

# north east history

Volume 41 2010



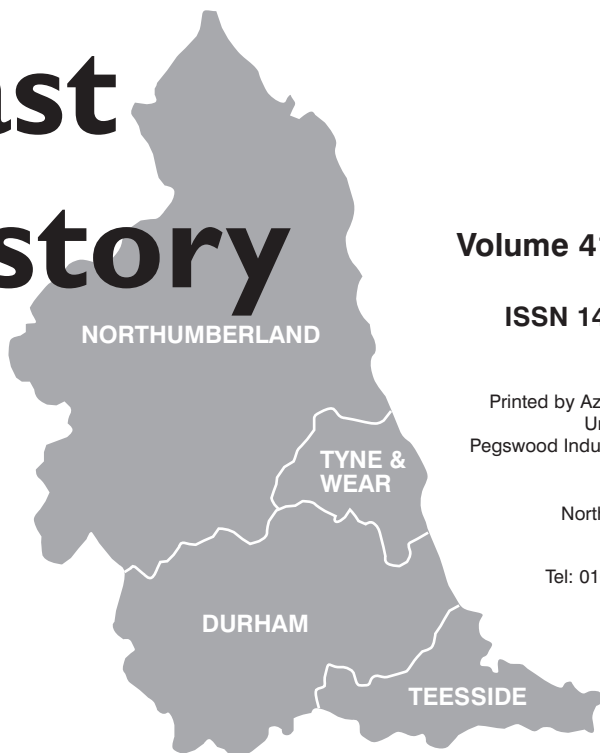
- Sam Davies *Gateshead Politics between the Wars*  
Rob Doherty *The Building of the Tyne Bridge 1920-1929*  
Kevin Davies *The IRA Campaign in the North East and the State Response 1920-1923*  
Peter Livsey *The reign of terror - Solomon Hodgson, the Newcastle Chronicle and the events of 1794 plus oral history, appreciations and reviews*

journal of the north east labour history society



*north east history*

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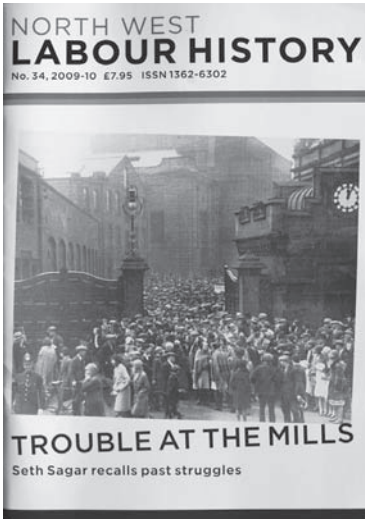
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*North West Labour History* is our sister journal. It is available from:

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M30 9LA

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## EDITORIAL

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Our parent body the Society for the Study of Labour History (SSLH) commemorates its fiftieth anniversary this year with a book and a supplement to its journal, *Labour History Review*. The supplement's opening essay starts with a timely reminder of the project's purpose, 'to encourage teaching and researching the field of labour history and stimulate the preservation of labour archives. The field was conceived as encompassing the study of all aspects of labour: work, the labour process, health, leisure, ideas, 'social history in the fullest sense', as well as the trade unions, the Labour Party, other working class organisations and traditions, and the impact of capital and employers on labour'. The founders could never have predicted what a shocking fifty years lay ahead for working people and their organisations. The coal mines, ship yards, engineering plants, auto works and chemical plants have either completely disappeared or shrunk into relative insignificance. Labour movement organisations suffered correspondingly. After establishing itself as an academic discipline labour history has subsequently struggled to hold its place as an area of study. Despite difficulty in finding new enthusiasts to carry on the work of the pioneers the national organisation has held on though on a narrower base largely limited to the academic world. *Labour History Review* is a stimulating journal with articles largely written without jargon.

Our own society suffered somewhat in the late eighties and the nineties from similar problems on a local scale. Despite the efforts of some individuals the colleges base of the Society weakened. In recent times a firm shift towards the local communities has helped to repair the active base. This is reflected in the breadth of contributions to our journal.

The editors think we are offering another strong volume of North East History. The issue editor again has the relative luxury of starting the

task with a body of material already in the bank! This should be true for next year too as we have had to hold over some substantial articles on grounds of inadequate space. This year we are not following a specific theme as we did for the previous two years but we do have a rich mix. Sam Davies' article on Gateshead inter war politics provoked a supplementary contribution on a related topic by Don Watson. We are always keen to publish such material. It may be that Sam's article may provoke further comment in future issues. On local government issues Rob Doherty's Chaplin Prize winning essay examined the sometimes fraught controversy in the 1920s over the planning and execution of the iconic 'new' Tyne Bridge. The patronising arrogance of Newcastle city councillors in relation to Gateshead is firmly noted.

Maureen Callcott also visits the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century with her lovely article tracing and celebrating the contribution of Tyneside women to industrial life during the First World War. Drawing on oral testimony from the Beamish Museum's archive she paints a lively picture of working class women's struggle to occupy a public space denied them in peace time. This included playing football to large crowds, soccer being, perhaps Tyneside's strongest male bastion. Kevin Davies' provides an evocative study of IRA activity on Tyneside during the Irish Civil War. He prises the door ajar giving us a glimpse of underground activity, of secret police, informers and double lives. There is some of this flavour too in Peter Livsey's uncovering of Tyneside's reign of terror during the French Wars in the 1790s.

In the oral history/autobiography section of the volume we have two pieces. One of the Society's best friends and members, Rene Chaplin, contributes the third fascinating part of her life story. Then Ron and Doreen Curran tell the story of their early lives, personal and political. Their account of life in Tynemouth Labour League of Youth is one of the very few first hand accounts of that youth movement. The text is supported by Ron's own excellent contemporary photographs. He is a man of many talents having written a biography of his namesake, Jarrow's



first Labour MP, Pete Curran and had several exhibitions of his local Tyneside paintings. We also sadly carry an obituary of another member of the Tynemouth League of Youth, Albert Booth who later became a Labour candidate, a Labour MP (Barrow in Furness) and the Minister for Employment in the 1970's. In a period when so many MPs have brought down on themselves the common charge of self interest and corruption it is good to report that this could never be said of Albert Booth. An obituary in a national newspaper noted him as 'a man of integrity. He always identified with the shop floor and said: "You have got to be true to the people you represent." That was why he characteristically declined the life peerage that he was offered in the 1983 Dissolution Honours List.'

The journal is completed with the usual range of book reviews though one significant new book was issued too late to be reviewed. Chris Foote Wood's comprehensive biography of T Dan Smith will be discussed in the next volume. We also have Nigel Todd's now annual report of the Regional WEA and its activities.

As the back cover picture indicates, we celebrate the arrival of a blue plaque on Broad Garth recording the agitational space of Thomas Spence. Congratulations are mainly due to Keith Armstrong, our latter day Spence, who agitated tirelessly himself to gain recognition for Tyneside's own early communist activist.

Readers may notice a more compact appearance for the text. This reflects our need to economize especially on rising postage costs.

*John Charlton*

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Allen, Alan Campbell, John McIlroy, *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives*, Pontypool, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Making History, *Organisation of Labour historians in Britain since 1960*, supplement to *Labour History Review*, Volume 75, April 2010.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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**Maureen Callcott** taught history at Newcastle Polytechnic/University of Northumbria and for the Open University; was an early committee member of the North East Society for the Study of Labour History serving as Secretary and Chair and contributing articles and talks particularly on NE political history and women's history she was also a founder member of national Oral and Social History Societies.

**Kevin Davies** is an enthusiastic independent researcher who works as a porter at Newcastle University.

**Sam Davies** is Professor of History at Liverpool John Moores University. He is the author of *Liverpool Labour* (1996), and co-author of *Dockworkers* (2000) and *County Borough Elections in England and Wales* (8 volumes, 1999 and following).

**Rob Doherty** graduated from Durham University in 2009 and is now pursuing post graduate research there. He was awarded the Sid Chaplin Prize last year.

**Peter Livsey** was Senior Inspector with Durham LEA. He was a volunteer on the projects commemorating the abolition of the transatlantic atlantic slave trade. His work on a black soldier resident in Newcastle in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century appears on the Tyne and Wear Museum Service web-site.

**Don Watson** has published on a variety of labour history topics. He is currently writing a book on the National Unemployed Workers Movement in the north east between the wars. He works in local government.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**Illustrations:** Booth family, Ron Curran, Newcastle Central Library Local Studies and Tyne and Wear Archives.

### **PUBLIC MEETINGS 2010-11**

All meetings at the Lit & Phil  
Commencing at 7 p.m.

#### **Annual General Meeting**

Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> October  
AGM 6.15 followed at 7 p.m. by John Creaby  
**'Am I not a worker too?'**

...

Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> November  
Jim Cousins ( MP Newcastle Central 1987-2010):  
**The life of a critical MP**

...

Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> February  
Malcolm Chase:  
**The People's Farm**  
Book Launch

...

Monday 11<sup>th</sup> April  
John Charlton:  
**Popular Politics in North East England**

...

Summer 2011 meeting to be arranged

**NORTH EAST LABOUR HISTORY SOCIETY**

## Legal Challenges to Labour Rule: Gateshead Politics between the Wars

*Sam Davies*

### Introduction

*The county borough of Gateshead, situated in the county of Durham on the south side of the River Tyne, was at the heart of the heavy industrial region of the North-east of England, dominated by the coal, iron, engineering and shipbuilding industries. A local study points out that 'the relative cheapness of land encouraged the building of more houses than were needed for the people of Gateshead alone and the town became a dormitory for workers from outside.'*<sup>2</sup> Reinforcing this impression, J.B. Priestley in his *English Journey* of 1933 reported that 'the town was built to work in and to sleep in... no real town... nothing better than a huge dingy dormitory... a dormitory for the working class.'<sup>3</sup> Gateshead was, then, a strongly working-class borough, Henry Pelling describing it in electoral terms as the 'one overwhelmingly working-class constituency' of Tyneside.<sup>4</sup> This proletarian stronghold had a long history of poverty and overcrowding, Priestley again asserting that 'the whole town appeared to have been carefully planned by an enemy of the human race... if anybody ever made money in Gateshead, they must have taken great care not to spend any of it in the town'.<sup>5</sup> The borough suffered particularly heavily along

*with the rest of the north-east in the economic and social crisis of the inter-war years, which decimated the traditional heavy industries of the region. In 1932, for example, the monthly average unemployment rate in the town was 44.6 per cent.*<sup>6</sup>

It was in this context of economic distress that the Labour Party won control of the borough council of Gateshead in two separate spells between the wars, as well as winning a majority on the local Board of Guardians who administered the Poor Law. Labour rule, however, was fiercely contested by its political opponents, not least by means of legal challenges in the courts. The first legal confrontation took place in the mid-1920s, centred on the lenient and allegedly illegal operation of the Poor Law by the Labour-controlled Board of Guardians of the Gateshead Union. Legal action was taken on a second occasion in the late-1930s, this time over the cynical, and again allegedly illegal, tactics of the ruling Labour group on Gateshead council in the election of aldermen. This article will examine these legal challenges to Labour, and the contested meanings of justice and fairness that they embodied. The political partisanship of the contesting parties involved came up against the supposed 'impartiality' of the legal system, but the results in both cases were more ambiguous than might have been expected. But the crucial differences between the two occasions of legal dispute also reveal something about the changing nature of the Labour Party during this period, both at a local and national level. On the one hand, the contrast between the lofty moral stance adopted by Labour in the 1920s, and the low political scheming it demonstrated in the 1930s, was indicative of how the local party adapted itself to the *realpolitik* of the council chamber. On the other hand, the differences illustrate how combative locally-based campaigning, already frowned upon by the national leadership of the party by the 1920s, had by the 1930s been largely eclipsed by the centralist, parliamentary goals of Labourism.

***First taste of political power***

Looking first, then, at the 1920s dispute, this arose as a consequence of Labour's first taste of political power in Gateshead. The party won a majority on Gateshead Council in 1923 and retained it until 1926, as well as gaining control of the Gateshead Board of Guardians from April 1925 until its abolition in 1929. A number of factors immediately pushed the Labour guardians towards confrontation with the law. One was the high unemployment already prevailing in the mining districts of north Durham, but also affecting the engineering and shipbuilding workers of Gateshead. This meant there were a large number of families dependent on poor relief within the Gateshead Union, putting an enormous financial burden on the Poor Law authorities. The inequalities of the rating system of local government finance had already been made starkly apparent in the 1920s with the rise of mass unemployment. Those councils with the highest unemployment at the same time usually had the lowest rateable values, and therefore had to raise the rates the most in response to increasing social distress. This was a key issue underlying the struggles of various Labour councils which brought them into legal conflict with the government in this period, most famously in the London borough of Poplar from 1921 onwards.<sup>7</sup> Even before Labour had won control of the guardians in Gateshead, the party had been campaigning on this question. Thus a Labour candidate in 1919 was reported as follows:

the system of financing the town by a rate on property was becoming an obsolete system... the rapid rise of the rates, with very little hope of reduction for some time at least, made it advisable to suggest new methods of financing the town. He advocated a municipal income-tax ...coupled with municipal trading ...[which] would give a more equitable and more efficient basis for taxing the people.<sup>8</sup>

When Labour took over the administration of the Poor Law in the Gateshead Union in 1925, the rateable value per head of the county

borough was at the extremely low level of £3.9. This was one of the lowest figures amongst the County Boroughs (the lowest being Merthyr Tydfil in South Wales at £3.5), and lower for instance than any of the London Metropolitan Boroughs (the comparable figure for Poplar was £5.6).<sup>9</sup> Any attempt to raise the level of out-relief by the new Labour guardians was bound to necessitate a large increase in the poor rate.

### ***Industrial action***

A second problem facing the Gateshead guardians was the industrial action that affected the miners locally in 1925-6, which only exacerbated the already widespread economic distress and put further pressure on the Poor Law. On 20 June 1925, miners working at the pits owned by the Consett Iron Co. at Chopwell were locked out after refusing to accept a pay cut, and remained out for months of bitter conflict and economic hardship. In August for instance, fifty-two miners were charged with stealing coal from the company, and in October forty-six of them were charged with unlawful assembly, intimidation and larceny of coal after violent picket-line disturbances.<sup>10</sup> This was followed by the General Strike of May 1926 and the succeeding long months of lockout for the miners, again accompanied by violent picket-line disturbances and extreme hardship for miners and their families. Thus fifty miners from Chopwell were prosecuted in May 1926 after disturbances described in the local press as 'strike terrorism in Durham'. Major rioting took place in Heworth in September when a crowd of 2,000 attacked fifty 'blacklegs' as they left work. The crowd included many women, who were described as 'more infuriated than the men, and [who] kicked and clawed at the miners'. As late as November 1926 there was a riot of 10,000 miners in Ryton, showing how long-drawn out and bitter the dispute was in north Durham.<sup>11</sup> The long lay-offs due to industrial dispute experienced by miners over 1925 and 1926 meant even greater numbers claiming outdoor

relief. The legal position of guardians with regard to relieving strikes and their families was limited however. The judgement of the Court of Appeal in *Attorney-General v. Merthyr Tydfil Guardians* (1900) had set the precedent: 'where the applicant for relief is able-bodied and physically capable of work, the grant of relief to him is unlawful if work is available for him, or he is thrown on the guardians through his own act or consent, and penalties are provided by law in case of failure to support dependents, though the guardians may lawfully relieve such dependents if they are in fact destitute'.<sup>12</sup> Thus the guardians could relieve the families of strikers if they were destitute, but not the strikers themselves.

In addition, the Gateshead guardians did not have to look as far away as Poplar for encouragement towards bold and confrontational attempts to raise the living standards of working-class families financed through the rates. The borough lay on the northern edge of the county of Durham, which was the only County Council in England won by the Labour Party between the wars, (first between 1919 and 1922 and again from 1925 onwards), primarily due to the support of the numerous mining villages. A local precedent was set when this 'Pitmen's Parliament', as it became known, pushed up the County rates from 1919 to finance improvements for the working class in education, health and other local services.<sup>13</sup> A further complication lay in the fact that the boundaries of the Gateshead Board of Guardians and Gateshead County Borough were not identical. The Gateshead Board extended well beyond the County Borough boundaries to include a number of outlying urban districts of north Durham, including the mining villages of Chopwell, Heworth, Ryton and Winlaton. In these districts, it was reported, 'the controlling vote is cast by the miners... it is given now practically solidly to Labour'.<sup>14</sup> This was where the Labour guardians found their strongest support, and they were bound to be most sympathetic to the plight of the miners. But if the Gateshead Labour guardians were to follow the confrontational lead of the County Council, primarily to the benefit of the residents of the



mining villages, then they ran the risk of provoking opposition within the County Borough. As will become clear, the Gateshead ratepayer's association certainly objected to what it saw as borough ratepayers subsidising miners from outside the borough. While this claim might appeal most obviously to middle-class voters, it might also strain the class solidarity of the engineering and shipyard workers that predominated in Gateshead proper.

### ***Rapid confrontation***

Given all these circumstances, then, the actions of the Labour guardians after they had taken power in April 1925 led to a rapid confrontation with the law. In May 1925 they implemented a new and more generous scale of out-relief. An unemployed man and his wife were now entitled to 27s a week, plus 3s. per head for their first three children, 2s. per head for others, rent up to 7s 6d, and for aged persons living with them 10s. to 15s. per week. The local press claimed that 'the amount obtainable by recipients and their families equals or surpasses the weekly wage drawn by skilled workmen in the town'.<sup>15</sup> Also included in the new scales of out-relief was a proposal that in the case of industrial dispute, a striker's wife's allowance should be increased to 27s. per week, equivalent to a man and wife's joint allowance. The guardians were warned by their clerk that this attempt to circumvent the regulations was illegal, but he was over-ruled.<sup>16</sup> The impact on the finances of the Board was dramatic (see Appendix One below for details). In the year ending 31 March 1925, just before Labour took power, expenditure on out-relief totalled £43,000, and total expenditure came to £151,000, equivalent to 12s. 7d. per head of population. In the following year the cost of out-relief alone rose to £255,000, and total expenditure to £367,000, equivalent to 31s. 3d. per head. This had the effect of pushing up the poor rate from just under 3s. in the pound in 1924-25 to just under 6s. in the pound in 1925-26. This massive doubling of the rates still did not cover the rise in expenditure, however, and the guardians

ran up a deficit of £80,000 by March 1926, which had increased to £146,000 by September.<sup>17</sup> The impact of this increase in the poor-law rate was dramatic enough, but when Labour lost control of the Borough Council in November 1926 it became even more controversial. It was the Borough that collected the poor-rate on behalf of the guardians, as part of the whole rate demand to cover the cost of both the Guardians and the Council. While Labour still controlled the council, the actions of the guardians were supported. The 'Moderates' (a Tory-dominated 'anti-socialist' alliance), however, bitterly resented having to collect what they regarded as 'extravagant' poor-rates on behalf of their political opponents, especially as they regarded much of the extravagance going to the miners in the outlying districts outside the borough. Thus the poor rate rose from being just over 20 per cent of the total rate bill in 1924-5 to almost 45 per cent by 1928-9. (see Appendix Two below for details)

The legal reaction to the Labour guardians' stand was swift, instituted by 'large ratepayers' including directors of many of the largest companies in the area. A writ was issued in the High Court in August 1925 'asking for a declaration that payments made by the Gateshead guardians of relief to men able to obtain and perform work at wages sufficient to support themselves and their families is unlawful, and asking for an injunction to restrain such payments.'<sup>18</sup> In October, the majority of members of the Gateshead Board of Guardians 'received notice from the Minister of Health's auditor to appear before him if they desired and give a reason why they should not be surcharged in respect of money paid by the Guardians', including out-relief given 'to persons not entitled to it legally and in defiance of the law'.<sup>19</sup> Gateshead was not alone, however, as the nearby Chester-le-street and Lanchester Board of Guardians were by now also involved in legal disputes over high relief payments and illegal payments to strikers.<sup>20</sup>

The Gateshead guardians reiterated the argument that the inequalities of the rating system was the root cause of the problem,

passing a motion 'that the heavy financial burden now imposed on the respective industrial areas in the union through abnormal unemployment, and consequent distress, is most unjust and should be transferred to and accepted by the Government as a national responsibility. They asked that the Government should consider the matter, and take steps to promote legislation with a view to spreading the cost equally over the whole of the country'.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the legal pressure forced them to suspend the 27/- payments to the wives of strikers, and in the meantime they played for time over their surcharge, complaining that 'the information as to the alleged illegal payments contained in the notices served was insufficient to enable the individual members to prepare their answers'. This won them a delay until December of the audit of their accounts for the period from April 1 to July 31, and in the meantime they could carry on operating with an overdraft sanctioned by the Ministry of Health, although further action by ratepayers with 'a view to restraining the expenditure of the board' was possible.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Guardians surcharged***

Eventually twenty-six of the guardians were surcharged a total of £165. 6s. 6d., although they immediately appealed against the decision. The onset of the 1926 strike then brought even greater pressure from the Ministry of Health on the guardians over their 'extravagant' payments, and in order to get an extension of their overdraft in June 1926 they had to agree to comply with conditions imposed by the Ministry, including 'substantial economies'. The guardians were forced to reduce their out-relief scales to 'that recognised by the labour exchanges, and reductions were also made where children were fed by the education authorities'.<sup>23</sup> The Labour stand had effectively been ended by now, although this was not confined to Gateshead alone, as other Labour-controlled Boards had also been forced into retreat, including two, in West Ham and Chester-le-Street, whose administration of the Poor Law had been placed in the

hands of Commissioners appointed by the Ministry.

The Gateshead guardians still pursued their fight over the administration of the Poor Law through legal channels, however. George Rix, the chairman of the Board, was prominent in this campaign. At a special meeting of councils in the north and north-east in 1927 he put forward a motion 'calling upon the government to make relief of unemployment a national charge', and later that year led a deputation from the North-East to the Minister of Labour putting forward a similar argument.<sup>24</sup> The guardians also doggedly resisted the legal proceedings over their actions, with distress warrants being issued by Gateshead County Magistrates in December 1927 against twenty-one of them for non-payment of the surcharge imposed by the Ministry of Health. Their obduracy was finally rewarded by a partial victory in February 1928 when the Ministry agreed to drop part of the surcharge, amounting to £50. 16s, after which the remaining £114. 10s. 6d. plus £17s 12s. costs were paid.<sup>25</sup> This gave rise to a furious reaction by Labour's political opponents in Gateshead. Sir G.B. Hunter, director of one of the largest shipbuilders in the North East, Swan Hunter, was involved in a long and wrangling correspondence with the Minister of Health complaining about the part-remittance of the surcharge, claiming that it condoned the actions of the Labour guardians in defying the law.<sup>26</sup> When the Gateshead guardians came up for re-election in April 1928, the 'Moderate' opposition ran a fierce campaign to unseat them, but to no avail. When Labour was returned to power the local ratepayer's newspaper was aghast:

The Gateshead Board of Guardians is once more constituted a Socialist body. Out of 41 representatives, Socialism will have a majority of eight, simply because Heworth, Ryton, Chopwell, and Winlaton – hot-beds of Socialism – have not the sense to loose their red spectacles... In these villages of socialist domination, the population is largely composed either of unemployed or of miners who are victims of long strike periods, or of economic factors which make for

privation. Is it to be expected of human nature that where there is little or no prospect of employment there will be a vote for anyone save the Socialist, with his lavish policy and promises? ... Gateshead has nothing in common with Chopwell. Let Chopwell and all the other off-shoots of the Gateshead union be cut adrift and let them manage their own affairs in regard to the Poor Law as well as to their Urban Council interests.<sup>27</sup>

As a final postscript to this sequence of events, members of the local Ratepayers' Association raised the issue again at a public audit of the Board of Guardians' accounts in July 1928, as a result of which the auditor entered a certificate of surcharge against 21 members of the Board for sums amounting to £2,135 17s. 6d. When the Labour guardians appealed to the Ministry of Health, however, the surcharge was waived completely, even though the Ministry agreed with the auditor's judgement that payments had been made illegally in 1925 to 'single able-bodied men for whom work was available'. The local Ratepayers were aghast at the Ministry's decision, stating:

The entire business is therefore wiped clean out. Time and energy expended ... to secure the end of this illegal relief might just as well have been bottled and thrown into the ocean. We have previously protested against the Ministerial leniency afforded to surcharged members who misapplied public funds, but to discharge their personal responsibility altogether fairly staggers one.<sup>28</sup>

### *Similar responses*

The behaviour of the Gateshead Labour guardians was not an isolated case, as it was part of a wave of similar responses that can be traced from the actions of Durham county councillors from 1919 and other local

councillors and guardians in the 1920s, via the most famous case of the Poplar councillors from 1920-21, through to attempts to resist the Means Test by local councillors in the early 1930s. The Gateshead Labour Party in October 1931, for instance, unsuccessfully proposed that the council should refuse to apply the Means Test, one councillor claiming that 'defiance of the law was not new'. The Moderate majority defeated the proposal, and internal dissension within the Labour group was displayed, as one Labour councillor abstained in the voting, having attempted to put an amendment to the motion which had been vetoed by his Labour colleagues.<sup>29</sup> Even as the legal controversy in Gateshead was being resolved by Ministerial decision in 1928, similar issues were being raised elsewhere in the north-east. The Tynemouth Labour guardians, for example, were forced by the District Auditor to withdraw proposed extra relief payments to able-bodied unemployed for Christmas 1928, which they had paid out the previous Christmas. Sixteen Sunderland guardians were also surcharged for similar payments amounting to £2,800, although in the end they were also shown leniency by only being charged £50 each.<sup>30</sup>

It was only the abolition of the Boards of Guardians under the Local Government Act of 1928 that was to end the legal disputes over the Poor Law in Gateshead. Gateshead Labour, for its part, could argue that it had done its best to defend the interests of its working-class supporters through these struggles, and it had won a partial success in the courts.

### *Election of aldermen*

Turning now to the very different legal case involving Gateshead Labour in the 1930s, in this case it was the election of aldermen on the council that proved litigious. Gateshead, like the other eighty-three county boroughs in England and Wales at this time, was divided into wards, with each ward electing three councillors on a three-year cycle. In addition, for every three councillors there was one alderman, who sat for a term of office of six years. They were usually elected from the

ranks of the elected councillors, although of course retiring aldermen could also be re-nominated.<sup>31</sup> Before 1910 all the members of the council (i.e. councillors and aldermen) were entitled to vote in the aldermanic elections, but after that date only the councillors could do so. The aldermanic elections took place at the first full council meeting after the annual council elections at the beginning of November. There were no rules as to whether the numbers of aldermen should be proportional to the number of seats any party held on the council, and each borough decided its own conventions. In some, the principle of proportionality prevailed, although this was uncommon in the inter-war period.<sup>32</sup> More commonly, aldermanic vacancies were filled on the basis of seniority of service on the council, regardless of party, and retiring aldermen were often re-elected without opposition. In many cases, however, where the balance of power on the council was seriously contested, as it was in Gateshead, party advantage became the determinant of the outcome of aldermanic elections. The aldermen comprised a quarter of the total membership of the council, so a party with a majority amongst the councillors, however small, could if it so chose take all or most of the aldermanic vacancies, thus bolstering its control or even enabling it to take control.<sup>33</sup> The aldermanic system was described in a contemporary study as 'contrary to the general democratic tendencies of the time', and in a parliamentary debate in 1933 a Tory MP stated bluntly that 'the Aldermen's bench saves our local government system from the twin evils of democracy and equality', but it was only abolished as late as 1974.<sup>34</sup>

When the aldermanic elections were contested in Gateshead in November 1938 they proved politically explosive. From 1935 the Labour Party had once again held power in the borough, but the municipal elections of 1938 had resulted in a tie, with Labour and the Moderate party opposition group each having twenty members, made up of fifteen councillors and five aldermen. (for details of party balances, see Appendix Three below) Five aldermanic posts, four held by the Moderates and one

by Labour, were due up for re-election, however, and both parties put forward five nominees at the next council meeting. As had always been the case since the legislation of 1910, it was assumed that only councillors were entitled to vote in these aldermanic elections. As one of the Labour councillors was unavoidably absent visiting relatives in the United States, it was thus expected that the fifteen Moderate councillors would outvote the fourteen Labour members present and replace the Labour alderman up for re-election with one of their own, thus giving the Moderates an overall majority of twenty-one to nineteen on the council.<sup>35</sup> The Labour group sprung a surprise, however, as they claimed that the Labour mayor, who was himself an alderman and therefore apparently barred from voting in aldermanic elections, could nevertheless cast a vote in his capacity as Mayor. He proceeded to do so in favour of the five Labour nominees, thus tying the vote at fifteen apiece. The rules of the council held that in the case of a tied vote, the Mayor was to have the casting vote, so the mayor cast his vote for a second time for the five Labour nominees, resulting in Labour replacing the four Moderate aldermen and securing an overall majority in the council of twenty-four to sixteen.<sup>36</sup>

The local Labour paper, the *Gateshead Herald*, defended Labour's actions on the following grounds:

The Town Clerk gave a reasonable and very clear statement of his opinion on those entitled to vote for aldermen. It depended on the interpretation of the Local Government Act of 1933, which replaced various acts of earlier date. The vital words were that 'An alderman shall not, as such, vote at the election of an alderman of the borough'. It was a legal maxim that all words included in an Act of Parliament should be supposed to mean something; the words 'as such' could only mean that an alderman might be allowed to vote in some other capacity, though not as an alderman; and the



only other capacity in which he could vote is as Mayor. It was therefore his considered opinion that under the law the Mayor had a right to vote in the election of aldermen, as Mayor, in spite of the fact that he was an alderman himself.<sup>37</sup>

The Gateshead Moderates, on the other hand, were furious at this turn of events. Their interpretation of the issue was summarised in their local mouthpiece, the *Gateshead and District Municipal News*, as follows:

The question... rests on a difference of interpretation of the meaning of two words in the Local Government Act of 1933 – ‘as such’... This position is due to carelessness on the part of those who drew up the [Act]... If it was intended to allow the Mayor to vote in the first instance, although an alderman, it was easy enough to say so definitely and it does not, in any part of the Act... [The Mayor] is still an alderman until another alderman is elected in his place and is therefore debarred from a first vote for aldermen... Can the Mayor be two persons? On the Town Clerk’s ruling that the mayor though an alderman is a separate entity in this matter, he would be a separate entity always, and would have two initial votes on every other matter of the council where an alderman is not debarred, one as a Mayor and one as an alderman, which shows the claim to be absurd... The Moderate group were thus left with a right of appeal to the High Court... and four of the councillors have been appointed by the Moderate group to... [go] forward with an appeal.<sup>38</sup>

### ***Democratic will flouted***

It should be clear that Labour could hardly claim to be occupying the moral high ground in this matter. The democratic will of the electorate was

apparently being flouted by a questionable interpretation of the semantics of a parliamentary act, in the interest of preventing the Moderates from securing a narrow majority on the council, and instead giving a comfortable majority for Labour. Yet the issue can only be understood within the context of how affairs had been carried on in Gateshead council over the previous two decades. As Labour argued:

It has been described as ‘a good old Gateshead custom’ for each party to take as many aldermen’s seats as they could get, and this somewhat cut-throat habit goes back to the years just after the War when the anti-Labour forces were determined to use the aldermanic bench as a bulwark against all advance. They claimed appointment by strict seniority which meant ten votes always against Labour to nullify the first ten seats won in the wards. Under such a handicap a Labour majority would have been postponed to a very distant date.<sup>39</sup>

Labour had in fact won its first two aldermen in 1920 by mistake, due to confusion amongst its opponents resulting in some abstentions, and one Independent councillor casting his vote for the Labour nominees. When Labour first gained a majority of the councillors in 1923, it ignored the seniority principle and took the five aldermanic posts due for re-election that year to gain overall control of the council. This meant that Labour retained control in 1925 even though by then it had lost its majority amongst the councillors. The Moderates responded by unseating the two Labour aldermen due for re-election in 1926, giving them control of the council. At the next opportunity in 1929, when the five remaining Labour aldermen came up for re-election, the Moderates unseated them as well, two of them on the casting vote of the mayor after a tied vote in the council chamber. The local Labour paper waxed indignant over this, despite Labour’s own behaviour in claiming the maximum number of aldermen possible six years previously:

‘You have laid down a new principle’, said ex-Aldermen Peacock, just before he withdrew from the Council Chamber; ‘that the party in majority in this chamber claims the whole of the aldermanic bench...’ He was addressing the Mayor ..., who had just given his casting vote against two Labour aldermen ... both of whom have given more years of service on the Council than the two ... to whom the Mayor gave his casting vote ... We do not mention this because we want the rule of seniority re-established; it is one in which we never believed; but merely to show how completely it has been abandoned by the Reactionaries, who defended it to the last ditch when it served their purpose, but find no difficulty in discarding it ... now that some of the senior councillors are Labour men ... The seniority rule is gone, then ... What is to take its place? Apparently simply the rule of ‘the spoils to the victor.’

This helped to maintain Moderate control up to 1935, even though by 1934 Labour had won a majority of the councillors. Once five aldermanic posts came up for re-election in 1935, however, Labour seized them to take control of the council again. From 1936, though, the parties were tied with twenty members each, and Labour control was only maintained up to 1938 by the casting vote of the Labour mayor.<sup>40</sup>

Thus the precedent of selecting aldermen for party advantage had been long established in Gateshead, and even the principle of the mayor having a casting vote in the event of a tie had been in operation in the two years before 1938. It was the novel interpretation of the wording of the 1933 Act that was really controversial, and it was on this that the High Court was asked to adjudicate. Judgement was given in April 1939 by Justices Greaves-Lord and Hilbery. They acknowledged that section 22(2) of the 1933 Local Government Act stated ‘an alderman shall not,

as such, vote at the election of an alderman', which was the key point as far as the Moderate councillors' appeal was concerned. However, section 17(2) of the Act read 'the council of a borough shall consist of the mayor, aldermen, and councillors and shall exercise all such functions as are vested in the municipal corporation of the borough', while section 22(1) said 'the aldermen of a borough shall be elected by the council of the borough'. Thus, as the mayor was constituted as a distinct part of the council, he or she could vote in aldermanic elections, notwithstanding the fact that he or she might also be an alderman. The appeal was therefore dismissed, and the Labour group's actions were condoned in law. The legal challenge to Labour rule in Gateshead was on this occasion plainly unsuccessful.

### ***Interesting points raised***

Some interesting points can be drawn from these two separate occasions in the inter-war period when Labour rule in Gateshead was challenged in law. First of all the obvious point should be reiterated that there were very significant differences between the two cases. The behaviour of the Gateshead Labour guardians between 1925 and 1928 could be portrayed as a principled communitarian response to the industrial and social conditions of the local working class. It was part of a wider struggle that both pre-dated the Gateshead controversy and carried on into the 1930s, with local Labour parties challenging the law over the treatment of the unemployed. Labour occupied the high moral ground in these struggles, whereas the controversy over the aldermanic elections in Gateshead in 1938 was much more an example of low political chicanery in order to cling on to political power. The latter was also an isolated case applying only to Gateshead, rather than part of any wider campaign, although the implications of the High Court's decision may have been significant for post-1945 politics.

The transition from the high principles of the 1920s challenge to the low political pragmatism of the 1930s perhaps can tell us something

significant about the development of the Labour Party over this period, and especially the role assigned to local government within the party. Like Poplar and other similar situations before and after it, the Gateshead guardians' clash with the law was deeply embarrassing to the national and parliamentary leadership of the party. As in Poplar, it

raised in an acute form the differences within the Labour Party. Though these disagreements appeared to centre round the issue of immediate tactics, in reality they went deeper, embracing two closely related questions: what was meant by socialism and how to achieve it.<sup>42</sup>

George Lansbury and the other Labour councillors in Poplar put the case for local challenges to the law in order to advance socialism quite plainly: 'the master class has made the laws'; 'the question is not whether what we are doing is legal or illegal, but whether it is right or wrong'; 'all reforms come from those who are ready to break bad laws'; and, 'when men are hungry they do not care much about constitutionalism'. By contrast, Herbert Morrison, the most important figure in the leadership of the Labour Party as far as local government was concerned, exemplified the opposite argument: 'personally I am very determined in this question or any other question, only to uphold constitutional action and action within the law'; 'by accepting office on the various borough councils we accepted the responsibility of discharging the functions and liabilities of those councils'; and, 'high principles without an efficient machine constitutes but a voice crying in the wilderness. We have to make an efficient machine for a high moral purpose'.<sup>43</sup> Labour's leader, Ramsay MacDonald, echoed similar sentiments: Labour rule meant 'wise economy', and 'a grip of the realities of life'; 'instead of recklessly putting up the rates we are carefully and wisely keeping them down'.

In the most detailed study of Labour's attitude to local government in this period, John Rowett has convincingly shown how 'by 1939

the national party had effectively adopted an attitude towards local government which was strongly centralising and functionalist. That communitarian and decentralist view of local government which had been clearly evident within the party during the 1920s was by the late 1930s almost entirely eclipsed'.<sup>44</sup> The Webbs, Cole, Laski, MacDonald all supported the centralised case, although Cole and Laski had earlier been strongly communitarian. Thus Cole, for instance, was arguing in 1921 that local government was 'a matter of primary concern, above all to the Labour Movement, not only on account of the immediate services which it is capable of performing, but also because of the place which it can be made to assume in a reorganised social system'; and again, 'I have always regarded the local government institutions of this country as far more important from the point of view of the future structure of society than Parliament'. Yet by 1929, he was arguing that 'broad questions of policy must indeed be nationally determined and the local authorities ... must work within a framework of national control'.<sup>45</sup> Rowett's conclusions have since been challenged to an extent by Abigail Beach, but her study of Labour and citizenship does not fundamentally refute his broad argument, and in any case applies mainly to the post-1945 period.<sup>46</sup> When the publication of *Local Government News* was wound up by the Labour Party in 1931, in itself a symbol of the party's indifference to municipal politics, its editor, William Robson, put the case explicitly:

At no time has there been adequate recognition of the immense problems and difficulties facing the groups of Labour councillors in the localities ... or the opportunities for leadership in municipal affairs open to those at the head of the party in London. An enormous over-emphasis on the Parliamentary scene as compared with a relative indifference to what was happening in Manchester or Liverpool or the West Riding, a concentration of interest in the trade union side of the movement in contrast to the municipal

aspect, have been unfortunate characteristics in a party whose programme to a large extent relies on the provision of social services ... the Parliamentary Labour Party and Transport House have never been fundamentally interested in the municipal instruments by which these services are administered'.<sup>47</sup>

As Rowett concluded, 'although those active in local government, particularly in what became the bed-rock Labour areas, emphasised a communitarian approach they received little support from the national party which was concerned to win support in particular in the cities where the social-structural underpinnings of the practices of Poplar and Hemsworth were lacking.' Thus the Gateshead Labour guardians' stand in 1925-29, rooted in the very real concerns and aspirations of a local working class and only understandable within the context of the unemployment, industrial strife and social distress that prevailed in the locality at the time, was in national terms an embarrassment and an irrelevance. What mattered was getting Labour into power nationally in Parliament and then implementing change in a constitutional fashion, so local struggles like those of Gateshead were a diversion and, moreover, threatened the respectable and law-abiding image that the party leadership strived for. What was needed in local government was Morrison's responsible, efficient machine.

### ***Retaining power***

By contrast, the 1938 controversy in Gateshead was far less problematic for the party nationally, for it was concerned simply with retaining power in the municipality, which to an extent had become the be-all and end-all of many local Labour parties' ambitions by that time. The struggle was over legal niceties, rather than matters of principle, and moreover the Labour councillors' actions were ultimately upheld by the law. In part,

the pragmatic political tactics of Gateshead's Labour leaders had been learnt from their political opponents. It was the Moderates on the council who had first manipulated the aldermanic elections after Labour rule had become a real possibility in the early 1920s. Nevertheless the move from the high moral ground of the 1920s to the low pragmatism of the 1930s still represented a coarsening of Labour's principles. It was perhaps a precursor of post-45 developments, when Labour's reputation in local government in the 1950s and '60s became entangled with allegations of 'boss politics' in its political heartlands. Manipulation of the political process, such as over the aldermanic bench, became synonymous with the rule of the Braddock's in Liverpool, the 'Taffia' of South Wales or Clydeside's Labour bosses. Most pertinent for Gateshead were the dubious political practices and even corruption of Labour in the North East, personified by the cases of T. Dan Smith and Poulson.

The events in Gateshead also illustrate a problem that afflicted the relations between local and national government and the law in the inter-war period. At the heart of these problems were the inequalities of the rating system of raising local revenue, the tangled relationships between various institutions of local government such as Metropolitan or Borough councils and the Poor Law, the attempts by some local Labour leaderships to treat the unemployed in what they regarded as a fairer way than previously, and the ineffective legal remedies that national governments possessed in dealing with illegal action by local councils. Whether in Poplar or Gateshead, local Labour revolts in the 1920s were usually sparked by low rateable values and high unemployment. Thus the Poplar councillors refused to raise the rate legally due to the London County Council, as their local rate was so high due to the rising cost of the Poor Law. Similarly, the Gateshead guardians refused to raise the local rates to the astronomical levels that would have been required to pay for the out-relief which they believed the unemployed and locked-out were entitled to, and instead ran up unauthorised deficits. In both cases the Labour renegades appealed for



government action to reform the rating system. On the government side, as the Poplar rebellion had very clearly demonstrated, there were no effective legal remedies to force local councils to obey the law. It was not possible for the government to simply take over the running of such councils, and the only recourse was to surcharge the councillors individually to try and force them to back down, and failing that, to send them to prison. In Poplar this only made martyrs of the councillors and amplified the significance of their protest, to the discomfort of both the government and the national leadership of the Labour party. The Gateshead case outlined here only reinforced the impression that the surcharge was an inadequate weapon, as it took so long to enforce, and even then was partly remitted, providing an element of symbolic victory for the Labour guardians and provoking fury amongst their political opponents.

The resolution of these problems was only achieved in a piecemeal fashion over the 1920s and 1930s. One key development was the increased powers given to Ministry of Health auditors to take over the running of recalcitrant local councils, as was the case by 1926 in West Ham and Chester-le-Street. A second was the gradual removal of local responsibility for treatment of the unemployed through the extension of the national insurance scheme, the transformation of the Poor Law into the Public Assistance Committees of local councils in 1929, and the established of the Unemployed Assistance Board in 1934-5. A third was the gradual extension of grants from national government to subsidize local councils' expenditure which went some way to equalize the rates burden, even if it did not amount to a fundamental reform of the rating system that some in the labour movement were calling for.

The final point to be made is that these clashes in Gateshead show that the legal system was not necessarily the fearsome weapon against Labour that some portrayed it. The 'master class' may have made the laws, but they did not guarantee a clean victory against Labour rebels. In part this was the case in the 1925-28 events because the precedent of Poplarism

had already shown the pitfalls of legal action. Arguably it was the fierce political contestation in Gateshead that precipitated the recourse to law, and the courts proved far less willing to enforce the letter of the law than the local big ratepayers would have liked. In 1938-9, the law came down firmly on the side of the cynical pragmatism of the Labour councillors, perhaps demonstrating how far even at a local level Labour had been incorporated into the traditional pattern of party politics.

### **Appendix 1 - Gateshead Union, 1920-21 to 1929-30**

<b>Financial Year ending 31 March</b>	<b>Cost of Outdoor Relief (£)</b>	<b>Total Expenditure of Union (£)</b>	<b>Poor Law Rate levied (pence)</b>	<b>Surplus (+) or Deficit (-) of Union (£)</b>
1920-21	22,223	130,553	30.5	+6,642
1921-22	117,867	234,793	51.0	-36,903
1922-23	106,384	214,967	67.75	+42,187
1923-24	72,633	183,690	48.0	+4,795
1924-25	43,151	151,457	35.25	+442
1925-26	255,293	367,028	71.25	-80,970
1926-27	439,810	569,068	125.0	-70,004
1927-28	274,367	399,383	120.0	+44,681
1928-29	300,526	421,019	120.0	+3,600
1929-30	254,776	402,823	106.0	+18,803

**Source:** Ministry of Health, *Annual Local Taxation Returns, England and Wales*, (HMSO, London, annually 1923-32)

**Appendix 2 - Gateshead County Borough, 1920-21 to 1928-29**

Financial Year ending 31 March	Borough Rate (pence)	Poor Law Rate (pence)	Total Rate (pence)	Poor Law as Percentage of Total Rate
1920-21	143.5	30.5	174	17.5
1921-22	160.0	51.0	211	24.2
1922-23	136.25	67.75	204	33.2
1923-24	124.0	48.0	172	27.9
1924-25	128.75	35.25	164	21.5
1925-26	141.75	71.25	213	33.5
1926-27	160.0	125.0	285	43.9
1927-28	147.0	120.0	267	44.9
1928-29	149.0	120.0	269	44.6

**Source:** Ministry of Health, *Annual Local Taxation Returns, England and Wales*, (HMSO, London, annually 1923-32)

### **Appendix 3 - Political Balance of Gateshead Council 1919-38**

(Years of Labour control shown in bold)

Year*	Councillors		Aldermen		Total	
	Labour	Non-Labour	Labour	Non-Labour	Labour	Non-Labour
1919	14	16	0	10	14	26
1920	11	19	2	8	13	27
1921	10	20	2	8	12	28
1922	11	19	2	8	13	27
1923	16	14	7	3	23	17
1924	15	15	7	3	22	18
1925	14	16	7	3	21	19
1926	12	18	5	5	17	23
1927	11	19	5	5	16	24
1928	12	18	5	5	17	23
1929	18	12	0	10	18	22
1930	18	12	1	9	19	21
1931	15	15	1	9	16	24
1932	12	18	1	9	13	27
1933	13	17	1	9	14	26
1934	16	14	0	10	16	24
1935	18	12	5	5	23	17
1936	15	15	5	5	20	20
1937	15	15	5	5	20	20
1938	15	15	9	1	24	16

*\* Totals show position after municipal and aldermanic elections in November of each year*

**Source:** *Gateshead Herald, Gateshead and District Municipal News, Newcastle Daily Journal*, various dates 1919-38.

- <sup>1</sup> An early version of this article was presented to the 30<sup>th</sup> Annual North American Labor History Conference, Wayne State University, Detroit, in October 2008. I am grateful for the comments and suggestions made by the participants.
- <sup>2</sup> Manders, F.W.D., *A History of Gateshead*, (Gateshead, 1973), p.19.
- <sup>3</sup> Priestley, J.B., *English Journey*, (Harmondsworth, 1977), pp. 284–285.
- <sup>4</sup> Pelling, H., *Social Geography of British Elections 1885–1910*, (Aldershot, 1994), p. 327.
- <sup>5</sup> Priestley, *English Journey*, pp. 284–285.
- <sup>6</sup> Fogarty, M.P., *Prospects of the Industrial Areas of Great Britain*, (London, 1945), p. 33.
- <sup>7</sup> For a detailed study of the Poplar campaign, see Branson, N, *Poplarism 1919-1925: George Lansbury and the Councillor's Revolt*, (London, 1979).
- <sup>8</sup> *Newcastle Journal*, 25 October 1919.
- <sup>9</sup> All figures taken from Ministry of health, *Annual Local Taxation Returns England and Wales, 1924-25* (London, 1927), Pt. 2, pp. 10-11, 60-63.
- <sup>10</sup> *The Times*, 28 August, 12 October, 1925; *Manchester Guardian*, 28 August 1925.
- <sup>11</sup> *The Times*, 21 May, 7 September, 6 November 1926.
- <sup>12</sup> *The Times*, 20 December 1926.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Times*, 9 February 1921.
- <sup>14</sup> *The Times*, 20 October 1924.
- <sup>15</sup> *Newcastle Journal*, 2 November 1925.
- <sup>16</sup> *The Times*, 17 November 1925; Gateshead and District Municipal News, February 1928.
- <sup>17</sup> The latter figure was quoted in *The Times*, 20 December 1926.
- <sup>18</sup> *The Times*, 26 August 1925.
- <sup>19</sup> *The Times*, 20 October 1925.
- <sup>20</sup> *The Times*, 16 November 1925.
- <sup>21</sup> *Times*, 17 November 1925.
- <sup>22</sup> *The Times*, 17 November 1925.
- <sup>23</sup> *The Times*, 3 June 1926.

- <sup>24</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 2 September, 28 October 1927.
- <sup>25</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 16 December 1927, February 25 1928; *The Times*, February 15 1928.
- <sup>26</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 20 September 1928.
- <sup>27</sup> *Gateshead and District Municipal News*, April 1928.
- <sup>28</sup> *Gateshead and District Municipal News*, September 1928.
- <sup>29</sup> *Gateshead and District Municipal News*, November 1931.
- <sup>30</sup> *Gateshead and District Municipal News*, December 1928, January 1930.
- <sup>31</sup> It was also possible to nominate people from outside the council, but this was rare.
- <sup>32</sup> In Bristol, for instance, an all-party agreement that aldermen should be allocated on a proportional basis was struck in 1936; see Davies, S. and Morley, B., *County Borough Elections in England and Wales, 1919–1938: A Comparative Analysis, Vol. 2, Bradford-Carlisle*, (Ashgate Press, 2000), pp. 201–202.
- <sup>33</sup> For further discussion of the aldermanic system in the inter-war period, see Davies, S., *Liverpool Labour: Social and Political Influences on the Development of the Labour Party in Liverpool, 1900–1939*, (Keele, 1996), pp. 110–119, 156–163; Keith-Lucas, B. and Richards P.G., *A History of Local Government in the Twentieth Century*, (London, 1978). p. 23.
- <sup>34</sup> Hasluck, E.L., *Local Government in England*, (Cambridge, 1936), p. 176; *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 281, col. 766; col. 770, (14 November, 1933); Keith-Lucas, B., *The English Local Government Franchise: A Short History*, (Oxford, 1952), p. 189; Keith-Lucas and Richards, *A History of Local Government*, pp. 23–24.
- <sup>35</sup> *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 2 November 1938.
- <sup>36</sup> On these events in the council, see *Gateshead Herald*, November 1938; *Gateshead and District Municipal News*, November 1938; *Newcastle Daily Journal*, 10 November 1938; on the balance of parties in the council, see Appendix 3.
- <sup>37</sup> *Gateshead Herald*, November 1938.
- <sup>38</sup> *Gateshead and District Municipal News*, November 1938.

- <sup>39</sup> *Gateshead Herald*, November 1938
- <sup>40</sup> *Gateshead Herald*, Nov. 1929.
- <sup>41</sup> *The Times*, April 19, 1939.
- <sup>42</sup> Branson, *Poplarism*, p. 54.
- <sup>43</sup> Quoted in Branson, *Poplarism*, pp. 55-57.
- <sup>44</sup> Rowett, J.S., 'The Labour Party and Local Government: Theory and Practice in the Inter-War Years', Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 1979, p. 334.; on whole issue, pp. 333- 352.
- <sup>45</sup> Cole, G.D.H., *The Future of Local Government*, (London, 1921), pp. 1 and 39; *The Next Ten years in British Social and Economic Policy*, (London, 1929), quoted in Rowett, 'The Labour Party', p. 344, 346.
- <sup>46</sup> Beach, L.A., 'The Labour Party and the Ideal of Citizenship, c. 1931-1951 Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1996.
- <sup>47</sup> *Local Government News*, December 1931, quoted in Rowett, 'The Labour Party', pp, 53-54.
- <sup>48</sup> Rowett, pp. 358-359.
- <sup>49</sup> On these developments, see Schulz, M., 'The Development of the Grant System', in Wilson, C.H., *Essays on Local Government*, (Oxford, 1948), PP. 113-160.

## **Comment: The Gateshead Unemployed Workers Committee in the 1920s**

*Don Watson*

A key factor which pushed Gateshead's Labour Council of 1923 and its Board of Guardians of 1925 towards a confrontation with the law was a vibrant movement of local unemployed workers. In response to the severe recession the Trades Council organised an Unemployed Workers Committee and by 1921 the Journal reported that it had at least 1,200 members on its books, many of whom had no income at all. I would suggest that the work of this Committee provides an important context in which the Council and Guardians operated. This can be seen from how the UWC represented and organised the unemployed in a series of actions in Gateshead through the 1920s.

In April 1921 the Mayor of Gateshead agreed to chair a meeting between the Council, the local Tory M.P and the Unemployed Workers Committee in the Town Hall. A speaker from the packed audience told them, 'amid cheers' that 'we followed the flag in 1914 but we're following



a different flag now.’ A number of unemployed ex-servicemen denounced the cost of the Gateshead war memorial compared to the pittance their families were now forced to live on. The audience agreed a resolution urging the Council to ‘put into practice all possible means to alleviate the unemployment problems in the town and protest at the criminal policy of the government’. The message was repeated a month later when ‘a large number of the unemployed packed the Council Chamber’ to hear their delegates lobby the Council.

In September 1921 what the Journal described as an ‘imposing demonstration’ of 1,600 unemployed workers was held outside the Board of Guardians’ Office on Prince Consort Road. Standing in ranks 8 deep, their banners included the slogan: ‘1914- Your King and Country Need You. 1921- Nobody Needs You’. Unemployed ex-servicemen were also to the fore that same month at a mass meeting in the Town Hall, ‘an impressive scene’ where the Council again agreed to hear from the unemployed. The Unemployed Committee Secretary told them that ‘the heroes of 1914 are now on the scrap heap...you are playing with fire’ and his colleague told the Councillors that ‘...many of you own the slums we live in’.

Meetings like these passed resolutions calling on the Council to implement higher benefits scales, establish public works at trade union rates to relieve unemployment, and press the government to take over unemployment benefit as a national charge rather than a charge on local authority rates. Special government action was needed for the areas of high unemployment, but before Labour took control the Council did establish a distress fund (organised with the Unemployed Workers Committee) and extended free school meals for needy children to weekends and school holidays.

These September demonstrations took place during a week of action called for by the National Unemployed Workers’ Committee Movement. This militant network was the forerunner of the National Unemployed Workers Movement of the 1930s, and in Gateshead the Secretary and key

organiser of the Unemployed Workers Committee, Jack Cogan, was definitely in touch with the NUWCM network. Cogan himself was an engineering worker and AEU branch chair, an ILP activist and in the early 1920s an unsuccessful Labour Council and Board of Guardians candidate.

Interestingly, although the Gateshead UWC appears to have been dominated by male skilled workers, reflecting the employment characteristics of the region, there is evidence that the movement was not purely a men's movement. In 1923 the NUWCM women's organiser Lily Webb reported that, '200 women, members of the NUWCM, have formed a women's section in Gateshead. A distress fund has been formed after organising a deputation to the town hall. Women here are taking up their own labour exchange and board of guardians cases'. This deputation to the Council from the Unemployed Workers Committee (Women's Section) had raised issues about the families of out of work men and out of work young women who were ineligible for benefits. In fact the Council's response – to refer the points raised to the existing Distress Fund Committee – was criticised by Labour Party branches as just a way of shelving the issue.

This deputation was one of a regular series that the UWC sustained both before and after Labour gained control of the Council in November 1923. For example delegations in February 1923 had pressed for expansions in public works, and for trade union rates to be paid, and for extensions to free school meals provision given the evident malnourishment of children in the town. A deputation from Relief Workers (the term for those on public works schemes) successfully lobbied the Labour Council over trade union rates.

The unemployed movement had other means to make its voice heard besides the regular pressure of deputations. The accountability of elected or prospective representatives to the movement seems to have been expected and not just confined to the local elections. Although in early August 1921 only a minority of the Guardians were Labour they were still obliged to defend their record at the open-air meetings organised by the

ILP, Labour or the Unemployed Committee at Windmill Hills. This was Gateshead's Speakers' Corner and the assembly point too for the demonstrations to the Town Hall and the Boards of Guardians' office. In May 1921 the unemployed were said to be 'highly active' for Labour in the local elections, attending meetings where they marched in with their banners. Election literature too featured the candidates' records on work with the unemployed movement.

Gateshead Labour Party said it could not support certain positions 'put forward by a section of the unemployed' (i.e. the NUWCM). Once it took control though it did make efforts to implement the programmes of the local and national movements. Drastic cuts in funding for school meals by the Board of Education meant that free school meals for necessitous children had to be funded through the rates: this was done, the numbers of free meals rising from 80 to 400 a day within a year. Public works such as a council house building programme were expanded, the UWC ensuring that trades union rates were paid. These projects all had to be charges on the rates (and thus, apart from anything else, limited) because central government funding was either absent or completely inadequate given the scale of need. The Conservatives, through the vociferous local ratepayers associations, were determined to end this use of public money and turned to the courts to do so.

Therefore the elected Labour representatives who were testing the bounds of legality in the 1920s were supported by, liaised with and were accountable to a well-organised movement outside the Council Chamber. The role of that movement in this period of Gateshead's labour history deserves to be included too.

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<sup>1</sup> *Newcastle Daily Journal* 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1921

<sup>2</sup> *Gateshead Labour Party and Trades Council Monthly Circular* no.55  
15<sup>th</sup> April 1921

- <sup>3</sup> GLPTCMC no.56 15<sup>th</sup> May 1921
- <sup>4</sup> *Newcastle Daily Journal* 1<sup>st</sup> September 1921; 8<sup>th</sup> September 1921
- <sup>5</sup> *GLPTCMC* no.56 15<sup>th</sup> May 1921
- <sup>6</sup> Letter from Cogan in the NUWCM paper *Out of Work* no.57 1923
- <sup>7</sup> *New Charter* (NUMCM paper) no.1 June 1923; *GLPTCMC* no.78 March 1923
- <sup>8</sup> *GLPTCMC* no.77 February 1923; no .90 February 1924
- <sup>9</sup> *GLPTCMC* no.56 15<sup>th</sup> May 1921; no. 93 May 1924
- <sup>10</sup> *GLPTCMC* no. 66 15<sup>th</sup> March 1921; no 89-91 January – March 1924; *Gateshead Labour News* no.1 October 15<sup>th</sup> 1924

# **'Uncertain Waters Beneath the Rainbow Arch': The Building of the Tyne Bridge 1920-1929**

*Robert Doherty*

*Winner of the Chaplin Prize 2009*

*Few if any landmarks have come to symbolize Tyneside and the North East quite as strongly as the Tyne Bridge. Astride the Tyne between Gateshead and Newcastle, the single span of 531 ft., standing 84ft. above the water remains as impressive and awe-inspiring a feat of engineering today as it must have been at its opening over eighty years ago.<sup>1</sup> Like many objects of cultural significance the Bridge has become the subject of several myths, the most well known being its supposed prototype status for the larger Sydney Harbour Bridge, whose plans and designs in reality predated the Tyne Bridge by around a year. It has however been done justice by several publications that have documented excellently both the technical aspects of the Bridge and its construction, as well as a general narrative and context for the project.<sup>2</sup> This article does not look to*

*either challenge or repeat these accounts, but instead concentrates on documenting events on Tyneside that accompanied the proposals for and construction of a bridge which have arguably been done less justice. Though the Bridge is rightly celebrated as an immense focus of local pride, when it was built in the 1920s it was against the backdrop of much local tension; a time indelibly etched onto the soul of the North East for the immense economic hardship and rupture that was only beginning and would fundamentally alter the region.*

*The initial context for the Bridge will first be considered including the uncertainty over the location of a prospective bridge from 1920 onwards. What will also be discussed in turn are how Newcastle City Council approached the building of the Bridge, their further designs for the city centre, and how these would ultimately conflicted with the views of Newcastle's inhabitants; the implications of the Bridge for the labour of the two corporations involved; and finally, what lay behind Gateshead's involvement in the project and subsequent relations with their neighbour as the Bridge project progressed. This investigation utilizes both official records including those of the Newcastle-Gateshead Joint Bridge Board [hereafter JBC], and also local newspapers. Unfortunately this had ultimately limited the extent to which personal experiences of working on the Bridge and, or indeed the royal visit that accompanied the opening, could be explored and incorporated.*

## I

George V's declaration upon opening the Bridge on 10 October 1928 that '...it is my most earnest hope that this notable improvement to the facilities of transport may help to bring back to your city that full tide of prosperity which your courage and patience under recent difficulties so justly deserve',<sup>3</sup> emphasised the bleak backdrop against which the Bridge had been built; the crippling structural decline of the staple heavy engineering, shipbuilding and mining industries at the heart of the North East, along with the unparalleled levels of unemployment and immiseration that became immortalized in such acts as the Jarrow Crusade in 1936. In light of this, many have seen the Tyne Bridge's *raison d'être* as primarily a

remedy for this unemployment, providing work for those men without due to the industrial decline.<sup>4</sup>

An examination of the context for the Bridge would suggest however that this supposed origin was more of an expedient aside for the individuals who brought the project to fruition; whose aspirations in reality were more grandiose than merely the construction of the majestic Bridge. Though the decision to form a Joint Bridge Committee did follow an appeal by the head of the Newcastle Labour Exchange in January 1924, proposals for a bridge had been pursued officially and unofficially since the decade's commencement, separate from the unfolding economic distress. Though the Tyne between Newcastle and Gateshead was already spanned by the Swing and Redheugh road bridges, the King Edward VII rail bridge, and the Stephenson designed High Level (which carried both road and rail traffic, and also tramlines from January 1923),<sup>5</sup> the need for new facilities to accommodate ever-increasing road traffic was very much acknowledged. In 1920 Newcastle Corporation had approached Gateshead to consider joint action for road and pedestrian provisions to be added to a proposed bridge between Pelaw and Walker promoted by North Eastern Railway. Gateshead reluctance to act however due to lack of information meant nothing came of this particular scheme.<sup>6</sup>

Central government's own acknowledgement of the desperate need to improve road facilities post-1918 led to the establishment of the Ministry of Transport in 1919 which was provided with a Road Fund of some £5.2 million per annum to subsidize new roads and improvements to road surfaces.<sup>7</sup> As a result of this, Joint Town Planning Committees were established in early 1922 for both North and South Tyneside [hereafter JPCs] comprising officials from various local authorities, whose tasks included consideration of new arterial roads. The two JPCs met in May with the firm intention of determining the optimum location to construct a new road bridge over the Tyne.<sup>8</sup> The preliminary report by the County surveyors and engineers (including Newcastle's) made clear

preference for St. Anthony's Point, some 2½ miles east of Swing Bridge.<sup>9</sup> The final report in October 1923 reaffirmed St. Anthony's as the priority, with the site of Scotswood Bridge a second preference.<sup>10</sup>

In both reports, the Tyne Bridge's eventual position between Pilgrim Street (Newcastle) and High Street (Gateshead) had also been considered, but concerns over the effects of routing through-traffic through the already congested urban network had led to this being deemed of lesser importance.<sup>11</sup> Concurrent with official activity however, this location had been vociferously advocated in the local press by T.H. Webster and H.Y. Richardson, two Novocastrian engineers. From September 1922 onwards, Webster had barraged several newspapers with letters advocating his scheme and design (shown below), deeming the location the 'natural' site for a new bridge.<sup>12</sup> H.Y. Richardson revived a previous proposal which had surfaced in 1899 which he published in April 1923.<sup>13</sup> His promotion of this also extended to a letter campaign and even a wireless address in May.<sup>14</sup> Both also presented their ideas to the Chamber of Commerce.

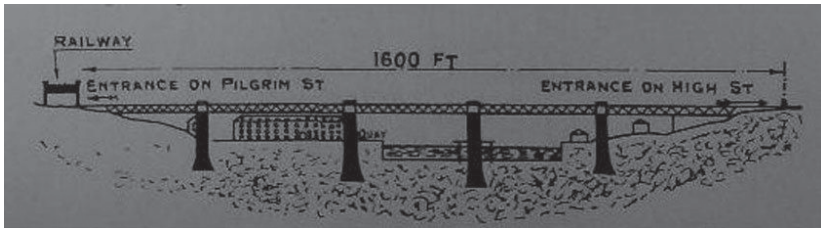


Figure 1. T.H. Webster's proposed New High Level Bridge, published in Webster, *New High Level Bridge* (Newcastle, 1928)

The ubiquitous nature of their coverage has seen their efforts and ideas prized in histories of the Bridge over the ongoing and more considered efforts of the Council-sanctioned Joint Committee. Their influence and importance is debateable however. Despite Webster's



contacting of numerous City Councillors the matter never graced the Council Chamber in the course of 1923. The reasons both gave for the particular site were also somewhat vague and did not consider the changed transport circumstances in the two decades since the proposals they were now reviving. Webster thought the Pilgrim Street location as befitting of 'Grainger's City' and ultimate intentions,<sup>15</sup> whereas Richardson justified another bridge through Newcastle rather than a by-pass simply as he believed the City 'a good pull-up'.<sup>16</sup> Both also found their proposals met with high-profile scepticism, especially from George Renwick, Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, who was 'hostile' on the ground of greater potential transport chaos.<sup>17</sup> Both seemingly drew little in the way of affirmative support to match their own gusto, save an article by Councillor Elliott in support of the Pilgrim Street site.<sup>18</sup>

When the JPCs published their report, their decision received endorsement from Newcastle Council (though the Pilgrim Street site was not discounted) and then from Gateshead on 5 December.<sup>19</sup> Planning Council members Alderman Cail (Newcastle) and Councillor Watson (Gateshead), stressed the need not 'to force the pace' over the building of any new bridge.<sup>20</sup>

Before 1924 therefore, while 'an entirely new bridge' was gaining favour throughout Tyneside, no consensus existed on either the location or an immediate programme of action. The issue also had no definite link to the unemployment problems the region was experiencing which, despite the concerns raised by the alarming 26,722 persons receiving Poor Law relief in Newcastle in August 1923 (which led to a special Council committee on unemployment being established in September),<sup>21</sup> had not yet been identified as anything more alarming than a severe downturn in the trade-cycle. Companies such as Dorman Long still at this time remained optimistic over future economic prospects for the North East.<sup>22</sup> Suggestions proffered as to public works provisions in the city, the traditional relief measure to aid 'respectable' workers,<sup>23</sup> were not insistent

a bridge should be part of these schemes.<sup>24</sup> Recommendations included the removal of old gaol that stood in Carloli Square.<sup>25</sup>

## II

Newcastle in the 1920s benefited greatly from its importance as the 'capital' of the North East, having a large and established middle-class and strong commercial interests inhabiting the 'well-to-do' districts of Jesmond and Gosforth.<sup>26</sup> Its council, unlike similar large cities and despite returning Labour MPs, remained 'Liberal' controlled until the Second World War.<sup>27</sup> While the Armstrong and Stephenson families had withdrawn from active civic politics, a premium was still placed in the Council on individuals of comfortable means with many years of experience and public service to their name, and it was considered a rather 'closed institution'.<sup>28</sup> This was in sharp contrast to the supposed 'decline' of 'notables' in local government nationally.<sup>29</sup> The Council also indulged in supposed 'ancient' ceremonies such as biannual civic processions.<sup>30</sup> Such rituals have been argued 'invented traditions', a way in which elites legitimized and displayed their authority.<sup>31</sup>

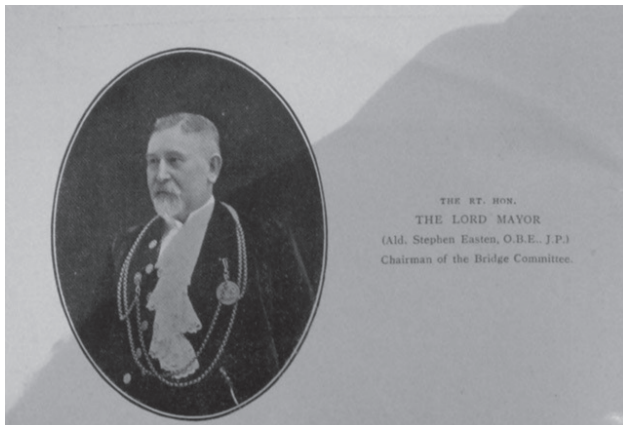


Figure 2. Alderman Stephen Easten, in  
*Visit of Their Majesties King George V and Queen Mary* (1928)

Stephen Easten, Mayor of the Corporation in 1924, was of national significance in the building trade, briefly holding a government position in the Housing Department of the Ministry of Health.<sup>32</sup> Sir George Lunn was also a prominent figure in the National Association of Education Committees.<sup>33</sup> Both men held the mayoralty several times and had been active for many years by the 1920s. When Easten convened the Council in Committee and resolved to form a Bridge Committee with Gateshead, in which he became chairman (and Lunn vice-chairman), it was this middle-class commercial interest, and sense of grand civic purpose as found in Hearnshaw's history of the City, that were the primary motivators in overriding the groundwork of the JPCs. The Council leaders' subsequent plans for Newcastle would seem driven by a sense of 'duty to maintain its glories, perpetuate its benefices and hand on to their successors a still more splendid name'.<sup>34</sup>

While, as noted above, the catalyst was ostensibly a plea from the Labour Exchange, the benefits to the ratepayer were made clear in reducing the £22,000 per annum the Corporation paid to LNER for running trams over their High Level Bridge.<sup>35</sup> The aim of a toll-free bridge across the Tyne had distinct commercial benefits. The opportunism in the timing of the decision, coinciding with the forming of the first minority Labour government who were anxious to subsidize any scheme generating unemployment relief, also appears very apparent.<sup>36</sup>

The haste with which proposals proceeded once Gateshead had accepted the proposals was remarkable. From having no definite plans at the inception of the JBC in late-January, the parliamentary bill that was vital for government grants had been deposited by May and gained Royal Assent in early August.<sup>37</sup> The deadline for tenders from companies to construct the Bridge was set as 18 November.<sup>38</sup> Despite the reservations and concerns that had been voiced over the Pilgrim Street site and its associated problems, the JBC were intent on this location alone, employing consulting engineers to only assess the favoured line to High

Street, and pressing on despite notes of caution over the insufficient time for a full survey and 'very estimate' quote of £580,000 for bridge-works alone.<sup>39</sup> Having given assurances the new bridge would not affect the plans at St. Anthony's to the JPC,<sup>40</sup> Newcastle promptly deferred involvement once royal assent had been given to their own proposals.<sup>41</sup> This location appears to have carried an element of slum clearance, as many road improvements did,<sup>42</sup> as the 'worst slums' were generally found 'clinging to the banks of the River',<sup>43</sup> and a Health Ministry inquiry led Newcastle's Town Clerk in December 1924 to declare Pilgrim Street's dwellings 'a reproach to the community'.<sup>44</sup>

The JBC's speed of action saw them swiftly get their wish: the £973,000 scheme, divided between the two participant Corporations proportionally to their total rateable values, received confirmation of a Transport Ministry grant of 65% in September 1924.<sup>45</sup> Of the eight tenders accepted, it was Dorman Long of Middlesbrough who were successful (having already secured the Sydney tender), at an estimated £571,225. Armstrong's bid, in an unfortunate blow to local pride, was some £170,000 in excess of the Teesside company's.<sup>46</sup> Though the Bridge was in motion, the actions of Newcastle Council's leaders now made apparent that the Bridge was merely the beginning of much grander proposals to transform the urban landscape of the City. Though not discussed publically or even in the Council during the Bridge discussions, the Town Improvement and Streets Committee [hereafter TIC] appointed architect Robert Burns Dick to formulate a redesign of the City Centre, acknowledging the problems the JBC had not aired over the effects of the traffic from the impending Bridge. The Plan (Figure 3), declared 'practically a revelation' by the TIC, was completed in November 1924.<sup>47</sup>



Figure 3. Proposals for Newcastle City Centre (new thoroughfare circled), in Burns Dick, *Suggested plan for future developments [in Central Newcastle]* (1924).

At the heart of the scheme was a new thoroughfare running parallel to Pilgrim Street that would run from City Road to Barras Bridge (circle above and Figure 4).



Figure 4. Sketch of proposed new thoroughfare, (Journal, 25 January 1926).

Burns Dick was also appointed to design the architecture of the new Bridge, his original sketches and designs including ‘enlarged pylons and a gigantic Beaux-Arts style arch’.<sup>48</sup> The JBC was instructed any new buildings erected should form a ‘gateway’ to the City.<sup>49</sup> It was clear from these designs that prestige as much as unemployment relief was the central concern in the Bridge’s construction.

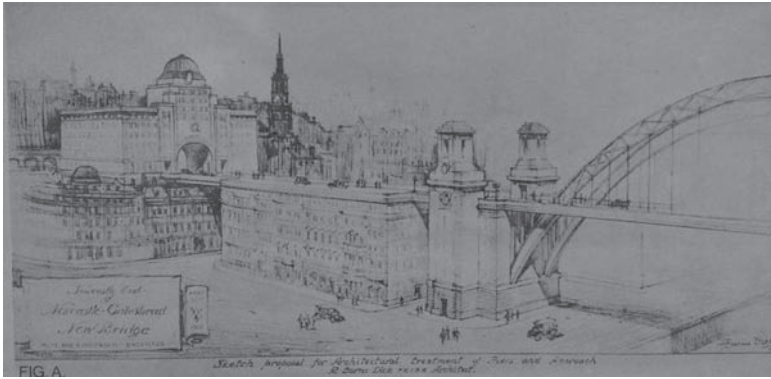


Figure 5. Robert Burns Dick, proposed Tyne Bridge architecture (1925),  
reprinted in *In Trust*, 8 October 1978, p. 3.

This new street scheme proved however to be a watershed moment in the tacit trust and faith Newcastle's electors and lesser Councillors placed in their Council leaders. Despite some dissentient voices over the proposals' haste and usurping of the agreed Tyneside-wise scheme, the motion to deposit a parliamentary bill on 2 April was passed by a majority of 56-0, not unanimously as Potts and Manders have claimed,<sup>50</sup> but no councillor willing to stand in the way of 'progress'.<sup>51</sup> Lunn and Easten's assurances that sufficient consideration of location had been made proved enough to allay most fears. The electors' attitude was even more accepting, the town meeting for the Bill attended by little more than one hundred citizens and described blandly by the *Chronicle* as 'pleasant'.<sup>52</sup>

However, when the previously undiscussed road proposals related to the Bridge surface prematurely in January 1925 due to a private planning application to build on the intended line, the apathetic mood was almost entirely dispelled. Many councillors believed the Bridge a solution in itself to the traffic problems and were now angered by the revelation the new street was 'essential' to its 'efficiency' (including JBC member Alderman Morton).<sup>53</sup> A substantial number of councillors

joined Telford's resistance to further expense for 'progress' sake',<sup>54</sup> and the motion to agree the road in principle passed by only a single vote amidst a volatile atmosphere.<sup>55</sup> A further motion in June was then defeated 29 to 24, to the much publicized shock of TIC Chairman James Lunn (brother of George), who was already negotiating with builders.<sup>56</sup> Defiantly, the TIC obtained the signatures required to reopen the matter and bundled the scheme together with quay extensions eastwards (both costing around £1 million each) to be put to a public meeting held in January 1926 to authorise applying for parliamentary powers so as to obtain government grants.<sup>57</sup>

The response from the public contrasted sharply with their apathetic acceptance of the Bridge as, in light of the growing realization of the extent of industrial and economic hardship, the 'ratepayers' poured scorn on the proposals, writing in numbers to the press bemoaning Council expenditure commitments that would amount to £10 per head.<sup>58</sup> The Chamber of Commerce's Retail Section complained to the Trade and Commerce Committee the plans were 'unfair' on the City's struggling tradesmen and refused to support any scheme that would add to the rate.<sup>59</sup> Novocastrians actively demonstrated their displeasure in the ill-tempered public meeting, rejecting every proposal except the quay extensions.<sup>60</sup> Still determined to save their vision, the Council hastily prepared an electors' poll for the 30 January 1926. The result was an even more comprehensive rejection as both the new thoroughfare and quay were finally defeated by a huge majority from the 25,000 votes cast.<sup>61</sup> The mood of the predominantly middle-class ratepayers was jubilant, and correspondents to the press warned the Council they were their 'representatives', not their 'masters', and they should descend from their 'land of dreams'.<sup>62</sup>

This mood for greater economy and accountability persisted as the financial pressures showed no signs of abating. There now came regrets and questioning of the decision to construct a bridge in the heart of the City. A

fierce Council exchange occurred in early 1927 when the inclusion of tramlines on the Bridge was confirmed, many Councillors arguing of their obsolescence and the unnecessary expense.<sup>63</sup> Easten continued to come under fire, especially when an agreement to compensate LNER £10,000 per annum for fifteen years for lost revenue on High Level was revealed.<sup>64</sup> One citizen pessimistically suggested the 'Bridge of Sighs' should be the Bridge's official name.<sup>65</sup> Anxiety reached an apparent zenith in January 1928 when the *Sunday Sun* demanded the opening be pushed back a year to avoid Newcastle being 'a laughing stock'.<sup>66</sup> The Bridge's construction did seem to mislead as to how much work remained; the steel arch still apparently far from complete (Figure 6). Despite the story's sensationalism, several Councillors still responded by voicing regret at having endorsed Easten as mayor again for the year.<sup>67</sup>



Figure 6. Tyne Bridge, January 1928, reprinted in *Building the Tyne Bridge* (Side Photographic Gallery)

In light of this questioning of their actions, the almost immediate resolution by the JBC that the King should be asked to attend the Bridge's opening,<sup>68</sup> and subsequent management of events thereafter, appears to have been an attempt reassert the legitimacy of their actions, and restore the



damaged civic pride in the 'Tyne Bridge' (the name being decided in December).<sup>69</sup> Much of the tension was diffused initially as hundreds watched on the 24 February as the two halves of the great rainbow arch were joined together.<sup>70</sup> The announcement, when assurances had been obtained, that George V would attend, generated a renewed sense of excitement and optimism as preparations began to welcome His Majesty in a grand ceremony that would also include the opening of the newly built Heaton Secondary Schools. At the heart of the proceeding were those civic leaders so under-fire for their ambitious decisions. In the souvenir programmes given to 53,000 Newcastle schoolchildren and 24,000 from Gateshead, portraits of Easton and Sheriff Joseph Stephenson followed those of the King and Queen, seemingly aligning them with a monarchy: a symbol of unity, but also of social hierarchy and deference.<sup>71</sup> The *Sunday Sun* would even speculate as to whether JBC members would receive honours.<sup>72</sup> Numerous volunteer groups and associations lined the route as the King and Queen arrived at Jesmond Station at 10.20am and proceeded with the Council leaders to the Heaton Schools, to be greeted by 23,000 children and watch displays of physical drill and dance performed by the children of the poorer schools.



Figure 7. Postcard of King's Visit to Heaton Secondary Schools, October 1928 (Author's Possession)

At 11.40am the King reached the Bridge, where the opening was carried out with all the 'traditional' symbols of the monarchy;<sup>73</sup> the peal of bells, the twenty-one gun salute and National Anthem. The centrality of the Council and the JBC members in the royal ceremony appears to have been an attempt to quell the continuing murmurs of disquiet over the Bridge, a technique that while successful in the short-run as debate subsided somewhat in the opening days, was of doubtful long-term effectiveness in restoring confidence.

### III

For many of the working-class of the region the 1920s were a desperately grim and sobering time, with those who worked in the shipbuilding and heavy engineering industries hit especially hard. Armstrongs' saw their industrial output fall to less than half of what it had had been in the six years that followed 1920.<sup>74</sup> The company became a shadow of its former self as errant investments forced merger with Vickers in 1927.<sup>75</sup> The last warship constructed by the Walker naval yard was launched in 1924 and the yard would close for good in 1928.<sup>76</sup> For those shipbuilders who were insured, unemployment reached nearly 20,000 by 1927 and would continue to increase.<sup>77</sup> When the benefit ran out, as it quickly did, these men and thousands from other industries were left to the indignity of the Poor Law. As noted above, the workers of Newcastle in particular were a much more secondary concern in civic matters, their contribution to rate income being 12.8% compared with that derived from the city's commercial bourgeoisie and industrial employers.<sup>78</sup> The Labour councillors through their minority status were forced to assert their individualism and localism against the fears of 'socialism'. With the Tyne Bridge project, though other perceived benefits for Newcastle and ulterior ambitions were apparent catalyst, many in the labour movement still believed the work it would provide as the key motivation.

Bean has declared the Bridge was 'welcome work while it lasted but over too soon'.<sup>79</sup> While the second part of this statement was undoubtedly

true, the first would appear over simplistic and straightforward. Such a remarkable structure as the Bridge remains was necessitated by the Tyne Commissioners condition that no supports were to be placed in the River, or the River impeded at any point of the construction. The process of construction required as a result therefore a specialized, skilled workforce (used to working at heights) unlike the other Tyne bridges which had been built by large gangs of migrant labour.<sup>80</sup> The sinking of the caissons for the support columns began in August 1925 and progressed at a daily rate of around fifteen inches a day (Figure 8).<sup>81</sup>



Figure 8. Work on Tyne Bridge, February 1926, from  
Geddie Photograph Collection (TWAS:DX978)



The piers of the approach roads were erected by a process known as ‘rolling out’ which ensured the in properties underneath the roadway were spared from demolition (Figure 2).

Figure 9. Postcard of ‘The New High Level Bridge’,  
April 1927, from Tyne Bridge Photographic  
Collection (TWAS:DX57)

When work began on constructing the arch in 1927, the frames were held back on either side of the River by sixteen cables attached to masts (Figure 3), while as 5 and 20 ton derrick cranes were alternately built and dismantled atop the structure to lift the steelwork into place (Figure 4).



Figure 10. Tyne Bridge Construction, November 1927, from Geddie Photograph Collection.



Figure 11. Tyne Bridge Construction, Early 1928, from Geddie Photograph Collection.

What is striking, even in these images, are the insignificant numbers of men working on the Bridge at any one time. Even the early demolition work was marked by the many without employment watching the fortunate few with (Figure 5). The numbers working on the Bridge on any given day appear to have not exceeded a mere couple of hundred.



Figure 12. Tyne Bridge Construction, September 1925,  
reprinted in *Bridge* (Side Gallery).

With the scant work offered anxiety quickly surfaced as to who was actually being employed. Both Newcastle and Gateshead Labour Exchanges made pleas to be used as the source of labour in August 1924,<sup>83</sup> but by September 1925 Gateshead was raising concerns that men were drifting into the area and being employed through giving bogus local addresses.<sup>84</sup> Whereas other public works schemes kept detailed information of numbers and residency of those at work, Dorman Long stated early

they could give only limited guarantees over using local labour due to the construction's technical nature and foreman's penchant for hiring on the job.<sup>85</sup> The scant evidence that exists suggests many of the hired men were indeed not from the immediate area. Complaints were made at various stages of a man from Dundee and a dozen other non-indigenous workers, as well as supposed Irish 'aliens' in employ.<sup>86</sup> In February 1928, the only fatality to occur was Nathaniel Collins from South Shields, who fell from atop the arch. The man he was working with was from Sunderland.<sup>87</sup> The work was undoubtedly dangerous and the men employed took great pride in their ability to hold their nerve working so precariously above the Tyne; this solitary death appears testament to their ability. The inquest held was informed Collins was a good climber who 'knew no fear' and did not suffer giddiness.<sup>88</sup> Yet the reality that only very specialized work was offered can only have added to the mood of dissatisfaction with civic leaders with increasing numbers left destitute as the 1920s progressed.

The opening ceremonies for the Tyne Bridge further emphasized how the project in reality had offered few tangible benefits to the workers of Newcastle and Gateshead. Proceedings, as noted above, were much more a celebration of the Council leaders rather than those whose toil had built the Bridge and Tyneside itself. The declaration of a public holiday in Newcastle caused dismay for those fortunate to be in employment over the prospect of having to sacrifice a day's much-needed wage.<sup>89</sup> The labourers of the City held no antipathy to George V and much loyalty towards a monarch whose pronouncements had appeared to show much concern for the proletariat.<sup>90</sup> Calls for the compromise of a paid hour in which to see the King fell on deaf ears.<sup>91</sup> Though Bridge workers were allowed to line the approaches, they were predictably absent from those members of the Corporation presented to Their Majesties. The route of the procession down Jesmond Road, for example, steered clear of the poorer districts, much to the lament of a resident from Byker.<sup>92</sup>

The official programme of the opening presented a city contrasting sharply with the heavy, large-scale industrial concerns that had constructed the Bridge, being replete with advertisements for consumer products and retailers,<sup>93</sup> highlighting the divergent fortunes of the residents that would continue to be exacerbated into the next decade. The Bridge's lifts when completed made apparent the lack of activity on the Quayside, and move of the city's economic heart away from the River,<sup>94</sup> as they lost £5 weekly against their operating costs.<sup>95</sup> The staircases reportedly came to be used as brothels.<sup>96</sup> The indefinite postponing of using the tower warehouses had already been agreed several months before.<sup>97</sup>

Public works such as the Bridge could only ever be a temporary relief measure for cyclical trade-slumps; they could not absorb the level of distress experienced or its permanence. The Chamber of Commerce emphasized this grim reality that only 5,000 workers had been employed in Council schemes amounting to £2,340,000.<sup>98</sup> At the 1926 meeting that vetoed the thoroughfare, the *Journal* reported a significant working-class presence.<sup>99</sup> Labour Councillors also held divergent views on the Quay extension proposals. As the anxiety increased the approach to the problem became more proactive, with the breaking of the taboo over advertising trade facilities, acknowledging extraordinary methods were needed for extraordinary times. This began in December 1925 with the forming of the Tyneside Development Conference which produced a series of pamphlets to attract new industries to the Tyne.<sup>100</sup> The epitome of this shift however was the North East Coast Exhibition which was first proposed mid-1926. In telling contrast to the Bridge and in light of the public backlash, the Council and Exhibition Committee backed down from initial projections of a May 1928 opening in postponing the event until 1929 due to insufficient planning.<sup>101</sup> The Bridge at its opening therefore had already been eclipsed as the primary symbol of economic hope for the region.

#### IV

Gateshead's experience with the Tyne Bridge project was no less notable than that of its larger neighbour across the River, and carried with it no less frustration and unrealized aspirations. Very much in the shadow of Newcastle and the butt of many jibes,<sup>102</sup> the town faced much more severe economic distress and deprivation, having for example, the unwanted distinction in the early 1920s of England and Wales' highest tuberculosis death-rate.<sup>103</sup> Originally a railway town, the completion of the King Edward VII Bridge had caused NER to close most of their works and as a result, save for the extraordinary economic conditions created by the Great War, Gateshead had been subject to chronic unemployment.<sup>104</sup>

These problems became exacerbated when the lack of commercial and industrial property that meant an average rateable value of just £5 combined with a Poor Law Union that included mining districts that became subject to bitter industrial dispute. 1926, the year of the General Strike produced a rate of over 23s, twice the burden on Newcastle's citizens.<sup>105</sup> Despite this, the Union was still faced with bankruptcy and was secretly blacklisted by the Government.<sup>106</sup> J.B. Priestley would remark nearly a decade later Gateshead was 'a workshop without work',<sup>107</sup> while the eventual intervention that led to the Team Valley Trading Estate scheme emphasized the town's status throughout the interwar period and economically 'depressed'.<sup>108</sup> The men of the Council were generally of more modest means than their North Bank counterparts, skilled workers or low-status white-collar, like railway clerk Alderman Peacock.<sup>109</sup> Party politics were also fiercer, as was the case elsewhere,<sup>110</sup> with Labour holding the Council between 1924 and 1926, when the conservative Ratepayers Association toppled the so-called 'spendthrifts'.<sup>111</sup>

Due to the disadvantaged status of Gateshead in comparison to Newcastle, their acceptance of the city's invitation to join the Bridge Committee rather than maintain support for the St. Anthony's scheme is not easily explainable. The town already suffered commercially from the



existing crossings between the corporations and, unlike Newcastle, did not own their tram and trolley company.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, the Council's parliamentary committee had flatly rejected the consideration of the High Street position for a bridge when it had been referred to them in May 1923.<sup>113</sup>

However, what has been little documented, but for which there seems certain compelling evidence, is that amalgamation between the two corporations was a very real possibility throughout 1923 and 1924 when the decisive action on the Bridge was taken. In January 1923, the *Chronicle* had professed that amalgamation was 'common sense'.<sup>114</sup> It seems no coincidence that concurrent with the forming of the JBC, Gateshead had begun preparing to attempt to make this a reality, the Council forming a committee on the matter in March 1924 and inviting Newcastle participation,<sup>115</sup> which was quickly secured.<sup>116</sup> In October 1924 the notion was very much alive, Newcastle's Town Clerk privately instructing the Trade and Commerce Committee to plan for 'what might happen in a year or two'.<sup>117</sup>

Being the junior partners in the JBC, with only nine representatives to Newcastle's fourteen, Gateshead ultimately suffered as a result of the City Councillors' designs discussed above. The unsuitability of the location of the Bridge for the town was even greater than for their neighbour, and this became more apparent as the construction unfolded. The proposed junction for the Bridge with High Street required a confusing array of amendment to the road system, and it became apparent properties outside the initially envisaged dividing line would be needed.<sup>118</sup> The alterations to Church Street, which swung down towards the quayside (Figure 1) were then deemed unsatisfactory by the Transport Ministry due to the angle of intersection with High Street being too acute.<sup>119</sup> Further changes and compromises were being made as late as April 1927.<sup>120</sup>



Figure 13. Postcard of Tyne Bridge, October 1927, from Tyne Bridge Photographic Collection (TWAS:DX57): Picture shows Church Street and St. Mary's Church, Gateshead.

The financial implications of the location were even more severe in the disruption they caused to Snowball and Co., a drapery employing substantial numbers (in a town where employment was at a premium) located on Church Street.<sup>121</sup> The Council's initial oversight in neglecting their legal obligation to re-house the 216 working-class tenants displaced by the Bridge, led in 1926 to the construction of flats that added £21,353 of loan debt to an already indebted Corporation.<sup>122</sup>

The acceptance of Newcastle's lead over the Bridge in hope of greater unity and assistance for their heavy burden ultimately came to nought. The greater emphasis on thrift and obsession with the rate that over took both corporations, led Newcastle to increasingly view their struggling neighbour as a cautionary tale. In the two years from October 1924, there were no further meetings of the Amalgamation Committee. When it did reconvene in 1926 it now included Newcastle's adjoining, suburban and affluent local authorities on the North Bank,<sup>123</sup> and in 1928 Newcastle's representatives moved for subsequent meetings to consist solely of these authorities, effectively excluding Gateshead.<sup>124</sup> The reciprocal growing enmity towards 'that powerful community on the



Figure 14. Royal Procession entering Gateshead, October 1928, reprinted in Linsley, *Spanning the Tyne* (Newcastle, 1998)

opposite side of the River' Gateshead's citizens felt is apparent in many literary examples from the time. A social survey of Tyneside published in 1928 whose committee included Gateshead Council members, remarked bitinglly: 'Everyone would realize the injustice if it was proposed to detach Byker from the rest of Newcastle'.<sup>125</sup>

What perhaps illustrates most aptly the manner in which during the construction of the Bridge events had dispelled the previous spirit of consideration and replaced it with antipathy, are the expressions of mutual exclusivity between the two Corporations replete within the ceremonial opening of the Bridge and the associated preparations. It was decided by the JBC that rather than place the coat of arms for each corporation at the centre-point of the Bridge, they would be set on their respective sides of the River.<sup>126</sup> The cover of the souvenir programme given to schoolchildren seems also to symbolically keep them apart (Figure 3). The official programme sold to mark the occasion also kept the included portraits of the Corporations' officials very much apart; Newcastle's being at the front while Gateshead were at the back.

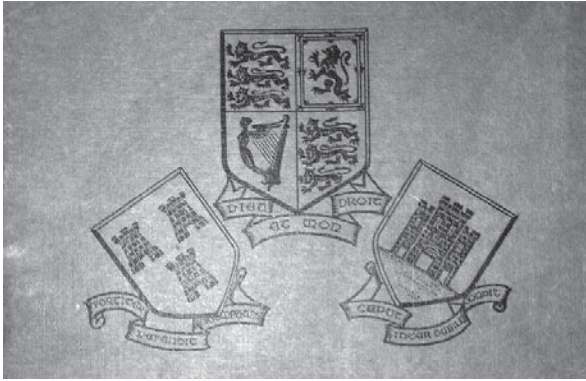


Figure 15. Cover design, *Visit of Their Majesties King George V. And Queen Mary* (1928)

The plans for the royal visit were organized entirely separately which consequently led to greater symbolic shows of division. Not a single official from Gateshead was presented to His Majesty before the Bridge and no member Newcastle dignitaries went with the King as he proceeded over to Gateshead to receive the Town's loyal address at the Shipley Gallery before leaving at 12.25pm for Chester-le-Street.<sup>127</sup> In a telling act of bitterness it has even been resolved by Gateshead's Council they would not grant expenses to Newcastle at the luncheon that took place to celebrate the opening.

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The Tyne Bridge was indeed a lasting triumph for Tyneside and an achievement both in human and engineering terms that should be celebrated and remembered fondly. However, this investigation would suggest that for those involved, in light of the aspirations that both civic leaders and ordinary people invested in the project in 1924, the triumph was bittersweet in a manner that for the most part has been neglected. Two days after the opening, a correspondent in the *Chronicle* remarked: '...as matters stand at present we might as well pray the Tyne Bridge had never been built.'<sup>129</sup>

The initial desire to remedy the congestion over the ageing bridge-stock and the promise of increased tram revenue to the ratepayers both proved to be frustrated, as the diminished running costs of buses would rapidly see their proliferation at the expense of the tram network in public transport.<sup>130</sup> The traffic congestion on either side of the River would increase dramatically,<sup>131</sup> and calls to remove the tolls from both the High and Redheugh bridges began almost immediately.<sup>132</sup> This was eventually done by the authorities at the price of heavy compensation packages in 1937.<sup>133</sup> The greater suitability of St. Anthony's where a bridge and much-needed bypass had seemed the more likely alternative until the end of 1923, was made apparent by the two corporations once again involving themselves in new proposals by 1936.<sup>134</sup>

The new thoroughfare, which may have allayed much of the ensuing traffic chaos, was thwarted by a public whose tolerance for large municipal spending was waning, and whose implicit trust of their civic leaders' vision had all but evaporated. The vision for Newcastle, which the Bridge formed an integral part of, remained unrealized as did the hopes of the workers of the region that the Bridge would form part of a future where their skills would once again be called upon to reignite the old industrial heart of Tyneside. Shipbuilding unemployment would continue to soar and, from 1929 to 1932, the engineering trade would shed 41.3% of its insured workforce.<sup>135</sup> Even the prospect of jobs in the building of the Bridge fell way short of the modest expectations and promises made to so many.

The real possibility of amalgamation which had existed for Gateshead and had formed a backdrop to partnership on the Tyne Bridge would be ultimately forgotten as the town drifted further from its counterpart, barely mustering 1/5 of Newcastle's rateable value by 1934.<sup>136</sup> Even such ostensible shows of unity like the royal visit contained barely suppressed tensions. As much as the Bridge joined the people of the North East, it could not rebuff the forces at work that were pushing them apart. The complexities of the process of building the Bridge and the difficulties

therein should not detract from the fond and heroic manner in which it has been remembered and imagined, but they are nonetheless evident and interesting when the surface of the veneer is scratched.

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- <sup>126</sup> JBC Minutes, 25 July 1928, p. 54.
- <sup>127</sup> *Chronicle*, 9 October 1928, p. 1.
- <sup>128</sup> GC Minutes, 3 October 1928, p. 458. TWAS:CB/GA/1/82.
- <sup>129</sup> *Chronicle*, 12 October 1928, p. 10.
- <sup>130</sup> Armstrong, 'transport', p. 253.
- <sup>131</sup> Ward, *Geography*, p. 195.
- <sup>132</sup> JBC Minutes, 19 November 1928, p. 71.
- <sup>133</sup> Manders, *Gateshead*, p. 124.
- <sup>134</sup> Potts and Manders, *Crossing*, p. 14.
- <sup>135</sup> McCord, *North East*, pp. 218-219.
- <sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 218-219.



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## **The IRA Campaign in the North East and the State Response 1920-1923\***

*Kevin Davies*

*The battle for Ireland's independence had far reaching consequences for the North East. In the area that fight was reflected by various Irish Nationalist organisations which played an important part in the struggle for Irish Self Determination. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that fight was carried forward by the Home Rule Confederation of Great Britain, the Irish National League, and the United Irish League. These Irish nationalist bodies strove for Irish independence through constitutional means by organising the Irish community to vote in support of the Liberal Party which put forward the Irish Home Rule bills of 1886, 1893, and 1912 respectively.<sup>1</sup> The North East also showed support for physical force Irish nationalism known as Fenianism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nonetheless there are no figures to demonstrate the depth of that support. Regardless of this factor Tyneside provided safe houses for Fenians on the run, or those connected to Fenianism.<sup>2</sup> The greatest support for this form of nationalism in the region arose in the 20<sup>th</sup> century during the Irish War of*



*Independence (1919 - 1921 ) in which the Irish Republican Army waged a guerrilla war against British forces in Ireland.<sup>3</sup>*

As a result of that campaign the I.R.A. began a campaign of the same nature in the United Kingdom in November 1920.<sup>4</sup> The importance of this campaign were the actions committed by I.R.A companies who lived and worked in the areas which operations took place.<sup>5</sup> In the North East these operations were executed by the Tyneside Brigade of the IRA.<sup>6</sup> In relation to this campaign the examination of correspondence to the Chief Constable at Durham<sup>7</sup> sheds invaluable light on how the police reacted to the I.R.A. campaign from November 1920 to June 1921, the truce period, from July to December 1921, the post Anglo Irish Treaty period leading up to the Irish Civil War from January to June 1922, and the Irish Civil War from June 1922 to April 1923. The letters cover an area south of the River Tyne providing a geographical framework contributing to the interpretation of the documents as the Tyneside Brigade of the I.R.A had four companies in the Tyne and Wear areas. Overall the brigade had ten companies established in the North East between the start of 1920 and March 1921. They were: A Company Jarrow, B Company Hebburn, C Company Newcastle, D Company Wallsend, E Company Bedlington, F Company Consett, G Company Stockton-on Tees, H Company Chester-Le-Street, I Company Thornley + Wheatley Hill & J Company Sunderland.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Under observation***

Also of great significance is the correspondence which shows the North East to be under observation that went beyond reports on the I.R.A.. The role of the police against the United Kingdom I.R.A and subversive organisations, especially those based on communist ideology, was pivotal. Legislative powers put the police at the cutting edge in dealing with those groups.<sup>9</sup> This is verified as Chief Constables were ordered to send intelligence reports on extremism.<sup>10</sup> With regard to communism, although

the I.R.A.. had contacts with the Soviet Union as a means to obtain arms, such contacts amounted to little because of differences in political ideology.<sup>11</sup> The attitude of British intelligence was the opposite. Its view was that there were links between communism and the I.R.A.. These opinions were formulated by the intelligence services' right wing political bias. Such opinions could only have been solidified in the Irish Civil War period with intelligence reports on cooperation between the anti-treaty I.R.A. and communists in Britain.<sup>12</sup> These factors make the reports to Chief Constable at Durham substantial as in the national context they are a reflection of the British states concerns over revolutionary activity, which was seen as a threat to the ideas and beliefs of the existing political order.<sup>13</sup>

By December 1920,<sup>14</sup> reports on potential I.R.A. attacks in the North East were being despatched to the Chief Constable on a daily basis. At this point in time the police were using local public houses for intelligence gathering. Licensees were asked by the police to keep an eye out for strangers frequenting their establishments. They were looking for individuals, '.... who might make enquiries respecting the strength of police and various large buildings in the district.'<sup>15</sup>

Against the backdrop of these factors and prior to the commencement of the Tyneside Brigades operations on various forms of property between March and May 1921, the police were giving special attention to Dunston Power Station as it was seen as a potential I.R.A target.<sup>16</sup> These concerns led an Inspector Carruthers to stress that a particular employee of Newcastle Electric Supply Company Ltd, should not be in a place of authority at the power station as he supported Sinn Fein. However his employers had no problem with him.<sup>17</sup> In an interview with the police the respective employee denied being a Sinn Feiner and said rumours of association with that party were based on him being Irish and a Roman Catholic. He then declared his loyalty to the nation and his employer stating that, 'he knew on which side his bread was buttered.'<sup>18</sup>

### ***Security arrangements***

By February 1921 a wide range of security arrangements at sites which were seen as potential I.R.A targets were in place. These arrangements were composed of watchmen at workplaces, employers providing their own fire prevention services, and twenty four hour police cover. In respect of these arrangements the police felt they and the employers were doing everything possible to counteract a potential I.R.A. attack.<sup>19</sup> Intelligence obtained of potential I.R.A. attacks led the police to believe that Dunston Staithes had been subjected to an arson attack. Further investigation showed that an attack had not taken place but that a fire on the jetty was caused by workmen's cigarettes.<sup>20</sup> Additional security measures were put in place at Dunston Power Station with the setting up of a warning system which would alert the police in the event of an I.R.A. attack.<sup>21</sup> Subsequent security measures were bolstered when a number of soldiers from the Ninth Battalion of the Durham Light Infantry were posted to Dunston.<sup>22</sup> On March the 5<sup>th</sup> 1921 companies of the Tyneside Brigade committed incendiary attacks on a bonded warehouse in Hanover Street, an oil refinery in Forth Bank both in Newcastle. A timber yard at Tyne Dock, South Shields was also attacked. Fires were started at the latter two, the former was interrupted by the police.<sup>23</sup> There were a number of gratuities awarded concerning the incidents at Hanover Street and Forth Bank. They were made to:

P.C 37 Ratcliffe £10. 10/-<sup>24</sup>

Mrs Jane Bell £5. 5/-

Mrs Jane Ann Stocks £5. 5/\_

Harry Jackson (Sea Scout) £2. 2/-

The respective individuals all received the thanks of the Watch Committee on a personal basis. Harry Jackson was singled out for special praise by the Chief Constable who informed the Sea Scouts that Jackson's actions were of 'praiseworthy conduct.'<sup>25</sup> With regard to the attack on

the bonded stores in Hanover Street information submitted of P.C. Ratcliffe's actions were deemed to have, 'prevented a disastrous explosion and fire taking place at H.M Bonds wherein (were) stored approximately £1,000,000 in value of dutiable goods.'<sup>26</sup> It was further added that P.C. Ratcliffe 's actions were, 'worthy of praise, he acted promptly and with courage knowing as he did that Sinn Fein outrages were taking place all over the country, and that most of the perpetrators were fully armed and even did not hesitate to shoot the police when discovered.'<sup>27</sup> It would seem that the Irish community in Newcastle or of the vicinity she lived in turned on Jane Ann Stocks as the report stated, 'Mrs Stocks frequently received threatening letters for having given information to the police, her life became intolerable as she had to be escorted by the police whenever she left home to come into the city.'<sup>28</sup> The respective attack by the Tyneside Brigade led Chief Constable Scott to appeal for special constables from the public.<sup>29</sup> By April 1921 the Lord Mayor of Newcastle was also calling for voluntary special constables'.<sup>30</sup> Both these appeals demonstrate the seriousness of the threat that the Tyneside Brigade posed.

### ***Spectacular operations***

The next set of operations were of a more spectacular nature. The attacks of the 26<sup>th</sup> of March 1921 encompassed the complete geographical structure of the Tyneside Brigade as all companies were involved in incendiary attacks which were carried out on a large number of farms over a wide area of the North East.<sup>31</sup> The operations of this date showed that the Tyneside Brigade were a highly motivated and organised group. The respective assaults highlighted the depth of local knowledge the I.R.A. companies had of their areas and targets.<sup>32</sup> In terms of financial damage the operations on this date caused in excess of £100,000 worth of damage.<sup>33</sup> Further attacks took place on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April 1921. These consisted of incendiary attacks on the Gosforth aerodrome, a farm in Middlesbrough and three in Newcastle.<sup>34</sup>

There was also the destruction of telegraph lines by chain saws which disrupted communications between London and Scotland for a week.<sup>35</sup>

The overall importance of communication facilities regarding the I.R.A. operations throughout the United Kingdom was illustrated by the government's attitude. Its response was to have communication facilities around London guarded by the army.<sup>36</sup> In the North East wider security measures were implemented to try and detect I.R.A. volunteers and stop their attacks. Train stations in urban and rural areas were under police surveillance aided by railway staff. The police thought that the I.R.A. would use public transport or other forms of motorised transport to reach their operational destinations.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Wide geographical remit***

The final operations of this nature took place on the 21<sup>st</sup> of May 1921. These operations covered a wide geographical remit resulting in around thirty attacks on farms on both sides of the River Tyne. Attacks took place in Wallsend, South Shields, Hebburn, Durham, Jarrow, Blackhill, and the Derwent Valley. A number of civic installations were also attacked in this operation.<sup>38</sup> In the aftermath of these attacks the police drew up a list of I.R.A. suspects for interrogation. They had a set of guidelines to follow regarding this process.<sup>39</sup> Eleven of the police constables' notebooks contained descriptions of I.R.A. suspects.<sup>40</sup>

Another feature of the Tyneside Brigade's activities was the procurement of arms and ammunition. For the whole of 1920 the Tyneside Brigade supplied arms for Ireland via Liverpool,<sup>42</sup> the major port through which munitions were channelled. Other munitions sources for the I.R.A. were the Lancashire and Scottish coalfields. London was also important for chemicals to make explosives.

The I.R.A. companies in the United Kingdom were essential for obtaining munitions for their counterparts in Ireland as prior to the truce period there was a shortage of arms in Ireland.<sup>43</sup> Tyne ports were seen as

vital logistical points in receiving and despatching arms from Europe to Ireland via the United Kingdom network.<sup>44</sup>

One of the greatest concerns for the police in the North East was the security of explosives as there was a large supply available due to the region's coalmining industry, and other various industrial works. The security of bonded stores or magazines were of concern. At Blues Hills, Bathead, Blaydon, a magazine held five tons of black powder but no detonators. At Lingy House Farm, Heworth, two magazines contained two and seven tons of explosives respectively. Neither had detonators because the army had taken possession of them.<sup>45</sup> Various quarries had their explosives moved with only a small number of personnel knowing where they were placed.<sup>46</sup> The brick manufacturers Messer's Johns Brothers Ltd. at Pelaw had the overseeing and distribution of their gunpowder placed in the hands of the police. The same process at Phoenix Brick Works Co Ltd at Crawcrook was in operation concerning their gelignite.<sup>47</sup> Also under police observation were the magazines at Leam Farm, Usworth.<sup>48</sup> Attention was also paid to petrol storage at Marley Hall Colliery as 20,000 gallons of petrol could be stored there. At Newcastle Benzol Co., Otto Vale, Blaydon there was a much higher storage capacity where their tanks could hold 100,000 gallons.<sup>49</sup>

### ***Police security intensifies***

However during the truce period from July to December 1921 the I.R.A. in the United Kingdom carried on obtaining munitions to be sent to Ireland in the event of the cease fire breaking down.<sup>50</sup> During this period the Special Branch kept up its surveillance on the I.R.A. as they came to the conclusion that I.R.A. operations would commence if the truce broke down.<sup>51</sup> Intelligence and military services felt that armaments were being acquired in significant levels in relation to potential munitions supplies.<sup>52</sup> Police security intensified in Felling, Pelaw, Winlaton, Ryton, Chopwell, and Dunston sections of the division as all these sections had

ample amounts of explosives stored at various collieries and other works. Each of the workplaces were covered by the police on a twenty four hour basis, supplemented with employee security.<sup>53</sup> Fears of a truce breakdown did surface in the North East as the police were informed that this would happen by Mr George of Consett Iron Company Ltd. In his message to the police Mr George stated, ' I have just received a warning from London that there is likely to be trouble tonight or tomorrow night, the information appears to be good, I cannot get Derwenthaugh Staithes and want them warned. I also want Chopwell Power Station warned.'<sup>54</sup>

Superintendent Waller of Durham County Constabulary was informed of the respective message as were the police at Chopwell and Blaydon and were told, 'to give special attention to these places.'<sup>55</sup> Commenting on Mr George's fears Superintendent Dryden of Consett remarked, 'Mr George had reliable information that the negotiations between the Government and the Sinn Feiners had broken down, and it was expected by night or the following day we would be in a state of war .....'<sup>56</sup>

Resulting from these messages the police of the respective division returned to the security measures and a state of alertness that had been in place prior to the truce until further notice from the Chief Constable at Durham. Where Mr George got his information is unknown, but there is a degree of validation concerning his message to the police, as during the truce period the British Army was put on standby three times to resume war with the I.R.A. in Ireland.<sup>57</sup> The Tyneside Brigade was well prepared to recommence operations if the truce broke down. In June 1921 Richard Purcell and Gilbert Barrington the Commandant and Quartermaster of the Tyneside Brigade respectively met Cathal Brugha the Sinn Fein Minister for Defence in Dublin. At this meeting Barrington and Purcell put forward prepared plans for the destruction of Tyneside's High Level Bridge and Teesside's Transporter Bridge. These plans were approved by the Office Commander of the United Kingdom I.R.A. Rory O'Connor in the event of a cease fire breakdown.<sup>58</sup> It would seem there had been plans in January 1921 to destroy the High Level

Bridge. These plans had been halted by those above Rory O'Connor in the I.R.A. command structure.<sup>59</sup>

### ***Arrests!***

Nevertheless it was during the truce period in an operation with explosives that led to the arrest and imprisonment of Barrington and Purcell<sup>60</sup> as a Special Branch operation discovered a significant arms operation which had links from the North East to South Wales. The political fallout from this operation led Winston Churchill to accuse Michael Collins the most senior figure of the I.R.A. of using the truce as a trojan horse for I.R.A. rearmament.<sup>61</sup> The link to the North East were the explosives that were stolen from the Bebside Colliery magazine between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> of October 1921.<sup>62</sup> In all three hundred and fifty pounds of explosives were stolen in which there was one fifty pound box of samsonite and six fifty pound boxes of gelignite.<sup>63</sup> The explosives were eventually transported back to Newcastle by taxi as the explosives were picked up at the Catholic Church in Cowpen.<sup>64</sup> The taxi had been hired by Barrington in Neville Street, Newcastle. At Greys Monument, Barrington got out and another man got in. This may have been someone from "E Company", as it was this person that took the taxi to the Catholic Church in Cowpen to pick up the explosives. The taxi driver was previously given instructions by Barrington that he was to return, 'the luggage back and you will have to deliver it at 87 Hawes Street in the city.'<sup>65</sup>

When arrested Purcell was found with a notebook which showed himself and Barrington to be at an Irish Self Determination League meeting at Blyth. The significance of this meeting was that Anthony Mullarky<sup>66</sup> was one of the speaker's. Mullarky<sup>67</sup> was captain of "E Company". This meeting took place on the afternoon of the Fifteenth of October 1921 and the explosives were picked up that night.<sup>68</sup>

It is possible that the final details of the pickup of explosives from Cowpen were determined that afternoon as "E Company" was responsible



for the raid on the Bebside Colliery magazine.<sup>69</sup> In the court proceedings that followed correspondence found by the police showed that the Tyneside Brigade sent munitions through various channels to Ireland as a letter regarding the ceasefire stated, 'The truce does not affect us in any way as regards getting the stuff away. Of course all reprisals are to cease until the truce ends.'<sup>70</sup>

Other correspondence showed that various chemicals were wanted for the making of explosives especially potassium chloride. Also found was a drawing of a home-made bomb.<sup>71</sup> Also demonstrated by the prosecution was that the explosives stolen from Bebside Colliery were part of the North East to South Wales operation.<sup>72</sup> Purcell and Barrington were jailed for three years each. Prior to the passing of sentence both made speeches affirming their Irish patriotism and Ireland's right to self-determination. In passing sentence and in the light of Purcell and Barrington's speeches his Lordship, the judge, de-politicised their statements. Barrington and Purcell were convicted of felony not treason even though their actions were politically motivated. The judge stated:

'I wish to protest most strongly against the idea that you are to be punished because you are Irishmen.

Nothing of the kind. You have been convicted because you were in the unlawful possession of a large quantity of explosives, and one cannot doubt that you were in possession of them for unlawful purpose.

It is not the fact, then, that you have to suffer for this because you are Irishmen, but because you have done something which the legislature has recognised as being a danger to the entire community, namely of being unlawfully in possession of this large quantity of explosives.'<sup>73</sup>

The Bebside Colliery case saw security in the North East tighten up even further. Detonators were removed from magazines. Only colliery management knew where they were at the respective mines. The same practice was operated at quarries.<sup>74</sup> The seriousness of the situation was reflected concerning two magazines at Leam Lane which both had considerable amounts of detonators. These belonged to Messrs.

Christopher & Co, 61, Westgate Road, and Messrs. C. H. Stevenson & Co, St. Nicholas Buildings of Newcastle upon Tyne respectively.<sup>75</sup> The former was in possession of 6,000 detonators,<sup>76</sup> which were moved to a safe at their Newcastle offices under the guard of the residential caretaker.<sup>77</sup> As for the latter they were in possession of 60,000 detonators and were making provisions for them.<sup>78</sup> There were checks on various chemicals used for making explosives. The object was to see if any orders had come in from Ireland as the Cooperative Wholesale Society at Pelaw was a distribution centre for the supply of nitrate of potassium for the North East. An investigation of orders over the previous twelve months found everything in order, four days later the Anglo Irish Treaty was signed.<sup>79</sup>

The signing of the Anglo Irish Treaty did not create an Irish Republic but a state within the British Empire with Dominion status which was divided by partition creating Northern Ireland. This laid the foundation stone for the split in the I.R.A and the ensuing Irish Civil War. From the moment the treaty was signed the I.R.A was in a state of confusion. This was seen in the actions of senior I.R.A figures refusal to arrest those who signed the treaty.<sup>80</sup> By March 1922 the I.R.A army convention had voted against the treaty.<sup>81</sup> With regard to these situations the British government felt that an anti-treaty I.R.A could still overthrow the Irish Free State government and mount a campaign in the United Kingdom with anti-treaty based forces.<sup>82</sup> There was also the view within the British political, intelligence, and military establishment, and those of a pro-Irish Free State position who feared the Irish Free State provisional government was janus-faced and would declare an Irish Republic with the I.R.A when conditions were in their favour.<sup>83</sup> These views turned out to be flawed as the Irish Free State under William Cosgrove began a ruthless campaign against the anti-treaty I.R.A which was in essence martial law enacted by a civilian government.<sup>84</sup>

### ***Recruit and reorganise***

As for the anti-treaty I.R.A. in the United Kingdom it were making

significant efforts to recruit and reorganise their organisation.<sup>85</sup> These events saw the area South of the River Tyne in a state of vigilance concerning explosive magazines as anti-treaty forces had raided stores in the Lancashire coalfield.<sup>86</sup> As for colliery stores in the North East division,<sup>87</sup> security measures were bolstered. Explosives at collieries and quarries were kept to the bare minimum and were watched constantly.<sup>88</sup> The whereabouts of detonators were only known to a few people, and the police visited explosive stores habitually.

The creation of the Irish Free State initially brought about problems over cooperation between Irish and British intelligence prior to the assassination of Michael Collins. An example of this lack of cooperation can be seen concerning arms smuggling from the United Kingdom to the Irish Free State by anti-treatyites. At the request of the Irish Free State, the Royal Navy operated a stop and search policy in order to stop arms coming from Britain. The operation was a complete failure in which Michael Collins was seen as a stumbling block.<sup>89</sup> In the aftermath of his death in August 1922 and the advent of William Cosgrave's government in September of that year intelligence cooperation between the respective governments entered a new phase of openness. The Irish Free State sought the help of the British government, to defeat all republican elements outside the Irish Free State. Representatives of the respective governments met and discussed the level of anti-treatyite activity in the United Kingdom. What arose was a lack of communication between pro-treatyite agents in the United Kingdom and the police force over arms smuggling to anti-treatyites in the Irish Free State. This problem was resolved with the establishment of channels of communication. Also pro-treatyite agents in the United Kingdom could legally carry fire arms for protection.<sup>90</sup>

By November 1922 Irish Free State intelligence had informed their British counterparts that operational structures were being used by United Kingdom anti - treaty I.R.A. companies for smuggling arms to Ireland.<sup>91</sup>

The reality behind this factor is that from May 1922 arms were arriving in the United Kingdom from the United States of America courtesy of Clan Na Gael. The importance of this aspect is the opinion that the Irish Civil War would never have lasted the period it did without arms from that nation.<sup>92</sup> In the North East the division were on alert to see if an anti-treaty I.R.A. was being established.<sup>93</sup> Investigation of this matter has found no evidence of a unit existing.<sup>94</sup>

By December 1922 British intelligence felt that anti - treaty activity in the United Kingdom was expanding.<sup>95</sup> The Irish Free State also held this view.<sup>96</sup> By January 1923 the I.R.A. in the North East had been reorganised<sup>97</sup> covering the same geographical area prior to the Anglo Irish Treaty. In all the reconstituted brigade had one hundred volunteers but only a small percentage of this figure were deemed reliable for potential operations.<sup>98</sup> In February 1923 Liam Lynch the I.R.A. Chief of Staff was planning another offensive for the United Kingdom I.R.A. By March 1923 Lynch asked for all arms based abroad to be sent to Britain then to Ireland. The objective of the offensive was for the Irish Free State government to come to a settlement with the anti - treaty I.R.A. The operation collapsed as Irish Free State intelligence services were aware of the United Kingdom I.R.A. plans as were British intelligence through the interceptions of Liam Lynch's correspondence to the United Kingdom.<sup>99</sup> This resulted in a catastrophe for the United Kingdom I.R.A. command structure and the I.R.A offensive as a whole. In March 1923 110 Irish republicans were deported to the Irish Free State by the British government.<sup>100</sup> The background to this event lay with the Irish Free State watching anti-treatyites in Britain,<sup>101</sup> as they gave priority to the activities of the Irish republicans in the United Kingdom.<sup>102</sup>

### ***Arrest and deportation***

The creation of the Irish Free State was itself a legal barrier in coping with anti-treatyite activities in the United Kingdom in respect of arrest

and extradition to the Irish Free State.<sup>103</sup> On these issues a formal agreement was reached where the Irish Free State would identify anti-treatyites in the United Kingdom, the British government would arrest the identified and send them to the Irish Free State. Within the United Kingdom, Irish Free State intelligence officers were operating within the Irish community. It was their intelligence reports that led to the deportation of United Kingdom anti-treatyite I.R.A. volunteers breaking the movement of arms destined for the Irish Civil War.<sup>104</sup> The Irish Free State produced a list of 300 republicans that they wanted deporting. The British government would not agree to this figure.<sup>105</sup> The response to the arrests and deportations by Liam Lynch was a recognition that the anti-treatyite forces had been dealt a severe blow.<sup>106</sup> That blow went beyond the shores of the United Kingdom, as documents discovered during the deportation raids showed various forms of support the anti-treaty I.R.A. was receiving concerning prospective arms transactions from the United States of America and Germany. This resulted in a curtailment of arms smuggling from those nations.<sup>107</sup>

The deportations had consequences for the North East anti-treatyite I.R.A. Of the four arrests in the North East,<sup>108</sup> Anthony Mullarky and Thomas Flynn were of the highest level as the former was the Officer Commanding and the latter was the Quartermaster of the I.R.A. in the North East.<sup>109</sup> After being in Mountjoy Prison for almost two months, the Irish deportees were returned to England on the steamer *Lady Wicklow* on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 1923 arriving at Holyhead, Liverpool on the same day.<sup>110</sup> On his return home to Jarrow, Thomas Joyce felt that the medical treatment in Mountjoy Prison was not satisfactory as he was in ill health with his lungs when deported. On his return to England Joyce was detained by Special Branch and placed in the prison hospital of Brixton Jail. While in Mountjoy prison Joyce was asked if he would accept the sovereignty of the Irish Free State. This he refused and this cost him his instant release from prison.<sup>111</sup> When Anthony Mullarky arrived

at Bedlington Station he was welcomed warmly.<sup>112</sup> In his time in Mountjoy Prison he intimated that all prisoners were subjected to psychological torture with repetitive gun shots being fired in the wings of the jail. The objective of this from Mullarky's perspective was to get prisoners to swear allegiance to the Irish Free State.<sup>113</sup> The same claims were made by Thomas Flynn of South Shields in regard to gunshots. He also said that prison officers were drunk on duty in Mountjoy.<sup>114</sup>

Although the House of Lords overturned the deportations on a legal technicality, the deportees were re-arrested on their return to the United Kingdom and stood trial at the Old Bailey.<sup>115</sup> When re-arrested a note book said to belong to Mullarky was seen as a crucial piece of evidence as it gave details of an I.R.A. meeting.<sup>116</sup> When Flynn was arrested a report book was found at his home which implicated him as Quartermaster of the battalion.<sup>117</sup> On July the 4<sup>th</sup>, 1923 Mullarky and Flynn were imprisoned for twelve months respectively.<sup>118</sup> A third member of the North East I.R.A. Thomas Joyce never stood trial through ill health and it was on these grounds that legal proceedings were cancelled against him in December 1923.<sup>119</sup> Although the deportation cases severely weakened the I.R.A. in the United Kingdom, the arms routes remained intact as explosives to Dublin arrived from Britain in May 1923.<sup>120</sup> In the North East it was not till December 1923 that collieries in the division returned to storing normal levels of explosives.<sup>121</sup>

The major factor concerning the respective correspondence that has been highlighted is that an area of the North East was under constant surveillance, as daily reports were submitted about the Tyneside Brigade and its potential targets, the Irish Self Determination League, and the attitude of the Irish population in the truce period and its attitude towards the Irish Free State.<sup>122</sup> The reference to the Irish Self Determination League represents a serious gap in the North East Irish historiography. With the exception of Inoue<sup>123</sup> and to some extent Maguire<sup>124</sup> there is no detailed study of the Irish Self Determination League in the North East

pre and post treaty at local levels. The point made by Hart<sup>125</sup> that Irish nationalism of a republican nature in the United Kingdom crossed over to radical and revolutionary organisations raises a number of important issues. To what extent did trade unionism and political organisations in the North East support the, "Hands Off Ireland Movement". Were these movements in favour of Dominion or Republican status for Ireland? The attitude of the Catholic Church in the North East is of significance as there were constitutional home rule priests.<sup>126</sup> If politics is about relationships which involve authority and power, religion is a political ideology in its own right. This has been made clear by Gilley<sup>127</sup> in his critique on Catholicism. Was there a political divide among priests over the political form of self-determination for Ireland? Also of value is the role of women in the Irish Self Determination League and in Cumann na Ban.<sup>128</sup> The I.R.A. campaign in the United Kingdom from 1920 to 1923 saw the women of Cumann na Ban playing a central part in that campaign with various roles in the Irish Self Determination League.<sup>129</sup>  
<sup>130</sup> General Irish historiography in the North East is a rich seam that is virtually untapped and is waiting to be mined on a number of levels.

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<sup>1</sup> I M.A Barrington, *The Irish Independence Movement On Tyneside 1919 – 1921*, Dun Laoghaire, Co Dublin, 1999, pp.6-7, R.J Cooter, *When Paddy Met Geordie. The Irish In County Durham And Newcastle 1840 – 1880*, University of Sunderland Press, 2005, pp.143-172, K. Davies, *The Irish Community In South East Northumberland 1874*, Unpublished Thesis, Northumbria University, M.A. 2005, pp.22-33, pp.42-45, D.M. MacRaid, *Faith, Fraternity And Fighting. The*

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- <sup>2</sup> M.A. Barrington, *Irish Independence Movement*. pp.6-7 R.J. Cooter, *When Paddy Met Geordie*. pp.147-160. F. Lavery, *Irish Heroes In The War*. pp.22-62., N. Todd, *The Militant Democracy*. pp.66-69. p.79. p126. pp.128-129.

<sup>3</sup> Irish Republican Army came to be known as the I.R.A.

- <sup>4</sup> The I.R.A. In Jarrow - 1920-1923. p.3 <http://donmouth.co.uk>. This Article is of paramount importance as the author shows the existence of Branch Minutes of the Jarrow Irish Self Determination League in the post treaty period. There are also private letters in regard to the Irish War Of Independence and the role of David Fitzgerald in the North East I.R.A. Campaign and his role In the Republican Movement which the author feels has not been given the historical attention it deserves.

<sup>5</sup> J. Belchem, *Irish, Catholic And Scouse The History Of Liverpool Irish, 1800-1939*, Liverpool 2007, p.271. P.Hart, *Operations Abroad: The I.R.A. In Britain 1919-23*, English Historical Review, February 2000, p.79, K. Inoue, *Political Activity of The Irish in Britain 1919-1925*, University Of Dublin, Trinity College, Phd, 2008), p.182, P. McMahon, *British Spies And Irish Rebels British Intelligence And Ireland, 1916-1945*, Suffolk 2008, p.99, M.G.P. Maguire, *A Community At War: The Irish In Britain And The War Of Independence*, University Of Surrey, Phd, 1983, pp.741-742.

- <sup>6</sup> The I.R.A, in Jarrow, 1920 -1923, M.A. Barrington, *Irish Independence Movement*.

<sup>7</sup> Tyne And Wear Archive Service, Durham County Constabulary Copy Of Letters, Superintendent At Felling To The Chief Constable Of Durham: T148/4. 2.6.19-11.1.21. 1 Volume, T148/5. 12.1.21-19.2.22. 1 Volume, T148/6. 15.3.22-30.1.24. 1 Volume. TJ48/12. 3.J.2.20-11.9.22. J Volume.



- <sup>8</sup> The I.R.A.. In Jarrow -1920 - 1923 p 4, op cit, M.A. Barrington, p 7.
- <sup>9</sup> op cit., P. McMahon, p.100.
- <sup>10</sup> op cit., M. P. P. Maguire, p 48.
- <sup>11</sup> op cit., P. McMahon, pp.97-98. pp.119-120.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., p 120-125.
- <sup>13</sup> C. Andrew, Secret Service. *The Making Of The British Intelligence Community*, London 1985, pp.243-245, B. Porter, *Plots And Paranoia. A History Of Political Espionage In Britain 1790-1988*, London 1992), pp.151-152. Tyne nd Wear Archive Service (TWAS):T148/4. 2.6.19 - 11.1.21. Volume T148/5. 12.1.21-19.2.22. 1, Volume T148/6. 15.3.22 - 30.1.24. 1, Volume T148/12. 3.12.20-11.9.22. 1, Volume T148/13. 11.9.22-14.10.23 1, Volume: The Reports Submitted To The Chief Constable Of Durham In The Period 1920 -1923 On "Labour Unrest", "Theft Of Arms, Arson Etc", "Unemployment, Communism, etc", And Various Reports On The, "National Unemployed Workers Movement", And Individual, "Communists", Demonstrate The Depth Of Surveillance In A Local Context Which Was Then placed in a National Framework.
- <sup>14</sup> TWAS, T148/4. 5.12.20-31.12.20.
- <sup>15</sup> TWAS,148/4. 6.12.20. The Police Were Observing All Irish Nationals And Strangers In The Division As A Whole. See T148/4. 7.12.20.
- <sup>16</sup> TWAS, T148/4. 31.12.20, K. Inoue, "Political Activity", p.19.
- <sup>17</sup> TWAS, 148/4. 6.1.21.
- <sup>18</sup> TWAS, 148/4. 11.1.21.
- <sup>19</sup> TWAS,T148/5. 18.2.21.
- <sup>20</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 25.2.21 + 26.2.21.
- <sup>21</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 15.3.21.
- <sup>22</sup> TWAS, 148/5. 17.4.21 + 18.4.21.
- <sup>23</sup> The I.R.A. In Jarrow -1920 - 1923. pp.5-7, op cit., M.A.Barrington, pp.16-17., op cit., K. Inoue, p.200, op cit., M.G.P. Maguire, p.749.
- <sup>24</sup> TWAS, Watch Committee Minutes, PAINC/2/7, 12.11.20.-17.2.22.) 22.7.21.
- <sup>25</sup> TWAS, "Watch Committee Minutes", PAINC/2/7. (12.11.20.-

17.2.22.) 22.7.21.

- <sup>26</sup> TWAS, "Newcastle City Police, Personnel Files, PAINC/37/674.
- <sup>27</sup> TWAS, "Newcastle City Police, Personnel Files, PAINC/37/674.
- <sup>28</sup> TWAS, "Newcastle City Police, Personnel Files, PAINC/37/674.
- <sup>29</sup> op cit., M.G.P. Maguire, p.752.
- <sup>30</sup> *The Shields Daily News*, Page 3., column 3.7.3.21.
- <sup>31</sup> The I.R.A.. In Jarrow-1920 -1923. pp.7-9, op cit., J. Belchem, p 275, op cit., M.A. Barrington, pp. 17-18, K. Inoue, pp.200-201, op cit., P. McMahon, p.99, op cit., M.G.P. Maguire, pp.574-755.
- <sup>32</sup> op cit.,M.A. Barrington, pp.19-20, op cit.,P. Hart, "Operations Abroad", p.91
- <sup>33</sup> op cit., P.Hart, p 85.
- <sup>34</sup> op cit.,The I.R.A. In Jarrow - 1920-1923. pp.9-10, op cit., M.A. Barrington, p .18, op cit., K. Inoue, p.201.
- <sup>35</sup> op cit., M.A. Barrington, pp.19-20,op cit.,P.Hart, p.85. K.Inoue, p.201. M.G.P. Maguire, pp.751-752.
- <sup>36</sup> op cit., P. Hart, p 85.
- <sup>37</sup> TWAS. T148/5. 7.5.21
- <sup>38</sup> op cit.,The I.R.A. In Jarrow - 1920- 1923. pp.11-13, op cit.,M. A. Barrington, p .19. op cit.,K.Inoue, pp.201-202, op cit., M.G.P. Maguire, pp.754-755.
- <sup>39</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 30.5.21.
- <sup>40</sup> TWAS.TI48/5. 3.6.21.
- <sup>41</sup> op cit.,M.A. Barrington, p14, op cit., J. Belchem, p270.
- <sup>42</sup> C.D. Greaves, *Liam Mellows and The Irish Revolution*, London 2004, p.224. op cit.,P. Hart, p.75.
- <sup>43</sup> P. McMahon, "British Intelligence And The Anglo-Irish Truce July-December 1921". *Irish Historical Studies*. Vol.XXXV. No 140 November 2007.p.530.
- <sup>44</sup> op cit., K. Inoue, p198.
- <sup>45</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 27.4.21.
- <sup>46</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 27.4.21.
- <sup>47</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 27.4.21.

- <sup>48</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 27.4.21.
- <sup>49</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 27.4.21.
- <sup>50</sup> op cit., P. Hart, pp.86-88.
- <sup>51</sup> P. McMahon, "British Intelligence and the Anglo-Irish Truce July-December 1921", p.532.,P.McMahon, *British Spies And Irish Rebels*, p101.
- <sup>52</sup> op cit.,M.G.P Maguire, "A Community At War", p.759.
- <sup>53</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 14.7.21.
- <sup>54</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 14.7.21.
- <sup>55</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 14.7.21.
- <sup>56</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 14.7.21.
- <sup>57</sup> op cit.,P. McMahon, *British Spies And Irish Rebels*, p.63.
- <sup>58</sup> op cit., M.A. Barrington, p21.
- <sup>59</sup> op cit., K. Inoue, p203.
- <sup>60</sup> M.A. Barrington, p.23, K. Inoue, p204.
- <sup>61</sup> op cit., K Inoue, pp.205-206, op cit., P. McMahon,"British Intelligence..." p.533, op cit., P. McMahon, *British Spies And Irish Rebels*, pp. 101-102.
- <sup>62</sup> *The Blyth News*. 27.10.21. Page3. Column 3.
- <sup>63</sup> *The Blyth News*. 17.10.21. Page 2. Column 7.
- <sup>64</sup> *The Blyth News*. 27.10.21. Page3. Columns 1,2,3.
- <sup>65</sup> *The Blyth News*. 27.10.21. Page3. Columns 1,2,3.
- <sup>66</sup> *The Blyth News*. 17.10.21. Page3. Column 7, The Irish Self Determination League Was A Pressure Group which sought to shape Public Opinion on Irish Self Determination. It Was Also seen as a recruiting ground for I.R.A. Volunteers, See the Following: The I.R.A.. In Jarrow 1920-1923. p24. *Irish, Catholic And Scouse*. p.263. op cit., "Operations Abroad", p.75. "Political Activity", p.143, "British Intelligence And The Anglo/Irish Truce July-December 1921",p.530, "A Community At War",p.299. *British Spies And Irish Rebels*.pp.98-107.
- <sup>67</sup> op cit.,M.A. Barrington, p40.
- <sup>68</sup> *The Blyth News*. 17.10.21. Page 2. Column 6.
- <sup>69</sup> op cit., M.A. Barrington, p.23.

- <sup>70</sup> *The Blyth News*. 31.10.21. Page 3. Columns 1.2.3.
- <sup>71</sup> *The Blyth News*. 31.10.21. Page 3. Columns 1.2.3.
- <sup>72</sup> *The Blyth News*, 31.10.21. Page 3, Columns 1.2.3, *The Blyth News*. 3.11.21. Page 3. 4. Columns 1.2.3.5, *The Blyth News*. 31.11.21 Pages 5.6 Columns 1.204, *The Blyth News*. 14.11.21 Page 2. Column 6.
- <sup>73</sup> *The Blyth News*. 31.10.21. Page 3. Columns 1.2.3.
- <sup>74</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 20.10.21.
- <sup>75</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 9.11.21.
- <sup>76</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 9.11.21.
- <sup>77</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 19.11.21.
- <sup>78</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 19.11.21.
- <sup>79</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 2.12.21.
- <sup>80</sup> op cit., M.G.P. Maguire, "A Community At War", p.350.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid., M.G.P. Maguire, Ibid. p.530, op cit., P. McMahon, *British Spies And Irish Rebels*. p.64.
- <sup>82</sup> ibid. p.541.
- <sup>83</sup> P. McMahon, *British Spies And Irish Rebels*. pp.76-77.
- <sup>84</sup> ibid. p.82.
- <sup>85</sup> K. Inoue, "Political Activity", p.350
- <sup>86</sup> TWAS, T148/6. 10.6.22
- <sup>87</sup> TWAS, T148/6, 11.6.22 + 17.6.22. + 8.7.22. + 17.9.22.  
Although an explosive store was raided in the north east, there were no details of who was responsible, if any explosives were stolen, or whom the magazines Belonged to, or where the magazine was situated. See T148/6. 2.4.22.
- <sup>88</sup> TWAS, 148/6. 24.6.22.
- <sup>89</sup> P. McMahon, *British Spies And Irish Rebels*. pp.93-94.
- <sup>90</sup> ibid. p.95.
- <sup>91</sup> op cit, M.P.M. Maguire, p766.
- <sup>92</sup> Op cit., P. McMahon, pp115-116.
- <sup>93</sup> TWAS, T148/6. 11.9.22
- <sup>94</sup> TWAS, T148/6. 17.9.22 & 14.10.22
- <sup>95</sup> Op cit., M.P.M. Maguire, pp779-782, Op cit., P. McMahon, p 107.
- <sup>96</sup> K. Inoue, "Political Activity", p 355.

- <sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp 354-355.
- <sup>98</sup> Ibid., p 373.
- <sup>99</sup> Op cit., M.P.M.Maguire, pp779-782.
- <sup>100</sup> The I.R.A.. In Jarrow - 1920-1923. pp.17-18,T. Gallagher, *Glasgow: The Uneasy Peace. Religious Tension In Modern Scotland*, Manchester, 1983, pp.95-96, M. Hopkinson, *Green Against Green: The Irish Civil War*, Dublin.2004), p.255, K. Inoue, pp.355-356. pp.374-375,M.G.P. Maguire, pp.645-652, LD. Patterson, *The Impact Of The Irish Revolution On The Irish Community In Scotland*, 1916-22,M. Phil, Strathclyde University, 1992, pp.217-218.
- <sup>101</sup> E. O'Halpin, *Defending Ireland: The Irish Free State And Its Enemies Since 1922*.(Oxford.1999.),p.18.
- <sup>102</sup> Ibid.p.20
- <sup>103</sup> Ibid.pp.21-22.
- <sup>104</sup> M.G.P Maguire, "A Community At War", p.623, P.McMahon, *British Spies And Irish Rebels*.pp.107-108., op cit., J. Belchem, pp.278-279.
- <sup>105</sup> Ibid.p.624
- <sup>106</sup> M. Hopkinson, *Green Against Green*. p.255, P.McMahon, *British Spies And Irish Rebels*. p.108.
- <sup>107</sup> P. McMahon, *British Spies And Irish Rebels*. pp.116-117.
- <sup>108</sup> The I.R.A.. In Jarrow, 1920-1923. p17., J.J.King. Was the fourth deportee like Thomas Joyce who never received a prison sentence. See M.G.P. Maguire, pp.908-909. *The Shields Daily News* 12.3.23. Front Page. Columns 1.2.
- <sup>109</sup> M.G.P. Maguire, "A Community At War,"p.650.
- <sup>110</sup> *The Shields Daily News* 17.5.23. Front Page. Column 4.
- <sup>111</sup> *The Shields Daily News* 18.5.23. Front Page. Column 6. *ibid.* p.17.
- <sup>112</sup> *The Blyth News*. 22.5.23. Page 4. Column 5,*The Shields Daily News* 18.5.23. Front Page. Column 6
- <sup>113</sup> *The Shields Daily News* 18.5.23. Front Page. Column 6.
- <sup>114</sup> *The Shields Daily News* 23.5.23 Front .Page. Column 5
- <sup>115</sup> The I.R.A.. In Jarrow - 1920-1923. P 17, E. O'Halpin, *Defending Ireland*. pp.21-22
- <sup>116</sup> M.G.P. Maguire, "A Community At War", pp.651-652.

- <sup>117</sup> *The Shields Daily News* 29.6.23. Front Page. Column 5.
- <sup>118</sup> The I.R.A.. In Jarrow - 1920-1923. P 17.,E. O'Halpin, *Defending Ireland*. pp.21-22, *The Shields Daily News* 29.6.23. Front Page. Column 5,The I.R.A.. In Jarrow - 1920-1923. p.17.,M.G.P Maguire, "A Community At War", p.906.
- <sup>119</sup> Ibid. p.17.
- <sup>120</sup> op cit.,K. Inoue, pp.356-337. op cit.,M.G.P. Maguire, "A Community At War", p.784.
- <sup>121</sup> TWAS. TI48/6. 5.12.23. TWAS, TI48/4. 2.6.19-11.1.21.1 Volume, TI48/5. 12.1.21-19.2.22. 1 Volume, TI48/6. 15.3.22-30.1.24. 1 Volume, T148112. 3.12.20-11.9.22.1 Volume, T148/13. 11.9.22.-14.10.23. 1 Volume.  
123 K. Inoue, pp141-147. pp322-329.
- <sup>122</sup> TWAS, TI48/4. 2.6.19-11.1.21.1 Volume, TI48/5. 12.1.21-19.2.22. 1 Volume, TI48/6. 15.3.22-30.1.24. 1 Volume, T148112. 3.12.20-11.9.22.1 Volume, T148/13. 11.9.22.-14.10.23. 1 Volume.
- <sup>123</sup> K. Inoue, "Political Activity", pp141-147. pp322-329.
- <sup>124</sup> M.G.P. Maguire, "A Community At War", pp.188-129. pp.309-441. pp556-608. pp.660-690.
- <sup>125</sup> P. Hart. "Operations Abroad", p.102.
- <sup>126</sup> TWAS, T148/5. 19.8.21
- <sup>127</sup> S. Gilley, "The Roman Catholic Church In England 1780-1940",S. Gilley,W.J.Shields (Editors) *A History Of Religion In Britain: Practice And Belief From Pre Roman Times To The Present* (Oxford. 1994.), pp.346-350.
- <sup>129</sup> E.M. Brady, Irelands Secret Service In England. (Dublin + Cork. 1928.), p.26, M.A. Barrington, *Irish Independence Movement*. pp.19-20, David Fitzgerald, 1897-1933. p.4. <<http://www.donmouth.co.uk>, The I.R.A. In Jarrow - 1920-1923. p4, T. Gallagher, Glasgow: The Uneasy Peace. pp.91-94.,K. Inoue, p.332, LD.Patterson, "The Impact Of The Irish Revolution", p.159.pp.165-166.
- <sup>129</sup> David Fitzgerald, 1897-1933.p.2 p.4,K. Inoue, p.322, P.O'Leary, *Immigration And Integration: The Irish In Wales, 1798-1922*, Cardiff 2000, p.285.

## **Arms and the Women: Women and the War Industries on Tyneside 1914-1918.**

*Maureen Callcott*

*The First World War, 'The Great War', was war on a greater scale than previously experienced in modern European society. The total upheaval which several European societies experienced, with social revolutions and the collapse of dynasties and empires was not the British experience, but nevertheless, few families remained unaffected by the four years of war. On Tyneside, as elsewhere, major changes came about in the lives of many working women. The recruitment poster (GO) showing a well-dressed mother and her children waving the man off to war illustrates a stereotype which had gained increasing currency during the Victorian period. Men and women were seen as occupying separate spheres in life. The ideal for women was a husband and home for which a man's wage would provide. As well as Victorian role-definers portraying women as 'angels of the hearth' this was also the aim of trade unions. Very few women employed outside the home were covered by trade unions in 1914 and the unions fought for a family wage for men. The poor health and*

*general quality of volunteers for the Boer War at the beginning of the century had re-enforced the felt need for women to be nourishing their families. When war was declared women were expected to encourage their menfolk to support the enlistment drive and volunteer to join the armed services.*

The early victory promised to the British volunteers – there was no conscription at the outset – did not materialise and opposing armies became mired in their trenches along the Western Front for most of four years. Battles, which usually only succeeded in gaining a few yards of ground, were enormously costly in lives and equipment. One consequence was an ever-accelerating demand for men and munitions. Tyneside had been a major producer of weapons and war ships for more than half a century and its factories and ship yards were expanded to increase production. To work in munitions production, more and more women were recruited, until by the end of the war in 1918 they numbered more than 90% of munitions workers. In May, 1915, after early losses and complaints from the front about shortages of everything, Lloyd George, Chancellor of the Exchequer in Asquith's Liberal government, was placed in charge of the newly created Ministry of Munitions. He instituted a powerful drive to recruit women workers into jobs left by the men who had hitherto worked there, to answer the need for ever more arms. By the end of the war over two million women, most of whom had never previously had industrial experience, were working in war industries.

### ***Women at work before 1914***

What has often been overlooked, however, when acknowledging the dramatic impact of the war on the employment of women in its industries and in many previously male work places, is the fact that women had always sought employment beyond their homes when necessity drove, as it so often did. What did dramatically change was the nature and payment for the work becoming available. According to *Ward's Local Directory of Newcastle upon Tyne for 1914*, at the beginning of the war women were





Women of Britain say Go

listed in only 10% of the 500 categories of employment listed. In the North East as a whole, where heavy industry predominated, official figures show a lower than average rate of 27% of women employed outside the home. The majority of these women were unmarried but even many married women sought and found paid work. This was typically in fairly low-paid, low-skilled casual work such as cleaning, taking in washing, sewing, shop-keeping. Some, probably far more than we can know, were driven to prostitution. On Tyneside, as elsewhere, there were also factory jobs, low-skilled and low-paid. However, for 45% of women workers, mostly single women, domestic service with very long hours and low rates of pay, often residential and allowing little freedom, was the largest single employer. How women felt about this kind of work is clear from the choices made when better paid and more interesting opportunities became available. A cautionary note was sounded by Anne Tracey, a Factory Inspector, who noted in 1913, 'Sometimes one feels that one dare not contemplate too closely the life of our working women, it is such a grave reproach.'<sup>1</sup> The average industrial wage for women in 1914 was 11s.7d per week which was between one third to one half of men's industrial wage. While it is not feasible to compare prices here *Round About a Pound a Week*, a study by Maud Pember Reeves for the Fabian Society, examined the difficulties of managing even a small household on such a small sum.<sup>2</sup>

The outbreak of war did not result in immediate change, although on Tyneside Armstrong-Whitworth's had lost 2,000 men as early as autumn 1914 and had begun to recruit women, as did the Wallsend Slipway and Engineering Company. A letter to the Wallsend company from the Ministry of Munitions suggested training women in a range of tasks traditionally carried out by men. The first response was that this was not necessary, but within two months women were indeed being trained for such tasks as shaping and slotting, milling, drilling and turning. Subsequently the demand for women to work in munitions accelerated in Tyneside. The demand for women to work in munitions subsequently accelerated in Tyneside.

### ***Tyneside Women in Munitions***

Although women were never conscripted to work for the war effort in the First World War, in 1915 a Voluntary Registration Scheme for women was devised. Their recruitment threw up all kinds of issues. Trickiest of all, concerned the level at which they should be paid. The rates for all the different processes involved in production had been negotiated by male unions and employers before the war, with different rates agreed for piecework, fully time-served skilled jobs, semi-skilled jobs, apprenticeships etc. Because women replaced men in all these categories but were regarded as temporary, for the duration of the war only numerous regulations regarding their status in the munitions factories were promulgated. Indeed, one trade unionist on a deputation to the Ministry of Munitions in June 1917 stated that it would take a good lawyer to work out the meaning of all the regulations and that he and his colleagues could certainly not understand them.<sup>3</sup> Although they earned much more than in previous occupations, only infrequently did women gain the wages previously earned by men. The regulations contained a clause which could be used to women's disadvantage. 'A woman shall be considered as not employed on the work customarily done by fully skilled tradesmen, but a part only thereof, if she does not do the customary setting up or, where there is no setting up, if she requires skilled supervision to a degree beyond that customarily required by fully skilled tradesmen undertaking the work in question.'<sup>4</sup> Naturally enough, the trade unions insisted that the established rates for time-served men were only to be paid for equally rated work and this clause could be used to keep women in a sort of learning situation. How to agree the status of piecework and apprentices' replacements was a national issue which had to be sorted out in individual work places.

The Ministry of Munitions set standards, only enforceable in specially created government factories with oversight in workshops where work under the control of the Ministry was being carried out. 'Dilution agreements' and 'arrangements' denoted the means of re-defining jobs for

women. This is illustrated by negotiations at Elswick on the Scotswood Road with the Joint Committee on Dilution<sup>5</sup>. For example, on 21 February 1916 under the heading 'LATHES', Mr Marjoribanks asked whether it was agreed that the term 'semi-skilled men' included women on machines doing repetitive work or 'whether it is a question to be discussed when the Chairman is present'. It was agreed at Elswick that the matter could be dealt with without the Chairman. The following were some of the points discussed. Was a woman on day rate to be rated the same as a Turner or was there to be a probationary period from the very commencement? It was agreed that 'if a women or a semi-skilled man was put onto a lathe previously worked by a Turner it was a case of Dilution'<sup>6</sup>. A Minute (18) of 14 March discussed the probationary period for women and a further Minute (22) noted the women introduced into the mine-making shops and describing the work said it should have been treated as 'Dilution'. A further Minute (24) stated that although women should obtain the same time-rate and piece-work when replacing semi-skilled men, this was not happening. Women were complaining about piece-work prices in 28 Shop and were advised to consult their Lady Supervisor about any supposed short payment. Minute 43 raised the case of a woman employed as a machine inspector but Marjoribanks said this was not Dilution as it was a Staff appointment. But in the case of a woman in 39 Shop where a woman was using a micrometer, this was said to be skilled men's work and therefore should be subject to Dilution.<sup>7</sup> These sorts of disputes continued throughout the war over individual cases as well as over general categories of work but nonetheless women, even when carrying out 'women's work', were, for the duration of the war, being far better paid for it.

More subtle than the issue of wage rates was that of class. The historian Deborah Thom in *Nice Girls and Rude Girls: Women Workers in WWI* highlights the dominance of class attitudes.<sup>8</sup> Some were concerned that respectable women were working in munitions factories at all. There seemed to be something not quite respectable about women wearing



Armstrongs Scotswood

trousers – termed ‘womenalls’ in the United States – and working alongside men (remember the Edwardian women’s highly elaborate clothes worn even in suffragette demonstrations before the war). The comments of Ruth Dodds, who described her fellow shift-workers in her diaries, illustrate this. She came from a comfortable middle-class family in Gateshead, related to the important Tyneside families of Joseph Swan and the Mawsons. Ruth, well-educated, highly articulate and observant, kept a diary for most of her life. She and her younger sister, Sylvia, both in their twenties, volunteered to work on the night shift at Armstrong’s factory on the Scotswood Road, their first paid employment. Ruth was intrigued by the whole experience - the atmosphere, the other women, the travelling to and fro, but the unavoidable tone of class-consciousness is evident throughout her comments.<sup>9</sup> An early diary entry for 13 October 1915 illustrates this. ‘... working - training - on the indexing machine for time fuses learning from nice little girl called Annie Peacock – she says it is terribly hard on night shift; the girls take it alternate weeks, the hours are 7.00 pm to 7.00 am – 12 hours and the rushing of the machinery never stops and on the day shift similarly they hardly see daylight. Yet they don’t seem to think their lives hard: they are full of talk and fun, and all sorts of silly schoolgirlish jokes

run up and down the shops ... I was told there were 2,000 girls in shop 40 ... Annie said that before the war there were 250 girls at Armstrong's, and now there are 8,000' (a number that continued to increase). Ruth also told of a 'rather nice story about a very proper lady, (Mrs Watts), who was much horrified on being told on arrival that she was to spend the evening 'ragging with the foreman'. She observed how 'some Gosforth women did not even take their wages'<sup>10</sup> The implication being that from this middle-class suburb they didn't need them.

It is clear that issues of class were linked to those of morality, and Lady Supervisors and Lady Factory Inspectors, usually from the middle and upper classes, were appointed mainly to support the women workers by upholding (or controlling) their morality than dealing with practical concerns such as the provision of toilets and canteens where at first there was a serious shortage. Of course, many of the women much enjoyed working, and playing, with their male colleagues and found 'sweethearts' and even husbands. A sad story was told by Mrs Mary Maughan (Beamish Resources Centre); 'There was a machiner, such a nice boy, we got to go out together, it was very nice, and then they called him up in the last year of the war and they were all wiped out, so that was the end of that'.<sup>11</sup>

### ***The Experience of Munitions Work***

All accounts describe work that was tiring because of the required 12 hour shift. The work was not only dirty and dangerous it often had to be carried out in alarming conditions. Soon after Ruth Dodds and her sister had begun their work, for example, they had to spend four hours in the dark during an air raid after the long shift had finished.



Sylvia, Hope and Ruth Dodds,  
Spring 1917

At first the experience must have been more difficult for the women than for the remaining men, for it took time to become accustomed to such unfamiliar conditions without lengthy training and the experience of local and family tradition and expectation. However, most of the new women workers proved very resilient and found camaraderie by talking and joking and sharing their experiences. It was also very heartening to receive a good wage, or, in the case of the Dodds sisters, a wage at all. Ruth wrote on the 6th November, '... very exciting to get paid. I got 11s.2d and Sylvie 11s.9d – I suppose because I was ragging (finishing the metal edges of the shelves) one night and I don't think one gets quite so much for that'. And the following month, 'I hold my head much higher now I know I am worth something'.

While Ruth Dodds' diary account provides her immediate reaction to munitions work, examples from the collection of memories in Beamish Museum's illustrate the way it was recalled and passed on to family members. For instance, the experience of Gladys Craig, 16 when the war broke out, highlights the contrast between work and wages available pre-war and during the war. 'At 14, the minute I left school I went into service at a lady's home to mind the baby. I hated it. I got 2s.6d per week and an afternoon off once a fortnight ... then an ice-cream parlour – my mother baked pies etc for 5 different baker's shops. Her bread and pies were famous but they took the credit for them ... I was tempted to go to work in the (munitions) factory when all my friends were working there and the wages were fantastic with time off as well ... ammunition factory and I made plenty of money ... making shells. I used to turn 100 a night. You were on a bonus if you could do that many. It was hard work and as you turned the steel off the shell it used to jump off in bits and I can tell you my body is tattooed with scars from doing that. I saw my mother alright for money but I used to love nice clothes. People always thought I was well-to-do... after the war they couldn't get people to go back into service ...'<sup>12</sup>

Also looking back, G Brown wrote about his mother who had worked at the Newburn Industrial Estate, filling artillery shells with explosives. The Industrial Estate there was known locally as Canary Island because everyone who worked there developed a yellow tinge to their skin due to constant contact with the explosives.<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Harm from Whickham described working 60 hours a week at Armstrong Vickers, making shells and bombs. 'I was so tired days off that all I could do was rest in bed'. Mrs McArdle's mother recalls the heat when stamping shells. She was presented to the visiting Queen Mary who 'looked as though she was going to faint.' She related how the factory 'boss' failed to persuade the girls to change into new uniforms 'to meet Her Majesty ... none of them would wear them ... she should see them as they were every day.' Margaret Parker was only there two nights, 'when I bent down and got my hair caught in a machine, and all pulled out ... they sent us home, a bitter cold February morning and I had to walk home ... I'd taken my hat off too soon, I was supposed to wear it, so I didn't get compensation or anything.'<sup>14</sup>

It wasn't long before Ruth began to worry about what she was doing. Perhaps some others felt similarly. On October 14 the 1915 she wrote, 'I hate war and I hate killing and yet I am right to make munitions. I thought once that I could not but since then I have changed my mind ... and the need is much greater and our men write saying every shell helps to save their lives ... I cannot stop the war by holding back but I and my like may shorten this war by working. And I cannot escape blood-guiltiness by sitting at home idle.'<sup>15</sup>

### ***The Munitionettes – The Women's Football Teams***

Shortage of young men and the continuous background of anxiety and dreaded news of loss of dear friends and family members led to close friendships with workmates. Unsurprisingly social life flourished amongst the girls and women crowded together for the first time and enjoying



greater freedoms from domestic controls and restrictions. Dancing was the favourite activity, but also hundreds of women joined one of the football teams which organised themselves into leagues. This was a national phenomenon and Tyneside was no exception with records of women's football going back to the 1890s.<sup>16</sup> New teams were assembled at major work places, support was substantial and leagues were organised. The matches were well-covered in the local press, though editors struggled with what to call the teams, examples being 'Female Munitions Workers', 'Munitions Girls', 'Fair Footballers' and latterly 'Munionettes'. Local teams went from strength to strength: the first champions were Blyth Spartans Munitions Girls with star player Bella Reay. They took the Alfred Wood Munitions Girls Cup, 'munitions' being interpreted widely including women from mills, trams, railways and shops. Matches usually raised money for charities, for example, the Wallsend Slipway Company played NE Marines to support the Queen Mary Needlework Guild. There is a great story here with a sorry ending. In 1921 the Football Association arbitrarily banned women's teams from all FA grounds. The ban lasted for fifty years.

### ***Conclusions***

The end of serious women's football was not the only post-war set-back for women in society after 1918. The impact of war upon social change is difficult to assess. The evidence can be contradictory and inconclusive and depends upon who you were and also upon short and long-term considerations. The most important impact of the First World War on British women in all sections of society had to do with the fate of the men serving on the front line. For every one of the some 600,000 men killed, and every one of the nearly 2 million men injured or gassed and permanently traumatised, there were women whose lives were damaged in many different ways. Millions of women, mothers, wives, grandmothers, daughters, sisters, fiancées saw the rest of their lives permanently scarred.

Vera Brittain wrote in her diary as people thronged onto the streets to celebrate the Armistice, 'but they are still dead'<sup>17</sup>. She had lost her fiancé Roland, her brother and two other close friends. Many women suffered similarly.

Although at the time women's contribution to the war effort was undoubtedly acknowledged and even celebrated, one of the many legacies of the war for women was the need for many to become the family bread winner. But this became very difficult. For example in July 1919, at the Victory Meeting of the North East Coast Institution of Engineers and Shipbuilders, Lady Parsons, an Honorary Fellow, read a paper on the subject of women's work in those industries. She spoke of how early attempts by women to unionise were opposed by men argued who that 'to organise was to recognise those outrageous women who turn at the lathe and file at the vice' ... and of (a chain maker), 'complaining that when he himself is exhausted with labour, his daughter can till go on'. She gave detailed descriptions of the tasks and skills learnt and practised by women during the war and the benefits they gained from the short intensive training in the technical schools set up by the Ministry of Munitions and in private firms. 'Great hopes' she said, 'were entertained by many women that a new profession was open to them, where they could gain good wages and where they would have some scope for their skill and intelligence. But with the signing of the Armistice all such pleasant hopes were destroyed, the training schools were closed to women, the trade unions reminded employers of the Government's pledge to restore trade union rules, and within a few weeks the demobilisation of women was general'. As she pointed out, the agreements of February 1916 dealing with women's working conditions had been made without the presence of women and in no time most of the 90% of women in the munitions industries were out of work, allowed no place in the industries of peace.<sup>18</sup> The work women could find after the war was much more poorly paid and although a new statute of 1918 introduced equal pay for women

in the civil service and local government jobs it required resignation of women on marriage. An economic and industrial depression followed, and much unemployment for both men and women. There was no attempt to fulfil the election promise to build 'homes fit for heroes'.

After lengthy campaigns going back well into the previous century women were given the vote in 1918, though only to women over 30. Whether or not this was reward for war service is debatable. There is evidence that the Liberal Prime Minister, Asquith, was on the point of introducing women's suffrage in 1914 but even in 1918 equality of franchise had to wait another ten years and women from the age of 21 at last voted equally with men in the general election of 1929.

However, by 1939, the eve of the Second World War, it is possible to observe that some improvements had taken place in women's lives in the 20 years of peace. To what extent the ongoing social changes were the consequences of wartime experience rather than economic and industrial developments is questionable. To some extent women had liberated themselves in the fashion world. They had cut their hair and shortened their hems and with the cinemas, the dance halls and the influence of the jazz age there appeared to be more fun and freedom available by the late 1920s and 30s. Contraception was becoming more readily available as with the campaigns of Marie Stopes, the birth-control campaigner, clinics began to spread; there was a handful of women MPs (almost all of them unmarried), more and different jobs became available in the consumer industries, and in shops and offices. For the majority of families with a wage-earner, more homes were becoming equipped with labour-saving devices like vacuum cleaners and washing-machines. There were more home-owners with cheap loans in the 1930s (think of the suburbs of Newcastle and the coast). Nevertheless, Tyneside remained heavily dependent on its dominant pre-war heavy industries which were depressed and the proportion of women employed fell to a pre-war figure of c. 20% of all occupied persons, compared with the national figure of 30 %.

When war began again in 1939, a conflict justifiably described as total war, this time women were recruited and conscripted not only into the factories but into the armed services from the outset. It was well remembered that they were capable of responding to all the demands made upon them.

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- <sup>1</sup> B L Hutchins, *Women in Modern Industry, Studies in British Labour History*, 1915, (ed.1978), p.188.
  - <sup>2</sup> Maud Pember Reeves, *Round about a Pound a Week*, 1913, G Bell and Sons, a classic account of working lives before the First World War. Recently re-issued by Virago.
  - <sup>3</sup> Arthur Marwick, *Women at War, 1914-1918*, Fontana, p. 56
  - <sup>4</sup> Ibid, quoted from Ministry of Munitions: Summary Memorandum, June 1918, PRO. MUN. 5/349 .
  - <sup>5</sup> *Tyne Wear Archives (TWAS) Joint Committee* on Dilution established 21 February 1916.
  - <sup>6</sup> Ibid, Notes of meeting. Minutes 22 -54, 14 March 1916
  - <sup>7</sup> *Minute* 54(c) .
  - <sup>8</sup> Deborah Thom, *Nice Girls and Rude Girls; Women Workers in WWI* Tauris, 1998.
  - <sup>9</sup> Ruth Dodds, *A Pilgrimage of Grace, The Diaries of Ruth Dodds 1905-1974*, ed. Maureen Callcott,1995,further refs as Diaries.
  - <sup>10</sup> Ibid pp.58-9
  - <sup>11</sup> Beamish Resources Centre (BRC)) interview in 2005 by Jo Bath. BRC sources are taken from Gillian Mabbitt, 'Wha did ye de in the Waa, Hinney?' *Working Class Women's Work on Tyneside, 1900-1925*. M.Litt. thesis, Newcastle 2006.
  - <sup>12</sup> ibid
  - <sup>13</sup> At Gretna there were 8,000 women from all over Britain housed in hostels doing similar work. Two women Medical Officers from Edinburgh, Agnes Livingstone-Fairmont and Barbara Martin-Cunningham, wrote a full account of the effect of TNT on women workers for the Lancet, 12 August 1916.

- <sup>14</sup> BRC op.cit.
- <sup>15</sup> *Diaries*, pp62 and 69. By the end of the war Ruth had become seriously politicised and joined the Independent Labour Party many of whose members had been conscientious objectors. She also began to attend the Quakers, The Religious Society of Friends, much associated with pacifism. She became a Labour Councillor in Gateshead and was forced to leave the Council when she opposed Britain's entry into the Second World War.
- <sup>16</sup> Football on Tyneside, 1914-1919, TWA , summary of local sources and short account with illustrations, 16/10/08
- <sup>17</sup> *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain, 1936 pp. 460-463.
- <sup>18</sup> North-East Coast Institution of Engineers and Shipbuilders, *Transactions*, vol. xxxv, 35<sup>th</sup> session, 1918-1919, TWA, F8107.

We have copies of: Ruth Dodds, *A Pilgrimage of Grace, The Diaries of Ruth Dodds 1905-1974*, ed. Maureen Callcott.  
Order from nelh@blueyonder.co.uk (price £3.00+p&xp

## **The reign of terror – Solomon Hodgson, the Newcastle Chronicle and the events of 1794**

*Peter Livsey*

*In the churchyard of St. John's, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, one of the few remaining memorials is a large table tomb. On it is a crumbling inscription, "Sacred to the memory of Solomon Hodgson. In times of unexampled difficulty, the honest and independent conductor of the Newcastle Chronicle. As he would not stoop to court the smile of any man, so neither did he fear any man's frown; but, through the medium of an uncorrupted press, delighted in disseminating the principles of rational liberty and eternal truth." Never were those principles more sternly tested than by the dramatic events, abroad and at home, of 1794.*

Solomon Hodgson was born in Westmoreland in 1760. In 1785 he was married, at St. John's, Newcastle, to Sarah, the daughter of Thomas Slack, shortly after her father's death, and became the owner of his newspaper, printing, bookselling, stationery and patent medicine

business. These were housed in a large building between the Groat Market and Union Street (now the upper part of Cloth Market). He clearly had an enquiring mind. He was a founder member of the Literary and Philosophical Society. He published reports on agriculture, a treatise on the plough and one of the first books in Arabic in the provinces. He once sat down with Thomas Bewick and worked out how many times the woodcut the latter had made for the paper's Newcastle column had been used. In July 1794 his scientific interest was clearly aroused by reports from the front that "French officers had been seen hovering, by means of air balloons," and by October 18th he could give his readers the specification of the French army's "new aerostatic invention."

He is perhaps best known for printing Bewick's *Quadrupeds*. He had a third share in it, which Bewick later claimed he did not earn because of his "dissipated life." After his death his widow, Sarah, took the opposite view and conducted a prolonged dispute with the engraver. Bewick admitted in his *Memoir* that he himself had enjoyed the company of Solomon and three Newcastle medical men, all of "charitable, humane and noble dispositions," but too fond of "the Bottle". The two seem to have remained friends and Bewick provided the woodcuts for Solomon's own book *The Hive of Ancient and Modern Literature*, a collection of improving stories for schoolboys, many with a humanitarian, and some with an anti-war theme.<sup>1</sup>

Solomon Hodgson's real interest was his newspaper. On January 2<sup>nd</sup> 1794 the paper carried an announcement of the disposal of the bookselling and stationery side of the business to his brother-in-law. After his death Sarah reintegrated the businesses as soon as she could. He continued to manage the Patent Medicine Warehouse and full lists of the medicines available appeared in his newspaper.

For national and international news all provincial papers had to make extensive use of material from London. However, the Newcastle papers did so selectively and a strong editorial line on national and local

matters gave them distinct political stances. The *Chronicle's* had been set by Thomas Slack in opposition to the American War and in support of political reform in the early 1780s. In the same period *The Newcastle Courant* attacked the Opposition and the reformers. In 1794 it supported Pitt's government and the war. A third paper, *The Newcastle Advertiser*, had appeared in 1788 and, although supporting the Pitt government, was more moderate in tone than the *Courant*. Solomon Hodgson supported Charles James Fox's Whig opposition group in Parliament, and denounced the views of the London "hireling papers" that supported the Pitt government. Many, including *The Times*, were indeed taking Treasury allowances, although their politics were also those of their editors and what they believed their readership wanted.<sup>2</sup>

The *Chronicle's* circulation is hard to estimate, but may have reached 3000 - the next nearest newspaper centres were York and Whitehaven. Readers would be mainly male and middle class, purchasing a copy individually or sharing one in a coffee house. However, one young Newcastle woman writer has one of her characters say, "... but certainly every lady should be so far versed in the affairs of Europe as to understand the contents of a newspaper."<sup>3</sup> A radical joiner wrote, "A good number have formed themselves into societies, and meet weekly admitting none but known friends, and have assumed no name, but that of Newspaper Company," where presumably newspapers were shared or read out.<sup>4</sup> The *Chronicle* itself denounced as insulting (April 5<sup>th</sup> 1794) the claim by the "hireling papers" that one benefit of an increase in paper duty would be to confine information "to the higher orders."

### ***Reporting the Revolution***

1794 saw the climax of the phase of the French Revolution that became known as the "Reign of Terror," conducted by committees of the Convention, with measures discussed beforehand in the Jacobin Club. The *Chronicle* had to tread a line between appearing to condone atrocities



and letting them define not only the Revolution but the reform movement everywhere. On January 11<sup>th</sup> the *Chronicle* insisted that the “equality” of which British reformers spoke meant impartiality in the administration of justice – not the other “chimeras” attributed by their enemies.

The *Courant*, in its free supplement of March 29<sup>th</sup>, appealing to the poor to support their betters, reminded them that, “the dreadful guillotine” was killing more in a day than the old French government had done in years. On January 4<sup>th</sup> the *Chronicle* insisted that religion was tolerated in France, and on the 18<sup>th</sup> readers were reminded that the French were their fellow men, not “regicides, anarchists, butchers, sans culottes.” They should not cast the first stone at the “wicked” French since Britain was allied with the plunderers of Poland and still conducted the Slave Trade. A “career open to talent” was one of the achievements of the years since 1789 and on January 25<sup>th</sup> the *Chronicle* claimed that the French generals sent against the allies’ best princely and aristocratic commanders included a horse-dealer, a haberdasher, a stationer and a groom. More insultingly, every one of these “low fellows” had succeeded in his mission.

On March 1<sup>st</sup> the *Chronicle* noted the French abolition of slavery. But on March 8<sup>th</sup> it gave examples of French tyranny – the destruction of Lyon, by the Convention’s own account, and the guillotining of people merely for the sentiments they expressed – all with the usual justification of tyrants – “Necessity.”

Although he ignored the alleged expulsion from their home of orphans and nuns in St. Omer, reported by the *Courant* and *Advertiser* on May 17<sup>th</sup>, Solomon Hodgson would not defend other actions of the French government. On May 24<sup>th</sup> the *Chronicle* expressed sincere sorrow at the execution of Mme Elisabeth, sister of the late King. On May 31<sup>st</sup> it denounced Robespierre as “that pious murderer” and asked why, if August 10<sup>th</sup> and January 23<sup>rd</sup> were to be new religious festivals, why not also have 2<sup>nd</sup> September, date of the massacres for which he shared responsibility. “The conduct of this French statesman is similar to that of statesmen in

most countries – they insult that God they pretend to adore.” On July 28<sup>th</sup> he denounced the “detestable decree” to give no quarter to British and Hanoverian soldiers, although by August 9<sup>th</sup> he claimed (correctly) that it was not being carried out.

The state of war and the distance involved often made it difficult to follow events in Paris. As late as August 9<sup>th</sup> the *Chronicle* understood that, despite wild rumours, Robespierre’s power was unshaken. In fact he had been overthrown on July 28<sup>th</sup> and guillotined on the 29<sup>th</sup>. By August 23<sup>rd</sup> the Newcastle papers were drawing different conclusions from these events. The *Courant* exulted in the fall of “that execrable villain Robespierre ...the events also demonstrate the wisdom of our government in not treating with such ephemeral usurpers of supreme authority, as anything that may possibly be obtained from the Cut-throat of one hour, might be refused by the Cut-throat of another.” The *Chronicle* insisted that the fall of the dictator showed the strength of revolutionary principles and continued its advocacy of negotiation.

By October 4<sup>th</sup> the *Chronicle* was reporting that justice in the Revolutionary Tribunal was now tempered with mercy, punishing actions rather than words. On November 15<sup>th</sup> it reported that, as it had predicted, the Convention had closed the Jacobin Club. Yet on December 13<sup>th</sup>, as the new French government sought to distance itself from its more extreme former colleagues and the events of the Terror, the *Chronicle* reported emerging details of the mass drownings at Nantes earlier in the year during the civil war in western France. In fact, an attempt was being made to return to constitutional government, but it would have limited effect in the middle of an all out war.

### ***Reporting the War***

In 1794, the war of Britain and its continental allies against the French Republic was the biggest single item of news. Solomon Hodgson sought to condemn the war without appearing unpatriotic.

At the beginning of the year details were still emerging of the Republicans' recapture of Toulon, which the allies had occupied at the invitation of the French royalists. On January 11<sup>th</sup> the *Chronicle* acknowledged "we have been baffled in our efforts," and by the 25<sup>th</sup> it was pointing out that fewer French warships had been burned by the retreating forces than the government had claimed. It asked

(January 11<sup>th</sup>) whether the object of the war was to restore the Bourbons. On the other hand the *Courant* stated firmly (February 22<sup>nd</sup>), "The real ground of the war is to repel invasion – to resist oppression – to defend the laws, the liberty, the religion, the hearths, the fields of Britain."

On February 1<sup>st</sup> the *Chronicle* took Charles Brandling, the Newcastle MP, to task for claiming that the government was providing protection for shipping from Shields. Navy ships came only to press merchant seamen into service. Some merchant ships were able to go with them when they left, but 80% sailed unprotected. On the 15<sup>th</sup> it quoted complaints from merchants whose ships were delayed at Lisbon and Leghorn for want of convoy, adding, "It appears to be a kind of half-treason to dispute the word of an MP, and therefore we warn them to be cautious what they say on the subject." On April 5<sup>th</sup> it complained of "...a great deficiency of zeal and attention somewhere" in the navy in letting French frigates operate.

The *Chronicle* also emphasised the human cost of the war. On January 4<sup>th</sup> it had an anecdote of an African Prince who built palaces of human skulls to show his prestige and asked, "How many could we build now?" On February 22<sup>nd</sup> it published the anti-war satire *Things by their Right Names from Evenings at Home* by Mrs. Barbauld. Then, on

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NEWCASTLE,  
SATURDAY, — JULY 5.



THE melancholy intelligence contained in this paper, respecting the situation of our armies in Flanders, must to every man, whatever his political sentiments may be, convey the most gloomy picture that every true friend to his country ever beheld.—The feelings of a Briton revolt at the horrible situation into

which we have been drawn.—After paying a band of hireling ruffians (or Prussians) who have not dared to face our enemy, we see our brave fellow-countrymen left defenceless amidst surrounding armies flushed with conquest, and heated with the fire of revenge. On the bravery of the British troops we may place every dependence, but in the present dependent aspect of affairs we have much more to fear than to hope. If any thing at present can induce Ministers to think of bringing about a peace, we now most sincerely hope they will not delay the negotiation.

Bad news from Flanders

June 7<sup>th</sup>, as the cordon of allied armies ground slowly forward on France's northern frontier, it gave the figure of 60,000 dead in a month - "and no nearer Paris!" By June 21<sup>st</sup> a grim small item claimed that hair from the battlefields, from which wigs were made, was selling cheaply.

On April 5<sup>th</sup> a correspondent known only as "The Old Whig" denounced the unreliability of Britain's allies and the government's call for volunteers and subscriptions - "A ruinous war - the war of a party, not the people." On June 14<sup>th</sup> the *Chronicle* humorously commented that 60,000 Prussians had gone missing with 9 months British pay in their pockets, and hoped they had not wandered off to Poland. This accurately reflected the inaction of the Prussian forces on the Rhine, suspicious of the Empress of Russia's intentions towards what was left of Poland, where a desperate uprising was taking place.

On May 10<sup>th</sup> the *Chronicle* reported that in Flanders, "Our worthy allies, the Austrians, have suffered most severely." The editor felt the need to add that he was sorry to announce a reverse, "but we are governed by the strictest impartiality, and shall ever discharge our duty to the public by laying before them the earliest intelligence, be it successful or otherwise." In the same issue the *Chronicle* printed a congratulatory letter from the "Friends of Peace and Reform" to Earl Stanhope, who was urging peace with the Republic in Parliament. The following Saturday (17<sup>th</sup> May) the *Courant* launched an unusually sarcastic and direct attack, its questions "suggested by several Friends of consequence in this town who have never heard of any such Society; and surely, had the meeting been so numerically attended as represented, some of the respectable inhabitants must have been informed of this great and memorable event, which conveys a stigma upon the loyal inhabitants of this town, consisting of ninety-nine out of every hundred."

On June 14<sup>th</sup> the Newcastle papers had the *London Gazette's* news of the naval victory on the ("Glorious") 1<sup>st</sup>. The *Chronicle* pointed out that the French fought better than under their old despotic government and that

our own loss was “not trifling.” However, the first item in the Newcastle column started with bells being rung for “the agreeable intelligence” noting that, “The utmost joy was pictured in every countenance.” (In London, joy was not the only emotion - Lord Stanhope’s windows were broken because he had not immediately illuminated them, as were those of the imprisoned radical Thomas Hardy, even though his pregnant wife had done so.)<sup>3</sup>

On the June 21<sup>st</sup> the *Chronicle* acknowledged a great victory. However, it questioned how it promoted the professed objects of the war, and expressed the hope that a change of government and peace would follow, as in 1782 after Admiral Rodney’s victory off the Saints. It quoted Fox as saying that Britain was now safe from invasion, and his supporters in the Lords that the sea was our proper element and that we could not conquer France itself. By June 28<sup>th</sup> the newspapers could quote the raw fury of Barère’s account to the Convention of the events of June 1<sup>st</sup>, including the safe arrival of 116 ships with provisions from the USA, which had been the real British target. He denounced the British as a “nation boutiquière” (nation of shopkeepers) and claimed, “Here then is what the French marine has done now that it is rid of its vermin nobility.”

The *Chronicle* was also quick to spot other deviations from the aims of the war. The British admiral who had been driven from Toulon had on his own initiative undertaken the conquest of Corsica. Its people asked George III to become their King. The *Courant* gushed on July 26<sup>th</sup> about the “Bright jewel of Corsica added to the splendid crown of our inestimable monarch.” But on August 2<sup>nd</sup> the *Chronicle* grimly predicted that the fate of the Corsicans would either be war without end, or betrayal, like Toulon and the royalist rebels in La Vendée for “having trusted to the faith of the British monarch.” Two years later Corsica was again a part of France.

By June 28<sup>th</sup> the Newcastle papers reported bad news coming in from Flanders as the young generals of the Republic battered the right

of the allied armies, including the British contingent, north of Lille. By July 5<sup>th</sup> they had the London Gazette's reports of the fall of Charleroi on the left of the allied armies and of the failure to push back the French at the Battle of Fleurus, fought on the June 26<sup>th</sup>. Solomon Hodgson rightly predicted fatal consequences from that hard fought battle. He claimed that peace was needed if our brave soldiers were not to be overwhelmed. But, by July 12<sup>th</sup> he was sorry to hear that the new cabinet, in which the Duke of Portland's Whigs joined Pitt, would continue with the war.

The war in the West Indies was even more difficult to report, because of the distance and the vagaries of communication by sail. At the beginning of the year Lieutenant General Sir Charles Grey carried out a swift and effective campaign against France's colonies. He was the father of Charles Grey, the Foxite Northumberland MP, whom Solomon Hodgson unfailingly supported. Yet on April 12<sup>th</sup> the *Chronicle* was prepared to publish, though without comment, General Grey's reported threat to deport "people of colour," in arms on Martinique, to Africa. Before this could be taken further, news arrived on the 26<sup>th</sup> of the surrender of General Bellegarde and his "mulattoes and blacks." Grey went on to capture St. Lucia and Guadeloupe. By December 20<sup>th</sup> the *Chronicle* felt able to support Grey when the planter faction and its supporters in the government accused him of lining his own pockets, claiming that the "treasury papers" were attacking him to cover up the ministry's own failures.

By July 26<sup>th</sup> there were reports of yellow fever among troops in the West Indies and there were rumours of the loss of Guadeloupe. This was premature, but the French expedition that would indeed retake it, with help of the black population, had made a surprise landing the previous month. On St. Domingue, where the royalist planters had asked for allied help, the *Chronicle* accused the British command of being no better than the French in threatening death to those supporting the Republic. It

hinted at the real reason for intervention in noting that the British capture of Port au Prince had led to a fall in the price of sugar.

By August 23<sup>rd</sup> there were worsening reports of the situation on Guadeloupe. The *Chronicle* described our forces as “sick and inadequate.” On September 20<sup>th</sup> it led its London column with a letter dated August 10<sup>th</sup> from Guadeloupe stating that “the finest army which ever left his Majesty’s dominions are now reduced to a few emaciated invalids.” On December 6<sup>th</sup> the long rumoured recapture by the French was confirmed as having taken place in mid-October. On the 20<sup>th</sup> there was news of losses in Ste. Domingue to the Republicans and “a numerous corps of revolted negroes.” Thus was announced the advent of Toussaint L’Ouverture and the future black Republic of Haiti.

By November 15<sup>th</sup> the *Chronicle* was already claiming that the “hireling and suborned prints” were now gloomier than it was itself. Stanhope had been derided as mad for urging peace, but Spain and Prussia seemed able to negotiate with the Republic. In fact they were to drop out of the war in 1795. “We side notwithany party; it is our duty to be the ‘brief and just chronicles of the times,’ and that duty, so far as our information has led us, we have, according to the best of our abilities, fulfilled: - Regardless of temporary censure and discredit, it has been our invariable opinion that ‘Truth would come through.’” On December 6<sup>th</sup> the *Chronicle* published a long pro-peace letter to the editor by “Junius Redivivus.”

In its last edition of the year (December 27<sup>th</sup>) the *Chronicle* quoted in full the letter of resignation offered by the Prussian commander at the beginning of the year, after two unsuccessful campaigns: “When a great nation like that of France is conducted by the terror of punishments, and by enthusiasm, an unanimous sentiment, and the same principle, ought to prevail in the measures of the coalesced powers,” but this had not yet been achieved. The editor of the *Chronicle* could rely on his readers to apply this judgement also to the disastrous events of 1794.

Wednesday being the anniversary of the glorious Revolution, it was observed here with the usual testimonials of joyful and grateful remembrance.  
The Arabella. Capt. William Reedhead, from Jamai-

On March 29<sup>th</sup> the *Courant* took the step of issuing a free supplement - "*The Poor Man's Friend*." It was aimed at those without property, pointing out that their prosperity depended on those who had it. God distributed talents unevenly and the question was how they were used - "Blessed are ye poor, for yours is the Kingdom of Heaven." By May 17<sup>th</sup> it was reassuring its readers that, "The Seditious in this country are a mere handful...but we hope Government will treat with proper rigour all who are really detected in attempting to overturn our happy constitution, and prepare the way for the execrable French."



As well as pursuing radicals, the government pushed forward plans for internal defence. On May 17<sup>th</sup> the Newcastle papers carried a letter from Northumberland peers and gentlemen in London calling for a County Meeting on Monday May 19<sup>th</sup> to raise voluntary contributions for the purpose. The *Chronicle* assured its readers that the government's call was unconstitutional and that the meeting would reject it once they had heard the case put by their MP, Charles Grey.

The following week (May 24<sup>th</sup>) Solomon Hodgson had to report that Grey had not been able to attend the meeting at Morpeth, insisting that it was not true, as some in Newcastle had said, that he never intended to. Grey's letter urging rejection of the call for contributions appeared in all three papers. The *Advertiser* noted that the reading out of this letter at the meeting was met "by a dead silence." The Sheriff's resolutions were supported at length by Walter Trevelyan of Nether Witton. He said that seditious letters were circulating and attempts being made to overturn the Constitution. He called upon the meeting "to prove to the world that the County of Northumberland was not so disloyal as had been held forth." The *Courant* also covered Trevelyan's speech at length. Solomon Hodgson merely reported that the bulk of it was "inaudible to us". The resolutions were carried unanimously.

The reason for Grey's remaining in London swiftly became clear. The government had already arrested the leaders of the London Corresponding Society and the Society for Constitutional Information, and seized the societies' papers. On May 24<sup>th</sup> the *Chronicle* reported that, despite speeches by Fox, Grey, Sheridan and Lambton, Parliament had voted, 136 – 28, to suspend the Habeas Corpus Act.

The *Chronicle's* July 5<sup>th</sup> issue held a visual clue to the line Solomon Hodgson felt he was treading. Since Thomas Slack's time the news had been headed by a woodcut of a female figure holding scales and the cap of liberty on a pole. These symbols must have seemed too close to those of the regicide Republic with which Britain was at war. On May 11<sup>th</sup>

1793 the figure had been replaced with an innocuous floral motif. Now a new female figure appeared - Britannia, bearing a spear, but also an olive branch. In the same issue he returned to the subscriptions issue, asking whether they were necessary after the June 1st naval victory, or were they really a test of loyalty? On August 9<sup>th</sup> he asked ironically whether Britons could have free representation and short parliaments like the King's new subjects, the Corsicans.

In Newcastle, July was dominated by a dispute between the coal owners and fitters and the keelmen. Solomon Hodgson was no supporter of strikes.<sup>5</sup> But on July 19<sup>th</sup>, although he declared himself unable to describe the terms of the dispute, he attributed it to the lack of demand for coal caused by the war. The *Chronicle* admitted some damage done, "but nowhere enormously outrageous," and suggested that the keelmen were perhaps led into error by misrepresentations. The *Courant* (July 19<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>) blamed the keelmen and urged support for the magistrates.

After the military had been deployed, without clashes, and the strikers had returned to work, both the coal owners and the moderate representatives of the keelmen took care to put their cases by means of letters printed in all three papers (August 2<sup>nd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>). Neither side linked their industrial dispute to the current political crisis. The three newspapers made relatively little of it when eight keelmen were sentenced at Durham Assizes. The *Chronicle* simply listed names and sentences; the *Courant* noted that they were keelmen; the Advertiser noted that they were imprisoned "for riot and assault at Swalwell" (August 23<sup>rd</sup>).

Another case at the same Assizes had caught Solomon Hodgson's eye. In November 1793, John Harrison, a cobbler from Easington, for "uttering treasonable and seditious words" in the pub, was sent to prison by his local magistrate, who was also the Rector, Reverend Dr. Benjamin Pye, Archdeacon of Durham. Pye refused his offer of bail and Johnson was held in Durham gaol for two weeks until bail was set at £200 and four sureties of £50. Solomon pointed out that he was that lucky Habeas Corpus was then

still in force. No sworn testimony had been taken and there might have been no case put, but some local gentlemen wanted it before the Grand Jury, which found no case to answer. On October 18<sup>th</sup> the *Chronicle* was able to report that the cobbler had got 50 guineas settlement from Dr. Pye. "This, we hope will be a caution to magistrates, in their aristocratic zeal, not to sport too wantonly with the liberties of their fellow subjects."

By the autumn the government at last obtained a death sentence for treason. At his trial In Edinburgh, Robert Watt claimed to have been working as a government agent in a murky plot for armed insurrection. With unusual harshness Solomon Hodgson wrote (September 20<sup>th</sup>) that Watt should be executed whether he was a spy or not – a pardon would prove who his employer was. On October 18<sup>th</sup> he declared the execution a "great national example," but on December 20<sup>th</sup> published a poem portraying Watt as a spy sacrificed by the Home Secretary, Henry Dundas.

While he distanced himself from traitors, Solomon Hodgson continued to criticise the government's attack on reformers. On October 4<sup>th</sup> the *Chronicle* ran a satire of John Bull denouncing Pitt – "What are genuine Jacobins but what we call Whigs?" On the 11<sup>th</sup> he said that the war itself showed the need for Parliamentary reform. On the 18<sup>th</sup> he quoted Sheridan's tribute to the gallant Poles "whilst it was not yet treason," and printed letters from Joseph Priestley, exiled in New York, about republicanism. On the 25<sup>th</sup> he shared in the mockery of the "pop-gun" plot to kill the King. But he knew how serious things were, recording the indictment of James Montgomery of the *Sheffield Iris* (who served three months in York prison for a poem celebrating the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille).<sup>8</sup> He noted that witnesses used in the Watt trial in Edinburgh were being brought to London. He reminded his readers that, "The Liberty of the Press is the faithful and universal monitor."

Thomas Hardy, the shoemaker who was secretary of the LCS, stood trial for High Treason at the Old Bailey from Tuesday October 28<sup>th</sup> to Wednesday November 5<sup>th</sup>. On Saturday November 8<sup>th</sup>, claiming a

“total dearth of foreign and domestic news” and by only including urgent adverts, the *Chronicle* was able to give Pages 2, 3 and part of 4 to the trial. The other papers also covered it extensively. The *Advertiser* was unable to include the verdict. The *Courant* got it from Wednesday’s London *Sun* - “Late as the time is, for the satisfaction of our Town readers, we stop the press to state...” The *Chronicle*, quoting a letter written outside the courtroom late on Wednesday afternoon, could proclaim in large letters that Hardy had been found “Not Guilty.” The following Saturday (November 15<sup>th</sup>) it listed the jurors as “Saviours of English Liberty”, as well as advertising Solomon Hodgson’s book on the trial. The optimistic note continued as other radicals were acquitted or released without charge.

Yet, the government would find other ways to pursue radicals; Parliamentary reform was still far away; and the war would drag on for 20 years. But Solomon Hodgson held to his chosen line until, on April 12<sup>th</sup> 1800, in an edition bordered with black, the *Chronicle* announced the death of its owner and editor, aged 39. The tribute concluded, “... he viewed with honest indignation the corruptions too prevalent in society. He feelingly lamented the miseries of war; and, so long as he could do it consistently with personal safety, he exercised the privilege of declaring his conscientious sentiments with boldness and freedom, but always without descending to licentiousness or personality.” He was, in the words of his opponents at the *Courant*, “much respected throughout an extensive circle in the Northern counties, Mr. Solomon Hodgson, printer of *The Newcastle Chronicle*.”

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Welford, *Early Newcastle Typography 1639 – 1800* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1907) pp 45-48; C.J. Hunt, *The Book Trade in Northumberland and Durham to 1860* (Newcastle, 1975) p 90; Jenny Uglow, *Nature’s Engraver* (London, Faber and Faber, 2006) pp 264 and 270 – 71; Thomas Bewick, *A Memoir of Thomas Bewick*, edited by Iain Bain (OUP, London, 1975) pp 106, 112 – 3 and 191; ‘Solomon

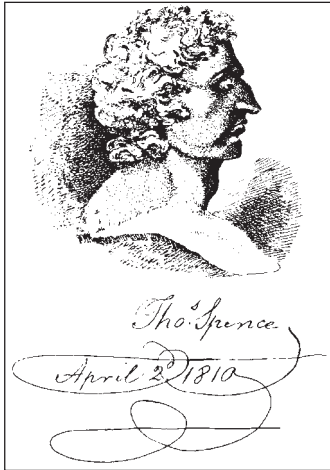
- Hodgson' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, OUP, 2004) Vol. 27, pp 503 – 5.
- <sup>2</sup> Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth Century England* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998), pp 72, 97, 112, 114 and 129; *The History of the Times* (London, 1935) p52.
- <sup>3</sup> A Young Lady [Jane Harvey] *A Sentimental Tour through Newcastle* (Newcastle, 1794) p 18.
- <sup>4</sup> Northumberland Collections Service, Ridley (Blagdon) Manuscripts ZRI/25/17.
- <sup>5</sup> Joseph Farington, *The Farington Diary*, edited by James Greig (London, 1923-28) Vol. 1 pp 52-53; 'Thomas Hardy' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, OUP, 2004) Vol. 25, p226.
- <sup>6</sup> William Godwin, *(Things As They Are or the Adventures of) Caleb Williams*, edited by David McCracken (OUP 1970) p 2.
- <sup>7</sup> H.T Dickinson: *Radical Politics in the North East of England in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Durham County Local History society, 1979) p 17.
- <sup>8</sup> 'James Montgomery' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, OUP, 2004) Vol. 38, p 857.

## COMMEMORATION

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### Thomas Spence 1750-1814

Thomas Spence was born in Newcastle in 1750. Spence was the leading English revolutionary of his day, with an unbudgeable belief in individual and press freedom and the common ownership of the land (he used the Town Moor as an example of how land could be held in common, but called for a democratic way of running the Moor).



His tracts, such as *The Rights of Man* (Spence was, perhaps, the first to use the phrase) and *The Rights of Infants* - Spence earned a living in Newcastle as a teacher - along with his utopian outlines of how society could be better organised without extremes of wealth and privilege, were the most far-reaching radical statements of the period. Spence was born in poverty and died the same way in 1814, after long periods of imprisonment including seven months for being accused of high treason in 1794.

# FOLK SONG FOR THOMAS SPENCE

(1750-1814)

Down by the old Quayside,  
I heard a young man cry,  
among the nets and ships he made his way.  
As the keelboats buzzed along,  
he sang a seagull's song;  
he cried out for the Rights of you and me.

Oh lads, that man was Thomas Spence,  
he gave up all his life  
just to be free.  
Up and down the cobbled Side,  
struggling on through the Broad Chare,  
he shouted out his wares  
for you and me.

Oh lads, you should have seen him gan,  
he was a man the likes you rarely see.  
With a pamphlet in his hand,  
and a poem at his command,  
he haunts the Quayside still  
and his words sing.

His folks they both were Scots,  
sold socks and fishing nets,  
through the Fog on the Tyne they plied their trade.  
In this theatre of life,  
the crying and the strife,  
they tried to be decent and be strong.

Oh lads, that man was Thomas Spence,  
he gave up all his life  
just to be free.  
Up and down the cobbled Side,  
struggling on through the Broad Chare,  
he shouted out his wares  
for you and me.

Oh lads, you should have seen him gan,  
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With a pamphlet in his hand,  
and a poem at his command,  
he haunts the Quayside still  
and his words sing.

*KEITH ARMSTRONG*

(from the music-theatre piece 'Pig's Meat' written for Bruvvers Theatre Company)

**Malcolm Chase**  
**The People's Farm**  
**English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840**



*For publication in late 2010*



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## RECOLLECTIONS

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### **Educating René Part Three**

*René Chaplin*

On January 1 1957, 10 years to the day after the pits were nationalised, my husband Sid Chaplin set off from his lodgings in Whitley Bay to start a new job as a public relations officer for the Northumberland and Cumberland division of the National Coal Board at Graham House in Benton. He'd spent much of the intervening period away from the North-East, working as a journalist on the NCB's 'Coal' magazine based in London, but travelling all over Britain and Ireland. It was his boast at that time that he'd visited every working colliery in the UK, but the job took its toll – in that decade he'd done almost no creative writing of his own. The novels, short stories and poems about the mining culture of Durham that had made his reputation as a promising, new working-class writer had simply dried up.

That frustrated him and saddened me. To me, there had never been a happier sound in our home, with the exception of our children's voices, than the clacking of Sid's typewriter as a new story took shape. I wanted to

hear that noise again. Something had to be done, and Sid had the answer. He reckoned a return to our roots would get his creative juices flowing again.

I have to say this involved some sacrifices. I was very happy with our home – a big house and garden on the very edge of the Essex Green Belt – and our life there. Our children were happily settled in good schools. But I've always believed in that old Durham saying, 'Work Comes Fust!' I just felt there was so much to come from Sid's writing and I was proved right.

But we didn't return to Ferryhill, the village where we'd grown up and started our married life. We were going to Newcastle, the wonderful, smoky city I remembered from visits as a child in the Twenties and Thirties. We looked for a home in the east end, searching West Jesmond and Heaton before opting for a 4-bedroom house on a hillside in the middle of an Edwardian terrace: 11 Kimberley Gardens, overlooking Jesmond Vale. We paid £1750 for it, with the help of a mortgage from the NCB, asking for and getting an extra £100 so we could replace the monstrous black-leaded kitchen range (you only ever see them at Beamish now) with something that didn't make a drudge of the person who looked after it – me.

To be honest, the house was dank, dark and dismal, but I could see it had the makings of a nice home and in time we made it one. And I'm still here, 53 years later. I've had some sad times in it, but they're far outweighed by the good. Our children grew up here, our grandchildren came for many happy holidays, and now the great-grandchildren ring the bell and head straight for its heart – the kitchen, minus that range, of course.

It wasn't all plain sailing. Our daughter Gillian had an unsympathetic headmistress, Chris had to stick up for himself (and his accent) at Northumberland Road School and when I went to pick Michael up at the end of his first day at Sandyford Road Primary School, I nearly wept. He'd been at a lovely village school in Essex, surrounded by trees and fields, but his new school was next to a brewery! Added to that, the sweet-sounding Jesmond Vale was actually then a pungent-smelling municipal tip and over

the next 10 years it received much of the spoil from T. Dan Smith's slum-clearance and motorway programmes.

'What have I done to this child?' I asked myself.

In truth, he and his pals loved the burn, as they called it. It was a perfect place to recreate the Second World War.

But we were made to feel welcome. On the day we moved in a lady from across the street arrived at the front door with a tray of tea and freshly-baked scones for us. Ella Pearce, who became a lifelong friend, also brought a bucket of coal, which of course everyone burned back then. Ours came courtesy of the NCB from Weetslade, but the coalman was only one of a number of tradesmen that hammered on the back door. There was more than one rag and bone man, the herring-seller (his pony also poked his head through the gate in the hope of a morsel), and a French onion man all the way from Brittany on his bike. Nowadays there's only the lad from Ringtons.

We settled in. Sid bought a scooter to take him to Benton every day, but after he fell off twice, he took the trolley-bus. We all had tea together in the kitchen (the dining room was for best), usually around half-past five. Sid would have a shave and a rest, then start writing, usually from about 7 until 11 or 12. He used our front room then, with various aids to concentration – his fags and Radio Luxemburg, usually jazz, never quite properly tuned. It used to drive us all mad, but he seemed to like it. Sid worked at weekends too, which was sometimes hard for us as a family, but he was driven to write and now had a new subject – the Newcastle of that 'never had it so good' era, the break-up of the old working-class districts of Byker and Scotswood and effect this might have on its young people. These themes he explored in his two Newcastle novels, *The Day of the Sardine*, published in September 1961, and *The Watchers and the Watched*, which was published the following year. Of course the work wasn't just done at home – he'd walk the city, looking for ideas and locations, and end up talking to people. Once

he was stopped on Byker Bridge by a man with a cart full of scrap (I think it was one of the Shepherds) who said how much he'd enjoyed *The Day of the Sardine*. One Sunday he took Michael out for a walk and when they came home I asked Michael where they'd been. Jesmond Old Cemetery, he said, Dad wanted some names for his new book.

The night before *The Day of the Sardine* was published, Sid and I walked to the Central Station to collect the first editions of the newspapers from the late London train. We walked home again with them under our arms, then spread them out of the kitchen table. The reviews of the book were excellent – we celebrated with tea and bacon sandwiches. It was the most wonderful night.

### ***Working for The Guardian***

As a result of the success of these two novels, Sid was offered a good deal of journalistic work. Brian Redhead, then northern editor of *The Guardian* (I think it was actually still *The Manchester Guardian*) asked him to write a weekly column for the paper, appearing on Saturday. This had to be delivered on a Thursday evening and if Sid hadn't had an idea by the Wednesday, it was a tense week, but he always thought of something. Many of these pieces were collected together by Frank Graham 15 years later to make the splendid collections of essays, *The Smell of Sunday Dinner* and *A Tree With Rosy Apples*. Sid also started reviewing books and plays for the paper.

One day during this time, Sid was called into the Chairman's office at Graham House to face an inquisition. Surely, they said, he must be doing his writing during work time. Sid denied the accusation – he was extremely conscientious - but no matter, he was required to sign a statement that all of his creative and journalistic writing was done in his own time. I sometimes wish they had asked me...

In 1959 we discovered a small gift shop in Brunswick Place. J. B. Stone specialised in modern design, but also had a tiny art gallery upstairs. In fact there was no J.B. Stone – the business was run by a very lively couple

called Mick and Tilly Marshall. They became our friends and I suppose we became their customers. One of the first exhibitions they held featured the work of our old friend Norman Cornish, who had worked with Sid at Dean and Chapter pit in Ferryhill and was a fellow-student at Spennymoor Settlement. In the years that followed we saw some wonderful work there, by artists like William McTaggart, Sheila Fell, Willie Johnstone, Anne Redpath and John Peace. L.S. Lowry exhibited there many times, latterly at the larger premises in St Mary's Place, and we met and talked to the old man many times. I was going to write that we got to know him, but I'm not sure anyone got to know Mr Lowry (as he was always called). He was a very private and rather strange man – he used to take holidays in Roker, not many people's destination of choice – and though I liked many of his paintings, some – like his portraits of children – rather gave me the creeps.

I remember at the first Cornish exhibition at the Stone in 1959, Mick Marshall asked Norman's father what he thought of the pictures. The old man pondered his answer and then said, 'They're very good, but you should see the lavatory our Jack's just put in.' This reminds me of the answer Sid's father gave to the Vicar of Shildon when he suggested that Ike (short for Isaiah) must be very proud of his son. 'I'm very proud of all my sons,' he said quietly.

It was about this time in the early 60's that Sid had a letter and then a visit from a young architecture student at King's College in Newcastle. His name was Alan Plater and until his very sad death earlier this year, he was a regular visitor to this house, and so close a friend that he was more like family. Later in the 60's he became a collaborator of Sid's, to spectacular effect, but I mustn't get ahead of myself.

One of Sid's journalistic patrons at this time was the energetic young editor of the Northern Echo, Harold Evans, who later became editor of *The Times* and *Sunday Times*. It was through Harry that in 1964 Sid was asked to write the script for a son-et-lumiere production inside Durham Cathedral. Dame Flora Robson was the narrator of the story of this most wonderful

building, helped by the Hordern Colliery Band, Cornforth Methodist men's Choir and the Cathedral Bellringers, who filled the interior with triumphant sounds. 22 years later, another brass band, the Durham Mechanics, played Aaron Copland's *Anthem for the Common Man* at the climax to another moving evening in the cathedral – Sid's memorial service in 1986.

### ***To Russia...***

In the same year we had a letter from the Professor of English at Moscow University, Valentina Evashova, in which she revealed something we never knew – that many of Sid's books had been published in the Soviet Union. Not long afterwards he received an official invitation from the Soviet Writers' Union to visit Moscow and Leningrad – and collect his royalties in roubles. For this reason we decided to fly to Moscow but spend some of this money by returning on a Russian boat from Leningrad. This caused some consternation in Thomas Cook's in Newcastle when we went in one day and asked for two one-way tickets to the Soviet Union.

Even though I had some trepidations about the trip, it turned out to be such a memorable experience. We visited the home of the writer Maxim Gorky, where Sid gathered pebbles from the garden, and also sat at the desk of Tolstoy, whose writing had such an effect on him as a young pitman. We were entranced by the Kirov Ballet and the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad. One night we were invited to a party at the country dacha of the playwright Arbusov at which the conversation and vodka flowed all night. At one point in the early hours we were served coffee spice with lemon juice to keep us awake. I cannot recommend it.

Our life went on. Our daughter Gillian became a nurse at the RVI, was married to David, a maths teacher, and they had two daughters, Sarah and Kate. Chris served an apprenticeship at Vickers Armstrong's Walker Naval Yard and then joined the Merchant Navy before coming home to Newcastle to marry Elizabeth, who was a civil servant. They had one son, Grahame. After the death of my mother, my father Andrew came to

live with us – and stayed for 35 years until he died at the age of 102. We acquired a dog, and an allotment around the corner that hung above the Flora Robson Playhouse on Benton Bank.

In 1968 a young director whose family came from Wingate in Durham came to work at the theatre. His name was Bill Hays, and it wasn't long before he climbed the bank to see us. He had an idea – to create a musical play about the history of the Durham miners. Soon another conversation took place in our front room about this, involving two other collaborators – Alan Plater and our friend, the composer and singer Alex Glasgow. Alan based his script on Sid's early stories, and framed the history around the golden wedding anniversary of a pitman and his wife. The resulting production struck gold – if that's the right thing to say about a story of coal. The reviews were uniformly excellent, but what was most striking was the reaction of the audiences, which moved me terribly. These people, *our* people – coach-loads came from Durham – took the play to their hearts, and to sit among them, hear their laughter, stillness and occasional sob, was a privilege. The play went on tour and then to London, where, as one of the characters said of the Jarrow March, 'it stirred the conscience of the nation'.

In 1970 our youngest son Michael became the first of the Chaplins to go to university. While he was there he married Susan and in time they had two sons, Mat and Tom, while Michael became a journalist, TV producer and writer and Susan became a teacher. In 1973 he got his degree in history and Sid and I made plans to go to Cambridge for the graduation ceremony, but a few days before Sid had a heart attack at the Essex home of our friend, Doris Watson. It was the beginning of some worrying times for us.

### ***Illness strikes***

Sid had retired from the NCB the previous year to concentrate on his writing, but it would be some time before the typewriter was heard again in

the house. It was a month before he was fit to come home, then he suffered further angina attacks and it was decided by his doctors that he must have open-heart surgery. The date set for the operation at Shotley Bridge Hospital – May 19<sup>th</sup> 1975 – was uncomfortably close to the deadline set by the BBC for the delivery of the second of Sid's episodes for a new series called *When The Boat Comes In*, produced by a lovely man called Leonard Lewis. In the event the script was finished on the 13<sup>th</sup>, we had tea with L.S. Lowry at the Stone Gallery on the 14<sup>th</sup> and he was admitted the next day.

On operation day, I waited for hours with my daughter – the vigil was endless. Finally the surgeon Michael Holden came to us and his face was so grave, I knew the news must be bad. He told us Sid's heart wasn't functioning at all – if he'd known its true state he would never have operated at all. He was being kept alive by a new heart/lung machine from the USA, which was being used for the first time. Somehow, Sid clung on and slowly, imperceptibly, improved and after a week he left intensive care and finally came home on June 6<sup>th</sup>, as unseasonal snow fell outside.

Finally he was able to start working again, at the desk where I'm sitting now. The top drawer on the left still holds all the odd objects he picked up like a magpie over the years – Gorky's stones, pieces of coal, badges, even a false moustache! After the further novels of the 60's – *Sam in the Morning* and *The Mines of Alabaster*, set in London and Tuscany respectively, Sid's thoughts were turning back to home, and in the late 70's and early 80's he wrote two collections of short stories set in the Durham of his boyhood. They were jewels, like the treasures in that top drawer.

He was working too as a writer-in-residence at libraries in Blyth, Ashington, Shildon, Newton Aycliffe and Middlesbrough. One of his students, I remember, was a very young woman, the late Julia Darling, whose work at Live Theatre years later I so admired. Honours began to come his way – an OBE for services to the arts, and honorary degrees from Sunderland Polytechnic and Newcastle University – most fitting for a man whose further education had been prevented by a combination of Hitler's invasion of



Poland and lack of funds. There was his continuing work for Northern Arts, the Mid-Northumberland Arts Group, the Lit and Phil, the People's Theatre and Live Theatre. In his 60's Sid remained as busy and lively as ever and in 1985 he began to plan a new book to be called *In Blackberry Time*.

That year saw the bitter end to the great Miners' Strike. Sid had never been a great fan of Arthur Scargill, feeling that in the end his bull-headed approach didn't serve the miners' cause well, but the vindictive attitude of the Government towards the people they were supposed to serve outraged Sid. He kept his feelings inside, but I know how much he grieved at the suffering of mining families and communities. Somehow this was tied to the death that early summer of Sid's old boss at the NCB, head of public relations Geoff Kirk, who'd been sidelined and then effectively sacked by his chairman (and Mrs Thatcher's hatchet-man) Ian McGregor for effectively being 'not one of us'. Geoff was drowned off the coast of his beloved Skye, a few weeks after his 'retirement'. This was a bitter blow.

### ***Widowhood***

By the following January – 1986 – Sid was in better spirits. He first-footed as usual with his piece of Cannock coal – and as he swapped it for my piece of silver, one of our New Year guests remarked how well he looked. A few days later Sid travelled to the Lake District to attend a literature seminar at Dove Cottage organised by our friends, the Wordsworth scholars Robert and Pamela Woof. That evening, I tried to ring him, without success. For some reason I felt uneasy.



Sid Chaplin

The next morning the phone rang at about 10.30. It was Pamela. She told me to sit down, she had very bad news. Of course I didn't need to be told. Sid had suffered a massive heart attack the evening before and had lain all night before he was found by a maid. When I phoned him, he was already dead.

It was a dreadful time, obviously. The night before the funeral, we brought Sid home for the last time. The following morning, as he left the house, a blackbird sang. He was buried in Jesmond Old Cemetery, where he'd once collected names for characters in his books, his grave marked by a slab of Frosterley marble decorated with a carved quill pen, under a holly tree, a spot chosen by his children. Sid had once written a short story called *The Berry Holly*.

It is hard for me to believe that almost a quarter century of widowhood have passed since. I am approaching 90. People sometimes ask me the secret of my longevity. I am sure the love and care of my family and friends have a lot to do with it, along with the inherited genes of my centenarian father and four aunts and uncles who themselves lived into their 90's. But I also believe that retaining an interest in the world around me is important. I am still curious about books, current affairs, art and theatre, but most of all, people. I still yearn to be educated.

From time to time, people ring the front door-bell, their curiosity aroused by the black and white plaque recording that 'acclaimed North-East author Sid Chaplin lived here, 1957-86.'

'Well,' I say, 'it's quite a story. Where would you like me to start?'

## **Remembering the Labour League of Youth**

*Ron & Doreen Curran*

*Ron and Doreen Curran have been labour movement activists for over sixty years. Along with the future MP, Albert Booth and others they formed a highly successful youth group in North Shields and Tynemouth. Always on the Labour left they were active in CND and other campaigns persistent thorns in the side of Labour leaders. Ron worked at Rising Sun Colliery till it closed in the early sixties. He spent the rest of his working life as a NUPE official, latterly in Midlothian returning to the north east on retirement. This is the first part of the interview dealing mainly with Ron and Doreen's family roots and early political activity. They present a fascinating detailed account of young socialist life in the decade following the Second World War.*

*Part two will be included in the next issue of the journal.*

*Interview conducted and edited by John Charlton.*

**Ron:** I was born in 1927, in Church Way, which is about ½ mile from the River Tyne, in North Shields.

**Doreen:** I was born in 1929, in Trinity Street in North Shields which is closer to the banks of the river than Ron.

**Ron:** My father was 51 when I was born. I say that deliberately because he was white haired all the time I ever knew him.



Tynemouth League of Youth c 1948

He was 20 years older than my mother. That meant nothing when I was young but as I grew up a bit I started to wonder. He was born in Annbank, Ayrshire, in 1876 and my mother in Wallsend in 1896. I thought it was strange that there were no photos of a wedding, no photos of anybody in the family except us. As a child I expected to see grandparents. I found out much later that my parents weren't married to each other. Nobody had said anything about my dad's past except he told us that he was related to the MacFarlane & Lang biscuit manufacturers which turned out to be true. That was the first mystery I solved when doing my family tree. My Dad worked at the Rising Sun colliery as a check weighman and before that he was a hewer. His first job underground in Ayrshire was at nine years of age as a trapper boy whose job was to open and close airlock doors. These doors were meant to divert air throughout all the passageways underground. His father Frank Curran was a trapper too; underground from the age of seven.

Eric Clarke, the scots Labour MP and General Secretary for the Scottish Miners' Union told me the probable reason why my father was elected as a check-weighman at the Rising Sun Colliery Wallsend. He asked if I knew if my father was blacked by the mine owners. My father had said that. He told me that he walked from Scotland looking for work with his brother Patrick and a man called Paddy MalLOY. Eric Clarke went on to say "Did you know that the check weighman is empLOYed by the miners. The manager has no say at all. The Truck Act is the act that protects them. My father said that his father, Frank Curran was very active in 'Keir Hardie's Union'. (At that time Keir Hardie was secretary of the Ayrshire Miners Union). I could never find Frank Curran on the census returns except once in 1891 when he was down in Clackmannanshire while the rest of his family was in Lanark.

He was shown on the census as single, a miner, born in Ayr, which was his place of birth. I suspected he was doing this (*blurring his identity, ed*) to protect himself because he was blacked after the tattie strike in I think 1891 or 1892 in Lanarkshire. I noticed that the family split up after this date. They all worked in different places. My father had to work as a tube worker at Blantyre Iron works for a short while. His father is shown on the Census as a cartman. Then Dad joined the army and went to the Boer War. He joined the Home Guard in the Second World War. As a reservist from the Boer War he was called up and went to France in 1916 but was only there about 6 months. He was put into the labour corps because of his age and because he was a miner. He was only over there for 6 months and in the 3<sup>rd</sup> battle of Arras. I've got his memoirs of that; little snippets. He told me that a man standing near him in the trenches called Hyman "was shot in the thrapple\*" as they stood talking in a trench (\*Scots I for throat). He also said that his company of soldiers went out over the top and only sixteen survived. They were marooned in a vast shell hole that was full of dead and dying. He told me that as a veteran of the Boer War, although a private, he had

to assume authority as no soldier of rank had survived him. When they returned an officer complimented him and Dad said (his words) "If I could have 'got oot' that hole sooner I would have".

He came to Wallsend in 1904. A child was born to Elizabeth Ann Curran (My grandmother) at Coxlodge, in 1905. Much later I found the family in Wallsend on the 1911 Census. I think that his father was in Kenton, Newcastle at about this time because I found a Frank Curran, 'single' born 1848 in Scotland. However, my grandfather died in Stirling in 1912. He died a pauper, and was buried in a cemetery under the castle. I arranged to meet the superintendent who gave me a number and a general idea where to go. All I found was just a green sward with no markings of any kind. That's all there is. When I went back to see the superintendant he told me that is a pauper's grave, they were buried by the local authority.

Despite these unusual and difficult circumstances my mother looked after us like a hen with chicks, although we must have been in absolute penury with my father having ten kids in his first family and another four with us. I once saw my parents in their bedroom crying on each others shoulders. I believed it might have been because one of his sons had died. The only photo I ever saw was above Dad's bed of a lad lying in bed. I asked my mother who it was and she said someone your dad knew. Actually it either had to be dad's son Alexander Patrick or his elder son Frank.

**Doreen:** My father was born in 1900 in Grimsby. In 1914 he served in the First World War, at the age of 14, in the merchant navy right up until the beginning of 1939 when my mother was expecting her 4th child so he gave it up and went to work in the shipyards as a carpenter at Smiths' docks North Shields. He missed the sea and as they were asking for volunteers in the RAF air sea rescue, and they wanted men with experience of the sea he Dad signed up and after training in Blackpool and London he was stationed up in the Orkney Islands where they would rescue airmen whose damaged planes had crashed into the sea. My mother died in 1944 at the age of 39 five months before the end of the War. My father got

compassionate posting from the Orkney Islands to Blyth to join the air sea rescue group there. He got permission to come home at weekends to keep an eye on us. My sister was just going on to 4. I had a brother who was 9, my sister Lily was about 13 and I was 14. I had to look after the family while my dad was away. After the war he became a painter and decorator. He wanted to go back to sea but he couldn't because he didn't want to leave the four of us children on their own.

My dad bought me a bike for my fifteenth birthday. I'd always wanted to be a cyclist so I joined the South Shields C A E R U R F A club. We used to go out and cycle all over Northumberland and Durham on Sundays. I later joined the North Shields Polytechnic Cycling Club. One day there were pictures of Ronnie and his brother with a Tory in the North Shields *Daily News*. He was debating for the Labour League of Youth. My Dad said why don't you join the Labour League of Youth and I said I can't because they have their meetings on a Sunday and my cycling is on a Sunday. No way am I giving up my cycling. Anyway a friend of mine, Rosie, whose mother was secretary of Trinity Ward LP asked if I would help her go canvassing. So I went canvassing with her and through that I met Councillor Len Dolby. He asked if I would help in their Ward because they were short of workers which I did. I said to Rosie, come along to a Labour Party rally, at the Ridges Infant School. We were wearing our rosettes and we sat in the front row. There was a platform with the speakers behind and one of the speakers was Ronnie. At the end of the meeting they asked for volunteers to do Percy Ward where I lived.

**Ron:** That was my ward, I was a Councillor in Percy Ward where I had previously lived for 12½ years. At 22 I was a councillor. It was in the press that I was the youngest Councillor on Tyneside at that time.

**Doreen:** So I volunteered and we went with Ronnie and Harry Rutherford to his house and lo and behold when the door opened I was faced by cousin Muriel, Harry Rutherford's wife.

**Ron:** After the meeting at her school there was another meeting

taking place where Grace Coleman the Labour candidate (and MP) was speaking. Harry Rutherford said do you want to come down and we had some company behind us (young kids who had been helping in the election) as we walked down to Percy Main. When that meeting finished we were walking back and Harry Rutherford said to me 'do you want to come to my home for supper' and I cheekily said yes thank you, would you mind if she (Doreen) came as well? Harry said sure she can come with us. That was the first time I'd personally met Doreen. My sister Winnie had told me earlier that she had met a smashing looking lass while canvassing. She described her and sure enough it was Doreen. She and her sister used to walk past our window going to school each morning.

Harry Rutherford was also on the council. He told me that night that he had been a member of the Labour Party League of Youth before the war. However I wasn't really surprised when I heard that he later reneged on the Labour Party and became a member of the breakaway SDP.(1980s)



The brothers Ron, Ken and Ian Curran



*JC: Was your dad in the Labour Party.*

**Doreen:** Not at the time but at the elections our house was a committee room. At the polling station they were taking numbers and they'd bring them down to my Dad's house and we'd mark them off. People would come down for a cup of tea before they went back to the polling stations and people would come to get leaflets.

*JC: How did you become involved Ron?*

**Ron:** My father asked (Ian my older brother and I) to join the Labour Party? I used to box and play football and was in the art club at about 16 and at about 17 years of age he urged me and Ian to join. Ian was very keen politically and had a very good memory. He could remember Dr Segal, a Labour candidate before the war. Not only the fact that his placards went around in the 1930's but he also remembered what they said. Ian wanted to join and I didn't. I said I'm not interested. Until one day there was a snippet in the local paper about the Labour Party League of Youth being reformed after the war and a piece about them joining the Youth Hostels Association. That attracted me straight away. I loved the countryside. So Ian and I went to the meeting and joined the Labour Party. It was held in Len Dolby's house. Len was a Labour Councillor and chairman of Tynemouth Labour Party at that time. This would be 1946. Later we were joined by my other brother, Ken. Within about the proverbial 20 minutes I find I'm the secretary and I loved it. I love organising. Then I became secretary of the hostels group. Following that I became the representative on the Youth Council and I wasn't very good at that, if I remember rightly - organising dances and what not was not my cup of tea! I enjoyed the debates although they weren't very political. It was a Youth Council which was encouraged by the schools to engage in an organisation that mirrored the town council itself, so you became a bit more community minded. That was the idea and it worked at that level. You had to diminish any political aspirations.

If you criticised the Council itself it had to be on a practical matter rather than policy.

I went to Ralph Gardener School, senior school. First the Jubilee school, which was the infant school and then Spring Gardens Junior School. That was brilliant, a real outdoor school. I was afflicted at Spring Garden School with agrophobia very badly of which I suffered years later. I then went to Ralph Gardener school, and it affected me in all kinds of ways. This was during the war. It was a good school. But I have never encountered bullying like I witnessed there. I was also a victim. But we had a wonderful English teacher. I wish every teacher was like him. Absolutely brilliant. But I had no political stance whatsoever at that time. Except I knew “we” were Labour. His teaching of English was in a very practical way that involved to whole class. He said words to the effect - “Let us suppose that we are all part of a national newspaper and I am the editor and you are all reporters. I want volunteers to act as say - sports reporter, home affairs, foreign correspondent, business news, etc. Then we put together all your news and see what we get”. I immediately opted for foreign correspondent. I was in my element, drawing maps, following battles and giving reports. When I left school my mother read out my school report. I only remember one sentence. For English she read the teacher’s comment - ‘will go far on this subject’. I had no idea where that would take me or what I would do to make it come true, but it was enough. I knew that maths was not my strong point, I liked geography and drawing maps and I was fairly good at art. Also I had missed a slice of my education. Perhaps I was a typical secondary school boy?

My dad was political, but I wasn’t at that time. I heard him and his brother, Patrick, who at that time lived in Edinburgh arguing about communism versus Labour so I asked my mother what is communism. She said “ask your dad, I know nothing about it. I’m just Labour like your dad”. So I asked my dad, I was about nine years old. He said “Well son it’s difficult to describe (to a nine year old). The best way to put it is that in the Labour Party you can say what you want to say. You can be heard and

play a part. He says 'In the Communist Party you are part of the machine that is dominated from the top, and I don't want to be part of that. When you grow up you'll probably learn more about that'.

I did not grow up with the communist Sunday School as some did. It was actually named the Socialist Sunday School. I met people who told me they learned their politics in the Socialist Sunday School from a very early age. They were Mick McGachey president of the Miners Union, Hugh Wyper Scottish Secretary of the Transport and General Workers, and Jimmy Milne, General Secretary of the Scottish TUC) to name only three very powerful figures in the Scottish labour movement.

The Socialist Sunday school was an indoctrination. Len Dodds was telling me about a Socialist Sunday School in South Shields. Len's father was the owner of ferry taxis in North Shields. Len went over to South Shields to learn Esperanto which was being taught by a councillor in South Shields, who was a product of the Socialist Sunday School and when Len's father heard what was being taught under the guise of an Esperanto class, he pulled Len out of it. His father was a great socialist, not just by words but by deeds as well. In the election he used his own cars. He had started by pushing a barrow, then acquired a horse and cart and then bought a car. He then built his taxi business on that one car. That man was rock bottom solid what I'd called socialist. Not part of a political machine. His motivation came from the heart. That's my view as well, a socialist must also act as he believes. Practice what you preach!

I lived 26 years in Scotland as a leading trade unionist (Scottish National Officer of NUPE) attending all annual conferences of both the Scottish TUC and the Scottish Labour Party and I saw the (CP) machine working. They worked (used) through an organisation called the Broad Left. I got the opportunity to see communism working first hand because I was on the General Council (STUC). I attended two meetings of that ad hoc organisation until I found out by accident that the communist members always met beforehand to have a co-ordinated pre-discussed policy. I didn't

attend again. On separate occasions I visited Budapest, Hungary; Sofia, Bulgaria; Vilnius, Lithuania; Moscow, Russia; Minsk, Byelorussia and East Berlin and the Berlin Wall. I saw things that puzzled me. I went with an open mind, except I'd heard about how this political machine operated. I asked questions that everyone wanted to avoid. I went to Hungary with Jimmy Milne and I asked him a few questions he wanted to avoid. He didn't want to answer. They wouldn't let me visit a hospital. I represented the hospitals and local government in the UK. I asked questions in Moscow and also in Hungary. Could I visit a hospital? They took me to a local government depot. Looking at machinery was not what I wanted, I wanted to talk to people. I found that, if I had an 'open' mind, that was sufficient to close doors in your face. I was in East Germany before the Wall came down and I asked a number of questions. I never got a satisfactory response that answered the question. I stood watching from my hotel window and saw a train on this side of the wall, going round in a circle, and thought I'd never known anything so stupid. On this side there is a Smidt family on the other side is a Smidt family and never the twain can meet, yet they are the same family. So I went personally on my own to have a look at the Wall. I couldn't get to within 40 yards of it and soldiers were guarding it with rifles. Barriers and rifles dividing one of the big cities in the world in this day and age. When it was torn down I wasn't surprised.

*JC. When did you leave school?*

**Ron:** I left school in 1941 at 14. Had a few odd jobs such as delivering papers, then a grocery lad with a bike. Eventually working for the jobbing builder George Minto in North Shields. I fell out with him because he promised me a wage rise I never received. That was my first confrontation. It helped to turn me to trade unionism I think. He then asked me to deliver letters around the borough (walking) "on your way home" he said. It was to save him buying stamps. If you know North

Shields at all, I had to walk from the town centre to Preston village delivering on the way and then on to East Howdon before returning home on foot. In all it was a two and a half hour journey twice a week. One day my mother stopped me from going on to East Howdon and said she would ask a lad who had a bike if he would go. She returned and said he agreed. The following morning, Mr Minto asked if I had delivered the letters and I said "Yes". That was true, I had delivered them to Preston and other places on the way and truly believed that they had also been delivered in East Howdon. He then called me a liar. I leapt at him. I hated being called a liar! I was going to hit him with a small brush. He ran up the stairs shouting "if it wasn't for Christmas I would sack you". I told him a few things about his meanness. This guy changed my view of life at an early age. What he told me to do as a kid delivering letters far and wide he wouldn't dare ask the men. When this mean mealy mouthed man called me a liar I just exploded. One of the young lads said if I were you I would go home now. Christmas or no Christmas my mind was made up. I left of my own accord.

My brother was working on the buildings on bomb damage for another jobbing builder called Jimmie Dixon and Ian was getting better pay than me so I went there. I was working with a brickie and Ian with a joiner, working on bomb damage. I was still just under 16. At 16 my father said he was going to try and get me an apprenticeship at the pit and he took me to the pit engineer who set me on as an apprentice blacksmith. Father didn't do that for my older brother who was a year older than me. I believe that it was because he had a bad stammer and because he had never shown any usefulness with his hands. I don't think he could have made an apprentice if he tried and I think he knew that. I became an apprentice blacksmith and my younger brother became an apprentice fitter, all working at the pit.

Ian could stand on any platform and make a speech. He seemed to gain confidence and lost his stammer. Once we went to Sunderland politicking. In front of a hoarding there was a flat cart. Ian said he was going to get on that and start talking. There was a queue outside the picture

house. He started, 'you lot over there'. I can't use his style. He was brilliant, an orator, not a just speaker. He gave the picture queue the whole of the economic situation as it was at that time and then he went onto how it affected "us". He started with the pharmaceutical companies, and went on about monopolies and capitalism. They own us lock stock and barrel, he said. I noticed that the queue had broken up and some people were coming over to this young lad, aged about 20. I am sure he would have gone far, so convincing was. No road block of any sort would have stood in his way. He saw the whole picture that other people couldn't until he described it. I wish he'd stood as a member of parliament. He'd have got in with the LOY behind him. They loved him to bits. But he'd do nothing practical at all. He wouldn't be a chairman, a secretary or take any responsible job. Yet he criticised everyone else. If we were hiking and said we'd better hurry for the bus he would say "Oh there you go, buses, maps and timetables. Not me". At home he was difficult to get out of bed. What a waste. He had a rubbish job at the pit, what you call a datal worker. It means a day worker at the pit doing anything was necessary at the time, on the surface.

*JC: Let's go back a bit. I want to ask you both about the General Election of 1945. What you remember about that. How you responded to the result.*

**Doreen:** We thought it was just brilliant. We were just kids. I was about 15 then. My dad made us banners and I got all the kids in the street, in Percy Main, to march through the streets with the banners. There were a lot of railway men there. Some of the kids were Tory or Liberal and they were throwing stones at us. We were marching up Percy Main with the banners. That's the night when I first met Len Dolby. He came round the corner with the Labour Party and their banners, singing vote, vote, vote for Gracie Coleman. All the kids joined behind us. I thought it was brilliant. My dad's house became the committee room. I'd go to the school and take the numbers from people going in to vote. I'd take them back to the house and

my dad would mark them off the electoral roll.. We'd go and knock on the doors at night time. Not the doors of any Tories or doubtful because they were either Tory or liberal. Mind lots were not prepared to tell the truth.

**Ron:** I want to say a bit about the time before the Election first. My father had joined the Home Guard but before that, he'd joined the army. He'd come home and told my mother he'd joined the Tyneside Scottish. She went berserk as he was well into his 50s. He went up to the office and somehow they cancelled it. It was just as well for the Tyneside Scottish went across to France and were obliterated. Now at that time Ian was called up into the Home Guard, one year older than me, and I thought 'I'm not having this' and I joined the army cadets. It was funny but I was non-political at the time. So we were all in uniform and my dad and I were involved separately in a mock invasion of Tyneside. I was in the army cadets in the Gas Works and dad was in the Home Guard. Both of us were 'killed' with yellow chalk marks on our uniforms to prove it! Quite exciting at the time but totally non-productive.

Anyway then came the 1945 general election and I've never been so fascinated in my life. The election which brought nationalisation to the main industries and created the health service and the welfare state. That was when I wakened politically, if marginally in terms of activity. Before that there was the war and just thinking about trying to survive. Before the war I was too young and politics to me was something adults talked about.

*JC: When you were boys, around the time you left school did you read books?.*

**Ron:** Ian did but not me. Ian got my father's book, a Robert Burns anthology, for example. He'd read books and I'd play football. He would read a book and never ever forget it. I read a book, even now, and if I see it again I might remember I've read it. That's all. Ian had an amazing memory. I would put Ian as good at least as Harold Wilson famed for his memory,

and even the memory man, Leslie Welsh. He should have met Ian. For example he would remind me when I called in from Scotland - "by the way it's your Susan's birthday (my daughter) next month", or whatever. He was always correct. Ian was a great letter writer, writing to the local newspaper and often sending up his cuttings to me. He always wanted to be a journalist. But he never made it.

**Doreen:** I was always a reader. I read a lot when I was young. One of the first was 'How Green was my Valley' and that stayed in my mind and I think that's why I was interested in the Labour Party and socialism. I was about 12 or 13 and it made a great impression. My mother had read it and it was hidden away as though it wasn't for our eyes. Out of curiosity one day I got it and I read it . When I got into the Labour Party and joined the LOY most of them seemed to be miners and I thought I'd got to educate myself. So I went to North Shields library and asked the librarian if they'd got any books on politics. The librarian took me into a dusty old room with rows and rows of old books. I asked if there was anything more modern. So she gave me a book by Aneurin Bevan called Why not to trust the Tories? That was brilliant. I asked if they got anything on the miners. Yes she said and looked around and gave me the Sankey Coal Commission Report. So I read it from beginning to end and took dates down. For years I went to meetings and no one ever mentioned it. I waited for someone to mention the Sankey Coal Commission so I could say yes that happened at such and such a time.

**Doreen:** My first school was the Trinity Church School. Trinity Church was at the end of our street and it had its own school which was just three classes in size. Then we got a brand new house up on the Ridges estate in Hazelwood Avenue. I went to Percy Main School then my mother took me away on evacuation during the war. She'd put an advert in the local paper Wanted accommodation in the country for a family. There were the 4 of us. So we went to Rennington. We were given half a large house, a manse. It was about 5 miles outside



Alnwick, near Rock. So I went to school there. But while I was at Rennington my Auntie Amy, my mother's sister, was ill in hospital with rheumatic fever and my mother said you're coming into the country with me. So we took my Auntie Amy and her two children, Carol and Alan. Unfortunately Carol died of diphtheria while we were there. We'd taken them to the country to get them away from the bombing too!

My mother's other sister, Auntie Evelyn's husband was killed in a bombing on the docks. He was in hospital unconscious for a month so my mother and Auntie Amy went down to help her. We stayed in the manse and there was a lady looking after us. Little Carol took ill with what she thought was tonsillitis and I said that we needed to phone the doctor. This Mrs Parker said, oh no she's just got tonsillitis. So I went to the phone box to phone a doctor and realised that I needed money to make the phone call. I was twelve years old and hadn't made a phone call before. I went back and said to this woman I want the doctor's number and I want three pence. I phoned the doctor and he came, looked in her throat and she was whisked away to hospital where she died. She was only five. Then who should come walking up the path but my dad in uniform. He'd got word and he'd come from the Orkney's to take us home but he couldn't stay. When we came back home again I went to Ralph Gardner School. But I'd missed a lot of education.

When I was evacuated, this little school in Rennington was so advanced from what we'd been doing in Shields. We were doing pounds shilling and pence but they were doing decimals and fractions. The headmaster who took our class wrote fractions, decimals and algebra on the board but didn't tell us how to do it. For months we were staring at the board but we didn't have the key to unlock the puzzle. So when we came home I never passed. I hadn't a clue what they were talking about. History I knew, but not maths.

At infant school we got the times tables drilled into us, every morning, and English that was excellent. All that was good. It was when

I went away that I missed out. When I came back to Ralph Gardner they were doing long division and stuff like that in spite of that I was often second top of the class in exams. I was also looking after my mother who was ill at the time. My dad got a week end pass and came down from the Orkneys to see how my mother was, he went to my school and saw the Headmistress to give me time from School to look after my mother and the family. It was agreed that I could leave school for a few months as long as I went back for assembly on the last day.

I had to leave school at 13½ because my mother took ill and my dad was away. I had to look after the house and look after my mother. I got permission from school to stay at home as long as I went to school for the last day, because you had to go for the last day to say goodbye to everyone.

My mother recovered from that illness. I went out to work at Clays clothing factory. I was there just before the end of the war. My mother took ill again and then died. That was the end of me going out to work. I had to look after the family until much later when they got up a bit.. I went to Dukes and Markus, dress making. Then I went to Woolworths and was there for a while but I gave that up because you had to work all day Saturday and I'd taken up youth hostelling and cycling and I wasn't going to work all day Saturday. So I went to Duke and Marks because you only had to work to 12 o'clock on a Saturday.

When I got interested in politics I joined the LOY and I was told that the Percy Main Ward needed more members. I joined it and became secretary. I used to go to the general meetings of the Labour Party ex-officio as secretary of the ward and to Tynemouth executive and GMC. Immediately there was a council election pending. A guy called Tom Alexander was standing as Independent Labour against the LP candidate which meant splitting the vote. So Len Dolby and another guy went to see Alexander and offered him a Labour seat if he'd stand down from the ILP. And I got word that they were going to put him in my ward, in Percy Main. So I got on my bike and went round all the members and said there was an

emergency meeting and the reason why. I wanted all the members there. We looked at who we could elect. Asked for any other person and there were two members we could elect, Alexander and a chap called Sowerby. We weren't going to have this pig in a poke dumped on us. We picked Harry Sowerby.

**Ron:** I was vice chair of the Party and in the absence of the chairman Len Dolby I went to see Alexander, who lived in Lynn Road just up the street from me. I went to his bungalow and lo and behold there was a Labour councillor there. It was Nancy Kitwood, who I didn't trust as far as I could throw her. So I asked what she was doing there and she said she'd just come to have a chat with Mr Alexander. So I said well I'm here in an official capacity as the constituency party vice-chairman. Alexander said "I feel that I could do a good job". So I said lots of people might think that but it's your politics that I'm concerned about. It's just not enough to say you are Independent Labour. Nobody knows where you stand. He was deputy headmaster in Wallsend. You are just playing off the Labour Party looking for members that will support you. You'll join the Labour Party and you're in for the statutory 12 months and you'll stand in the line like everybody else. If you want to put your own name forward that's fine. If somebody else wants nominate you that's fine. But you're not going to blackmail us. He said I hear what you are saying but I'm going to do it anyway. Afterwards Nancy Kitwood said he seems a reasonable guy. Anyway there was a special meeting to validate Alexander. I stayed out of the meeting. Grace Coleman the MP came out to try to persuade me to go in. I refused saying that people should abide by the Party rules. I said I am not going to accommodate someone for the sake of appeasement.

There was going to be a by-election and he was going to be given an easy seat. That was one of the problems I had in the Labour Party, one of the many. They were giving way to blackmail. They went ahead and adopted him Alexander in another ward without ever being a member of the Labour Party until he was promised a safe seat next time round.

Manoeuvring people into seats and so on was something I always disliked the LP for doing.

**Doreen:** In 1954 we moved to Wallsend and I was a member of the Hadrian Ward branch, famous for Herby Bell. I had many a little argument with Herbie. I was chairman and Herby Bell would stand up with his sheaves of paper and talk for 10 minutes and then I'd say thank you Herby and I'd say any questions but nobody would want to ask any questions because Herby had rattled on for another 20 minutes. Another activity was CND. It helped to boost the activity of young people. A lot of people joined the Labour Party in the late 1950s because that was the platform against nuclear weapon. I was Secretary of Wallsend CND.

*JC: What about the social life of the League of Youth. What did you get up to?*

**Doreen:** We went to different places. I remember they had a dance on outside of Gateshead.

**Ron:** Yes, a dance at that place on the hill -- Winlaton. We met two sisters. One I called Ironsides, a bonny looking lass. I met her later when I was a union official for NUPE. She was on the other side of the table. We were discussing drivers and their wages. I wasn't looking for favours but she was absolutely hard. That was Olive Winder and she had a sister. They were both formerly in the League of Youth.

**Doreen:** I remember the dance at Winlaton as I hadn't been long in the LOY. There was a room where you could go to have a cup of tea and lads from another area came in and asked me why I'd join the League of Youth. You must have only joined because of the lads. I replied 'Because I believe in socialism and that's why I joined.' They looked at me in amazement. You weren't supposed to be political if you were a woman, especially in your teens. I thought what a cheek.

**Ron:** Talking of political women reminds me of Jean Urquhart. She

was one of two sisters from Sunderland. She was a real high flyer. I went to this big rally in Filey in 1947. I was part of a speaking team representing the North East of England and was Mover of the Vote of Thanks. Jean was our Chairman, and on the day in question she was brilliant and wiped the floor with everyone else. She should have been our main speaker. We had a Speaker called Eric Shuttleworth, from Hartlepool. Our team was awarded third place out of 11 teams, Not bad, I thought.

Many years later I was at a Labour Party conference in Scotland and I made a speech, and was coming off the platform and a voice said 'hello Ronnie' and the minute I heard 'Ronnie' it took me right back. When I left the pit I was Ron. In Yorkshire I was Ron. The minute I heard the name Ronnie it took me right back to the LOY. I looked at her, hair not so red now. She said "you'll not know me I'm Jean Urquhart". I replied 'I do remember you. You got an accolade from Tom Driberg in the Reynolds News, didn't you?' I asked 'How are you up here in Glasgow?' She said, "I married the secretary of the Paisley Young Socialists". After that we met every year (at the Labour Party Conference) and had a coffee together. She was a brilliant young woman but was bit too right wing!

She was at all the Federation meetings of the League of Youth in Newcastle and was a very good speaker. She pipped one of ours, Gordon Fanstone to the post for the Chairmanship of the North East of England team. We got a big write up in the Sunday Citizen and Reynolds News about the Filey Speaking Contest where Tom Driberg thought we should have won. He was one of the judges.

I finished with the LOY at 26. It was a bit after 1950. I was on the council and at the same time active in the LOY. I always gave reports back to the LOY and the Party. It was after that Albert (Booth), who was also sponsored by the Labour League of Youth, stood. He put himself forward for Tynemouth Ward. Tynemouth had never been Labour. He stood four times and won on the fourth occasion. Determination and integrity was the hallmark of Albert Booth. His intelligence was inspiring and often awesome in one so young.

As far as the Labour Party was concerned the only purpose of the LOY was stacking chairs and moving tables. I said this on the platform of an open meeting held in the Vienna Ballroom at Filey. I said that nationally the LOY had become a protest organisation instead of an academy for young socialists. I was chairman of the organisation which became regarded as an irritant inside the LP. However, my work at the pit where I was working three shifts on a weekly rotation basis prevented me from carrying on. I also had council work and was branch secretary of the Colliery Mechanics union. Branches were sending resolutions to their local parties but the party didn't do anything and things dried up. We were too militant they said.

*JC: There's an opinion that the LOY was hit by National Service, that youngsters taken off to Service were less interested when they came back.*

**Ron:** That may be true but Len Dodds came from National Service to the LOY. He came after having been to Nairobi (the Mau Mau period) where he had been for his two years. He'd been looking for a political party and he joined the LOY. Also Ian was called up to the air force despite being in a reserved occupation. He thought he'd been picked out because he was an agitator.

To be concluded...

## APPRECIATION

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### **Albert Booth 1928-2010: an "Old Labour" man**

*Janine Booth<sup>1</sup>*

Albert Booth, former “Old Labour” Cabinet Minister, lifelong socialist and trade unionist, and my much-loved uncle, has died aged 81.

Albert was born in Winchester in 1928. His father's search for work took the family up and down the country, and by the late 1930s they were living in Willesden, north London. One day, ten-year-old Albert answered a knock on the door. An unemployed hunger marcher was collecting along



Joan & Albert

their street to pay for the funeral of a fellow marcher who had died en route. Young Albert listened with horror as he learned that when working-class people died, their bodies lay unburied until their grieving loved ones could raise the

cash for a burial. The sheer, brutal injustice of this added to the socialist zeal imparted by his parents (my grandparents) to send Albert on the road to a socialist life.

Spending the war living in Scarborough, Albert left school at 13 and studied evening classes, funded by a grant from the Co-op. As the war ended, he moved to Tyneside and began work as an engineering draughtsman. He quickly became an active trade unionist, and by his early 20s was attending the national conference of the draughtsmen's union (now part of Unite).

He joined the Labour Party as an extension of his trade unionism, was a national council member of the Labour League of Youth, secretary of his constituency party at the age of 24, and was a Labour election agent in 1951 and 1955. On the latter occasion, a young woman named Joan Amis volunteered her services to Labour's election campaign; Albert and Joan married two years later, had three sons and a fantastic lifelong partnership.<sup>2</sup> Albert was a Tynemouth borough councillor from 1962 to 1965, and chaired the local Trades Council.

Having previously put up a decent show in losing a safe Tory seat, Albert was elected Labour MP for Barrow-in-Furness in 1966. As an MP, he was active in the soft-left Tribune Group, then rather more influential than now. His closest political ally, in many ways his mentor, was Michael Foot.

When Labour kicked out the Tories in 1974, Foot became Secretary of State for Employment and picked Albert as his minister, in what was seen as an appointment to satisfy the unions and the left. As minister, Albert drafted some important legislation, including the employment sections of the Race Discrimination and Sex Discrimination Acts. At last, it became illegal to sack a worker for being black, or to pay a worker less for being female. He also drafted the Employment Protection Act, which created ACAS and enshrined in law that the state favoured collective bargaining, ie., that employers should negotiate workers'



pay and conditions with their trade unions. This clause would later be repealed by Thatcher, and has not been restored by New Labour, a fact for which former Labour Party General Secretary Jim Mortimer roundly castigated the government at Albert's funeral.

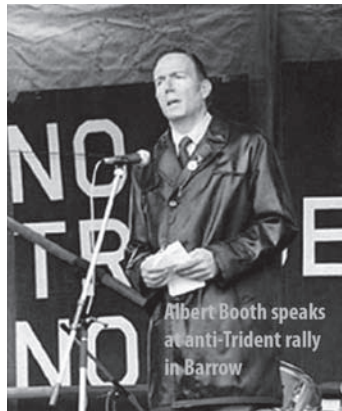
When Harold Wilson resigned as Prime Minister in 1976, Foot became leader of the House of Commons and Albert succeeded him as employment secretary. The legislative highlight was probably the 1977 health and safety reps' regulations, still in use and set out in the "Brown Book". It forced employers to recognise union-selected health and safety representatives and to afford them various important rights, for example, to carry out workplace inspections.

However, that Labour Government badly let down working-class people, falling out with the unions, attacking jobs and public services, lashing up with the Liberals, and signing a woeful deal with the International Monetary Fund. It ended in the "winter of discontent", and its unpopularity opened the door for Thatcher's Tories. Albert argued against some of this in Cabinet, but supported the leadership's line outside, earning criticism from the left.

Socialists said that never again should there be a Labour government like that one — although subsequent ones have been even worse!

When Labour lost the 1979 election, Albert became transport spokesperson, and hired a young Peter Mandelson as his researcher, his first job at Westminster. In his last years, Albert described this to me with a sad smile as the worst mistake he ever made.

Albert lost his seat in the 1983 general election. One reason was that he refused to compromise his commitment to unilateral nuclear disarmament, at a time



when this was a dividing line between Labour's left and right, and when the new nuclear submarines were to be built in his constituency. Despite Albert arranging for Foot to write to Vickers workers assuring them that Labour would defend their jobs when it scrapped nuclear weapons, the issue still both lost him the seat and provoked substantial personal grief for him and his family. His stand on this issue earned him a reputation for integrity, Tam Dalyell describing him in an obituary in the Independent as the most principled politician he ever knew, even though not the best.

A further reason for his defeat in Barrow was a nasty campaign by anti-abortionists based in the local Catholic church, who preached that Catholics should not vote for Albert Booth and put up posters denouncing him as a baby killer. Albert believed that the law should not prevent women accessing abortion should they feel they needed to, and had refused to sign an anti-abortion Early Day Motion.

Albert became Labour Party treasurer in 1984, and sought election to Parliament in the Warrington South constituency in 1987. He had been offered the safe seat of a retiring Labour MP, but refused on the logical grounds that it was the Tory seats that Labour needed to win! He lost the election, but achieved the biggest swing to Labour in the country. He was then offered a seat in the House of Lords, but refused on the principle that as a democrat, he could not accept a seat that he had not been elected to.

Albert then worked as transport director for South Yorkshire and then Hounslow Councils until his retirement, when he remained active in his trade union, though less so in a Labour Party he found increasingly distant from him politically. In the week before his death, he both gave his apologies that he could not attend his union branch meeting because he did not feel too well, and decided that he could no longer represent the Labour Party as a delegate to external bodies.

He also spent his time enjoying life with his family, cycling, walking, fishing, spending hours preparing delicious meals, and volunteering with



League of Youth hike: Albert top left, Joan far right

his local Methodist church. Albert (or Uncle Ted to me) was a genuinely nice bloke — humble, friendly, very funny, great with kids, listening as much as talking, never pulling rank or putting anyone down. In one amusing episode, he spent about half an hour at my 30th birthday party arguing with a posh and arrogant young Tory that one of my mates had brought along. He politely pulled apart each one of his arguments, but never once revealed who he was.

Albert was a profoundly caring man, his socialism coming more from morality than from Marx. He understood that socialism would come not from earnest wishing, but from a movement, the labour movement. Albert Booth's political life was not without mistakes, but the labour movement is poorer without him.

*John Charlton* writes, in March 2006 I visited Albert and Joan in Beckenham, Kent. Below are some extracts from the interview with them.

I joined the Tynemouth League of Youth soon after arriving in the North East in 1946. We had about forty members mostly in their late teens and early twenties; as many girls as boys. The occupational spread was wide and included shop and office workers, civil servants, school students, draughtsmen, a colliery blacksmith, a printer, a high school teacher, a seamstress and a university student. Only a few came from strongly active political families.

There were a lot of debates and a lot of resolutions to the Party GMC. The issues were demands for further nationalisation, more public housing, against NATO, arms expenditure and the horror of Hirsoshima; a lot of 'We deplore, etc.etc...' and usually ignored by the GMC..

We attended NCLC [National Council of Labour Colleges] classes. A favourite lecturer was the organiser Stan Rees, a veteran of the Ruskin College strike in 1908. There was a definite thirst for knowledge. We were sure we knew what socialism was about: peace, international government, anti-colonialism, more Clause 4, common ownership and co-operation. We hadn't much time for the Monarchy and wouldn't stand for the National Anthem. Joan likes the tune but hates the words! On the Soviet Union we believed the Labour Government should not have followed the US in cold war hostility.

We were encouraged to speak at open air meetings at a Bomb site on Camden Street North Shields, the Bigg Market, Newcastle and Filey Holiday Camp. One of our members, Joan Murgatroyd actually spoke on the street in New York! Our branch entered a team of four for the national speaking contest.

On the social side we did a lot of hiking and camping. We used the YHA. The Currans always brought a red flag. Sing songs were important. I remember, 'Three cheers for bureaucracy...' and 'There's gelignite in the fire place...'

I admired our MP, Grace Coleman. She was Tynemouth's first Labour MP. Many people found her austere and academic. She was a university lecturer in economics. I was her agent (at 22, ed) in 1950 when we lost. She was a remarkable woman. She spoke to packed meetings and had an amazing memory for people, faces and family association. She probably lost because a boundary change brought Whitley Bay into the constituency. I remember one humorous episode. A shop keeper from Hartley (a mining village) called urgently asking for a window bill. What was the hurry. He said he'd get no customers till he had one.

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<sup>1</sup> Janine Booth is Albert's niece. Her appreciation was originally published in *Workers Liberty*.

<sup>2</sup> A small correction is called for. Joan (Amis) Booth was an active member of the League of Youth in Tynemouth before 1949 and is well remembered by Ron and Doreen Curran. She appears on several of the League of Youth photos some of which are used in these articles.

## Gordon Burn



Gordon Burn and friend

The death of Gordon Burn on July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2009 at the age of 61 was a blow to British literature and robbed the north east of its finest writer. The praise that was heaped upon Gordon by his obituarists was certainly justified. The winner of the Whitbread Prize in 1991 for his first novel

Alma Cogan, a postmodern exploration of celebrity; he was shortlisted for the Booker for his second Fullalove in 1995. A regular contributor to the Guardian, he was one of Britain's finest journalists who won the Columnist of the Year award for his sports writing in Esquire in 1991.

His non-fiction work explored the dark corners of modern society: *Somebody's Husband, Somebody's Son*, 1984, which took its title from one of the baffled appeals for information by the head of the Yorkshire Ripper squad, George Oldfield, was published in 1990. Gordon spent three years hanging around the pubs and clubs of Sutcliffe's Bingley, which resulted in a piece of work that won widespread critical acclaim including praise from Norman Mailer. His *Happy Like Murderers: The Story Of Fred And Rosemary West*, 1998, cemented his reputation as one of the greatest writers of his generation. These explorations of the macabre, dark and celebrity were often referred to as 'GordonBurnland', a literary adjective as recognisable as 'Ballardian'-indeed some commentators claimed that the mantle of Britain's finest writer passed to Gordon on the death of Jim Ballard in April 2009.

As if this wasn't enough he was also an exceptionally talented sports writer: his *Pocket Money: Inside The World Of Snooker*, 1986 was hailed by Richard Williams as one of the three best sports books ever written. *Best And Edwards: Football, Fame And Oblivion*, published in 2006, is a hugely satisfying comparative biography of the two Manchester United stars as well as being a fascinating analysis of the changing nature of celebrity. Young George famously enjoyed pheasant dinner, champagne and Miss World in a hotel bed at the same time, whilst little more than a decade earlier his only equal in the United Valhalla, Duncan Edwards, spent Saturday evenings with his girlfriend, in her parents' front room listening to the wireless and smoking his pipe. The rest of the week Duncan could be found in his room at his landlady's house typing up his soccer manual on his Remington. 'Sixties denialists' would do well to ponder this contrast.

Born in Gallowgate, Newcastle in 1948, Gordon started life in the tenements close to St James's Park, an area where Jack Common's aunt conducted her heroic battle with 'dort' and a few years earlier the writer and master of the 'Theatre of the Absurd', Stanley Eveling, was also born.

Gordon's dad was a paint sprayer and his mother worked at Binns, the department store. An only child, his small family move nearby to a new council flat in Barrack Road, which remained the family home until his father, Jimmy's death in 2005. To his own surprise he passed the eleven plus and entered Rutherford Grammar school in Newcastle's west end, where he shared classes with the future poet Barry McSweeney. Quickly drawn to literature, bookish young Gordon developed a liking for American literature which stayed with him for the rest of his life. As a teenage schoolboy he became part of the audience during the early days of Morden Tower and established a lifetime friendship with Tom and Connie Pickard.

After leaving grammar school he went to Birmingham College of Commerce-later Aston University- where he read sociology. His time at college was by his own accounts far from distinguished and his interests were becoming dominated by popular music. He was a cousin of Eric Burdon which gained him entry to concerts and he spent one summer in America with the Animals. At the time of the publication of *Born Yesterday, The News as Novel*, he commented on his youth:

When I was a student I never got a student job. Not because I didn't need the money, but every summer I went to America. I would get these cheap Greyhound bus tickets, \$99 for 99 days, and you would meet people and stay with them, or just sleep on the buses. So when I had this interview at 21, they said, 'Don't you think you should have had a job?'. And I said something chippy like, 'What, work in a frozen pea factory in Hull like everyone I was in college with? I don't need to go to work in a factory to find out about the workers! My family are workers! I don't need all that crap!'



He applied for a post as a trainee journalist with the Newcastle Journal. This involved an interview that lasted several days. On the final day the remaining candidates were given an assignment to be delivered the following morning. His was to venture down to Spennymoor and interview the artist Norman Cornish and the result is a much cited dialogue between the artist and young potential journalist. Cornish complained that he was tired of the pitman sobriquet,

‘sick of being looked at like some sort of zoo animal or specimen’ and that despite his having been ‘rather obsessed’ with the pulley wheel those huge structures criss-crossing the sky could easily have been a reference to windmills in early Dutch landscapes.’(Burn responded) ‘I don’t want to hear this. Get him back to the poetic stuff. Miners and mines. Open fires and tin tubs. Darts and dominoes. As carefully as he can Norman Cornish is telling me I’m wrong. Norman Cornish, painter, self taught is no primitive.

The Journal did not give him a job but they and the Guardian did publish this remarkable article full of insight and predating Feaver’s Pitman Painters by almost a decade.

During the following years he gradually carved out career as a journalist. He was leading figure on Friends the radical rock magazine, wrote for Rolling Stone, Esquire, Time Out, Radio Times and the Guardian. Material success was slow in coming during the early period and he continued to live with his parents in Newcastle, delivering his copy by hand to metropolitan editors having travelled down overnight on the ‘Clipper’ coach to Victoria, long the cheapest way out for the Gotta get out of this Place generation. Even when success came he would occasionally take the coach rather than the train in order to remind himself of those youthful experiences.

He could have remained a child of the sixties, refining his considerable talent on sports and music writing, but his encounter with Cornish and his long partnership with the artist Carol Gorner led to a deep

interest in the contemporary art scene. He was the friend and chronicler of the group of artists who emerged during the 1980's known as the YBAs. Gordon not only knew them all he was an integral part of the scene. He championed many of them in his Guardian articles and Gordon, who 'got it' before most of his generation, was instrumental in guiding a wider audience to the riches of contemporary British art. He had a particularly close relationship with Damien Hirst whose famous shark formed the cover art for his last publication *Sex and Violence, Death and Silence*. With over forty essays on artists as diverse as Modigliani, De Kooning, Gilbert and George, Emin, Koons, Lucas and a moving account of George Shaw the artist of Coventry council estates and working men's clubs, this collection of writings demonstrate the vast range of his critical expertise.

Gordon was often described as an unvarnished Geordie. He was and remained a child of Gallowgate. Not for him the tortured vowels of Dr Jack Cunningham or 'Jesmondspeak'. He lived in Chelsea and walked his Bedlington terrier in Battersea Park where he had daily encounters with Mrs Thatcher brilliantly portrayed in his last novel. But much of the action in his writing took place in the provinces where research was usually carried out from 'digs' in a pub and hanging out with locals. His account of the by-election in Sedgefield that followed Blair's resignation and his stalking of Brown in his Fife constituency which are contained in *Born Yesterday* and Guardian articles chart the demise and bankruptcy of New Labour. Indeed this novel, which combines news reportage, the study of the Madeleine McCann case, celebrity, the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction, time and space, has been singled out as turning point in English literature. One critic noted that Burn managed to capture the essence of a year, 2007, in a way that had not been achieved since Elliot's evocation of 1922 in *The Wasteland*.

Gordon remained a regular visitor to the region. Like me, an only child, we both spent much time in and out of hospital tending to the needs of dying parents. We would meet in Newcastle; usually the Bachus

in High Bridge, after hospital visits, compare notes and take strength from each other. In London we would sit in the corner in the French House where this little middle aged Geordie was frequently hailed by the glitterati of the metropolitan art and literary world whilst we organised expeditions to Northumberland to find a cottage/studio for him and Carol. In recent years the north east frequently featured in his writings. The North of England Home Service was set in Newcastle and Northumberland during the foot and mouth epidemic; Hanted, an evocation of Ashington during the 1966 World Cup, appeared in Northern Review, volume 15, and some excellent articles were written for the Guardian reflecting on death, 'northernness' and Tyneside working-class life. As an editor, the expectation of having him up here more was an exciting prospect.

In December 2008 he was due to pay tribute to Bill Griffiths at an event I organised at Morden Tower. A long time admirer of Griffiths' dialect work and a fellow member of the Northern Review editorial board, Gordon, Tom Pickard, Lee Hall and other writers were to read extracts from Bill's voluminous dialect writings. We got word that Gordon had been taken to hospital with a cancer scare. A few months later he was back in Newcastle, having been told that his problem was not cancer. He had just bought a cottage in the Borders and was looking forward to spending more time in the region. The diagnosis was incorrect and he was back in hospital with what we initially feared. To lose Bill and Gordon in such a short space of time and both at a comparatively early age is a loss and a tragedy. Gordon Burn often avoided the limelight yet no other writer of his generation was plugged into the contemporary scene as much as he and none could write about it with such insight and forensic power.

*Bill Lancaster*

## REVIEWS

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*The reviews section of Volume 41 leads off with two reviews of John Charlton's recently published book on the Tyneside left wing youth in the late fifties and early sixties, the era of CND, the Young Socialists and various other left-orientated organisations. On account of the importance of this theme and the fact that it is based on interviews with a great number of participants, contemporary photos of whom appear in the book, we felt that it merited printing both of the spontaneously submitted reviews, respectively by Sandy Irvine and Archie Potts.*

*Sandy's is a review article rather than simply a review of the volume, and it deals with a wider range of themes than those covered in the book. Readers will agree that it is a most perceptive and thoughtful appraisal of the issues Sandy raises, and invites much further discussion. Archie's is a more concise assessment, made from deep local knowledge. Another book reviewed here deals with the social life of Tyneside youth around the same period*

*The other reviews in this number of North East History cover a variety of subjects, from the experience of the coal industry and its trade union struggles to struggles in a very different area of employment – that of clerical workers, and taking in themes such as tracing ancestors, Basque refugee children, literature, photography, tracing ancestry. A number of these texts are produced by the excellent Tyne Bridge Publishing, surely one of the region's most important cultural assets.*

*Willie Thompson*

John Charlton, *Don't you hear the H-Bomb 's thunder? Youth and politics on Tyneside in the Late 'Fifties and Early 'Sixties* (Merlin Press, 2009) ISBN 9780-85036-699-0, 202 pp. £14.95 pbk.

### ***Introduction***

Histories of left-wing politics tend to focus on major parties and movements as well as individual leaders and influential theorists. A small number of professional politicians and intellectuals thereby usually dominate the picture. The new book by labour movement historian John Charlton has the considerable virtue of looking at the movement's rank and file at ground level, in this case, the North-East of England and particularly Tyneside.<sup>1</sup> The Left's real soul is to be found amongst those many thousands, if not millions, of unsung individuals, inspired by some sort of socialist vision, who, in their workplace or local neighbourhood, have fought against exploitation and oppression.

Perhaps their actions concerned the defence of workers threatened with the sack or a pay cut. Perhaps they were trying to get homeless people housed, fight the closure of a local hospital or combat racist agitators. In such causes, other interests and commitments were put on the back burner, money lost, careers sacrificed and, especially under dictatorships, lives put on the line. Usually such people got little for their efforts, often not even a 'thank you'. Indeed, frequently, they met hostility from the very people whose interests they were trying to serve to the best of their ability. Yet it was their time, energy and enthusiasm that kept trade union branches going, breathed life into tenants' associations and other community groups, and got leaflets distributed, petitions collected, voters canvassed. They were the ones who could be relied upon to stand on the picket lines, march behind the banners...

Their struggles might have been about day-to-day 'bread and butter' matters or concerned fundamental rights and liberties. The thread that linked such activity was concern for the betterment of fellow working people and a belief that the status quo, which most of those appearing

in John's book would have defined as 'capitalism', was the major barrier to such progress. They are the people who did all the humdrum work on which all the well-known leading figures of the broader 'labour movement' have always depended.

### ***Time and place***

John's period of study is the late 50s and early 60s, an era when the economy was in the middle of a long boom, with unemployment low and wages rising, and when a political consensus about the desirability of a 'welfare state' reigned. That latter harmony was to persist, with only the odd interruption under Ted Heath<sup>2</sup> until the advent of that most discordant of Prime Ministers, Margaret Thatcher. Many people agreed with Prime Minister Harold Macmillan when he told them 'they had never had it so good'. Indeed after the Conservative triumph in the 1959 Election, it was widely wondered whether the Labour Party, let alone the Far Left, was doomed to permanent marginalisation.

As the title of John's book reflects, there were issues that did disturb what, later, economist J. K. Galbraith was to call the 'culture of contentment'. The shadow of the nuclear bomb and the on-going 'Cold War', which threatened to heat up during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, alarmed many. The 1956 Suez fiasco had demonstrated both the delusions of imperial grandeur and utter incompetence of the 'Establishment', whose other vices were soon to be exposed by the Profumo Scandal. The rise of political satire such as the magazine *Private Eye*, first published in 1961 also reflected a certain disenchantment with the 'power-that-be'. (It might be wondered whether growing irreverence also eroded political commitment as well. Later, of course, postmodernist 'relativism' was to further gnaw away at all-embracing political theories and programmatic policy).

### ***What's in a name?***

There is, of course, an immediate problem with any discussion of the

history of the Left, namely the difficulty of defining what exactly it is. Certainly when a serious student of socialism, the historian and novelist David Caute, attempted back in the 60s to define socialism in his book *The Left in Europe*, he could not come up with any satisfactory description that could satisfactorily encompass all varieties. Down the decades, there has jostled under the red umbrella a mix of cautious reformists as well as militant revolutionists, syndicalists and parliamentarians, Christian Socialists and atheist Marxists. Alongside the major parties there has been the fractious world of left-wing groupuscules as well as independent thinkers and circles around unaffiliated journals and bookshops.

John takes the sensible step of basically accepting into his history anyone who called him or herself a socialist. Thus one individual is accepted as a 'Catholic Marxist', even if that might strike some as a contradiction in terms.<sup>3</sup> So 'Healeyites' (SLL/WRP) sit alongside 'State Caps' (the IS/SWP) as well as members of the Labour and Communist Parties.<sup>4</sup> The major focus, however, is a group around what became known as the '59 Club', though some of its members did gravitate to those other bodies later, as John chronicles.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond these ranks are broader bodies which bring together not just political activists but also a wider layer of concerned citizens. So the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament features prominently in the book. Often such organisations would take the form of 'solidarity' movements supporting causes such as national liberation in distant lands. The Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 was a critical event in the period John covers, one that helped to build support for the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa. The Cuban revolution the year before similarly reinforced the notion that the political way forward might be found outside the 'metropolitan' heartlands.

This is actually one of the few instances which John might have explored in more detail. This 'turn' was to lure many away from the more traditional socialist politics he describes. Sometimes it took the

form of activity amongst marginalised groups such as the homeless and unemployed, as opposed to the organised working class in factories, mines and offices. More often, it focussed on what then was called the Third World, now the 'South', where theorists like R\_gis Debray were to identify as the new centres of revolutionary activity, effectively abandoning Marxist ideas about the class struggle.

There have been similar studies to John's, albeit at a more national level and with far less personal detail. The sometimes wacky world of the Far Left in Britain is amusingly captured in a 1983 pamphlet *Go Forth and Multiply* by Prunella Kaur (John Sullivan) and updated under the new title of *As Soon As This Pub Closes* (1988),<sup>6</sup> a quote from the Alex Glasgow song to which John's book also refers. *Then there was More Years for the Locust*, an entertaining but, at times, bitter critique of the IS/SWP and of Tony Cliff in particular by Jim Higgins, who has also documented elsewhere, often with redoubtable wit, the failings of other sections of the Far Left.<sup>7</sup>

Such accounts tend to throw the baby out with the bathwater, downplaying the genuinely difficult choices facing the Left and what, none the less, it managed to achieve in often unfavourable circumstances, if only in terms of its insights into how society really works. Certainly many groups have been too quick to announce the imminent death agony of capitalism. Yet socialist writers certainly did better than most economic academics and professional pundits when it came to an appreciation of the fundamental flaws of the system, as demonstrated by the recent downturn.<sup>8</sup> In the many cases where battles over redundancies, cutbacks and the like have been lost, things might well have been much worse if it had not been for those prepared to stand and fight.

### ***The struggle continues***

John's story does not feature any great victories. After all, despite the strong campaigning by CND and others, the recent Labour government



was seeking to update, at enormous cost, the absurd Trident nuclear weapons system, as its successor continues to do. He simply records a history of local left-wingers struggling to spread their ideas and fight the good fight. Some focussed on party politics, others trade union work. Community campaigning tends to become more evident later in the tale.

The well-written text rolls along at a fair pace and very much benefits from the photographs John has collected for it. It follows a largely chronological order but also, in a separate section called 'Taking Account', explores what led individuals to become involved. There is, as he notes, a strong autobiographical strand but this helps to bind the narrative (appendices add some other personal reminiscences) while a necessary degree of detachment is observed.<sup>9</sup> The book is admirably well referenced too.

The only section that does not quite work is one, 'Directory', relating what happened to the various people who feature in the narrative. The length of the different entries in this section does not reflect the role that listed individuals play in preceding chapters. Inevitably, some of the latter are also missing, presumably because the necessary information was not available. Indeed a final note in the book does request help to fill in such gaps. This section is also clumsily laid out, unlike the rest of the book. But, overall, the material is well presented and consistently interesting.

John notes that it is a popular stereotype that people are radical in their youth but become more and more conservative as they age. His chronicle suggests that there are many exceptions to any such rule, even if some of the more naive expectations held in teenage years may be dropped and active participation declines. After all, working all the week and then getting up first thing on a Saturday morning to sell a mere handful of papers on the High Street is not everyone's cup of tea but that does not mean those who prefer to stay in bed have fallen by the wayside.

Of course there are always some who do go over the 'other side'. Gus McDonald is mentioned, though there are far worse cases. The odious

Roger Rosewell, for example, journeyed from the IS/SWP to the Aims of Industry and became an advisor to the even more repellent Dame Shirley Porter in the rotten London borough of Westminster. Many, many more, however, simply dropped out of activity. Yet several stayed the course and John shows that much fun was had en route, alongside the more prosaic activity. The activist's lot may not be a happy one much of the time but not all of it. Indeed good humour pervades many of these pages.

### *Carry on comrade*

It is not clear if, in the interviews he conducted, John asked whether the individuals who populate the story would do the same again if they could relive their lives or whether they would opt for more wine, women/men and song instead. The two are not exclusive of course but most people have other priorities, such as spending time with their families, building careers at work, doing home improvements, going to the pub, holiday-making, pursuing all sorts of hobbies... instead of attending deadly dull meetings, knocking on unwelcoming doors, handing out leaflets that get thrown on the ground, protest marching in the rain and the like. The impression is left, however, that many found politics quite stimulating and do not feel that they wasted their time and energy.

Of course the sample of interviewees is inevitably skewed towards those who stayed involved to some extent and who were therefore contactable. There may well be many amongst those who 'disappeared' who were to feel bitter about their time in left-wing politics or just write off the period and perhaps all political engagement. Certainly the army of ex-Trotskyists is a big one. Indeed quite a few made it to the London and European Parliaments wearing rather different hats.<sup>10</sup>

Some sources of personal unhappiness do lurk within the text, however. Political involvement can open the door to new friendships and possible sexual dalliances, sometimes leading to a distancing from past friends and wrecked marriages. John chooses not to spotlight the more

common pattern of wives and/or children left to their own devices when partners (and historically it has been men) become absorbed in trade union duties or political activity.

Sometimes such involvement opens participants' eyes to new lifestyle possibilities. They might thereby leave their previous partners 'behind', creating further grounds for estrangement and divorce. In this case, it is more likely to be a woman who will put up no longer with the restrictions of her previous domestic role. Another variation of this theme is the politicised worker who then decides to go to somewhere like Ruskin College, perhaps becoming in due course a teacher or social worker. In other words, the movement has effectively lost a blue collar activist, even if that person gains new opportunities and satisfactions in life.

Again John chooses not to spotlight examples but some local readers will identify them from his story. Yet perhaps it is best just to note that political involvement has many overheads and side-effects. To some extent, sacrifices are unavoidably involved. In any case, sports jocks, computer nerds, trainspotters, Trekkies, twitchers, and many, many more, not least those saddest of cases, workaholics, can encounter similar pitfalls. So politics is far from being the only path to perdition, though some of the Left's more negative proclivities will be revisited in a moment.

### ***Own goals***

John's book is not just a set of anecdotes, however, nor is it merely of local interest. It provides much food for thought for any political activist. It is interesting, for example, that those who have stayed active have tended to become more involved in 'movement' bodies and community organising (including broader cultural concerns like music) rather than in organisations like the SWP, Socialist Party and their ilk. The question is begged throughout the narrative whether there is something intrinsically flawed about such bodies (including factions inside the Labour Party) that sets a ceiling on their growth, regardless of 'objective' circumstances.

John's story does spotlight some less-than-appealing features of this world, ones which helped to explain the recurrent haemorrhage of members and limited impact on the wider public. Top of the flops must be the fetid SLL/WRP and John tells some revealing stories about it, though the truth turned out to be worse than was recognised by even severe critics at the time (especially about the malodorous Gerry Healey). But other organisations have not been free from repellent oddballs, bossyboots, and nastier bits-of-work. The book sticks to national examples but they crop up at all levels. Even the local CIU club probably has that committee member who enjoys going around telling folk to shut up during the bingo game. The ignorant and officious Fred Kite from the comedy film *I'm Alright Jack* is not unknown in real life.

Now names could be named from the local movement. But it would be somewhat pointless, not least when there are more people whose lives are worth celebrating. None the less one is left wondering whether there is some political law of magnetism in which like attracts like and which may explain why different political groupings have a differing internal environments, regardless of constitutions and programmes. John notes in passing that the early IS, for example, had a quite tolerant atmosphere and attracted people who valued that quality, though whether this came at the cost of effectiveness is a moot point.

Certainly the unsustainable 'hot house' atmosphere of many left-wing organisations (paper sales quotas, manic drives to 'build the conference', frantic membership campaigns) and the vituperative bickering over comparatively minor points of theory do not commend themselves as models for future advance. None of the smaller organisations that feature in John's book has managed to break out of the ghetto. The sole big one, the Labour Party, has also shed members by the truckload and its local ward organisations have become skeletons.

Worse, in the name of The People, many left grouplets and parties have paid little heed to the well-being of actual people, including their

own members. Obviously the most shocking examples come from the Stalinist years. Yet even powerless groupuscules have sometimes treated their members as mere cannon fodder to be used (some becoming 'star cadres' for a time) and then simply discarded when they outlived their usefulness to those running the organisation. At the helm – or challenging for control of it – are often to be found little cliques composed of people who desperately want to play admiral even if it dooms them to be in charge of a very, very small navy.

At the very least, traditional hierarchical structures have usually turned out to be more centralist than democratic, regardless of any formal constitution. Often the price has not been just high membership turnover but also greater detachment from reality and decreasing effectiveness, inevitable once the necessary conduits of feedback are lost in such organisational forms. High membership turnover means the newer recruits have no memory of past cock-ups and other own goals so the mistakes get repeated.

### ***Alternative models?***

Yet attempts to find alternative models have also failed to break the pattern. At the time of John's study, perhaps the most creative thinking about the changing nature of society and its implications on politics and political organisation was being done by the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group. But its sister organisations, such as Solidarity in Britain, do not seem to have avoided many of the shortcomings that afflicted more conventional left-wing groups. Sometimes decision-making power simply fell into the hands of whoever owned or housed the duplicator.

As the 60s progressed and perhaps influenced by hippie ideas about 'peace and love', not to forget 'doing your own thing', there was to be more talk of 'leaderless' and 'structureless' modes of organising.<sup>11</sup> Sections of the feminist movement certainly took up such ideas. In the 70s in Newcastle came the Tyneside Socialist Centre and then the Cradlewell/

Days of Hope bookshops. Union convenor Jim Murray who appears in John's book was one leading figure as was Hilary Wainwright, a co-author of *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism* which trumpeted these 'other ways of working'. The Ecology / Green Party also entertained such fancies.

Yet such initiatives generally came to nought and not just because of hostile external circumstances. Internally, they did not achieve more effective nor more truly democratic organisational forms. Sadly there are no obvious answers to that old conundrum: 'what is to be done'. Sometimes, as in the issue of having full-timers, either at local or national level, it seems to be a case of swings and roundabouts. Yet one thing seems clear. Organisations functioning in the society of today cannot be totally modelled on the vision of some good life tomorrow. They have to cope with the exigencies of the here and now. So the Green Party eventually bit the bullet and opted for a national leader, not least since it seemed the best way to get the ear of the media.

It might be noted that the comparatively loose body at the centre of John's story, the 59 Club (veterans of which still have reunions), disintegrated as key members chose to join groups like the YCL, SLL & IS. Perhaps there was something about the tighter organisation, more compete political ideology and stronger sense of some strategic direction that they offered which the 59 Club could not match. There was a similar organisation, the Left Club: it too suffered the same fate.

There are many parallel bodies today up and down the country: this network, that forum. If the story of the 59 Club teaches anything it is that such organisational forms may well find it hard to sustain themselves over any length of time. There are, of course, exceptions. One is the body in which there is some charismatic figure whose extra energy and commitment keeps things going, though, on his/her departure, things normally begin to disintegrate.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes magazine production or some sort of research role might keep things rolling along. *New Left*

*Review* has had a long run, though some may doubt its value regarding struggles in the real world.<sup>13</sup>

Another is the parasitic entity that feeds off some host body such as the Labour Party whose structures and processes provide the necessary stimuli for on-going activity. John's books shows how the Labour Party Young Socialists became one such 'fishing pond'. The danger is one of excessive adaptation in which the political parasite begins to resemble its host. Literally and metaphorically its work becomes a matter of going through the motions, a kind of 'revolutionary socialism'. An alternative fate, as happened to the RSL/Militant, is expulsion and the desperate search for a new niche.

So more formal organisations may, in some ways, have the edge over more loosely structured ones. One advantage is that they usually have some sort of system for training inexperienced members (which is why so many former ones have done quite well in the outside world once they deploy skills they thereby learned for other uses).

Yet, as discussed above, the groupuscules have often squandered whatever opportunities came their way.<sup>14</sup> In the meantime, they have been unable to sustain the commitment of many of those they do recruit. Here is a terrible conundrum. Perhaps all that can be done is to keep on experimenting and go with what works, dropping it when it ceases to do so.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Left behind***

Generally, socialist politics have been trapped in a rather small ghetto. Indeed this aggravates the above problems since, in such isolation, it is easier to turn on each other, denouncing this or that political deviation, instead of facing the realities of the indifferent, if not hostile, world out there. John does chart some of the external factors that kept the radical Left thus confined. He notes in particular the strength of traditional 'Labourism' in the NE. Indeed it is remarkable how many folk one meets

who despise the current leaders of the Labour Party but who refuse to leave its ranks ('abandon the working class', according to one mindless formulation).

John wisely avoids the trap of blaming every setback on 'traitor' leaders. It is too simplistic to see things merely in terms of a 'crisis of leadership'. That said, one still comes across those who, bizarrely, explain a Tory victory by saying the Labour Party was not left-wing enough (Tony Benn has been a serial peddler of this illogical nonsense). The book generally resists rhetoric about treachery and betrayal. Certainly there are some downright anti-socialist elements in his story, not least Labour Party office holders and trade union bureaucrats. Yet most seem to have been open about their position and so can scarcely be accused of 'selling out' principles and policies to which they did not subscribe.

The causes of this marginalisation reside in wider economic, social and cultural forces. Discussion of that context must avoid the myth of some socialist 'golden age'. Witness the deep hostility to socialist ideas amongst working people reflected in the famous novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* by Robert Tressell who drew on his own experiences of trying to win over his fellow workers to socialism. In 1914 a tidal wave of working class jingoism swept away the Second International. In 1917 power essentially fell into Lenin's lap, decisively aided by Latvian bayonets and naval cannon. Arguably many Russian workers did not support the Bolsheviks per se but rather backed the notion of Soviet power, thinking that the Bolshevik Party might be the best route to it. So down the decades radical socialist politics have been usually confined to the fringes and they odd moment of mass influence (the American SWP & the 1934 Teamsters strike, etc.) has proved very transient.

Perhaps the most common answer to explain such isolation is the 'media'. They are blamed for systematic distortion, twisting how ordinary people perceive reality. To be sure, the press and broadcasting have routinely sided with the 'Establishment' (falsely reporting mass



returns to work during the 1926 General Strike etc.). Yet every piece of scientific research into media effects confirms just how varied and indeed unpredictable they are.

Readers, listeners and viewers tend to be very pro-active and selective in terms of what they take from the media and how they then interpret and act upon it. In other words, they are not some *tabula rasa* on which the media can inscribe anti-socialist thoughts and plant general 'false consciousness'. Otherwise socialists too would be brainwashed into other ways of thinking. In reality, even the most carefully contrived media messages (e.g. wartime propaganda, public health campaigns and the marketing of new movies) often fall flat on their face.<sup>16</sup> The point is not to excuse Tory papers like the *Daily Mail* or right-wing radio 'shock jocks'. Rather it is to suggest that serious analysis of the Left's weaknesses must dig deeper into a wider context.

It is, of course, a commonplace to date the decay in the labour movement and of left-wing groups within it to the period after John's book and particularly to the late 70s, when hopes of a mass radicalisation at the time of the two miners' strikes were dashed. Yet it could be argued that the rot had set in well before and that it stemmed from factors that are hovering at the edges of John's narrative.

### ***From us to me***

John picks upon 'boom conditions' as the defining feature of the period he describes. He claims that it gave workers 'confidence' to fight for betterment. But the connections between the two, let alone likely knock-on effects in terms of general values and behaviour, are complicated. Certainly, as the IS in particular argued, better pay and greater job security can lead to a kind of D-I-Y reformism where social and economic improvement is sought through trade union militancy, not least when there is little danger of being replaced from the ranks of the 'reserve army' of (unemployed) labour.

Yet, when people are so poor that they have little to lose, they too can turn to militant struggle. After all some of the most violent struggles have taken place in the context of mass unemployment and during the Great Depression, millions flocked to extremist parties on both Left and Right, though, it must be said, the latter tended to benefit the most. Affluence can also have politically sedative effects. Generally, however, the state of the economy is only one variable. In the case of the individuals who feature in John's story it is not clear it is far from clear whether economic factors per se played any direct or decisive role in their political itinerary. (Of course what might motivate individuals could well be different to what sets mass movements in motion).

### ***Consumer society***

Other forces were at work in his period that may explain why the body politic evolved the way it did. This was the era when large-scale suburbanisation spread across the land, having first mushroomed in the Home Counties during the 1930s. Its cousin was mass consumerism, a social phenomenon that can be dated back to the 1920s in the USA. Its trappings took hold in the UK post-rationing in the 50s with spreading ownership of property, home furnishings and appliances, not least the private motor car.

Several people interviewed by John recall the sub-standard housing in which they grew up. This was, of course, an incentive to go out. Even attendance at unproductive political meetings might be better than staying in. All this changed with the advent of more comfortable housing. If it were sited far from the town centre and also distant from work, there was all the reason not to go back out on a night. Teenagers might have been an exception but this too began to change in recent years as bedrooms turned into electronic cages full of games consoles and the like.

The North East as a whole came to the party a bit later. TV broadcasting in the area only arrived late in the 50s, for example, while the shopping

obsession, endless bouts of 'retail therapy', only entered popular lifestyles in the mid-60s (some readers may remember the arrival of such novelties as the boutique Marcus Price!). Large-scale restaurant-going happened later still. Yet, from the mid-50s onwards there was growing separation in the region, as had started earlier 'down south', between home, work and leisure. It was not just in physical terms but also in the way people began to see their lives. Life became more home-centred as well as more individualistic, with people taking on a wider diversity of 'identities', often not work-related ones.

In terms of work itself, deindustrialisation had not yet cuts its swathe through the NE in the period John describes, though the regional nature of unemployment had long been an issue (that Tory buffoon Quinton Hogg being given special cabinet responsibility, 1963-64, to tackle it). Already underway, however, was the switch away from 'blue' to 'white' collar work. This did not necessarily mean the end of large concentrations of employment: witness the huge Longbenton 'Ministry' complex. Some jobs off the industrial 'shop floor' could be centres of militancy and sometimes definite left tendencies, notably amongst the draughtsmen at workplaces like C. A. Parsons (which John does spotlight).

Yet offices in general and, of course, sectors like retail and leisure in particular (the latter two beginning to boom in the mid-60s with massive developments like Eldon Square just around the corner) have usually been difficult places to organise in trade union terms. Individuals who work there tend to be grouped in small numbers and more transient (though the latter characteristic only became really pronounced much later, with the rise of so-called McJobs and the spread of 'contract culture').

Ironically one of the most prescient people in John's story was the much maligned T. Dan Smith. To his credit, and unlike so many others at the time, he did foresee that dependence on the old heavy industries could not be long sustained and that change must come. The developments he helped to father left a very great deal to be desired of course, though the big turn-out at his funeral suggested that memories in his activities were not all bad.

Add all this together and the result is a much more individualistic, home-centred, and materialistic culture, one which is not fertile soil for a politics that deals in collectivities, prioritises public welfare, and focuses itself on the workplace. In other words, movements like socialism were going to find it harder to connect to the denizens of mass consumer society. John has called his book *Don't You Hear the H-Bomb's Thunder?* Thousands of people answered positively, marching in support of CND. But millions more heard nothing or, if they did, remained passive.

Withdrawal into the 'private sphere' had various consequences. John spotlights several left-wingers who played leading roles in local workplaces. He is doubtless right to give them their due. But it must be noted that, up and down the country, many socialists had 'captured' such positions simply because no-one else was interested. Bodies like Trades Councils ceased to be a meaningful gathering of genuine workplace representatives. It might even be thought a bit of a lark to elect a Communist (the 1960 film *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* hints at this as well as the broader disengagement amongst younger workers from both trade unionism and socialism).

It might be noted that such social and cultural changes did not just hit politics. Robert Puttnam's study *Bowling Alone* documented how all sorts of mass participation activities were hit in the USA (as the title spotlights, ten pin bowling clubs were badly hit). John has a chapter on the local poetry and music scene. It too has declined. Cinema attendances were falling well before the advent of mass TV ownership. Domestic television, then video and computers, reinforced such trends.

Of course there are always other factors (debts instead of physical payment of union dues, supermarket alcohol rather than the pub and club, etc.) but, together with the broader changes just noted, these developments progressively undermined community identity and mass participation. True there have been exceptions to the rule. There were, for example, the huge demonstrations against the Anglo-American

invasion of Iraq yet it is striking just how quickly the anti-war movement evaporated, leaving little trace, except, perhaps, just more disillusionment with politics. One wonders whether the world of John's book is not an endangered but extinct species.

The position of women in society has not been mentioned here. John does devote quite a bit of space to the matter and his observations are shrewd. He spotlights a number of female activists in the area: it is not a male-dominated picture. But it has to be underlined that there were certainly sexist currents in some of the circles described. One leading female activist in the late 60s was labelled the 'iron butterfly', presumably because those sneering thought it not lady-like to be so politically active. Female trade unionists often suffered patronising treatment at the hands of male 'comrades'. One wonders whether it is more a matter of continuity, not change, here.

### *A cup of culture*

John rightly devotes a discrete chapter to developments on the cultural scene. Of course, there is a great danger that artists can be reduced to 'engineers of the soul', with music and other art forms treated as but another set of weapons in the 'struggle'. But the arts can be a genuine stimulant to political engagement, be it a painting like Picasso's *Guernica* or a novel like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, banned for many years in Britain. The book tells how Tyneside in the 60s did produce a left-wing songwriter and performer of note, Alex Glasgow, as well as some radical graphic designers.

It might be wondered whether there is a trace in the book of left-wing unwillingness to critique popular culture (with an attendant penchant for labelling critics as elitists). Perhaps it leads John to underestimate how 'pop' had already established a stranglehold on youth culture. This was the period of those anodyne teen idols who all seemed to be called 'Bobby' or 'Ricky'. This was also the era of TV shows like the ghastly Perry Como

Show, whose popularity reflected the true state of mass taste. The cinema-going public quickly tired of innovative movies from the British New Wave, preferring Bond fantasies, 'Carry On' naughtiness and the warbling of a Julie Andrews.

In any case, anything more radical always ran the risk of co-option, the so-called 'revolt into style' syndrome (Newcastle was, in due course, to acquire a night club with a giant image of Che Guevara outside). At the same time, the British Left's role in cultural matters was often not a happy one. True it largely seems to have avoided the evils of Proletcult and, worse, Zhadanovism in the Soviet Union (though it try to silence dissident voices like George Orwell in the late 30s and 40s).

But sometimes, as in the case of the Communist Party and the English folk song revival movement, it acted in ways that were ultimately restrictive. In some extent there was an attempt not just to revive but also 'freeze' the tradition. Fortunately there were those who did appreciate the need to continue development (Fairport Convention in England, the Battlefield Band north of the Border). In the case of Tyneside, it might be argued the genuine innovators were not new 60s bands like the Animals (who looked to American blues) but later ones, notably Lindisfarne ('Fog on the Tyne' etc). John somewhat ignores the classical music scene about which a comment might have been in order (this reviewer comes from Huddersfield where choral singing and symphonic music had real working class roots in the 50s & 60s).

### ***See no evil***

There is one matter, indeed the really big issue, that scarcely features in John's book. It is the unfolding, all-embracing and all-changing ecological crisis. The recession in the Earth life-support systems will make economic downturns look like small beer indeed. It will exceed the effects of World War 2. Its roots are long but the pressures driving it were beginning to accelerate in the 1950s. In that decade, several US newspapers carried

stories about the prospect of long-term global warming and in 1962, in the very middle of the period covered by John, Rachel Carson published that seminal warning cry, *Silent Spring*.

It seems fair to speculate that many characters in John's story did not know and, more importantly, did not care to know about the most significant development happening around them. However there is at least one exception and one which John, to his credit, does note. It was Harry Rothman whose 1972 book *Murderous Providence* has a good claim to be the first ecosocialist book written by a Briton, the American Barry Commoner publishing his *The Closing Circle* the previous year.

Nuclear bombs did thunder in anger twice and in tests more often. But nuclear annihilation mercifully has remained a threat, not reality. Ecological Armageddon is actually unfolding. It is a tragedy that more people were not thundering about it back in the early 60s. Who knows whether it is too late now.

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- <sup>1</sup> John is Newcastle born and bred though later he taught in Leeds for a number of years before returning to his home ground. He was to become a 'full-timer' for the IS and, for a time, served as a Central Committee member. He has played a unique role in building the North East Labour History Society. On top of his quite varied writing activities, he also gives regular lectures at venues like the Literary and Philosophical Society.
  - <sup>2</sup> Remember 'Selsdon Man' who was quickly interred after a strong trade union response to what was, to some extent, a short-lived precursor of Thatcherite / Reaganite policies? There were huge strikes and marches which effectively killed off Tory policies like the Industrial

Relations Act. The Left played a leading role via bodies such as Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions. Later came the two miners' strikes which terminated the Heath government. It is hard to imagine anything similar today. The biggest protests such as the those against the Poll Tax have taken place outside the traditional structures of the labour movement.

- <sup>3</sup> Most socialists are probably agnostics if not militant atheists, though some contributors to John's book do make clear the influence of Christian ideas about good and evil, right and wrong, on their political development. Yet it is curious how a degree of religiosity pops up across left-wing discourse. It is interesting, for example, that the final section of John's book is called 'Keeping Faith'. Of course, those dropping out of this or that groupuscule are routinely accused of 'losing faith in the working class'. Others will say that they 'believe' that the future will be socialist. The religious undertones are evident. Moreover, for all its talk about scientific socialism, the Left had been militantly disinterested in what sciences such as thermodynamics and ecology might teach about the human prospect, though Marx himself was very interested in what soil scientists and other naturalists had to say.
- <sup>4</sup> There is a thorny conundrum here, however, and one which lies beneath 'broad church' bodies like the North East Labour History Society. It is the fact that such inclusivity brings together people who, in the past, would have killed each other. In particular, there are, in the ranks of the veteran Left on Tyneside and doubtless elsewhere, individuals who willingly, nay enthusiastically, would have shot innocent victims, including many socialists and trade unionists, in Stalin or Mao's secret police cellars or worked them to death in the slave camps. Yet the logic of greater exclusivity about whom to accept under the great red umbrella leads, if stretched too far, to the position of organisations like the Socialist Party of Great Britain. It treats members of all other left organisations as phonies and, indeed,



conscious or unconscious supporters of capitalism. Not surprisingly the track record of the SPGB is but an exercise in utter ineffectuality and one which perpetually hovers on the brink of oblivion.

- <sup>5</sup> The sub-title of John's book is 'Youth and Politics' but this focus inevitably spotlights the more radical left at the expense of 'ordinary' Labour Party members and, for that matter, probably Communist Party activists too.
- <sup>6</sup> See <http://www.whatnextjournal.co.uk/Pages/Sectariana/Pub.html>
- <sup>7</sup> See <http://www.whatnextjournal.co.uk/Pages/Index/Authors.html> and <http://www.marxists.org/archive/higgins/index.htm>
- <sup>8</sup> See recent issues of *International Socialism*, *New Left Review* and the *American Monthly Review*. Compare articles therein to the bluster of, say, a Robert Peston on BBC TV.
- <sup>9</sup> As far as this reviewer can judge on his own experiences, John's characterisations are fair and, if they err, it is on the side of generosity.
- <sup>10</sup> Alistair Darling, a former IMG supporter, seems to have reached the dizzyest height, becoming Chancellor of the Exchequer in the inglorious reign of Gordon Brown. One of the latter's sharpest Labour critics would be Alan Milburn, an ex-Trot of sorts but one whose phoniness was obvious from the start, at least to this reviewer. Stephen Byers started out as a Militant sympathiser in North Tyneside on the trail from local council to Parliament and government ministry.
- <sup>11</sup> A stimulating look at these matters was Jo Freeman's *Tyranny of Structurelessness*, now posted at <http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm>
- <sup>12</sup> Chris Pallis might be said to have played that role in Solidarity in the UK.
- <sup>13</sup> Once again Peter Sedgwick is a thought-provoking guide. See <http://www.marxists.org/archive/sedgwick/1964/08/2newlefts.htm>
- <sup>14</sup> In the period covered by this book, there was the possibility of a significant regrouping around the considerable number of talented

and committed individuals who left the Communist Party following the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising of 1956. The opportunity was squandered largely thanks to Gerry Healey and his clique. Later came the disasters of the Scottish Socialist Party, and, south of the border, the Respect Party. In between there were various 'unity' initiatives, usually generating greater disunity (e.g. the IS-Workers Fight 'fusion')

- <sup>15</sup> The Newcastle-based North-East Labour History Society reflects many of the points being made in this review. Such is the decline of radical politics that the NELHS is just about the only organisation locally to hold regular meetings of a quasi-political nature. Those meeting places too have contracted. Once there were pubs like the Bridge Hotel where leftists of one hue or another could usually be found. Gone too are radical bookshops (the Communist Party used to run one, for example). The NELHS itself is in comparatively good health yet this owes a great deal to John Charlton himself. If he dropped out, the Society might well begin to contract. See <http://www.nelh.org/>
- <sup>16</sup> One of the most famous examples occurred during the period of John's book. It was the *Never Alone with a Strand* cigarette advertising campaign. It must have seemed a good idea to the company executives at the time and was certainly well made, but it spectacularly backfired, leading to a massive fall in sales. Reference is made by one of the interviewees in John's book to Vance Packard's celebrated critique *The Hidden Persuaders* but such pop sociology does not get to grips with the complex interaction over meanings, let alone subsequent thoughts and behaviours, between the media's messages and the audiences receiving them.
- <sup>17</sup> It is well worth reading Peter Sedgwick's comments on the 1950s posted @ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/sedgwick/1971/xx/fifties.htm>
- <sup>18</sup> John makes some interesting speculations, including changes to the education system. Writing as someone who lived on a council estate

but got to a grammar school, I cannot but agree with his comment that this whole experience helped to radicalise several individuals. In my class, there were only two others (twins) who lived in council housing. Certain aspects of the class system became so much clearer.

- <sup>19</sup> This reviewer has always thought that the differences between Series 1 and 2 of *The Likely Lads* capture many of these developments, especially the title sequence of the latter. Another TV sitcom, *Only Fools and Horses*, was to identify changes in the working classes more perceptively than did many left-wing theorists at the time and accurately anticipated the appeal of Margaret Thatcher to previously loyal Labour voters, especially in sprawling suburbs of south-east England.
- <sup>20</sup> An interesting local example is how the take-up of video by the Asian community (fastest group to buy the gadgets) knocked the nail in the coffin of the cinema in West Jesmond, which had been specialising in Bollywood movies.
- <sup>21</sup> A germane example this reviewer encountered of where the masses' tastes lie occurred at a strike benefit at which Alex Glasgow performed. He was barracked by several of the strikers present (aided, it must be said, by much alcohol) for being boring as he performed songs like 'Close the Coalhouse door'. It might be remembered that the great Eisenstein films bombed with Russian working class audiences. Ordinary Italians were not turned on by Neo-Realism, preferring Hollywood pap. Dwight Macdonald's critique 'Masscult and Midcult', published in 1960, are perhaps better guide to what was going on in culture in that period. The Left, of course, tends to bristle fiercely whenever notions such as 'dumbing down' are raised since it does not like nasty things to be said about the masses.
- <sup>22</sup> It was actually predated by several other studies from the likes of William Vogt, Fairfield Osborn, Samuel Ordway and Lewis Heber (Murray Bookchin). The excuse that 'we did not know then what now

we know' will not wash.

- <sup>23</sup> As John recounts, Harry's father, Benny, had been a leading figure in the 'access' battles of the 1930s in the Peak District which helped to open the door to the creation of the National Parks post-war. However here is an example of how the environment can be despoiled not by capitalist greed but simply by too many people. Mass access has led soil erosion, water pollution, wildlife disturbance and so forth. This is not to defend land ownership patterns that activist like Benny Rothman challenged. It is to simply state that Mother Earth's ills have many parents, ones which simplistic 'anti-capitalism' fails to address satisfactorily.

- <sup>24</sup> I have tried to assemble some of the evidence here: <http://www.sandyirvine.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/PDFs/Bibliography%20Ecocode.pdf>

*And from Archie Potts ...*



CND marchers rest at North Shields 1960

The 1960s was a decade of political radicalism and cultural change embracing music, literature, fashion and attitudes to gender, sex and authority. Or so it seemed at the time. Historians, however, have problems with the 1960s, and are far from agreeing on what happened and why. Behind the television images of women burning their bras and student demonstrations: what was it all about? John Charlton's book offers fresh evidence on this question, and it is solid evidence.

John Charlton has studied the lives and family backgrounds of fifty young, left-wing Tyneside activists of the 1960s. Because they first met together as a group in 1959 they called themselves the 1959 Society, although the so-called Society was very loose and informal. Clearly the 1960s were halcyon days for this particular group because over the succeeding years they continued to hold reunions. In carrying out his study of the group John Charlton has not applied a rigid methodology and many of his judgements could be described as 'impressionistic'. Someone who read a rough draft of the book described it, echoing A L Balfour's description of Winston Churchill's *The World Crisis*, as 'autobiography disguised as history'. There is some truth in this, for a strong autobiographical streak runs through the book because John Charlton was an active member of the 1959 Society. However his membership of the group enables him to secure insights that would elude a more clinical social scientist coming from outside.

John probes the family backgrounds of his young activists and finds that, almost without exception, they came from 'activist' families. Activism breeds activism, it would seem. Revisionist historians have pointed out that during the inter-war years real wages rose in Britain, and much needed restructuring of the economy took place as capital was transferred from the declining industries of coal, steel and shipbuilding into the growth industries of motor manufacturing, chemicals, electricity and a wide range of new consumer products. Behind the statistics, however, many people lived bleak lives, living on low wages or dole money. The

parents of John Charlton's activists were part of this generation. It was this generation that swept Labour to power in 1945, and it was their sons and daughters who enjoyed full employment, the benefits of the welfare state, and the post-war changes in the educational system.

John points out that the early 1950s were dull and conservative, and indeed popular culture had changed little since the 1930s. The music scene was dominated by tenors and sopranos, dance bands and light concert orchestras until Bill Haley and the Comets made their breakthrough in the mid 1950s. Rock and roll went on to conquer the world. Tyneside followed the trend with the appearance of many local groups, notably the Animals and Lindisfarne. Jazz continued to be popular and there was a folk music revival in the area. Morden Tower became a lively centre for poetry reading and the People's Theatre continued to put on plays. This was the cultural background to the political activities of the 1959 Society.

The first half of the 1950s' political scene also lacked excitement and change. The Churchill Government 1951-55 was content to consolidate the social and economic reforms implemented by the post-war Labour Government. However things perked up in 1956 with the Anglo-French attack on Egypt and the Soviet invasion of Hungary. Out of this turmoil emerged the New Left, CND, the Anti-Apartheid Movement and, later, opposition to the Vietnam War. Members of the 1959 Society were active in all these campaigns and joined the various left-wing groups and minor parties that emerged on the political scene.

A great merit of this book is that it is a local study of the 1960s: it covers people and events outside of Carnaby Street and London's television studios. Television coverage of events can sometimes view them through a distorting lens, and this was certainly true of the 1960s when far too much attention was paid to what was happening in a small area of London. For example, how many people attended wild sex orgies in the 1960s? When it comes down to it the answer is very few. The exploits of the Rolling Stones and Marianne Faithfull were the exception and not the rule. Indeed John

Charlton's young activists come over as a serious minded bunch, interested in issues such as nuclear disarmament and opposition to apartheid in South Africa. Unlike Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger* they were not 'rebels without a cause', and they pursued their causes with considerable energy. The 59ers are an interesting group and John Charlton has done them justice.

*Archie Potts*

***Newcastle in the sixties***

Anna Flowers & Vanessa Hurst, (eds). ***It's My Life*** (Tyne Bridge Publishing, 2009), 192pp, ISBN 978 18795 138 7: £10.00, pbk.

For someone who was a teenager and, then, married in the Sixties Tyneside, this book is a nostalgic jaunt. As Britain was beginning to lose its postwar inertia, with jobs to be had and signs of wages 'affluence', exciting things were happening in music, fashion, and politics, especially for young people. Teenagers, in the North East, felt Newcastle, the Toon, had its own Sixties identity. From over 70 contributors, including the Society's very own John Charlton, the book under review is essentially devoted to a mix of graphic memories and evocative photographs. It certainly recaptures a little of the excitement of that decade. However its appeal will, probably, go beyond the 10 yers that makeup the Sixties and those who reminisce. There is a new interest in its music, fashion trends and, of course, peace protest is back in vogue. But for me it was the memory pull. Gateshead lad, born, bred and working there, the highlight was to cross the Bridge, any of the four that I could cross as a pedestrian or in the bus, to the Toon!

***'The Swinging Sixties'***

The foreword, by Dick Godfrey retired Journal newspaper feature writer, gives an overview of the societal change; 'work and excitement'. This 'decade of the young' was sustained because 'we were children of the Welfare State',... 'healthy by it, and above all, were educated by it'. Although recognizing that it was a 'country still sharply divided by class', nevertheless there was work, especially for the young. It was, therefore, this that made possible, the 'decade that created teenagers'. Newcastle, however, was to start the decade with little change, but 'those determined to build a different future began their work'. The infrastructural changes in the region and particularly the vision of T Dan Smith led to the subsequent redevelopment of the city centre. Outlining Smith's 'legacy'; 'planned, bulldozed and built'; old landmarks, like the old Town Hall, Blackett Street YMCA (replaced by the Eldon Square Shopping Mall), the old Central Library and the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Royal Arcade were all demolished. Then writing what has become obligatory when Smith is mentioned, he refers to the corruption charges and, (questionably!) that this left 'a stain on the reputation of the City of Newcastle.' Much has been written about this period of redevelopment and the role of Smith, but for the '*ordinary people*' the memorable effects were always new homes, women gaining a new sense of freedom through fashions, by 1968 the contraceptive pill and, the new phenomenon teenagers. However, for the young, it was the music that was a defining factor. Not only the Beatles, although he claims, with justification, 'Beatlemania reigned supreme', Newcastle had its own 'scene'. He then referred to that club 'scene': the Club A' Gogo, and the Downbeat; all of which subsequently leap from the memories elsewhere in the book.





The Downbeat

### *Politics*

But, as it also says in its introduction, ‘Political awareness grew with the knowledge that the young could, perhaps, influence events. Involvement in protest groups – most notably the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament – grew’. So, as everyone does with this kind of ‘Remembering’ book, I turned first, nearly to the closing pages, to the part related to my direct interest, politics. Entitled, ‘I’m Going to Change the World’, the section was disappointingly brief, considering the sentences above from the introduction. Nevertheless it did give an impression of the impact of politics. The section, begins with Charlton recollecting the ‘great labour movement ritual’ of the May Day events of 1960, and then it follows through with others memories and photographs of CND. It distinctly showed the link to the Sixties cultural shift: the symbol, the badge, was not only for protest, but also a defiant fashion statement. In merely five pages it depicted, if briefly, how ‘serious and politically aware’ were some young people. Possibly I expected more, as my own memories of Youth CND (YCND) and the period have these issues as paramount. Even

for those not directly involved, it was an integral part of the changing youth culture. But to be fair, this volume does not set out to record the memories of Tyneside's radical youth of the sixties. Filling that purpose, Charlton's recent book, *Don't you hear the H-Bombs Thunder?*, reviewed in this Journal, is the most informative read.

### ***How we lived!***

In the words of those who faced the possible changing home surroundings, and of course from the pictures, it was apparent that 'the city arrived in the 60s as it had left the 50s'. This is amply demonstrated, in two short sections, within the first portion of the book. The 'good old days' of neighbourliness and community. Here, the photographs and contributors capture the moment; a time when kids 'played out', the street games, community 'trips to the coast', the *local* shops, the school and the homes. For some there was housing squalor, whereas a student suggested a fascination with the changing environment of the demolishing terraced flats. Replaced by multi-story blocks, 'the flats' for one was their '*dream house*', nevertheless others declared they were 'often badly built and unpopular'. But as songwriter/singer Bob Dylan put it in 1964 *The Times* *They Are a- Changin'*. And they did!

### ***The music, fashions***

But for nearly everyone, especially the young, it was the music, youth sub-culture, and fashion that defined the 60's Newcastle, to which a major part of the book, 74 pages, is dedicated. Songs and a film title of the era are used as the headings of the four sections transporting you to the sounds and, with '*Dedicated Follower of Fashions*', to the time of 'mods'. What is unmistakable, there were two distinctive phases and trends in the decade: what may be called 'the self improvised' and the commercialized. The voices in this part of the book caused me to drift back and remember that it wasn't all intense politics. Often part of the 'peace and politics' of

the time was the night music scene: the clubs. The music and styles were categorized by venues. Jazz, both traditional and modern, was played out in all the clubs, although raw rhythm and blues (R&B) were the staple music of the *legendary Downbeat* and *Club A' Gogo* or as it was always called, *The Gogo*. As the comments depict, these were all live music haunts where you literally rubbed shoulders with those who were performing that night ; the jazz bands, local R&B groups (they were not called bands then) and national stars ; a case in point being the Rolling Stones. The New Orleans jazz club, the Quay Club, for great jazz outlined by those that had the opportunity to have been there, but mainly the Downbeat and the Gogo resonate with my memory. The Downbeat, particularly was the weekend night venue for '*the beatnik*' as one comment had it. She 'wore a duffle coat (with a ban the bomb badge ) black stockings and a long black jumper.....'. Ah! Memories. I recall it was the place for YCND folk to hang out, as local radio called, the 'peaceniks'. As the poster reproduced in the book shows it was open **'EVERY SATURDAY. Midnight - 3a.m.'** The comment that 'It was pretty basic...' was an understatement. It was an old building with every one of the inner doors and walls removed and always in semi-darkness. However it was the music that is vivid in memory, really loud. The pulsating bass and the skip jive/jazz dancing are memorable to them and to myself. So is eating after midnight at the place here mentioned, Bowers and the British Rail (workers) canteen, along with the inevitable all-night bus, in my case back to Gateshead at some unearthly hour. I cannot guess when that nice photograph of the Downbeat was taken!

With the now famous local group, the Animals, being a virtual part of north east folklore, John Steel, their drummer, gives his exposition of their story, 'An Animal's tale.'. The Animals were the resident group at the Downbeat and then at the Gogo. To go into the Gogo in Percy Street Newcastle you needed to be 'dressed', by that it meant, unlike the Downbeat, collar and tie and no jeans. Nevertheless, as all the contributions show, it was the place to go for the blues and to hear the top national and Black American

Blues stars. Obviously for me a place to be was always the Folk Clubs. With only one comment on this Sixties revival obviously it was inevitable the Bridge Hotel Pub would be mentioned, but there were many others. Maybe this needed more contributions as these clubs continued, and still do, an historic tradition.

The other places highlighted, the Majestic, the Oxford, the Mayfair were the more 'conventional' dance venues of my work colleagues in the Gateshead Cooperative Society. Here the *'bopping, twisting and even the Locomotion' were the dances. The music was contemporary* popular music, pop music...both live and records. The socializing place for the young! The coffee bars were, as the contributors recall, mostly for daylight hours and many are remembered. The Palletta, under the YMCA, Blackett Street, opposite Fenwicks now the Eldon Square Shopping Mall) and the Marimba on High Bridge, all of which no longer exist, were where Downbeat and Gogo regulars met together for the new espresso coffee, to share gossip, even to discuss politics, enjoy a snack, listen to the records and, I recall, talk about poetry.

Anna Flowers appropriately adds her memories of the poetry readings in the Morden Tower, back of Stowell Street, to that of others that link it to YCND culture. Of course there was also the pubs and clubs. The reminiscences here give credence to the comment that this was 'the start of Newcastle becoming the party city'. Certainly the memories echo the hedonism associated with 21<sup>st</sup> century Tyneside. There are many recollections of the wild excitement before and during the Beatles and the Rolling Stones concerts. By the mid '60s things were becoming more commercialized.

Shopping was changing too. Memories of the Department Stores show the difference between the up-market and those that were 'shopping on credit', although still remaining was the Co-op and the dividend, fondly remembered by one contributor and by myself. But the media and the retail trade now realized the potential of this sub-culture, so the clothes of the early sixties the improvised 'look', were being replaced by 'a more commercialized uniform ... the mod culture was emerging'. Here

are the shops that catered for this new trend that came out of the previous creative energy, and evidence that it was now important to dress as stylish as your wages, grant or pocket money allowed. But primarily it was about breaking free (but often not quite totally) from parental control. There then follow other recollections of 'how we lived'. The bus stations, the buses and the trains, it showed that majority used public transport then. Sport, inevitably meant Newcastle United, but also the Speedway. As for work, the only reference is the shops where young women found employment. Student life shows the development of a university city. The concluding sections cover; the weddings, now a costly event; the Hoppings; the old and the Sixties new Central Library.

For me apart from the testimonies to the changes, it was the photographs and adverts that immediately transport you back to the decade; the people, the places and of course, the old landmarks, swept away in the 'modernization'. It is particularly difficult to appraise a book of individuals memories. However the editors have produced a very interesting compilation of photograph and personal recollections. These are not the result of interviews, but free-flowing reminiscences and are all the better for that. It does give a sense of how it was to live in the 1960s, especially for young people. Obviously one begins to wonder why there was no mention of this or that, for example the Bridge Hotel as a political haven for young '*revolutionaries*'; employment; the day release and night schools. However as a book of the 'remember this' genre it fulfils its purpose more than adequately. It has provided the testimony of experiences which would normally go unrecorded.

*John Creaby*

*A heady blend*

David John Douglass, ***Geordies –Wa Mental*** (Hastings, Read ‘n’ Noir, 2008), ISBN 1-873976-34-8, 330pp; David John Douglas, ***The Wheel’s Still in Spin***, (Hastings, Read ‘n’ Noir, 2009), ISBN-10 1-873976-36-4, 466pp.

Dave Douglass has embarked on an epic of autobiography represented in his trilogy *Stardust and Coaldust*. The first two episodes in the series form a remarkable structured stream of consciousness. That may seem contradictory but Dave’s personal history interwoven with the turmoil of working class politics – and in his case a heady blend of Trotskyism and Anarchism and much more – sets his accounts of that period in a different dimension to many others, and anyway life does not always follow an academic straightforwardness.

*Geordies – Wa Mental* deals with Dave’s childhood and teenage years, and takes in Tyneside youth politics and social life up to the mid-1960s. It should be read in conjunction with John Charlton’s *Don’t You Hear the H-Bomb’s Thunder? Youth and Politics on Tyneside in the late ‘Fifties and early ‘Sixties* (Pontypool, Merlin, 2009). Where John Charlton gives a deep insight into a largely middle class young people’s encounter with left wing enthusiasms for Socialism, Communism and CND, Dave Douglass overlaps with several of the same incidents, but starts from youth rebellion on the Ellen Wilkinson housing estate.

Through Dave’s story, the fraught experiences of working class teenagers with the police in everyday life are recalled, and then projected into teenagers’ efforts to make space for their share of 60s culture through music, parties, booze, sex. What makes this story distinctive is that this fragment of 60s culture tried to colonise an organisational framework spanning an ILP meeting hall and, thanks to the Young Communist League, the Communist Party’s building on Newcastle’s Westgate Road.

The police managed to close the ILP hall, but the YCL proved a tougher nut to crack (and became famous for its street graffiti).

All the big moments of the period are there, including youth-driven demonstrations in Newcastle at the height of the Cuban missile crisis. Dave has deliberately concealed some identities in case there remains a possibility of prosecutions. One incident was the police raid on a Tyneside flat where Spies for Peace leaflets identifying Regional Seats of Government were being produced on a duplicator (what would we have done without duplicators in those days!). Audiences at North East Labour History Society meetings will be familiar with more of the details of this raid, but Dave's telling of the story is vivid.

Moving to work at a pit in South Yorkshire in 1966, led straight into the rising momentum of revolutionary politics that spread through the 1970s and '80s. The story is taken up in *The Wheel's Still in Spin*. This volume revisits the intensity of commitment to Marxist organisations, factionalism and the belief that the world might be on the verge of change. The vanished world of coal mining and miners' union bureaucracy inhabited by Labour and CP activists, and the difficulties for young miners in grasping change in their social lives as well as other political options on the Left, are recorded in immense detail. Here we meet groups like the Goole Labour Party Young Socialists that once consumed enormous energy and worried the Labour establishment. And Dave brings back to life the inner worlds of revolutionary groups, and the campaigns, pickets and raucous sociability that he enjoyed so much.

*The Wheel's Still in Spin* reaches beyond the end of the pits and the miners' strikes. On the way, it also uncovers little known adventures such as the 'military training' that Dave, also a member of Sinn Féin, and some of his friends devised and undertook around Rothbury and Otterburn during the Irish War.

One of the strong features of the book is its insight into education as a venue for political and organisational development. The section on

Dave's time at Ruskin College is especially fascinating to those of us who just preceded him at the College, and describes something of how that institution impacted on working class men at the start of the '70s.

It's not entirely clear to this reviewer how women fit into the story? There are plenty of references to women in Dave's books, some of them are positive, but there's much more (much, much more!) about his detailed attention to women's clothing (especially mini-skirts) and his variable success in sexual clinches. A lot of this could come straight out of Mils and Boon. It's all part of labour history, of course, and usually the unwritten aspect (you don't find it mentioned in minute books!), but Dave Douglass simply mentions in passing that he favoured 'open relationships'. Some reflection on this 'inner life' of the Left would have been helpful.

Overall, the books are an absolute goldmine of a slice of left-wing life in a world that has now largely disappeared.

*Nigel Todd*

***I am a camera ...***

Jimmy Forsyth, ***Photographs from the 1950s and 1960s***: Selected and with an introduction by Anthony Flowers (Tyne Bridge Publishing, 2009), 140pp, ISBN 9781857951332, \_£8.99, pbk.

Mrs Harold Pinter, generally known as Lady Antonia Fraser, nee Antonia Margaret Caroline Pakenham, daughter of the 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Longford, is the noted author of numerous historical studies. Her highly-praised biographies, whilst well-researched, contain nothing which could be described as first-hand experience. She has seen life through a glass darkly, protected by her wealth and aristocratic background. Only death will confound this cushion of cash and connections.



James Forsyth, generally known as Jimmy, was born in the South Wales coalfield in 1913 and was not expected to live. That he did was, perhaps, an indication of an inner strength which sustained him through the next ninety-six years. He saw life in the harsh light of reality: a living had to be earned, work had to be sought. Death was a ever-present part of that present reality, whether through illness, industrial accident or the ravages of war.

Leaving school at fourteen, apprenticed fitter, unemployed, merchant seaman, fitter, his fragile livelihood took him to many places, eventually to Tyneside in 1943 where he was recruited for urgent munitions production. After only four days in the ICI factory, an accident left him blind in one eye. He continued to work there until he was sacked in a dispute with a foreman. On the meagre dole, he trudged round England looking for work, only to be told, upon returning to Tyneside, that he was no longer eligible for dole. He cheated death at an ironworks when a crane jib fractured his skull, and in 1955 he even tried self-employment as a general dealer, but without success.

Sometime in the early 1950s Jimmy acquired a camera. Things carried on as before, working when there was work, but the camera gave his life an added dimension, restoring, in a sense, the eye he had lost. This slim volume records the 'camera years' of the fifties and sixties when Jimmy was pointing his lens at everyone and everything around him. The old order was disappearing fast and the brave new post-war world was fast arising out of the rubble of regeneration. In his admirable, concise but comprehensive introduction, Anthony Flowers mentions two people who might be portrayed as Jimmy's guardian angels: Steve Wood and Des Walton. The former was manager of a photographic dealer's shop in Newcastle, and he kept Jimmy supplied with film, second-hand cameras and probably technical advice. The latter was a city librarian and local historian who was approached by Jimmy to look after his negatives as he feared they could be cleared out with his belongings in the event of his

death. It was Des Walton who introduced the photos to the public in Newcastle, which led to national recognition and acclaim.

Whatever technical help he may have had, Jimmy Forsyth's was a natural talent. His work, in a modest way, reminds one especially of two great American photographers. Firstly, Walker Evans, born in 1903, documented life in the depression years, recording the twenties and thirties across the United States just as Forsyth did in the fifties and sixties but on a much smaller scale. Walker's work often has the conscious socio-political dimension of a middle class rebel. With Jimmy, this dimension is only discernible by interpreting the photos themselves, which are produced, as one might say, at the ground level of society. Secondly, his portraits of the residents of Newcastle's West End are reminiscent of Diane Arbus, who often sought to portray strange and unusual people. Whilst he was happy to snap the 'ordinary' residents of the West End, he somehow manages to imbue many of these pictures with an Arbus-like quirkiness.

All of which is brought out in this modest, well-produced volume, published in the year of his death. The selection of photos provides an overall view of Forsyth's achievement and are reproduced in a deep sepia tone which adds a touch of warmth to the monochrome. The Jimmy Forsyth Archive is stored with the Tyne and Wear Archive Service.

I like to think that at some time in the future, a high-born lady, will come across Jimmy's photos whilst researching a book about the lives of ordinary people in mid-twentieth century. She will find an extraordinary first-hand record at the cusp of change and social upheaval, produced by a little man, with one eye and a second-hand camera. Well done Jimmy! And thank you.

*Alec Ponton*

***Miners' travails***

Hester Barron, ***1926 Miners' Lockout: Meanings of Community in the Durham Coalfield*** (Oxford University Press, 2010) 330 pp, ISBN 978-0-19-957504-6, £65, hbk.

Ostensibly this is a book about the general strike of 1926, but as its sub-title suggests, it is more than this for it is also a review of the historiography of British coalmining and its attendant concepts. As a empirical history of the general strike in the region this adds very little to what is already known and, like much other work in this area, Barron's book draws heavily upon Tony Mason's seminal, but out of print, *The General Strike in the North East*, Hull 1970. (Surely, there is no work in regional labour history more deserving of re publication than this?) . As a review and critique of the historiographical<sup>1</sup> and conceptual structure of mining histories this book is as comprehensive and systematic as any I have ever read (though Barron's apparent belief that paternalism in Durham has been neglected appears to be an egregious error in the light of the historiography). I would recommend it as essential reading for anyone embarking on serious study of coalmining in Britain and the region.

Barron is, in one sense, a new type of revisionist, critical of metanarratives and over arching concepts such as social class and community and keen to present 'a more nuanced' analysis of social formations and identities, even if there is an attempt to synthesise old and new approaches in the conclusion of this book. Nevertheless, her general critique of older mining histories falls into the trap of presenting a straw man which is quickly and easily consumed by the cruel flames of a 'nuanced' (read here postmodern) critical analysis. The trick is to present conceptual constructions, which are necessarily generic, abstract and ideal, as models of historical reality and then condemn them when they fail to reflect, exactly, empirical history. Thus we are offered evidence (often anecdotal) of difference; blackleg miners, miners who secretly wish they were blacklegs, Tory miners, militants and moderates, leaders and led, the patronised and those who refuse to be so, those working in small pits

in the in the west of the county those in big pits in the east, Durham miners and other county based miners, usable history (community myth) and other narratives and so on in order to reveal all manner of difference and diversity and thereby 'demonstrate' the impotency of generic notions such as class and community and the distortions of the old romanticised histories.

But hold on a moment. Many of the old histories are not really guilty as charged. True, ideologically based sentiment has infected historical, documentary and fictional representations of the region; not least during interwar years. Yet Edward Thompson's conception of class consciousness, as an event, something that happens, 'in the same way in different times and places, but never just in the same way'<sup>2</sup> (this notion can equally be used to define community) informs many of the standard scholarly works on the Great Northern Coalfield. The analysis of difference inhabits the work of Williamson, Colls and Beynon and Austrin,<sup>3</sup> but it does not prevent them from revealing wider solidarities, based on common experiences, that produced a powerful mining identity, the miners' unions, effective political machinery and control, the Durham miners Gala, and the warm, if restrictive, collective social relations which we now refer to as community (which allowed miners to identify with each other and shift from one place to another without too much discomfort). To be fair, Barron does attempt to resolve the contradiction she creates for herself (class without class, community without community) by pointing to the ability of communities to subsume and integrate and the concept of interlocking layers of identity, again ideas which are hardly new in the historiography and literature of mining. In the end, revisionist accounts of this kind stand in danger of watering the beer, for such attenuations reflect, and exaggerate differences slight in their overall political, social and cultural impacts and thereby serve to distort. Frequently, one is left with only a vague impression of the tincture and potency of the original.

*Stuart Howard*

- <sup>1</sup> P.114. For example, Beynon and Austrin's *Masters and Servants* (1994) is a study of impacts of paternalism. See also R Moore, *Pitmen, Preachers and Politics*, (1974) and B Williamson, *Class, Culture and Community*, (1982) for important contributions.
- <sup>2</sup> E P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (1963:1982), p.9
- <sup>3</sup> Beynon and Williams, *ibid.*, R Colls *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield*, (1987)

Maureen Anderson, ***Northumberland and Cumberland Mining Disasters*** (Pen and Sword Books: Barnsley, 2009), 168pp, ISBN 1-84563-081-5, £12.99, pbk.

John Graham, ***Beneath this Green and Pleasant Land: A miner's life*** (Tyne Bridge Publishing, 2009): 220pp, ISBN 978-1857951431, £7.99, pbk.

These are two interesting but very different books. Anderson's is a catalogue of disasters, literally. She has collected accounts of mining disasters in the two counties in summary for the eighteenth century and in particular detail from 1806 onwards to the Weetslade incident in 1951. So we have a short account of 'multiple fatalities' from 1710 and then forty detailed vignettes covering the later period. This is a very competent work of assemblage in which she has drawn on range of sources to give detailed accounts, not only of the disasters but also of the whole social and technical context in which they occurred. A real strength of the book is the reproduction of a wealth of contemporary illustrations, many drawn from the author's own collection.

The argument of the text, mostly implicit but perfectly clear for all that, is that disasters were to a very considerable degree the product of the pursuit of profit with a frequent disregard for the safety of the workers,

coupled with the lack of a 'whole system' management across particular coalfields. The relatively late example of the flooding of the Newcastle pit, the Montagu Main in Scotswood, demonstrated the problems caused by a failure to have a systematic approach. Plans existed which would have shown the danger of breaking through to old flooded workings but these were not accessible to any engaged in mining that pit.

Graham's book is a personal memoir from a man who started work in Prestwick Colliery in Northumberland in 1953 as a fifteen year old and worked right through until finishing as Colliery Overman in the giant Westoe Colliery in the late 1980s. There are lots of interesting things in this well written and lively story. One is the theme of the miner from a mining family, albeit one which seems to have produced mostly senior officials in Graham and his brothers, living their lives through stormy political times. The other is an absolutely riveting account of how coals were got and how the getting of coals changed. Again the book is improved by illustrations, particularly line drawings by the author of the production process. When Graham started underground this would have been familiar to a pitman of the later nineteenth century. Basically coal was loosened by shots, loaded by men and hauled away by younger men and /or ponies although Prestwick seems to have worked with man haulage alone. Deputies were supervisors of sorts with a continuing responsibility for safety but the actual coal getting was still essentially a job for the miner under direction of a limited kind.

Graham's career coincided with the development of massive mechanization in mining – a real technological transformation which involved a transformation of modes of working and of authority relationships. Any mining engineer would profit from reading this book because it tells the real story of how technology can be made to work at the coalface and what issues arise in relation to man-management in getting that technology to work in an optimum fashion. Graham is a man of strong opinions and has a real sense of his own worth as an organizer of

production, which on the evidence of his account is fully justified. He is the classic up-from-below supervisor – really aware of the nature of the job and how to get it done but often stuck between a recalcitrant and, on his description, bone idle set of workers, and a varying lot of superiors some of whom knew the job and were entirely supportive and some of whom didn't and weren't. Above the mine management itself was the NCB bureaucracy with a sometimes cavalier attitude to resources. His tales of under-used and abandoned equipment resonate with other accounts I have had directly.

The book is really interesting in relation to the account of the relationship between technology, authority and personal history in mining. Graham began work in an era when the miner did the mining. He often comments on how older miners continued to have a sense of personal responsibility for production, derived in part of course from the material rewards of earlier piece work systems but also from pride in the work and a desire to see where they had been at the end of a shift. It is obvious that when he was a miner Graham himself was a stakhanovite of the first order. The introduction of technology shifted the authority over the job. The powerloader was much more dependent both on machinery and on direction, with the setting of machinery being crucial to efficiency. This meant that officials as organisers of production took on a much more central role. Graham is not a romantic about mining. He is all for the getting of coal but wanted it done in the most efficient and high tech fashion with the minimum of highly paid manpower. I recently was talking to a Professor of Engineering in an Australian University who began his working life in Operations Research for the NCB. He worked on the theory of efficiency. Men like Graham had the tacit knowledge. The combination is unbeatable but we don't often see it.

Graham, the son of a miner militant and originally a miner himself, is not unsympathetic to the NUM but he is critical and his criticisms are to be taken seriously. Plainly he wanted miners to do well but by miners he means men who would do the work to the best of their ability and

considerable competence. I have met Polish miners and officials who make exactly his distinction between the real miners, in southern Poland the men from long standing Silesian mining families, who know how to get coal and set about doing it, and those along for the ride intent on doing as little as possible for as much money as possible. Of course this distinction ignores all those in between those positions and the way in which at different times the same person might occupy either of them but Graham is the foreman who knows the job and wanted it done right. He has something to say and it is worth taking notice of.

*David Byrne*

### ***Solidarity***

Peter O'Brien: ***A Suitable Climate: The Basque Refugee Children at Hutton Hall*** (2009), 80 pages, illustrated The book is available from Peter O'Brien, 3 Belle Vue Grove, Middlesbrough TS24 2PU, £7.50 (inc. p&p), pbk.

The arrival of 4,000 Basque children in Britain in 1937 was, at that time, the biggest single entry of refugees into this country and the only one to be almost completely made up of children. They had been extricated by the National Joint Council for Spanish Relief from the bombing of civilian targets by Franco's forces in Spain. They received no moral or financial support from the British government, which didn't want to know, and one of Prime Minister Baldwin's more asinine remarks is quoted in the title of this work: in his opinion Britain could not offer a 'suitable climate' for Spanish children.

There are two or three national accounts of this episode, but an understanding of the nuts and bolts of the Basque Children Campaign in Britain can only be found in the 80-odd 'colonies' as they were called, or



settlements, where the children were housed and supported by voluntary effort. Investigating their story is a task for local historians, and *A Suitable Climate* is a very good example of what can be done.

Thirty six Basque children and their four adult companions were looked after at Hutton Hall, near Guisborough, between June 1937 and September 1939. Hutton Hall was a somewhat decayed mansion in its own grounds, leased from a Quaker industrialist and refurbished by local volunteers. The prime mover was the indefatigable Ruth Pennyman, a well-to-do left theatre producer and relief work organiser, who successfully mobilised support from church groups, Co-operative Societies and the National Union of Blastfurnacemen branch in Middlesbrough. Like most of the other 'colonies' Hutton Hall had to be self-supporting financially and so everything needed for the care, education, and social life of the twenty children had to be raised by the management committee.

Peter O'Brien's account makes use of all the available primary sources including the local press and the recollections of some of the former child refugees. These were obtained through telephone interviews and through the Basque Children of '37 Association's compilation of oral testimonies and memoirs from some of the refugees, told by themselves or related by their families, and which includes contributions from Hutton Hall. He was also fortunate to have access to a scrapbook belonging to Ruth Pennyman: this was obviously a treasure-trove of contemporary letters and notebooks, photographs, children's drawings, concert programmes and general ephemera. There are also records of activities, visits and meetings. These sources both illustrate the book and support a detailed and clear reconstruction of daily life for the children at Hutton Hall.

The focus of the book is on how Hutton Hall succeeded, and it is made clear that it did, and not just financially. It demonstrates how the coalition of volunteers from humanitarian groups and the labour movement sustained the qualities of self-esteem and respect for others that the children had already absorbed from their own Basque cultural

and political backgrounds. One example is the following advice from the father of Narciso, Javier and Moises given to them on their departure:

*'My sons, be decisive always. If they ask if you are Red, say that you are proletarian, poor, human, and Christian. Say that you love best those who are workers, earning their bread with the labour of their hands, that you love the sacred mandates of the laws of God, that I, your father, and the fathers of the other children who are with you do not kill in aggression, but to defend ourselves; that all we ask for you is bread and peace. My sons, in conclusion I give you a counsel of obedience and respect to those in charge of you'. (p.36)*

These values helped to maintain the children, both those who stayed in Britain and those who eventually returned to Spain, through the trauma, disrupted family life and upheaval caused by war and evacuation.

The book also supplies a summary of how the Basque Children's Campaign began, about the national organisation and some relevant material from other 'colonies'. This provides a useful wider explanatory context for the local research. My only quibble is with Peter's statement that the Catholic Church in Britain, which had accommodated a large number of the refugees, '*made the tragic miscalculation*' (p.72) of returning the children to Franco's Spain before the end of 1938. In fact Franco had persistently lobbied the Church hierarchy to do this because he was aware of the negative publicity the refugees were generating for his regime. It should be recorded that the Church supported Franco and was only too willing to oblige him. This, though, is a minor point to make about an otherwise thorough account.

*A Suitable Climate* definitely adds to our appreciation of the campaigns in support of the Spanish Republic as well as to the history of progressive movements in the North East. It also contributes to the awareness of how refugees have been encountered in the region, an issue that continues to be relevant.

*Don Watson*

***Trade union grassroots***

John Creaby, ***Geordie Clerks Unite! A Centenary History of the Newcastle & Gateshead Branch of the Clerk's Union 1908-2008*** (2009).

As John said, introducing this book at its launch, it is rare to have a centenary history of a union branch. This is partly because history is generally written by the 'winners' and those who rise to national positions in trade unions; partly because over the years many branch records have been lost and destroyed (fortunately John managed to access some of these before they disappeared) and partly because not many union branches have existed for this length of time.

This is a book that covers a great deal more than might be anticipated from its title. Alongside the detail of the Branch's work it serves as an excellent record of the effects in the North East of the political and industrial ups and downs of the century. As I read it is apparent that a significant factor in the Branch's participation in the local and national industrial events is the dedication and hard work of its members many of whom have devoted years to the struggles in the labour movement. Also its continued existence against an ever changing industrial background has been assisted by it being a general branch with members from a wide range of industries and the public sector.

Each chapter covers a specific historic period where the Branch's concerns and activities are related within the context of the wider political scene. The early years are covered in less detail than later times; presumably due to limited records and little oral history. The stage is set for its formation by the foundation of the National Union of Clerks in London in 1890 and a similar one in 1894 in Leeds. These led to a group of clerks registering as a branch in 1908; one of only 32 in the national union.

The Branch grew quickly during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and contained a number of prominent activists who stood with various

degrees of success for positions within the Union. These early campaigners had varying views about supporting any political group although comment is made about their family backgrounds and how the union was generally aligned to the labour movement. The initial growth of membership fell off in the 1920s as basic industries declined and unemployment rose; a pattern repeated throughout the century. Another pattern that occurs more frequently as time passes is that of union and branch mergers and amalgamations, often due to the same industrial changes and resultant decline in the membership. The first of these occurred in the late 1920s when the Northern Area of the NUCAW amalgamated with the Yorkshire area in 1932 to give the North East Area.

I had not appreciated until I reached this point in the book that the union was only for men (obvious with hindsight) and thus found the record of attitudes about the merger with the Association of Women Clerks & Secretaries very interesting. I also discovered that there was an 'unattached' membership register via which 'Mannie' Shinwell was entered into the Newcastle General branch in 1945.

The Branch has had strong political links from its early days. Looking back from 2010 and its General Election campaign one reflects that these days while a branch campaigning in an election is not unusual, three of its members being elected as MPs is; (Shinwell, Blenkinsop & Fletcher in 1964). These were the days before the career politician and as time passes John follows the weakening of the link between the union and local MPs until the 1980s when Jack Dromand (who replaced Shinwell) became the only APEX-sponsored MP in the Northern Area.

Although the early postwar period saw the growth of the welfare state and a partnership between the government and the union movement it was not a time free from industrial disputes. The Branch's involvement in, and views about, a number of these is carefully detailed. As governments concerned themselves with industrial matters via attempts to legislate about industrial disputes and attempted a variety of incomes

policies John explains how and why on occasion the Branch took a different position from that of the national union. This history illustrates how significant personalities and local conditions can be in making these decisions. He also covers the tensions in the relationship between staff and manual unions, particularly in the newly nationalised iron & steel industry carefully describing the negotiations and attitudes at the time.

The period after 1964, is more difficult for a writer to cover succinctly as there is a plethora of written material and many more who remember the events being considered. Oral sources have own perspective on them which adds interest and details but they may also 'rewrite' history, albeit unintentionally. John has done well in pulling together the significant national and local political events while detailing the Branch's response and views on these. For example the Branch supported the campaign to make the Newcastle May Day march into a real celebration and was much involved in the Trade Union Exhibition and Arts Festival held for 2 weeks in July 1965.

The Branch supported industrial disputes locally and nationally, memorable local ones being that at Clark Chapman that lasted 6 weeks in 1971 and the work in at Coles Cranes in Sunderland which was successful by March 1973 in getting redundancies rescinded and agreements reinstated. This demonstrated what united action could achieve. One of the major national disputes that Branch members took a part in was the infamous Grunwick one where they travelled south to be on the picket line and encouraged others in their support. Branch building continued against a background where unions were in competition for members rather than being confined to their own areas of influence.

### ***Super-unions***

Amalgamations and mergers became more frequent as time passed and the Branch was involved in debates about these, the major one being in the late 1980s. Prior to this the Branch had seen the formation of CAWU

from NUCAW and AWCS in 1940 and become part of APEX in 1972. (Members also played a significant part at APEX Annual Conferences managing to introduce a 'Geordie Neet' as a regular feature.)

However in the late 1980s the era of the super union approached with the formation of UNISON and Amicus (more recently becoming Unite with its merger with the T&G Workers). The book details the options considered by the union at its conferences and how the industrial and political pros and cons of these were debated nationally and at the Branch. Eventually the Newcastle General Branch (a title to which it reverted after a number of other names) became part of the GMB Northern region on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1989. Such a merger was positive in that it brought members with considerable political experience into the Branch but the author considered that it also resulted in changes in political involvement and some feeling of loss of identity.

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century these 'super unions' have been much concerned with their own internal concerns and organisation which has left less time for consideration of external issues. This is very different from the outward looking policy of the Branch. For all of its existence it has debated and discussed major international issues including the Suez Crisis and unilateral nuclear disarmament. Members opposed the Vietnam War throughout the 70s and debated entry to Common Market, being against despite CAWU official policy to support. It will be interesting to see if this outward approach revives within the union movement once the dust settles on the organisational and structural union matters.

### ***Conclusion***

John Creaby's book will be of interest to political historians as well as Branch members, past, present and future. There are some layout and typographical errors and some of the photos might have been better captioned but these fairly trivial observations that should not detract from what is a significant record. Branch members decided that the relevant

references and notes should be at the end of the relevant chapter and these will be a very useful starting point for anyone researching any of the named individuals or industrial events. John has ensured that those who have worked tirelessly for the Branch over the years are recorded; something that is the exception rather than the rule. In generously praising their activities I feel that he has probably underemphasised his own considerable contribution to the Branch, including his work on this history.

I wonder what the record of the next 100 years of the Branch will say?

*Val Duncan*

### ***Controversial poet***

Keith Armstrong, ***Common Words and the Wandering Star*** (University of Sunderland Press, 2009), 296 pp, ISBN:9781906832025, £7.95 pbk.

If the truth be told the bare facts of Jack Common's life do not make for a compelling read. This could be why Keith Armstrong has opted for a hybrid – part autobiography, part zeitgeist and a great deal of kindred material (quite a lot of it Armstrong's own verse) intended, I assume, to hint at what Common might have done if he had branched out a bit.

Most readers presumably arrive at Jack Common's work by stumbling over his two great novels-cum-autobiographies, *Kiddar's Luck* and *The Ampersand* both depicting an outsider's view of Newcastle life in the first two decades of the last century. For me, a teenager in Heaton in the 1950s, they had, it goes without saying, a special resonance. Like Dr Johnson's dog walking on its hind legs, it was not that they were done well but that they were done at all. Somewhat later it was apparent, however,

that they were done very well indeed. Both books can bear persistent re-reading as the compelling narrative of each yields fresh rewards.

The Avenues in South Heaton remain much as they were when they constituted the centre of Common's life before he made his ill-starred move from the North East to which he scarcely, like Kipling with India, ever returned. Many hoped, as Armstrong confirms, that further episodes of the adventures of Kiddar/Clarts might appear but this was not to be. In fact, one of the many puzzles of Commons demi-career is why he waited until 1951 and aged forty-eight to publish *Kiddar's Luck*. Ill-health and disappointment over the popular and critical reception of the two books made it improbable that any sequel would appear.

Armstrong's fascinating book, though not strictly then a biography or literary critique, reminds us how many people back home in Newcastle resented those elements of the two volumes which were as much accurate and candid observation of working class life as popular romance. This may go some way to explain the belated publication of the two books but also underlines one of the other puzzle of Common's life – his signal lack of success. He never threatened to become the Geordie Alan Sillitoe or Keith Waterhouse even though many voices considered him better than most of the competition.

Why was this so? As I understand it, Keith Armstrong, himself a worthy recruit to the ranks of the Heaton literati, points to the Edwardian capitalism which shaped not only Common's rather dyspeptic social opinions but the sort of socialist alternative that he espoused and anticipated. Common was strung between these two, resenting the hand to mouth world he struggled in until the very end but day-dreaming, often in the pubs of Newport Pagnell no less, about a utopia which might mitigate his career miseries.

This brings me to a third puzzle – the style and content of Common's essays, (for instance *Revolt against an Age of Plenty and Freedom of the Streets*) regarded quite highly in some quarters. These, I have long



thought, bear the imprint of Common's sometime associate, George Orwell. Armstrong quotes at some length the judgement of 'pacifist and poet' Max Plowman, who could not make neither head nor tail of them. True Orwell's gnomic style is evident in them (each might have influenced the other, of course) but very little of the Orwellian insight. Common's quest, shared by many others, for a Richard Hoggartian style of grass-roots wisdom and proletarian culture, has rarely promised to win the day. Apart from exceptions like the *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, the Pitman Painters and sundry working class memoirs, written in opposition to capitalism, by and large the socialist writing tradition continues to be marginal.

The irony that writing as vocation itself isolates the author from the working class mainstream was not lost on Common, as many of the essays show. Socialism, if it ever came to pass in Britain would, he brooded, reproduce many of the faults of the capitalism which had driven him into penury. Kiddar and Clarts would eventually confront the terrifying compromises of adult life and the adolescent freedom of the streets which he and his kind had joyfully exploited would be just a fading memory. The life of the imagination became one of the few bonds between these two separate worlds.

Jack Common, of course, experienced the defeats before and not after he published his autobiographical novels and it is interesting and commendable that not only did more of his pessimism not seep into them but that they read as the recollections of a younger man. Keith Armstrong in his valiant attempt to bring together all these strands – social class conflict, working class culture, the writer as critic, the particular facets of Common's intellectual and material trajectory – is tremendously stimulating to say the least. Given what we know now about the prospects for the working class writer who does not care to become merely middle class there is some consolation in the argument Armstrong chews over that Common was a writer out of his time. His two semi-autobiographies might have flourished if

they had been published two decades earlier or ten years later but then again it is doubtful that this alone would have resolved the contradictions inherent in the life and work of the train driver's son.

*Roger Hall*

***Ancestry***

Mark Crail, ***Tracing Your Labour Movement Ancestors: A Guide for Family Historians*** (Pen and Sword Family History, Barnsley, 2009), 176pp, ISBN 978-1848840591, £12.99, pbk.

More than half of the 60 activists interviewed for my recent book on young socialist activists on Tyneside round 1960 were the children and sometimes grandchildren of socialists. Other evidence suggests that this is not uncommon. This makes Mark Crail's book especially useful for movement activists wanting to trace their family histories. In a most attractively produced volume he demonstrates the enormous range of material available in archives, libraries and museums as well as private collections. Holders of private collections should be encouraged to lodge material in the appropriate collections. It is no longer essential to have the material based locally, for web catalogues and digitised material are becoming increasingly common.

Mark indicates some of the excellent national collections held at, for example the Working Class Movement and Peoples' History libraries in Manchester, Warwick University Modern Records Centre and the TUC library at North London University. Of course local archives should be encouraged to take a special interest in local labour movement figures. The North East Labour History Society takes as one of its responsibilities the finding of such material. Only too often one hears of important material being dumped at the decease of an activist. Recently the papers of Len Edmondson and Eric Walker have been deposited in the Tyne and

Wear Archive and others are promised.

Activists reading Mark Crail's book will often be familiar with the narrative he develops to context family information. If an important market for the book will be labour movement activists it could be even more useful for family historians with no current movement connections. Those who have pursued their own family story will be familiar with the problem of discovering an area of activity in an ancestor about which the researcher knows little or nothing. For those who discover a trade unionist, a socialist activist or a progressive campaign participant in their family tree this book will be enormously valuable. There is a series of engaging brief biographies which point the researcher towards a method of writing up your own relative's story. The book is worth buying for in itself but it is to be hoped that readers of this review will recommend it to their local library, especially where family history is diligently pursued.

*John Charlton*

## AT THE BACK

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### **Secretary's Report 2009/10**

My second year as Secretary has rushed past just as quickly as the first one and although I now have a much better idea of what needs to be done, once again John Charlton has assisted with timely prompts and reminders when necessary. Other members of the Committee have also helped in a variety of ways and I thank them all for their work.

The year started with our outing to the Theatre Royal to see Lee Hall's 'Pitman Painters' where the performance was followed by an interesting question and answer session with cast members. Shortly after this was our AGM where the winner of the Sid Chaplin Prize, Robert Doherty, and Rene Chaplin made excellent short contributions related to Robert's essay topic, The Tyne Bridge. After the business part of the meeting we were treated to John Charlton's illustrated talk about his recent publication 'Don't You Hear the H Bombs Thunder?'. This started with John inviting those present to sing 'The H Bombs Thunder' and reflecting that everyone has their own memory of the 1960s. He looked at the backgrounds and experiences of some of the CND marchers from the North East and concluded with a Tyne Tees film clip of the Animals in Newcastle and Alex Glasgow singing 'As Soon as This Pub Closes'. Both of these items raised wry smiles and the AGM, with refreshments organised by Mike Cleghorn and Lynda MacKenzie, was an excellent start to the Society's year.

The high standard was continued by the speakers at our main meetings throughout the year. November's meeting had a strong link with the centenary of the Workers' Education Association in the North East. The Society supported the WEA in its successful bid for Heritage Lottery funds to develop its regional centenary celebrations and our November speaker was Dr Stephen Roberts. Stephen edited 'A Ministry of Enthusiasm', a

book of essays published to mark the national centenary of the WEA, and for his talk he considered various aspects of the WEA's history, its evolution and a few of its notable characters. Nigel Todd, wearing his WEA Regional Director's hat, added some local detail to round off the evening.

In December the Society joined Keith Armstrong in holding a Jack Common celebration where Keith introduced his book on Jack Common supplemented by input from Peter Common. The evening was given a celebratory feel with some excellent poetry by Catherine Graham read by the author and finishing with music from Kiddar's Luck folk band.

2010 started with several members of the Society attending the launch of John Creaby's book which celebrated the centenary of the Newcastle & Gateshead Branch of the Clerk's Union. A good social meeting with a spattering of 'old' faces. John's contribution was so interesting and entertaining that he was invited to be the speaker at our 2010 AGM. (Anyone reading this on receipt of the Journal may still be in time to catch this at the Newcastle Lit & Phil on 6<sup>th</sup> October).

In February we were treated to 'The Independent Labour Party & the North East in the 1930s' a talk given by Dr Gidon Cohen. Gidon covered a wide scope in his talk but concentrated on the significance of the North East during this period by examining possible reasons why its experience differed from that in many other parts of the country after the ILP disaffiliated from the Labour Party. His thoughts generated a lively question and answer session that could have gone on for far longer than time allowed. This was also the case in June after a presentation on a very different topic, that of 'Martz and Markets' and the decline of rural life in Northumberland by Ian Roberts. Some of us had been present when Ian talked about the Irish drovers who brought cattle to the border region and knew that this would be another excellent event. Although a sad tale of decline due to moves to intensive farming, EU membership and the general strangulation of the small farmer by rules and regulation it was given in an upbeat manner. The Society's talks often feature our industrial history

so it was good to be reminded about the issues that affect the significant rural areas of the North East. Both Gidon and Ian left this listener feeling that there was much more to be said and still to be researched on the issues raised. Maybe we can return to these in future.

First Tuesday continued to be a varied and lively forum despite a few technical and communication glitches at the end of 2009 for which I apologise. John Charlton used the February 2010 meeting to introduce the bid he was putting together to fund a project to map the North East's radical history; an on-going task to which he has devoted a great deal of subsequent work.

March saw Dave Walmsley talking about his book illustrating the history of the Tyne & Wear Rescue Service, April featured Don Watson on the North East unemployed workers movement of the 1920s and in May Robert Doherty gave a presentation on his research for his building of the Tyne Bridge paper for which (as mentioned above) he was awarded the Sid Chaplin prize.

Along with other sources Don used police reports for his research and amused us with the tale of a policeman reporting on how on being turned away from a women's meeting he had sent his wife along. There is no record of what she thought about this.

Our May trip to the Scottish Mining Museum didn't take place as not quite enough members were able to come along to fill the coach. With rising fuel costs hiring a coach is far more expensive than it used to be. We will take this into consideration when looking at future outings. The alternative Town Walk was delayed when John Charlton became a 'victim' of the Icelandic volcanic ash, having to stay in South Africa for an extra week. However the walk was rescheduled for later in the month.

The late May Bank Holiday week saw the Society having stalls at the Woodhorn History Fair and the Sunderland History Fair. As I was away during this period I would like to thank the members of the Committee who went along, distributed information and publicised the

Society. Thanks also to Sandy Irvine who produced a very attractive leaflet for us to use at such events.

All of the above and a number of other events which we have been asked to publicise were advertised on the Web Site. I admit that I'm not all that keen on either web sites or the like of Facebook partly due to lack of experience but I hope to make far more use of these facilities in future.

Finally I would like to thank all of the Committee members for their work and help during the year. It has been invaluable. Once again we welcome any member who is willing to join us as there are areas of work that we would like to tackle given additional resources.

## **2010 SubscriptionSubscriptionSubscription**

Individuals (including overseas): £15 & £2.00 p&p

Individuals (students,retired,unemployed):

£5& £2.00 p&p

Institutions: £25

(£2.00 p&p for Journal)

17 Woodbine Avenue,

Gosforth,

Newcastle upon Tyne,

NE3 4EV.

email: [mike.cleghorn@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:mike.cleghorn@blueyonder.co.uk)

## **Web-site**

It has been a good year for the new web site. We get a substantial number of regular hits. We do need more people to contribute with opinions and events. If you are not sure how to please contact the Secretary. During the coming year we hope to start putting up articles from past journals.

## **North East Labour History Society**

Officers and Committee

(As of the Annual General Meeting 2009)

President: Ray Challinor

Vice Presidents: Maureen Callcott, Archie Potts

Chair: Nigel Todd

Vice Chair: Sandy Irving

Treasurer: Mike Cleghorn

Secretary: Val Duncan

Journal Editor: Ben Sellers (Vol 40)

Committee Members:

John Charlton (*Newcastle*)

Val Duncan (*Tynemouth*)

Sandy Irvine (*Newcastle*)

Tony Jeffs (*Ryton*)

Lynda MacKenzie (*Newcastle*)

Steve Manchee (*Newcastle*)

Lewis Mates (*Newcastle*)

Paul Mayne (*Hebburn*)

Ben Sellers (*Durham*)

Win Stokes (*Tynemouth*)

Willie Thompson (*Sunderland*)

Nigel Todd (*Newcastle*)

Don Watson (*North Shields*)



## The Sid Chaplin Labour History 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
2005	Craig Armstrong
2006	Elspeth Gould
2007	Candice Brockwell
2008	Ruth Blower
2009	Rob Doherty

The author 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:

1. 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.
2. The competition will be open to anyone who is not employed full-time as a professional teacher or writer of history.
3. 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.
4. All entries must be submitted to the Secretary of the Society and received not later than 30<sup>th</sup> June each year. The results will be published in the Society's Journal.

The Trophy is a miner's lamp with the name of each winner inscribed on it. Winners may keep the Trophy for one year. The winner also receives a £50 book token.

## **THE WEA REPORT 2010 FROM ASHINGTON TO BROADWAY**

This year, the Workers' Educational Association is celebrating 100 years in the North East.

Throughout its history, the WEA has offered intellectual creativity as well as education for social change. Albert Mansbridge, who provided inspiration for the WEA as its first general secretary from 1903-1915, saw the movement as a means of achieving social justice, 'an adventure in working class education.'

Together with W.R. Rae, a prominent Sunderland Co-operative educator, Mansbridge helped to convene a conference at Newcastle upon Tyne on 29 October 1910 to launch the North East District of the WEA. This well attended assembly was brought together by several Co-operative Society education committees and the local associations of the National Union of Teachers. They were joined by working men's clubs, the Co-operative Women's Guild, branches of the Independent Labour Party, other trade unions, and the more reforming enthusiasts of the Church of England, the University of Durham, and the old Liberal Party.

The new WEA quickly set up courses, lectures, branches and study circles as well as social and leisure activities. The Co-operative Wholesale Society loaned an office in Newcastle, and an effective full time organising secretary was appointed. This was John Lee, a former Baptist minister who had been driven out of his living at Jarrow by chapel elders who objected to his support for striking dockers.

In 1914, Lee moved on and was replaced by Jack Trevena, an ex-miner from Stanley. When the hugely energetic Trevena was jailed in 1916 for opposing the First World War, his wife Hilda – secretary of the Stanley WEA – became the first female district secretary in the Association, and promoted a great campaign for educational reform.

WEA pioneers also included women's rights campaigners such as Lisbeth Simm, North East organiser of the Women's Labour League, and Dr Ethel Williams, suffragist, peace activist and Tyneside's first female GP. Ethel Williams was lucky to escape from a raging mob in 1917 having organised a public meeting welcoming the Russian Revolution and calling for an end to the war.

Early WEA courses set a pattern for variety, but always focussed on strengthening students' capacity to change the world. Shop workers studied economics and history, miners did the same and on courses that matched shift work, and the first women's classes covered citizenship and ways of improving family and public health. And most short courses were seen as part of "a broad highway" leading to three years university level tutorial classes.

The first two decades of the WEA laid firm foundations. WEA programmes for unemployed young workers on Tyneside in the 1930s found late 20<sup>th</sup> Century echoes in prioritising adult learning in the disadvantaged post code areas of the region.

The debt owed to women enabled the Association to run a highly effective North East Women's Education Programme in the 1970s and 1980s, linking with the forceful contemporary movement for equality.

Trade union education has continued with the NUT, GMB and others. For over twenty years, the WEA and UNISON have offered the union's Return to Learn programme to low paid council and NHS workers in the region, transforming lives and generating numbers of Union Learning Representatives.

New challenges have been taken up, too, ranging from a novel science education project on Tyneside in the 1960s – responding to Harold Wilson's call to embrace the "white hot heat of the technological revolution" – to recent regional conferences on tackling climate change arranged jointly by the WEA, the Co-operative, UNISON and the Open University.

And just as WEA members engaged with Belgian refugees housed at Birtley in 1918, and tried to set up English classes for European refugees from fascism at Darlington in 1939, we're stepping up our support for the WEA in

Zambia where the movement's trade union affiliates are fighting for the survival of free, independent trade unionism.

In another revival from the early days, the WEA and the Co-operative Movement have formed a national partnership, forged in the North East, to work together on education and democracy.

Yet the most fitting tribute to WEA imagination can be seen in Lee Hall's hit play, *The Pitmen Painters*, which is taking the story of the Ashington Group of working class artists not only around Britain but even to America's Broadway.

From *Ashington to Broadway* is a good narrative for a generally quiet, persevering movement, but whose achievements should be 'never knowingly understated'!

*Nigel Todd*

WEA North East Regional Director

## ***Learning for Life!***

With over one hundred years of experience in helping adults to learn, the WEA knows a thing or two about adult education. So if you're thinking about taking a course or returning to learning, why not think about the WEA?

- ▶ Local – courses at locations across the North East
- ▶ Convenient – classroom, workplace and community-based courses with a friendly feel
- ▶ Courses for all – from arts and crafts to science and technology, there's something for everyone

# **WEA**



**Learning for Life**

**Workers'  
Educational  
Association**

**Call**

0191 212 6100

**Fax**

0191 212 6101

**Web**

[www.wea.org.uk](http://www.wea.org.uk)

# 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.

**STOP PRESS**

**SUCCESS!**

## **Mapping the History of Popular Politics in the North East Region**

In May of this year the Society in association with the WEA made an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for support to mount a project with the following aims:

1. To map the incidence of popular political events (drawn widely) and persons in the regions communities, archives, libraries and museums.
2. To find, record and transcribe the personal narratives of living participants in political parties, movements and campaigns.
3. To find relevant material in private hands and encourage its owners to donate it to the appropriate archive (this might include minute books, correspondence, accounts, diaries, press cuttings, notebooks, scrapbooks and photographs)
4. To collect the material and package and display it to make it widely available to the community.
5. To involve the maximum number and variety of volunteers possible to undertake the work.

We were delighted to find just as the journal was going to press that the HLF had granted our application in full! We are also grateful for the support of the North East Area Committees Co-operative Movement and several Trade Unions in the region.

Over the next few weeks members and supporters of the Society will be informed of the details and invited to join in to ensure the project's success. It is a unique project and could become a model for similar enquiries in other parts of the UK. If you would like to find out how you could be involved please contact – Popular Politics Project-NELH, c/o WEA, 21 Portland Terrace, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE2 1QQ. [Phone Project leader on 07761818384]

**north east labour history society**

I would like to join the society

rates

institutions £25

individual (including overseas) £15

concession £5 (student/retired/unemployed)

subscription includes journal

£2 p&p

address .....

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email:.....

send to:     Mike Cleghorn (Treasurer),  
                 17 Woodbine Avenue  
                 Gosforth  
                 Newcastle on Tyne  
                 NE3 4EV



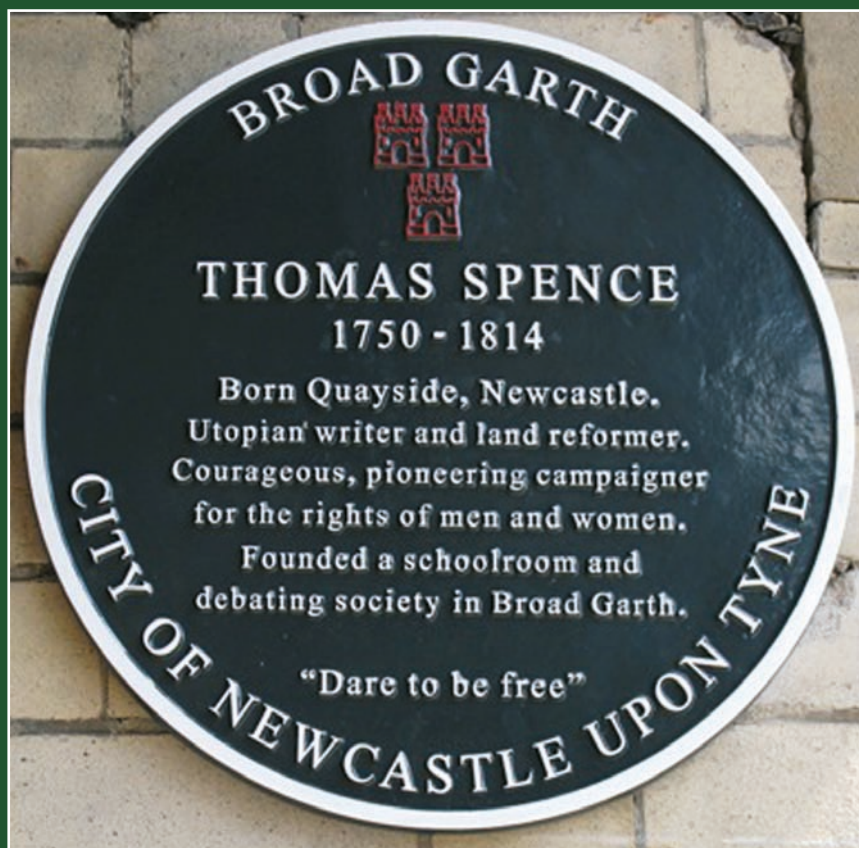
*north east history*





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The Thomas Spence plaque was installed on June 21<sup>st</sup> 2010 after years of determined campaigning by Keith Armstrong and others. See inside for more on Spence & the event...



The north east labour history society holds regular meetings on a wide variety of subjects. The society welcomes new members. We have an increasingly busy web-site at [www.nelh.org](http://www.nelh.org) Supporters are welcome to contribute to discussions

journal of the north east labour history society