1986), p 115.
- 61 Dabb, 'Official Secrets'.
- 62 Bornstein & Richardson, *War and the International*, pp 115-119.
- 63 The Times, 1 April 1944, p 4.
- 64 ibid.
- 65 TWAS: 895/10. Tyne Shipbuilders Association minute book, special general meeting, 11 April 1944, p 217.
- 66 TWAS: 978/8. North East Coast Shiprepairers Association, minute book, meeting of the Executive Committee, 24 March 1941, pp 200-201.
- 67 Alan Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin*, Volume 2 (London: Heinemann, 1967), p 269.
- 68 ibid, pp 394-396.
- 69 TWAS: PA/NC/5/55. Summary of Reports, Newcastle upon Tyne, 7 November 1941.
- 70 See: Nigel Todd, 'Ambition and Harsh Reality', in I. Ayris (et al), *Water under the Bridges*, (Newcastle: Tyne Bridge, 1999), pp 99-100.
- 71 *The Times*, 20 June 1944, p 2.
- 72 ibid.

- 73 Calder, *The People's War*, pp 441-442.
- 74 Bornstein & Richardson, *War and the International*, pp 120-121.
- 75 Calder, *The People's War*, p 154.
- 76 *The Times*, 20 June 1944, p 2.
- 77 For a fuller discussion of the impact that the Tyneside Apprentice's Strike had had on labour laws in Britain, and for the credibility which it lent the RCP, see: Bornstein & Richardson, *War and the International*, pp 115-141.
- 78 Calder, *The People's War*, p 259.
- 79 Robert Mackay, *Half the battle. Civilian morale in Britain during the Second World War*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p 61.
- 80 *ibid.*
- 81 Andrew Thorpe, *The Longman Companion to Britain in the Era of the Two World Wars* (London: Longman, 1994), p 100.
- 82 Calder, *The People's War*, p 395



## Chris Mullard and black radicalism in Newcastle 1968-73

David Renton



*Chris Mullard's **Black Britain** was one of the first works to express the anger of the 'second generation' of postwar Black Britons. Mullard argued that the problems of his own generation were different from those faced by their parents, who had arrived in the 1940s and 1950s. 'A Black man born in Britain is a shadow of a man', Mullard wrote, 'A form but no identity. You are not West Indian, Indian, Pakistani or African, because you were born in Britain, and know little or nothing about your parents' country ... Similarly if you choose to identify with whites the same mechanism goes into reverse gear. In the end you have no alternative but to remain alone, insecure, without an identity of your own making.'*<sup>1</sup> This paper compares Mullard's book to the account that appears in press records and archive sources, including the minutes of the Tyne and Wear Special Committee on Commonwealth Immigrants (1966-8), the forerunner of the Newcastle Community Relations Council, by which Mullard himself was later employed. Mullard was arguing for a distinct political strategy of radical Black militancy, which this paper explores. First, however, we must place Mullard's campaigning in some historical and geographical context.

The great symbol of post-war migration to Britain was the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* on 8 June 1948, with 400 Caribbean workers on board. Over the following ten years some 125,000 West Indians and 55,000 Indians and Pakistanis came to Britain. On arrival, Black and Asian people in Britain were frequently treated with contempt.<sup>2</sup> One report, commissioned in 1968 for the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination, looked at the experience of Asians living in Newcastle's West End. Eight-eight respondents gave examples of discrimination. Sixteen people complained of discrimination at work. Six people complained of difficulties in getting mortgages. 'The only case of discrimination in the sale of houses discovered was a blatant one. A Pakistani offered the full purchase price but was told "No coloureds"'. This happened, significantly, in Benwell, a better-class area with few coloured residents.<sup>3</sup>

By the 1970s, a movement had grown up against racism. The Jamaican writer Rodney James was one member of this younger generation. Born in 1956, he lived in Leeds and then London, 'Most of my generation of Afro-Caribbeans in Britain was in one way or another profoundly affected by the Rastafarian movement that swept across the Atlantic to Britain in the early 1970s.' Another influence on Rodney James was the image of Black Power, learned from the movement in America. 'Besieged as we and our parents were by British racism, we welcomed its attack upon white supremacy and its attempts to decolonize our minds. From the United States, Black Power also came to Britain and we became familiar with the writings and struggles of George Jackson, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Angela Davies and Stokeley Carmichael.'

How much of this tradition was available to an individual like Chris Mullard? Born in sleepy Hampshire, the author of *Black Britain* was by his own account a model student. 'During my youth, I realized

I was Black, different from other people I knew, but that was all. I never thought like a Black man.’ Only slowly did he realise that white society remained closed to him. ‘All my thoughts were white, conceived and acted upon within the framework of white society. I had tried to avoid myself by accepting the prejudices of white colleagues. Black men were evil, dirty, rapists, lazy and savage; they were to be despised. Because I held such views my white friends thought I was quite normal, just like themselves.’<sup>4</sup>

Mullard left home and settled on Newcastle-upon-Tyne. In 1967 Mullard established an office at his home on Tyneside and bought a typewriter. He began to act as a one-man lobbying organisation, representing Black people in locally-based campaigns. ‘I was in the powerful position of the middleman, a position which aggravated the distinction between Black and white.’<sup>5</sup> By autumn 1968, he had been appointed as a full-time officer of the Newcastle-upon-Tyne Community Relations Commission (CRC).

The criticism of Community Relations campaigning was developed in Mullard’s book. *Black Britain* argued that such groups were dominated by figures with no sympathy for Black issues. The force driving this model was the government. A national Community Relations Commission (CRC) was established under Labour. A network of local CRCs was encouraged to report to the national body. It was a space for racial conciliation between the forces of Black militancy and white reaction.<sup>6</sup> The CRCs were associated with the Race Relations Act, which passed through parliament in the same year, and began to outlawing racial incitement. They also belong to the same period as the 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, Labour’s attempt to cut off Enoch Powell’s anti-immigration campaign by conceding further restrictions.

The irony of course is that while Mullard was criticising community relations work, this was at the same time his own employment. When we speak of Mullard's radical Black nationalism, the point is not that he had a fully-developed alternative to institutionalised anti-racism, but rather that he sort to militate within existing structures to reclaim them for a more radical strategy. His employers, needless to say, were not impressed. When Chris Mullard was eventually appointed to post, as community relations officer for Newcastle upon Tyne, his success sparked a bitter row between the city council and the CRC in London. The Commission queried Mullard's militancy and age (24) and recommended that the offer be revoked. The London body withdrew funds from its Newcastle offshoot. On the side of obstruction were several Tory councillors, the Very Reverend Alfred Jowett, and several police officers who seem to have conducted an ongoing vendetta against Chris Mullard's work.<sup>7</sup> Eventually, following interventions by the Members of Parliament for Newcastle East (Geoffrey Rhodes) and Sunderland (Gordon Bagier), Mullard was recognised in the post. 'I received my first salary cheque in May 1970, eighteen months after my original appointment.'<sup>8</sup>

One other product of this period was a 'Commonwealth Immigrants Working Group' (sometimes described as a 'Special Committee as to Commonwealth Immigrants'), which met in Newcastle between September 1966 and May 1968. As the numbers of immigrants rose, Newcastle City Council saw a need for a separate forum to discuss race issues. Members of the group included Aldermen Russell and Robson, Councillors Storey and Lewcock, Graham, McCambridge, Abrahams and Abrahart. Abrahart was appointed Chair. Various other locals were invited onto the group, Dr. B. Basu ('Nationality: Indian'), Mr. Neville Pierre ('West Indian'), and Mr. Khwaja ('Pakistani'). Health Service representatives were also invited. Meetings were supposed to be held each month, although their actual frequency was less.<sup>9</sup> Chris Mullard was never named as an observer

at these meetings. He may have known about them by proxy through figures such as his friend John Rafferty, a member of the Special Committee, and the Organising Secretary of the Newcastle Council of Social Services. The Special Committee is not mentioned once in *Black Britain*. Yet its very absence there justifies its mention here. Precisely because the committee was not named in Mullard's books, we can actually approach it afresh and on its own terms. We can use the minutes of the Special Committee, therefore, to ask whether Mullard's criticisms of this model were in fact justified.

In November 1967, 'The Chief Constable's representative (Superintendent Bensely) reported on an incident at a school in the City involving coloured and white children. It was noted that the incident had been exaggerated, and was without significance.'<sup>10</sup> At another meeting, in March 1968, Mr. Rafferty asked about a newspaper report of 'an incident at a City school involving coloured and white children. Mr. Chadderton (for Director of Education) replied; it being noted that the incident was without significance.'<sup>11</sup> The official verdict was that the event was 'without significance', even though it was the second incident in five months.

The March 1968 meeting opened with a presentation from Mr. A. R. Hill, of the Ministry of Labour in Newcastle. Hill reported that the Ministry was successfully involved in securing the employment of migrants. 'The main problem was that of effective communication. Prejudices did exist but there was no rigid resistance in Newcastle upon Tyne toward the employment of coloured people.' The second half of the discussion focussed on the 'immigrant community centre', whose opening had taxed the Working Group now for some eighteen months. Mr. Haywards from the City Surveyor's Office reported that Elswick Library could be made available. 'The members expressed some concern at the costs and discussed again whether sufficient use would be made of a Community Centre if one was established'. The decision was deferred.

At the next meeting, Mr. J. Rafferty moved a motion 'that this Working Group considers its aims and objects', saying that 'the Group seemed to have made little impact and that it had no powers to achieve anything tangible', Councillor Abrahart replied that 'in the absence of any real racial problems in the City there was not much more that could be done.' Miss Smith spoke up for the appointment of a Liaison Officer. 'She thought that anti-immigrant feelings were spreading from the south and that such an officer should be available to deal with any problems that might arise.' Promises were made to secure a post 'in the not too distant future'.<sup>12</sup>

The last recorded meeting took place on 6 May 1968. The group passed a motion calling for the appointment of a part-time Liaison Officer. A report was given on the 1965 Race Relations Bill. Mr. Rafferty made reference to a march against racial discrimination that had been organised by local branches of CARD, the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination.<sup>13</sup> The march was planned for Saturday 11 May. 'Following a lengthy discussion', the minutes record, 'it was agreed that while members of the Working Group present had some sympathy with the aims of the organisers of the protest march, it must, as a sub-committee of the Council, dissociate itself from the march'. The Chair ended by thanking everyone for their attendance, and looking forward to meeting in the New Year.<sup>14</sup> There were no further meetings.<sup>15</sup>

The conflict between different anti-racist strategies was expressed very clearly in the row surrounding Newcastle's demonstration against Enoch Powell. The demonstration took place at a time of clashes around the country. In London on 1 May, fighting took place between pro-Powell dockers and anti-racist students.<sup>16</sup> At Warwick, two days later, a Conservative MP was heckled, after addressing students on the need to remove sanctions against white-dominated

Rhodesia.<sup>17</sup> In the North East, members of the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination called the demonstration to highlight the danger of Powellism, and to oppose it spreading north.'

Right from the start, the Newcastle papers took an attitude of hostility to the march, warning of violence, and instructing their readers not to attend. The hints of rumours were reported as if they were facts, and little attempt was made to compare hostile comment against any favourable view. On 7 May, for example, the *Evening Chronicle* reported that the organisers of a Black Power campaign in Leeds were planning to send two hundred followers to radicalise the march.<sup>18</sup>

On the same day, the *Newcastle Journal* claimed that the event lacked any backing from the various local communities. Reference was made to the Council's Immigrants Working Group, whose members were asked to disassociate themselves from the expected trouble. Even Rafferty opposed the May demonstration, as pressure from the police and the council told.<sup>19</sup>

The march went ahead, from Elswick Road to the Town Moor. Mullard was identified in the press as the organiser. No demonstrators arrived from Leeds. The event was peaceful.<sup>20</sup> Jimmy Murray, the union convenor from Vickers Armstrong, spoke from the platform. He attacked Powell for encouraging an atmosphere of racism. He joked at Powell's expense, 'And he looks like a South Shields White Arab himself.'<sup>21</sup> Around 200 people took part.<sup>22</sup>

Mullard continued to work for the Community Relations Council until autumn 1973, but his period of office was subject to continuous controversy. In June 1969, Harash Naray of the Indian Forum walked out of meetings of the Newcastle CRC, in protest against Mullard's personal style.<sup>23</sup> That September, the Hindu Temple also walked out.<sup>24</sup> In March 1970, Mullard spoke out against

the Northumbria police's failure to investigate claims of racial harassment, 'It has reached the stage where immigrants go to police stations in groups of four or five or six, out of fear that they will be pushed around. These fears are largely unfounded but they exist.'<sup>25</sup>

Mullard antagonised two groups in particular. The first were prominent Indian businessmen and local politicians of Asian descent. The second group of consistent critics were town councillors, including Bennie Abrahams. Here the criticism was that in adopting a militant politics of anti-racism, Mullard threatened to bring the city into disrepute. The criticism of the first group was not that Mullard was doing the job badly, on his own terms, the criticism of the second group was that he was doing it too well. Their anger was that Mullard was using the post as a platform for Black militancy, rather than adopting a community relations approach.

One of the strongest points made by Mullard's critics was that having earned the enmity of the London CRC, Mullard had therefore jeopardised the main source of funding for the Newcastle group. Some monies were still paid, but at a lower level than was required. Over the period of his appointment, the CRC's debts continued to rise, reaching £3000 by January 1973.<sup>26</sup> In March 1973, the London CRC stopped all further payments to its Newcastle offshoot. Councillor Abrahams was quoted as saying that 'It is virtually impossible for this debt to be cleared.' The *Journal* reported a council decision that the CRC would be wound down, all staff sacked, and the organisation reconstituted as a voluntary body.<sup>27</sup> The effective sacking of Mullard may have been presented as a compromise measure, but he was not willing to go quietly. Mullard remained in post, attempting to clear the debt through private fundraising. The start of April saw the publication of Mullard's book *Black Britain*, which contained strong criticism of the police, immigration law, and the community relations model. W. A. Kutub, President of the Tyneside Bangladesh Association criticised



the book for being over-militant, Mullard replied by calling him an 'Uncle Tom'.<sup>28</sup> Richard Harbottle attacked Bennie Abrahams for pursuing a vendetta in the council against Mullard.<sup>29</sup> Finally, in September 1973, Mullard quit his post for good. He sent a short letter to the press, insisting that he now planned to leave the region altogether.

Having mentioned some of the obstacles faced by Mullard and his allies, we can end by recalling his politics at their militant height. In March 1970, the Newcastle *Journal* reported on clashes between the CRC in Newcastle and the London body. Mullard was invited to explain why he thought the authorities were hostile to him? 'I would certainly not call myself a militant', he said, 'but I believe that in some cases the only way to achieve one's aim is by revolution.'<sup>30</sup> Three years later, in *Black Britain*, he began to develop a language of authentic Black delight:

Already we have started, like Black Americans, to foster the growth of Black identity, without which our struggle is meaningless, doomed to self-destruction or impotence. At long last we are beginning to reject the white myths about ourselves - we are *not* lazy; we do *not* live off the dole; we do *not* breed like rabbits; we are *not* the cause of this country's social and political problems; we do *not* smell; we do *not* bring down house values; we are *not* maladjusted; we are *not* educationally sub-normal; and emphatically we are *not* inferior or ugly. Our habits, customs and values are just as civilised as anybody else's. We are beautiful. We are just as intelligent as others. We are industrious. We possess a sense of morality. The work we do is of vital importance to white society. We are proud.<sup>31</sup>

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- 22 *Journal*, 13 May 1968.
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## **History, heritage and region: the making of Beamish and Bowes, a question of class?**

*Stuart Howard*

### *The Heritage Debate*

*Karl Marx observed in 1852 in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte that 'the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.' Never did this observation ring more true than in the contemporary world of regional heritage in north east England. The region possesses two of the most prestigious museums of their kind in Britain, the Josephine and John Bowes Museum in Barnard Castle and the Beamish Open Air Museum near Chester-le Street. Both of these institutions find their raison d'être in that most potent symbol of north east England - deep coal mining. But in their origins, style and mission and, not least, in the passions they evoke, Bowes and Beamish articulate economic and social differences which reflect the region's modern history and structure and ingrained patterns of regional identity and polity. In this sense at least, heritage in north east England is culturally significant and contested.*

The conceptual and analytical categories which frame the 'Heritage Debate' - authenticity, identity and representation for example, have a relatively recent history in academic terms and have constituted part of a larger debate which has seen the orthodoxies of the twentieth century 'meta-narratives' severely challenged. Both

Beamish and Bowes have featured in this literature, indeed one of the earliest and most significant analyses of late twentieth century British heritage, Robert Hewison's *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline*, 1987, used many of the assumptions and arguments of the early postmodern movement to interpret its subject and Beamish, inter alia, to illustrate them (interestingly Bowes does not get a mention).<sup>1</sup> Hewison focuses on two elements. The first of these is the commodification of leisure culture in a context of economic decline - he notes that 'we may feel it is the only industry we have got.'(p32). The second is the perceived failures of the purveyors of heritage. 'The heritage industry draws a screen between ourselves and our true past', Hewison says on p10 - whatever our true past may be. His work introduced and articulated large chunks of the contemporary debate.

Important work such as Raphael Samuel's essay 'Heritage-baiting' in *Theatres of Memory*, 1994, Part iv, succinctly summarized and contested the positions taken by Hewison and later pessimists, notably the journalist Neal Ascherson, the historian Patrick Wright (*Living in an Old Country*, 1987) and scholars attached to the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Samuel detected in their hostility to Heritage '....residues of that conspiracy theory according to which historical change is engineered by ruling elites....'<sup>2</sup> Despite the force and eloquence of this analysis, some more recent work focused exclusively upon Beamish has returned to the pessimistic paradigm. Jennifer Iles, for example cites commercialisation and consequent 'reorientation of aims'<sup>3</sup> alienation of local people, misrepresentation of the past<sup>4</sup> and the operation of establishment influence upon patterns of representation<sup>5</sup> among the institution's failings. In parallel with these developments, heritage as a tool of economic regeneration has contin-

ued to receive approval in the corridors of power and the language of 'cultural (economic) regeneration' along with the 'cultural industries' and increasingly pervades university departments and more importantly, the strategies of economic planners.

*Loss of perspective*

In all of this an important historical perspective on heritage has been lost, for the heritage debate and the heritage industries both have a contemporary and sociological locus, focusing as they do upon theories and patterns of consumption in the 'postindustrial' and 'postmodern' era. Relatively little attention has been paid to the historical contexts which produced the institutions which mediate contemporary heritage and which so often are the subject of contemporary analysis. Yet the history of Beamish and Bowes, for example, casts a different kind of light on the heritage debate, one that exposes the operation of historical forces upon the struggle for representation. Thus the comodification of cultural forms and the nature of the representation of the past in the contemporary world are not the concerns of this article, here I am dealing with origins and I shall merely engage with the basic question, why were these institutions established? This task requires a different kind of approach and different tools from those required to analyse contemporary forms of making and marketing history and culture.<sup>6</sup> Here structural factors are of primary consideration and this essay will identify and analyse the forms and forces which created, orientated and sustained Beamish and Bowes in their early years and in different and changing contexts.

*Class and culture*

This is not to say that some strains of postmodern scholarship have not had an impact upon how social economic and political

forces have been seen to shape cultural forms, indeed in this respect the work of Patrick Joyce has been to the fore. The key to Joyce's revisionism lay in his critique of the primacy that Marxism lends to social class or more precisely, class consciousness, in social and cultural production. Joyce wants to move beyond what he sees as the limitations of key Marxist notions such as 'struggle' and 'agency' as the structural features of proletarian consciousness and towards alternative models which incorporate extra-proletarian sources of social identity and social imagery. According to Joyce the notion of 'the people' represents an important example of such popular consciousness.<sup>7</sup> Joyce's social analysis is premised upon a form of revisionism within economic history which problematised linear models of economic development and their attendant patterns of proletarianisation. The 'combined and uneven' model of British industrial development rendered E P Thompson's model for the chronology for class formation - which concluded that the English working class was formed by the 1830's<sup>8</sup> - more difficult to sustain and highlighted differences between the formation of class and the formation of class culture. This produced the Marxist 'the same but later' hermeneutic fostered by Hobsbawm<sup>9</sup> and more radical postmodern interpretive revisions led by Joyce which disputed the primacy of class-based identities during the nineteenth century. The impact of this revisionism was profound and may have given some the impression that the British working class had, as a social and cultural force, been all but erased from history.

However, from the perspective of the North East at least, much of this revisionism can seem like someone describing, in some theoretical detail, the colours and designs of the emperor's new clothes. The question of the source(s) and construction of

identity is of course complex, if less so for the nineteenth than the twenty first century. As corner stones of belonging, place, work and class come to mind, but shared values and experience can also flow from shared ideological conviction for example. For much of the Victorian era the North East housed a very small but vociferous middle class, concentrated almost exclusively in the suburbs of Newcastle and Sunderland. This group followed the self-improving cultural agenda of the nineteenth century middle class as a whole, but some of its number also indulged in the construction of a mythical regional history based upon a romantic vision of Northumbria and Northumbrianess. This is perhaps best represented By William Bell Scot's series of paintings depicting the region's history at Wallington Hall Northumberland.<sup>10</sup> This whimsy hardly became the a popular focus of regional identity since it was merely an empty ideological construct that utterly failed to engage with the experience and lived culture of the vast majority of people which it, anyway, failed to represent. The majority of people in the region, were not Northumbrians, many were immigrants, and, despite the depiction of iron and coal on one panel at Wallington, the largest industrial occupational group in the region – coal miners – are not represented. Religious and political conviction was shared on some levels. Catholic Irish immigrants certainly identified as a group, but except in small urban pockets, on Teesside and Tyneside for example, where their Irishness found popular cultural expression, Irishness was not an essential cultural component of the Northerner.<sup>11</sup> This was true for other ethnic groups such as the Welsh and the Scots as well as those born in other counties who, finding themselves brought together by economic imperatives, tended to blend into homogeneous work based groups.<sup>12</sup> For much of the nineteenth century Methodism and Liberalism were the dominant ideologies in north east



England and these could be seen as conduits of shared meanings and values, but it must be remembered that both were class bound,<sup>13</sup> a phenomenon revealing the primacy of class over other social and political forces during the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries. This is not to say that social mobility by way of position; education and social circle could not re-position visions and values. The region's most important labour leaders were often in tension with the grass roots as a result of their perspective. Once elected to office the autodidact labour leader often moved in lofty social circles and they frequently reflected, in their various contexts, what they saw as progressive thinking, which the traditionalist grass roots resisted.

The history of the Durham Miners Association reflects this ideological struggle between the leadership and the rank and file as does the post 1945 modernization movement in the region.<sup>14</sup> It would be wrong to suggest that there was no variation in the senses of belonging and identity in north east England, but overwhelmingly it was occupation and a sense of social class which lent to people of the region a sense of who they were. Here lies the challenge for the postmodernists.

Putting aside the obvious problems associated with extra-proletarian identities and imagery such as 'the people' (even if we allow, like Joyce <sup>15</sup> for the contemporary concept of plurality of identity), did working folk when they spoke or thought in such terms think of themselves and the rest of society as a undifferentiated mass somehow striped of the pain and prejudices produced by the class system? The related questions of class formation, class culture and social identity in the North East resist the complexity ascribed by the postmodernists, since in industrial

Northumberland and Durham occupation was the catalyst and medium of all three. Coalmining was the key force in the making of both the regional working class, its attendant class culture and class-based forms of identity which were derived by way of occupational identity.<sup>16</sup> Northerners, both old and new, working in, often related, industrial monoliths such as iron, later steel, and heavy engineering drew their cultural water from similar wells, premised as they were on company towns and villages, large workforces, heavy and dangerous manual labour, a strict sexual division of labour and extensive productive forms exemplified by the shift system. The roots of regional identity are thus neither mythical or to be found in the sociability of the Newcastle crowd<sup>17</sup> but were shaped by work in the context of stupendous economic and demographic growth in Durham and south east Northumberland during the nineteenth century. The people of north east England persistently represented their interests and celebrated their way of life, but they did so in the context of a fierce resistance engendered by the culture of business and the moral and social ideologues of industrial capitalism; it is only within this dynamic that the making of both Beamish and Bowes can be understood.

### *Society in the North East*

The economic and social forces which Beamish and Bowes exemplify were generated by the expansion of the Durham coalfield after the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Until this time Durham had been little more than a semi-feudal backwater dominated by an omnipotent Prince Bishop and a small group of aristocratic landowners who exerted a hegemonic grip over the County's economic and social life. It was this elite which entered the coal trade as entrepreneurs, rentiers and industrialists as the sea coal trade grew and the region's mineral economy evolved.

As Austrin and Beynon have shown <sup>18</sup> the entrepreneurial aristocrats and their bourgeois imitators not only constructed the industrial infrastructure of the coalfield by building company towns and villages, but imposed upon them the social relations of the old order. The Third Marquess of Londonderry for example spoke of 'his pitmen' and his agent referred to Londonderry's men as his Lordship's 'little black family'.<sup>19</sup> Pease and Partners felt the need to stamp every brick in their colliery villages with their monograph.<sup>20</sup> But the social relations of the Durham coalfield were best characterised by the Bond, an instrument which bound the men to their masters for a year (after 1844 one month), but did not guarantee them employment. For the men, though not the masters, breach of the Bond was a criminal offence. Offenders were incarcerated in Durham Jail.<sup>21</sup>

### *Short distance migrants*

The colliery towns and villages of Durham were populated by immigrants, largely short distance migrants from the declining Tyneside collieries but supported by substantial numbers from outside the region who frequently were employed as surface workers, or as labourers in associated heat-process industries, or in construction. The expansion of Durham's labouring population through the nineteenth century was staggering, moving from approximately 350,000 in 1801 to almost 2,000,000 in 1901. On occasion the county experienced twice the national average rate of growth and consistently achieved above average population growth in every decade between the 1820's and 1920's.<sup>22</sup> This rapid rise in the labouring population had a profound and lasting effect upon the social structure and ultimately the culture of the region. County Durham quickly became a society polarised by social class. Durham's colliery villages and company towns were unambiguously class bound, characterised by tiny

hegemonic industrial elites, a disproportionately small middle-class largely comprising a handful of managers and shopkeepers, and vast workforces uniformly engaged in some of the most dangerous and alienating occupations that industrialization has yet produced.

The class culture that evolved in County Durham was premised upon the confluence of these factors, that is to say a large migrant population dispersed in relatively small, isolated and industrially homogenized industrial communities, subject to an ‘overloaded’ paternal order.<sup>23</sup> Work was the energising and shaping social force. Work in the ‘occupational community’ lent form and rhythm and value to everyday life and a powerful sense of role and identity to the individual. In Durham, as Jack Lawson has pointed out, a man was not a man until he attended the coal face.<sup>24</sup> The social structure and constraints of the occupational community also conditioned the making of the formal institutions of the regional working class. In the industrial villages of the Durham coalfield the masters demanded deference in exchange for economic and social patronage. Throughout the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries the Durham miners sought independence from paternalistic control and in doing so they created the institutions of Labour; free chapels, the Durham Miners Association and the regional Labour Party. In Durham occupation, class, culture, identity and polity were almost indivisible.

In 1919 the representatives of the Durham miners formed the first Labour administration to run a County Council.<sup>25</sup> Except for a brief break in the 20’s Labour has been in power ever since. The Durham miners who built Labour’s political machine were intent on using it to promote their vision, their values and their way of life. The ‘municipal socialism’ they espoused and implemented was

inward looking, regional in its ideology and in the orientation of its economic and social policy; it attempted to deal with specifically north eastern problems not least the decline of the coal trade and attendant social deprivation and exclusion. The first Labour leader of Durham County Council, Peter Lee, epitomised Labour's project.<sup>26</sup> Guided by the miners' long struggle for independence, Lee eschewed a Parliamentary career in favour of building a strong Labour Party power base dedicated to modernisation and social regeneration on the coalfield. It was to be a model for future north eastern Labour administrations, but in some ways it contradicted traditional sensibilities which were rooted in patterns of community-based culture and identity. This tension led to an ideological contradiction in Labour's north eastern cultural politics exemplified in the postwar period by the Durham Development Plan, the rise and ideology of T Dan Smith and the establishment of the Beamish Open Air Museum, which was born out of what I will call the regional culture movement

*Development plans and local communities*

The (1951) Durham Development Plan was an explicit attempt to reverse spiralling industrial decline and attendant social deprivation and population loss by modernizing the county's infrastructure. The strategy was to concentrate urban and industrial development into key areas in order to break the historic pattern of scattered piecemeal development on the coalfield, and to improve infrastructure and the environment in order to attract new industries and other forms of inward investment.<sup>27</sup> Following postwar Government housing policy, the new towns of Newton Aycliffe and Peterlee were already being built and these were integrated into the Plan. Aycliffe and Peterlee featured futuristic housing and public art symbolic of the break with the past,<sup>28</sup> their populations were

to be drawn from former pit villages. Some of these communities were categorised 'D' and were deemed to have served their purpose and to detract from the modernization of the County. According to the Development Plan they were to be demolished and, as it were, erased from history. This radical attempt to modernise and re-brand the region demonstrated the dangers and difficulties of social and cultural engineering in a culturally distinctive area such as north east England vigorous campaigns were fought by local people, throughout the 60's and 70's, to save the doomed category D communities. In Durham the chain between past, present and future was not easily broken.

The political career of T Dan Smith parallels the period discussed above. Smith was the son of a Durham miner and like Peter Lee was a consciously regional politician, who rejected a Parliamentary career in favour of building a regional power founded upon the Labour Party. Smith was an important figure because he articulated the ideology of postwar regionalism in north east England, arguing for semi-autonomy and regional representation in national government by means of replacing the House of Lords with a House of Regions. During the 60's Smith led Newcastle City Council but more significantly he became Chairman of the Northern Economic Development Agency during the Wilson years. Like many of the region's 'party bosses' Smith claimed, and was said to have, considerable influence within Labour Party and Labour Governments. In approach Smith was a moderniser recently characterised by Byrne as 'just as much an elitist futurist as the (city and academic) planners.....What drove him was a sense of "vision"- vision not so much of social justice as of the "new" as "good"'.<sup>29</sup> Smith had been a consultant on the project to develop the new town of Peterlee, and he made grandiose predictions for

the region claiming, for example, that he would transform Newcastle into the 'Milan of the North' by redevelopment and the promotion of cultural initiatives particularly in the arts.<sup>30</sup> Smith's modernising project for the region and its 'capital city' proved every bit as unpopular among those it touched as the Durham Development Plan. Newcastle city centre was redeveloped and became a tangle of brutal concrete fly-overs and, often, poorly built high rise blocks where former residents of the tightly knit working class communities endured the alienation and cultural exclusion of the modernist project.

In north east England modernization found a counterpoint in that other movement of the 60's and 70's - cultural politics.<sup>31</sup> The period saw a heightening in class-based consciousness, confidence and pride expressed not only in the rise of trade unionism and socialism but in class-based literature, history, folk culture and media. Traditional values in the region had always found their most potent expression in the Durham Miners' Gala. Here the massed banners and brass of the miners' lodges articulated not only the political case but also the culture of the mining communities. The miners' leader Sam Watson articulated this sensibility when reviewing an exhibition by the pitman painter Tom McGuinness in 1964:

He belongs to that type of miner that feels his own culture within himself ... No one can go round this exhibition without getting a real insight into mining. The pit village has its place in the world of art and beauty along with the palaces and great buildings. Mr McGuinness has captured a great deal of beauty, culture, fellowship and companionship and displays great personal integrity. <sup>32</sup>

It was around this core of cultural consciousness, the feeling of one's own culture within oneself, that the regional culture movement developed, more often than not articulated by young working class men and women who were the first generation to have attended college or university. The folk song movement was an early and important example. The notes accompanying an EP entitled '*The Colliers' Rant*', released in 1962, gives an impression of its nature:

This record has two aims. First, to jolt the memory of North-east miners; to bring back to their minds songs which have as much feeling, to be tender or humorous or down-right aggressive, as anything the 'pop' market can produce, and which are far more akin to the reality of their lives. The second aim is to let people outside the north east hear what miners think of themselves and their work..<sup>33</sup>

Some modern regional histories reflected the mood, particularly the work of Robert Colls,<sup>34</sup> and popular local historian Frank Graham as did the oral history movement which developed the 'from the bottom up' approach. In literature working class regional writers such as Jack Common and Sid Chaplin had a renaissance and new publications such as *Strong Words*, which represented the thought and experience of 'ordinary people' proliferated. In media the rise and celebration of the Northeastener began with the '*Likely Lads*', moved to historical drama with '*When the Boat Comes In*' and back to comedy with '*Auf Wiedersehen Pet*.' The effect of the movement on popular culture in the region was striking, for during 70's the celebration of all that was 'Geordie' reached new heights and is best exemplified by the work of local art critic Edward Scott Dobson who produced the affectionately satirical,



some say patronizing, *Larn Yersel Geordie*,<sup>35</sup> a text which spawned many imitations and variations (see for example Peggy Howey, *The Geordie Cookbook* 1971) and was successful enough to be released as a cassette tape narrated by local BBC presenters Mike Neville and George House.<sup>36</sup>

The regional culture movement was popular because it connected with patterns of grassroots experience, consciousness and culture, something which the proponents of the modernization project palpably failed to do. Indeed it is fair to say that the modernization movement strove to obliterate the industrial legacy of the region and was quite blind to the historical and sociological dimensions of planning. The planners could see nothing in the villages but 'backwardness and decay' and nothing in the villagers' protests except an 'obdurate traditionalism'.<sup>37</sup> It was within this context of cultural struggle that the Josephine and John Bowes Museum fell into the care of Durham County Council.

#### *John Bowes and his museum*

John Bowes (1811-85) typified the nineteenth century Durham aristocratic entrepreneur.<sup>38</sup> He was the illegitimate son of the 10th Earl of Strathmore who, through his mother Mary Eleanor Bowes, had inherited vast estates in Durham and Yorkshire. The 10th Earl married Bowes' mother, the commoner Mary Miller, only hours before his death in order to secure his son's succession. However, the legacy was contested by the family and John Bowes was denied his father's title, but acquired the Durham estates. Although at times in his life the victim of aristocratic snobbery John Bowes had the best of the arrangement since the north Durham estates were rich in coal and he inherited and worked his coal measures at a time when demand for sea coal - coal bound for the London market - reached record levels.

Bowes was a consummate entrepreneur, alive to the possibilities and shifts associated with industrialization. In 1852, for example, he pioneered the use of the steam collier which enabled regional producers to counter growing inland competition for the London trade. In succeeding decades Bowes dedicated more of his time and increasing wealth to his passion for all things French, but in particular French decor and objets d' art. In 1852 he had married the French actress Josephine Benoite- Coffinchevallier (1825-74), and it was she who conceived of the idea of creating a purpose built museum to house their growing collection of art on land near to the family's south Durham (Streatham) estate near Barnard Castle. It is claimed that 'Their policy was largely educational, to introduce ordinary people to the wider world of art'<sup>39</sup> even if, as Kane points out, 'no statement about the intended function of the museum, nor indeed any clues as to what prompted the Bowes to found a museum in the first place' appears in John Bowes correspondence between 1860-and 1880. <sup>40</sup> Certainly, during the 1860's and the first half of the 70's, they collected all manner of furniture, paintings, ceramics and tapestries especially for the museum. The foundation stone of Bowes Museum was laid by Josephine in 1869 but financial problems, which were to dog the project throughout its history, prevented its opening until 1892, by which time both John and Josephine were dead.

### *Grandest gesture*

Josephine and John Bowes' museum project was perhaps the grandest gesture in the tradition of paternalistic symbolism and largesse practiced by the north eastern aristocratic entrepreneurs during the nineteenth century. The Museum, if the contemporary Bowes establishment is to be believed, was for the benefit of ordinary people but in architecture and content it was a celebration of aristocratic status, cultural values and cultural power. That Bowes

chose to spend his money this way rather than by improving wages and conditions in his collieries and colliery villages, or that the museum, as originally conceived, made no reference to the region or its people is, to judge by contemporary standards, not surprising. It is ironic however, that the foundation stone of Josephine and John's grand educational project was laid in the same year that Bowes' own men gathered with the other delegates of the Durham pitmen in the Market Tavern, Durham City in order to improve their condition by forming the Durham Miners' Association.

From the start The Bowes Museum struggled to attract interest and visitors. The Museum's location in thinly populated south west Durham was a problem and, seemingly, the county's small middle class could not provide the scale of core support it needed to prosper. As early as 1922 Curator Sydney Harrison was complaining in a three-page report to the Governors that lack of resources left him in a 'difficult position'. Harrison's proposed solutions of the Museum's problems expose the contradictions which gave rise to them. The curator suggests on the one hand that the museum should build up a strong local collection and open a Local Room:

..to attract the local people and gradually build up civic patriotism for the collection', but on the other he argues that the elite art journals the Burlington and the Connoisseur be placed in a prominent position in the library in order to attract 'people of knowledge' and that the museum should encourage 'artistic, antiquarian and literary societies to visit the museum. [since] the members forming such societies are people who really care for Museums...To be advertised and quoted by members of learned societies would carry much more weight than the thousands of trippers who visit the museum during the Summer.<sup>41</sup>

This was the museum's problem; like its founders, it represented the values and art of the elite but failed to value, or at best took a condescending view of, the potent folk culture that everywhere surrounded it. In this sense since its inception Bowes had been moving against the grain of history. Following a further financial crisis in 1956, Bowes joined many of the other palaces of the great coalowners in the care of the (NUM dominated) Durham County Council. Significantly, within two years of the acquisition, Frank Atkinson was appointed Director of Durham Museum Service. Atkinson was influenced by and associated with the Open Air Museum Movement, which was dedicated to the celebration and preservation of folk culture. During the 60's Atkinson's interests and intentions soon became apparent as he began to fill every available space in Josephine and John Bowes palace of European culture with industrial equipment salvaged from what he saw as the region's 'imploding' industrial economy. (This section is based upon, and all related quotations are taken from the author's 'Interview with John Gall', 1999). This vision was prophetic, but it made explicit the differences in cultural values that existed in the county and raised the associated question of the role of Bowes and the representation of north east England.

Atkinson's solution to these problems eventually resulted in the birth of the Beamish Open Air Museum, but its gestation during the 1960's and its consolidation during the 70's and 80's serves as an object example of the way in which the complexities associated with cultural representation can articulate the politics of heritage, for in north east England tensions associated with the formation of Beamish and the role of Bowes still rumble on.

During the spring of 1999 I conducted interviews with two extremely well informed sources at Beamish and Bowes which

reflect and highlight the clash of perceptions. What became clear from my interview at Beamish was that during the 1970's the museum came to symbolise and mediate the strong current of traditional sentiment which had always resisted the 'imposition' of cultural forms and values associated with the paternalism of the past and ran counter to the 'top-down' ideology of economic and social modernization perpetuated by economic planners and sections of Labour's regional political elite.

This perspective was articulated by John Gall, who has worked at Beamish since 1972 and is now Director of Museum Services. Gall pointed out, tongue firmly in cheek, that during Atkinson's early tenure at Bowes 'people complained that oil paintings were being left outside and miners' lamps cared for' in the Chateau. Although this account represents a caricature of Atkinson's policy it is none the less telling for it articulates a widely felt sense of triumph over forms of exclusion that have their roots and a parallel in the economic and political history of the region. According to Gall, Atkinson's success was based upon an 'inclusiveness' that enabled him to dramatically increase access and visits to Bowes <sup>42</sup> 'you did not need a Canaletto [to be part of the project] a picture of a pitman would do' Gall told me. Atkinson's tentative first steps to create Beamish were built upon this policy of popular participation, and it is clear that it found strong support in the post war context of rising regional and class consciousness. This was most clearly reflected in 1970 when a consortium of local authorities agreed to start up and fund the first regional Open Air Museum in the country. Their aim was to create 'an open air museum for the purpose of studying, collecting, preserving and exhibiting buildings, machinery, objects and information illustrating the development of industry and the way of life in the North of England'.<sup>43</sup>

John Gall explained that the supporters of the museum were ‘folk who could see that the great industrial past of the people of the region really was a far greater story than Bowes’, people, he said, who were fascinated that in Frank Atkinson they had ‘A leader of society who cared about their history.’

*Art and attitudes*

It was this undercurrent of traditionalism, of parochialism, of ‘folkyness’ in County Durham, the very attitudes that so frustrated the modernizers, that made the creation of Beamish possible and it is the same current of consciousness, it is claimed, that rejects or at best resents Bowes. Such are the tensions in the cultural politics of the region that my source relating to Bowes asked not to be named or even quoted verbatim. I hope that my reinterpretation of the interview <sup>44</sup> adequately articulates the sense of frustration even anger which is felt there. It is an irony that Bowes is seen by informed opinion such as my source, as a purveyor of culture in the French Revolutionary tradition. According to this point of view Josephine and John Bowes’ plan was to democratise European art and culture by allowing public access to it, just as the art and culture of revolutionary Europe was taken from the seats of power, the chateaux and the monasteries, and given over to the gaze of the common people. A large part of the frustration that is felt appears to turn upon the perception that this concept is not understood by many local politicians in Durham, particularly those representing ‘socialist’ mining constituencies in central and east Durham. To them Bowes is alienating because they cannot break from a localist village mentality which associates art with aristocracy and a distorted view of social class. An example given to me of what is seen to be this kind of ‘irrationality’ relates to resentment which is still said to be felt in some mining communities towards

the Museum as a result of harsh treatment said to have been meted out to the miners working for John Bowes and Partners during the 1920's, something John Bowes could not possibly be held responsible for since it happened more than thirty years after his death. Asked if the Durham County Council supports the museum I was told that it simultaneously claims to approve of what is being done there while wishing to cut the museum's support grant (66% of income) from £450,000 to £250,000. Since this interview was conducted it has been revealed that Durham County Council has decided to relinquish control of Bowes; administration of the museum is to be returned to a Board of Guardians.

The history of the Beamish and Bowes museums, it seems, reflects a much wider debate which seeks to establish what the subject of heritage should be, but it also presents a graphic demonstration of how the issues of social class and regional identity can inform it. This despite the fact that in some fashionable academic circles representation and language have eclipsed structure and action as the tools of conceptual analysis, and categories such as social class have consequently been relegated in perceived explanatory significance or charged with being infected by ideological assumptions<sup>45</sup> - or simply declared to be meaningless. However, in the context of County Durham at least, neither Beamish nor Bowes can dislocate themselves from the history of social class, the myths of popular memory or a politics embedded in the peculiar social structure of the region. Indeed in north east England, it could be argued that the politics of heritage is very largely a product of an historic struggle to archive or assert cultural hegemony. In this sense at least, the Josephine and John Bowes Museum stands for many as a symbol of the economic and cultural paternalism from which generations of working class Northerners struggled to free themselves, just as

Beamish represents the most recent institutional expression of popular cultural autonomy and identity. In north east England it seems, tradition continues to frustrate those who fail to honour it.

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- 1 R Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline*, London,1987, Ch 6 for Beamish.
- 2 R Samuel, 'Heritage Baiting,' *Theatres of Memory*, London, 1994, pp 264-5.
- 3 Jennifer Iles, 'Gone with the wind: Versions of History at Beamish', *Northern Review*, Vol. 5, 1997, p 57.
- 4 *ibid.* p 65.
- 5 *ibid.* p63.
- 6 It would be absurd to project onto the founders of Bowes and Beamish the aims of the culture industry since they were both established to celebrate cultural forms rather than regenerate economies. It is of course possible to



interpret what has become of their collections through the theory of post modernism. Nevertheless theatrical representations of the past cannot replicate the interpretive plurality inherent to formal academic history and perhaps should not be analysed within the same categories.

- 7 Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People*, Cambridge, 1991, p.5.
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- 16 B. Williamson, *Class, Culture and Community*, London, 1982, preface; D. Byrne, *ibid.*
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- 24 Lawson, *ibid.* p.46.
- 25 Beynon, and Austrin, 1994, *ibid.* pp.259-281.
- 26 For autobiographical details see Beynon and Austrin, 1994, pp.267-281 and Lawson, 1949.
- 27 Durham Development Plan, 1951:1964
- 28 Significantly, the new town of Peterlee took its name from Labour's first Chairman of Durham County Council. The town features perhaps the most blatant symbol of modernism 'the Pavilion' by Victor Passmore. This monument has never lent itself to public affection and local people have frequently attempted to have it demolished.

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- 30 A. Potts et. al., 'Perspectives of 'T Dan Smith'', in *North East Labour History*, No28, 1994, pp.7-26.
- 31 Colls and Lancaster, *Geordies*; B. Lancaster, 'Sociability in the City', in Colls and Lancaster, *Newcastle*, passim.
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- 33 L. Killen, J. Handle, C. Ross, 'The Colliers' Rant', London: Topic Records, 1962.
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- 35 Scott Dobson, *Larn Yersel Geordie*, Newcastle, 1969
- 36 G. House and M. Neville, *Scott Dobson's Larn Yersel Geordie*, Newcastle, Mawson and Wareham Music Ltd., 1970. See B. Lancaster, 'Sociability' for further examples.
- 37 Bulmer, *Mining*, pp.192-3
- 38 Biographical details are based upon Bowes Museum Guide, 1996, pp.3-5 and S. Kane, 'Greedy Parsons: Goose pies, Drunken Servants: The Correspondence Of John Bowes, 1860-1880', *Northern Review*, Vol.2, 1995
- 39 Bowes Guide, p.5,
- 40 Kane, *ibid.* p.86
- 41 S. E. Harrison, 'To the Trustees of the Bowes Museum' (Three-page report) September 1 1922.
- 42 According to Gall attendance at Bowes 'reached levels which have not been achieved since', during Atkinson's tenure (1958-1970). My source at Bowes placed attendance figures there for 1999 at 70,000. Attendance figures for Beamish are estimated by Gall to be 300-350,000 per year over a thirty year period, totalling almost 10,000,000 visits
- 43 'What is Beamish?' 1999, This document also sets out the funding history of the museum noting that, 'Between 1958 and 1970 the project was conceived and planned; from 1970 to early 1974 a beginning was made and the project was financed by a complex Joint Committee of nine Local Authorities. In 1974 the museum was formally taken over by a new Joint Committee representing four County Councils and is now administered by a Joint Committee of City, County and District Councils.'p.1.
- 44 Author, Bowes Interview, 1999
- 45 It is difficult to see how the postmodernists escape the constructed, and thus ideologically contaminated, categories through which they mediate their analyses.

The truth, not fully recognized even by those anxious to do good to woman, is that she, like the labour-classes, is in an oppressed condition; that her position, like theirs, is one of merciless degradation. Women are the creatures of an organized tyranny of men, as the workers are the creatures of an organized tyranny of idlers. Even where thus much is grasped, we must never be weary of insisting on the non-understanding that for women, as for the labouring classes, no solution of the difficulties and problems that present themselves is really possible in the present condition of society. All that is done, heralded with no matter what flourish of trumpets, is palliative, not remedial. Both the oppressed classes, women and the immediate producers, must understand that their emancipation will come from themselves. Women will find allies in the better sort of men, as the labourers are finding allies among the philosophers, artists, and poets. But the one has nothing to hope from man as a whole, and the other has nothing to hope from the middle class as a whole.'

*Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx Aveling*



Ellen Wilkinson at the head of the Jarrow March October 1935

**Ellen Wilkinson**  
**John Mapplebeck**

*The response of the female member of Neil Kinnock's shadow cabinet was singularly discouraging. 'How,' she was asked by the television researcher, 'had Ellen Wilkinson's career helped women in the Labour Party today?' 'Who,' she replied, 'is Ellen Wilkinson?' Ellen with that fashionable velour on her head and the sturdy walking shoes on her tiny feet at the head of the Jarrow march; Ellen, head flung back on the steps of Nelson's column pleading for arms for Spain; Ellen, knees tightly together in a sensible suit in the garden of number ten, the only woman member of Attlee's 1945 cabinet. It just goes to show that even the most striking image is no guarantee against being cast on the rubbish tip of history.*

Any attempt to recycle Ellen might suggest that indulgent sentimentality which is the abiding, but pleasing vice of so many Labour historians. Either that, or a perversity so at odds with our times that it searches out causes that are not only lost, but no longer have a single protagonist. If Ellen is remembered at all it is only in those potent black-and-white images within the Hulton picture library. There she still breathes, an icon of a decade, a reminder to our parents, or more likely these days, grandparents of the way things were.

She was my mother's first Member of Parliament and the first cross she was legally entitled to put on a ballot paper went in 1929 in Middlesbrough East next to the name of Miss E.C. Wilkinson (Lab). (Although I'm not sure Miss Wilkinson would have got my mother's vote had she known that Ellen was to describe Middlesbrough "as a book of illustrations for Karl Marx". My parents remained proud of their home town throughout their lives and would much have preferred Gladstone's description of "the infant Hercules.")

But the researcher's question was wrong. Ellen Wilkinson's career is not particularly relevant to women in the Labour Party who, until the birth of Blair's babes, used to come in shapes, sizes and intellects which varied from Bessy Braddock to Edith Summerskill. What it is relevant to is the central problem that faced the democratic left throughout the twentieth century – how do you use parliament to transform society?

At first glance it seems to be a career which confirms the jibes of the revolutionary left – that familiar journey from left to right. Ellen, after all, was one of the founding members of a tiny sect – the British Communist Party – who ended up as Herbert Morrison's acolyte, publicly defending his banning of the Daily Worker. But unlike those other "old comrades" who can now be found in such numbers in Blair's cabinet and among his advisers, she never lost her faith in the power of democratic Socialism to change society for ever. This is her response, in 1946 as Minister of Education, to the thoughts of a civil servant unwise enough to reveal his true feelings about Secondary Modern Schools.

I wondered why I felt so angry...Then I realised that Mr. Squeers had given me a quizzical look across the years...This

is fundamentally phoney because it subconsciously disguises the real question...‘What shall we do to get miners and agricultural workers if a hundred per cent of children are able to profit from secondary education. .... It’s answer – give the real stuff to a selected 25% and steer the rest away from humanities, pure science, even history.’”

She was even more infuriated by the civil servant’s gender assumptions. He suggested that the girls at the new Secondary Modern Schools should be groomed for laundry work, or catering.

Can’t these precious three years of secondary education be at least a rest from all that. Can’t Shakespeare mean more than a scrubbing brush – can’t enough of a foreign language be taught to open windows on the world a bit wider – I learnt French verbs saying them as I scrubbed floors at home.

It’s almost as difficult to imagine any contemporary Labour minister looking to English literature to sustain an argument, as it is to imagine them scrubbing floors. Certainly, they would have difficulty with her use of the English language. This is her introduction to *The Town That Was Murdered*, a sort of people’s history of Jarrow which she wrote in 1938, two years after the march.

It may owe something to her youthful Marxism with its echoes of *The 18th Brumaire*, or the *Communist Manifesto*, but there is no denying its force.

The poverty of the poor is not an accident, a temporary difficulty, a personal fault. It is the permanent state in which the

vast majority of the citizens in any capitalist country have to live. That is the basic fact of the class struggle. Class antagonism cuts as deeply to the roots of capitalist society as ever it did. Men are regarded as mere instruments of production, their labour a commodity to be bought and sold. Vast changes can be made which sweep away a whole town overnight.”

That language and those sentiments would be anathema to most contemporary Labour politicians. Melodramatic hyperbole – not so much old Labour as geriatric Labour. But is what happened to Consett in County Durham in the nineteen seventies, or Ellington in Northumberland this year, so very different to what happened to Jarrow between the wars?

*The Town That Was Murdered* is also a reminder of the journalistic talent that kept Ellen afloat between her various electoral triumphs and disasters. Only the sharpest of reporters could have hit on the telling detail of the re-addressed blue official envelope sent to what had been Jarrow’s only source of employment, Palmer’s Shipyard, Ellison Street, Jarrow, and returned with a postman’s scrawl, ‘Not Known – Gone Away’.

She also had the talent of the best popularisers of making history relevant. Having catalogued Lord Londonderry’s hypocrisy in enjoining the pitmen he was throwing from their homes, along with their families, in the strike of 1844 to return to work for the sake of their wives and children, she reminds her Left Book Club readers, on the eve of the 1939-45 war, of the then Lord Londonderry’s hypocrisy over appeasement.

But journalists of the left – Cameron, Foot, Pilger – are easily



dismissed by politicians. They know nothing of the apparatus of power – they are impractical, naïve, impossible. What makes Ellen so difficult to dismiss is her record in office. Even if you regard her time as Minister of Education as too brief for any conclusive judgment, the fact is that even before that she had got a piece of legislation on the statute book.

The ‘never never’ was the curse of my parents generation. My father was an engine driver, one of those aristocrats of the working class, who because of their industrial muscle were relatively immune to the collapse of the economy in the late twenties and thirties. Some of them, however, were not immune to the wiles of the door-to-door salesmen who targeted the suburbs around the engine sheds of Heaton in Newcastle or Neville Hill in Leeds. Hire purchase was their potent weapon and few of them bothered to point out that until the very last payment was made the goods remained the property of the seller.

Before Ellen’s Private Members Bill in 1938 the seller could legally take back goods – even on the penultimate instalment – without having to refund down payments. Single handedly Ellen piloted the legislation through parliament and hirers who had paid at least a third of the purchase price were at last given some legal protection. This might be dismissed as classically New Labour, albeit before its time. You accept the realities of the market place, but mitigate its more spectacular injustices. But what is interesting is that Ellen got this legislation through in the same year that she was waxing her most lyrical Marxist prose for the readers of the Left Book Club on behalf of Jarrow. It might seem to indicate a sort of political schizophrenia, but it reminds us of the way politicians of the left could hold to the ultimate socialist ideals which

were to triumph in 1945, and yet still engage themselves with life at the margins as it was lived by their constituents.

It may be difficult to imagine the Red Ellen of the marches and demonstrations working line by line through the clauses of a hire purchase bill and finally persuading parliament to place it on the statute book in 1938, a time when Westminster and the rest of the country had other things on their mind, but for all the romantic gestures there was always, as well, a sane streak of pragmatism, some would say, calculation to her character. Take her decision in 1924 to leave the infant British Communist Party. This seems to have had as much to do with the threat of expulsion from the Labour Party and the subsequent loss of the parliamentary seat she was nursing, as with the early onset of democratic centralism within the world communist movement.

Ironically, it was Herbert Morrison, the man who was to become central to her political and emotional life, who forced the decision on her. Then, and throughout the thirties, he opposed all the moves towards a British popular front. On the conference platform after he had made his customary curt dismissal of the Communist Party and all its works, Ellen could be relied upon to follow him to the rostrum with a passionate plea for the unity of the left. At that time the two seemed diametrically opposed on just about every issue facing the party. Yet Morrison became both her lover and political hero, the man she risked her own career for in a vain attempt to win him the party leadership.

What can have brought them together? The first and most obvious answer is sex. It's rather hard nowadays to imagine the

cheerful, podgy cockney one remembers from the Pathe newsreels, as a man with a great deal of sex appeal. Yet the early photographs suggest a dashing political cavalier – the Prince Rupert who won London for Labour. He was also a very good ballroom dancer – not a talent widely found or appreciated among men of the left – so much so that the more puritanical delegates to one Labour Party conference were visibly shocked by the way Ellen danced with him at the close-of-conference ball. Their foxtrot it seems had distinct sexual overtones!

But there was something else. While Ellen was no power fucker – how could she have been when she had attained so much without any male assistance – she had a sneaking regard for men who achieved. Even in *The Town That Was Murdered* she finds it difficult to disguise her admiration for Charles Palmer, who first saw how iron steam ships could transform the coal trade in the North East and established a yard at Jarrow to build them. Similarly, she saw Morrison, mainly on the evidence of his work at County Hall, as a doer and achiever.

With that colossal misjudgment of men to which ardent feminists seem particularly prone, she weighed him against Attlee and decided that Morrison would make the better leader. Having made that decision, she let no opportunity slip, mainly through her journalism in *Time and Tide* and elsewhere, to dish Attlee and have Morrison elected leader. On the eve of war when Attlee was ill she wrote an article calling for a change of leadership which brought down on her the wrath of the whole parliamentary Labour Party. Yet Attlee himself seems to have born her no ill will. Whether it was down to a forgiving nature, or political acumen, he had no hesita-

tion in appointing her Minister of Education in his post war administration.

But if Attlee was generous, her one time lover, turned out to be particularly mean. The first public pledge of the new government was to raise the school leaving age to fifteen. But what had seemed proper and possible in the bright dawn of 1945 was under threat in the bleak winter of 1946. Cripps, as Chancellor, was worried about its effect on the labour market and simply felt that the country couldn't afford it. Much to the rest of the cabinet's surprise he was supported by Morrison. One wonders whether it was the betrayal of a pledge, or the betrayal of a friendship which so affronted Ellen.

Certainly, her cabinet speech with its implied threat of resignation, made only three weeks before her death, has a ring of passionate conviction which suggests a response to personal as well as political rejection.

She reminded her cabinet colleagues of the pledges on which they had been elected - rather more specific pledges than New Labour goes in for these days. She warned that those who would suffer most from postponing raising the school leaving age would be 'precisely those working class children whose education has already been so seriously interrupted by the war.'

As one of those working class children I have reason to thank her and the majority who supported her in cabinet - Attlee, Nye Bevan, Ernest Bevin, Chuter Ede and George Tomlinson. But Morrison was not won over - one of the factors which led to the speculation about Ellen's death.

It has been suggested by Morrison's biographers, Bernard Donoughue and G.W. Jones that Ellen committed suicide, a theory vehemently rejected by her close friends. Donoughue and Jones do not claim that Ellen was heartbroken by Morrison's cabinet betrayal the previous month, but more damagingly infer that she was not up to her job.

She had always suffered from ill health, especially asthma, and kept going on drugs. Her appointment as Minister of Education presented a burden which her frail frame could not carry.

This is a spin worthy of their subject's grandson. To allege suicide ignores not just the coroner's verdict that she had accidentally taken an overdose of the drugs which had been prescribed for her asthma and bronchitis, but the expressed belief of her own physician that the death was an accident prompted by Ellen's cavalier attitude to the drugs she was prescribed. Her habits were confirmed by Beryl Hughes, Ellen's secretary for many years:

When she was busy or distracted she would muddle her medicines and say 'I cannot remember whether I've had them or not – so I'll take a double lot now'.

But, of course, what is important is not how she died, but how she lived. Inevitably, you have to begin at the end of her life, with the brief ministerial career so casually brushed aside by Donoughue and Jones. Quite apart from her brave insistence on raising the school leaving age, there is other evidence that she was an education minister whose first priority, unusually, was children. Although she was faced by all the immediate practicalities of rebuilding blitzed schools and recruiting extra teachers, she always

insisted that her policy was to create a system of education to “suit different children, not different income groups.”

The Labour Party Conference, which then, unlike now, was a force to be reckoned with, was already passing resolutions in favour of comprehensive education, or multilateral schools as they were known in the jargon of the day. Ellen was accused by some Labour backbenchers of dragging her feet and giving grammar schools priority. It was suggested that the scholarship she had won some forty years earlier to Ardwick Higher Elementary School in Manchester made her believe that all bright working class children should follow a similar path. It was true that comprehensive education was not at the top of her agenda, but how could it have been when, whatever the educational system, there were neither enough schools, nor enough teachers.

As for the rest of her political life it could be seen as a long march under the banner of lost causes – Palmers Shipyard, the Spanish Republic, the Socialist League and Morrison for leader of the Labour Party. None of these brought her much reward, particularly the last of them. Morrison sent no flowers to her funeral and makes not a single mention in his autobiography of the woman who worked herself to exhaustion as his wartime parliamentary secretary and risked her own career through scheming and plotting on his behalf. He remains the most hopeless of her lost causes, but then the loves and affections of politicians are notoriously wayward. Morrison also seems to have shared his grandson's obsession with image and believed that in the climate of the times any whiff of scandal would scupper his leadership chances for good. For Ellen, at 55, wracked by illness and the sheer exhaustion of the war years, this can't have offered much consolation.

What then, as the young researcher, asked the ambitious woman politician, is Ellen's legacy? Well there is not much evidence of it today unless you count the destination board to the Ellen Wilkinson Estate on the buses of South Tyneside. But if all political lives end in failure there is something to be said for ending up as an image, or an icon - a bright shard of coloured broken glass glittering amid the rubbish tip of history. She will always be there at the top of the tip - Red Ellen, the Pocket Pasionara, striding forward at the head of the hungry looking men carrying a home made banner. None of her contemporaries can sum up their times quite as eloquently as that. Ellen Wilkinson will symbolise for ever the dawn of our country's days of hope.



## **The Long Stick** **William Hunt-Vincent**

*The River Wear is very quiet today after centuries of industrial activities that have brought a cacophony of sound only interrupted by the periods of slump that were part and parcel of the life of the people who inhabited its banks. We may have seen the last of the disputes that have throughout history disrupted the commercial affairs of this watery chasm that was part of the umbilical cord of the modern world, where the industrial revolution made some of its uncertain and infantile steps. Around the mouth of the river has grown a town and a city, that could at one time claim that it built more ships than any other town in the world.*

There have been many disputes in the life of the Wear. Strikes by seamen, demarcation disputes in the ship yards, the struggle of keel boatmen against the introduction of coal spouts that threatened to drive them and their families into the Poor House, dockers who demanded a bigger share of the wealth they were creating, and engineers who organised to claim what they considered to be their rights.

1825 saw one of the most violent industrial battles ever to hit this small river. This was the middle of the reign of George IV and the year of the opening of the Stockton-Darlington railway. It was



one year after the repeal of Pitt's Combination Acts but still a time of repression of dissent in Britain.

The seamen of the north east ports had formed themselves into a union. They called it the Royal Standard Association. It was an attempt to alleviate their desperate conditions of labour. They presented a claim for a raise in wages, an increase of the quota of hands per ton and a payment for heaving ballast. The ship owners rejected the claim outright.

At the time Sunderland housed most of its population on the elevated ground on the south bank of the river, between its mouth and just above the ferry landing, and from the river to the lonning, known today as Coronation Street. The houses were crammed together as if land beyond the confines of the narrow, dirty streets was non-existent. These unsanitary and cramped conditions were probably big contributors to the cholera epidemics that blighted the town.

At the rejection of the seamen's demands a general strike was called at the beginning of August, by the seamen of the Tyne, Wear and Blyth. It lasted for several weeks and was remembered for many years as the Long Stick. The owners brought in seamen from other ports and persuaded lads from the Orkney and Shetland islands to be bound as apprentices. As in many industrial disputes false motives were imputed for the reasons for the Long Stick and feelings on both sides became bitter.

Robert Scurfield, a leading Sunderland ship owner of the day negotiated a deal with the men but when it was presented to the other owners they refused to entertain it. The men were deeply

aggrieved by the rejection of what they considered to be a fair compromise. They decided to step up their action.

The strikers learnt that loaded ships, manned by blacklegs and apprentices, were lying at the Hetton spouts and elsewhere up river, ready to sail on the next tide. They took to cobbles and other river boats resolving to put to a stop such treachery. Many ships were boarded and the strike breakers dragged ashore or otherwise ejected from the loaded vessels.

A number of special constables were sworn in, chiefly ship owners and their families. At six o'clock in the evening, *The Busy*, owned by Roland Metcalf, got underway guarded by as many police and specials as its deck could hold. Before *The Busy* had traveled many yards it was stopped by the union men. They remonstrated in a positive manner with as many of the crew as appeared above deck. Little response came from these appeals. In fact the seamen were told to get out of the way and threatened by the ship owners and their friends who were armed with pistols, staves, handspikes and capstan bars.

However reinforcements were arriving for the strikers. After a great struggle the strikers boarded the ship and took control, disarming the police and bruising several ship owners. The crew, apart from the captain and mate were forced overboard while strikers climbed the rigging, waving their hats as a sign of victory.

A troop of 3rd Dragoons arrived from Newcastle the following day and marched along the High Street, down Bodlewell Lane, into Low Street and onto the fish market led by Lieutenant Phelps and accompanied by a party of ship owners, merchants and the magis-

trate John Davison. The Riot Act was read and the people asked to disperse. Not much notice was taken of the magistrate or his soldiers. The soldiers drew their sabres and the people scattered.

The people on the Monkwearmouth side of the river let the magistrates know what they thought of him and his Riot Act by stepping up their activities. Try to picture the scene: a nice sunny afternoon on the River Wear with masses of people on both banks challenging the authority of a magistrate and his armed troops. The rigging and yards of the ships crowded with men who threw stones and hurled abuse at those who would be legally in command as they crossed the water in boats to suppress those on the north side. Feelings were high and tempers ragged.

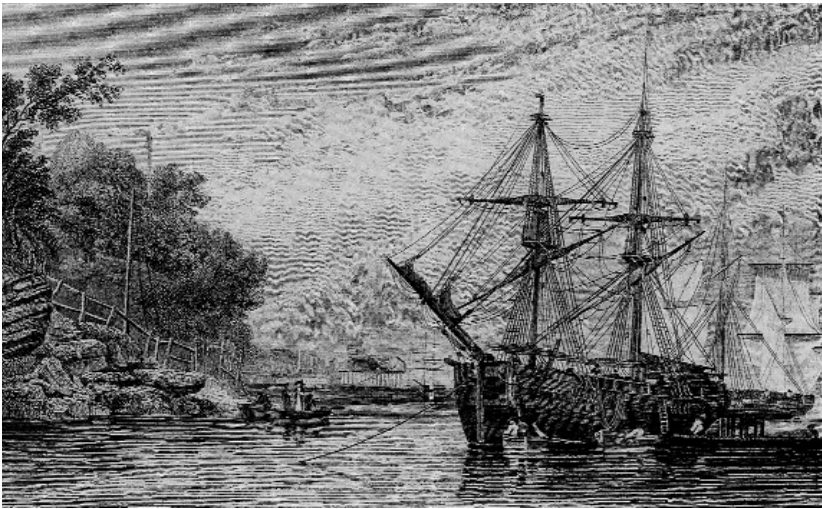
The fusillade of stones from the Monkwearmouth bank were so heavy that the boats representing law and order were forced to turn back only to find the missiles from the south bank equally prolific and accurate. Every man in the boats was injured and many were bleeding. Alarmed at the situation the magistrates suggested troops should open fire. A volley of shots aimed over the heads of the standing at the Cobble Slip on the south bank rang out infuriating those it was meant to subdue. Even more stones were thrown at the boat.

The soldiers kept firing until the people had dispersed many of them wounded. Some sources report that five men were killed, others that the death toll reached nine. A woman named Wilson was killed in town that day, the third of August, but whether she was involved in the battle is not known.

The Long Stick ended in terrible bloodshed. Many families had sold their furniture to try to survive the ordeal. Several men were

tried at Durham and committed to hard labour. Others had to seek work in different parts, some having to travel abroad to find work.

Many years passed before Sunderland got over the effects of the Long Stick and the disturbances. Sadly these struggles are largely unknown to today's Wearsiders. The padlocks have been fitted to the last ship yard. The battle has been lost but that is unlikely to be the end of struggle on the Wear.



Courtesy of Tyne and Wear Museums

Collier brig by J W Carmichael

## ORAL HISTORY

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### Our Working Lives

#### Interview by Jacqueline Apperley

*The NELHS project **OUR WORKING LIVES** sets out to record the texture of working experience in the first years of the twenty-first century. This interview is the second in the series. Harriet Vyse (nee Hopper) a former shop steward and sometime Convenor, looks back at her working life on the line at electronic components factory on Wearside. Harriet was born in 1930 at Hendon, Sunderland. Following a severe accident, and contracting TB, as a toddler Harriet needed hospital treatment throughout her childhood and late teenage years. She left school at 14 years and initially trained as a secretary and cashier. After three years working in an office environment, Harriet realised she wasn't happy so promptly swapped shorthand typing and book-keeping for a job in a local factory. In this setting, she found companionship, trades unionism, party politics and voluntary activity. Becoming an active trade unionist was made possible by a keen eye for injustice and supportive colleagues – male as well as females. However, on some celebrated occasions, sexism and petty male prejudices made the job of an active women trades unionist just a little harder to do.*

*The Sunderland economy is probably best known for its shipbuilding, ship repair and mining industries; but alongside these male dominated trades, there*

*were expanding opportunities for women workers in manufacturing, the factories making glass, electronic component as well as garment making industries. The experience of this hidden army of women workers on Wearside has yet to be uncovered. Women had always raised families and worked - it was an inescapable economic necessity - but in the post war period thousands were recruited into the 'newer' factories established along the Wear corridor. These factories providing opportunities for skilled and unskilled female labour and perhaps inevitably became a seed bed for the flowering of women's political and social awareness through trades unionism.*

HV: I applied to Cosmos (a Sunderland based firm manufacturing radio valves). I worked in the allocation stores at first. I used to issue the parts to make the radio valves. I liked that job but (not long after) when I was about 18 I went to see David Brown (hospital consultant) about my spine. He wanted me to go into Ryhope General, back on a frame and then be fitted with a Jones' posterior support. So I was in there for ten months. I was expecting miracles, at 18 of course I was beginning to be conscious of my disability, well it was a deformity. He said I was at risk of spinal paralysis in my legs (and) I would needed to wear it (the support) for four years.

So I went back to Cosmos and got a job on the 'final test' - this is where we used to test the valves. I loved working in the factory 'cos I was involved with the Social Club and used to organise the dances and trips and everything. It was while I worked on the final test, we used to go down to the toilet because you couldn't smoke at the bench; I mean, everybody smoked then and we would go down the toilets for a smoke. And then two senior girls came round one day and said only six of us could go down to the toilets at once. We said "what for like?" They said that's the rule by the

foreman. So we thought well, we're not bothered, so the six of us - we had our own crowd - just carried on. Well, this day, I said "I'm just going down the back (that's what we said)" and she said "No you can't, there's six already down". And then it just developed and getting unpleasant. So we protested at the finish and went up to the foreman and said we're not putting up with this. We were the only section on this ruling. So anyway we eventually got it abolished. Sometime after, a woman in no.1 Factory came down to ask us to join the Union and we took her hands off for the forms. Because we thought there was no way we were going to risk this happening again. So I filled the forms in - it was AEU, well, the AEF then - and then a fortnight later she come down and asked if I wanted to be a shop steward. I said "What? I haven't been in the union five minutes". So, daft me said yes...and I took that on. Well, it was a disaster.

### *Shop steward*

My first case, I did a review every so often and if the foreman thought you were good at your job you got halfpenny (1/2d) an hour increase. Well, there was this girl, I mean she was a damn good worker, and she came to us and said she hadn't got her merit award. So I said I'd take that up and waltzed up to his (the foreman's) desk and said I've come with Maureen, she hasn't get her merit award. Well, he just looked up at me and he said "I'll deal with this, you can go away". So daft me again just walked away. Well, anyway I told the factory Convenor about it and said I don't care much for this job, it just shows you up! Anyway, within about a fortnight, because Joe had got onto our district secretary (John Loughran), I knew no more 'till the foreman called us up and he says "I owe you an apology and I shouldn't have treat you like that". So from then on it just developed.

Anyway I heard about Erikson's. I fancied a change. I had been at Cosmos for twelve and half years. So I got a job (at Erikson's). But I had decided this union lark wasn't for me like, I was going to live a peaceful life, I thought! There was only about 500 who worked at Erikson's then. I hadn't been long there when the shop steward packed in and she asked me if I'd take over. Like the daft lass again, I said yes. So from there it just developed.

Of course Plessey then took over Erikson and (the firm) got bigger. Then we got the women's branch. Jack Loughran was chuffed to bits to get the women's branch. He thought there were so many of us and we could function better - we had 720 members at one time. Peggy, the one who was secretary at first .. (left to get married) .. so I took on the job as secretary for branch number 17 and we run it for 20 years and right until Plessey closure in 1977.

I had a long period as a shop steward; being a branch secretary kept us busy. Every thing was done manually then. Now, a lot is done at head office. Being a shop steward, it was about being involved, knowing that you could help people. I had a choice at the beginning, I could either join the Labour Party and become politically involved, but you cannot give your time to both properly, so I chose the Union but as soon as that ended I joined the Labour Party.

We had an occasion at Plessey, when this new manager came up, from Liverpool I think. I expect it was "a new broom sweeps clean" sort of idea, I suppose. He had an idea that we were going to have patrolling supervisors. We already had women supervisors which we didn't object to. But these new ones were to be checking toilets, and



we had already experienced that at Cosmos! We had meetings with the women and they rejected it. It took five months for it to go to national level. The answer come back 'no', so we were out. We were out seven days. We got rid of them. We didn't want anybody sacked; they give them a supervisor's job in the factory.

It used to worry me when my members were losing money. But for every strike they were out, for all I wasn't on their section, I was out with them you know? It was the comradeship; but I've got to say at the end I had a good working relationship with the management. I think that's because we never tell lies, the women shop stewards. The managers couldn't cope with it, because I think managers are trained to tell lies, they cannot function if you tell the truth it just knocks them off their stride!

It was boring work, I was putting buffer blocks on the yolk and the screws. You didn't concentrate on what you were doing - I mean I used to travel the world sitting there! But we had some great times. The work was boring but we had the comradeship of the lasses and the lads; and we used to have socials and that.

### *Works convenor*

I can't remember the year now, but I was elected as works Convenor. We had a Convenor, he was a smashing lad, but the women shop stewards said "if you don't stand we're gonna pack in". 'Cos he was a bit on the weak side. So I thought all well I'll stand but I'll not get it. But I did – by one vote. There was the tool room shop stewards, the fitters, the joiners – you know, the men. I was amazed and thought what have you done now? Well, the next day the tool room shop steward came down and says to me: "I've just come down to tell you, as a matter of courtesy, my members won't accept you". Well, that was like a red rag to a bull.

So I just looked at him and said “Well, tough, I’ve been elected properly and they’ll just have to accept it.”

They were toolmakers, craftsman, who thought they were the ‘bees knees’. Some of the lads were great but these... Well, I thought that was a good start. Anyway it put me in an awkward position because I got on well with the management. One day a meeting was called so I went up like and the Personnel Manager said “I’ve got a dilemma; they (the toolmakers shop stewards) said if you’re in the meeting, they’ll walk out.” He said “I can cancel the meeting or go along with..?” I said “Cancel the meeting, they’re not getting away with this.”

So anyway it came to wage negotiations. I called this meeting of all the skilled men to put the offer to them. I’m not kidding, I never slept that night. I thought well, I’ve got a choice. I can either let them have it all their own way in which I’ll let the women down or I can stick it out and have a nervous breakdown. I decided to stick it out. At the beginning of the meeting all I got out was “This meeting has been called for..” and this fitter shouted “Who’s taking this meeting?”. I replied “I am, but all your shop stewards are here right behind us”. He replied “I’m not stopping” and I could see all the toolmakers walking out. So anyway there was a voice at the back, one of the setters, I’ll never forget him, shouted “Never mind Harriet, we’re still here.” I could have run up and hugged him. I said well, unfortunately the meeting couldn’t go on without the toolmakers because it wouldn’t be right so I had to cancel the meeting. So that was that.

Anyway I did the (Convenor) job for a year and they put us up for election and I thought well, I’m not going to get it. The vote was unanimous, well except for one lad, an inspector in the machine shop. After

the meeting he came up to us and said “It’s not because you haven’t been a good Convenor, Harriet, but because you’re a woman”. Well, I said, you’re entitled to your opinion! Anyway, I did it for two years, I stood down and it was the shop steward out of the toolmakers, he got the job!

### *Equal pay*

I’m amazed at the question of equal pay. The women at Fords encouraged us. In our machine shop we had women doing the same job (as men) and getting less money. We decided to start with a little group, so we put in a claim for equal pay. It took five months to get it through procedure and the answer came back no. The excuse was women didn’t go on the 100 ton press. But our argument was there were some little men who couldn’t operate it. So we had another go, this time for equal bonus. Again, the procedure took five months and come back ‘no’. So we were out and out for seven weeks, the women in the machine shop. Well, the men didn’t support us, so Harry (District Secretary) sent the order in that any work coming in had to be blacked by the craftsman ...so that brought them out.

We eventually got 98% of the male bonus rate. At the next wage negotiations, Harry negotiated that each year women would get a bigger rise than the men. I’ve got to be honest, I didn’t agree with it so I asked members to vote against it but Harry swayed them and they voted in favour. But actually I was wrong because it did work. We had achieved equal pay six months before the Equal Pay Act came in; so there’s one consolation the women had equal redundancy pay – it’s not much to be proud of, like, but at least they got that.

*Factory occupation*

The closure in 1977 was a disaster. We found out from the telly, the ten o'clock news. It was such a shock. I went into work the next morning, there were families that worked there - crying and everything. We tried to save some jobs. (The company) made a decision that the first compulsory redundancies was going to start on June eighth so the works committee sent word out that any member that refused their redundancy cheque, we would support them. There was quite a few that got their cheques but out of them, only 22 refused. So there was a quick meeting and we decided to occupy the personnel and training area - I've never seen anything organised as quick.

One of the girls in the No.1 factory, she came back that night and brought in a stove, all cooking facilities and everything. (The occupation) lasted a fortnight. We weren't locked in. I think the management thought it was just a joke so didn't put the block on straight away. They didn't lock us out. It was too late anyway because we were organised. There were about thirty odd of us. We had been in two or three days and we were saying we're not having much effect because all the others were going back into work. So we made a decision to steal the chairs from the No. 2 and No. 4 factory. The next morning we looked out the window and they were coming up in droves - the women. We thought "God, they're coming up to attack us". One of the Convenors from the General Workers had a hose pipe hanging out the window and said they'd get sprayed if they came anywhere near us. Anyway, they just walked passed and we wondered where they'd gone. And then they all walked back again - and this time they were all carrying chairs. They'd been to the canteen for chairs - we'd forgotten about the canteen!

Anyway, as I said it lasted a fortnight and after that there was a meeting with the management and we got sixteen of them back at work albeit for about three months but we won the principle. We worked until the September and then we were all out; there were a few left until December and that was the end of it. But I still see some of the women to-day and they say “those were the days!”. They just loved it, we had some real characters.

Looking back, it was great. I think you will always find women willing to be shop stewards and Convenors.

*Harriet is still the treasurer of her union branch which now holds monthly meetings. With a friend, she set up and organises a friendly club with a membership of forty-six women and meets weekly at St Lukes. She retains her Labour Party membership but regrets the loss of activism that was once a hallmark of the Party.*

## **Interviews by Keith Armstrong**

### **Peter Common**

We're an interesting family! I being the eldest son. I have a brother, Bob, who you know and have met, and I've three half-sisters – Sally and the twins Mary (now deceased) and Charmion. I also have a step-brother Jan who's about two months older than me and he was from Connie's first marriage. On one occasion we met when I was serving in Cyprus. We became totally separated after Connie's death and I haven't seen or spoken to him since then. Last time I heard he was living somewhere in the Southampton area.

I was born in Datchworth, Hertfordshire, in 1934. I only have vague memories of the first house. We moved to another house when I was ten months old which I can remember. At the age of about four we then moved to Wallington, Herts., where we lived in Orwell's house and by the time I was about five we moved up to Sandon where I stayed until my mother died when I'd be about seven-and-a-half. After Mary's death, Jack was involved with the Ministry of Information making films for the Army and I was shipped across to Essex, Frating Hall, where Irene Palmer, my guardian, lived. Frating Hall Farmers' Society it was called, on the road from Colchester towards Clacton. It was an organisation run by a number of people who were conscientious objectors who were all exempt from being in the Army but were directed into that kind of work. Joe and Doris Watson were also my guardians at that particular point in Lime. Joe was a good Durham lad. I think that they were the link to my father because they had a lot of Fabian leanings and also were from the same background and era. And there we stayed until I was eleven and we then moved to West Sussex and various houses, it was a low time for Jack. West Chiltington was the first one, Firtree Lane. We then moved to a council house, when Jack was doing book reviews and films, script reviews and things like that and working in local farming and things like that; at one particular point working on a mushroom farm.

We stayed in that general area until I left school and then served a five year apprenticeship for a garage, believe it or not, before I went into the Army. While I was in the Army, of course, Jack went on his way and worked in various places.

*Open and honest*

He could see straight through people who were false and he had no time for them, not at all. He was very open, very honest, very straightforward. One of the reasons why he initially had some problems with Orwell was because he thought he was a poser, he wanted to be. It's said that when he went to Wigan he looked through the train window and he saw an 'other world'. Jack was his guide in that 'other world', wasn't he? He (Orwell) wouldn't have understood Wigan, he wouldn't have understood the working-class, without Jack's guidance and interpretation, I feel strongly about that. If he had any regard for Orwell it was that, when it really came down to it, Orwell acknowledged to Jack that he needed his help.

I have been influenced by my father more than I'd like to originally recognise or perhaps accept. You can't live with a man like that and not be influenced. As I look back on things I've done and said, some things I've only recently realised I was influenced by him. Within the last five years, my good lady wife Shirley once said that the one thing you are able to do is to see both persons point of view; and I hadn't thought about that but I do know it's true and I know it's from Jack.

*Genes flying round*

He liked the thought of 'karma', that some things are fated to be. In his first chapter in *Kiddar's Luck*, he talks about his genes flying around in the stars, and it's true that he had a spiritual sense of what's marked out for you. I didn't know until I was about nine or ten that he didn't believe in religion. He gave me every opportunity and encouragement to go to church and choirs and things like that and I independently came to my own conclusion that there

was no room for modern religion and God in my life, and it was with a sense of relief that I found that my parents were agnostic or atheist.

I came to the conclusion by the time I was eight that I couldn't believe in this and I tried hard because I thought that my parents did. This was a random thought found in his notes before his death: 'We live in a world half-way between Communism and Conmanism.' I don't know if he ever used this thought anywhere.

I think his writing is beautiful, I really do. I particularly appreciate it because I know how much work went into making it look easy and free-flowing. When *Kiddar's Luck* first came out, I read it to my children, they didn't read it initially. He, like Dickens, thought that his work should be read to (people) rather than just read yourself. I don't know if you've ever tried reading it out loud, but all his work is very easy to read out, it flows, in other words you feel it conversational and because he loved to talk and we all feel that his work was meant to be read out like that. His work is a form of poetry, again, when you read it out, you can tell, it flows, it begs to be read out aloud rather than just read to yourself.

### *The Ampersand*

I think the clue to his writing is in *The Ampersand*, the word 'ampersand' was his quest for success. You've achieved success if you're known as 'Common & Son' or 'Common & Company'. He felt that a way of achieving success and recognition was at what he could do best and I think that he was aware of this when he was about twelve, very much so. So in his search for success and recognition he went for his 'Ampersand' by becoming a writer. Like anybody who does anything thoroughly he researched his subject very



well, not just what he was writing about but the tools of the trade. I don't know if you are aware of it, but he tried to be a musician. For two years he tried to play the violin – I don't think he was very good but whether he was very good or not is immaterial. He wasn't good enough for himself and he knew that wasn't where his skill lay, his skill lay in the music of words. Mary, my mother, was a good amateur operatic singer, as so many people were at that time when there was no such thing as TV and very little radio and people amused themselves by playing the piano and singing. Every family could put together half a dozen people but in Mary's family, and to some extent in Jack's, there was a great appreciation for music and I think that there's a musical quality to his writing as well. I know how hard he worked just to get one paragraph to sound right. The more I think about it the more I'm aware of how music affected his writing. He was great lover of classical music and operatic singing. He had a great love of Gilbert and Sullivan.

He wanted success and recognition but he was also frightened in case he got it too big. If you look around this room there's a lot of wines and spirits in there but you wouldn't find that in Jack's house because he'd be frightened of the effect it had on him. Dylan Thomas was an object lesson to him because he ruined his life through booze and Jack said that he was frightened that if he was in the same position the same thing would happen to him. If he was in a position where there was no financial limitations or opening hours, I fear that the game he played about rushing to get there before the pub closed would be lost because it wouldn't be that game any more.

He felt that he ought to have made a lot more money and Turnstile Press or whoever it was at the time should have made a better job of things than they did – they went out of business and

somebody else I think published the second book. If only he had achieved some financial success earlier on so that he didn't have to do the hack work that bogged him down for years, the stuff that he hated doing and really only got peanuts out of anyway, then he would have been free to write what he wanted to write. I used to dream when I was young that if I won the Pools I'd be able to finance him so that he wouldn't have to do all that stuff. It was very frustrating for everyone who knew him at that time to see the length of time that he'd lost, wasted literally, and couldn't get on with the third book, the final part of the trilogy.

For something like ten years he was wasting the greater part of his time, in Newport Pagnell and prior to that as well. Hence we had this argument, 'Why don't you write something you can make money out of? Because you've got the ability, write what people want, to make money and then get out of the way, you can write it in about three months the way you write, honestly!' It would have been against his principles, though, and he thought that if he once did that he'd never be able to get back onto writing what he wanted to.

### *Early reader*

There's something else I owe a great deal to my father for. Schooling during the war years was very, very poor. I was taught to read by my mother when I was four, when I was ill in bed with mumps or something. The result was that when I went to school my reading age was a long way ahead of most of my contemporaries. But it wasn't just that I could read well, it was what I was being encouraged to read. So I read all the classics, you name them, Rider Haggard, Dickens, I read all of them before I was ten and I had a voracious appetite – I'd go

to the school library, for example, get four books out the school library and read one and complete it before I went out at seven-thirty to the Boys Club, that sort of thing. In this day and age, it's hardly ever done like that amongst the young.

There are a lot of books I've never touched at all. I never saw an Enid Blyton-type book or any of those sort, they just didn't exist.

*Jack London*

Jack had a tremendous admiration and regard for Jack London, not only because of the type of work that he did but the fact that he was a waterfront gang-leader when he was sixteen or seventeen and had tremendous physical ability.

Jack would fight. I don't know how often he did fight but I know he did fight and he was quite a strong, powerful man. He was proud that his father was one of the biggest men around the place. When I first went to Newcastle after the War, there were still people around who remembered his father. That would be hard for Jack to follow, I've no doubt. Like I don't try to follow my father, he couldn't follow his. There's nothing worse than being called, as I was at one particular stage, 'Young Jack', even though my name isn't Jack. For about three years my nickname as a schoolboy was 'Young Jack'! Of course, his father was about six foot four-and-a-half, which is tall even by today's standards. There were four brothers and three of them were well over six foot.

Jack would be about five foot eleven, still quite tall, but his father was enormous, he was a powerful man in a man's world, a train-driver on the Flying Scotsman and well revered, one of those strong men in the pub who everyone gave respect to.

Going back to when we first went to Langham when I was billeted on the conscientious objectors – Irene and Joe Watson, Vera Britten and all that crowd – he reiterated to me, ‘We’re staying with them, we’re not them, I have to put you somewhere while I go away to do what I’ve got to do, but you are not a conscientious objector (or ‘conshie’ as the local village lads called them). The first week at the village school I got into a fight with somebody and got hurt but then was respected and that’s something that Jack would have encouraged me to do.

He worked for the Army and he certainly wasn’t averse to it. There was nothing conscientious-objectionwise about his attitude to life. He went for life head-on. I don’t think he held a negative view on anything. That’s a good way to remember him.

### **John Burke**

Some years ago, before I ever met Jack, I worked in publishing as Editorial Manager for what was then the Paul Hamlyn Group, in its early days. One of Paul’s fellow directors was Eric Warman, who had for a time run his own publishing house and produced an annual review of the year’s films. After a while I left there and went to Shell International, then left there to go into the film business as European Story Editor for 20th Century Fox, who had offices in Soho Square.

The job there involved getting every possible lead on to things that might make films – books, plays, and what were known as “treatments” of basic ideas for films. I had to oversee the preparation of dozens and dozens of reports – three pages of synopsis of a forthcoming novel, say, plus one page of comment as to whether it would make a film or not – churning it out by the yard and sending lots of copies to the New York office. Wee had a

number of very good readers who knew films in their bones, and I would study their reports, or read a thing myself or attend a London theatre first night, and say, 'I think we should buy this'.

Then one day Eric Warman rang me and said, 'Look, John, I know you need readers. An old friend of mine, Jack Common, is a bit down on his luck and could do with an odd job like reading'.

I had read *Kiddars Luck* and *The Ampersand* – a brilliant book but forgotten; but the moment Eric mentioned it I said, 'Good Lord, Jack Common! Send him round.'

Jack did come round, and I thought him one of the most charming of people, and least pushy person I'd met. He just seemed terribly shy, and a bit sad about life. I don't mean that he moaned: he never moaned; but I thought, what a pity. I loved his company and gave him various books to read, explaining to him what it was all about:

'We want a synopsis of the story, your opinion on whether it'll make a film, or what do you think about it on the whole? I'll only want four pages, or make it three if you like. Make it clear and concise.'

He would do these things for me. and he'd come in to the office with them. But I'd have to be honest: his typing was terrible, it really was pretty blotchy. Several times I would retype it for him or get my secretary to do it, without telling him. New York wasn't impressed. They didn't argue, but they weren't impressed. It wasn't really his line, I'd have thought, but he was such a nice bod to know, and he revived some of my sentimental memories of Newcastle and so on.

Every time he came into the office I'd be rung by the Door to say 'Mr Common's downstairs', and I'd say 'I'll be down in a few minutes' and if I'd got something to give him I'd take it down and say, 'See what you can do with this'. I don't remember what we paid then, but it wasn't very much – about five pounds a time, I think. Mind you, I'm going back to '63.

Jack didn't ever ring me to say he was coming in, or me ring him; it was just that every now and then he'd arrive without much notice just to see if anything was doing. If I was in a meeting or had to go somewhere ridiculous, I'd tell him 'Sorry' or leave a message, or someone would say 'Mr Burke's not in'. So gradually we drifted apart, which was sad, because he was such lovely company. We used to go round the corner to the pub – my secretary knew where I was if there was a disaster. We usually went to *The Crown and Two Chairmen* in Soho, and we didn't always talk shop. We used to talk about his part of the world and things that had happened.

Jack never made a big thing of Tyneside, there was no sort of sentimental crap about it at all, he wasn't that sort of bloke, but he didn't belong in London. I didn't even know anything about his wife or anything like that, it just never cropped up. He just struck me as a real loner: lots of things can be a pain, they can be rather boring, but he was awfully nice to be with. I can remember that sort of glow of his. I'd make excuses to go out and have a drink with him even when I knew I hadn't got any work for him. They were just pleasant drinking sessions, just a pint or two – we didn't get as pissed as newts. I don't think he had much idea of what would make a film, really. He needed a few quid and I tried to get it to him because he was such good company. As I've said, he was basically shy, delighted when you said something nice – and you didn't want to say any-

thing that wasn't true. I always think of him coming in looking terribly polite, not smart but in a dark, not very new, suit. He was almost too modest to talk about his own projects.

He did no more than a dozen treatments for me. It was hack work. He would provide a very intelligent synopsis and his opinion. Knowing our Head Office, none of it mattered a damn. That he wanted the money was fine by me, but it was unlikely we'd churn up anything out of his reports, and I don't think he thought we would anyway. He knew what it was about. I think if he'd spotted something brilliant he'd have been the first to ring and say, 'Look, we've got something here', but we saw more rubbish than the human brain can conceive. I think he was disappointed that we were giving him rubbish, but it wasn't just him – we were giving everybody rubbish.

*John Burke was born in Rye, Sussex, in 1922, but brought up in Liverpool where his father became a Chief Inspector of Police. During the war he served with the RAF and REME, including a spell near Dumfries and a longer one in Orkney, and on attachment to the Royal Marines during the Liberation of Europe. After the war he worked in publishing, public relations for Shell International (where he met Jean) and the film business, before becoming a full-time freelance author. For several years they lived in Suffolk before settling just over ten years ago in Kirkcudbright. John's first novel, **Swift Summer**, won an Atlantic Award in Literature from the Rockefeller Foundation. As a sort of post-birthday treat, his 150th book will be published this autumn – a thriller with a musical theme, entitled **The Second Strain**. Among his other publications have been **An Illustrated History of England**, **A Traveller's History of Scotland**, **Life in the Roman Villa in Britain**, and many other historical studies, novels and short stories. He has 'novelised' a number of successful film and TV scripts including **A Hard Day's Night**, from the Beatles' first film, **The Bill** and **London's Burning**.*

## **I dreamt of Jack Common.**

I dreamt I glimpsed Jack Common on a train.  
He had his nose stuck in a book;  
the Newcastle rain seeped from his eyes.  
Jack looked sad  
and I dreamt he sleep-walked across the  
station bridge  
and staggered down The Side;  
he'd had a drink,  
and couldn't believe  
the things he saw.  
He bowled along the corridors through Milburn  
House  
and stalked the nightmare of his past;  
all around him fell bulldozed history  
and his suit shook with soot.  
He sensed a shallowness in the air,  
a city with its guts ripped out.  
He blinked at the scale of the new Law Courts  
and thought of battles the workers lost:  
Sons of the Battleaxe,  
bands of brass.



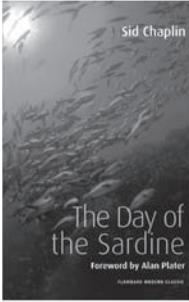
The Tyne slid by him  
and his big heart  
swelled with the agony of years;  
a great history swilling in his veins  
and the banks of the river cleansed  
for millionaires.

We live in hope I would suppose  
but how many games must we Geordies lose?  
Jack looked down at his shredded roots  
and felt his home city shudder with pain.  
It was the ache of the starving in an age of  
plenty,  
the shudder of a rudderless future:  
the Johnny Riddle trickle of the lonely Ouseburn  
running  
down the drain.

Keith Armstrong



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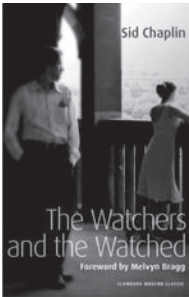
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## REVIEWS   ARCHIVES   SOURCES.

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### **A cornucopia of delight...**

Colin Matthew and Brian Harrison (editors), *Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, 60 volumes. £7,500. ISBN: 0-19-861413-6

There is little doubt that the most important work to be published in 2004 was the Oxford University Press's *Dictionary of National Biography*. Compiled over twelve years at an estimated cost of £26 million this new work contains 55,000 biographical entries and it replaces the original version founded in the 1880s by Virginia Woolf's father, Sir Leslie Stephen. Obviously the passing of over a century meant that some updating had become necessary but, it was also felt by the editorial staff, there was a need to broaden the scope of the *Dictionary* by including more women, members of ethnic minorities, and non-Establishment figures. This has been done and the new work has been greeted by paeans of praise. The *Dictionary's* publication was even welcomed by warm words in the House of Lords when the historian Lord Briggs described it as 'probably the biggest contribution to the history of scholarship in the humanities – certainly in my lifetime'; and *The Independent* described it as 'a vast cornucopia of delight as well as an independent source of information'. This proclaimed horn of plenty certainly pours out many entries of interest to members of the NELHS.

There are entries on Labour MPs who have sat for North Eastern constituencies. The list includes: Margaret Bondfield, Hugh Dalton, Chuter Ede, Patrick Hastings, Arthur Henderson; Alf Robens, Emanuel Shinwell, Charles Trevelyan, Sidney Webb, Ellen Wilkinson and Konni Zilliacus. Although he was never an MP Newcastle Council leader T. Dan Smith merits an entry. Northumberland miners are represented by James Bowman, Thomas Burt and Charles Fenwick; and the Durham men by William Crawford, Thomas Hepburn, Jack Lawson, Will Lawther, Peter Lee and Sam Watson. From the Boilermakers' Union there is Mark Hodgson and Robert Knight, and from the Engineers John Burnett. The working class writers Sid Chaplin and Jack Common find a place in its pages, as does the Newcastle United footballer and founder member of the Players' Union, Colin Veitch.

The sixty volumes of the *Dictionary* are on sale at £7,500 a set, and it is to the credit of most public libraries in the region that in spite of tight budgets they have purchased copies. NELHS members can spend many enjoyable hours browsing through these pages. Does this publication supersede the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*? I think not, because the *Dictionary of Labour Biography* provides a wider net catching those who do not make it into the *National Biography*. Furthermore, the *Labour Biography* is an ongoing exercise with new volumes appearing every year. There is room for both.

*Archie Potts*

### **The fight for democracy...**

George Wheeler, *To Make the People Smile Again. A Memoir of the Spanish Civil War*, with a forward by Jack Jones, Newcastle upon Tyne, Zymurgy Publishing, 2003. pp.190. pbk+illustrations. £8.99; Javier Cercas, *Soldiers of Salamis*, trans. by Anne McLean, London, Bloomsbury, 2003. pp.213. pbk. £6.99.

*To Make the People Smile Again* is the account of one extraordinary man's contribution to the defence of the Spanish Republic through his service in the 15<sup>th</sup> International Brigade between 1938 and 1939. George Wheeler, without a passport, made his way to Spain during this traumatic period. He produced this account of his part in the battle of the Ebro, and his subsequent capture and imprisonment by the nationalists is written in unadorned prose which adds to the story's immediacy. Wheeler came from a socialist background in London but was not doctrinaire in his beliefs. Those seeking the labyrinthine squabbles of the Left will be disappointed; the text is without guile or partisanship beyond the author's understanding that democracy was worth fighting for. Informed of his destination his mother maintained a calm exterior and his father, one imagines, was rather proud. Indeed, this is the account of ordinary people taking direct action in defence of a legitimate government. They also understood that this defence was against an ideology that was intrinsically evil:

*Fascism may be defined as an ideology which explicitly rejects the ideal of a limited style of politics in favour of a new and entirely opposed political style, which may be described as an activist style of politics... a style which conceives of the highest good for man as a life of endless self-sacrifice spent in total and highly militant devotion to the nation state... unconditional allegiance to a fascist 'leader', whose arbitrary personal decree is the sole final determinant of right and wrong in every sphere of life.<sup>1</sup>*

It was a system based upon the will to power: a system that attacked and would attack again those governments based upon the will of the people.

Wheeler is more prescient than the then government of the United Kingdom which shamefully pursued a policy of non-intervention whilst the Axis powers poured men and equipment into Spain to support Franco. He meets men from a variety of backgrounds for in his own

words the Brigade contained, as well as working men, ‘toffs’ and intellectuals such as Lewis Clive and David Guest both of whom are killed in action; the former whilst talking to the author.

*John Hope*

### **CultureVultures...**

Helen Berry & Jeremy Gregory, eds., *Creating and Consuming Culture in North-East England, 1660-1830*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2004.

In the last two decades or so historians concerned with investigating social status have switched their focus from production relations to consumption as the vital tool in understanding behaviour. Some readers of this journal have seen the dropping of ‘Labour’ from its title as symptomatic of an unwelcome acceptance of this direction. The last word on the importance of production relations has not been written but there is no doubt that that the shift in direction has added much to our understanding of people’s behaviour in past societies. There has been an outpouring of material on Britain exploring what people ate and drank, what they wore, the nature of their accommodation, the language they spoke and wrote, how they worshipped and how they took their leisure.

This slim volume turns the enquiry on to the north east claiming to deal with the histories of cultural production and consumption of regional and national identities. It covers a very long time span and is necessarily fragmentary in the ground it could cover. However many of the essays have interesting things to say. Helen Berry’s micro essay on the building of the Assembly Rooms in the 1770’s throws light upon the project of creating a cultural and social centre by the town’s elite for itself. There is no sense at that time of

casting pearls before swine. Working people were still a mob, occasionally threatening but showing few signs of independent action. This marks a sharp contrast with the 1820's when the town's first art exhibitions were decidedly 'public', their middle class promoters part of that class which saw itself as having responsibility for educating and refining the manners of the new working class brought out in Paul Usherwood's essay. Nevertheless in the former essay Helen Berry indicates that the palpable display of extravagance in the creation of the Assembly Rooms produced an antagonism among some citizens which became the source of organised opposition to the ruling elite, an opposition which was to broaden over the next decade.

In a meticulously researched essay Richard Allen examines another kind of opposition; that mounted by the Quakers. Members of the Society of Friends were a numerous and distinctive group in Tyneside society. They attempted to stand out against visible signs of increasing affluence expressing moral disapproval at society at large and exacting fierce behavioural discipline among its own members. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century their stance resulted in their wide spread exclusion from employment and cultural association though the latter was largely self inflicted. The author shows how in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century there was some adaptation and greater involvement especially in business and in progressive causes such as the anti-Slavery movement.

The introduction draws attention to some of the volumes omissions and invited further research to enrich the account. Sadly the publishers have not helped the book to act as a spur. At nearly £50 for 150 pages public libraries, even in the region, as this reviewer has found, may demur at purchasing.

### **Against the grain...**

Matt Perry, *Marxism and History* (London, Palgrave, 2002) ISBN 0-333-92244-1, 195pp., £11.99.

This volume is short, but very impressive. It was the first to be published in Palgrave's 'History and Theory' series, with three further titles having appeared so far. The author, a lecturer at Sunderland University, trade union and political activist, writes as a committed Marxist, and the book is none the worse for that. His exposition of 'the materialist conception of history' - the alternative name for Marxism - is clear and intelligible, but in no way oversimplified or condescending to the reader. Marxism is not an arid formula to be mechanically applied irrespective of the messy complexity of real historical events (though 'vulgar Marxists' have treated it in this manner, even in Marx's own lifetime, causing him to exclaim in exasperation that he was no Marxist). Rather it is a subtle and flexible manner of grasping and understanding in a critical spirit the apparent disorder and confusion of historical processes. Marxist historians in the main have tended to direct their attention to the era of rapid economic and social change and upheaval beginning in the late eighteenth century and 'gravitated towards history's great revolutions' (p.15), but Marxism has proved an enormously fruitful approach when applied to ancient, medieval and early modern societies in addition - as well as broad areas of human accomplishment such as science.

Perry makes no bones about the fact that the historical writings of Marx and his colleague Frederick Engels were not written as academic texts, but for revolutionary purposes, since to explain and contribute to the social revolution they perceived to be on the horizon was their lifetime endeavour. He first of all outlines the concepts which they developed and deployed, particularly those of the forces, relations and modes of production, then in the following chapter discusses how this was translated concretely into their historical writings. The specific writings which are cited here are Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Engels's *Peasant War in Germany* and his *Letters on Historical Materialism*, and finally Marx's masterpiece, the first volume of *Capital*, which is as much a work of history as of economic analysis.



The next section deals with what Perry describes as the ‘second generation’, who made their mark as historians or theorists of history during the inter-war years, with ‘works of unrivalled importance in both the writing and philosophy of history’. The three most significant are Trotsky (with his *History of the Russian Revolution*), Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci, a Russian, a Hungarian and an Italian. It was by no means accidental that these individuals were at the heart of the revolutionary storm and all in one way or another suffered for their actions and theoretical insight.

Under the chapter heading ‘“Rescuing the Poor Stockinger”: History from Below’ Perry examines the work of what could well be termed the ‘third generation’ of Marxist historians, to which the group of British historians represented by such luminaries as E P Thompson, Christopher Hill or Eric Hobsbawm – to note only the most influential – was central. He notes the powerful and salutary nature of the ‘history from below’ approach and the way in which it has transformed historical studies – but also points to its dangers and narrowing in the hands of less skilled and less politically aware practitioners.

Which leads on to postmodernism. In his last chapter Perry measures the insights of the new fashionable notion (in its historical guise) against those of Marxism – and finds them severely wanting. The postmodern tendency has been especially prevalent in the field of literature and literary studies: its proponents have also pronounced it to be an appropriate approach to historical understanding – indeed the assimilation of historical writing to imaginative literature has been among its themes, along with an assertion of the randomness historical development. Perry here develops a strong argument to contest postmodernism’s denial of historical agency, especially revolutionary agency.

Perry concludes with the comment that, ‘The space for a radical history that sees, in Walter Benjamin’s words, that its “task is to brush histo-

ry against the grain” continues to exist and is perhaps even growing’ – a thought perhaps also applicable even to our Society’s own modest efforts.

Willie Thompson

**Party ‘hack’...**

Andy Croft, *Comrade Heart. A Life of Randall Swingler*

(Manchester University Press, 2003).

Randall Swingler was not like, and did not like, those middle class poets who had a brief dalliance with communism when it became momentarily fashionable in the later thirties. Though middle class himself, and the beneficiary of a very privileged education, Swingler stuck with the CP through its vicissitudes and was contemptuous of people like Auden and Spender who quickly dropped communism when it looked like it was going out of fashion again. This characteristic makes Swingler an interesting subject for study, which is augmented by the considerable contribution he made in terms of time and effort to various communist-linked or led cultural forays, notwithstanding the extensive copy he provided for and major role he played in the day-to-day functioning of the party paper, the *Daily Worker*.

However, whilst we learn a great deal of the kinds of things Swingler and individuals like him did, why he did them, their effects and the politics behind it all are areas that remain relatively unexplored. Swingler’s motives in joining and then staying with the CP are largely only hinted at. A deeply religious young man, Swingler’s ‘romantic conception of the artist, Wykehamist [his private school] notions of public service, Anglican paternalist ideas of community, the Georgian dream of sharing in the life of the common people, Marxist ideas of consciousness, ideology and class, and the New Testament call to be born again’, seems a fairly unconventional path leading to membership of the Communist Party

(p.47). Swingler's leaving the CP after the 1956 revelations about Stalinism came after a period of increasing disenchantment with the party's attitude to his cultural endeavours and experiences in communist Czechoslovakia. What kept Swingler in the CP in the late thirties, especially after the Nazi-Soviet pact and then the imperialist war period, too, is not particularly well explained. These events caused serious problems for many communists, and it is reasonable to think that the intellectuals were forced to do more soul searching than the ordinary rank-and-filer.

In general, Croft appears too close to his subject to be able to take a more detached view. Swingler's antagonistic attitude to Trotskyism was, as Croft says, mainstream thinking on the British left at the time, but there surely must be more to be said about it than simply that Swingler was representative in not liking Trots. And, given the almost total lack of Trotskyists in Spain, it is difficult to understand why 'For Swingler the arguments against Trotskyite politics had been clarified in Spain' (p.66). On page 68 Croft deems Orwell's response to the 'Authors Take Sides' (on Spain) questionnaire as 'offensive and incoherent'. In a sense it was offensive, and certainly a rant, but Orwell was making some very important points about the counter-revolutionary role of the CP in Spain, based on his recent bitter experience there. Yet these are in no way addressed by Croft, who appears to accept the CP 'line' at the time as unquestioningly as his subject matter. There are other examples of Croft blithely repeating the communist slogans of the time. On page 77 he notes that the closure of *Left Review* was a 'disheartening setback in the attempts to mobilise the literary intelligentsia against fascism and war'. Why the literary intelligentsia were needed in this fight, their role and supposed influence are all accepted without further enquiry, as is the idea that fascism could be fought without the possibility of war.

Then there is the question of what exactly people like Swingler were trying to do and how they were going about it. At one London LBC poets' group meeting for example, 'Elizabethan recorder music' was played between readings and discussions (p.78). We can only wonder at how a working class communist at one of these meetings would have reacted to 'Elizabethan recorder music'. Certainly, there is little indication given by Croft of the kinds of people who attended these 'cultural' events and what they thought about them. There is a whole discussion here about the nature of culture, who defines it and who is in a position to help others 'appreciate' it. This revolves around class and power, and it is hard to escape from the feeling that in the kinds of activities in which Swingler was involved, the middle class communist literary intelligentsia told the proles how to appreciate their (middle class) culture. Swingler's apparent hatred of his own class and desire to 'escape' it and the corollary of idolisation of the working class is another fascinating theme running throughout much of the book that could have been explored in greater depth.

The biography is very detailed, painstakingly researched and closely referenced: we learn a lot about what Swingler does on a day-to-day basis, what he reads, what he thinks about what he reads, etc., but all this detail often seems to divert attention away from some of the bigger questions. The detail is frustrating in another way, too. There are long lists, for example, of the characters Swingler went on drinking binges with, but they are generally little more than oft-repeated names. Dylan Thomas' name, for example, is frequently mentioned in lists of drinkers but there is very little indication of his relationship with Swingler and the rest, his politics and so forth. The only idea of what Swingler felt about him is what he said after Thomas' death: 'A sad little man and a really sad little life'. But there are nice insights into the mentality of a type of left wing activist. Told a lover was pregnant by him in 1947, Swingler destroyed

all mementoes of her and did not see her again for years. Croft comments: 'Jobless, penniless, loveless and mostly pissed, Swingler had somehow turned his massive sense of responsibility for the world into a fear of accepting personal responsibilities' (p.188).

It seems that Croft is intent instead on concentrating on Swingler's literary output and putting his name up there with Auden's and Spender's as a major figure in the poetry and writing of the period. To this end much of the book is devoted to long quotations from Swingler's work. As to whether Croft is right, that remains a question for the experts. Whilst Croft does provide insights into Swingler's love affairs with human beings, there remains room for further exploration of his love affair with the CP, and, by connection, with the working class (and his simultaneous hatred of his own class), surely the more interesting of his affairs.

*Lewis Mates*

### **Down the river...**

Ron French & Ken Smith, *Lost Shipyards of the Tyne*, 2004 and Jim Cuthbert & Ken Smith, *Palmers of Jarrow*, Tyne Bridge Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, both 2004.

At the time of writing it could be said that all shipyards on the Tyne are 'lost,' or will be soon. The last orders are about to leave Swans at Wallsend and the remaining repair outfit has no orders pending at Hebburn. It's quite a moment in history. Records tell us that ships have been built on this river for at least a thousand years and probably for a good deal longer; maybe back beyond the Romans. Ron French and Ken Smith start the story in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the days of sail. Unfortunately surviving records are few for that period which makes the volume thinner than the reader would like. No doubt many of the hun-

dreds of collier brigs plying the coal trade from the Tyne to London, the 500 keel boats of the upper river and the cargo boats bringing timber from the Baltic from at least the sixteenth century were built on the river. And since the Newcastle merchants ruled the river with extreme ruthlessness to the detriment of Shields and even Sunderland, we can be pretty sure that the shores from Dunston to St Peter's and Felling were crowded with yards great and small. We do know that the shipwright's company was the most influential of the town's *craft* guilds.

From the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century the authors list 135 ship yards though don't claim it to be comprehensive. They pick out the most significant for a more detailed treatment. Here they record the names of some of the most famous ships to be built on the river, charting the technical advances which marked success. They also show the terrible impact made by economic circumstances on the lives of the workers and their families. In the good times the skilled craftsmen could enjoy living standards well above the average for working people in Britain. However they could never have security. Nowhere is the point more dramatically made than in the story of Palmers of Jarrow told here by Jim Cuthbert and Ken Smith. From its foundations in the 1840's Palmers established a leading role in world shipbuilding. Technically innovative, they established the first successful commercially viable steam driven cargo carrier, the *John Bowes* in 1852. The firm was on the leading edge organisationally too, creating vertical integration in one firm and largely on one site mining ore and coal, operating blast furnaces and rolling mills, building and repairing great ships for the royal and merchant navies.

Charles Mark Palmer, the firm's founder was almost a template for the industrial entrepreneur. He was designer, innovator, financial wizard, politician and local benefactor. He was credited with turning a rural, riverside village into an industrial town, unusual in having a vast statue of

himself erected in his own lifetime. Yet this massive edifice, the business not the statue, came crashing down in a week in 1931. The surviving legacy was, 'the town that died' and 'the Jarrow Crusade.' Cuthbert and Smith, whilst recounting the Palmer legend, give due space to the insecurity and social debris that form the workers' experience.

An attractive part of both of these books are the little personal accounts of some of the workers who made ships along the river Tyne. They are part of a beautifully produced series of books from Tyne Bridge Publishing detailing the history of enterprise on the river from the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Together they suggest another title: the history of labour on the River Tyne. Would the next author step forward?

*John Charlton.*

### **Local Chartist Studies...**

R.P.Hastings, *Chartism in the North Riding of Yorkshire and South Durham, 1838-48* Borthwick Paper No.105 , 2004, price £4 + 50p. p&cp from Borthwick Institute, University of York, Heslington, York YO10 5DD

This, the latest in a useful series, is a brief but generally well researched attempt to fill some of the gaps in our knowledge of the several phases of Chartism in an area outside the major northern industrial conurbations. As Dr Hastings has already covered the early development of Chartism in the same area in an article for the Bulletin of the Durham County Local History Society (no. 22 1978) he tends to focus here on the years 1839-42 with a brief coda devoted to 1847-8 and after.

Readers may not necessarily entirely concur with his identification of economic distress exploited by politically committed local or national leaders as a crucial factor in determining whether particular sections of the work force became involved in the movement. Yet as Dr Hastings

demonstrates it was certainly true in the 1830s that workers in the domestically based textile industries of the region were losing their livelihoods as water and steam technology replaced handloom weaving, factory produced Lancashire cotton replaced linen and the woollen industry moved to the towns of West Yorkshire. And this was offset by the employment opportunities offered by nearby developments in coal and lead mining, railways and port installations. Agricultural wages remained stable and the anti Poor Law agitation which formed the starting point for Chartism in many other parts of the country, was largely absent here.

But this is to ignore the counter argument that the appeal of Chartism was less to workers in the decaying outworking trades than to the increasingly radicalised industrial proletariat represented by the north eastern miners. Yet here again in the area covered by this study the workers seem to have failed to conform to the wider picture. A possible explanation not offered by Dr Hastings, is that the expansion of coal mining in south and west Durham was a recent phenomenon stimulated by railway development. There was a labour shortage and the terms of employment offered at the annual bindings in the early years of Chartism at least, compared very favourably with those on Tyne and Wearside. But did the men recruited from these older established mining areas leave their radicalism behind them?

Clearly the workers in south Durham and north Yorkshire did not remain unaffected by Chartism. Chartist 'missionaries' toured the market towns of the region but despite the formation of Associations and collection of signatures in centres like Darlington, Stockton, Shildon, Thirsk and Bishop Auckland there was no centre like Newcastle or Sunderland where orators could muster the thousands of supporters necessary for a mass movement.



However they drew sufficiently large crowds to panic local magistrates into enrolling special constables and calling for military protection for persons and property. Generally though the sort of confrontation that could have led to physical violence seems to have been avoided and the policy of picking up individual agitators on minor charges and taking them off the streets seems to have enabled the authorities to maintain control. Also for much of the time the city of York itself remained significantly unmoved. (Hastings suggests that this may have been because much of its politically aware artisan population already had the vote) although the presence under arrest at York Castle in 1841-2 of several prominent figures including O'Connor himself and the enthusiasm that greeted his release created a brief upsurge of support there. For a few months there was a serious attempt to create a much more co-ordinated organisation using some of the pre-existing networks of Temperance societies and the Primitive Methodism that was so strong in the colliery and weaving villages. As Dr Hastings points out, 'Local preachers often combined the role of religious leader, trade union official and Chartist. From the Primitives were borrowed the model of class organisation and open air Camp Meetings'

But Primitive Methodists with their traditions of self help, mutuality, literacy and temperance were not the stuff of physical force revolution and one of the criticisms that might be made of this study is its failure to discuss the local relationship between the Temperance movement, Primitive Methodism and Chartism in greater detail.

There is a similar lack of engagement with the open question of how far the prolonged miners' strike of 1844 was Chartist inspired. Dr Hastings sees it rather as a diversion of energies that had formerly been at the service of Chartism but as Challinor and Ripley have shown and as Keith Wilson demonstrated in his article for the *Essays on North East Coalmining History* published by this Society in 1986 the relationship was

much more complicated than that. Perhaps this is an issue that needs to be re-addressed in a specifically south Durham context.

The limitations of a short review can hardly pick up on all the questions raised, but not necessarily examined in depth, in this little study which remains nevertheless a useful local contribution to the wider debate on Chartism.

*Win Stokes*

### **The other Newcastle...**

Greg Bogaerts, *Black Diamonds and Dust*, Vulgar Press, Melbourne, 2005 Obtain direct from :<http://www.vulgar.com.au>

Due to the efforts of the Durham Mining Museum [[www.dmm.org.uk](http://www.dmm.org.uk)] we know the names and often the ages of thousands of Northumberland and Durham miners who died in colliery disasters as far back as the mid-18th Century. From the many surviving day books of the viewers and local newspapers we have graphic and chilling accounts of terrible disasters. Rob Colls, Huw Beynon and Michael Flinn give us accounts of colliery work and life mostly from the early nineteenth century where rudimentary trade unionism was taking place and where records were being kept which sometimes give more than a glimpse of the lives, attitudes and behaviour of the miners themselves as these were able to draw upon autobiography, poetry, popular song and court reports. Virtually none of this exists for earlier periods when the mines were crude holes cut in the ground, where miners were largely dispossessed migrants recruited from a countryside driven by enclosure, where children as young as five accompanied their fathers or older brothers below ground, where the owners were utterly oblivious to even minimal safety standards, employed no engineers and could count upon the civil power to respond to their demands for repression of dissent. Such a world existed on the Newcastle coal field in New South Wales, up to the First World War; almost in living memory. It is through fiction that

we can enter the coal miners' world before trades unionism, popular education and legislation gave miner's a dignity recognised by society at large. Greg Bogaerts has written a powerful novel, *Black Diamonds and Dust*. Though set in late 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Australia it could easily serve as a picture of north east mining communities in the 18th century. It tells the story of Edmund Shearer (possibly a Geordie) and his family's struggle for that dignity in a world of privation, disaster, violence and tragedy. Shearer's people are not just victims for they make their own history building a community of mutuality and solidarity. It is an inspiring story.

### **Geordies in the Navy,**

Tony Barrow, *Trafalgar Geordies*, North East England Press, 2005.

An attempt to recover the history of the ordinary seamen who fought at Trafalgar. A full review of this fascinating book will appear in the 2006 volume of this journal.

### **The Northumberland Record Office...**

The Northumberland Record Office branch at Melton Park, Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne currently houses the collections of documents formerly kept at the Institute of Mining Engineers.

Catalogued as Specialist Collections under the number 3410 these include a series of volumes containing hand written viewers' reports on north eastern collieries actual or projected over a period extending from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth.

The coverage is not comprehensive, the documents have been preserved either as family papers or because the information contained in them was useful to subsequent generations of mining engineers, or in many cases, a bit of both.

At first sight these reports might seem to offer little of interest to the historian of labour for the viewers were the employees of the coal owners and lessees. Their initial role was to survey coal measures and advise whoever was seeking to derive profit from the extraction of this valuable commodity first on the practical viability of such extraction and then on the most cost effective means to achieve it. Coalmining on any substantial scale was a capitally intensive business. The workforce only figures in the calculations of the early viewers as an item of expenditure to be set against estimated profits.. So why bother to look at these documents?

Well, at the most basic level and particularly for the earlier period these reports are the only surviving evidence of where, when and by whom, miners were being employed in North East England. They explain the location of communities and the migration of populations.

At a later period when advances in pumping and sinking technology had made mining a much more potentially dangerous occupation it was the viewers' reports on colliery accidents that began the prolonged struggle for legislative action to improve mining safety. The viewers may have been the bosses' men but they were fully aware of the conditions under which pitmen worked because they also spent their working lives going up and down the same shafts entering the workings and making regular checks on the operation of each colliery within their remit

As the 'trade' of the viewer evolved into the 'profession' of the mining engineer some of this immediacy was lost but by then issues of safety and working conditions had been brought before the public eye in a variety of ways and the historian has much more material to work on.

The collections of viewers' reports are relatively easy to use although at first sight the amount of detail and sheer extent of the material may

seem daunting. There are indexes of names, places and subjects and a comprehensive four volume index of the various groups of reports catalogued under the names of the viewers responsible for preserving them.

The three largest groups because they comprise material gathered over several generations of one family are those catalogued under the names Watson, Forster , and Buddle.

John Watson who died in 1832 inherited the reports of his father whose viewing career stretched back to the 1730s and the papers were passed on to John's son William.

Thomas Emmerson Forster's collection is particularly interesting. A well known mid nineteenth century viewer who worked both in Durham and Northumberland he seems to have collected reports from whatever colliery he was called upon to survey and these include some of the earliest papers available as well as a volume of newspaper cuttings on the miners' strikes of 1831-2 and 1844. After his death his son continued to file his own reports well into the twentieth century. .

The Buddle collection is probably the one best known to mining historians. It includes not only Buddle's own comprehensive surveys of individual collieries but also some of his father's earlier ones and those of his nephew who succeeded him. Although chiefly known for his management of Wallsend colliery and his role as Lord Londonderry's agent his prestige at the height of his career in the 1820s and 30s was such that his opinion was sought throughout the North East and further afield. His papers also include those of his friend T.Y.Hall inventor of the pit cage and the underground rail system in collieries.

Less extensive but with many interesting items are the papers in the Bell, Brown, Easton, Johnson, Peck, Unthank and Weeks collections. All of these men were well known viewers in their day. Finally there are the papers of the Grand Allies the partnership of coal owning grandees who in successive generations dominated the Tyneside coal trade for a full century after their initial agreement of 1726 'for the mutual management of certain of their collieries and the purchase of additional collieries' and the range of whose interests enabled the assembly of the team of viewers many of whose reports form the backbone of these collections.

*Win Stokes*

### **County History...**

*Durham Victoria County History* re-started in September 1999, after a break of over 80 years. The three volumes completed before 1915 will shortly be joined by Durham VCH volume IV, Darlington, now in the press and due for publication in summer 2005. There has also been a paperback, *The Townscape of Darlington* (2003), the first one ever produced by the Victoria County History of England, which covered the physical growth of the town from the earliest times to the present day.

Work has been in progress on Sunderland for some time, although the official four-year Heritage Lottery Fund project, England's Past for Everyone (EPE) started only on 1 September 2004. My colleague Dr Christine Newman, having wrapped up the medieval and religious history of Darlington, is working on similar themes in our project area of Bishopwearmouth and Monkwearmouth parishes, supported by specialist input on the Anglo-Saxon period from Prof. Rosemary Cramp. Dr Maureen Meikle has been seconded from the University of Sunderland to cover the seventeenth century, through to 1719 when the parish of Sunderland was created out of Bishopwearmouth. Christine and Maureen's work, with architectural contributions by Peter Ryder, will

appear in paperback form in 2007 in *The Origins of Sunderland*, and later as part of Durham VCH volume v, Sunderland, some time after 2009.

Currently, in the academic year 2004-5, we are joined by Dr Gwenda Morgan and Dr Peter Ryder, seconded from the University of Sunderland to write on eighteenth century administrative and social history. There will be more secondments next year, and we are also about to recruit volunteers who will transcribe sources and be involved in the project in different ways. It's planned to produce a further paperback, *The Townscape of Sunderland*, investigating the growth of the port and city in a similar format to the Darlington paperback. Text will be mounted online, starting very soon (on <http://www.durhampast.net>) and once specialist appointments have been made to the central EPE project, it is intended that local educational schemes will be developed from our Sunderland research.

Shortage of source material is certainly not a problem. Thanks in great part to the National Archives project Access to Archives (<http://www.a2a.org.uk>) we have tracked down sources on Sunderland all over the country. A petition of 1698 objecting to the Aire and Calder navigation scheme, signed by more than 700 coal fitters and other tradesmen of Sunderland, was found in the House of Lords Record Office. A trip to the Hydrographic Office in Taunton (which I would recommend to anyone working on the history of a port) yielded some wonderful plans of the river and harbour and drawings of the coastline, the earliest in 16<sup>th</sup>-century atlases. There is also a lot on the development of the river and port in the Institution of Civil Engineers archives. In the Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Leeds, is a diary detailing the daily life of a regiment stationed at Sunderland in 1761 - though I am still trying to work out why 'the men are ordered not to eat too much fish'. The military presence in Sunderland gives an added dimension to the eighteenth

and early nineteenth century town, and I am eagerly awaiting from the British Library a copy of a birds-eye view of the barracks - east of the Town Moor - in 1839.

As a slight aside from our main work, we have been successful in obtaining a grant of £3,000 from the Marc Fitch Fund to start an online bibliography of articles on north-east history. This involves digitising a card index (with about 7,500 entries) which was produced by a Manpower Services Commission scheme in the early 1980s, supervised by Graham Potts and others at the University of Sunderland. More than half of the index has now been typed on to a database, and it will be categorised by historical theme and period so that the whole site can be searched for specifics - author or keyword from the title - or in a more general way, for example for articles about the nineteenth century coal industry. We are hoping to find ways to develop the site further, for instance by extending and updating the content. The site should be operational by the middle of 2005, at <http://www.sunderland.ac.uk/nebibliog>. We hope that it will be of value to anyone interested in the history of the north-east, and also to historians with interests beyond the region itself. Meanwhile, our very supportive Durham VCH Trust, which managed to keep us going through some anxious times before the HLF funding was confirmed, is now trying to raise money to cover a shortfall over the next three years - the HLF money covers less than half of our costs - as well as planning for the period after 2008. The HLF will not support the work of transforming the Sunderland research into a VCH volume, which will take perhaps a further one to two years. We are also looking beyond the Sunderland project and considering where in County Durham we should next focus on. All this depends on obtaining substantial finance, and we are always very pleased to receive sponsorship and donations. Regular subscriptions are especially appreciated - subscribers contribute from £10 a year. For further details of how to help, please contact me at



[gill.cookson@sunderland.ac.uk](mailto:gill.cookson@sunderland.ac.uk) or [gill.cookson@durham.ac.uk](mailto:gill.cookson@durham.ac.uk), or drop a note to me care of the History Department at the University of Sunderland, Priestman Building, Sunderland SR1 3PZ.

*Gillian Cookson*

### **Labour History on the Internet**

Many readers of this journal have access to the internet. Here are some of the sites worth visiting which relate to labour history and north east England. NELH has a parent organisation the Society for the Study of Labour History [<http://www.sslh.org.uk/>]. It has an excellent journal *Labour History Review* [<http://facstaff.uww.edu/sslh/home.html> ]. There are two sister organisations, North West Labour History [<http://www.wcml.org.uk/nwlhg/home.html>] and Scottish Labour History [[www.slhs.org.uk/](http://www.slhs.org.uk/) ] both of whom have journals. The London Socialist Historians Group [<http://www.londonsocialisthistorians.org/> ] has similar concerns and one of the best web sites of its kind including an interesting message board. Durham Mining Museum [[www.dmm.org.uk/](http://www.dmm.org.uk/)] is an invaluable source of information on coal mining in the whole region.

From further afield there is a very attractive site. It deals with Mexican workers but could act as a model for enquiring about labour conditions anywhere including the north east. <http://www.ueinternational.org/shop/>

## **Tyne and Wear Archives Service Shipbuilding Archives Project**

Tyne and Wear Archives Service is currently engaged in a Heritage Lottery funded project to carry out a thorough assessment of the access, conservation and cataloguing requirements of its shipbuilding collections. This is with a view to raising awareness of this valuable resource and to make it more accessible to more people. The project team want to consult with stakeholders in maritime history and expertise and invites readers to contact the project team with any views and opinions that may help to inform the final report. We are interested in the following issues:

*Whether you have used the TWAS shipbuilding collections and what for*

*Which records you used*

*Which collections you used*

*If you've used or are interested in related archives from other repositories*

*Whether you prefer to use web-based finding aids*

*If you use the web in general to find research material*

*What other methods you use to find out about potential research material*

*How you prefer to find out about relevant archive collections*

If you could also give us some information about yourself (age, gender, education, occupation, experience of using archives and research materials etc.), that would be helpful.

Responses should be sent to:

Margaret Crockett, The Archive-Skills Consultancy, 38 Lyttelton Court

Lyttelton Road, London N2 0EB, 020 8209 1613

[margaret@archive-skills.com](mailto:margaret@archive-skills.com) For more information about Tyne and Wear

Archives Service's shipbuilding records see:

<http://www.thenortheast.com/archives/index.html>

Action is the life of all, and if thou dost not act,  
thou dost nothing.

***Gerald Winstanley***

## AT THE BACK...

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### North East Labour History Notebook

North East Labour History Society  
Officers and Committee  
(As of the Annual General Meeting 2005)

President: Ray Challinor  
Vice Presidents: Maureen Callcott, Archie Potts

Chair: Stuart Howard  
Vice Chair: Nigel Todd  
Treasurer: Lynda Mackenzie  
Secretary: John Charlton  
Journal Editor: Don Watson (Vol 37)

Other Members: Ben Sellars (Durham), Don Watson (North Shields), Graham Brown, (South Shields), Lewis Mates (Newcastle), Mike Cleghorn (Newcastle), Paul Mayne (Hebburn), Nigel Todd (Newcastle), Peggy Jones (Hexham), Sandy Irvine (Newcastle), Stuart Howard (Darlington), Tony Jeffs (Ryton), Willie Thompson (Sunderland), Win Stokes (Tynemouth), Steve Manchee (Newcastle) and John Painter (Newcastle)

## **Secretary's Report**

We can report a steady increase in members of the society during the past year. This must reflect, in part, the remarkable upsurge in public interest in matters historical. No doubt family history has led the way with its mushroom growth over nearly two decades. For many people digging around the family tree has limits. Most families can only be traced back a few generations disappearing in a labyrinth of missing sources and missing people. Even when it is possible to reach back over a hundred or even two hundred years all but a tiny few are reduced to the barest of branches on the family tree. What did my great, great, grandfather do as a wheelwright in a country village in, say 1800? For some this can be the end of the quest but for others the enquiry spreads into social and economic history and questions about living standards, gender, class, religion and so on. Countless TV programmes, even dedicated history channels, and best selling history books reflect this growing urge in society to explore and understand our past. The North East Labour History Society has made a modest connection with this impulse. There is no reason why we can't go on doing it.

In the past year we have held sizeable public meetings on Dublin 1916, the Easter Rebellion in Galway, The heritage industry: Beamish and Bowes, Basque children refugees from the Spain in the Nineteen Thirties and the 1911 Seamen's strike on Tyne and Wear. We also initiated a monthly discussion meeting (noted elsewhere) where members bring their current research projects. In October we held our second Radical Ramble round Newcastle and took a full coach load to New Lanark on May Day week-end. Eighty people joined a Tyne Cruise during the visit of the Tall Ships.

Meetings for the coming year include Industrial conflict on the Tyne in World War Two, the Jarrow Crusade, Trafalgar Geordies and the Great Newcastle Reform Demonstration of 1819.

Our web site continues to develop. In addition to now regular information about events and the organisation of the Society we have added a Discussion Forum and an Index of all our journals (bulletins) from 1-35, a note of where they can be read and a article supply service. The address is: [www.nelh.org](http://www.nelh.org)

## **SubscriptionSubscriptionSubscriptionSubscription**

**Individuals (including overseas): £15**

**Individuals (students,retired,unemployed): £5**

**Institutions: £25**

### **A note from the Treasurer Lynda Mackenzie**

Very reluctantly we have been obliged to raise the cost of subscriptions to the Society. The Society is much more active now than once was the case and we are incurring higher expenses in creating and maintaining a web site and message board as well as communicating with our members by mail where necessary. Obviously our members at large do not gain the same benefits as those in the north east who can easily participate in events if they wish to. On the other hand the web-site is available to all and we hope more people will use its facilities as they are extended. With this issue we are upgrading the journal in size and production terms and this too means more expensive printing costs. We also hope to produce an extra publication in the near future, a newsletter, which will be part of the membership subscription. Readers will note that we

have kept a low concessions subscription as a firm commitment to include all those who wish to participate. .  
28 Belle Vue Avenue, Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE31AH.  
email:Lynda Mackenzie <lyndamacke@onetel.com>

### **‘First Tuesday’**

The Discussion Group launched in December 2004 seeks to provide an opportunity for members to lead off a discussion on a historical topic of interest to themselves. It has been very successful with members talking on the 1815 Tyne Seaman’s strike - John Charlton, Pennine Lead Miners - Steve Manchee, Fenham between the Wars - Val Duncan, Methodism & the Miners in Durham & Cornwall 1800 - 1830 - John Painter, Home Rule & the Miners : 1886 and all that - Paul Mayne & the Pitmen Painters: the WEA & the Ashington Art Group - Marie Therese Russell.

The participants are encouraged to come up with topics which they would like to research & speak upon at some point in the future, the sessions are informal with plenty of opportunity for debate & question.

The success of the project is dependent upon the members coming forward with their areas of interest. So far the formula has worked well.

*Come along to our regular sessions which are held at 7 p.m. on the first Tuesday of each month in the upstairs room of the Old George in the Cloth Market, Newcastle.*

*Steve Manchee - Convenor*

## THE SID CHAPLIN MEMORIAL TROPHY



### Past winners

|      |                  |
|------|------------------|
| 1988 | Kit Pearce       |
| 1989 | Elaine Knox      |
| 1990 | Sylvia Clark     |
| 1991 | Martin Searles   |
| 1992 | David Ridley     |
| 1993 | Pauline Lynn     |
| 1994 | Kathleen Smith   |
| 1996 | Reg Brown        |
| 1997 | Angela Goldsmith |
| 2000 | Robert Hope      |
| 2004 | Craig Turnbull   |

**SID CHAPLIN** (1916 - 1986) was born at Shildon and worked as a miner until 1946. He published his first collection of stories *The Leaping Lad* (1946). It gained him a prize which enabled him to take a year off and produce his first novel *My Fate Cries Out* about the lead miners of Weardale. Sid Chaplin may be said to have influenced a whole generation of post-war British writers, including Keith Waterhouse and Stan Barstow.

He also helped to form Northern Arts, the country's largest Regional Arts Association in 1961. Meanwhile his 1950 novel *The Thin Seam* formed the basis for a successful and moving musical play *Close the Coalhouse Door* by local writers Alan Plater and Alex Glasgow.

From 1957, Chaplin lived and worked in Newcastle. He wrote television scripts, including some for *When the Boat Comes In*. His two important nov-

els *The Day of the Sardine* and *The Watcher and the Watched* are set among the working class communities of Scotswood, Byker and Elswick. They have just been re-published by Flambard Press & are available from local book shops at £8.99.

Sid Chaplin was a founder member of the Society and his Memorial Trophy is awarded each year to the winner of a labour history essay competition. The aim of the competition is to foster the interest in North East labour history under the following conditions:

The Trophy will be awarded for the best essay submitted on any aspect of the history of labour in the North East. The essay should show some knowledge and use of original sources. It should be word-processed and not more than 10,000 words in length. The competition will be open to anyone who is not employed full-time as a professional teacher or writer of history and we are keen to encourage entries from undergraduate students. **We cordially invite lecturers & teachers to submit student work.**

An Adjudication Panel, drawn from the Society, will judge the essays and the Adjudicators' decision will be final in all matters affecting the award of the Trophy.

All entries must be submitted to the Secretary of the Society and received not later than 1st April each year. The results will be published in the Society's Journal.

The Trophy is a miner's lamp which is held for a year. The winner also receives a book token worth £50.



## **Our Working Lives**

North East Labour History wants to interview working people across the north east about their experience of work. It doesn't matter what you do for a living, we are interested. The first fruits of the project are seen in the Journal 35 with Dave Griffiths' and Barrie Vinnicombe's experience of working on the railway post office and Harriet Vyse's life as a factory worker in the Sunderland in this copy. Of course the Journal can only carry a limited number of pieces in each issue. All interviews will be featured on our web site ([www.nelh.org](http://www.nelh.org)) and will be lodged at the Tyne & Wear Archive and Beamish Museum. They may also be published in other forms.

So, we need both interviewers (training available) and interviews. If you fall into either category or know other who do please contact us by email (if possible) at: [nelh@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:nelh@blueyonder.co.uk) or by post to: North East Labour History, 46 West Lane, Forest Hall, Newcastle, NE12 7BE.

## **Journal Volume 37 2006**

The editorial collective welcomes contributions on any aspect of the labour history of the North East of England (conceived broadly). These can be formal articles (normally to a maximum of 10,000 words), less formal pieces, including opinion pieces, interviews, or reports of work in progress (enthusiasms). Reviews of books and other media likely to interest readers are also invited. We are interested too in information about archives, deposits and other resources for labour history in the region. Comments on previous volumes in the form of letters would be especially welcomed. Contributions-addressed to the Secretary-in the first instance should be typed or sent electronically via email or on disk.

We are very happy to help with any problems regarding research, writing or presentation.

## **Enthusiasms**

**This is new feature. Readers are invited to submit information on work they are doing with requests for help but also to inform us of relevant interests they might have.**

### **North-east and the Spanish Civil War.**

Lewis Mates [lewismates@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:lewismates@yahoo.co.uk)

I am currently researching this topic, hoping to use the north east as a case study in the grass roots campaigns that were staged in support of the Spanish republic during the civil war. I would very much like to hear from anyone with information on any aspect of this topic, including the role of the Labour Party etc., Don Watson's article in the current journal has provided food for thought!

### **Political Activism in the Post war Period (1945-1974)**

Lewis Mates

I have applied for funding for a two year project on this topic (several society members have been involved in this process). The project would involve comparing the levels of activism within the Labour and Conservative parties using quantitative as well as more traditional qualitative methods. The plan is to do a number of case studies, centring on Newcastle, Tynemouth, Darlington and the northern regional level. At present we're awaiting a funding decision on this, but I'd like to hear from anyone with ideas/ information.

### **Where do Geordies work?**

John Charlton [johncharlton@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:johncharlton@blueyonder.co.uk)

Since retuning to the north east after thirty years away I have been intrigued by the question of where people in the north east work now that mining, ship building, engineering and chemicals have almost disappeared whilst unemployment levels are round the national average. I am researching the figures but also very interested in individual experience. I would welcome any help and suggestions.

### **The Communist Party and 1956**

Ben Sellers [benhenrysellers@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:benhenrysellers@yahoo.co.uk)

I am doing some research on the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1956, focusing on the North East as a case study. 1956 was a water-shed year for the CPGB, when thousands of party members left the party. There were the high profile resignations of Edward Thompson and John Saville, but there were also many trade unionists and regional activists who left the party at that time. There were also many thousands of communists who stayed in the party. I'm particularly interested in the reactions of rank and file party members in the North East to Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" at the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU and the events in Hungary. I'd be very interested to speak to members of the party (or so-called "fellow travellers") at that time or their family members. Their recollections would be invaluable to my project. I'm planning to write up my research in early 2006.

### **The Socialist History Society**

Willie Thompson [w.thompson@newpolitics.org.uk](mailto:w.thompson@newpolitics.org.uk)

The Socialist History Society was originally the History Group of the Communist Party and at different times included such luminar-

ies as EP Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill. When the CP disbanded in 1991 the Group transformed itself into the Socialist History Society, open to all with historical interests.

The society, with around 250 members, organises a regular programme of discussions on a broad variety of themes. Speakers in recent years have included, among others, Eric Hobsbawm on his memoirs, Linda Colley and the late Paul Foot.

*Socialist History* (published by Rivers Oram press) is the society's twice-yearly journal with widely ranging historical scope. The society also produces occasional papers and a frequent newsletter, its members publish widely in a range of books and journals. Anyone interested in finding out more should contact the secretary – myself. [w.thompson@newpolitics.org.uk](mailto:w.thompson@newpolitics.org.uk)

We who have a Voice must be a Voice for the  
Voiceless!

*Oscar Romero*

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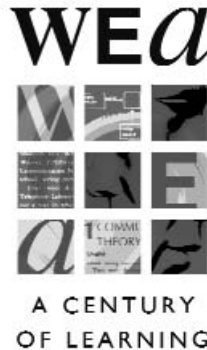
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## WORKERS' EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

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### THE WEA – INTO THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY

For over a hundred years, the Workers' Educational Association has offered adult education largely shaped by the learners themselves. As a 'college without walls' the WEA has often reached groups whose experience of education has been non-existent, or has 'badged' working class people as failures.

Conscious of its purpose, the WEA in the North East is embarking upon a renaissance. Partly, this new phase is about reshaping the curriculum to ensure that voluntary activity and social action will be a primary aim of WEA courses.

There will be a renewed focus, too, on workplace learning in partnership with the trade unions. Long established programmes, such as Unison's Learning@Work, already embrace confidence building and trade union activism. Programmes with the GMB enable union members to deal with representation in the workplace and health and safety. Following a new agreement with the TUC Education Service, the WEA is now poised to provide a more comprehensive service for trade unions.

The WEA is also reinvigorating 'old' relationships. Ruskin College and the WEA, for example, are joining together to raise Ruskin's profile, and offer College facilities for WEA members. In the North East, the WEA will be hosting a meeting with the Principal of Ruskin to take the partnership forward, and is asking former Ruskin students to get in touch.

Finally, the WEA is campaigning to convince the Government that alongside funding for skills for the economy there should be continuing support for adult learning that adds to democracy and the quality of life. The WEA defines its provision of history, literature, politics, philosophy, economics, art appreciation, poetry, music as the 'Great Tradition' of British adult education. It is a tradition made rich in the past by tutors including R.H. Tawney and Raymond Williams, and retains a vibrancy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In an age when people feel more powerless, the 'Great Tradition' is more relevant than ever.

NIGEL TODD

Secretary, Workers' Educational Association – North East Region

## **North East Labour History Society**

### **Constitution**

**Name:** The name of the Society shall be the North East Labour History Society.

**Objects:**

- a. To bring together those interested in labour history in North East England.
- b. To promote the study, teaching and research of labour history.
- c. To assist in the preservation of relevant records.
- d. To increase public knowledge and awareness of labour history.

**Membership:**

Membership shall be open to all those actively interested in the aims of the Society.

**Annual General Meeting:**

An Annual General Meeting shall be held open to all members of the Society.

**Subscriptions:**

The annual subscription shall be determined by the Annual General Meeting of the Society.

**Finance:** All money raised by or on behalf of the Society shall be applied to further the above objects. An audited account shall be presented to the Annual General Meeting.

**Officers and committee:** The business of the Society shall be conducted by a Committee composed of Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer plus six ordinary members. The Committee shall have the power to co-opt additional members. The Committee and Officers shall be elected at the Annual General Meeting. The Quorum for all Committee meetings shall be one third of its membership, including attendance of the Chair or Vice Chair. The Committee's agenda shall be drawn up by the Secretary in consultation with the Chair.

**Honorary Officers:** There shall be a President elected at the Annual General Meeting and not subject to re-election.

There shall be one or more Vice Presidents elected at the Annual General meeting and not subject to re-election.

The President and Vice President(s) shall be ex-officio members of the Committee with full voting rights.

**Bulletin:** The Society shall publish an annual journal. The Committee shall appoint the Editor/s of the Bulletin. The Editor/s shall report to the Committee on matters affecting the production of the Bulletin.

**Changes to the Constitution:**

Changes to the Constitution can only be made at the Annual General Meeting, and a motion outlining proposals for change must be submitted in writing to the Secretary at least 28 days before the date of the Annual General Meeting.

**Those who take the most from the table,  
teach contentment. Those for whom the  
taxes are destined, demand sacrifice. Those  
who eat their fill, speak to the hungry of won-  
derful times to come. Those who lead the  
country into the abyss, call ruling difficult,  
for ordinary folk.**

*Berthold Brecht*



**North East Labour History Society**

Public Meetings 2005-6

22 September 2005

Craig Armstrong, Industrial Conflict on the Tyne 1940-45

24 November 2005

Matt Perry, The Jarrow March: Protest and Legend

16th March 2006

Tony Barrow, Trafalgar Geordies and North country seamen in Nelson's Navy 1793-1815.

20 April 2006

John Charlton, 1819: Waterloo, Peterloo and the Reform Movement in Newcastle on Tyne.

All meetings start at 7.30 p.m. (16th March, 7.00 p.m.) at the Lit & Phil, Westgate Rd Newcastle.

\*\*\*

'First Tuesday' a discussion meeting on the first Tuesday of each month at the Old George, Cloth Market, Newcastle.

**north east labour history society**

I would like to join the society

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individual (including overseas) £15

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subscription includes journal

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email:.....

send to: Lynda Mackenzie (Treasurer),  
28 Belle Vue Avenue, Newcastle on Tyne,  
NE3 1AH, UK



# north east history volume 36

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## Articles & Essays

Politics and humanitarian aid: Basque refugees in the North East & Cumbria during the Spanish civil war.

The one who nearly got away.

War-time industrial action on the Tyne 1939-1945.

History, Heritage and Region:

The Making of Beamish and Bowes, A Question of Class?

Race Relations on Tyneside in the Sixties

Ellen Wilkinson

The long stick: an early strike on the Wear

## Oral History

Our Working Lives: Interview with Harriet Vyse

Interviews: Peter Common & John Burke

Poem: I dreamed of Jack Common

## Reviews, Archives & Sources

## At the Back...

Notebook, the WEA, Sid Chaplin prize...

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And don't forget our last volume, number 35 with articles on the Irish in County Durham, the CP & the Popular Front in the north east and an interview with the last railway postmen.

web-site: [www.nelh.org](http://www.nelh.org)