

North East History

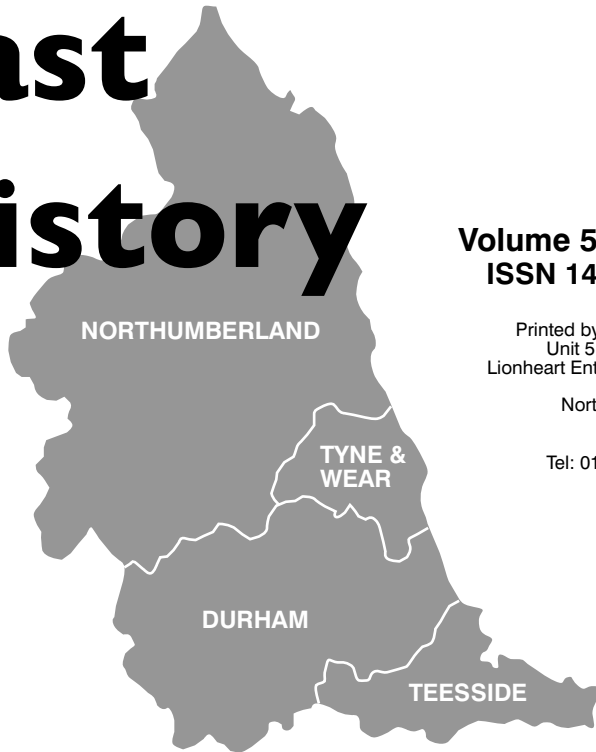
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Note from the Editors

The production of this year's Journal took place under very unusual and difficult circumstances brought about by the Covid 19 pandemic - the full consequences of which are still unknown. For a while, during the lockdown period, we were unsure whether there would be a Journal to publish: contributors were unable to access libraries or check references; the editorial team were only able to meet online, via Zoom; and then we received the unfortunate news that our printers had gone out of business.

The first three articles in this year's Journal are drawn from the experience of the heavy defeat suffered by the Labour Party in last year's general election, particularly the losses of the long-held seats of Blyth and North West Durham. The editorial team agreed it would be worth putting this defeat into historical context by re-visiting previous heavy defeats at the ballot box. We settled on the two worst defeats for the Labour Party: 1931 and 1983. John Charlton agreed to research the former and Nigel Todd the latter. Nigel Todd had been a Labour candidate in 1983, standing in the former Newcastle North constituency. He was able to draw on his personal experiences of that campaign. Both John and Nigel had shared their research, and engaged in discussion, through Zoom meetings, which replaced the scheduled First Tuesday meetings. If readers are keen to engage in these types of debates, they are welcome to join the NELH society (see last pages of this Journal) and participate, arrangements and schedules of talks are publicised on our web site (www.nelh.net).

The killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May led to the mushrooming of the Black Lives Matter movement across the world. In Britain, the statue of Edward Colston, the Bristol slave holder, was hauled down and dumped in the harbour and a great debate then ensued about the meaning and status of monuments throughout Britain. By total coincidence, the editorial team had accepted an article on the meanings

attached to Newcastle's monuments written by India Gerritsen, a final year student at Newcastle University and winner of the Chaplin Prize. Within the context of the above, India has included a foreword to her article explaining the background to her research.

The years leading up to, and including, the Second World War provide the context for four articles in this year's Journal. Don Watson writes about a Gateshead amateur theatre company established by the Independent Labour Party in the interwar years and their attempts to use drama in the cause of socialism. Tony Fox, inspired by the theatre production of *The Ballard of Johnny Longstaff* by The Young 'uns, provides a moving account of the six men from Stockton who volunteered to join the International Brigades and the harsh reality of their experiences fighting in the Spanish Civil War. Archie Potts writes of his memory of the Fall of France in the Second World War as an eight years old, evacuated to a village in County Durham. He remembers the rustic seat in the centre of the village, where on summer evenings and Sunday mornings men would gather to discuss the progress of the war. In a similar vein, Peter Brabban returns to the war years in Sleepy Valley, County Durham. We follow the second part of his trilogy in which he explores the army experiences of his father who fought in Egypt, while back home his mother and young family coped with war privations.

Celia Minoughan's research explores the lives of her Grandfather and Great Grandfather over a 100 year period (1870 – 1970). Both men were coal miners in the pits around Ashington but they are most remembered for their lifetime work improving the health and living conditions for miners in that area. Susan Lynn writes about life in Winlaton in County Durham, particularly the life of Ambrose Crowley, a hard-headed entrepreneur who set up a factory there in 1691, making nails for the navy. His workers (known as Crowley's Crew) were not downtrodden but their lives in the village were regulated by a rigid set of laws.

Mike Furlonger always intended to write an article based on his research about a mass membership political group organised by the Tories called the

Primrose League. Unfortunately, he was never able to finish this work, but this article has been published posthumously using Mike's rough draft.

Last November, Silvie Fisch gave a moving and engaging talk at a First Tuesday meeting about the work of the Newcastle West End Foodbank. Silvie is part of a collaborative research project, which drew upon the testimonies of clients and volunteers. Overall, 41 people were interviewed many of whom reflected a pride in living in Newcastle and a class-based solidarity but they also expressed a sense of loss, their lives being eroded by greater inequalities and the pernicious impacts of deindustrialisation and austerity.

With the future of history teaching being threatened by the planned closure of courses in history (and modern foreign languages and politics) at Sunderland University and also the ongoing national debate about what topics should be included in schools' history national curriculum, Peter Sagar's article is very pertinent. Peter writes about his experiences of working in primary schools in the region on a project teaching local history, as he describes it, 'from below'. He was encouraged by the enthusiastic response he received from pupils and the positive feedback from teachers. Peter is keen to work with others to try and get more 'People's History' taught in schools throughout the region.

In the Appreciations section, there are four articles. Liz O'Donnell writes an appreciation of the life of Peter Latham, a long-standing member of our society, who died in 2018. In commemorating the life of Terry MacDermott, who was one of the four people who formed the steering committee that launched the *North East Labour History Group* in 1966, Archie Potts and John Stirling write appreciations of Terry's life, who died this January, aged 97. Keith Armstrong provides a poem in appreciation of the life of local author, Jack Common.

The review section offers readers an appraisal of a range of recently published history books and a review of Ken Loach's latest output, which was filmed in the North East.

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Patrick Candon

Liz O'Donnell

Sue Ward

Win Stokes

John Charlton

John Stirling

Peter Brabban

How to Submit an Article to the Journal

The North East Labour History Society is committed to making our journal reflect the diverse range of historical experiences of working people in the North East region.

We aim to reflect all communities and groupings in the North East and would encourage contributions from those who live and work in them, those who research them and those who write about them. We want to hear from individuals, community organisations, local history societies, students and teachers and all who have something to say about our region.

If you have a research interest that could form the basis of a written article and would like to discuss this, please contact our Secretary or the Editors – contact details are on page 241.

If you have an existing article that you would like to submit for publication, we can send you a set of guidelines to ensure that the article and its endnotes are presented in a format that is appropriate to our journal's style.

Some past issues of the North East History Journal are still available, and these can be ordered via email to journal@nelh.org. Price per issue is £5, plus £2 p&p within the UK / £5 international.

A searchable index of articles and reports can be found at our website: <http://nelh.net/>

Past issues of the Journal, volumes 36 – 50 (2005 – 2019) can also be viewed on-line on at: bit.ly/PastJournals



Notes on Contributors

Don Watson is an independent historian and lives in North Shields. His most recent book is *Squatting in Britain 1945-55: Housing, Politics, and Direct Action* (Merlin Press 2016). He continues to research and publish on his first interest, the history of left and progressive theatre in Britain.

Nigel Todd is Secretary of the WEA's North East Green Branch, focussing on environmental adult education, and acts as a national ambassador for the WEA. He Chairs the UK Co-operative College, and is a Newcastle Labour Councillor. His recent research has been increasingly in the histories of both environmental campaigning as well as adult education.

Peter Sagar is a teacher and trade union and human rights activist. He is secretary of A Living Tradition (www.alivingtradition.org), a community interest company, which aims to help people in the North East to learn more about the heritage of human rights and community cohesion and be inspired by it. This includes working in schools to help young people have a better understanding of their own history and how it relates to their lives today.

Celia Minoughan was brought up in Ashington, Northumberland and, as a history undergraduate at Leeds University, wrote the history of Wansbeck Constituency Labour Party. After a public sector career, mainly in welfare rights, she is now retired. She is researching the history of the Minoughan family, where economic migration took family members from Ireland to work as miners in Ashington and also further afield to Canada, USA and Australia.

Susan Lynn studied at Newcastle Polytechnic and, now retired from a career in banking and insurance, has time to pursue interests in local history. A Newcastle City Guide, Chair of the North Tyneside Branch of the Northumberland & Durham Family History Society and Treasurer of Winlaton Local History Society, she has previously been a Labour Party local branch secretary. She has published *A Short History of Blaydon Burn* and co-authored *Blaydon & Winlaton Through Time*. Susan is not a native of Winlaton and although she has lived in that village for forty years, would still be classed as a newcomer.

Mike Furlonger taught history in further and higher education for three decades before returning to continue teaching history in schools, the University of Newcastle upon Tyne and Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society. His main area of interest was the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly the Napoleonic and Boer Wars. His last history class, at the Lit and Phil, was just a week before he died.

Tony Fox is a member of the International Brigades Memorial Trust, whose President, Marlene Sidaway, has supported his research throughout. He is Regional Co-Chair and Education officer for The Battlefields Trust, he had previously served 15 years as chair of the Durham Branch of the Historical Association. He is a History Teacher who has lectured on embedding local history into the Curriculum.

Silvie Fisch is the Director of Northern Cultural Projects CIC, a community history and cultural organisation based in Newcastle, and an Associate Researcher at the Oral History Unit and Collective at Newcastle University. She is particularly interested in transformative engagement and development work, as well as the creative interpretation and re-use of historical materials. She is also a community activist and involved in the mutual aid movement.

India F. H. Gerritsen completed her Combined Honours Degree in History and History of Art at Newcastle University, graduating with a First Class. Her dissertation won the Sid Chaplin Memorial Prize in 2019, and the Joseph Cowen Scholarship Prize from Newcastle University. This article version is a condensed summary of the main findings. Her dissertation is available to read by request. She is currently at the end of her Postgraduate Master's in International Politics (Global Justice and Ethics) at Newcastle University, writing her dissertation on governmental structural violence and residential fires, inspired by the injustices of Grenfell Tower.

John Charlton was born in Newcastle a long time ago. He worked as a high school teacher on Tyneside and West Yorkshire then at Leeds Poly and Leeds University. After thirty years as a migrant in Yorkshire he returned to the homeland twenty years ago. A lifelong political activist and optimist.

Peter Brabban was born three days after the NHS was launched and spent the first two years of his life in Sleepy Valley, County Durham. After a secondary modern education he went on to a career as a portrait and fashion photographer and then as a campaigner and aid worker with NGOs like Oxfam, War on Want, Age Concern and lastly with the National Trust.

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1931: LABOUR'S DEFEAT AND NORTH EAST ENGLAND¹

John Charlton

On 27 October 1931, the Labour Party suffered a crushing defeat in a General Election. The party's representation in the House of Commons was reduced from 265 seats to 46. It retained no seats in Northumberland, and only two in County Durham, reduced from 24 in the previous Parliament. When I joined the Labour Party during the 1959 General Election Campaign, in post canvassing chit-chat I was told more than once about the perfidy of Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, who had deserted the party he had helped to found to form a National Government, for which I was to read, Tory. MacDonald's treachery was an important part of Labour mythology, a story told and retold. His action was responsible for the electoral disaster of 1931. In the late 1950s I met some older party members for whom that event was a major experience of their political lives as young people and one which carried a warning; 'Never compromise with Tories or Liberals'. I got my fingers rapped by Joe Eagles, Newcastle City Party's full-time secretary, at our first meeting to consider starting a youth group just after the Election. The triumph of 1945 had offered a kind of revenge tempered by three consecutive defeats in 1951, 1955 and then most woundingly in 1959, when the defeat was followed by pundits questioning whether or not Labour could ever win again.² I had the temerity to suggest our prospective youth group might talk to the Young Liberals. Joe was scathing saying, 'Mebbe you should join them!'

So Ramsay Mac was almost a pantomime villain, but I do not remember there being any interest in the details of the story which led to the events of 1931 or indeed what immediately followed. The victory of 1945 and the achievements of the Labour Government appeared to have made serious analysis of MacDonald and 1931 unnecessary. It was abandoned to university politics courses, and even there it received scant attention. Study of the 1930s concentrated on the growth of fascism, the trials of communism and the consequences of mass unemployment. However, the Labour Party's defeat in December 2019 has awakened interest in the political disaster of the 1930s.

The parallels between the two events lie mainly in the actual results, as both were very heavy defeats for the party. In effect, 1931 was a defeat for the party of government, since only six weeks before the election leading figures in the Cabinet had joined Tories and Liberals to form a National Government. On display then was the record of the Labour Government elected in 1929, yet its leading figures, the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer, were not punished by the electorate. Remarkably, they were to lead a new government with the largest majority since the modern electoral system had emerged as a result of nineteenth-century parliamentary reforms.³

Red walls?

In 2019, pundits described the victorious Tories as having breached the Red Wall, a vague line of constituencies, traditionally Labour-held, which ran from the West Midlands through Lancashire to Durham and Northumberland. This was true of 1931 too, though the Labour Party losses then were very much higher. It was a genuine wipe-out across most industrial areas, felt most strongly in County Durham where most constituencies had substantial numbers of coalminers. Coalminers seem especially significant from a modern perspective, because in post-war Britain they were considered the backbone of the Labour Party. From 1945 until the decline of the mining industry, almost all such constituencies

returned Labour Members of Parliament and in County Durham most 'mining constituencies' also returned as MPs miners, or former miners, who were often officials of the Durham Miners' Association (DMA). This was not so completely the case in 1929, let alone 1931.

From the beginning of working class representation, especially in the North East of England, those miners who voted strongly supported the Liberal Party of Gladstone and Asquith. Although by the 1940s my grandmother had long since left her mining community origins behind, she told me then that her favourite politician, after Churchill, was Mr Gladstone, though she was still a teenager when he formed his last administration in 1892. When I visited her older brother's pit cottage in West Wylam in the late 1940s, the only picture on the kitchen wall was a Gladstone portrait. A friend who did interviews with elderly miners in South Yorkshire in the 1960s said that Gladstone engravings were seen in pitmen's houses even then. Liberalism had been strong among pitmen from the time of Thomas Burt, the first working man to be elected to Parliament in 1874. He represented Morpeth in Northumberland until 1906. The Liberal Party had attempted to align with the new working-class electorate, positioning itself a little to the left of the Tories with support for state education, some extension of the Factory Acts and trades union rights, electoral reform, Irish Home Rule, and free trade.

The 1867 and 1884 Reform Acts, both Liberal measures, led to the formation of an alliance across the classes, most strongly in the mining areas with the adoption of Lib-Lab candidates. By the 1906 General Election, there were fourteen Lib-Lab MPs. For the Liberal Party it was a tactic designed to outmanoeuvre the possibility of the nascent socialist parties becoming a serious electoral threat. The leaders of the Northumberland and Durham Miners Associations were strongly complicit in this, and a number of miners' union officials reached the House of Commons.

The label Lib-Lab had effectively died by 1914. No MPs carrying the name were elected after that. The rising strength of the Labour Representation Committee meant that if candidates needed endorsement,

almost regardless of the ideas they might hold, they would require the approval of that body or their appropriate trade union.⁴ The ideas they held would survive their change of label, beyond the Great War and into the new world of a large parliamentary representation. Free trade is an example of one such idea.

The Labour coalition

The Labour Party in opposition and then twice in government, in 1924 and 1929 as minority administrations, was itself a coalition of 'liberals', with both large and small Ls, trade union bureaucrats and socialists, ethical and Marxist. All prioritised getting into Parliament over socialist ideas. The Marxists were a tiny fragment after serial expulsions and the purging of at least thirty constituency parties in the mid- to late-1920s, though most north- east local parties were considered safe by the leadership. In office in 1924 and in 1929, MacDonald strove for conformity. He brought recent defectors from the Liberal Party into his Cabinet including Richard Haldane, a former Minister of War, as Lord Chancellor. Also included was the Tory, Lord Chelmsford, former Governor of Queensland and New South Wales, and then Viceroy of India. MacDonald's primary aim was not to disturb the ship of state. Radical programmes that might benefit the working class electorate were very thin on the ground. A sole exception was housing where Glaswegian Independent Labour Party member John Wheatley, who acknowledged his debt to Marx, enacted legislation to extend local government's powers to build houses for rent. The first government only lasted eight months and the same moderate formula was offered again in 1929 when MacDonald formed his second administration. The coalition that was the Labour Party in the House of Commons in 1924 and 1929 did nothing to challenge the status quo in an extremely disturbed decade. Those who were part of the socialist strand were hardly better than the old guard steeped in liberalism. They were, of course, minority governments in office on sufferance. This reflected the terminal crisis of the Liberal Party but the alliance of the Tories and

a section of the Liberal Party spelled ultimate doom for Labour. The Tories could await their moment to strike. In fact, they hardly had to, as Ramsay MacDonald and his Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Snowden responded to the economic crisis by punishing the working class, proposing cutting unemployment benefit and the wages of public employees.

At least part of the monster defeat in 1931 is explained by the cautious and moderate character of Labour MPs and the party leadership - both those who left with MacDonald and those who remained. However, it cannot alone explain the low Labour vote in so many constituencies, and for this one has to look back at the results of the 1924 and 1929 elections, when Labour was the largest party but with no overall majority, and so according to convention was asked to form a government. In such a situation, the largest party has to form a post-election coalition or at least secure the promise that it will be allowed to rule. There are other choices; the largest party can turn down the offer of visiting the Palace, mount vigorous opposition and wait for better days. It can also state that it will only take up the offer if other parties accepted the party's programme. These choices require political courage and clarity that it wants to press for social programmes, punitive taxation of the wealthy and, in the British case, a sharply different attitude to 'foreign people' and especially colonial subjects. Choosing not to rock the boat, as Labour did after these elections, meant choosing neither of these positions.⁵

Timid in office

In both 1924 and 1929, the Labour Party began in office timidly, accepting the existing conventions, including wearing morning dress to visit the palace, kneeling before the monarch and accepting ancient procedures - all perfectly calculated to contain radicalism. All that preceded selecting a government where Liberal and Tory gentlemen might be represented, while keeping a watching brief on pitmen with regional accents awed by their surroundings. The fact that a few rebels were tolerated only served to strengthen the status quo. In 1924 it took only seven months and fierce

press clamour round the Campbell Case to finish Labour off.⁶ Labour's campaign in the ensuing election was wrecked by the publication of the infamous and forged Zinoviev telegram which purported to implicate the Labour Party in a Bolshevik takeover of Britain.⁷

In government from 1924 onwards, the Tories faced very big problems. Their initial popularity, posing as the men who knew how to govern, frayed. They had a General Strike to deal with. They were effectively bailed out by timorous trade union leaders fully supported by most Labour politicians. In 1929, the Liberal and Tory Parties again divided the ruling elite and the middle-class electorate, allowing Labour to emerge the largest party on election day. Although no monarch would welcome the representatives of the working-class electorate they knew that there was little to fear from a leadership which entirely accepted the rules of play. This time the problems were immense, not just a local difficulty but financial collapse in 1929, just four months after getting the keys to Downing Street. A world recession followed.

Deficit spending, then the new Keynesian solution to economic crisis was argued for by the ILP section and rejected. Its more radical version offered by Oswald Mosley, then a Labour MP, was narrowly rejected by the 1930 Labour Conference. Such solutions were anathema to Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Snowden, a Gladstonian liberal in economic policy. Conventional approaches, wage and benefit cuts and a vast reduction in public spending were all that were offered by a Labour Chancellor. The argument on the Labour benches apart from some ILP members who were marginalised, was only about the degree of cuts to be administered.⁸

In Cabinet, the argument was batted back and forth through the spring and summer of 1931 as unemployment soared from 1.3 millions on taking office to 2.7 millions or 22% of the working population, by early Autumn. In the spring Snowden appointed a committee of businessmen led by Sir George May, late Chairman of the Prudential Assurance Company, to produce an allegedly independent solution. It pronounced at the end of July, recommending a 20% cut in the Dole (unemployment benefit) and

similar reductions in the pay of public servants, with encouragement to private employers to follow suit. My own grandfather, John Lee, an estate gardener near Morpeth, on 19 shillings a week, recalled being taken aside by his employer and being told, 'we all have to make sacrifices, Lee.'

The fateful decision

At this point the opposition was also divided, and even the Tory hardmen Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain were not ready to pounce. They were afraid of civil unrest and really wanted the Labour leadership to solve the problems by adopting their austerity solutions. Unable to control his own party and even his chosen cabinet members, MacDonald writhed about, talking behind the scenes to Tory and Liberal leaderships. Few wanted a full-blown coalition government. MacDonald's solution was to seek promises of formal and informal support from Tories and Liberals for a National Government, together with those of his government he could persuade to join with the other parties. This was what he did in August 1931, taking with him only Philip Snowden, to continue as Chancellor and Jimmy Thomas to become Secretary for the Colonies, and four junior ministerial posts.

The new cabinet was largely Conservative. MacDonald did not leave with enthusiasm for his new task. It later became clear that he had yielded to pressure from the King, but Stanley Baldwin was also strongly complicit, relishing an opportunity to destroy the Labour Party. Who better to undertake this mission than its leader and first Prime Minister? It also emerged later that his Deputy, Arthur Henderson had wavered on the question of joining the Government, but finally decided to stick it out. It soon became clear that a General Election was necessary to give a government authority to carry out unpopular measures.⁹

Labour's leadership in the 1929-31 parliament were old men. MacDonald was 65, Snowden, 70, Parmoor, 78, Thomas, 58, Henderson, 69 and Lansbury, 70. Most had been involved in the Labour Party's early years and had played their parts in the Great War followed by the repeated

crises of the 1920s. Some were somewhat unreconstructed liberals, some were ethical socialists and others were trade union leaders with no particular socialist history. None advanced radical solutions to economic problems, and all were much influenced, largely negatively, by the Russian Revolution. Faced with the great economic crisis following the Wall Street Crash they were uncertain what to offer. It was easy for MacDonald and his main henchman Snowden to take the step they took in August 1931. The remaining leaders wobbled but only Jimmy Thomas followed them. The rest tried to re-group round Arthur Henderson as they drifted towards a General Election.

This election was called for late October. Labour had not recovered from the August split, and went into the Election with a sick, compromised and unprepared Henderson as leader and a policy very little different from that of the MacDonald government. There was no great revolt in the Labour Party membership to change or offer a new direction. Consequently the party was massacred electorally. The National Government continued, still led by MacDonald with Snowden moving to the House of Lords, with Neville Chamberlain as the new Chancellor.

The Party was timid in the face of charges of incompetence and cowardice on the one hand and having idealistic and impracticable schemes on the other. They stumbled through September till the election was called for late October. Selecting and re-selecting candidates was the major task. We have some evidence of the situation locally in the pioneering research of Maureen Callcott and Judith Green, who in the 1970s each interviewed surviving activists. It seems that they were left with memories of anger, frustration, some disbelief and recrimination. Possibly the most significant contest in the country took place in Seaham, County Durham where MacDonald was the sitting MP. Immediately after he crossed the floor to form the National Government, the Constituency Labour Party met to exclude him from the party, the motion being carried by only one vote. Afterwards, his supporters in the Labour Party tried to have him come to Seaham to meet party members. He went once during the campaign

but the members would not hear him in a party meeting. That mattered only marginally as the Press was there in force. The newly adopted Labour candidate was to face a straight fight after both Tory and Liberal candidates were induced to withdraw. With MacDonald backed by Tory and Liberal machines and powerful supporters like Lord Londonderry, the Labour candidate had little chance. Recriminations were to continue. "He supported MacDonald," joined, "he scabbed in the General Strike," as labels to mark a man for life.

Developing a Labour Party programme different from MacDonald's was done in very great haste. Since most policies involved spending money on assisting the poor and unemployed, they were wide open to charges of being spendthrifts or as Snowden said, "[It is] Bolshevism run mad," views enthusiastically supported by the national and local press.¹⁰ Liberal Walter Runciman, in a speech in South Shields, also alleged that supporting Labour would endanger working people's savings in Post Office Savings accounts.¹¹ That millions of working people had no savings anyway did not save the party. In contrast MacDonald supported by both Tory and Liberal Parties and the press had the simplest possible message – don't rock the boat. That MacDonald and Snowden had been the main spokesmen of a government which had presided over galloping unemployment seemed to cut no ice at all.

Very heavy losses

A very heavy loss of seats in a General Election would suggest a massive desertion of voters. In 1931 this is not what happened. In the North East, in almost every constituency Labour did lose votes. With an electoral register little different from 1929, Gateshead's Labour vote was down by 6,000, Jarrow by 4,000, The Hartlepoons and Houghton by 3,000 each. These were very substantial losses, but in six further seats losses were 1,000 to 2,000 and in three 500. In South Shields, the Labour vote rose by 2,000. In every case, the Tory-National Government majorities in previously held Labour seats increased because of the Liberal Party not fielding candidates.

With the exception of Barnard Castle, a geographically vast constituency with only 27,000 electors, constituencies ranged in size from 39,000 to 65,000 electors and, with the exception of Bishop Auckland, no Labour vote fell below 15,000, while it rose to 29,000 in Sunderland. The city of Newcastle was almost a desert for the Labour Party, and remained so until 1945. Newcastle Central had been held briefly by Charles Trevelyan in the 1920s but the party's showing was generally very poor. In the four constituencies, with electorates of 40-50,000, they never managed to exceed Trevelyan's 17,500 in 1929. In Northumberland, they lost the predominantly mining constituencies of Wallsend, Wansbeck and Morpeth. However the important point about County Durham, and to a lesser extent Northumberland, was that in every constituency - even in the bleak year of 1931 - there remained a very solid mass of Labour voters. Presumably class instincts had them stay Labour despite the record of the Labour government in office falling so short of representing working class needs. In all cases the Labour vote improved in 1935 leading to winning back ten seats in the North East.¹²

Having said all that, for Labour to win office rather than just increase seats in Parliament, something more was needed than just a loyal working class vote. In 1931, for example, a significant proportion of working-class Labour voters voted for the predominantly Tory National Government, and that is without considering working-class voters who had moved from Liberal in 1929 to Tory in 1931. The modest gains by Labour in 1935 suggest that many working people stayed Tory in that year. Some would put this down to the way press opinion was fiercely anti-Labour, so that the Party's policies were never expressed clearly enough to potential voters. It is true that the press was largely owned by Tory barons, but there was a Labour paper, *The Daily Herald*. A better argument might be that those people who regularly voted Labour did so because any Labour Government was better than the Tory alternative on election day.

'On election day' is the key phrase here. The Communist Party (CP) had a few candidates in 1931 but only one across the whole North East,

in Seaham where he won 630 votes. In fact the CP was electorally very weak indeed everywhere in Britain and the North East was no exception. Electoral votes were only one measure of Communist Party support for a party that was not yet centrally focused on the Parliamentary struggle. From its inception in 1920, it had a strong extra-parliamentary strategy based on work-place organisation, strike support and work with the unemployed. Its key aim was to build and educate cadres not primarily win elections. In MacDonald's own constituency of Seaham, it had been a major organiser of the Dawdon Colliery miners' successful action to resist wage cuts in Autumn 1929.¹³ Though the CP mustered only 650 votes in 1931, this did not reflect its support in the DMA nor the antagonisms over union positions. CP members in the period held the critical checkweighman's position at several collieries. While the national LP fiercely opposed association with the Communist Party, comradely fraternisation at pit level was common. However, the CP was severely handicapped by its association with the Comintern, and this was intensified in the late 1920s by its hostility to international social democracy characterised by Moscow as social fascism.¹⁴

Inside the Labour Party, the Independent Labour Party's numbers were waning.¹⁵ Following the electoral disaster the ILP seceded from the LP in 1932 but the new independence brought no electoral success and reduced the number of active socialists in the Party. The ILP had enjoyed little success in Durham since the early days during which the Labour's electoral machine was a child of the DMA across most of the county except in Consett. In fact in Gateshead and across the river in Newcastle the ILP was strong in membership terms, though not electorally, from the 1890s. It formed the core of Labour branches in both towns but the patchiness of its electoral success was emphasised by the awful showing in 1931.¹⁶

A passive working class

A persistent debate at the time and subsequently, is the question of why the British working class was so passive given the continued wretchedness

of their condition of life for much of the inter-war period. Back in 1955, Mowat argued that, “the dole kept people alive, and it kept them on the safe side of discontent and thoughts of revolution.”¹⁷ In terms of the election results of 1929, 1931 and 1935, in the North East, Labour with its moderate and sometimes confusing policies, and with no majority Labour governments as outcomes, repeatedly retained the loyalty of substantial numbers of working class voters. In the case of the mining electorate it appears that the close identification of the party and the union, the DMA, was a crucial factor. Recent detailed studies of the DMA with access to oral history and workers’ biographies have shown two previously under-researched factors at play.¹⁸ These were the union lodge as a community organiser, involving Methodist chapel and Assistance Boards membership in many parts of Durham. Then there was the emergence and growth of Women’s Sections in the LP alongside. Beynon sees the DMA as critical in shaping a particular form of ‘labourism,’ rich in the value of trade unionism and nationalisation as an aim, but very light in issues of social transformation through workers’ control. With, at best, the majority of north-eastern seats in Labour hands and with DMA or Northumberland miners as candidates and MPs, the union values tended to permeate the Labour Party and were communicated to the electorate. Beynon, like Mowat, also stresses that while miners and their families suffered considerable privation, they did not starve. They were able to indulge in some out of the home activities including sports, gardening, playing musical instruments, self-education, union and political work. For most people voting Labour may just have been an extension of ‘keeping your head above water.’

There is a more tricky area where the evidence comes largely from left-wing activists.¹⁹ The average Labour elector, while certainly class conscious, was likely to be pro-monarchy, to a degree imperialist and racist, to have some religious conviction and supportive of the parliamentary system. Such views were normally unlikely to produce coherent opposition to the system and would play into a conservative mind-set with only minimal

interest in the electoral process nationally or even locally.

There remains a final question to be posed. Could Labour succeed in a crisis? By definition crises come quickly, almost out of the blue. They do not follow electoral rules. In 1929, for example, Labour assumed office with a given set of policies for the situation at the time. Six months later came the Great Crash which produced a vastly different set and scale of problems. They were handicapped by existing arrangements and ideologies with a mindset of cautious conservatism preventing the consideration of risky alternatives. Retrospectively we can see that continuing along the conventional track of following the parliamentary rules would harm its own electoral constituency most, but the Labour Party of 1931 lacked the political and cultural resources to institute dramatic change. Some readers may think the events of the past twelve months suggest the question is not yet resolved.

Notes

- ¹ There are three key works for this study. A. Thorpe, *The British General Election of 1931* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), M. Callcott, *Parliamentary Elections in County Durham*, M.Litt Thesis, University of Newcastle, 1973 (unpublished, but with its conclusions summarised in 'The Nature and Extent of Political Change in the Inter-war Years: The Example of County Durham' *Northern History* vol 16 (1980), pp. 214-37) and Judith Green, *Some Aspects of Politics in the North East During the Depression: with Special Reference to Jarrow*, University of Oxford, 1973, unpublished Mss, although a shortened version may shortly be prepared for publication).
- ² Mark Abrams and Richard Rose, with a commentary by Rita Hinden, *Must Labour Lose?* Harmondsworth, 1960. The book contained the suggestion that Labour could only win by making alliances with the Liberals. This was part of a bigger discussion of the period on the consequences of an allegedly newly affluent working class.
- ³ It is worth noting that the 1929 election was the first in which most adults over 21 were eligible to vote. The 1918 Franchise Act had extended to vote only to women over 28.
- ⁴ The Labour Representation Committee (LRC) was formed by a grouping of trade unions and socialist societies in 1900 to attempt to secure representation for organised labour. The largest socialist group was the Independent Labour Party (ILP), which had been founded in 1893 in Bradford. Its leading lights were Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden. Hardie had died in 1915 and along with Arthur Henderson, MacDonald and Snowden were the main players in the post war era..

- 5 In fact both positions were argued in the parliamentary party, the first by John Wheatley and the second by Brockway and other ILP members. They were treated derisively even by some fellow ILP members. Thorpe, p. 9 and Fenner Brockway, *Inside the Left* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1942), pp. 197-8.
- 6 The July 1924 edition of *The Workers' Weekly*, the newspaper of the Communist Party, under the editorship of the young activist, J. R. Campbell, contained a provocative article entitled 'An Open Letter to the Fighting Forces' calling for mutiny. Campbell faced prosecution for sedition. When MacDonald under left-wing pressure temporised, an anti-Government campaign was mounted which ended with defeat at the year's second general election.
- 7 Brockway, p. 156. The letter published in the *Daily Mail* on the eve of the election implied that the leading Russian Bolshevik, Grigor Zinoviev, was working with the Labour Party to bring about an insurrection in Britain. The letter was a complete fiction but is thought to have done damage on polling day.
- 8 Thorpe, p. 29. The ILP conference of 1930 had voted to bind its members in Parliament to conference policy, but only 18 from 151 M.P.s agreed to follow this position.
- 9 See Thorpe for a detailed account.
- 10 In a radio broadcast on 16 Oct 1931. See Duncan Tanner, 'Philip Snowden', entry in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* for more details [accessed 11 June 2020].
- 11 op cit. Callcott, 'Political Change', 1980, p. 232.
- 12 Details from Callcott, *Parliamentary Elections*, for Durham, 1973, and Green, 1973, for Northumberland.
- 13 W. R. Garside, *The Durham Miners 1919-1960* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971), pp. 249-51.
- 14 R. Martin, *Communism and the British Trade Unions, 1924-1933*, Oxford, 1969.
- 15 A. W. Purdue, 'The ILP in the North East of England', in D. James, T. Jowitt and K. Laybourn, *The Centennial History of the Independent Labour Party* (Krumlin: Ryburn Academic, 1992).
- 16 M. Callcott, 'The Making of a Labour Stronghold' in M. Callcott and R. Challinor, *Working Class Politics in North East England*, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1983, pp 69-70.
- 17 C. L. Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars 1918-1940*, London, 1955, p. 484. After sixty years this remains the best one volume account of the inter-war period. Green, pp 18-33, explores these issues with special reference to Jarrow, .
- 18 Garside; Callcott, *Parliamentary Election*; and more thoroughly with greater access to material, Huw Beynon and Terry Austrin, *Masters and Servants: Class and Patronage in the Making of a Labour Organisation* (London: Rivers Oram, 1994), pp. 338-362.
- 19 All the surviving personal biographies referred to in the works above and others in the author's possession are written by left wing political activists. They tend to be fiercely class conscious, strongly anti-imperialist, heavily pro-government expenditure, sceptical of the monarchy and the parliamentary system. These opinions cannot be considered typical of Labour electors in general.

The Harvest

December 14, 2019, 05:40

Thatcher and Major felled the woods;
Blair and Brown cleared the land;
Cameron and Osborne ploughed and planted,
For Johnson to harvest and gather.
A crop of great worth for the few,
Produce of poison for the many.

Paul Mayne

north east history

‘Back in ’83: A General Election Revisited

Nigel Todd

Jason English was on the run from Newton Aycliffe Approved School. With two friends he was wandering around Newcastle’s busy Northumberland Street, hungry and with no money until an unusual thing happened. A posse of men in suits, surrounded by photographers, came bustling down the street. Jason, being curious, nosed in. One of the group, who seemed familiar from television, was carrying strawberries from the Sayers’ fruit stall. He shared these with the hungry lads and had a bit of good natured banter with them before moving on. It was Denis Healey, a well-known Labour personality, former Chancellor, and often mimicked endearingly on TV. (*See photograph on the front cover*)

Jason’s experience is a reminder of how General Elections move through people’s lives, sometimes without insight into those they glancingly touch. For Jason, his life revolved around heartrending problems that politicians were not even discussing, at least not openly. Jason, after all, had escaped from abuse at a children’s assessment centre that had a history of brutality.¹ Years later, Jason wrote on Facebook:

Little story here about Denis Healey.

Back in ’83 when he visited Newcastle I was wandering round town with my mate Paul Robinson, we had absconded from a children’s home at the time.

I noticed a lot of reporters around the fruit stall on Northumberland Street, so I pushed my way through the crowd to see what the commotion was about. I recognised this bloke off the tele, I said, "Hey Mister, dee yee nah, Maggie Thatcher?!", to which he replied "Too well, my son, too well".

Anyway the bloke off the fruit stall gave him a punnet of strawberries and I shared them with him...the Chronicle headlined it 'Strawberry Walkabout'.

True story.

I never forget that day, R.I.P Mr Denis Healey, you were a gent; with mad eyebrows.

Jason's strawberry walkabout with Denis Healey and his eyebrows was an episode from the 1983 General Election that was itself full of incident. Even the onset of the whole affair was a shock. The first I heard that Margaret Thatcher had called the election a year early came from a chance remark in a Derry bar. It was the height of the Irish War, and a group from the Tyneside labour movement had travelled over to see what was going on. A man standing next to me said casually 'I expect you'll be going back for the election.' Election, what election? It had just been called, apparently, but nobody had told me. As a Labour candidate, I hurtled back to Newcastle, sleeping uncomfortably overnight on a Carlisle station platform, and into an election largely about a different war, namely the Falklands. The victory in the South Atlantic, combined with a mild 'bounce' in the economy, had given a previously unpopular Prime Minister an opportunity to trade on other people's sacrifices. A year later she would be laying waste to Britain's mining communities.

Politics is an unpredictable adventure. Although chosen as the Labour parliamentary candidate for the former Newcastle North constituency, in a close contest with Mo Mowlam, it was uncertain that I would still be the candidate once revised constituency boundaries were implemented. Yet in the frantic rush to get a campaign up and running, it turned out that I was the only option. This wasn't altogether popular. Even though the newly created Newcastle Central CLP was inclined towards the Left, it included a division between the 'soft' left, progressively inclined but focused on party machinery, and the 'Bennite' left that was more radically oriented and committed to engaging with wider campaigns for social and economic transformation. For the former, action could be approving a resolution to the Party hierarchy, and for the latter, action also meant picket lines, demonstrations, and mass rallies. Those wide definitions made sense in the context of Labour's internal politics of the early 1980s. But as secretary of the Newcastle branch of the Bennite Labour Co-ordinating Committee I was in the latter camp, and seen by some as 'a Marxist intellectual type' which I took as an accolade for a bloke from the Co-op.²

Context was important. The Newcastle Left was active and creative in the early 1980s. It was interested in workers' and community plans, researching alternative economic policies, developing a Tyneside Socialist Centre on Jesmond Road, maintaining the Days of Hope Bookshop on Westgate Road, leading a vigorous Newcastle Trades Council, instigating anti-fascist and anti-racist actions, supporting the Tyneside Nuclear Disarmament Campaign (CND), and building modest footholds among Labour Councillors. Directly relevant to change in the Labour Party was the Labour Co-ordinating Committee which collectively produced a manifesto (*United Newcastle*) in 1982 as a programme for socialists in local government. *United Newcastle* and the LCC supplied a platform, by no means the only one, for socialist feminists as an extension of the women's movement into the local Labour organisations. At a Newcastle LCC meeting, women members were very strong about their demands:

It was made crystal clear by women members of the LCC that they are deeply concerned at male bias in the Party and expect far more than token gestures towards equality from male comrades. Women's rights should be seen as central to Labour's purpose and *not* as something relegated to secondary importance behind other issues ... male comrades should take a lead in countering the offensive social attitudes ... which reinforce discrimination against women.³

Not for the first time in Labour history, 'the woman question' shook the foundations. In September 1981, there had been a Newcastle 'Women and Feminism' conference, co-ordinated via Ruth Todd, which attracted over 70 women and was a catalyst in advancing socialist feminism. It was pulled together by the Gosforth and Moorside Labour Party Women's Section. The Women's Sections were local branches of the national Labour women's organisation and tended to be bastions of the party's Right, with women relegated to making tea and stuffing envelopes at election times. However, younger women, in touch with 'second wave' feminism, were out to overthrow the old order. By June 1983, they had formed

a broad collective of socialist women from a wide variety of backgrounds, e.g. the Labour Party, Communist Party, Trade Unions, other women's groups, and some women not connected with any other group but wishing to be more politically active. The group first met in June when the name was changed from Left Labour Women to Women of the Left due to the large response from women who were not members of the Labour Party.

The group is a forum for women to meet and work together not only reacting to local and national political issues but campaigning and initiating action. Moreover, Women of the

Left believe this kind of political action should be enjoyable and that sometimes politics can be fun.

The group issued a statement under the names of Julia Darling, Margaret Mound and Margaret Chiles. They described keeping 'organisational structure ... to a minimum', operating from the Women's Centre in Newcastle's Pink Lane, intervening in a health workers' dispute, and deploying a 'flying picket' in which 'women and children toured the picket lines in a decorated mini-bus singing songs.' Members visited coal pits in Northumberland and spoke to workers 'at a local engineering works' to drum up solidarity. They next opposed an anti-abortion rally with leaflets and a 'counter-march which resulted in more support for the pro-abortion line than the pro-lifers.' Clearly, this was not the standard behaviour of the Labour Women's Sections, and 'fun' was definitely off the agenda for those who led them.

Local victories were gained over the acceptance of crèches at Labour meetings, and the Newcastle North CLP had agreed, despite opposition, that its selection of a parliamentary candidate should be made from a shortlist of 50-50 male and female aspirants. But the inevitable clash between traditionalists and socialist feminists erupted at the National Conference of Labour Women, held in Newcastle's City Hall in June 1982, and its evening rally which attracted an anti-war protest. Rage against the 'new women' exploded. Male stewards were allowed to assault women and their children, women delegates were prevented from entering the conference in a torrent of political and verbal abuse, threats of expulsion from the Party, and withdrawal of the Labour 'whip' from councillors were made (and attempted in the case of Tessa Grey, a Tyne and Wear County Councillor). A 'Sikh member of the Party, Atma Singh, was subjected to racist abuse by stewards ... and told 'don't come here telling us how to run our country'.' Tessa Green, an eye witness, reported seeing women and children 'being thrown down the steps and into the street' outside the City Hall, and noted 'that the irrational and deplorable behaviour of the

stewards was the result of fear ... fear at the audacity of some Labour Party members who wish to assert their own opinions ... rather than meekly accept all that is handed down from the Party leadership.'

Being the local parliamentary candidate, I immediately complained to the Chief Steward, who admitted to some of the heavy-handedness, before unleashing a torrent of denunciations of the socialist feminists for 'wrecking' the conference (ie passing critical resolutions), 'conspiring' to contest elections to the conference arrangements committee, and generally seeking to undermine the party (that was reserved for me!). After this, I called for a formal inquiry into the Conference stewarding. Not altogether surprisingly, the inquiry report was a whitewash. The Labour Party was not a happy place in the early 1980s when it came to women. History, of course, shapes how people respond to the present. Having quite literally fought so hard for women's voices to be heard and for their safe spaces to be respected makes it understandable why so many of that socialist feminist generation oppose present-day moves both to erode women's safe spaces and even to question the validity of defining women as a sex.⁴

Despite Labour's divisions, the Newcastle Central CLP by and large held together. A good deal of the credit for this was owed to the CLP secretary, Steve Cohen, and also to the dynamic involvement of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE; a forerunner of UNISON). The union's Northern Division, based in Newcastle, was 'one of NUPE's most radical campaigning divisions', aligned with the left, and with rising political and public sector influence on Tyneside.⁵ NUPE poured energy and resources into the Newcastle Central campaign, seconded one of its most capable officers, Jonathan Upton, as campaign organiser and election agent, and allowed its regional office to be used as the campaign base. And thanks to Steve Cohen, we have the post-election 'Cohen Report' – a highly detailed case study densely typed on 18 pages of foolscap paper.

It should be remembered that 1983 was a pre-internet, largely pre-computer and definitely pre-mobile phone era (on election day one campaign committee room could not be contacted frequently because

there was no telephone at the address and none nearby). Duplicators were still widely used, and one keenly felt shortcoming identified by the Cohen Report was that Labour head office had discontinued supplying 6-sheet Reading Slips (a carbon paper pack on which the names and addresses of Labour 'promises' could be typed – yes, there were typewriters – enabling the 'gold standard' of 6 'knock-ups' to take place on polling day).⁶

The Cohen Report is an historical treasure trove of insider analysis of Labour election organisation. It prefigured a subsequent, if drawn out, revitalisation of electioneering, counterposing a modernising, frenetic approach to election campaigning against a stuck-in-the-mud set of practices that too often ignored the need for active contact with the voters. And active contact came in abundance. The Cohen Report records that a 'third of a million leaflets, letters and notices ... were put out during the campaign... many printed by N.U.P.E on their offset duplicators.' Press and media coverage were gained almost every day by 'a freelance journalist', actually Andy McSmith, an ex-Newcastle Journal reporter who helped to run the leftist Days of Hope bookshop on Newcastle's Westgate Road. Public meetings were held ('3,000-5,000 leaflets for each meeting'), door to door canvassing was immense, and visits to shopping centres, old people's homes, school gates, and luncheon clubs arranged.

The campaign methodology segmented the electorate (an old Labour electioneering tactic). For example, a lot of effort was devoted to 'first time voters':

Early in the campaign a radio programme on first time voters not only indicated a generally more concerned attitude to the issues facing society and that they felt unemployment was the most important of them but also they were more alienated from what was seen as the 'bear garden' of politics.⁷

It was decided to send a letter to as many of the first time voters as it was possible to identify 'encouraging them to take the election seriously.' The

campaign certainly took *them* seriously.

Two of N.U.P.E.'s clerical staff spent a week at the Central Library going through all the [electoral] registers since 1979 identifying those voters who had come onto the register on a set date and then checking to see if they were still registered at the same address on the current register. As a result well over 2,000 first time voters were sent a letter from the candidate. This task was not made any easier by the fact that since 1979 the constituency, ward and polling district boundaries had been changed.

Canvassing nurses, a key group for Labour's NHS messages, required 'a determined effort.' Over a hundred nurses lived in one hospital residential block but 'to be honest the response did not make the work involved getting permission for a sympathetic nurse to enter the home to carry out the canvass worthwhile and there would have been no way of knocking them up on the day.' Double meanings could pass unacknowledged by men in the Labour language of the 1980s.

An energetic effort was made to talk to students who were thought to comprise 10 per cent of the electorate. John Mann, a full time organiser for the National Organisation of Labour Students, visited the constituency and decided to remain for the rest of the election. It was a complicated task as students' electoral registration was difficult to navigate, and Newcastle University students were not notably left-leaning. But a Labour students' team was formed and got to grips with canvassing, leafleting and polling day organisation:

It is interesting to note the canvassing technique used on students. In addition to finding the Labour vote, Tory supporters were encouraged to vote by post in their home constituencies 'because their vote couldn't make any

difference here' whilst Labour supporters had the importance of voting in Newcastle for the very opposite reason stressed to them. It is perhaps fortunate that the election took place at exam time limiting [the Tory supporters'] ability to take an active interest in the election.

There was less progress in visiting workplaces. The co-ordinator of Trade Unions for a Labour Victory was meant to lead on securing wider participation from the unions 'but the number of ordinary members brought in was disappointing perhaps reflecting the Party's standing with Trade Unionists nationally.' A few visits took place (one provided by Scottish and Newcastle Breweries carefully avoided any meeting between workers on the shop floor and the Labour candidate), but there was possibly an over reliance on... (the TULV co-ordinator) in that some suggestions which could well have been acted on earlier in the campaign were not made until the later stages ... when they appeared as questions why visits and meetings had not been organised at particular locations.

Things were better with most of the ethnic minority communities. Members of the Community Relations Council arranged a meeting with Newcastle's Labour candidates, and:

With the help of the National Party's leaflet and the N.U.P.E. print room, leaflets in the five different languages were produced and distributed by members of the ethnic minorities to their own communities. Small meetings were also organised for the candidate in people's homes. Fortunately, the lateness of this activity did not affect its impact because the candidate had already built up a fund of goodwill as the prospective candidate for the old Newcastle North C.L.P. which covered those areas where the ethnic minorities tend to live in the new constituency.

Much of the Cohen Report describes in minute detail the preparations for polling day, the campaign team's structure and its schedule of planning meetings. There were officers responsible for every facet – canvassing, publicity, press, finance, trade unions, postal votes, public meetings, transport, students and, of course, polling (including identifying 'those polling districts which needed to use the '6 sheet Reading' pads fortunately saved from the last general election'). Touchingly, there was also the Candidate's Officer, Campbell Macaulay:

Although there was originally some doubt in the value of such an officer, when appointed the Candidate's officer proved to be invaluable not only in ensuring that the candidate was always where he should be but also to make sure that at no time did he appear to have been abandoned by the Party to get on with it himself. As well as this the candidate was never left to brood on any setback, real or imagined, without his officer there to cheer him up.

A relatively unusual slant in the campaign was its visuality. Street music and window posters featured prominently. These things had been used in the past at elections, but largely died out. The Newcastle Central Labour campaign revived visuality, drawing on the contemporary styles of the peace and women's movements. The campaign had its own band! This was called the Stumbling Band 'of Socialist musicians' and was known for playing at demonstrations and events such as May Day as well as at Newcastle's huge 'Peace and Socialism' Christmas dance at the Guildhall where most of the Tyneside Left could be found. It was one of that era's classic big parties. The Stumbling Band was part of a new wave of street musicians integrating music with political activism, cohabiting on the scene with the We Don't Want the Peanuts We Want the Plantation Band, and coalescing with the Red Umbrella Collective.⁸ It saw itself as 'a resource to support a range of campaigns; from Anti-Apartheid to Trade



The photo of Nigel Todd sat with young people at a youth centre was used in Labour Party leaflets. They were popular and many people displayed them in their windows. Photograph courtesy Peter Brabban

Union demonstrations (and unofficial disputes too) to anti-nuclear events to anti-racism events.⁹ At the beginning of the election, the band

offered their services to the Party. Apart from supplying music at the start of public meetings and as a background to street activity, on the Bank Holiday Monday and election day they toured the Labour areas of the constituency on the back of an open lorry covered in balloons and posters, bringing back, as one voter put it, the old spirit of election campaigns.

The lorry was decorated at the NUPE office and on the Bank Holiday run also featured a guest appearance by Ossie O'Brien who had recently won a parliamentary by-election at Darlington, seeing off a supposedly strong (but quite hapless) challenge from the SDP. One young participant, Selina Todd, then at Todd's Nook Primary School, wrote about the 'Socialism is Fun Day' in a 'what did you do in the holidays' essay for her teacher:

We had a week off school and on Monday me and my friends Aimy, Kate and Anna went to the NUPE office. Anna arrived with her parents first then I arrived with mine. Then Kate and Aimy arrived with their dad. NUPE had hired a beer lorry and that had arrived. Christopher Maines came with his mam and so had the red umbrella band. We helped decorate the lorry with balloons and vote labour posters and coloured paper. Then some people put a bench that belonged to NUPE and some chairs on the lorry. We sat on the bench and red umbrella sat on the chairs and played tunes. We stopped at places and gave out stickers. Laura's mam painted faces.¹⁰



On the back of the Election Lorry. Photograph courtesy Peter Brabban

The NUPE lorry passed through areas displaying numerous Labour window posters. A campaign aim had been to ‘get as many posters displayed as possible in order to swamp any bandwagon that the [SDP-Liberal] Alliance might try to start by the same method ... By the end of the campaign the constituency was a sea of red posters.’

One street with a Labour poster in almost every other house was Brighton Grove in the City’s West End. Brighton Grove was a fairly trendy place to live, and was home to numbers of left wing students. It also turned out to be a street selected in a ‘representative’ public opinion poll that showed Labour on 42%, Tory 37% and SDP 20%. As it happened, Brighton Grove was not very representative and its inclusion in the poll was said to have skewed the findings, although it boosted ‘the morale of the campaign’ and provided material for a leaflet. This probably consolidated the campaign HQ’s view as the polls closed that there would be a Labour majority of 2,000-4,000 votes. The BBC and ITN had forecast a Tory

majority of 5,800, and the *Journal* newspaper had predicted that the Conservatives were 'favourite, though not safely so.' *What's Left on Tyneside*, the 'ear to the ground' left-wing magazine of the time, saw Labour as likely to be in second place. A year previously, Steve Cohen had guesstimated, on the basis of local election results, that Labour 'could only expect to come third ... should a General Election be held on the new boundaries'. In the end, the Tories won with a majority of 2,228.

The Cohen Report probed what went well and what went wrong. Successes included a calculation that the swing to Labour in the new constituency was between 5-7%, contrasted with a North East trend against the Party averaging 10%, and that in nearby Wallsend had hit over 30%. Running an intensive campaign of by-election proportions, and receiving lots of help, was thought to explain most of the difference, but the Report noted:

apart from the large number of leaflets and posters and the use of music... the work amongst the students, postal voters and the ethnic minorities must be singled out whilst the ability to draw in help from such disparate groups as the N[ational] C[ouncil] of C[ivil] L[iberties], Anti-Nuclear lobby, and animal rights activists and the use of them effectively has to be recognised.

What went wrong was the late discovery that there was an incomplete canvass in the more Tory areas ('literally thousands of Tory voters were not accounted for'), localised failures to realise that Labour support was almost entirely absent in several estates of semi-detached private housing, and the ability of the Tories to attract crumbling support from the SDP had been underestimated. There was also doorstep evidence that voters were becoming annoyed and resistant to the tidal wave of leaflets that they were getting from the parties, and this may have blunted the impact of eve of poll leaflets, conveying respectively Labour's supposed poll lead and the Tories' last moment 'red scare'.

The politics of the campaign were little touched upon in the Cohen Report, which concentrated mainly on organisation. The sole exception was defence, where doorstep intelligence suggested that Labour was vulnerable. At the second of the regular Saturday meetings convened to review the campaign, the core team

were able to compare notes ...for the first time and it was realised that there was a general groundswell amongst the electorate against the Party's policy on defence as they understood it. This led to a leaflet being prepared, printed and distributed by the following weekend, two days after it became an issue in the election nationally. This early recognition of feelings amongst the electorate and the prompt response to them was probably one of the more important factors in holding the Party's share of the vote against the national slide to the Alliance.

Preparing the leaflet, I vividly recall, required an angst-ridden and head-scratching evening at the NUPE office. The text was fairly nuanced and largely reflective of CND thinking, overlapping with Labour policy, but presentation was the challenge. Should it include a military motif in the standard 'branding' used locally in the campaign? What about a tank? Anything but a nuclear weapon. Certainly not a mushroom cloud! Finally, I suggested using an outline map of Britain (carefully leaving out Northern Ireland), and with relief everybody went home to bed.

What of the other parties in the election? The Ecology Party (forerunner of the Green Party) scored only 478 votes. The SDP fielded John Horam, a former Labour MP who deserted his Gateshead seat. He gained slightly over 20% of the vote and thereafter the SDP and then the Liberal Democrat constituency vote tended towards long term decline. Horam was to become a Tory MP and junior minister and now sits in the House of Lords. Piers Merchant won the election despite being dogged by

controversy about his past associations with the far right. Andy McSmith's detective work to pin down whatever Merchant's past had been brought no conclusive breakthrough, apart from discovering that someone had stolen an apparently revealing archived issue of a Durham students' union newspaper (intriguingly, Julia Hartley-Brewer took up the chase again in April 1997).¹² Merchant, defeated at the next election, became Tory MP for Beckenham until engulfed in a scandal, joined UKIP and at one stage was its General Secretary. He died in 2009.

It was the politics that mattered in the end. The big problem was that 1983 was not Labour's year to win. Engulfed by internal divisions, damaged by the SDP split, the Party was bound to struggle against a Government that had just won a war and appeared to be bringing about an economic revival. But the Tories had their own anxieties. Their tally in the popular vote fell by 700,000 compared with 1979, yet the electoral system rewarded them with more seats. Similarly, first-past-the-post protected Labour that came within 700,000 votes of being pushed into third place, and potential oblivion, by the SDP-Liberal Alliance.

And what of the aftermath for some of the principal actors in our tale? The Cohen Report, or highlights of it, were sent to the Labour National Executive Committee for consideration. Whether they were considered is unclear, but the Newcastle Central campaign served as a minor laboratory for rebuilding the Party's electioneering nationally, albeit there was little trace of the progressive characteristics during the Blairite ascendancy that reduced 'door knocking' to a mechanised and obsessive routine of collecting voter numbers. Andy McSmith returned to mainstream journalism – working as a senior political correspondent and editor for major titles – wrote politicians' biographies and remains an excellent freelance journalist. John Mann had a long parliamentary career, increasingly marked by a bitter relationship with his own party. Ceasing to be an MP in 2019, Mann accepted a Government job offered by Theresa May and, despite alleged ethical reservations from the independent watchdog on House of Lords appointments, he was made a peer in May's resignation honours

list. Jonathan Upton eventually became Labour's Head of Corporate Development. In 2001 he joined the Party's former Assistant General Secretary, and 'moderniser', David Evans, in setting up The Campaign Company that specialised mainly in research and public engagement work for local authorities. Now living in South Wales, Jonathan chiefly attends to 'raising sheep, ducks, geese and chickens, growing prize winning vegetables, and starting small scale production of sheep cheese.'¹³

Steve Cohen, the perpetual and universally respected CLP secretary, and ardent champion of Labour Party members' constitutional rights, died in 2019, and is missed by all who knew him.¹⁴

Notes

- ¹ Email from Jason English to Nigel Todd, 6 February 2020; <https://www.jordanssolicitors.co.uk/personal-services/child-abuse-compensation/cases/aycliffe-school/>. This remarkable blog with comments from former Aycliffe inmates is fascinating; <https://aycliffevillage.wordpress.com/2011/06/24/aycliffe-approved-school/>
- ² Julia Langdon, *Mo Mowlam: The Biography*, (London: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), pp.124-125. The book is slightly muddled over the sequence of the parliamentary candidate selections. The contested selection was held by the former Newcastle North CLP.
- ³ Newcastle Labour Co-ordinating Committee, Newsletter, No. 4, September 1981.
- ⁴ *What's Left on Tyneside*, No. 3, January 1983, p.11; Newcastle Evening Chronicle, 15 September 1982, p. 2; Tessa Green, 'Labour Pains' in *The Empire Strikes Back: Some Views on the Falklands War*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Tyneside Ad Hoc committee for Peace in the Falklands, 1982), p. 27; Nigel Todd, *Report to Newcastle North CLP Executive Committee*, June 1982.
- ⁵ Hilary Wainwright, *Labour: A Tale of Two Parties*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1987), p.141.
- ⁶ Steve Cohen, *Newcastle Central Constituency Labour Party General Election Campaign 1983*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Newcastle Central CLP, unpublished, 1983), known as the 'Cohen Report'.
- ⁷ All direct quotations are taken from the Cohen Report except where otherwise referenced.
- ⁸ Reebee Garofalo, Erin T. Allen, Andrew Snyder, *Honk! A Street Band Renaissance of Music and Activism*, (London: Routledge, 2019) – see Chapter 3 for brief references to Newcastle.
- ⁹ Caroline Airs, Jim Fowler, Ellen Phethean, Peter Thomson, Helen Walker, 'But

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we did have fun' in Anna Flowers and Vanessa Histon (eds), *Sweet Dreams: 1980s Newcastle*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Tyne Bridge Publishing, 2013), pp. 137-141.

- ¹⁰ Nigel Todd, 'Stand and Deliver: Serious Stuff' in Flowers and Histon, p. 255..
- ¹¹ *The Journal*, 18 May 1983, p. 23; Cohen Report; *What's Left on Tyneside*, No. 7, May 1983, pp. 11-13; Newcastle North Constituency Labour Party, *Executive Committee Minutes*, 17 June 1982.
- ¹² Nigel Todd fax to Julia Hartley-Brewer, London *Evening Standard*, 4 April 1997.
- ¹³ Jonathan Upton: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jonathan-upton-296199/>. As a footnote, David Evans was appointed Labour's General Secretary, being Keir Starmer's favoured candidate, in 2020.
- ¹⁴ Chi Onwurah, 'Steve Cohen Obituary', *The Guardian*, 6 February 2020 (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/feb/06/steve-cohen-obituary>).

‘Memory Lingers Here’: Are Newcastle’s Monuments Sites of Collective Memory?

India F. H. Gerritsen

Foreword

Like all projects, my research dissertation on the monuments of Newcastle did not emerge from thin air. During 2018-2019, I was in my final year of Newcastle University, undertaking a module called History and Memory in the United States under the supervision of Dr Bruce Baker. In this module we learnt and discussed how the memory of the Civil War, the fight for slavery, and animosity between the Confederacy and the Union were swept under the rug, and replaced with new memories of unity and leadership through monuments to Confederate soldiers. One year on from my graduation, monuments and their meanings have now resurfaced in both the USA and UK in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter (BLM) riots, bringing to the forefront discussions and ideas that have been around for decades.

I have been asked to discuss how I wrote my dissertation “long before the meaning of public statuary becoming so contested.” But the thing is, I haven’t. In the aforementioned module we were already having seminar discussions around the problematic nature and purpose of Confederate monuments such as that to General E. Lee, and the calls for them to be displaced. Such discussions have been held for much longer by people of colour. My dissertation stemmed from the fact such contestations already exist; from the thought that if monuments were so problematic and contested in the USA (as just one example) then why did our monuments in Newcastle not have this discussion? Why did we walk past them like they were nothing? Were they problematic? And if so, why? This curiosity was built upon, when, one day in the library researching the North East’s response to slavery and the Civil

War, I came upon writing about the actions of Earl Grey, which I had no knowledge of. If I, a Geordie and history student had no idea, then what about everyone else? And why? To answer these I needed to ask the underlying simple question: "what do people think of Newcastle's monuments?" What I have done is write about Newcastle's monuments in-depth regarding their efficacy as markers of memory prior to the recent media coverage. This is where my dissertation's originality lies.

My dissertation focuses on how external factors affect how monuments are perceived or function in spaces, specifically through city planning, green spaces, generational changes, and events. The recent forced removal of the Edward Colston monument, and the protection of Churchill's, reinforces this argument. Further, on a local level, the media's recent focus on monuments reiterates my research findings that the majority of the public do not actually know much about our monuments, even when they receive increased attention, or are regarded as iconic and symbolic to Newcastle. For example, people have since asked me whether any of the monuments in Newcastle are problematic, while most strikingly the Earl Grey Monument received 'protection' by right-wing anti-BLM protestors despite the fact the monument was not under threat - literally or ideologically - with Grey having been an abolitionist. What this suggests is that monuments, as of late, have become a pawn within a culture war. Acts of 'protection' are not necessarily about the statue, but an attack on BLM and how it has been framed within a narrative as an anti-white movement. Similarly, the fact there is rejection to the removal of problematic colonialist/racist monuments on the basis that they are part of a city, highlights how monuments are more than markers of history, having become infiltrated with new meanings.

I do not argue whether monuments ought to be removed or not, or what ought to become of them, but offer an in-depth observation and explanatory analysis in regard to the reality that, while monuments originally commemorate historical figures or events, the monuments in Newcastle serve as pieces of spatial furniture rather than markers of memory.

Introduction

Monuments are built with the intention and assumption that they will function as markers and reminders of history. As Pierre Nora puts it, monuments are symbols where memories are at their most glorious, and thus function as “*lieux de mémoire*”, sites of memory.¹ In reality however, monuments’ meanings, symbolism and function do not often remain as originally intended. Recent public and academic debate surrounding the controversial meanings and political and social repercussions of monuments proposes monuments to be sites of collective memory that generate emotions and opinions, as a result of being politically contingent upon a particular narrative. This interest in changing narratives surrounding monuments became personal when in the summer of 2018 I found information that was new to me regarding Charles, Second Earl Grey, MP of Newcastle and Prime Minister from 1830 to 1834. Memorialised in Newcastle via the Earl Grey Monument (EGM) since 1838, this discovery was concerning. If I, an undergraduate history student, ‘born-and-bred Geordie’ and perpetual sitter and passer-by of the geographically pertinent monument, knew little about its history, the question arose - how likely is it that members of the general public do? This provoked questions regarding the extent of Newcastle’s monuments as *lieux de mémoire*.²

Significant academic research on monuments and memory exists, but citizens’ oral memory and opinions of monuments have failed to be utilised as evidence by historians.³ Until now, no studies have existed on public regard of the importance or function of Newcastle’s city centre monuments as sites of collective memory; no index exists listing all of the city’s monuments; and the only existing study of a Newcastle monument fails to be critically analytical.⁴ However, critical and analytical research of the public regard for the monuments, their surroundings, function and relation to other monuments confirms history, architecture, human geography, and sociology as interlaced and integral to explaining why and how changes in collective memory and attachment to monuments occur.

As Halbwach defines them - and the definitions followed here - memory

differs from history as it is a fluid reconstruction of the past. Collective memory is group memory intertwined with individual memory and sustained by frameworks such as language and landmarks.⁵ The most recent monument studied in this article was unveiled in 1923, meaning a person would have to be 95 or older to have witnessed the event. The knowledge that respondents have of these monuments is therefore not from autobiographical or collective remembering from personal experience, but instead evidence of collective memory passed down from family, education, and independent learning.⁶ However, *collective remembering* and autobiographical memory do play a role in regard to participants' feelings towards the monument, highlighting *collective memory* and autobiographical memory as interlinked. Patrick Hutton's dichotomised assertion that 'history is rational and analytical; memory is emotional and inspirational' is disproven, as both overlap in regard to Newcastle's monuments.⁷

Whilst monuments form a central part of Newcastle's city-centre landscape, the majority of the Newcastle public lack knowledge of the monuments' history and meanings, instead regarding them as aesthetic and practical architecture. Collective memory of monuments exists, but not as intended. Partha Mitter's assertion that monuments 'enshrine' collective memory is too simplistic.⁸ Instead, monuments are both redefined by, and actively redefine, autobiographical memory, social behaviour and landscape. Monuments have become sites of culture that generate personal memories of times around the monuments, meaning their efficacy as *lieux de mémoire* is factor-dependent. The landscape, and its relation to social behaviour and events, is pertinent to preserving or redefining collective memory.

In the sections below, *Reactions to Monuments* compares past and present reactions to the monuments. The reasons behind these changes are discussed in *The Role of Landscape*. Monuments function as social spaces and sites of autobiographical memory. Landscape and surrounding events are significant in altering interaction and knowledge of the monuments, highlighting the impact of local government city planning on collective

memory. The role of events is interlinked with this geographical analysis, as landscape and events are argued to be intertwined in instigating change or continuity in monuments' function, affecting their *Success as Sites of Collective Memory*. These findings are based on five monuments: The Response (RM) (erected 1923) the Eldon Square War Memorial (ESWM) (erected 1923), the Winged Victory Memorial (WVM) (erected 1907), the Joseph Cowen Monument (JCM) (erected 1906), and the Earl Grey Monument (EGM) (erected 1838). Primary data was gathered from 143 respondents via six questionnaire types; one for each monument, plus a questionnaire on collective memory.⁹ Members of the public were asked about the monument they stood by. Many people refused or were apprehensive, stating they did not know anything. Whilst initially refusals were regarded as bothersome, they paradoxically proved beneficial, highlighting the lack of public knowledge. Refusals implied a sense of collective embarrassment, suggesting that the public believe the monuments are important and pertinent to Newcastle and thus ought to know about them.

Reactions to Monuments

Public knowledge and attitudes to the monuments have changed since their planning and unveiling. Due to changes in society and generations, the monuments are no longer accompanied by the extent of historical knowledge and specific meaning that they once had. As personal and specific regard for the monuments has dwindled, they have become sites of vague general awareness.

Generally, older respondents knew more about the monuments than younger respondents. A correlation between knowledge and generation was particularly strong with the JCM and ESWM. Only one younger participant could correctly identify the latter as a memorial to WWI, suggesting the ESWM only functions as an effective site of collective memory for older generations.¹⁰ As Halbwachs asserts, social memory declines alongside the decline of groups who housed original memories.¹¹



The Joseph Cowen Monument (JCM) today, on the corner of Fenkle Street and Westgate Road. Photograph, Sue Ward.



Eldon Square War Memorial (ESWM) St Georges Day. 23rd April 1935. Tyne and Wear Archives and Museum. [Accessed 1st March 2019 at https://www.flickr.com/photos/twm_news/28124602970]

However, generational changes in culture and politics do impact collective memory, as war memorials generate questions of morality. Predominantly, younger individuals regarded the war memorials as potentially problematic; as “a tribute that was fitting in the past, [but] now there are different ways.” Similarly, the WVM proved controversial since the Boer War was waged as an act of colonization, with the public arguing that “it glorifies colonialism”, “it’s not for this age,” and that it is problematic that the Dutch are not memorialised, asking “what about the families on the other side?”, proving Parkhouse’s assertion that war memorials generate a spectrum of both devotional and hostile responses.¹²



Winged Victory Monument (WVM), South African War Memorial, Barras Bridge, Newcastle Upon Tyne, Unknown, c.1910. Newcastle Libraries, 666797C. [Accessed 26 January 2019 at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/newcastlelibraries/4090438527/>.]

This ambivalence regarding the monument's place in current society suggests an altered cultural opinion about warfare amongst newer generations. Time's ability to impact on a monument's relevance demonstrates that collective memory can be reconstructed via personal experiences, culture and political climate. Regardless of this, a desire for the monuments to remain exists cross-generationally.¹³ Knowledge of a monument's meaning, and to an extent agreement with its politics, are thus additional, not primary, to generating collective respect for that monument. Walkowitz's and Knauer's assertion that the public are trained to view monuments as sites of universality and timelessness is proven.¹⁴

This is particularly evident with regard to the war memorials. In the 1970s there were personal connections towards the ESWM that solidified it in collective memory. Families of the deceased tended the monument as if it were a grave.¹⁵ In 1974 architect Faulkner Brown's plan to relocate the ESWM plan attracted uproar from the Royal British Legion and the public, who established the Eldon Square War Memorial Campaign Committee to take their concerns to the Environment Ministry.¹⁶ By August "6,000 more fighters" had joined the cause, with one writing to the press in anger.¹⁷

Just who does Mr Faulkner Brown think he is? The Monument in Eldon Square was erected in the memory of the dead of two world wars....He wants to replace it with a "water feature." I was under the impression that dictators went out in 1943...[there are] plenty of suggestions as to where he should put his "water feature". - A. Robson, Wingrove Road Fenham.¹⁸

Similarly, changes in reactions towards the RM and the WVM have occurred. The RM was expected to be known in 1983 by the readership of the *Evening Chronicle*, when it featured a quiz in which the monument's name was the answer.¹⁹ Yet today only 11% of respondents knew its name, in contrast to the expected knowledge in 1983.



*The Response Memorial (RM), a formal procession, date unknown.
Newcastle Libraries no: 053338,
<https://co-curate.ncl.ac.uk/resources/view/28469/>*

Likewise, turnout and reactions to the WVM unveiling in 1908 show a high level of public interest with mass crowds and parade.²⁰ A War Memorial Committee representative stated they hoped the WVM would console relatives of the deceased ‘to know that their names would be read for generations to come’.²¹ Research reveals this hope unfulfilled. Only 32% of respondents could identify it as a war memorial and only 16% could name it as a memorial to the Boer War.

Yet intense attachment and respect for these three monuments remains, with the majority of respondents stating their removal would cause anger or upset. However, reasons for attachment and against removal are less personal, replaced by a concern that removal would incite “disrespect”, and that a monument ought to remain because “it’s a reminder” as a site of history and “memorial to the people.” A sense of obligation to the past has overtaken a personal connection to a monument’s meanings and the desire for it to remain.

This argument is reinforced by the EGM’s opposite experience. Grey, although invited to the ceremony, turned down the invitation. Four

months later the monument still lacked status and belonging in the city. *The Northern Liberator* wrote,

The public, as well as we ourselves, have now begun to be a little anxious, as well as surprised, with regard to the unchristened condition of that Pillar at the head of Grey Street, which men have for some months been calling the “Grey Monument” ...It has got no name. It is not even in the parish register.²²



*The Earl Grey Monument (EGM) in 1963,
<https://co-curate.ncl.ac.uk/resources/view/39601/>
Tyne and Wear Archives Museums.*

This is surprising, considering friends of Grey and the public had spent four years planning, with the decision to erect a monument in honour of Grey's 'eminent services' made in 1834.²³ Today only 21% of respondents knew that Grey was once Prime Minister. Little has changed since 1929, when an introductory pamphlet to 'Canny Newcastle' described the EGM as 'virtually the centre of the city and one of its most familiar objects- so familiar in fact that probably not one in a thousand of the busy citizens who pass it daily could tell you, without reference, why it was erected'.²⁴ Familiarity thus enables monuments to become taken for granted.²⁵

Yet as Brett argues, despite this lack of knowledge there remains a 'general, albeit unspecific awareness that the monument matters and stands for something'.²⁶ Today the public are attached to the EGM, regarded as central to Newcastle and the favourite monument for over two-thirds of respondents, who expressed views such as, "[the monument] fills my heart with home", "it makes Newcastle Newcastle", and "to us it is our city." Brett's assertion in 1988 that the monument is symbolic of civil and regional identity, remains true today.²⁷

Attachment thus does not originate from monuments' symbolic function, but derives from personal reasons, autobiographical memories, or the monuments' role in culture. The majority of respondents believed the monuments generated culture, showing that "the city cares for people" or "has a strong military connection." Others noted the role of education or family ties, "my dad's in the army", for their appreciation of a monument. The following respondent highlights the extent of personal attachment. Despite lacking knowledge of the RM's meaning, they said that their homeless living status meant the bench beside was "home." Their reaction to the question of removal was "I sit here every day, seven days a week and I love it", "if they tried to take it down I'd be in jail." By implying preventative illegal action, a strong emotional attachment to the monument as a site of belonging was insinuated. This reiterates that meanings and relationships to spatial environments are rooted in experience and human behaviour, reinforcing Jeffrey Olick's

assertion collective memory cannot exist without social experience and autobiographical memory.²⁸ Knowledge is thus secondary in generating attachment to the monuments, as autobiographical memories generate personal and regional identity.

The Role of Landscape

Landscape and monument placements are critical to how monuments function and are viewed by the public. Changing public space is the main contributor to changes in collective memory and human interaction. Pedestrianised monuments have become redefined as landscape markers and social spaces, and are more dominant in collective memory than unpedestrianised monuments. Whilst this increases their power in collective memory and public attachment, this can negatively impact knowledge of the monuments' meaning.

The EGM fails as a site of collective memory to its original purpose, as its memorial element has become secondary. It now functions as an iconic landmark, congregation space, and navigational compass; "a place where I have always met friends," and a "nice landmark to meet people." All respondents regarded the monument as a social place rather than as a memorial to Earl Grey, proving that urban and rural sites are moulded by human actions and perceptions.²⁹ This collective memory is pervasive due to the EGM's practicality. The EGM is well known as "if you say 'meet you by Monument' everyone knows where you mean", it is a "focal point", "large, remarkable and easy to find", functioning as a visible city nucleus and navigational compass. As one respondent retorted, "if they removed it, there'd be confusion." Geographically, the EGM is an effective meeting space as it stands at the centre of four directions: east and west Blackett Street, Grainger Street, and Grey Street which are key to reaching the city's attractions and buildings. It serves as a middle ground for people meeting from different directions and allows people to choose where to go from there.

Today its central and populated location enables the EGM to signify culture, surrounded by performers, protests, events and stalls throughout the year. There is “always stuff going on around here”, proving social spaces as creations of everyday practices.³⁰ Activists throughout the political spectrum utilise the EGM, proving that whilst Grey was a politician, the public do not associate the EGM as a politically-specific site, but a practical one. As a result, the monument generates new collective and autobiographical memories, supporting the assertion that once monuments become spatial they create public spaces in themselves.³¹ As one respondent noted, “whilst I have little knowledge of him [Earl Grey], the monument itself has become an integral piece of Newcastle’s landscape.” The EGM has become redefined in collective memory as a social hub and architectural feature serving an aesthetic, practical and emotive purpose intertwined with regional identity. Not only is the EGM intrinsic *to* Newcastle, for many it *is* Newcastle, “to us he stands as our city.” The EGM is *the* monument of Newcastle.

These changes in function are not random, but often deliberate. Human agency in the way people interact and use social spaces redefines monuments and their meanings, generating new collective memories. Initially the EGM was surrounded by railings, featured a water fountain, and functioned as a roundabout for horses and trolleybuses. Its life as a city nucleus began when the roundabout became pronged with pedestrian crossings by 1968. This was reinforced in 1980-81 with the opening of Monument Metro Station which pedestrianised the EGM as a sitting space. Within a few years, the Grainger Town Project (1997-2004) focused on conservation and environmental enhancement to generate city identity and tourism.³² This proved successful in 2002, when a city report respondent referred to the EGM as Newcastle’s crown jewel.³³

The Metro station and pedestrianisation reinforce the EGM as a central landmark. The naming of the station in honour of the EGM reinforces the power of the monument as an iconic landmark, “the Monument”, superseding the monument’s original meaning. This is explicit in the

exclamation by one respondent who, when asked “what is your favourite monument in Newcastle?”, replied “what do you mean? There’s only one Monument!” In becoming synonymous with the term “monument”, the EGM no longer functions as an identity-specific memorial as Grey’s identity has been removed from collective memory. However, there is little incentive or need to reassert the EGM’s original meaning. As one of the highest buildings at the centre of ‘the finest street in Britain’, it remains functional as a viewing platform and central attraction surrounded by shops, bars, and restaurants, successfully serving tourism and city spending.³⁴

The importance of landscape in asserting a monument’s place in collective memory is reinforced by the example of the WVM. The creation of Haymarket Metro station has negatively impacted the WVM as a site of collective memory, suggesting the EGM’s status as a city pinnacle is more the result of its surrounding landscape than the Metro’s installation. Whilst the Metro works enhanced the EGM, the WVM has experienced the opposite, being “more noticeable before the Metro was there”, when it stood alone.

The impact that a lack of pedestrian space has on the forgetting of monuments is illustrated again by the JCM. Of the five monuments, the JCM is arguably the most relevant to local history. Cowen was a local MP who fought for the working class mining community, was involved in Blaydon Bricks, was editor of *the Newcastle Chronicle* from 1859, and founded the Tyne Theatre and Opera House in 1867. Yet, few could name the monument. The surrounding landscape is responsible for this, as the JCM has no commanding presence. As one respondent noted, “it’s not a focal point.” The monument elicited confusion and negative remarks pertaining to its location, one person asking, “what? this monument? I didn’t know it was there, but I’ve probably walked past it for thirty-one years.” When the JCM was erected, his placement by Westgate Road/ Fenkle Street was relevant and the monument stood pronounced, pedestrianised and close to the Newcastle Chronicle offices and the Tyne Theatre and Opera House. However, in 1965 the newspaper office moved to Groat Market, and then to Eldon Square. Today, the JCM lacks significance as

both a memorial and social point, situated far from the centre, no longer surrounded by pedestrian space but by a busy road.

Ultimately, Newcastle's monuments illustrate Thilo Folkert's point that landscape is an activated material in itself. Nora's assertion that the relocation of monuments does not alter their meaning, is challenged. Changes in landscape surrounding the monuments are so profound that they have been relocated into new contexts. The meaning and function of *lieux de mémoire* is landscape-dependent and thus able to be redefined.

Success as Sites of Collective Memory

Newcastle's monuments present a paradox. Whilst the public regard them as important, their collective memory of the monuments' original purposes is limited. Lack of awareness is evident across all five monuments on varying levels. The monuments to political individuals fail as sites of collective memory as originally intended, with the individuals and their actions lost to collective memory. Similarly, whilst the three war memorials assert a stronger place in collective memory in regard to their original meaning as a 'war memorial' the majority of respondents could not remember the monuments' name' or the specific wars they commemorated.

Familiarity is unfruitful to the monuments' success as sites of collective memory regarding their original meaning. People do not stop to look at the monuments in depth but instead, as Christopher Day argues, "breathe them in." This explains why despite information boards, knowledge is less pertinent in collective memory than attachment and autobiographical memory. As one respondent admitted "I feel quite daft not knowing anything because I live around here. I haven't paid attention to it [WVM]." This is not new. In 1992 a writer to *the Newcastle Evening Chronicle* stated, "one can't pass [The ESWM] without a fleeting glance...Something we all do unconsciously".³⁸ This act of 'unconscious' viewing supports Nora and Zheng Wang's assertion that monuments lull people into complacency and allow forgetting.³⁹ Collective memory then, is very often our 'collective unconscious'.⁴⁰

Lack of collective knowledge of the monuments' original meaning enables them to become mutable and susceptible to fluctuation in public memory. Variation in collective memory and understanding of the monuments renders Newcastle as having an individualist, rather than collective, culture which encourages individual interpretations to flourish.⁴¹ Collective narratives do exist in individualist cultures, but are little reinforced and thus usually have a weak consensus over history.⁴² People within an individualist culture are likely to be inward-focused and remember events relevant to themselves.⁴³ It is thus unsurprising that autobiographical memory is pertinent within collective memory of the monuments, as the public have connections to the monuments unrelated to their original purpose.

This is evident in the public propagation of the pervasive belief that Grey and his monument are associated with Earl Grey Tea. Many knew only this about the EGM, claiming that the monument was erected "because of the tea", with one admitting "I tell all my friends we have a monument to tea." This transmission of false memory impacts and shapes personal and collective memory, as the public believe this myth to be a true historical fact.⁴⁴ However, research on the tea's origins suggests a connection is highly unlikely.⁴⁵ The use of bergamot flavouring in tea is evident as early as 1824, but it was not until 1867 that the first mention of a 'celebrated Grey mixture' tea came about by the proprietors Charlton and Co.⁴⁶ The same proprietors are responsible for the first known usage of the name "Earl Grey Tea" in 1884, 41 years after Grey's death, and 51 years after he had left office as Prime Minister, making the association unconvincing.⁴⁷ As Jacquelyn Dowd Hall asserts, memory and history are intertwined regardless of contradictions.⁴⁸ The public have power to redefine monuments as sites of *lieux de mémoire*, as collective memories are not remembered but constructed.⁴⁹ It is likely that this myth goes unchallenged as tea is less contentious to discuss than the Reform Act and slavery. As Shanti Sumartojo argues, monuments' meanings are never direct.⁵⁰ The EGM functions as a memorial to Grey in collective memory

only through an urban myth. It thus holds a paradoxical place within Newcastle's landscape, as although it is the most pertinent monument of the five in public memory, it has one of the poorest scores in relation to public knowledge of its meaning. Nora's definition of *lieux de mémoire* as sites where the material, the symbolic and the functional coexist explains how this has transpired.⁵¹

Conclusion

Newcastle's monuments fail to function as *lieux de mémoire* in collective memory as originally intended. Whilst new or weak collective memory exists, collective forgetting is more prominent. Instead, they have come to be forgotten or redefined via landscape, social behaviour, autobiographical memory and individual interpretation, functioning as practical and visual points in the landscape, rather than as memorials. They are now sites that generate autobiographical memories, which become new collective memories themselves, proving monuments are 'pegs on which people hang memories', that go through 'stages' or 'afterlives' over time.⁵² Collective memory and forgetting of the monuments thus coexists.

Whilst their meaning and function has changed over time, emotional attachment and respect for the monuments has not. People are aware that they stand for something important. Despite lack of awareness they are regarded as integral to Newcastle's city landscape, regional identity, and pride, rendering historical knowledge inessential for individuals to have an emotional response or attachment to monuments. Monuments have always felt important to the public. In this respect continuity is evident.

Landscape changes have had the largest impact on the way the monuments are regarded and interacted with. Monuments surrounded by pedestrianised, green or social spaces, are better known in collective memory. However, lack of consistent, relatable and informative events enables their original meanings to be forgotten or replaced, proving that environments and monuments are creations of human actions and meanings.⁵³ This is a double-edged sword. Whilst social behaviour reinforces the monuments as

important and central to the landscape, it alters people's perceptions and knowledge of the monuments' meaning and purpose. Monuments' spatial status makes them vulnerable as the public know more about their function and surrounding events than what they stand for. Despite monuments' concrete form, they are flexible and impacted by humans as sites of memory, proving collective memory to be reconstructed.⁵⁴ Their relevance to political climate and culture, and fluctuations in the landscape, render monuments subject to change in collective memory.

Monuments and collective memory are like flowers. They are intrinsic and aesthetic to the landscape, but few people know about them in detail or examine them. Watered by relevant events and a beneficial landscape setting, monuments bloom as intended and are noticed and appreciated for their purpose. When they are neglected or placed in unsuitable landscapes, they wilt. Collective memory and monuments need to be nurtured to grow and sustain.

Notes

- ¹ Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Construction of the French Past volume III: Symbols* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), xii; For academic discussion on "sites of memory" and "collective memory" see Maurice Halbwachs *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, 1925 and *La mémoire collective*, 1950).
- ² Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (1989), p. 7.
- ³ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans., Lewis A. Coser, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 204; Eric Hobsbawm, ed. Terence Ranger, *Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 263-308; Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1984), 130.
- ⁴ Peter Brett, *The Grey Monument: The Making of a Regional Landmark* (Sunderland: North-East England History Institute 2000, originally 1988).
- ⁵ Halbwachs, pp. 53, 175.
- ⁶ Halbwachs, p. 24.
- ⁷ Patrick H Hutton, *The Memory Phenomenon in Contemporary Historical Writing: How the Interest in Memory has Influenced our Understanding of History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 1.
- ⁸ Partha Mitter, "Monuments and Memory for our Times", *South Asian Studies* 29 (2013), p. 165.

- 9 For an in-depth discussion regarding methodology and respondent information, refer to the original research paper, India Gerritsen, 'Memory Lingers Here': Are Newcastle's Monuments Sites of Collective Memory?', Newcastle University BA Hons Dissertation paper, 2019.
- 10 Gerritsen, pp. 17-22.
- 11 Halbwachs, p. 144.
- 12 Valerie B Parkhouse, Memorializing the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. *Militarization of the Landscape: Monuments and Memorials in Britain* (Leicestershire: Troubador Publishing, 2015), p. 304.
- 13 Gerritsen, 17.
- 14 Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa Maya Knauer, eds., *Memory and the Impact of Political Transformation in Public Space* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 5.
- 15 'Is Nothing Sacred to The Planners?' *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 25 June 1974.
- 16 'Bitter Battle for the Square', *Evening Chronicle*, 9 June 2004.
- 17 '6000 more fighters' *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 5 August 1974.
- 18 'Is Nothing Sacred to The Planners?' *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 25 June 1974
- 19 Untitled, *Evening Chronicle*, 24 September 1983.
- 20 'Legion of the Frontiersmen', *Shields Daily News*, 20 June 1908; untitled, *Evening Chronicle*, 24 September 1983; 'Northumberland War Memorial Unveiled', *Morpeth Herald*, 27 June 1908; untitled, *Berwick Advertiser*, 26 June 1908.
- 21 As above.
- 22 "Rumble O! Jumble O!", *Northern Liberator*, 1 December 1838.
- 23 Untitled articles, *Berwick Advertiser*, 25 January 1834; and *Durham Chronicle*, 10 October 1834.
- 24 Brett, p. 38. Originally in P. Brown, *Canny Newcastle: Some Scattered Threads of a Romantic Story Collected and Tied in a Bunch*, (Newcastle: Bealls Limited, 1929), pp. 31-33.
- 25 Michael Parker Pearson and Colin Richards, eds. *Architecture and Order: Approaches to Social Space* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 314.
- 26 Brett, p. 38.
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A Time of Heroes: How we will be remembering the International Brigaders from Stockton

Tony Fox

I have lived in a time of Heroes

I have lived in a time of Heroes
And heroines; of great objectors
To subjection and persecution

I have rubbed rough shoulders
With unnumbered unknown soldiers
Dead in their tens of thousands.

The working men who saved Madrid
Those lads that fell at Alamein
At Arnham and at Stalingrad.

These were my comrades, my companions
Civilians, conscripts, partisans,
Who did great deeds to win hard victory.

In unremembered graves they lie,
Untrumpeted, their songs forgotten
Our children are not taught their history

And you forget them at your peril
For though you fight as well as they
You'll be betrayed, as we were.

David Marshall, International Brigader (1916-2005)¹

The Stockton Memorial

David's words came to me as I walked past Stockton's Cenotaph on the High Street. I was on my way to meet John Christie to discuss his plans for a memorial to the men from the borough of Stockton-on-Tees who volunteered to join the International Brigades. Like me, John had recently witnessed the standing ovation received by *The Young'uns* at the end of their 2018 performance of *The Ballad of Johnny Longstaff*, in The Arc in Stockton, the town of Johnny's birth.² Also in the audience were the Longstaff family. I say witnessed, but to be honest I could not see a thing through my tears. John, the landlord of the award winning pub, *The Golden Smog*, had been leading a campaign to raise money for a large memorial commemorating the Stockton volunteers, to be erected just off the Stockton High Street, a short distance from the historic Green Dragon Yard.

Following the success of this campaign, the Stockton Memorial is to be unveiled in 2020.³ Its design is based on Picasso's *Guernica*, so as to illustrate the brutality the brigaders faced. It also features elements representing the brigaders' stories. With the help of the International Brigade Memorial Trust (IBMT), we plan to produce accompanying educational materials, to celebrate the lives of those who fell and tell the story of the men from Stockton-on-Tees who volunteered to fight to support the democratically elected Spanish Republic against the attack on it by a Nationalist alliance led by Franco.⁴

Both John and I are members of the IBMT, a fantastic organisation that keeps alive the memory and spirit of the 2,300 men and women from Britain and Ireland who volunteered to fight fascism and defend democracy during the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39. The IBMT brings together families, friends and admirers of the International Brigades, along with activists, historians and others who share an interest in their extraordinary story. The IBMT organises and promotes educational, cultural and commemorative activities to preserve the legacy of anti-fascism and international solidarity left by the International Brigades. They also help ensure that the, more than 100 memorials to the volunteers (526 who were killed) are maintained in good order.

The IBMT and Stockton Council have given their full support to the erection of the memorial to the eight volunteers from Stockton-on-Tees. We have also gained support from the children of two Stockton Brigaders, Duncan Longstaff and Elizabeth Estensen. Both have been very generous in providing support and information. We have appealed for any surviving relatives of the other Stockton men to contact us. Researching the men of the International Brigades has brought to light some fascinating and intriguing stories. The micro-study of the eight men from the area has enabled us to map out and highlight the harsh reality of what it meant to be a volunteer. They were:

George Bright – Thornaby
William Henry Carson – Stockton
Wilfred Cowan – Stockton
Otto Estensen - Thornaby
Joseph Myles Harding - Thornaby
John Eddie Longstaff - Stockton
Patrick Joseph Maroney - Stockton
Albert 'Bert' Overton – Stockton

The International Brigades

Volunteers for the International Brigades came from over 50 countries, with others serving in international medical services. The largest contingent came from France. Italy, Germany, Poland, USA and the UK also contributed substantial numbers.⁵ Recruitment for the International Brigades was coordinated by the Communist Party (CP) in Paris. The usual route for volunteers, after arriving in Paris, was to be secretly shipped into Spain or to be smuggled in groups over the Pyrenees. They would be taken to the International Brigade headquarters at Albacete, where volunteers would be processed and divided up by nationality, and then placed into the different linguistic battalions of the International Brigades. British speakers were placed in the 16th battalion of the 15th Brigade.⁶

The North East network

Recruitment of volunteers in the North East was organised by a small group of close friends. George Aitken and George Short were the CP District Secretaries. George Short and his wife Phyllis, who originated from Chopwell, had been active in the CP since the 1926 miners' lockout. Wilf Jobling, also from Chopwell, was an Executive Committee member of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM) along with a Communist Councillor in Blyth, Bob Elliott, who also volunteered for Spain. Newspaper reports show George Short and Wilf Jobling speaking alongside Frank Graham, a Sunderland branch activist, from the platform at Stockton's May Day rallies prior to the Spanish Civil War.⁷

This network of friends organised the volunteers into small groups. Recruits were interviewed to assess their suitability. Middlesbrough Brigader, David Goodman describes in his book how George Short interviewed him.⁸ George himself said that recruiting for the International Brigades was one of the hardest things he did, because he knew that 'many would not be coming back'. Charlie Woods, who replaced George Aitken as District Secretary when Aitken volunteered for Spain, also tells of the heart-breaking challenge of selecting volunteers.⁹

The Volunteers

Of the 2,300 volunteers who came from Britain, Ireland and the Commonwealth, roughly 80% were members of the Communist Party or the 'more socially acceptable' Young Communist League (YCL), but there was no bar on volunteers who were not Communist.¹⁰ It is estimated that several hundred volunteers had been National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM) activists. Recent research suggests that a significant proportion, over 20%, of the British Brigade volunteers were Jewish.¹¹ The volunteers came from overwhelmingly working-class backgrounds, with the largest number (almost a third) coming from London. Scotland and the Northern industrial cities provided the bulk of the rest. Only a small number were unemployed, with large numbers involved in industrial

occupations, such as labouring, construction, shipbuilding and mining. The average age of British Brigaders was twenty-nine. A significant number had already fought fascism in their own towns and cities. The Battle of Cable Street seems to have been an important watershed for many.¹²

The Stockton men reflected these statistics. All eight men were in employment when they left for Spain, although one man, George Bright, was a labourer and so would not have had a steady income. Being Jewish, he also reflects the disproportionate number of Jewish volunteers. Three of the Stockton men, William Carson, Joe Harding and John Longstaff were not members of the Communist Party when they volunteered, although both Carson and Longstaff, due possibly to their age, were involved with the YCL. George Bright at sixty was the oldest Brigader in the British Battalion. Remarkably, even if we remove him from the calculation, the average age of the Stockton Brigaders was still twenty-seven. Bright, a NUWM activist and CP member was described by Fred Copeman as 'an uncompromising fighter for Trade Unionism'.¹³ Patrick Maroney was a member of the Irish Republican Congress, a pro-communist grouping of the IRA, formed only in 1934. George and Phyllis Short, Bert Overton, and George Bright had led the group who organised the September 1933 anti-fascist protest known as the Battle of Stockton.¹⁴ John Longstaff had fought the British Union of Fascists at Cable Street. The picture that emerges is that of conscientious activists, with experience in a number of campaigns for justice, and anti-fascist activity.

Travelling to Spain

Frank Graham left Sunderland on 15 December 1936, with two friends, Dolan and Lower. In London the three Wearsiders joined up with a group from Glasgow who 'partied all night'.¹⁵ It seems likely that Aitken, Jobling, Elliott, Graham, Bright and Overton were some of the 'responsibles' for the North East Group. That is, they were established party activists who led the group and had to look after the welfare of the volunteers, ensuring discipline and political reliability. Once in Spain, they would become

officers and commissars. In London, the groups were sent to 16 King Street, the Communist Party offices, to meet the formidable 'Robby' Robson who would assess their suitability in military and political terms. After February 1937, volunteers were sent to a nearby office at 1 Litchfield Street, and it was here in September 1937 that the 17-year-old John Longstaff came to volunteer. Longstaff told Robson he was 19, but Robson must have known the truth. Before allowing Longstaff to go, Robson explained to him in detail the great dangers involved and the privations he would face. On acceptance, volunteers were told to purchase weekend return rail-tickets from Victoria Railway Station to Paris because this did not require a passport. At the railway station a Special Branch officer tried to dissuade John Longstaff from travelling.¹⁶

In France, volunteers had to act with discretion, because groups of volunteers would occasionally be arrested and repatriated. On arrival in Paris, the volunteers met their liaison person, Charlotte Haldane, the wife of J.B.S. Haldane.¹⁷ There they underwent a medical examination and more checks on their political reliability. Until February 1937, recruits would normally travel from Paris to Spain by train, then they would be smuggled in groups over the top of the Pyrenees. After February, some volunteers were also smuggled onto ships which attempted to bypass the patrolling Royal Navy warships and Italian submarines.¹⁸ In May 1937, William Lower, who had left Sunderland with Frank Graham, died when the MV *Ciudad De Barcelona* was sunk by an Italian Submarine¹⁹.

Into battle for the Spanish Republic

Frank Graham and Bert Overton arrived at the Madrigueras training base on 1 January. Four of the seven Stockton volunteers arrived in Spain the following week.²¹ At Madrigueras, those Brigaders who had had some military training became instructors for the others. Bert Overton had been in the Welsh Guards and was therefore made an officer in No.4 Company. Joe Harding, who who had served in the British Army for ten years, became an instructor, and seems to have done well in this role. Jack Edwards, a CP

activist from Liverpool, arrived in Spain with no military experience, yet believed his training at Madrigueras supervised by Joe Harding was, in the circumstances, very good.²²

Just three weeks after their arrival in Spain, the Stockton Brigaders of the British battalion were rushed to the front in order to try to stop Franco's assault on the east of Madrid. During fighting on 12th February 1937 against Franco's Army of Africa, the British Battalion suffered 275 casualties, leaving only 125 riflemen fit for duty. Two thirds of the men from Stockton fought at the Battle of Jarama in February 1937. This was the British battalion's first major battle. George Bright had been told to remain at the rear because he was considered too old, but he managed to work his way to the front line, with tragic consequences;

Just then I came across George Bright. George was a carpenter, over sixty years old. He had come to Spain to do carpentry, being too old to fight. George had been well known to me during the unemployed struggles in London. I asked him what the hell he was doing here, and just as he opened his mouth to answer, there was a very quiet plop and a small red hole appeared in his forehead. He died instantly. His Union card fluttered out as he fell – A.S.W. I thought what an awful thing it was that he, at his age should be here, and yet I am certain he would not have wished for any other end.²³

The Battle of Jarama would prove equally disastrous for another Stockton Brigader. On 13 February, the second day of fighting, the machine gun company had been sited ahead of the other three companies on a ridge. The Battalion commander, Tom Wintringham sent forward companies No.3 and No.4 to the exposed ridge line. No.3 company lost over half of its men and withdrew in confusion. Bert Overton of No.4 company requested permission to do likewise, but because this would leave the machine gun company exposed and unsupported, permission was denied. Accounts differ

on what happened next, but as night fell Overton's company withdrew, which resulted in the capture of almost all of the machine gun company. Overton led men in a counterattack to rescue the captured men, but this attack failed when he was wounded. To cover up his blunders Tom Wintringham blamed Overton for the loss of the Machine gun company. Overton was arrested while in hospital recovering from his wounds. At his court martial Overton was charged with desertion, promoting himself to captain and illegally drawing the pay of this rank. As a result, he was demoted to private and sentenced to work in a labour battalion.²⁴

While in hospital, Overton was visited by the American Robert Merriman, giving rise to a rather sordid tale. Merriman had recently been made an officer in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion (he would later command it) and had paid a substantial amount of money for a hand-made officer's uniform. However, lacking an officer's cap, he approached Overton requesting his officer's cap. This having been refused, Merriman recorded in his diary that he then spent the next week asking almost every officer in the 15th Brigade for Overton's cap, eventually getting it on the day of Overton's arrest. To add insult to injury, Merriman has himself photographed in his new cap and full uniform outside the hospital in which Overton was receiving treatment.²⁵



*Robert Merriman wearing Bert Overton's cap.*²⁶

After Jarama

By the end of February 1937 both sides had exhausted themselves. The new British battalion commander Tom Wintringham had been injured, which left battalion commissar George Aitken in temporary command. He was later relieved by Jock Cunningham, who would report on 1 March that he had just 140 of all ranks fit for duty.²⁷ The horrific level of casualties during this conflict is highlighted by the fact that half of all the British Brigaders killed fighting for the International Brigades fell at Jarama. The battalion remained in the trenches at Jarama until 17 June 1937, and it was here that Wilfred Cowan and Otto Estensen joined the British battalion.

Wilfred Cowan was the eldest son of William and Elizabeth Cowan of Cobden Street, Stockton. He had emigrated to Canada in 1925 where he joined the Young Communist League. Arriving in Spain at the end of April, he trained with the British battalion before being transferred into the Abraham Lincoln Battalion in June 1937. He fought in this unit until February 1938, when he transferred to the Mackenzie-Papineau battalion (nominally Canadian, but a majority of the 'Mac-Paps' volunteers were American), trained by Bob Merriman.

Otto Estensen was a member of the Seamen's Union and the Communist Party. He arrived in Spain in May 1937 to be allocated, along with his best friend Tommy Chilvers, to the British anti-tank battery. This unit had only just been formed that May in Madrigueras from forty volunteers. They were issued with three Soviet 45mm guns, capable of firing both armour-piercing and high explosive shells which, at that time, represented state-of-the-art military technology. As recruits to this unit were specially chosen for their 'superior intellect' the men were seen as an elite unit.²⁸ Later in the Civil War, Otto commanded the anti-tank battery for a period.²⁹



*Otto Estensen is shown in the photograph above with members of his unit. Otto is in the foreground playing a mandolin.
With the permission of the IBMT.*

Remarkably, another anti-tanker, Otto's best friend, Middlesbrough born Tommy Chilvers would, like Otto, survive the war. In 1939, he painted the lettering on the Teesside International Brigade's memorial, now in Middlesbrough Town Hall. The memorial bears the names of George Bright, Myles Harding and Bert Overton as well as seven others from the North East who gave their lives to defend Spain.

The Spanish Somme

Almost as soon as the 15th Brigade withdrew from the trenches of Jarama they faced what Alex Clifford has labelled 'The Republic's Somme', the Battle of Brunete.³⁰ In an attempt to relieve pressure in the North, government forces attacked west of Madrid, again coming up against Franco's African troops, this time supported by the Condor Legion and masses of artillery.

Patrick Maroney would not take part in this bloodbath. He arrived back in England on 17 June, claiming to have been wounded at Jarama. He was interviewed by Special Branch but denied to them being a member of any military unit.

At Brunete, Bert Overton lost his life. Cyril Sexton, a Brigader from Croydon wrote in his memoirs that he had seen Overton in a Genie battalion (a labour battalion) on the third day of Brunete.³¹ This is confirmed by other accounts that Overton was killed on Mosquito Ridge whilst taking ammunition to the front lines.³² This was not the end of Overton's tragic story, however. After Brunete, the officer in charge of the labour battalion was arrested and court martialled. He was accused of murdering Overton by deliberately putting him in danger but was later found not guilty. The Battle of Brunete effectively wiped out the British battalion: of the 330 men who started the battle only 42 remained a fortnight later. Henceforth, the Communist Party ceased recruitment, and the flow of volunteers fell to a small trickle. The British battalion would hereafter consist mostly of Spanish troops built around a core of battle-hardened British runners, officers and commissars.

In August 1937, at Aragon, Estensen and the anti-tank battery distinguished themselves. On 25 August the battalion attacked a strong Fascist position at Purburrel Hill. The Abraham Lincoln Battalion, in which Wilf Cowan served, were repulsed by intense rifle and machine gun fire. The following day another assault was made on the hill, this time involving the anti-tank battery. Under fire and at almost point-blank range, the battery blasted the enemy's strong points and machine gun nests with high explosive shells. By nightfall Purburrel Hill was taken by the British battalion. However, the heavy fighting had reduced the battalion to less than 100 men.

John 'Eddie' Longstaff, who would join the war in September 1937, was the last of the Stockton men to join the Battalion. Longstaff had enlisted in London because he now lived there. Deemed officially too young at 15, he had unofficially joined the 1934 Hunger March with the Stockton contingent, and had decided to stay on in London. Also on the march were

George Short and Bert Overton. Longstaff's life story is extraordinary and so brilliantly presented by the folk trio 'The Young'uns in their 2018 album, and 2020 stage show, *The Ballad of Johnny Longstaff*.³³ One notable aspect of John's life which they do not cover is the work he did after the Spanish Civil War to commemorate and memorialise the British International Brigaders. He was a founding member of the International Brigades Association and was instrumental in getting the Teesside memorial placed in Middlesbrough Town Hall. With David Marshall and Frank Graham, he was guest of honour at the dedication in the council chamber in 1992. This must have been especially poignant for Frank Graham as it was held on the 55th anniversary of the Battle of Jarama, the battle in which his friends Wilf Jobling and Thomas Dolan fell. Dolan was one of the two friends he had left Sunderland with in December 1936.

The slow agony

In October 1937 the 15th Brigade, now led by Bob Merriman, was involved in a disastrous operation against the Aragon town of Fuentes de Ebro. Initially, the anti-tank battery was held back from the main battle until, at the point when all the Republican tanks had been knocked out in street fighting, the panicked Merriman ordered the battery to advance unsupported on the Fascist lines. None of the guns were able to fire and the battery's second-in-command, Jeff Mildwater, was injured in the knee, before the battery was wisely withdrawn. Fuentes de Ebro saw the first major tank battle of the Spanish Civil War. The government deployed 150 of the Soviet T26 and BT5 tanks, which were far superior to the German Panzer Is and Italian CV-33s used by the Fascists. However, the Republican tanks were used to support infantry assaults, whereas the German commanders used their Panzers to spearhead attacks, involving the combined use of tanks, aircraft and artillery by German forces. These tactics preceded the Blitzkrieg tactics which would be so effective in France three years later. After the two-month long Battle of Teruel, the Republican army in Aragon was exhausted and lacked supplies and equipment.³⁴

In March 1938, a huge Nationalist force of 150,000 men and more than 900 planes started a renewed offensive in Aragon. Spearheaded by the Condor Legion's tanks and aircraft, they easily broke through the Republican line. Most of the units of the Republican army fled and the retreat quickly became a rout. Once again, the 15th brigade was asked to halt the fascist advance. On 10th March, the fascist forces reached Belchite which was held by the 15th Brigade and pushed towards Caspe. Despite being outnumbered a hundred to one, and without artillery or air support, the Brigade fought with great valour. However, after two days of heavy fighting, their supplies of ammunition, food and water ran out, and they were forced to retreat. During this Battle for Belchite, the anti-tank battery was surrounded and annihilated; the gunners were forced to destroy one gun that could not be moved, a second was lost to a strafing German aircraft, and the last was man-handled back badly damaged. The surviving gunners were incorporated into the British Battalion as riflemen, non-intervention meaning that the anti-tank battery could never be re-established.³⁵

The last Stockton man to lose his life was Joe Harding. Initially repatriated in August 1937, he returned to Spain on 17 October 1937 and promoted to lieutenant in the Transmissions Company in 1938. Harding was killed in the largest and longest battle of the war, the Battle of the Ebro. This assault in July 1938 by the Republican army across the River Ebro was a disaster. One consequence of fascist control of the air was that large numbers of Republican troops became trapped on the fascist side of the river once the bridges had been destroyed. Many men had to swim the Ebro to escape capture. On 21 September, Juan Negrin, head of the Republican government, announced at the League of Nations in Geneva that the International Brigades would be unilaterally withdrawn from Spain. That night the 15th Brigade and the British battalion moved back across the River Ebro and began their journey out of the country. On the evening of 23 September, Wilfred Cowan was wounded for the third time. He returned to Canada when the International Brigaders were repatriated. One Stockton Brigader who did not return home was Joe Harding, killed on 23 September

1938 at the Ebro River.³⁶

At the final parade in Barcelona on 28 October 1938, as the Brigaders bid their farewell to Spain, Isidora Dolores Ibárruri Gómez, known as La Pasionaria, said to them, 'You can go proudly. You are history. You are legend'³⁷.

In the words of the Middlesbrough-born brigader David Marshall quoted at the beginning of this piece, the Stockton Brigaders were civilians, who did great deeds and some do lie in unremembered graves. This Stockton memorial is intended to ensure that their sacrifice shall not remain without fanfare, and their songs are not forgotten. We intend to ensure that our children are taught their history, for they are part of our history, they are legend.

Notes

If you would like to contribute to the campaign, you can find the crowd funding page at <https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/stocktonbrigaders> or contact me at: foxy.foxburg@gmail.com or John Christie at thegoldensmog@hotmail.co.uk

For this study, I have corresponded with many people and have been fortunate to have had the support of Marlene Sidaway, the President of the IBMT, and Richard Baxell. Both have provided me with a huge amount of material, published and unpublished. Richard in particular has given me considerable support, supplying information and providing me with contacts. His book, *Unlikely Warriors*, is seen by many as the definitive account of the British battalion. I am also grateful to Duncan Longstaff and Elizabeth Estensen who have been most generous with their time and provided me with personal stories and images. The People's History Museum in Manchester, the Imperial War Museum, and the Marx Memorial Library in London have provided me with much unpublished material.

There is a substantial amount of literature on the Spanish Civil War and the British battalion, In addition to those cited in the endnotes, the following are personal recommendations; *Proud Journey*, by Bob Cooney (London :

Marx Memorial Library & Workers' School and Manifesto Press, 2015), Spain in Our Hearts, by Adam Hochschild (London: Macmillan, 2016), *The Spanish Holocaust*, by Paul Preston (London: Harper Press, 2012)

- ¹ David Marshall, *The Tilting Planet*. (London Voices, 2005). For more information about David Marshall and his Spanish Civil War poetry, see <http://www.richardbaxell.info/david-marshall/> [accessed 25 Mar 2020]
- ² For information on *The Ballad of Johnny Longstaff* see <http://www.theyounguns.co.uk/johnnylongstaff> [Accessed 25 March 2020]
- ³ It was intended to unveil the monument on 12 September, but at the time of writing, planning has been put on hold due to the Covid-19 crisis.
- ⁴ To summarise the start of the civil war briefly, on the evening of 17 July 1936, a pre-planned Army revolt began; rebel soldiers disarmed loyal Republican Officers, before declaring a region for the rebels. The military rising was supported by Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera's Fascist Falange party and some Civil Guard units, who often acted on their own if the local town had no military garrison. In Morocco, Mallorca, and some other areas, the rising was generally successful. However, in most areas, including the major cities of Madrid and Barcelona, the rebels were met with bitter and effective resistance from loyal members of the Civil Guard and from workers' militias who seized arms despite government instructions. As the air force and the navy remained loyal to the government the resistance in the major centres made it likely that the army coup would fail, as had one in 1932. In response British Security Services chartered a plane, piloted by Cecil Bebb, collected Franco in exile on the Canary Islands and flew him to the Army of Africa in Morocco. The German Air force (Luftwaffe) then transported the elite Army of Africa from Morocco to the Spanish mainland, where as head of the only unified army in Spain Franco replaced de Rivera as leader of the Falange party, proclaiming himself Head of State and Government under the title El Caudillo.
- ⁵ Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (London: Penguin 2013), pp. 941-945
- ⁶ Richard Baxell, *Unlikely Warriors* (London: Aurum Press 2012), p.119
- ⁷ North Eastern Daily Gazette, 2 May 1935,
- ⁸ David Goodman, *From the Ties to the Ebro* (London: CPGB, 1986), p.12
- ⁹ Interviews with George Short, (1967) and with Charlie Woods (1981) <https://www.amber-online.com/collection/no-pasaran/> [accessed 25 March 2020]
- ¹⁰ Baxell, pp.43-77
- ¹¹ Martin Sugarman, 'Against Fascism: Jews who Served in The Spanish Civil War', in *Fighting Back: Anglo-Jewry's Contribution*. (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2009) p.3
- ¹² Baxell, pp.26-42
- ¹³ Fred Copeman *Reason in Revolt* (London: Blandford Press, 1948), p.84. Copeman had led the Invergordon Mutiny in September 1931. On the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, he joined the International Brigades. He was wounded at Jarama but he recovered to later command the British battalion. He was taken ill just before the offensive at Teruel

in December 1937, with a gangrenous appendix and a splinter from a bullet that had entered the lining of the stomach. After the operation he was sent back to England to recover. Soon after arriving back in England, he was elected to the Executive Committee of the Communist Party. After a visit to the Soviet Union, he became disillusioned and he ceased to be a member of the Communist Party. In the Second World War, Copeman was placed in charge of public shelters in Westminster. He worked closely with Herbert Morrison and in November 1945 was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE). That year also saw him elected as Labour Party councillor in Lewisham. (Information from his Wikipedia entry, accessed 25 March 2020).

See Rosie Serdiville, 'The Battle of Stockton Campaign', *North East History Vol 49* (2018), pp-85-89.

Frank Graham, *Battle of Jarama 1937* (Newcastle: Frank Graham, 1987)

Author's interview with Duncan Longstaff, who is publishing his father's memoirs.

Baxell, p.72

Adam Hochschild, *Spain in Our Hearts* (London: Macmillan, 2016), pp.237-7

<https://ciudaddebarcelona1937.wordpress.com/>, [accessed 25 March 2020].

<https://internationalbrigadesinspain.weebly.com/british-battalion.html>

When Edwards later volunteered for the RAF during World War Two, his proficiency with a rifle was noted by an NCO who was somewhat puzzled by Edwards' claim that he had never served in the military. Interview with Jack Edwards, Imperial War Museum Sound Archive, IWMSA 808/3/2; cited in *British Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War: The British Battalion in the International Brigades, 1936-1939* by Richard Baxell, note 50 p.149.

Copeman, pp.89-90

Baxell, p.172. Esdaile writes 'first given a public airing in Wintringham's influential 1939 memoir, stories of Overton's cowardice and incompetence multiplied apace as veteran after veteran picked up on what was, after all, the official line, while they are still being repeated by such latter-day chroniclers as Ben Hughes.' (unpublished manuscript and conversation with author)

<http://merrimandiary.com/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Robert_Hale_Merriman.png [Accessed 25 March 2020]

International Brigades Archive, Moscow. cited in *The British Battalion of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* - Richard Baxell, Doctoral thesis Dec 2001

A number of members of the anti-tank battery kept diaries during the conflict. Those of Miles Tomalin and Fred Thomas are amongst the best known, and give us numerous accounts of Estensen in Spain.

Fred A Thomas, *To Tilt at Windmills* (East Lansing : Michigan State University Press, c1996), p.104

Alex Clifford, *The People's Army in the Spanish Civil War* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2020), Chapter 4, pp.72-115

Cyril Sexton memoirs

Richard Baxell, 2014

³³ <http://www.theyounguns.co.uk/johnnylongstaff> [Accessed 25 March 2020]

³⁴ Clifford, pp.172-229

³⁵ Three weeks after the army coup, France unilaterally announced non-intervention, on 14th September 1936 a non-intervention pact was agreed with Germany, Italy the USSR, France, USA and the UK the major signatories. Franco, however, continued to receive substantial military support from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in direct contravention of the agreement. In October, in order to maintain the non-intervention policy, the Soviet Union called on the Communist International (Comintern) to organise Brigades of Volunteers. The International Brigades offered Stalin an opportunity to support the Spanish Republic without breaking the agreement and alienating Britain and France as he tried to form an alliance against Hitler. The French and particularly the British imposed strict non-intervention regulations; On 9th January 1937, with all party support the National Government invoking The Foreign Enlistment Act of 1870 and passed The Merchant Shipping (Carriage of Munitions to Spain) Act, effectively blockading Republican Spain.

³⁶ <https://internationalbrigadesinspain.weebly.com/british-battalion.html>

³⁷ <http://spanishsky.dk/la-pasionaria-farewell-address/> [Accessed 25 March 2020]

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‘Socialists and the Drama’: The Dodds sisters and the Gateshead Progressive Players between the wars.

Don Watson

The Progressive Players, performing in the Little Theatre in Saltwell View, Gateshead, are a well-regarded amateur theatre company formed one hundred years ago in 1920.¹ Although a non-political organisation today, they evolved from an initiative by the Independent Labour Party in the town both to improve the cultural opportunities available to working people and to use drama in the cause of socialism. This article examines their first twenty years and discusses how they fit with national accounts of the ILP theatre movement.

Introduction

A contemporary survey described Gateshead in the 1920s as an ‘overwhelmingly working-class community.’ It was officially one of the worst boroughs in England for overcrowded housing and the associated problems of poor health. The staple industries of the district were in depression after 1920 and unemployment was high and persistent until the later 1930s. The town was not noted for civic amenities and those it had were comparatively late to arrive. Labour had a majority on the local council only between 1923 and 1926, and then again after 1934 but this was fragile. It controlled the Board of Guardians from 1925. The local authority was traditionally run by what has been termed a ‘shopocracy’: councillors who were small businessmen and shopkeepers adamantly opposed to expenditure on the rates. Attempts by Labour (energetically lobbied by the local National Unemployed Workers’ Committee

Movement) to use the Poor Law to alleviate distress, particularly after the two miners' lockouts in the 1920s, were met by legal challenges from the 'shopocracy'.²

The Gateshead ILP Amateur Dramatic Club was formed in 1920 and based itself in the Westfield Hall in Alexandra Road. This had been a meeting place for the Labour Party and the ILP since at least 1908 and it functioned as a hub for socialist political and social activity in the town. According to the official history of Gateshead, '...unlike many amateur drama groups, the Gateshead ILP Dramatic Club was almost exclusively working class in membership'.³ However a significant exception to this were three sisters, Sylvia, Hope, and Ruth Dodds, who were early members of the Club and were active writers, producers, wardrobe organisers and on occasion actresses for it. They came from an affluent Tyneside family and a loan from them had enabled Gateshead ILP to acquire Westfield Hall. The sisters were Quakers with pacifist convictions and had been active in the suffrage movement before joining the ILP in 1919.⁴



*Left to right: Sylvia, Hope and Ruth Dodds in 1917
(image courtesy Maureen Callcott)*

A Labour culture

This endeavour by the Gateshead ILP was part of a tradition among British socialists at the time of encouraging the working class to rise above the mass commercial culture on offer to it, and take up higher and more demanding pursuits.⁵ Such encouragement had a political motive. Popular magazines, music hall, theatre and later the cinema were believed by socialists to encourage a lack of reflection among the masses and thereby acquiescence in the current arrangement of society. As Ruth Dodds put it in her diary, 'The stunt press, & the kinema' serve to 'distract our minds with trivialities'.⁶ In contrast the more serious levels of cultural activities were more likely to encourage critical thought, and thus critical reflection on the conditions in which working people found themselves. This would have been particularly relevant in Gateshead which had, as Hope Dodds wrote in an article about the Drama Club for the labour press, 'no legitimate theatre at all. Two music halls and a dozen picture houses supply the artistic needs of the community.' The ILP were going to fill this gap in their belief that 'the best drama should be available to the workers'.⁷

Their performances were also an important element in the networks which activists created for themselves in Gateshead as elsewhere. These included a Socialist Sunday School, whose children's choir sang at meetings; regular lectures and educational classes, and social activities such as concerts, dances and whist drives. Entertainment was offered by the ILP Guild of Youth Choir, or the Clarion Vocal Union; the ILP band not only accompanied marches but was much in demand at socials for its 'excellent rendering of modern dance music'.⁸ The Gateshead ILP Amateur Dramatic Club was embedded in the local labour movement during the 1920s. It contributed two tableaux to the May Day procession in 1923 for example, one showing a scene from their own drama *The Pitman's Pay* and the other a scene from *The Merchant of Venice*. Tom Peacock, the first Labour Mayor of Gateshead, who had family members in the cast, became the Club's President in 1925. Nor was participation in the Club a distraction from

what some may have called 'real' political activity: one of the actors was Fred Tait, chair of Gateshead Constituency Labour Party and a member of the ILP Divisional Council. Of the sisters Ruth in particular was a political activist and sometime Labour councillor as well as being heavily involved with the Club.⁹

Organisation and repertoire

Live performances had to be licensed by local authorities if admission was to be charged, and in Gateshead this meant that the ILP met obstruction from the 'shopocracy', as Hope Dodds explained:

Their dramatic club is handicapped by the hostility of the town authorities, who refuse to license their hall for dramatic performances. Accordingly, they have to admit the audiences free and depend for finances upon dances, concerts, and collections. Naturally they are much handicapped by lack of money, but on the other hand, many people come to the free performances who could not afford to pay, but who thoroughly appreciate the opportunity.¹⁰

Licensing was eventually achieved and the Club continued to keep ticket prices as low as possible with additional reductions for unemployed people. The need to find additional uses for the hall, and the lack of money, meant that the Club had to draw on the skills of its members. They built a movable stage and lighting switchboard so that the hall could be cleared for other activities, costumes and curtains were home-made and stage furniture built out of soap boxes.¹¹

The Club was affiliated to the ILP Arts Guild, which had 130 branches in the 1920s, and by 1927, in common with other ILP amateur drama groups around the country, had adopted the name Progressive Players. Their programmes followed a similar pattern throughout the inter-war years. There were four to six plays a year and they included the works

traditionally popular with progressive audiences: Shaw and Ibsen, the socially conscious dramas of Galsworthy and Barrie, and also 'the annual Shakespeare production, firmly established and keenly anticipated by all'.¹² Each season included at least one performance of a play of the left, if possible a new work. Examples are Margaret Macnamara's *Mrs. Hodges*, in which members of the housing committee come up against the realities of slum conditions and the plays of Harold Brighouse, such as *The Price of Coal* and *The Northerners*, which dealt with pit disasters and cotton industry disputes in Lancashire. In addition political plays included the satirical *The Bruiser's Election*; also *Upstream*, which attacked exploitation on South American railways, and historical dramas about Luddism and the Tolpuddle Martyrs.

Performances were not limited to the Westfield Hall. Although, as Hope Dodds explained in *Socialists and the Drama*, 'It is not easy for workers to find time to go on tour', the Club met requests from labour movement branches for performances at their own meeting halls as well as from local institutions like Stannington Hospital. These were all activities, she wrote, about which 'the capitalist press is of course silent'. No commercial newspapers were published in Gateshead between 1900 and 1939, and the Newcastle press largely ignored the ILP Dramatic Club, and so they had to rely on the local Labour press for publicity and reviews. This was easily achieved given that Ruth Dodds edited (and the sisters were probably a financial resource for) the *Gateshead Labour News* (later the *Gateshead Labour Herald*) between 1925 and 1935. However criticisms of particular performances or choices of play were published there too. Ruth and Hope wrote and produced plays for the Club in the 1920s and 30s, generally historical dramas or adaptations of classic novels. The key production, certainly in terms of political theatre, was *The Pitman's Pay*, written and produced by Ruth Dodds.¹³

The Pitman's Pay

The title came from a local Victorian dialect poem and the play concerns Tommy Hepburn, who led the first Pitmen's Union in the north east in the

early 1830s. The genesis of the play was the miners' lock-out of 1921, a failed attempt to thwart substantial wage reductions in the industry, notable for the failure of the railway and transport unions to strike in support of the miners despite their previous agreement to do so. This reversal demoralised many activists in the labour movement. Ruth Dodds' diary indicates that *The Pitman's Pay* was intended to be a political response. In an entry she worries that after this defeat 'the great trade unions will dwindle & pine; people will lose all faith in each other, in comradeship, in direct action, in political action'.¹⁴ The purpose of *The Pitman's Pay* was therefore both affirmative and oppositional: seeking to affirm the value of trade unions with target audiences at a time when the organisations were in retreat. It was first performed at the Westfield Hall in December 1922 and published the following year, the text dedicated 'To the Miners of 1921 and Their Wives.'

It is a conventional four-act play with a speaking cast of twelve, although several crowd scenes provide opportunities to involve every member of the group on the stage, so that all could have a role even if they could not meet the demands of a speaking part. The action is dominated by dialogue scenes and with conventional stage sets for interiors. It covers events from the early success of the Pitmen's Union to the determination of government and coal owners to break the organisation, if necessary using spies and provocateurs to damage the union. Eventually they succeed, as the mine owners of the Durham coalfield refuse to employ men who are members of the union. Throughout this Hepburn argues against any sort of insurrectionary tactic that would only 'bring the military down upon us' in favour of solidarity:

Tommy: We canna best them by fighting; but we can beat them by bearing whatever they put upon us like men, by standing together like brothers, and by obeying the Union rules – no violence, but stand fast.



*A scene from The Pitman's Pay 1922
(image courtesy Gateshead Progressive Players)*

This repudiation of violence is both historically accurate as regards Hepburn's approach and also in line with the Dodds sisters' own Quaker principles. The theme recurs in the play, as does the superiority of Hepburn's values of trust and mutual loyalty over the underhand machinations of the agent provocateur and the unscrupulous establishment behind him. The other central theme is hope; the pitmen and their families are building something that will eventually succeed. As Hepburn says when he is forced to concede that the coal owners have won:

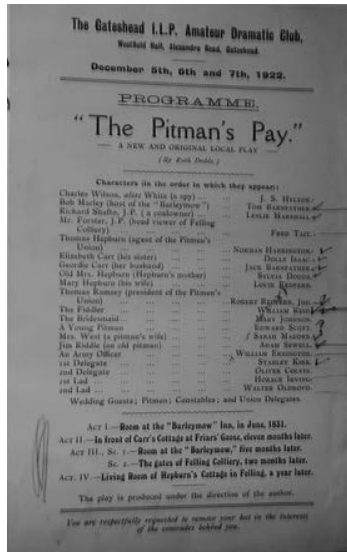
Tommy: But if we'd all been true to each other, no power on earth could have beaten us. Some day we shall learn the lesson and hold firm...Hepburn's Union is done, but there'll be another yet, a stronger and a better. And if that goes down they'll be another, and after that another. This thing we've started is going on, and the bairns will reap what we've sown.

The only strong female part is Bessie, Hepburn's younger sister. In the final scene Bessie, after two years (the time scale covered by the play) announces her pregnancy; she hopes for a girl, 'a scalding, unchancey woman like myself...'. Through this symbolism of forthcoming new life she can see, like Tommy, a future, optimism, and hope:

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Bessie: ...Eh, Tommie, now I know why you always speak of the days that are coming; now I know why it brings the light into your eyes, and why it is that nowt can touch that – not failure, nor the blackest wants, nor friends turned agin us – nowt. I know now, hinny, I know now.

The general story would have been known to the more politically conscious audiences and the play was well received in Gateshead. A working miner played the role of Hepburn (Sylvia was also in the cast), miners and their families were in the audiences, and a reviewer described how ‘...pioneers in the local movement were deeply moved at the portrayal of the struggles, comparable to those which they took part in, years back’. Further, ‘In these dark days the play is the best propaganda possible for those who are inclined to belittle the efforts of Trade Unions’.¹⁵



*Programme for The Pitman's Pay 1922
(image courtesy Gateshead Progressive Players)*

The play was taken on tour, albeit a tour confined to the areas within easy reach for the cast. Ruth Dodds diary recorded both high and low points of the tour. On one hand March 1923 saw 'a large and intelligent audience' in the pit village of Chopwell. However, an entry in the same month about a Bill Quay show describes the exigencies of touring non-theatrical venues: 'a horrible dirty inconvenient picture hall... every possible difficulty in entrances and exits, dressing accommodation, stage space and sitting generally.' Further, at this performance to raise funds for a new Labour Party branch, they played to 'a huge, noisy, ill-mannered audience' although 'I afterwards heard that it made a deep impression on the more serious-minded members.'¹⁶

The play was the Club's 'greatest venture', according to Hope Dodds, and it received enthusiastic responses from Labour notables such as M.P. Jack Lawson.¹⁷ The failure of the General Strike three years later obviously necessitated fresh efforts to sustain morale in the movement, and so the play was put on again at the Westfield Hall:

There was a large crowd in the hall. Admission free but by tickets distributed by No. 2 and 3 NUR branches – women as well as men in plenty & a very jolly appreciative audience; good listeners too, in spite of carrying babies. I don't know that the old show has ever gone better or even so well...I posted Billy in the wings to strike up the *Red Flag* when I called for it, & with a sure end in view I managed to return thanks articulately & say that the moral of the play was that the good cause can never be defeated.¹⁸

During the lock-out which followed the group performed *The Pitman's Pay* to raise funds for the miners. Again, as with the first tour of the play, a few performances within easy reach of Gateshead were all an amateur group with other responsibilities could manage. In July 1926 two performances were given in Ouston ('the distress in that village is very acute, as the pit

has worked very little during the past two years'), and a triumphant one at Houghton Le Spring. A cinema manager there gave free use of his hall for the play, and 'the place being packed to the doors' the group raised £20 for the Miners' Relief Fund.¹⁹

'Industrial Comedy'

In 1924 Ruth Dodds wrote her other directly political play, *The Hilltop: An Industrial Comedy in Three Acts*.²⁰ It is possible that involving comedy around the message was a reaction to the unrelenting seriousness of *The Pitman's Pay*, something at least one critic had noted.²¹ *Hilltop* had a cast of twenty, several crowd scenes again, and with music performed between acts by the ILP Guild of Youth. The play is set in a fictitious town (Upton Dryfield) which is the hub of a fictitious industry; the author's notes explain that this is so that the issues will be seen as general to industry as a whole. There are two parallel plot lines, one concerning Bill Chatton, Secretary of the United Brotherhood of Leatherworkers, and his huge inheritance from a long-lost relative. The other concerns Maud Ancroft, President of the Guild of Women Leatherware Operatives, a part taken by Ruth Dodds herself. Maud and Bill are behind a push to amalgamate the male and female workers into a single union. A pay reduction is known to be imminent and a strike in response may be required and so unity will be essential.

Bill first wants to use his new wealth to safeguard the future of the town's labour hall, a dingy building which is nevertheless the centrepiece of the movement:

Mrs. A: It's our spiritual dwelling place, that's what it is. Every attack on dirt and disease and injustice starts from here...It stands for the promises of the future as well as the struggles of the past. We know all this, but outsiders only see a grubby little hall in a mean street.

Possibly the audience would have taken this as applying to the condition and role of Westfield Hall in Gateshead. However, Bill is rapidly disillusioned by the distrust towards him that his new wealth generates as well as by the internal arguments of the movement. He takes an extended holiday abroad where he socialises with the well-to-do and considers abandoning his home town for the comfortable life. Unbeknown to him this has become a source of smear stories planted in the press. Reflection brings him back to reality and he sees where his duty lies, as he explains to a banker's daughter:

Bill: If you and I find it so good to come out into the sunshine and the green world, wouldn't it be good to give it to those others, to bring them out of the smoke and the grime onto the hilltop?...But I've no right to all these things, I'm not worthy of them, unless I try to share them – to give everyone a chance.



*A scene from The Hilltop 1924
(image courtesy Gateshead Local Studies Library)*

In Upton Dryfield meanwhile discussions in the union about the amalgamation are a means to examine some attitudes. Gibson, a union official, voices the familiar arguments against women workers and therefore against amalgamation: they are not supporting families, they are working for pin money, they can't make an equal contribution to the strike fund

and so the men will have to carry them. Gibson though is unmasked as the source of the smear stories in the press about Bill - 'you couldn't beat amalgamation in a fair fight so you dragged in personalities and trumped-up stories to defeat it by appealing to ignorant prejudice', as Maud Ancroft says, a charge that may have resonated with the audience following the forged Zinoviev Letter controversy during the general election earlier that year. As regards women and the union one of Maud's colleagues points out that if the women, striking separately from the men, are forced back at the new rates the men will be too. Unity will prevent this:

The girls will bring us unity, yes, and a good heart for the fight – I tell you their spirit's worth a dozen Strike Funds, and I've seen some trouble in my time. I only wish the chaps had half their keenness.

Bill's return, and his inheritance money, means that the labour hall and strike fund are secure and Maud's arguments for amalgamation win the day. Comedy as it was the play was an opportunity to raise some of the contemporary issues about women workers and the trade unions. As a letter in the local labour press put it, *Hilltop* 'contains home truths in the story that should be heard by all interested in the movement and taken to heart'.²²

The 1930s

The failure of the General Strike and the miners' lockout, the economic crisis of 1929 and the subsequent capitulation of the Labour Government generated a sharp escalation of class politics in Britain. In 1932 the ILP voted to disaffiliate from the Labour Party and pursue revolutionary socialism. It immediately suffered a drastic collapse in membership and influence from which it never recovered. According to Ros Merkin, in one of the few accounts of the ILP Arts League, one other consequence was that it left members interested in theatre with the choice of either joining

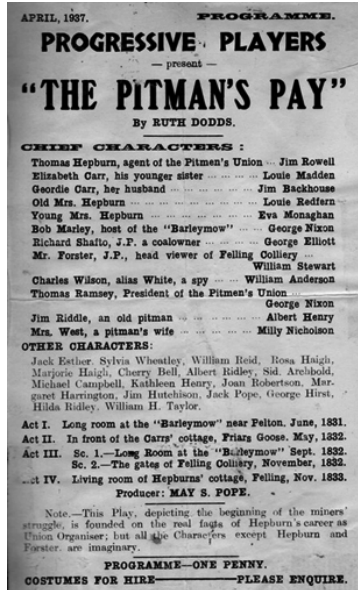
Communist theatre companies or 'finding a less political niche with an amateur group'.²³ Those associated with ILP drama activity apparently, in this account, now either drifted towards non-political amateur theatricals or a Communist Party group. In Gateshead such a binary choice did not apply. Ruth Dodds joined the local branch of the Socialist League, an organisation of former ILP members who had opposed disaffiliation and now sought to remain in Labour and continue their left influence. In 1937 membership of the League was declared incompatible with membership of the Labour Party - the League advocated a united front with the Communists against fascism - and so Ruth Dodds and others remained with Labour. However 1929 did see a crisis for the Players but that was financial. The hardship experienced by the Gateshead public meant that the group was unlikely to survive through the income from paying audiences. Sylvia Dodds, wardrobe mistress, sustained the Players through this period by hiring props and costumes out to amateur drama companies around the country.²⁵

Throughout the 1930s the Players continued to present seasons that mixed political and socially-conscious plays with comedies and the classics; in that respect there was little difference in the programmes after 1932. The 1930s repertoire included anti-war plays like Winifred Carter's *Moloch* and Harold Shipp's *Invasion*; attacks on the effects of unemployment such as Fred Chadwick's play *Dregs*, Alan Henderson's *Findings Keepings* and *After All These Years* by the Scottish miner Joe Corrie. Thus a claim made of the 1938 season seems accurate enough for the whole two decades: 'four plays representing a varied choice...all except the farce throw light on the social conditions of past days or of today'.²⁶

The Players revived *The Pitman's Pay* in 1937 as a political intervention. The context was the national ballot for strike action by the Miners' Federation of Great Britain over the use of non-union labour, a sign of renewed self-confidence in the Federation after the major national setbacks of the 1920s. As the *Gateshead Labour Herald* put it, the play:

...is again being played on Tyneside while the Miners' Federation is

taking a ballot on strike action against non-unionism. There is certain appropriateness in all this, since the play tells the story of Tommy Hepburn, the first man to organise a successful miners' union in the north east. True, this Union came to an untimely end, but it was the forerunner of a mighty movement.



*Programme for The Pitman's Pay 1937
(image courtesy Gateshead Progressive Players)*

The performance in Gateshead was followed by one at a Labour Party benefit in Blaydon and two in Newcastle for Spanish Medical Aid. An invitation to perform it at the Durham Miners' Gala that year had to be turned down because of practical difficulties in bringing all the company together on the day.²⁷ A left culture was still very much in evidence in the group – a local reporter attending rehearsals was amused to be addressed as 'comrade' by cast members, and the Players' Committee minute books show that 'comrade' was the standard mode of address for the company

throughout the inter-war period.²⁸ By the end of the 1930s the Players were looking for new premises; Westfield Hall, never entirely suitable, had become less and less adequate for the company. In addition the management of the Hall wanted the accommodation for other purposes, and Ruth was also noting 'the unfriendly attitude of the ILP' which might suggest some political differences too. Financial assistance from the Dodds sisters made possible the purchase of a site for a new theatre for the Progressive Players and this opened as the present Gateshead Little Theatre in 1943. In time the political imperatives that had once underlain their work faded away.²⁹

Discussion

How does the Gateshead experience fit with the histories of the ILP theatre? It has been shown that it is wrong to assume that it fundamentally altered after the demise of the ILP and the intensification of class politics after 1929. Further, in his account of the ILP drama groups of the 1920s Raphael Samuel comments that 'Propaganda was subordinate to the more general aim of making "great art" available to working people'. In a similar vein Andrew Davies writes of 'the seeming inability of the ILP to work out just what it was they were trying to do' with their drama groups. These accounts seem based on another binary opposition between the general improvement of the culturally impoverished and socialist politics.³⁰

Nevertheless from the outset here was a political understanding behind performing the classics and it was about more than cultural missionary work among the deprived, even if one of the aims was to promote 'the love of good drama in Gateshead' and build audiences for it. The ILP critique of popular culture was based on how its triviality discouraged critical thought and was thus in effect promoted acquiescence in the social order. Certainly their inter-war programmes included classics and comedies, but perhaps this combination of the political with the mainstream demonstrates a strategy rather than a confusion of purpose, and one based on practicalities. In order to survive the Players needed to sustain a presence, to become a recognised feature in the town and to establish the

regular attendance needed to cover costs. There were too few suitable plays available to achieve this on a political programme alone.³¹

The Players relied on the conventional stage play format, and the two plays by Ruth Dodds discussed here are cases in point. They passed over the American dramatists who were influential on the British left in the 1930s and eschewed the living newspaper, agitprop and mass declamation forms being developed by other progressive drama groups. An example is the Left Book Club Theatre Guild which had active sections in Newcastle, South Shields, Durham and West Stanley.³² This conservatism in form means that the experience of groups like the Progressive Players between the wars will escape the notice of theatre historians, whose priority is with the innovative and not the traditional.³³ Further, although *Hilltop* and *The Pitman's Pay* contain some strong parts for women their focus is very much on the working-class experience as a whole rather than on that of the women in the story. This again means that these plays are unlikely to interest many historians of women and theatre.³⁴ Neither case amounts to an argument against the quality of the performances or their resonance with the audience.

The Gateshead ILP Dramatic Club and the Progressive Players between the wars produced dramatic expressions of working-class experience and history at times when both were needed. The history of British political theatre is more diverse than some of the generalised national accounts of it suggest.

Notes

- ¹ See their website: www.littletheatregateshead.co.uk/history. I am grateful to Judith Carruthers, Volunteer Archivist at Gateshead Progressive Players, for her help with this article, and my thanks also to Maureen Callcott.
- ² Henry Mess: *Industrial Tyneside: A Social Survey made for the Bureau of Social Research for Tyneside* (London, Ernest Benn Ltd 1928 pp.21-22; 43); F.W. D. Manders: *A History of Gateshead* (Gateshead, Gateshead Corporation 1973 pp.236, 173, 48); Sam Davies: 'Legal Challenges to Labour Rule: Gateshead Politics between the Wars', *North East History* vol.41 2010 pp.10-37.
- ³ Manders: *A History*, p.265.

- 4 For details of the Dodds sisters, particularly Ruth, see Maureen Callcott and Margaret
‘Espinasse, ‘Ruth Dodds (1890-1976), Socialist and Labour Councillor’ in Joyce M.
Bellamy and John Saville (eds.), *Dictionary of Labour Biography Vol. VII* (London,
Macmillan Press 1984 pp.63-67); also the ‘Introduction’ in Maureen Callcott (ed.), *A
Pilgrimage of Grace, The Diaries of Ruth Dodds, 1905-1974* (Whitley Bay, Bewick Press
1995). Joyce Quinn, ‘Ruth Dodds (1890-1975), Playwright and Political Activist’ is
a short entry in Joyce Quinn and Moira Kilkenney (eds.), *Angels of the North, Notable
Women of the North East* (Newcastle on Tyne: Tyne Bridge Publishing 2018 pp.67-9).
- 5 For a detailed analysis see Chris Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture,
1884-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1990).
- 6 Callcott (ed.), *Diaries* p.85. The original manuscripts of the *Diaries* are in Tyne and Wear
Archives. Unfortunately some key years in the 1930s are missing.
- 7 M. H. Dodds, ‘Socialists and the Drama’, *The Labour Magazine* vol. 11 no. 3 July 1923
pp. 109-11; *Gateshead Labour Party and Trades Council Monthly Circular* (GLPTCMC)
no. 90, February 1924.
- 8 *Gateshead Labour News* (GLN), no. 18 February 1926.
- 9 *GLPTCMC*, no. 80 May 1923; GLN.no. 8 May 1925; *Daily Herald*, 7 and 14 May
1923.
- 10 M. H. Dodds, p. 109.
- 11 *The Gateshead Progressive Players, Diamond Jubilee 1920-1980* (Gateshead, 1980, p.1).
- 12 *GLPTCMC*, 79 April 1923. The plays performed in the 1920s and 30s are listed at [www.
progressiveplayersgateshead.co.uk](http://www.progressiveplayersgateshead.co.uk). This also has synopses of some of them.
- 13 Ruth Dodds, *The Pitman’s Pay, A Historical Play in Four Acts* (London: The Labour
Publishing Company 1923)
- 14 *Diaries* p. 85.
- 15 *GLPTCMC*, no. 75, December 1922.
- 16 *Diaries* p. 90.
- 17 M. H. Dodds, p. 110; *Forward*, 6 January 1923; reviews in *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 6
and 9 December 1922.
- 18 *Diaries* p. 107.
- 19 *GLN*, no. 23 July 1926; *Diaries* p. 109.
- 20 Ruth Dodds, *The Hilltop, An Industrial Comedy in Three Acts* (unpublished typescript,
Gateshead Local Studies Library Box 145 item 86/10). My thanks to Maggie Thacker,
Project Officer for Gateshead Archive, The People’s Archive, for tracking down the script
and photograph.
- 21 *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 31 January 1923.
- 22 *GLN*, no. 3, 15 December 1924.
- 23 Ros Merkin: ‘The religion of socialism or a pleasant Sunday afternoon? The ILP Arts
Guild’ in Clive Barker and Maggie B Gale (eds.), *British Theatre between the Wars, 1918-
1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000 p.184).
- 24 Callcott and ‘Espinasse’, p. 65.
- 25 *Diamond Jubilee 1920-1980*, p. 2

- ²⁶ *Gateshead Labour Herald* (GLH), no. 110, May 1938.
- ²⁷ GLH, nos 97 and 98, April and May 1937.
- ²⁸ *Morpeth Herald*, 30 April 1937; Committee Minutes, Progressive Players Archive at Gateshead Little Theatre.
- ²⁹ *Diaries* p. 161. In 1939 Ruth Dodds resigned both her Labour Party membership and her seat on Gateshead Council. As a Quaker she could not be reconciled with the Party's endorsement of the Second World War, although she continued to support Labour. See *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*. 3 October 1939.
- ³⁰ Raphael Samuel: 'Theatre and Socialism in Britain (1880-1935)' in Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl, and Stuart Cosgrove (eds.), *Theatres of the Left 1880-1935: Workers' Theatre Movements in Britain and America* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1985 p. 29); Andrew Davies: *Other Theatres: The Development of Alternative and Theatre in Britain* (London: Macmillan 1987 p.101).
- ³¹ The shortage of political plays was noted in the *New Leader* of 20 March 1925.
- ³² Don Watson: 'To the head through the heart: the Newcastle Left Book Club Theatre Guild 1936-1939', *North East Labour History*, no. 23 1989 pp.3-22. The West Stanley group did perform once at Westfield Hall, see GLH, no.109 April 1938.
- ³³ Claire Cochrane, 'The Persuasiveness of the Commonplace: The Historian and Amateur Theatre' *Theatre Research International* vol. 26 no. 3 (October 2001) pp.233-4.
- ³⁴ This point is made in Ros Merkin: 'No Space of Our Own? Margaret Macnamara, Alma Brosnan, Ruth Dodds and the ILP Arts Guild' in Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner (eds.) *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2000 pp.193-94).

The fall of France – a day to remember

Archie Potts

Eric Hobsbawm, in his autobiography *Interesting Times*, recalled how on 30 January 1933, walking home with his sister from their schools in Berlin, he saw on a newspaper placard the headline 'Hitler appointed Chancellor'. He wrote 'I still see it as in a dream'. He knew then, as a fifteen year old, that a decisive event had occurred that would change history and also his own life.¹

Most of us experience such moments at some time in our lives. Some of a later generation remembered hearing the news that President Kennedy had been assassinated, and even more recently millions of television viewers watched the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the destruction of New York's World Trade Centre in 2001. Such events are vividly remembered. There is, of course, a large measure of subjectivity in what is remembered, often influenced by the time and the circumstances in which we live.

My own particular memory of this kind occurred during the Second World War when I was evacuated to a village ten miles west of Bishop Auckland in County Durham. I was eight years old at the time. Hitler's successful invasion of Poland in September 1939 had been followed by eight months of military inactivity. An American journalist described it as the period of the 'phoney war', in which Britain, France and Germany were content to sit tight and build their military strength.

The German army struck first by successfully occupying Denmark and Norway in April 1940, followed the next month by military thrusts in Belgium, Holland and Northern France. France's generals believed this

to be the main invasion and they moved the main bulk of their forces to meet it. However, Hitler pushed his Panzer division through the wooded Ardennes, believed by the French to be unsuitable for tank warfare, thus bypassing the heavily fortified Maginot Line. Within ten days, German armoured columns had reached the French coast. The relatively small British army stationed in Northern France thereupon retired to the port of Dunkirk from which it was successfully transported back to Britain.

In the wake of these military disasters France's Third Republic collapsed and its parliament voted dictatorial powers to the octogenarian Marshal Petain. On 22 June 1940 Petain's government signed an armistice with Nazi Germany, taking a defeated France out of the war. The news of this surrender was my 'Hobsbawm moment'. It was a disaster few people had anticipated and young as I was, I was aware of its importance. The French army, widely regarded as the finest in Europe, has been defeated by German forces in a six week campaign.

The village where I was billeted had a rustic seat at its centre, and on summer evenings and Sunday mornings it was the custom of those men who were not pottering about their allotments to meet and discuss the progress of the war. I used to hang around and listen to their talk.

Most of the men of the village were employed in the small collieries of the area or on local farms. Some of the younger men worked for the Forestry Commission. A couple of retired men had fought in the First World War and they were not too upset at the early defeats. The same thing, they said, had happened in 1914 when Germany had made early gains. However the French had held the line until British troops arrived in numbers to support them.

In 1940 great faith was placed in the Maginot Line, built by the French at enormous cost, and the effectiveness of the Royal Navy's blockade of Germany. Imperial sentiments also remained strong among all classes but especially among people of the older generation who remembered the British Empire at its zenith. The old men in the village described to me how a large bonfire was lit on a hillside to celebrate the relief of Mafeking

and the joy they felt at this victory over the Boers. There was no need to panic, advised the veterans. However the capitulation of France could not be ignored: this was more than a military setback. Furthermore, a young man from the village serving in the army came home for a few days leave after being evacuated from the Dunkirk beaches, and he described the chaos and mad scramble to escape the advancing Germans. Clearly the British army was not in good shape to meet a German invasion.

The signing of the French armistice meant that Britain now faced Germany on its own. Churchill, in one of his great wartime speeches, warned 'The battle of France is over, the battle of Britain is about to begin'. A German invasion, probably spearheaded by Stuka dive bombers and the dropping of paratroopers, was widely expected.

We now know this did not happen. The RAF denied the Luftwaffe air supremacy over Britain and the German navy lacked ships and trained personnel to carry out a successful seaborne invasion of the British Isles.

Hitler weighed the odds and ordered heavy bombing raids against Britain designed to force it to the negotiating table. The Luftwaffe's bombing campaign, popularly known as 'the Blitz', lasted until the summer of 1941. Our village and surrounding countryside did not suffer raids, but we could hear the distant sounds of bombs falling and the anti-aircraft guns firing when German aircraft raided the coastal towns of North East England. Occasionally a German bomber would fly off-course and pass over the village pursued by Hurricanes and Spitfires scrambled from the RAF Fighter Command stations at Acklington in Northumberland, Usworth in County Durham and Catterick in North Yorkshire.

After the fall of France the village moved onto a wartime footing. A unit of the Local Defence Volunteers (soon to be renamed the Home Guard) was formed in the village, and an army searchlight unit was installed on a nearby hillside. Some local workers were transported by special bus every day to build a new army training camp in Catterick.

We did not know it at the time but as Britain prepared to meet a German invasion Hitler was planning to attack the Soviet Union and he

launched his forces against the Russians in June 1941. Then the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 brought the USA into the war. In the event, the defeat of France was not the game-changer it appeared to be at the time. Other unforeseen developments moved in Britain's favour. Britain gained powerful allies in the USSR and the USA, and fought alongside them until final victory in 1945.

Looking back, twenty nine years after the *Battle of Britain*, and writing in a programme issued at the premiere of the film *The Battle of Britain*, Lord Dowding, Commander-in-Chief AF Fighter Command in 1940, remembered it as 'a period that was almost intolerable in its stress and anxiety, but there was a grandeur in the human endeavour of that time which lingers in the mind'.² As an eight year old observer of events, even I was keenly aware that the French surrender placed this country in a perilous position, even if I was too young to understand the full implications of a German victory. Fortunately, Britain averted defeat, although military historians agree that it was by a very narrow margin.

Notes

¹ *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (Allen Lane, 2007), p.74

² Peter Tiphorn, *Battle of Britain* (London, 1969), p.3

The War Came Early to Sleepy Valley 1941 – 1942

The Scammells are Coming, Hoorah, Hoorah.

Peter Brabban



*Photograph: Scammell transporter with Matilda Tank.
With kind permission of the REME Archives*

This is the second part of a trilogy covering the period of the Second World War based on the experiences of the Brabban family of 'Sleepy Valley' (Ivy Place, Tantobie, County Durham) as an illustration of working-class life during the conflict. The first part of this narrative, 'The War came Early to Sleepy Valley' (North East History, Volume 50) covered the experience of Tommy on the

beaches of Dunkirk, while the rest of the family was adapting to being without a father and the income he brought to the household. This article continues the narrative into the mid-point of the war.

The New Year of 1941 saw Tommy Brabban and his wife Mary Brabban (née Ramsey) further apart geographically than they would ever be again, Tommy's troop ship was rounding the Cape off South Africa on its way to Egypt. Mary was at home in Sleepy Valley. Things were changing in 8 Ivy Place with the arrival of Aunt Emma from Coventry, who was one of the 50% of the British population who changed addresses during the war. Mary now had help with the three children Jean, Teddy, and Mary Louise and began to think about going out to work to add to the paltry income provided by the army.

Like other communities in wartime Britain, Sleepy Valley and Tantobie were settling into the habits and patterns of being at war. The initiatives introduced in 1939 and afterwards had become everyday reality. Rationing had meant that staple foods were available if the housewife had the coupons, money and time to queue for them. The Blackout every night was a nuisance and kept most people indoors after dark, but the distant thunder of Tyneside being bombed and the sound of the ack-ack guns defending the area were a clear reminder of why the blackout was in place. Yet there seemed little reason why people should carry around a gas mask when there had been no sign of gas as a weapon. In fact, the carrying of gas masks varied with the news. During periods of tension, such as the invasion scare of summer 1940, the carrying of gas masks increased to the levels experienced at the war's outbreak, between 30 and 40 per cent of the population. But in quiet periods this fell to about ten per cent. Christopher Tomlin, a Mass Observation diarist wrote "Where oh where have the gas masks gone? All the children wear one, but one adult in a thousand carries one of the clumsy things. I took mine with me in my attaché case today, first time for six months. It's hidden from view. I have no intention of being called – mentally or vocally – 'you sissy!'"¹

The civilian population were becoming acclimatised to being at war, what Angus Calder referred to as 'institutionalised'. By 1941 it was clear to everyone that the war would be a long affair. Europe was controlled by Nazi Germany and everywhere that Britain had opposed the German Army (the Wehrmacht) they had got a drubbing. It was evident that on her own Britain could not beat the Nazis; that her role was to survive until some help came along.

Egypt

Tommy Brabban arrived in Egypt in February 1941. The 14,000-mile voyage around Cape Horn (made necessary because of the dangers from enemy action on the much shorter Mediterranean route) must have been a very unpleasant experience for Tommy and others not in the officer class. Other ranks (ORs) were accommodated up to 300 to a room in below decks ward rooms. The only furniture were long benches and tables that doubled as sleeping platforms for those not in hammocks. The smell from the overworked toilets along with those overcome by sea sickness was overpowering. This combined with the sweat of 300 men stripped to their underpants in the tropical heat for much of their journey made the brief periods the men were allowed on the decks a blessed relief. For the officers, life was very different. They were billeted in cabins and had their own dining rooms and recreation areas and even their private deck for exercise and fresh air. In many ways, the British Army in 1941 reflected Britain's class structure: the officer class was made up of public schoolboys and men from the upper levels of the middle classes, while the ORs were predominantly working class - but with a major difference - the big battalions of the Labour Movement, the miners, engineers, steelworkers, and shipyard workers were missing. They were back home in the reserved occupations.

Disembarking in North Africa at the same time as Tommy was a man who would play a large part in Tommy's life for the next two years. This was Erwin Rommel arriving with his Afrika Corps in Tripoli, Libya.

Tommy's new regiment, the 7th Armoured Division, part of the newly formed Eighth Army, was undertaking a refit at Alexandria when he arrived. This allowed Tommy some time to acclimatise to the heat and discomfort of North Africa. Like many Allied soldiers in Egypt, Tommy did his bit as a tourist, visiting the Sphinx and the Pyramids and being photographed riding a camel. But for Tommy, who had been brought up by a devout Wesleyan mother, the wild drunken nights in Cairo of other allied soldiers held little attraction. Instead he sought out music, one of the great passions in his life. He even sat in with one of the quartets playing in a cafe in Cairo, contributing his skills as a violinist.



Photograph: Tommy Brabban playing his violin in the Western Desert

For the first time in his life, Tommy found himself mixing with men from all over the Empire and from other European countries. He was serving with soldiers from Australia, New Zealand, India and South Africa as well as Poles and Czechs and Free French - the Eighth Army was a truly

multinational force. The group that impressed him more than the others were the Gurkhas with their formidable knives, the kukri. Their custom was that a kukri couldn't be returned to its sheath without tasting blood. But like most people of his generation - brought up with the values of the British Empire - Tommy travelled abroad with racist attitudes, which found a focus in his dislike of Egyptians and the other Arabic people he came across. This was an attitude common among his contemporaries who usually referred to all Egyptians as 'wogs'. The fact that they were occupying Egypt against the will of its people never seemed to cross their minds.

The refit in the Delta came to an end when the 7th Armoured Division was sent back 'into the Blue', (the army term for the desert) to play their part in Operation Battleaxe. Life in the desert was hard. The environment was hostile, with blistering heat at midday and freezing cold at night. During the day the men were plagued by flies which settled on any trace of moisture: eyes, mouth and any food or drink exposed to the air. Sand got everywhere; for the ranks forced to wear battledress this was a particular problem. Sand became embedded in the rough material and caused sand sores around the neck and the cuffs. This was especially the case during the times of the khamsin, the wind from the south that brought sandstorms. These reduced visibility to nil and all activity was forced to stop. Drinking water was restricted to four pints per day per man. It was usually used for making endless brews of tea, brewed on the desert cookers, which were water containers cut in half, filled with sand and doused in petrol. Food was plentiful but monotonous, consisting of stews made from tinned ingredients but when on the move, it was no more than bully beef and biscuits, of the hard tack variety. Experience of 'the blue' was what distinguished the old timer from the new arrivals with their white knees and neatly ironed shorts. The first battle in the Desert War was against the desert itself.

County Durham

The food being provided for Tommy was better than that available to his family. "The diet available in the early months of 1941 was the poorest

of the war. Food imports were running at only two thirds of the pre-war level".² In the North East, the biggest number of complaints was about the shortage of eggs and onions, along with the ongoing grumbling about the amount of time spent in queues. Rumours of the arrival of any foodstuff would result in a rush to the shop and the creation of long queues. The authorities responded to the food crisis with the setting up of feeding centres. By the end of the war there were over 100 feeding centres throughout the North East, 25 of which were British Restaurants, including the one down the road from Sleepy Valley in Stanley.³ The food available was simple and traditional, as shown by this three course menu from the British Restaurant at Burnhope: soup and dumpling at penny ha'penny; stewed steak, potatoes, cabbage and carrots at six pence; rice pudding at two pence and a cup of tea for half a penny. A whole meal cost less than a shilling.⁴



*Photograph: British Restaurant in Stanley.
With kind permission of Kenneth Young*

In 1941 the Germans switched their bombing campaign from London to other centres of population throughout Britain. In April, Tyneside became the target for major raids, especially at the beginning and ending of the month. Sleepy Valley was involved in this blitz only as a spectator. The glow in the sky from burning buildings could be seen to the East but it was the thunder of bombs and guns that was the most obvious sign. Local people would speculate about which anti-aircraft guns they could hear in action against the Germans. In a follow up raid on the night of 11 May, Sleepy Valley was drawn into the front line at 2.30 in the morning, a high explosive (HE) bomb was dropped into the fields near to Tanfield, rattling doors and breaking a window. Other communities were not so lucky: from the same stick of bombs three HEs fell just over the hill at Sunniside, Whickham, demolishing three houses and damaging others. A man died at Fernville Avenue and six people were injured.⁵ Teddy Brabban can recall rushing home from school in the afternoon of 12 May with the intention of seeking shrapnel in the bomb crater only to find that boys who had bunked off from school had picked the crater bare. Ted's wife Mavis Brabban (née Pattison) recalled walking to Sleepy Valley with her father from their home in Shield Row just to view the crater.

In the spring of 1941, Mary decided to solve the problem of the family's depleted income by taking on a job. She went to Tommy's old employer, the Northern General Bus Company and secured a job as a Bus Conductress, to be paid half the wage of the male bus conductors. Nevertheless the extra income greatly increased the standard of living of the family. Throughout 1941, considerable energy at all levels of government was devoted to persuading women to take part in the war effort. In October 1941, the *Stanley News* (the local newspaper) devoted its front page to promoting this campaign. Under the headline 'Call to Durham County Women', the newspaper urged women to take up a number of jobs, but placed much emphasis in persuading young single women to work in the munitions factories that had been set up secretly in the south of the county.⁶ The appeal struck home in Sleepy Valley when the Brabbans' next-door

neighbour in 7 Ivy Place, Rhoda Opie took a munitions job in Southern Durham. The type of work that women took on was often defined by their class origins. Middle class girls and women were attracted to and dominated the uniformed services, while working class girls and women were recruited to the factories, workshops and transport sectors.⁷

The sight of women bus conductors seems to have excited a number of observers especially in London, where some of the newly appointed women conductors were obviously well-off middle-class women doing 'their bit'. The poet A. P. Herbert penned some verses called 'Seeing it Through' describing the female bus conductors as 'Conductor-Captain - of the mighty bus' with 'Much on your mind – and fat men on your feet' 'As brave a soldier as her King demands'.⁸ The artist Laura Knight (later made a Dame) included the Bus Conductor in her series of paintings of women war workers. Mary, it seems, had made a fashionable choice.



Photograph; Wartime bus conductress Jenny Carrington from the Northern Bus Company Stanley Depot. By kind permission of Eric Ridley

In 1941, a number of initiatives by the Government were launched to ameliorate conditions at home. The most famous of these was the 'Dig for Victory' campaign aimed at encouraging civilians to grow their own food. Stanley Council complained that the campaign was not very successful at Tantobie and Sleepy Valley. This was hardly surprising, as the citizens already had an extensive programme of home food production in place, a product of the 'Hungry Thirties'. Most gardens had vegetable plots and these were supplemented by produce from allotments. In Tantobie, there was a plethora of clubs and shows celebrating home produce, from the usual leek shows to cabbage and onion shows and extending to rabbit clubs and pig clubs.

The 'Holidays at Home' initiative was intended to persuade civilians not to travel during Bank Holidays and the summer season by organising activities at home. This venture was taken up with some enthusiasm in Tantobie where a programme of events included a 'Fancy Dress Parade from Flint Hill to Tantobie Cricket Field. After prize giving there was a children's sports day including skipping, a three-legged race, bowling at a wicket and pillow fights. On Saturday there were baby shows and an ankle show for ladies.⁹

For such a small community, the amount of entertainment available during the war years was quite astounding. Alongside the endless whist drives, in 1941 The Old Vic Theatre Company performed 'The Merchant of Venice' starring Sonia Dreede and Frederick Volkes at the Tantobie Jubilee Hall on Wednesday 1 October. In September, the Tantobie Union Working Men's Club agreed to hold weekly concerts by local people, a programme that lasted throughout the war. In the first concert, the participants were - M. Curry Dees and T Coyle (tenors) T. Hunter (comedian), E. Potts, TJ Halladay & G Pyle (Tenors), D. Fitzgibbons (Dancer), E McKenna (Tenor), and Mrs French accompanist. Political meetings were not unusual, especially after Germany invaded the Soviet Union. There were meetings calling for the lifting of the ban on the *Daily Worker*, and for aid to Russia. Speakers included Jack Lawson MP and

Mr W. Coulson. With a proposal to organise a bring-and-buy shop in Tantobie. Even at this early stage in the war, a growing number of people were casting their thoughts to the post-war world; the *Stanley News* carried a growing number of articles, editorials and even adverts about laying plans for the post-war period. Christmas 1941 saw this communal approach at its finest when a Christmas Tea and social was held in Tantobie Social Services Centre, attended by 80 children and 30 adults. By now, Britain had another ally to add to the Soviet Union with the entry of the USA into the war.

Egypt

The arrival of Rommel in 1941 galvanised the Axis Forces who had been driven back by the Allies to Beda Fomm in Libya. However, the allies were now weakened by the transfer of troops to Greece and the 7th Armoured Division in the Nile Delta for refitting. Taking advantage of this, Rommel launched an attack and by early April the Allies were in full retreat. In the Delta, there was frantic activity by Tommy and his comrades in the 7th Armoured Division to get the Division ready to fight. For the RAOC fitters like Tommy, keeping the British tanks running was a challenge. In early 1942 there was six different models of tank being employed by the Allies and fitters would need to know how to deal with each as well as carry spares and tools. In mechanised warfare it was crucial to keep as many tanks and other vehicles in the field as possible. The Germans understood this very well and had developed an efficient system of recovery and repair. In later years Tommy recounted how he would hear nearby the German recovery teams going about their business at the same time as his unit went about theirs. The Germans had a number of advantages over Tommy and his mates, one of which was that British tanks were notoriously unreliable with very high breakdown rates and armour which left them vulnerable. It was not unusual for a tank crew to change tanks two or even three times in a day when in action. For Tommy and his mates, their job was to recover and repair as many tanks as possible. General Montgomery, Commander

of the Eighth Army described their role as ‘keeping the punch in the Army’s fist’.



*Photograph: Tommy Brabban and
his younger brother Frank (right) in Egypt*

The recovery and repair operation functioned around three echelons. Echelon A consisted of the mobile workshops, heavy trucks equipped with winches and tools to undergo onsite/battlefield repairs. Echelon B consisted of frontline workshops, responsible for the recovery of tanks that had broken down or were too badly damaged for repair *in situ*. These had to be transported to the frontline workshops for the work to be carried out which meant driving the huge trucks, the Scammells, needed for tank transport into the battlefield areas. Such was the familiarity of this work, that tank crews would often greet the recovery teams by singing ‘the Scammells are coming, hooray, hooray’ (to the tune of the Campbells are coming). The danger of the situation for recovery teams was evident in the casualty rates experienced. It was brought home to Tommy when after

one operation he discovered that a piece of shrapnel had cut through his haversack and buried itself in his leather writing case. If the recovered tank could not be repaired by the frontline workshop within three days, it was either scrapped and used for spares or transported back to HQ workshops, Echelon C in the Delta.

Tommy's desert war began properly when the 7th Armoured Division were ordered back to the frontline in May 1941. The long convoy of loaded tank transporters trundled towards the west on the single road for day after day, but locating the frontline was getting difficult as the Germans had attacked the line at El Agheila and had driven back the Allies across Libya to the Egyptian border. The desert war ground on for the next year, moving backwards and forwards with the Allies gaining ground then losing it again, with the siege of Tobruk relieved in December 41 only to be recaptured by Rommel six months later. Places such as Halfaya (Hellfire) Pass, Sidi Azeiz, and Gazala, as well as Tobruk became household names. A year after Tommy had moved west to the frontline the Axis powers inflicted a heavy defeat on the allies at Gazala swinging around the south of the line to attack Allied forces from the rear. On June 13th 1942, Rommel's Panzer Divisions caught up with the Seventh Armoured at a location known as The Cauldron and inflicted heavy losses. Tommy now a Corporal, was in the thick of it. In his seminal text *The Desert War*, Australian journalist Alan Moorehead described the work of Tommy and his contemporaries,

Huge tank transporters, the largest vehicles in the desert, were bounding over the tracks. Gangs were hoisting the tanks, both British and German, onto the trailers..... crews who had been forced from their tank were moving back to collect another The place where they got their new tank was a square half mile of desert covered with vehicles wrecked in battle,..... Much that the Germans had taught us about recovery in the winter campaign had been learned and

improved upon. Each British armoured brigade had its own recovery unit and mobile workshops. The transporters were going right into the battle to lug out disabled vehicles. At this forward workshop those tanks which could be repaired within three days were handled and sent straight back into the fight again.¹⁰

During the battle of Gazala 'The Royal Army Ordnance Corps recovered 581 tanks --- repaired 278 and sent 222 back to Egypt (326 being US-made tanks). The British were reduced to about 185 operational tanks by the end.'¹¹

The allies began to fall back, a retreat that turned into a rout with vehicles of all types streaming eastward on road and open desert, all the time at the mercy of the Luftwaffe and their Stuka dive bombers. It must have seemed depressingly familiar to Tommy. The retreat from the Gazala line was so chaotic that it was dubbed the 'Gazala gallop'. The Eighth Army came to a halt on a defensive line that ran from the rail stop of El Alamein in the north to the Qattara Depression (low lying desert impassable to vehicles) in the South. The Eighth Army was back at El Alamein, with 137 serviceable tanks, 42 en-route from workshops and 902 tanks waiting to be repaired. The Axis powers launched an attack on this new line at the end of June 1942 but were unable to break through and so began to dig in. Rommel was aware that his armies were at the end of a very long supply chain and because of this were very vulnerable. The Allies were not yet ready to launch their own offensive. For the moment it was stalemate. For the next three months the Eighth Army was put through an intensive training schedule and re-equipped ready to take the fight to the Axis powers under their new commanding officer General Bernard Montgomery¹². The armoured divisions by now were equipped mostly with the American Grant and then Sherman tanks, making life a little easier for Tommy and his mates because of standardisation.

County Durham

By 1942 wartime social structures and practices had become the norm. This was the case at 8 Ivy Place: Mary Brabban was now the main bread winner, her wages outstripping Tommy's army allowances, even though these had been increased from 38s (£1.90) per week to 43s (£2.15). She was the undoubted head of the family and ran the household to her liking. But the War was never far away, as events early in 1942 were to prove. In early February Rhoda Alice, the eldest daughter of the Opie family, who lived next door to the Brabban family at 7 Ivy Place married Lance Corporal G.A. Dixon of the Military Police at St Margaret Church in Tanfield. As with most wartime marriages, the celebrations were brief and sparse and the happy couple were back at work within days. Rhoda had wanted to be a nurse but had failed the entrance examination, and subsequently went on to work at one of the munitions factories near to Bishop Auckland in south County Durham. Tragedy struck less than two weeks after the wedding, when Rhoda was killed in an accident in the ordnance factory where she worked. Her mother told the *Stanley News* that Rhoda had wanted her wedding to be on the front page of their newspaper but not in this way.¹³ Teddy remembers the response of his great aunt Emma, who was now living with the family, "I remember Aunt Emma saying that she'd anticipated a tragedy because a carrion crow had been hanging around the garden all week!!"



Lance Corpl. G. A. Dixon, Military Police, Newcastle, was married at St. Margaret's Church, Tanfield, by Rev. W. E. Swinney, to Miss Rhoda Opie, Tantobie.

Photograph: Rhoda Opie and her new husband Lance Corporal Dixon. Stanley News, February 1942

In June of 1942 rationing reached its peak with goods of every sort from foodstuffs to clothing and furniture going 'on the ration'. For the children of Britain it was a heavy blow because sweets became rationed. Ted (Teddy) Brabban remembers how rumours of the arrival of sweets at Jarmins shop in Tantobie resulted in a huge queue of children winding down the street and when at last Teddy got his small bag of mint imperials, the bag split and his sweets fell on the floor. Without a second's thought he fell to his knees and scooped the sweets up.

1942 was a big year for Jean Brabban. Having gained a scholarship, in September she started at the Alderman Wood Grammar school in Stanley. It must have been a struggle for Mary Brabban to find the rations and money to properly equip Jean for her time in grammar school. Nevertheless, she managed somehow.

Thoughts of the post-war world were high in the consciousness of many in 1942. A range of booklets and pamphlets were published about the questions of the country's war aims and plans for a post war Britain. In March 1942 the local Women's Institute at Tanfield Lea held a talk by Councillor J. W. Straw entitled 'A Woman's Part in Post War Reconstruction'. Later in the year, local authorities from across North West Durham met in Stanley to discuss the post War situation. The Stanley News carried a report on the conference on its front page;

A further step in the effort to avoid the depression in North West Durham that took place after the last war was taken on Wednesday by the holding of a conference attended by representatives of neighbouring authorities. Recognizing that many pits would be worked out in the coming decades they proposed working together to attract more industries to the area.¹⁴

Another hot topic which ran through many issues of the *Stanley News* at this time was that of educational and school reform. It was into this

environment that the Beveridge Report was published in November 1942.

The social life of the communities around Tantobie and Sleepy Valley continued at quite a pace. The Sunday night concert parties at the Tantobie Working Men's Club had now become a regular feature, while in the Jubilee Hall Etty Veale's juvenile troupe, the Dainty Dancers, entertained the locals and in May took part in a fundraising event for the Prisoners of War Comfort Fund, along with juvenile dancers from Catchgate and Annfield Plain. It was reported that 'A large crowd watched an exhibition of individual, group, roller skating, tap and acrobatic dancing.' The great and the good from world of culture continued to arrive in the locality. Sybil Thorndike and the Old Vic Company appeared at the Community Centre at New Kyo, Annfield Plain in a production of the Greek classic *Medea* in which 'all were enthralled and fascinated' reported the *Stanley News*.¹⁵ At Christmas time the people of Sleepy Valley had the choice of the same pantomime in two different venues. In the Tanfield Lea Working Men's Club Miss Enid Foster's juvenile troupe, with orchestral accompaniment were performing *Cinderella*, while in the Jubilee Hall, Tantobie, Miss Etty Veale's juvenile troupe were also performing *Cinderella*, with proceeds from the event going to the Newcastle Royal Victoria Infirmary and the Tantobie Nursing Association.



Miss Etty Veale's troupe of talented juveniles who have recently given a number of performances for charitable objects.

Photograph: Stanley News, March 1942

Egypt

October 1942 was a significant month for Tommy Brabban. On the first of the month he was selected from the RAOC to join the newly formed Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME) an elite Corps of specialist engineers and mechanics, each member of which was regarded as a 'craftsman'. Nine days later he was promoted to Sergeant.

On 23 October the Allies, under General Bernard Montgomery launched Operation Lightfoot, which became better known as the Battle of El Alamein. The first aim of the operation was to break through the enemy minefields, which proved to be a bloody and difficult task. The 7th Armoured Division were in the forefront of the attack in the north of the line where Montgomery hoped the breakthrough would take place. In places like Kidney Ridge the tanks battered their way through the enemy lines, creating a forty-mile salient. REME was in action from the word go. Such was the rate of casualties in the Battle of Alamein that just one day after the launch of the offensive Tommy Brabban was promoted again, this time to that of Staff Sergeant, the highest rank beneath that of an commissioned officer, with greater responsibility, wages and authority.

When the Eighth Army began its advance.... REME begun work under full scale battle conditions for the first time. The mobile workshops wrestled with the final desert adjustments modifications and last-minute repairs. Then, when hundreds of British guns started their barrage from the Alamein line, the REME recovery sections moved forward to undertake the vital task of keeping the minefield lanes open for the advance of British tanks. The Royal Engineers (Sappers) first cleared a pathway through the enemy minefields, but it was inevitable that some of the tanks moving forward in the dark would accidently deviate. It was foreseen that such accidents could wreck the whole attack, since a tank with its tracks blown off would block the narrow passage and would render

useless the entire lane. The advance had barely started when calls for REME assistance began to pour in. Surrounded by mines and meeting a hail of machine gun and artillery fire, the huge recovery vehicles roared to the scene of each casualty and the lanes were kept clear.¹⁶

Alan Moorehead has described the scene when the breakthrough happened, 'The line was pierced and that was enough. The armoured brigades roared on. With them flowed the artillery and the anti-tank guns, the fuel and ammunition wagons, the workshops and recovery vehicles, the jeeps and command cars'.¹⁷ After eleven days of hard fighting, with attacks and counter-attacks the Afrika Corps, who were now in a pitiable state short of ammunition, food and water, began to fall back and this soon turned into full retreat.

As 1942 drew to a close Britain was in a very different situation from the one two years before. Now the country had two major allies. In the east there was the Soviet Union, which would bear the brunt of German aggression and from where victory would eventually come. In the west there was the USA, whose vast industrial power would equip and supply all the other allies, and whose manpower would fight alongside Britain in Western Europe. For Tommy Brabban and his colleagues in the Eighth Army, the final days of 1942 were spent advancing across Libya towards Tunisia with the intention of driving the Germans out of Africa.



*Aunt Emma Armstrong with Mary Louise Brabban and
Alan Armstrong (her Grandson)*

In 8 Ivy Place, Sleepy Valley, major changes had also taken place. This was now a household, like many others in wartime Britain, dominated by women. Mary Brabban was the main bread winner, her wages equalling or even exceeding those of Tommy, in the household she was the ultimate authority. Aunt Emma was now a permanent resident and had formed a strong bond with little Mary Louise. Jean was now a grammar school pupil and Teddy was preparing to follow her. The communities of Sleepy Valley and Tantobie had also adjusted to being at war. Rationing and queuing had become a way of life, and the blackout had been justified by the near miss of a bomb dropped near to Sleepy Valley. The state of war was creating change for both individuals and communities across Britain.

Notes

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- 2 Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-45* (London: Pimlico Edition, 2008) p. 231.
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- 4 *Stanley News* 5th May 1942
- 5 https://ne-diary.genuki.uk/Inc/ISeq_19.html#N617 (accessed 24/2/2020)
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- 7 Geoffrey G Field Blood, sweat and toil, Remaking the British Working Class 1939 -1945 OUP 2011
- 8 Angus Calder – The Peoples War 1939 -45 The Literary Guild P 335
- 9 *Stanley News*, 5 September, 1941.
- 10 Alan Moorehead, *The Desert War* (London: Aurum Press, 2017), p. 352.
- 11 George Forty, *Desert Rats at War* (sea ,Air Media Services 2014), p.154
- 12 In 1968 the author met Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery. 'I was the assistant to a well-known portrait photographer with a studio in Soho in the West End of London. We travelled to Sussex to photograph Montgomery for the Illustrated London News. While I was setting up the lights and camera, I took the opportunity to nervously approach Montgomery to introduce myself. I told him that my father had been in the Eight Army and that I wanted to tell him that I had met Montgomery. Monty looked at me with those shrewd little eyes and asked what rank my father had been and in what regiment. I told him that my Dad had been a sergeant in REME and had something to do with rescuing and repairing tanks. 'Ah', he responded 'it sounds as though he was part of a retrieval and repair workshop unit. Fine fellows. Did you not want to follow in his footsteps? He asked; then took another look at my long hair and hippy clothes and muttered, "perhaps not". That was as far as the conversation went because the photographer wanted to begin the session. When I told my Dad of this encounter, I was surprised by his less than enthusiastic response. I asked if he rated Montgomery to which he told me that he rated Alexander above Monty and that he thought that Montgomery was a bit strait-laced'.
- 13 *Stanley News* 26th February 1942
- 14 *Stanley News*, 29 October, 1941.
- 15 *Stanley News* 11 May and 26 March, 1942.
- 16 Mike Sibbons, *From the Archives : An eclectic mix of stories from the history of REME* (London: Osprey Publishing, 2016), p. 13.
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A passion for miners' welfare: two generations of Ashington's Minoughan family, 1872-1969

Celia Minoughan

Introduction

A passion for miners' welfare was shared by my grandfather and great-grandfather, both named James Minoughan, whose lives spanned the years 1872 – 1969. Their activism started in the Ashington Mineworkers' Federation and their achievements in the field of welfare in local organisations, politics and the National Coal Board took place during the heyday of Ashington, one of Northumberland's main colliery towns.

Hailed as an 'institution' by the *Morpeth Herald*, James Minoughan senior's most notable contributions were in the fields of health and leisure in Ashington, in particular as President of the Ashington Nursing Association and in founding the Ashington Miners' Welfare Institute.¹ His son James helped steer the development of the town's post Second World War housing as a councillor on both Ashington Urban District Council and Northumberland County Council. He was one of the first employees of the National Coal Board in 1947, making the transition from the coal face to a white-collar role where he was able to work from the employers' side to further miners' welfare.

My interest in this research was first sparked in 1980 when I came across a reference to my grandfather's attempt to become a Labour Party parliamentary candidate while writing a history of Wansbeck Divisional Labour Party between 1918 and 1950.² More recently, having spent

most of my career as a welfare rights worker, I researched the lives of my grandfather and great-grandfather to find out more about their contribution to Ashington's welfare provision.

This article is based on my research using the records of the Ashington Mineworkers' Federation, Ashington Hospital, Ashington Urban District Council, Northumberland County Council, Wansbeck Divisional Labour Party, the Northern District of the National Coal Board, St Aidan's Church and articles from the *Morpeth Herald* and specialist coal industry journals. Academic studies of Ashington's development, and Mike Kirkup's pictorial surveys of the town, provided useful background and illustrations. My relatives shared interesting anecdotes.

James Minoughan senior: Ashington miner and trade union official

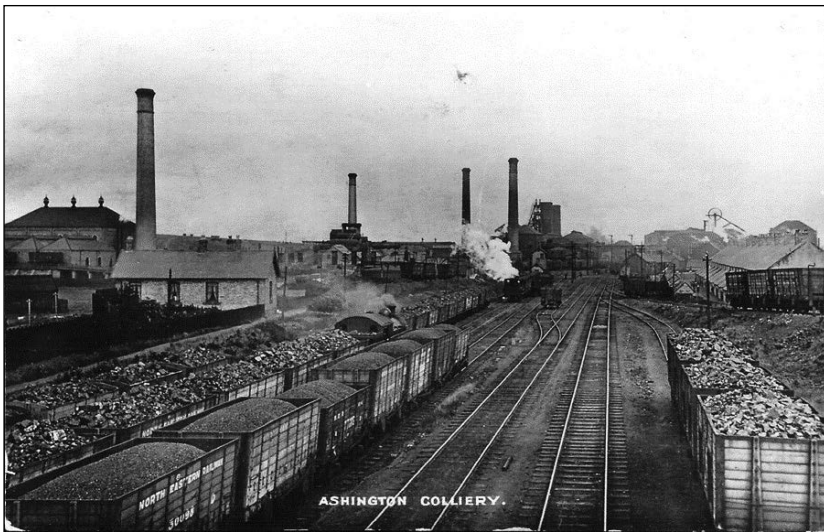
James Minoughan senior was born in Belmullet, County Mayo, Ireland in around 1872. After leaving Ireland in the 1880s due to poverty, he came to England to seek employment. He settled in Ashington in 1891 after spells of working on Tyneside, including Walbottle.³ He married Sarah Jane Heron, a local postmistress on 3 November 1896. Between 1898 and 1919 they had thirteen children, including James in 1902. Sadly, three of their children died in infancy.

In 1896 James worked at Longhirst Colliery, and when the pit closed down, he was dismissed with other miners.⁴ James' obituary in the *Morpeth Herald* reported that it was at this point that he became an active trade unionist.⁵ During the rest of his working life he was at Woodhorn and Ashington Collieries.

The union was the Ashington Mineworkers' Federation, representing employees of the Ashington Coal Company, which dominated mining in south east Northumberland. Within the Federation each of the five collieries had a branch, known as a lodge.⁶ James was elected as Chairman of the Woodhorn Miners' Lodge and, after he left Woodhorn to work at Ashington Colliery, he became chairman of Ashington Miners' Lodge in 1927, a position he held for eight years. He also chaired the Federation for several years.⁷

James' description of his miners' union career was featured in the *Morpeth Herald* in 1936, in a report of his speech at his retirement presentation. He said he had occupied all positions, his first being that of crakeman, going around the streets with the crake, a big wooden rattle, to rouse union members to attend meetings. In the early days he paid his union subscriptions to officers who sat in the hedge-side near the colliery. He had also attended trade union meetings held in the fields on Saturdays and Sundays. He recalled a day when he went to work, then went to the union to put a complaint before the officers. He then went home, and returned to the pit to take part in a deputation - all over the sum of fourpence. He lived two miles from the pit.⁸

In 1932 James was admitted to hospital suffering from injuries to the spine received in an accident in the Carl Pit, part of Ashington Colliery.⁹ By 1935 these injuries forced James to retire from employment and active trade union work. He resigned as Chairman of the Ashington Mineworkers' Federation in October 1935.¹⁰



Ashington Colliery, 1930s. With the kind permission of Mike and Lorna Kirkup

Ashington Mineworkers' Federation's role in improving miners' welfare

Ashington Mineworkers' Federation campaigned for better working conditions and lobbied the Coal Company to improve local housing, health and welfare schemes. James was Vice-Chairman of the Federation from 1926 and then elected Chairman. Ashington Coal Company set up a Welfare Department with a full-time officer in 1920.¹¹ Funding for welfare schemes came from the national Miners' Welfare Fund, with more than £30 million spent between 1920 and 1951. National funding improved in 1926 when part of the national Miners' Welfare Fund was earmarked for the building of pithead baths under the auspices of the Miners' Welfare Committee. The funding was used for various purposes: pithead baths, clubs, institutes and recreation grounds; colliery canteens; non-mining education, including university scholarships; health, including rehabilitation centres for injured miners; and research, mainly into safety in mines.¹² Ashington Coal Company claimed that it was 'almost alone in the field of welfare'.¹³

Pithead Baths

Pithead baths were a success story in the Ashington area and a good example of the Federation working in close cooperation with the Coal Company to identify priorities. In 1923 Ellington's pithead baths were the first in the county to be built.¹⁴ They was followed by Linton in 1926, Woodhorn in 1930,¹⁵ and North Seaton and Lynemouth in 1938.¹⁶ It was not until 1952, however, that pithead baths were installed in Ashington Colliery.¹⁷ The Federation requested the Coal Company install baths in miners' homes as an alternative to pithead baths. When this was rejected, they asked that swimming baths be built. These opened in March 1931 beside the Institute.¹⁸

The Great Lockout, 1926

An example of the Federation's hard work to alleviate miners' hardship in the Ashington area was during the Great Lockout from May to November 1926. One million coal miners had been locked out of the mines in response to their refusal to accept reduced pay and working conditions. Although the Trades Union Congress called a General Strike in solidarity, that only lasted nine days, after which the miners soldiered on alone for a further seven months. The surviving minutes of the Federation for the period May 1925 - January 1927 give us an insight into the role of the Federation during the period of the lockout when James became Vice-Chairman.¹⁹

Hardship was widespread, with the Northumberland Miners' Union only able to pay 6/- a week to each member, which reduced to 2/- from 9 August.²⁰ Relief payments were made by the Boards of Guardians for miners' wives and their children, for example 20/- a week in the Ashington and Morpeth area for a miner's wife and two children. To supplement these meagre amounts the Federation organised the feeding of schoolchildren, relief to able-bodied men and soup kitchens such as the one at the Premier Social Club.²¹

At the beginning of the dispute the Coal Company decided to deliver one hundredweight of coal to each striking miner's home each week.²² The Federation also successfully lobbied the Ashington Coal Company for permission for men to be able to pick coals from pit heaps.²³ Four months into the dispute in September 1926 the Federation asked Northumberland County Council's Education Committee in September 1926 to feed schoolchildren whose parents were receiving Guardians' relief.²⁴

Defeat for the miners and a return to work came at the end of the lockout in November and although in other areas there were examples of union officials being victimised it appears this was not the policy of the Ashington Coal Company.²⁵



James Minoughan senior and his wife Sarah Jane.

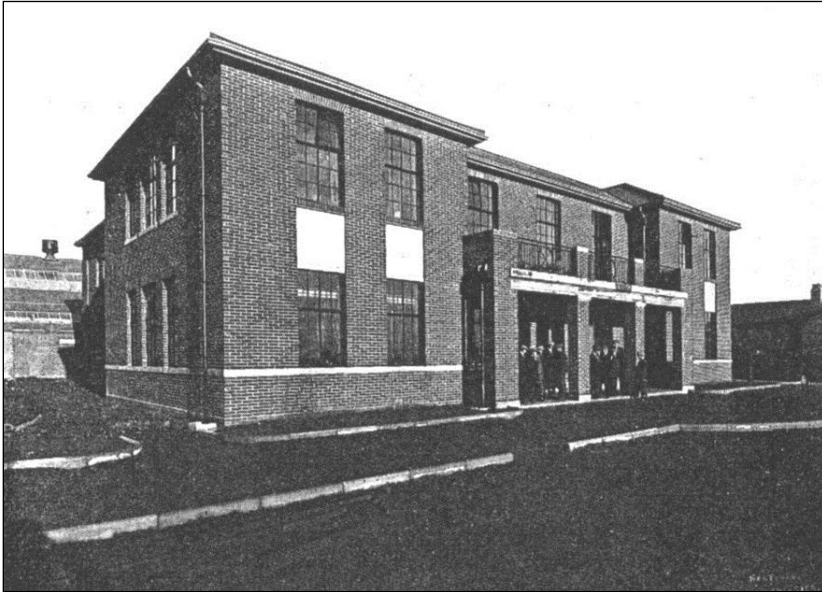
With the kind permission of Paul and Carol Jarvis

Founding of the Ashington Miners' Welfare Institute

Following the 1926 lockout James devoted much of his energies to his work as Chairman of the Ashington Miners' Welfare Institute Committee which founded the 'Tute' as it was known, with sports and leisure facilities for miners and their families. Miners' Welfare Institutes were springing up in the area at this time. For example the North Seaton Institute opened in January 1926, and James was instrumental in founding the Ashington Institute which was opened on 15 November 1930 by Manny Shinwell, MP, Secretary for Mines.²⁶

It was an ambitious project, with funding of £23,000 coming from the Miners' Welfare Fund. There was a billiards room, reading and writing room, library and a large games room which, at 2,176 square feet, was the only one of its kind at the time.²⁷ The swimming baths opened in March 1931, costing £12,000 to build.²⁸ The ongoing running costs were funded by a subscription paid by miners. James continued as Chairman of the Institute until 1947, the year he died.²⁹

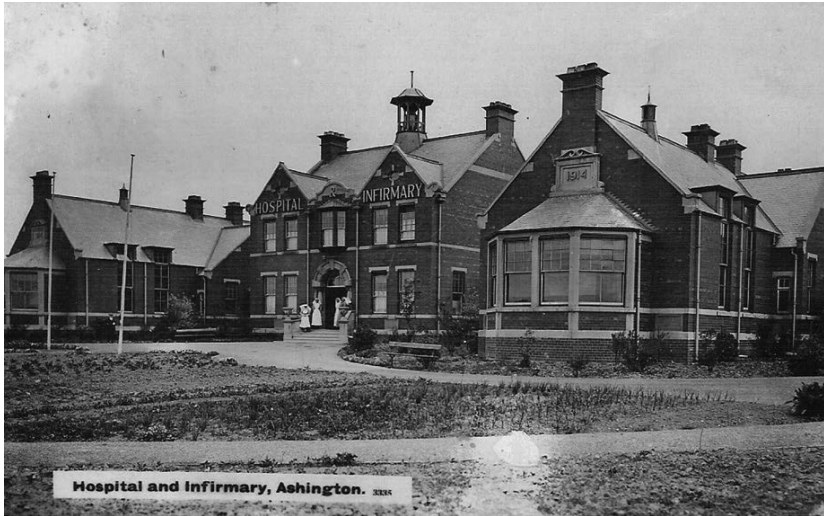
The Institute complemented the other leisure and sporting facilities set up by the Coal Company. By 1924 there were, in the Ashington group of collieries area, 50 acres of playing fields, gymnasia for physical training, tennis courts, children's playgrounds. The Coal Company was considered to have made generous provision for the well-being of its miners.³⁰



*Ashington Miners' Welfare Institute 1930.
With the kind permission of Durham Mining Museum*

Improving miners' health: Ashington Nursing Association and Ashington Hospital

James' other passion was the improvement of Ashington's health facilities and from 1926 he represented Ashington Mineworkers' Federation on the board of Ashington and District Nursing Association Hospital which had been completed in 1914.³¹ The Duke of Portland gave the site at a nominal cost of £1,000, the Coal Company gave £1,000, and miners raised a similar sum.³²



*Ashington Hospital and Infirmary.
With the kind permission of Mike and Lorna Kirkup*



*Ashington Hospital and Infirmary's first mechanical ambulance, 1923.
With the kind permission of Mike and Lorna Kirkup*

James became more closely involved from 1930 when he was elected onto the Hospital's Management Committee as one of six representatives of the Mineworkers' Federation. The committee consisted of twenty-four members, with six each nominated by the Nursing Association, the Directors of the Coal Company, Ashington Mineworkers' Federation and local medical practitioners.³³ James was elected to the Executive Committee in 1931 and held this position until his accident in 1935.

During the period James was most active, the hospital extension was completed in 1931, with the help of a grant of £10,000 from the Miners' Welfare Fund. The extension provided better facilities for consultation and treatment of outpatients and accommodation for staff. In 1933 two ambulances were purchased with the help of a grant of £5,000 grant from the Miners' Welfare Fund.³⁴

James was President of the Ashington Nursing Association from 1934 to 1943, having been one of its founders. James retired from an active role in the Ashington Nursing Association in 1943 due to advancing years, having already left the district to live in Longhirst.

The Morpeth Herald paid tribute to him in 1943:

If it is possible for a man to become an institution, and if ever a man contrived to become an institution it is James Minoughan whose identification with the Ashington Nursing Association since its inception forty years ago has been so intimate and personal that it is extremely difficult to reconcile ourselves to the prospect of our Nursing Association operating without Jimmy Minoughan's Irish humour, fire and accent. He has given way to a younger man, but will retain a connection with what has been one of the dominating interests in his life by virtue of his election as honorary Vice-President, a position reserved for those whose contribution to the Association has been concrete and substantial.³⁵

James died at his home in Cairns Avenue, Longhirst on Wednesday 10 December 1947, at the age of 75.

James Minoughan junior, 1902-1969

James Minoughan junior was born in 1902. In 1915, at the age of thirteen, he followed in his father's footsteps to become a miner. He lived in Ashington throughout his life. He married Margaret Doyle and they had six children, four of whom survived, Mary, James, Peter and John.

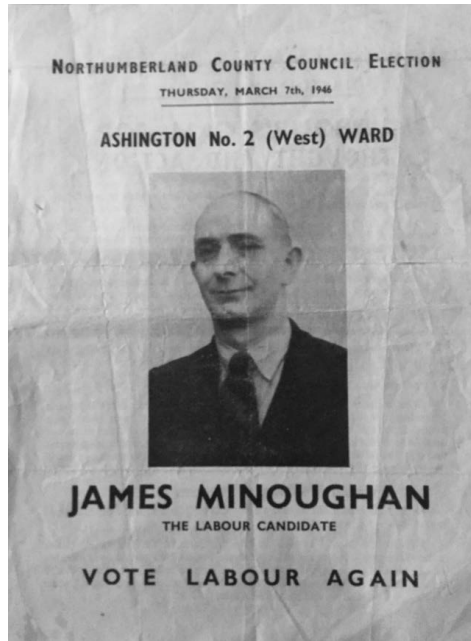
James became active in local Labour politics and was a dedicated and ambitious member of the local Labour Party. He tried unsuccessfully to be nominated to stand as the Labour candidate for Wansbeck at the 1945 election, when Alfred Robens (later Lord Robens and Chairman of the National Coal Board), became the Labour MP.³⁶ After the war he became a local councillor and from 1944 to 1947 he was Secretary of the Ashington Mineworkers' Federation. From 1947 to 1964 he worked for the National Coal Board, first as an Area Welfare Officer and then, when this post was abolished, as Manpower Officer. Welfare was James' passion throughout his work, trade union and political life.

Housing and education in Ashington after the Second World War – James' contribution as a local councillor

On the back of the sweeping national Labour victory in 1945, the Labour Party gained a majority on Northumberland County Council and Ashington UDC in 1946. In March of that year, James was elected chairman of Ashington Labour Party and went on to be elected for the first time to Ashington Urban District Council, for the Ashington ward, from 1946-1950.³⁷ Ashington UDC covered Ashington, Woodhorn, North Seaton, Sheepwash, and Bothal.³⁸ At the County Council elections on 7 March 1946, James gained Ashington no 2 Ward for Labour.

Labour controlled both councils until 1949; as Labour's national fortunes declined so they did locally in Northumberland. James was up for re-election to the UDC in 1949. He retained his Ashington ward seat but

was unsuccessful at the next election on 9 May 1950, beaten into fourth place by the Rent and Ratepayers Association.⁴⁰



James Minoughan's leaflet for the March 1946 Northumberland County Council election. With the kind permission of Paul and Carol Jarvis

James was a member of the UDC's Housing and Finance Committees, which steered housebuilding schemes for the town in the four years after the Second World War.⁴¹ He was also on Northumberland County Council in this period; they were the strategic planning authority for housing.

Ashington Coal Company's record on housing provision before the Second World War had been poor compared to its record on other aspects of welfare provision. Older colliery housing had not been improved, apart from the water supply. The company had resisted calls by the Ashington UDC to bring their older properties up to contemporary standards of

sanitation in order to reduce the risk of smallpox epidemics which occurred frequently in the district.⁴²

By September 1948, 279 houses had been built since the end of the war. Ashington's Woodhorn Road scheme, for example, was agreed by the UDC in April 1946 and provided 146 houses plus shop, flats and aged peoples' homes. The shops included the Ashington Industrial Cooperative Society, a butcher and a general dealer. In addition, almost a hundred houses were built on the North Seaton housing site. These developments included prefabricated houses which were a major part of the delivery plan to address the UK's post-Second World War housing shortage.⁴³

Planning new schools for Ashington was also a key part of the County Council and UDC's expansion plans for the town. 'Secondary education for all' was the promise of the 1944 Education Act.⁴⁴ During 1946-1947 the County Council agreed much needed new school buildings, including sites for Ashington Day Special School, Modern Schools at Bothal and Hirst, a new Technical School for Boys, another for Girls, and a day nursery, all at Ashington, and the purchase and improvement of a house for the caretaker of Bothal School.⁴⁵ On 25 July 1946 the UDC agreed four sites for schools - North Seaton Rd, Richardson Street, the Technical School County College and the replacement for Bothal School.⁴⁶

Welfare Officer for the National Coal Board

James was a keen trade unionist and was Secretary of the Federation from 1944-47 until he started working for the NCB in May 1947. He was appointed as an Area Welfare Officer for the mid-Northumberland area of the National Coal Board (NCB) Northern Division, Area no. 8, based in the Labour Department.⁴⁷

In 1946 the Coal Industry Act gave the NCB the duty of securing the welfare of people in their employment and the NCB provided funds, with the priority being the speedy building of pithead baths and improvement of pithead canteens. By 1946 in the Ashington area, pithead baths had been built at most of the collieries except for Ashington which finally got

its baths in 1952.⁴⁸ The picture was different elsewhere in the country. By 1947 baths had been built at only 366 collieries with provision for 450,000 men.⁴⁹ However, by December 1955 the number of baths had increased nationally by 70% to 622, with accommodation for 676,000, 90% of miners.⁵⁰ Pithead baths became the norm in Britain's collieries.

Improving miners' safety: First Aid Competition Leagues

The nationalisation of the mines in 1947 brought about many improvements in the treatment of injured miners. Area Medical Officers were appointed and Medical Centres were built as part of new pithead baths. They were staffed by a State Registered Nurse as well as First Aid Men.⁵¹ Improving first aid knowledge and practice was one way the NCB's improved safety for miners.

The NCB ran first aid competitions to encourage interest in its training programmes. James gained national recognition for his work in setting up first aid competition leagues. First aid competitions were not new in the mining industry and the National Coal Board followed the pattern of most national industries and held its own National First Aid competition for both senior and junior miners. James innovated by designing the First Aid League for Area no. 2 as a round-robin style competition where all teams in the league competed against each other over a number of weeks.

In early 1951 James and his colleague, Medical Officer Stanley Hickling, organised a trial run for the Number 2 Area First Aid League at the Bedlington 'A' Pit Training Centre. Six teams entered and the League was judged a huge success. James said: "This is the first attempt to start anything in first aid outside the usual competitions. From the experience we have gained during the running of this league we consider that we can usefully extend the idea in the next winter season."⁵²

Following the trial, a larger Inter Area League competition was set up in November 1951 where fifteen teams took part, catering for all ages, with senior, junior, beginner and juvenile categories.⁵³ James commented: "The competition has been arranged to encourage and maintain interest during

the winter months. It will also keep teams interested for the National Competition to be held in April.”⁵⁴ It was described by the *Morpeth Herald* as “Probably the first in the country under the auspices of the National Coal Board.”⁵⁵ It was viewed as such a success that it was hailed as ‘innovation’ by the national Coal Guardian magazine in December 1951.⁵⁶

In July 1952, the funding of First Aid competitions became the responsibility of the NCB’s Northern Division Board, and in September they agreed £1,000 for First Aid Competitions across the Division area.⁵⁷

The NCB and the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation

James’ role as a Welfare Officer changed in 1952 when the NCB and the National Union of Mineworkers signed an agreement to divide welfare into two categories. Colliery welfare became the responsibility of the NCB, while responsibility for social welfare passed to the new Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation (CISWO) set up under the Miners’ Welfare Act 1952. Its functions included provision of recreation facilities, medical services outside collieries, and non-vocational educational services. CISWO took over a proportion of the Miners’ Welfare Fund and received further grants under the terms of the Miners’ Welfare Act 1952.

Following this reorganisation, by 1952 the number of area offices in the Northern Division was reduced from eight to four, and James became Welfare Officer for the No. 2 Area Mid-Northumberland.⁵⁸ Duties of the Welfare Officer included colliery welfare; pithead baths and canteens (purchase of stores and equipment and general management); mineworkers transport; and liaison on education and training.⁵⁹

James was a key link person for the Northern Division NCB to miners’ health provision. He represented the NCB on the Newcastle Regional Hospital Board from 1951 when Hartford Hall Rehabilitation Centre was transferred to their jurisdiction.⁶⁰ During the early 1960s, James was an NCB representative on the Northumberland Miners’ Rehabilitation Committee until his retirement in 1964.⁶¹

Liaison between the NCB and CISWO was also crucial in making a

success of the new arrangements for the split of welfare provision work. James was appointed to the new no. 2 Area Welfare Committee in March 1952 when new Divisional and Area Welfare Committees were appointed under CISWO. In July 1952 James was appointed as Joint Honorary Secretary for no 2 Area Committee of CISWO.⁶²

National Coal Board Reorganisation: James becomes Manpower Officer

1957 was a year of reorganisation at the National Coal Board, following contraction of the mining industry. In the Northern Division No 2 Area James was transferred into a newly created post as Manpower Officer, following the abolition of the posts of Welfare Officer and Labour Officer. Manpower Officers worked on recruitment, training and apprenticeships. At the Division level the Labour Department became the Industrial Relations Department.⁶³

Further reorganisation of the Northern Division came in November 1961 with the merger of area numbers 1 and 2 and the reorganisation of number 4 Area.⁶⁴ James was transferred to number 3 Area (North Northumberland) with a promotion: from 17 May 1962 his salary increased to £1865 per annum. Number 3 Area was based at the Mining Offices, Ashington.

Family members recall that James was recommended for a Queen's honour but he refused. He said that buying new outfits for himself and Margaret plus the cost of travel and hotels seemed unnecessarily extravagant when he was working with people in poverty. By all accounts Margaret was very disappointed. James was a principled man who was very committed to the miners he worked for. It is also likely that this decision was influenced by his anti-monarchist views.

James retired in 1964 and passed away on 16 December 1969 aged 67 at his home in West View, Ashington, Northumberland.

Conclusion

By the time James Minoughan junior retired in 1964, miners' welfare provision in the Ashington area was much improved compared to when his father started working as a miner seventy years earlier.

James Minoughan senior helped the Ashington Miners' Lodge and the Ashington Mineworkers' Federation to develop and expand. At his retirement celebration in 1936 James said that the formation of the Federation was an important step in the history of trade unionism in Ashington: 'Ashington had now one of the finest federations in the County.' James Bowman, Secretary of the Northumberland Miners' Union, paid tribute to James, with whom he had served in the miners' union in Ashington: 'I have always admired his Irish wit and there is no doubt his wit has been the means of saving several critical situations.'⁶⁵

James senior was passionate about the improvement of health provision in Ashington and as President of the Ashington Nursing Association oversaw improvements to Ashington Hospital in the era before the National Health Service was founded in 1948.

The Ashington Miners' Welfare Institute was open for over eighty years until 2013. Bill Bryson in his book *Notes from a Small Island* praises the Institute, the Philosophical Society, the Workers' Education Association and other cultural institutions in the town: '...how rich life was, and how enthusiastically opportunities were seized, in Ashington in the years before the war.'⁶⁶

James Minoughan junior seized the opportunity to become one of the first miners to work for the National Coal Board in 1947, bringing to his role as Welfare Officer experience as Secretary of the Ashington Mineworkers' Federation and a good knowledge of the grievances and aspirations of Ashington's miners. He developed welfare programmes for collieries in the mid-Northumberland area and in particular was passionate about first aid training and the competition leagues. Although his political ambitions were not fully realised, his contribution to Ashington's housing improvement and expansion after the Second World War addressed the

poor quality of the housing stock in the town.

While Ashington Coal Company had a better record than some colliery owners on welfare provision, the nationalisation of the British coal industry in 1947 and the NCB's divisional and area structure, addressed the postcode lottery of welfare provision which had existed during the era of individual coal companies. The success of the pithead baths programme was one of the high points of the NCB's colliery welfare programme in the first ten years after nationalisation. Pithead baths became the norm in Britain's collieries, and Ashington Colliery finally got its pithead baths in 1952.⁶⁷

Both James Minoughans, senior and junior, worked tirelessly and sacrificed time with their families to improve life for Ashington's miners and their families. A stronger Mineworkers' Federation and a legacy of better health and leisure facilities were the result. At the newly established National Coal Board, ex-miners like James brought a creativity and dedication to their task of improving miners' working conditions and safety, with impressive results.

Notes

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- ² Celia Minoughan, 'The rise of labour in Northumberland', in *Working class politics in North East England*, ed. by Maureen Callcott and Raymond Challinor (Newcastle: Newcastle Polytechnic, 1983), p.79-95.
- ³ *Morpeth Herald*, 19 December 1947, 'Obituary. Mr James Minoughan, Longhirst.' (Obituary) p. 4.
- ⁴ *Morpeth Herald*, 4 June 1943, p. 6.
- ⁵ *Morpeth Herald*, Obituary.
- ⁶ The five collieries were Ashington, Woodhorn, Linton, Ellington and Lynemouth. Mike Kirkup, *Ashington Coal Company: The Five Collieries* (Seaham, Co. Durham, The People's History Ltd, 2000).
- ⁷ *Morpeth Herald*, 19 December 1947, Obituary.
- ⁸ *Morpeth Herald*, 24 January 1936, p.11.
- ⁹ *The Colliery Guardian*, 8 January 1932, p.92.
- ¹⁰ *Morpeth Herald*, 25 October 1935, p.9.
- ¹¹ Ashington Coal Company, *Handbook, 1924*, Northumberland Archives (henceforth NRO), NRO 08577.

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- 23 AMF, Minutes 1926, NRO 01286.
- 24 AMF, Minutes, Annual Meeting, 20 September 1926, NRO 01286.
- 25 McNiven.
- 26 Miners' Welfare AR, for 1926 and 1930.
- 27 Miners' Welfare AR, 1930.
- 28 Miners' Welfare AR, 1931.
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- 31 Arthur Gordon, 'The Social and Economic Development of Ashington' (unpublished thesis, Newcastle University, 1954).
- 32 McNiven.
- 33 F. L. Booth, 'Ashington Hospital', *Ashington Collieries Magazine*, July 1923, p.204
- 34 Ashington Hospital Annual Report, 1933, NRO 04758.
- 35 *Morpeth Herald*, 4 June 1943, p. 6.
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Crowley's Crew: From Royalists To Radicals

Susan Lynn

Addressing a meeting of the Blaydon Burn Lodge of the Durham Miners Union on 7 October 1883, Joseph Cowen MP said;

When many busy centres of industry in Durham were moorland and forest, Winlaton was the seat of a vigorous industry. The semi-socialistic experiment of Crowley was interesting both politically and industrially, it got together a body of workmen who gave a distinctive character to the village, who afterwards acted as pioneers in the special trades in other districts. They lived in a community, they adjusted their differences at voluntary courts, they had a church and a school; a cock pit and a bull ring. They were stout church and king's men rough but loyal.¹

This was Joseph Cowen talking about his home village of Winlaton, six miles west of Newcastle. He is referring to Ambrose Crowley a West Midlands iron manufacturer who set up business in Winlaton, a series of blacksmiths' shops making all kinds of ironware, which a visitor in 1768 said was 'supposed to be among the greatest manufacturies of the kind in Europe'.² There remains only one blacksmith's forge, now a small museum, the last link in the history of blacksmiths' work in Winlaton which stretched from 1691 until 1966, a remarkable 275 years. But who

was Ambrose Crowley, and why did a man born in Stourbridge in the West Midlands and resident in London set up his works in Winlaton?



Former Hood Square forge of Richard Hurst, building now owned by Gateshead Council. Photograph 1980, Susan Lynn.

Ambrose Crowley III, was born at Stourbridge in 1658, the son of a man described variously as a nailer, a blacksmith or an ironmonger (the term was used at the time for a person connected with the iron industry, not merely a retailer). His father Ambrose II had built up a thriving business, was a pillar of the local Quaker community and had given land for the building of a Friends Meeting House. The Stour valley at that time was one of the most concentrated areas of iron manufacture in the country and an important centre of the infant steel industry, with the river ports giving access to the sea port of Bristol.

We know little of Ambrose's early life in Stourbridge. However, his father sent young Ambrose to be apprenticed to a London merchant. The Great Fire of London in 1666 had destroyed much of the capital and London was being rebuilt, offering a range of opportunities for a young lad with ambition. Ambrose was indentured to Clement Plumstead, a draper and ironmonger in the City of London. The Plumsteads were originally from the West Midlands and known to the Crowleys, Ambrose II had once lent them money.³

Ambrose III served his apprenticeship well and said ‘I never asked for one holiday all the time of my apprenticeship except when my father was in town, my diligence raised me several friends who was (sic) always ready to assist me in everything that was needful’.⁴

This offers a picture of the young Ambrose already ‘networking’, sowing the seeds of his own future success. He became a trained merchant and was admitted to Mastership of a Livery Company, a step on the way to becoming a Councillor and Alderman in the city of London and later MP for Andover. He was knighted in 1707.

He set up home in London, later moving to a fine house in Greenwich where he also built a new warehouse. The house, which was demolished in the mid 19th century, had a wooden staircase by Inigo Jones, a marble hall and a great gallery with panelled walls. A 1726 inventory lists all the fine furnishings of the house, suitable for a rich city merchant and a far cry from the modest Quaker home in Stourbridge. There is not much information about his early business years but there are records of his supplying frying pans, nails, brads and fetters.⁵ He always traded at the ‘sign of the doublet’ a picture of a leather jerkin such as he had worn when he worked as a smith himself, so, a man who did not forget and was not ashamed of his past.⁶

Why the North East?

Ambrose’s first venture in the North East was in Sunderland. He had been involved in a quarrel with the Midlands merchants who supplied him with nails, and apparently decided to take advantage of the expanding coastwise transport developed by the coal trade and the availability of good quality bar iron for nailmaking from Sweden across the North Sea. Most of the nails made were for the shipbuilding industry, and the naval dockyards were in the Thames estuary or on the east and south coasts. Ambrose was working at a time of almost continuous war and colonial expansion, and it was as a naval contractor that he grew rich.

We do not know exactly when Ambrose came to Sunderland, but it

seems likely that it was in 1682 as that was the date found on the lintel of a stone building, demolished in 1918, located on what became the site of Richardson & Westgarth, Marine Engineering.⁷ Nailmaking was a new craft to the North East and Ambrose's problem was labour. He secured a number of workers from Liège (in present-day Belgium) with the intention that they would then teach their skills to locals. Sunderland had been a parliamentarian town during the Civil War, and remained nonconformist and hostile to the Roman Catholic newcomers. By 1688 Ambrose was forced to petition the King and the Bishop of Durham to seek protection of his interests.⁸ This was when he took the decision to move his works to Winlaton.

Why Winlaton ?

Annoyingly, no records for the years 1688-1691 have survived, so we do not really know. Following a visitation of the plague in 1604 when 35 souls died, Winlaton seems to have consisted of 'a few deserted cottages'.⁹ The Tempest family, from whom Crowley leased the land, were recusant Catholics, which meant that his workers from Liège were less likely to be persecuted.¹⁰ In addition, the coal in the Winlaton area was very good for smiths' work, burning hot and clear. Whatever the reasons, in April 1691 Crowley took a 99-year lease on several houses and 4 acres of land, and started the factory which made his name nationally known. Despite the detailed planning involved in the setting up of this enterprise, he did not leave London.

He became a very successful entrepreneur, but due to the lack of documents from those crucial early years we do not know how he raised capital or secured customers or on what scale he operated. He seems to have secured his first naval contract by 1693, mainly for sheathing nails.

Sheathing nails were important to the navy, whose ships required thousands upon thousands of them. The blacksmiths at Winlaton could supply nails and could just as easily make any other type of small ironware. Larger items, including anchors, chains, and steelware were made at

Winlaton Mill and Swalwell utilising the waters of the River Derwent. In retaining a London base Crowley clearly envisaged national, not just local trade. His solution to running his business from a distance was to appoint local managers who had to adhere to his law book and his ten-week accounting system. Ambrose Crowley had no role models, and he was years ahead of his time both in the management of his business and in the job security and social benefits enjoyed by his workers, but he demanded hard work and loyalty in return.

He employed locals and advertised around England for skilled labour, guaranteeing 'constant worke, ready pay and a healthfull and plentifull country to live in (*sic*)'.¹¹ A workman applying to Crowley for employment was advanced cash for his transport to Winlaton against the security of his belongings. Upon starting work, his goods would be kept for 15 weeks and the man could redeem them from his wages. If the fare was not paid back, then the goods were auctioned off. Workers had to give 6 months' notice before leaving and could not work within 50 miles of Winlaton under penalty of a fine of £50. An experienced nailer could expect to earn 14s 2d (71p) per week for his 80 hours. They were paid by weight of nails, so every nail had to be inspected to stop the smiths adding lead to make up the weight.

The Works

The blacksmiths' forges were arranged around a square with living quarters and workshops. There was a large wooden gate at the entrance for works traffic and a small gate for pedestrians. There were three squares at Winlaton and two at Winlaton Mill. Each craftsman worked independently, drawing bar iron from a common stock and delivering his finished product to the Crowley warehouse, and then the goods were shipped in Crowley vessels to London.

The workers' lives were governed in every detail by the Law Book, which had some 117 laws designed by Ambrose to control large-scale industrial production from a considerable distance.¹² Each square was in

the charge of a timekeeper, who had to see that all carriages were out of the square before candle light and that the great gate was shut and locked after dark. The monitor had to ring the bell for the start of work at 5 am, and work continued till 8 pm, except on Saturday when they were allowed to finish at 7 pm, an 80 hour week. The monitor checked the workers were at work and not wasting Crowley's time and money drinking, gaming or poaching. No-one could leave the square without informing him. At Winlaton Mill, the windows had to be so high that no-one could easily look out of them. Everyone had to be home by 9 pm on Sunday and 10 pm other nights, no strangers were allowed in the squares, the curfew was strictly observed. There were long lists of persons not allowed in the squares, including hawkers and tinkers. Drunks were driven out unless they lived in the square.

There were fines for swearing, betting and fighting; children breaking any of the regulations were to be whipped by their parents, or the parents would be fined, workers were encouraged to inform on any infringement of the laws.¹³ Anyone infringing the rules would be fined and the fine paid was generally divided between the informer and the poor fund.¹⁴

Crowley was a hard headed businessman, but, perhaps as a legacy of his Quaker upbringing, he was conscious of building a community and referred to his workers as 'this society' or 'my people'. He said he wanted to create such conditions for his workers 'as would make them quiet and easy amongst themselves and a happy and flourishing people among their neighbours'.¹⁵ He felt a moral responsibility to his workers.

Money

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there was a chronic shortage of coins of small denominations. Crowley was not unusual in issuing his own coins, though unusually his were made of leather, so unfortunately there are none surviving. He also drew up his own notes, at values ranging from 2d to 20/-, which could be used in all shops, markets and houses where meat and drink was sold. These bills were issued on printed forms from

books with counterfoils; both bill and counterfoil had to bear numbers and characters quite like a modern cheque book. Sadly, none of these have survived either. The first cheques issued in Britain, in 1659, were a product of Quaker banking systems. Ambrose himself had a Quaker background and two of his daughters married into the Quaker Lloyds banking family.

Crowley's ironworks had their own courts with five Arbitrators, the Chaplain and two nominated by Crowley, and two elected by the workers. The court met every 10 weeks, and the system lasted through into the 1840s. A debt could be retrieved by a percentage deduction from the debtor's wages, but Crowley would not acknowledge debts to a publican.

Ambrose Crowley built a chapel with contributions from his workmen and a levy to pay for a clergyman. He provided schooling for the children of his workers, most unusual for working-class children to receive an education in the eighteenth century.¹⁶ Each worker subscribed to a fund for a schoolmaster. Because this was before compulsory schooling, it gave rise to Winlaton being known as Knowledge Hill, and there is a street in the village with that title. The teacher also had to comply with Crowley's rules; he had to be at the school for all the appointed hours, and not dismiss the children for his own pursuits. The children had to be taught to show respect to their superiors and the teacher had to set them a good example.

There was a health fund and Crowley appointed a full-time doctor. This fund had problems we would recognise today. Crowley was annoyed at anyone feigning sickness or frivolously demanding treatment then selling the medicines they had received. He wrote 'I have never forgot Thomas Haydon for being too sick to work but well enough to bayte the bull'.¹⁷

There was even a pension scheme; both employees and employer paid into a superannuation scheme from which the workers received a pension of 5 shillings (25p) per week, when too old or infirm to work. However, the pensioner had to wear an armband with the inscription 'Crowley's Poor' written on it. On the death of a workman, the widow either received a weekly allowance of 2s. 6d (12 ½ p) or was provided with employment at the factory, usually to make nail bags.

The workers became known as Crowley's Crew, and living and working as they did as one unit, their social life was shared too. They were masters of gaming, bull baiting, cock fighting and the like, they had no match in bare fist fighting and being smiths were all very muscular. It was said that as poachers, Crowley's Crew had no match in the county. In fact, in 1702 Crowley had to promise Sir William Bowes that he would try to protect the game on the Gibside estate from his workmen.

Every year, there was horse racing to celebrate the birth of Ambrose's grandson. The races lasted three days, but it was stipulated that only the organisers of the race, three local publicans, could sell liquor on the course. Foot races are nothing new, there were races for men and women, the men ran for a guinea and the women for a smock valued at 8/- (40p). Bells were rung and everyone drank to Mr. Crowley's health and the prosperity of the factory.

So this was not Utopia; these people had a very long working week and we have a picture of a village where the people were locked in at night, they were paid with Company money and their lives were governed and regulated to a remarkable degree. But they were not downtrodden, they lived in small but solid housing, enjoyed their sport and their drink (there were once eleven public houses in the village), and had the security of their jobs and the social benefits Crowley provided, although these were paid for by deductions from their wages.

Ambrose Crowley died in 1713 and was buried at Mitcham in Surrey, in the parish church of his wife's family. The business was then run by his son John Crowley who married Theodosia Gascoigne, a lady with a large dowry in cash and land in Suffolk elevating John Crowley to the landed gentry. John in his turn became an Alderman for the City of London and MP for Okehampton.

Colonial Markets

John Crowley continued to run the family business as his father had. The main change was that he entered the colonial market. Crowley's had

Quaker connections and relatives through marriage in the New World. Accounts show that nails, edge tools, and hoes for the plantations formed the bulk of the colonial trade, with a fleet of ships whose names include 'Crowley', 'Ambrose', 'Theodosia' and 'John'. sailing to North America and the Caribbean. Crowley's blacksmiths made manacles, ankle irons, collars and padlocks for the necks of slaves. These are Crowley's unsavoury links with the slave trade. Although Crowley's were recognised to have established advanced conditions for their own workers, their business, like so many industries at the time, did support the slave trade. It may seem surprising that the Crowleys deserted their early Quaker sentiments in pursuit of money and what was then perceived as status, without thought for those enslaved peoples who suffered so much, it is important that we acknowledge their role in perpetuating this heinous trade.

John Crowley died in 1728 aged only 38. His widow Theodosia was only 34 with six young children, the eldest Ambrose IV only nine years old. At the time Crowley's employed nearly a thousand men in the North East at the various sites, and the firm still had interests in the Midlands and a headquarters in London. Theodosia guided the business with the support of her managers until Ambrose IV came of age in 1739. However, he died in 1754, and his younger brother John only a year later. This left Theodosia back at the helm; she lived in Suffolk with a town house in Berkeley Square. The old Greenwich house, home of Ambrose III, became the home of her managers.

During her years the business continued to expand. She was concerned to separate family money from the business, and to ensure all her children made good marriages, the Crowley girls, being very rich, were a magnet to impoverished aristocrats.¹⁸ Of the three who lived to adulthood, the youngest daughter Elizabeth married the Earl of Ashburnham (1737-1812). The house at Ashburnham, Sussex (near Battle) was enlarged in the eighteenth century with Crowley money. All three girls died before their mother, who died in 1782 aged 88. With the death of his wife, John, Earl of Ashburnham inherited two-thirds of the Crowley fortune and Charles

Boone, the widower of another daughter, inherited the rest.

These men only had a financial interest in the business, and manager Isaiah Millington bought a part-share. The company became Crowley Millington & Co. in 1782 and retained the name until its final demise in 1863.

Much of Crowley's business had been with the Admiralty, and with the end of the Napoleonic wars orders declined. Winlaton was abandoned in 1816 and the firm concentrated production at Swalwell and Winlaton Mill. This caused a huge upheaval as Crowley's had been virtually the sole employer in Winlaton. 1816 was the 'year without a summer', the Poverty Year, in which as a result of volcanic eruptions, especially the massive Mount Tabora eruption of 1815, severe summer climate abnormalities caused average global temperatures to decrease by about 0.4–0.7 °C. This resulted in major food shortages across the Northern Hemisphere. Failed harvests added to the notorious Corn Law forbidding the imports of foreign wheat, until the price reached 80s (£4) per bushel, meant that the poor were often near to starvation. This was followed by a recession which particularly affected sectors of the economy such as the iron industry which had been dependent on government contracts.

This time of famine, and the closing down of the Winlaton works, helped lead Crowley's Crew away from their Tory and royalist loyalties as described by Joseph Cowen. Throughout the eighteenth century they had had an unusual degree of security and stability but were now in an open and overcrowded labour market, with no means of redress without parliamentary representation. As a result of the benefits of the Crowley system, they were unusually literate and aware of current movements for parliamentary reform. One of the largest protest meetings following the Peterloo Massacre was in Newcastle. An estimated 40,000 people gathered in Newcastle and marched to the Town Moor. Among the numerous banners held aloft by the various groups present, was the blue silk flag of the Winlaton Reform Society, with the figure of Justice and her scales presented by the 'Female Refomers of Winlaton'.¹⁹ The Mayor, like the

rest of the town's governing body, was scared, they were convinced that a great armed rising was brewing. He wrote to the home secretary, '700 came prepared with arms, concealed, to resist the civil powers, they came from a village some miles from town and there is strong reason to suspect their arms are manufactured there'.²⁰ These were he believed 'Crowley's Crew', they had pikes, primitive hand grenades and caltrops (also known as craa-foot), four-pronged nails which when thrown would make cavalry ineffective. The various contemporary reports of the meeting agree that it was all carried out peacefully and with good order.

Some years later, at a reform demonstration in Durham in 1831, Charles Attwood, on hearing that there was a plan to disrupt the meeting organised a group of some 300 men from the Swalwell works to deal with any such disturbance.²¹

The People's Charter

The Parliamentary Reform Act of 1832 did little to enfranchise workers like those employed at Crowley and Millington's. Its limitations led to a more co-ordinated campaign to promote a People's Charter, aiming at universal suffrage for all men over 21, a secret ballot, payment and abolition of property qualification for MPs, equal electoral districts, and annual elections.

When parliament rejected the Chartist petition a strike was called for August 1839, many were convinced the country was on the verge of revolution. In Newcastle the Chartists held meetings most nights. Crowley's Crew were among the most ardent supporters of the Charter in the North. The upheaval caused to their previous steady way of life had made them think about how to improve their lives and they were firmly in favour of physical force, if needed, to achieve its aims. This was no idle threat, for as ironworkers they had the means to arm themselves. Pikes began to appear in the streets, 'an immense number' having been made at Winlaton and sold for 1s 6d (7 1/2p) each.²² The strike was in due course broken up by troops from Fenham Barracks, Newcastle. Chartist meetings

were held in the long room of the Highlander public house in Winlaton. At a Grand Radical Tea Party in December 1839, the noted chartist leader George Julian Harney addressed the crowd and gave a toast to the 'The health and happiness of the cannie lasses of Winlaton' in recognition of their support for the cause. He even sang to them, 'When this old cap was new'.

The Winlaton Chartists were prepared to help other groups in their struggles, donating £1.5s.0d to the Glasgow Cotton Spinners Strike in 1837 and 17s-6d towards the Fund for the defence of Mr. Frost and other Welsh Political Prisoners in 1839.²³

August 1839, when the Chartist petition was brought before parliament, saw Winlaton turned into an armed fortress after Jacob Robinson was charged with disorderly conduct in Newcastle. Two pike-heads were found on him, and he told the police they were being made in large quantities at Winlaton. He was immediately imprisoned, and shortly afterwards two of the Newcastle Chartists brought news that the cavalry was coming to search the village for arms. Two men with fife and drum called the village to arms.

Every entrance to the village was closed off and armed guards were in place, a cannon was fired with blank shot, then reloaded with grape. It was said the sound could be heard at Tynemouth Barracks. Scores of men were ready to scatter caltrops on the roads.²⁴ The *Newcastle Journal* reported that 'the village of Winlaton has been for the last week the scene of one continued disturbance, guns firing and bands of Chartists parading'.²⁵

So, what happened next, well, the armed troops of the Government did not arrive and the people gradually dispersed back to their homes, but for years afterwards weapons were discovered hidden away in old houses and in wells and ponds.

Were the troops ever going to arrive – who knows – but the people were ready.

The Blacksmiths' Friendly Society

Crowley pulling out of Winlaton in 1816 after 125 years, at the end of the Napoleonic wars, to concentrate on Swalwell and Winlaton Mill was devastating for the village. Indeed, we can compare it to the closing of the coal mines and steel works in modern times. For five or six generations the lives of the community had been guided by Crowley. Some obtained work at Swalwell and Winlaton Mill, while others migrated to the steel towns of the Midlands.

A number of the remaining Winlaton smiths set up business on their own. By the 1820s many were quite successful, but had not forgotten the social advantages and benefits provided by Crowley. In 1826, twelve men formed the 'Winlaton Blacksmiths' Friendly Society for 'the mutual relief of each other when in distress and for other good works'.²⁶ There was a fund for old age, sickness and infirmity into which all members subscribed. Amongst these was Joseph Cowen snr (1800-1873), the first secretary of the society, a brick manufacturer and a leader for social change. The first meeting was held at the New Inn in Winlaton, where the landlord was John Cowen, father of Joseph Cowen snr. and a Crowley's smith himself, who now owned a successful forge. To be a member, a smith had to be aged 18 – 28 years and be of good character, in perfect health and able to earn a competent livelihood for himself and his family. Mariners, pitmen, and pensioners were not admitted. In times of need, subscribing members could apply for sickness benefit, funeral benefit and legacies.

Not all the successful smiths joined the friendly society. Some became members of the Parish Council when it was formed in the 1830s. Joseph Cowen snr. said 'once they were working men, then they were political reformers and now they are aristocrats, gentility is their god and possession of the worlds riches is their sole aim'.²⁷ During the 1870s general depression in England, other trades were admitted, even a miner, and the final records known of the society are dated 1901.

The rapidly expanding town of Blaydon nearby saw a large influx of migrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who came to

work in the mines and various industries along the banks of the River Tyne, but Winlaton managed to retain a sense of separation and individuality until the second half of the twentieth century, which may be seen as a legacy of the close knit bonds of Crowley's Crew.



*The last chain forged in 1966 at Nixon & Whitfield blacksmiths.
Photograph courtesy Winlaton History Society.*

The last working forge closed in 1966, ending 275 years of village history and although 'we no longer hear the clink of the blacksmiths hammer beating on the anvil', I think those early smiths would be proud of the changes and improvements their efforts made to Winlaton life.²⁸

Notes

For this essay I have drawn heavily on *Men of Iron* by M. W. Flinn (Edinburgh: University Press, 1962), which is the first book to read for anyone interested in this subject. *Whickham Parish: its History, Antiquities and Industries* (Carlisle: G & T Coward, 1893) and *History of the Parish of*

Ryton (Carlisle: G & T Coward, 1896), both by William Bourn, also give a valuable insight into this area.

- 1 Cowen (1829-1900) was a local industrialist and radical politician, MP for Newcastle from 1874 to 1886. T. R. Hodgson, *Winlaton Blacksmiths' Friendly Society*, 1826 (Gateshead Libraries 2000). p. iv.
- 2 S. Middlebrook, *Newcastle upon Tyne: Its Growth and Achievement* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Kemsley House, 1950), p. 110.
- 3 M. W. Flinn, *Men of Iron; The Crowleys in the Early Iron Industry* (Edinburgh University Press, 1962) p. 31.
- 4 Flinn, *Men of Iron*, p. 31.
- 5 Flinn, *Men of Iron*, p. 34.
- 6 Bourn, *Whickham*, p. 92.
- 7 Flinn, *Men of Iron*, p. 40.
- 8 Flinn, *Men of Iron*, p. 40 and p. 41.
- 9 Flinn, *Men of Iron*, p. 41.
- 10 The Tempest family of Stella Hall, Blaydon owned land in Swalwell and Winlaton and were one of the old Catholic families of the North.
- 11 Flinn, *Men of Iron*, p. 235.
- 12 M. W. Flinn (ed), *Law Book of the Crowley Ironworks*, Surtees Society, vol. CLXVII (Durham: Andrews, 1957).
- 13 Flinn, *Men of Iron*, p. 26.
- 14 Flinn, *Law Book*, p. xvi.
- 15 Flinn, *Men of Iron*, p. 219.
- 16 Law 97 outlines the duties of the schoolmaster but does not indicate whether the children were taught for whole or half days or to what age they were educated.
- 17 Winlaton LHS, *History of Blaydon* (Gateshead MBC, 1975) p. 36.
- 18 Flinn, *Men of Iron*, p. 86.
- 19 *National Register*, 17 October 1819, p. 4.
- 20 *Newcastle Courant*, 4 December 1819 p 4; Flinn, p. 251.
- 21 Bourn, *Whickham*, p. 52.
- 22 Middlebrook, p.180.
- 23 *Northern Liberator* 30 December 1837, p. 1, and 1 February 1840, p. 1.
- 24 'Grape' or 'grapeshot' is an arrangement of small roundshot packed and separated from the gunpowder by a metal disc, resembling a cluster of grapes, the balls spread out when fired.
- 25 *Newcastle Journal*, 17 August 1839 p. 3; Bourn, *Ryton*, p. 126.
- 26 Hodgson, p. 1.
- 27 Hodgson, p. 2.
- 28 Winlaton LHS, p. 48.

north east history

Experiences of place and loss at Newcastle West End Foodbank

Alison Atkinson-Phillips, Silvie Fisch, and Jack Hepworth

‘Foodbank Histories’ has recorded interviews at the Newcastle West End Foodbank. They have yielded insights into multi-layered memory and highlighted dynamic conceptions of community and identity. This article examines how interviewees narrated two key themes: place and loss.

Who I am... Hmm. Born in Newcastle, at the General Hospital, within sight of the floodlights at St James’s Park, within smell of the breweries, and with the influence of my grandmother – who was a pitman’s widow, and who, alongside my parents, who came from widely different backgrounds, taught me the essence of decency, and right and wrong.¹

Bill C. projects a slightly nostalgic vision of Newcastle as a city of passion and compassion in equal measure, but whose people have been beset by inequalities and the pernicious impacts of deindustrialisation and austerity. For Bill, a Geordie upbringing was synonymous with a sense of ‘decency’ and comradeship.

A volunteer at the Newcastle United Football Club (NUFC) Supporters’ Foodbank, ‘a collective of NUFC fans bringing their backing and support to the Newcastle West End Foodbank (NWEF)’, Bill is one of the 41 people we have interviewed since 2018 as part of ‘Foodbank

Histories'. This is a collaborative research project involving university and community historians from Northern Cultural Projects CIC (NCP), a North East community cultural organisation, and Newcastle University's Oral History Unit & Collective, working in partnership with NWEF. Drawing upon clients' and volunteers' testimonies, we aimed to help improve service provision at the foodbank, inform policy-makers, foster attitudinal shifts, and find creative ways to reach a wider public.

The people we listened to shared similar beliefs in traditional working-class values: respect, consideration, and generosity towards family members, coupled with a commitment to a strong work ethic.² In this article, we reflect on themes of place- and class-based solidarity which permeated many of the interviews. These solidarities are interwoven with a sense of loss. Taken together, these testimonies provide a rich and layered social history of Newcastle's West End as a place of both community and conflict.

NWEF is one of the biggest foodbanks in the country. As the name suggests, it was set up to cater for the needs of people in its locality – in this case Newcastle upon Tyne's West End: an area without fixed boundaries, but largely synonymous with the historically poorer, deprived areas of the city's west. While the majority of foodbank clients live here, people come from all over the city and beyond.

Many of those interviewed reflected on the current struggle in this locality, with a strong perception of the impact of decline amid deindustrialisation and more recent austerity.

Volunteer Laurie pithily evoked the shifting social geographies which accompany regeneration:

We left here... somewhere around there, '87. To be perfectly honest, where we were it was starting to become a wee bit run down, but not to the extent that it is now. I mean, there is parts of the West End does perfectly okay, but there is places where it's very run down. Here you can see the difference, especially since austerity kicked in what, ten years ago? The industry

around Tyneside has basically gone, all the heavy industry's gone... Tyneside now, parts of it is more like a theme park where it used to be all industry... people have been left behind.³

Representations of Geordie togetherness coexist uneasily with invocations of immigration to deprived communities as a symbol of localised decline. Older volunteer Margaret said she would describe Newcastle to a stranger as 'very friendly', yet this was an exclusive framing of place which cast newcomers as problematic: 'People didn't, they're just - not the same, all foreign. And if you've got a hearing problem, you can't understand them. So it's drastic changes... These foreigners, they're just out for themselves.'⁴

The West End's diversity is not new. Until the early twentieth century it had been a popular destination for immigrants hoping to find employment in the area's mines and heavy industries. Major employers like Vickers-Armstrong had chosen to locate their factories in this part of the city, conveniently situated close to the River Tyne. Today, almost every family has at least one migrant grandparent.

Foodbank supporter Monju's family were once some of those 'newcomers'. He explained his commitment to a range of community initiatives through his extensive experience living in the area. This was no nostalgic representation, however: Monju also recalled several harrowing childhood experiences of racism on the streets where he grew up. But his tenacious identity as a Geordie transcended those experiences:

I'm definitely a Geordie, I was born in Newcastle, I live in the West End of Newcastle... I can absolutely relate to what's going on: I see it, I live it, I live in one of the most deprived areas of Newcastle, where the biggest food bank in the country is set up... Growing up in Elswick, it has changed just a tad in the last thirty years! Have been to a fair few places... lived in some pretty cool places... But my home and heart will always be in the west end of the Toon!⁵

Another volunteer, Patricia, spoke of ‘two Newcastles’: one engaged in social struggle, another – with the affluent suburb of Gosforth used as an example – oblivious to it. For her, the proximity of those two Newcastles rendered a unified social effort all the more imperative. ‘I think there’s two different separate types of Newcastle. And I wish more people inside the Gosforth bubble were aware of what’s happening outside of it.’⁶

The majority of our interviewees had lived in the West End most of their lives. Those who left, for example to pursue a career in the army, did not express any regrets about having returned to the area. James’s parents both came from Scotswood and he spent some of his early years in Denton Burn, an area comprising both poor and more affluent areas. He spent more than a year in temporary accommodation, and is now back in supported accommodation: ‘When I got the chance to go back there, I said, well, that’s great, that’s my dream home, Denton Burn.’⁷ He still knows people in the area, mainly older people ‘from years ago, some of them are still around you know’.

Deborah, whose family briefly lived in Hartlepool, also values her long-term connection with the place: ‘I know people round here. I grew up round here and all that’.⁸

Amid socioeconomic transformation and dislocation, collective identities connected to a sense of place offer an anchor point for localised distinctions and pride in an ‘imagined community’.⁹

Most people could reflect on several generations who lived in the area. Often, they did not know many details of their parents’ and grandparents’ life histories, but did have stories about struggles with low pay, often requiring women to supplement the household income through part-time work, most frequently bar work and cleaning jobs. Today, recollections of this employment tend to erase its challenges and instead remark on its attainability. For those who first entered the job market before the economic downturn, employment was easy to find.

In the past, you could leave one job and go on to another job straight away. But now, you cannot, you need all these forms, certificates and all that. If you haven't got all of them, you cannot get a job. And then, you've got to go on the computer, and if you cannot go on the computer... know what I mean?¹⁰

Many of the foodbank volunteers belong to this generation, and are now of retirement age. They recognise the different challenges experienced by a younger generation who are their children and grandchildren. For example, Shirley recalls, as a young woman, being sacked from a job:

I was on my way home to tell my mum I'd lost my job and bumped into a friend who said they were looking for an office junior at her place. I went for the interview, just after lunch and I had the job by four o'clock. It was nothing like today, when you lose a job you can't find another one. It was amazing getting sacked in the morning and still having a job in the evening... I would hate to be a youngster now... I think there's not security for them, no security whatsoever.¹¹

A recurring narrative in these women's lives was a strong sense of duty towards their children, particularly in their early years, which often meant that they left training or employment. Deborah, who comes to the foodbank with her daughter and grandson, told us:

When I was sixteen I was training to be a nanny. I'd done a year and a half at college, I had half a year to finish but I found out I was pregnant with K. so that went through the window. My mum says to us *you can go back to college if you want*, but I went, *no, she's my responsibility*. So that's why I didn't go back... My mum gave up a lot for me and my two brothers, I think I'm just following in her footsteps.¹²

Just as Tracy Shildrick and colleagues did, we found that the experiences of middle and older generations were typified by work, not worklessness.¹³ The interviews reflected a strong work ethic, linked to familial duty, that had been passed down through the generations and is still present now in a young generation that has little or no experience of the labour market. James remembered his father saying: '*If you want something, you've got to go out and earn it, get a job and all that* – and we all did that'¹⁴ When Kath's son left school on a Friday in the late 1990s she told him: 'Get a job, £30 a week. No job, £50 a week' [for your board]'. The following Monday he started work for a Chinese food wholesaler.

Most of the younger people we met or heard about were without employment, despite expressing conventional aspirations for work. Their common experience can be summed up with this quote from Linda, whose son left school assuming he would 'get a job anywhere': 'He keeps going online and applying online all the time and you just don't get a reply. *Thank you for your application.* That's all you get.'¹⁵

What has often been frowned upon as 'low aspirations' and misused by politicians to demonise people working in poverty are in fact longstanding working-class aspirations. When we asked foodbank clients about their hopes for the future, most people of working age wished for a 'steady job'. Apart from that, the motto is 'just to get on with life', ingrained in people's minds through personal and collective experience, nowadays often romanticised as 'resilience'.

Laurie, who came from a working-class background, reflected on his father's attitude:

When I was struggling with work and with the kids and with this, that and the other and I was down a bit, I remember sitting in the club with him... He says, *you know what, son.* And I said, what? And he says, *just get on with it...* And that's what they did. They went through wars and all the rest

of it and rationing and all this business and that's just the mentality, just get on with it.¹⁶

But throughout the good and not so good days, and often in the absence of satisfactory official intervention, many people relied on the help of the immediate neighbourhood. Usually, these are memories of mutual support, of helping and being helped.

You had to do without things and, you know, things like that. It's not like today where you have ample opportunity to get things, you know. I think then it was a bit more, you had to rely on yourself and your neighbours.¹⁷

Neighbourly support was most likely to be in kind, but could also be directly financial. For example, Kath recalled door-to-door collections for a neighbour's funeral costs, to avert the shame of a pauper's funeral.

A common story is the sharing of coal, with families who had a worker in the coalmining industry bringing home coal that was made available to others on the street, in exchange for bartered favours.

Now her husband was a miner... the miners used to get a load of coal and they used to dump it in the back lane and we used to take our buckets over and get coal and Mary would let us get some coal for the fire and mum would do something for Mary in exchange.¹⁸

Our interviewees' memories may have been nostalgic, but they were also reflective and measured. No pocket money, no holidays, but plenty of freedom and long days outdoor with friends are common recollections of childhood experience for the older and some of the middle generations. But this freedom also meant a lack of protection: 'We were the type of kids that were out, stay out, come back at teatime. You fended for yourself from a very young age.'¹⁹

Families could be a source of comfort, especially in larger families with relatives supporting one another and mitigating the impacts of poverty. Yet family could also be a source of conflict. We heard many harrowing stories of women having been abused by family members. Kath lives with the consequences of abuse to this day. Her memories exemplify the long-term emotional ambivalence resulting from both positive and negative childhood experiences. When she was pregnant with her third child, she worried about the family's financial situation and considered an abortion, even going so far as making an appointment at the clinic. However, in the end, she chose to go ahead with the pregnancy:

All I could get in my head was my dad used to say, *there's always a slice of bread for a baby*, meaning that you'll always find some way of feeding it.²⁰

The economic struggles of previous generations meant that interviewees had often accumulated personal problems, including mental ill-health, that made stability for families difficult to achieve, and prevented the development and transfer of social and cultural capital. Educational underachievement abounded, with young people leaving school early and quickly entering the labour market with few or no school or post-school qualifications. With the exception of Kath, who praised the assistance she had received from social workers, none of the clients mentioned any form of positive official intervention.

Lawrence, whose mother had 'kept disappearing', spent a lot of his childhood living in care. When we met him, he was sixty years old, living with a long history of depression, but volunteering and hopeful of gaining work as a gardener.

I don't know why she used to do it or anything, but I think my auntie Irene, she had kids of her own and we just ended up getting put in a children's home... There were a few homes

when we were all together but we didn't get a really stable school to go to or anything like that, it was just when you were there, there used to be people that used to teach you but it wasn't like a proper school or anything... Schooling is just something I picked up really, just what you pick up of other people.²¹

Close to retirement age, Linda struggles to cope with being on Universal Credit after having worked all her life in a pub and as a kitchen assistant. Linda recalled what had seemed a stable family setting, with her dad earning a decent living as a glassmaker, until he had a mental breakdown and lost his job. Her mother asked for help from a GP:

So he said, *you married him, so you look after him...* She tried to commit suicide twice. Like, just a cry for help really... My mum had part-time jobs and we just tried to do it that way. She wasn't as strong as I am. It's made me that way though, having a life like that... It's a terrible thing your mind though. It is different to physical. Even the doctors cannot cure it but they just give you medication to calm you down.²²

Jacqueline's mother had also worked in a pub, but left the family without explanation when Jacqueline was 'six or seven'. 'I thought she'd been, like, you know, like the Orient Express, murder on a train and [laughs], I thought some bad man had got her or she'd fell off the train.' Her father Derik, then a railway worker, now in his eighties and also a client at the foodbank but unable to talk to us because of a previous stroke, was left behind heart-broken, desperate to keep the children.

Hard, he fought hard for we, very hard... I'd hear him crying at night, very sad... Took we into care at one point and my dad had said to us, *when you get there, be naughty. Because if you're good, they'll want to keep you.* So we were, we were

really naughty, me and my brother, really naughty. Trashed the bathroom [laughs].²³

They returned home, but ‘he couldn’t work after that, he went on social’. Once the children were old enough to be left to their own, Derik started cleaning windows in the neighbourhood. ‘I was about nine years old when he learned to use the washing machine, and then I was eleven and he taught us finances in the house. Wash, you know, bills and shopping and then I learned to cook.’

Jacqueline’s life didn’t get any easier. Extreme abuse from her first partner caused severe mental-health issues. Except for one, all her pregnancies were the results of rape, and of a relationship with a man who wouldn’t commit to her. She had various cleaning jobs, until chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) forced her to quit work. Jacqueline now shares caring for Derik with her brother: ‘I just keep his mind going, me, and my brother does his body.’ She still speaks of her father in high regard. ‘He’s been an independent person, hasn’t he? Doesn’t talk very deep. Doesn’t judge people. *If you’ve got nowt nice to say, say nowt at all*, that’s what my dad told us. *If you’ve got nowt nice, don’t say nowt.*’

Most of the clients we met had led a precarious existence for most or all of their lives. Without a strong safety net, negative events such as job loss or a health issue easily triggered a crisis and often a prolonged downward spiral. In our interviews, health problems were central to the loss of opportunity – and often of autonomy. From the vantage point of visiting the foodbank, clients’ memories of injuries and diagnoses forcing the loss of earnings appeared as threshold moments in their life course. K., in her twenties, began her testimony by explaining the turning point early in her working life:

I was working in a pub, a very busy pub in town. And then I obviously had an accident, so I wasn’t able to go back ... You are better off when you working, and now, my money is just

less than half now, so I'm living on next to nowt really, and that's why I come here.²⁴

Client and volunteer Jess recalled escalating health challenges preventing her from working, compounded by the withdrawal of disability living allowances costing her family household some £400 per month, with devastating effects that saw her and her two children in hostel accommodation. She was unable to make use of her usual strategies to manage money, such as using a chest freezer to store food in bulk, making it impossible to weather the financial storm without access to the foodbank.²⁵

Elisabeth C. was visibly in pain when we met her.

I've been three times, cause me benefits have been mucked up at the moment. I live on £140 a fortnight. I'm not able to work. I wished. I was working seven years ago. But I've got loads of things on. I rarely leave the house. I'm on a lot of medication. I've got COPD in me lungs, kidney failure, microscopic colitis in me small bowel, me spine's narrow and it's knocking the discs out on the top, and depression, and now they think there's a tumour behind me eye. I'm waiting for an appeal hearing. A year I've had to wait for the hearing.²⁶

The findings of our Foodbank Histories research are similar to those of an earlier research project by Jane Perry and colleagues, which found that most people making use of Trussell Trust foodbanks did so because of some kind of serious 'life shock'.²⁷ A life-changing event rarely leaves hope for recovery in a neoliberal landscape. Moments of tragedy, acute loss, and shock punctuated many foodbank clients', especially men's, testimonies.

Lee was at the foodbank shortly after the sudden death of his long-term partner:

I met me girlfriend when I was nineteen, and she just died a couple of year ago. And this is how I'm in this predicament, where I am, at this foodbank. I was with her for twenty years, and I've got two children with her ... She'd only just turned thirty-six. We'd just been for a meal for her birthday.²⁸

The involvement of authorities and support agencies often proved to be ineffective, or even counterproductive. Dean, who visits the foodbank regularly with his mother Denise, told us how he went from earning 'enough to be able to do everything I really wanted to do, to pretty much nothing':

A couple of years ago, I became very poorly because I have a heart condition so I was admitted into hospital on the day that I had an interview for a job search... They actually sent an advisor out to the hospital to check that I was actually in the place where... It was I think probably about a couple of hours after the advisor had seen me in the hospital to me being sanctioned for not attending a work focussed interview...

I came out of hospital. I had intensive physiotherapy and was made to actively seek work. They put me on a training course and unfortunately I collapsed again and became very poorly to end up being back in the coronary care unit at one of the local hospitals again. And, again I was placed onto a sanction for not actively turning up to my work focussed training.²⁹

Laurence battled depression after the death of his mother and the separation from his partner.

I used to sit with the blinds shut all day and it's just horrible, I wouldn't wish it on anybody... I got help from the doctors and stuff like that, they used to give us tablets to help us sleep... I think finding work was just the furthest thing from my mind but you had to look for work anyway, otherwise you would get your benefits stopped.³⁰

Frustrations with the welfare system and obstacles preventing a return to work were a significant grievance for unemployed clients seeking to reverse the loss of employment. K. explained her sense of disillusionment after a visit to the Job Centre in 2016.

I said look I really wanna go to work, is there any help, any courses you can put us on? She went, if I'm going to put you on a course, I'm going to have to take you off income support and put you on jobseekers' [allowance] and then you would have to work full time. I said, well I can't work full time, I've got a son to look after. She said, well my best advice to you is just to stay on income support. I don't want to be on income support, I want to work!³¹

But despite multiple challenges many clients, unless suffering from progressive health conditions, represented past losses as temporary setbacks. From circumstances which were often highly difficult, clients frequently spoke determinedly about the future. Even Lee, still seriously struggling with the loss of his long-term partner, spoke of how he had undertaken short-term employment, and of his determination to return to work.

I did get a job for a few months over Christmas time, and then, that's why I stopped coming [to the foodbank], but that was only like seasonal work, so I'm hopefully being back to work for the summer holidays, hopefully.³²

While we listened to many frustrations and worries in relation to the area's troubles, such as crime, drugs, and racism, the testimonies did not allow any straightforward portrayal of the West End as a site of togetherness and mutual support declining over time.

People still cling on to traditional working-class values, especially concerning mutual support within the family. There is still great attachment to strong family ties. Deborah is 'always' at her daughter's house: 'If I don't go over, the bairn goes to the window and shouts, 'nana, nana'! It's about ten minutes down the road.'³³ We saw little evidence of working-class identity's erasure, despite the advance of neoliberalism. Self-conscious distinction and conceptions of a particular identity, connected to place and class in the west end, had not been subsumed by a contemporary consumer culture. Our findings supported Anoop Nayak's argument that deindustrialisation, while part of a global process, can cast regional and local identities and solidarities in sharper relief.³⁴

Keith spoke despairingly of destitution, famine, and poverty worldwide, and framed his own struggles as comparatively mild and part of a normative, perennial cycle:

There's always been rich and poor and it'll always be the same... I dinna want loads of money, as long as I've got enough to pay me bills, keep me cats happy, that's it... I was born poor and I'll die poor, and I'm quite happy. That's it.³⁵

When she reflected on mutual aid in the community she had grown up in, Linda summarised her conclusion in a brief but beautiful way: 'I know that they always say it was better then. But it was'.³⁶

The majority of clients expressed an interest in becoming involved in volunteering at the foodbank, often to 'give something back'. Solidarity remained a core value: the much-quoted 'community spirit', often said to have received its final blow under Thatcher, was certainly still alive. When we asked James if he thought mutual aid in the West End has ceased to

exist, he immediately replied:

No, I don't think it has, to be honest. I really don't think it has... I've heard people here helping out each other in the foodbank. You know, doing favours for each other. I don't think it's really changed, to be honest.³⁷

In almost every interview, there are small mentions that bear out James's view. Jim goes every week to do housework for his ex-partner who is disabled; Denise carries dog treats to give to rough sleepers with pets; Stan mentions that he is about to leave the foodbank to check on a friend who is drug-dependent, Keith is too old to take on heavy digging work at the foodbank garden, but shares his expertise with Laurie and the younger volunteers. And should he ever have lots of money, he says: 'I'd probably give it away to charity, simple as that – you might not believe it, but that's what I'd do.'³⁸

The West End still has plenty of positive stories to tell.

Let's make sure they get heard.

About the authors:

Northern Cultural Projects is a Community Interest Company based in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. We champion transformative, diverse and inclusive community history and heritage practice in the North East.

The Oral History Unit & Collective at Newcastle University includes academic and community oral historians. Our work explores the role of oral history in communicating the past in the present. Alongside our Community Partners, we produce globally significant research while attending to regional and civic responsibilities.

Notes

- 1 Jack Hepworth interview with Bill Corcoran, 26 June 2018.
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- 3 Alison Atkinson-Phillips interview with Laurie, 12 February 2020.
- 4 Jack Hepworth interview with Margaret, 15 October 2018.
- 5 Jack Hepworth interview with Monju Meah, 19 October 2018; Silvie Fisch correspondence with Monju, 13 April 2020.
- 6 Alison Atkinson-Phillips interview with Patricia, 14 August 2018.
- 7 Silvie Fisch interview with James Briggs, 10 March 2020.
- 8 Silvie Fisch interviews with Deborah H., 25 February 2020.
- 9 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
- 10 Alison Atkinson-Phillips interview with James, 17 September 2018.
- 11 Alison Atkinson-Phillips interview with Shirley, 1 October 2018.
- 12 Silvie Fisch interview with Deborah H., 19 June 2018.
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- 14 Alison Atkinson-Phillips interview with James, 17 September 2018.
- 15 Silvie Fisch interview with Linda, 18 February 2020.
- 16 Alison Atkinson-Phillips interview with Laurie, 12 February 2020.
- 17 Silvie Fisch interview with James Briggs, 10 March 2020.
- 18 Alison Atkinson-Phillips interview with Shirley, 1 October 2018.
- 19 Alison Atkinson-Phillips interview with Kathleen, 19 February 2020.
- 20 Interview with Kath, as note above.
- 21 Silvie Fisch interview with Lawrence Best, 2 February 2020.
- 22 Silvie Fisch interview with Linda, 18 February 2020.
- 23 Silvie Fisch interview with Jacqueline B. Redhead, 3 March 2020.
- 24 Silvie Fisch interview with K., 19 June 2018.
- 25 Alison Atkinson-Phillips interview with Jess, 19 October 2018 .
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- 28 Silvie Fisch interview with Lee Crawford, 7 July 2018.
- 29 Silvie Fisch interview with Denise and Dean Hunter, 11 February 2020.
- 30 Silvie Fisch interview with Lawrence Best, 25 February 2020.
- 31 Silvie Fisch interview with K., 19 June 2018.
- 32 Silvie Fisch interview with Lee Crawford, 7 July 2018.
- 33 Silvie Fisch interview with Deborah H., 25. February 2020.
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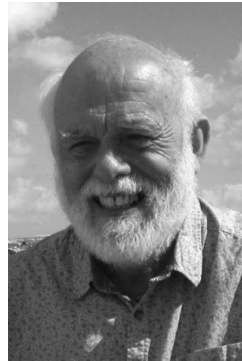
- response to deindustrialisation', *Environment & Planning*, 21 (2003), p. 7.
- ³⁵ Silvie Fisch interview with Keith Hutchinson, 4 September 2018.
- ³⁶ Silvie Fisch interview with Linda, 18 February 2020.
- ³⁷ Silvie Fisch interview with James Briggs, 10 March 2020.
- ³⁸ Silvie Fisch interview with Keith Hutchinson, 4 September 2018.

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The Primrose League on Tyneside, 1883-1901

Michael Furlonger

Mike Furlonger was a long-standing member of the North East Labour History Society. He first researched the Primrose League as part of his MA dissertation in Historical Studies at Sunderland Polytechnic (now Sunderland University) in 1980. He always intended to write an article based on his research about a mass membership political group which has gained little attention. Mike finally started writing it after having been diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease, but his health deteriorated more quickly than anticipated. He died in May 2018, leaving a rough draft which Liz O'Donnell and Sue Ward managed to shape into its current form. This is a tribute to a man whose enthusiasm for teaching local history was undimmed by his illness.



Introduction

Electoral reform in Great Britain was an incremental process over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and only with the 1884 Representation of the People Act did a majority of adult males in Great Britain have the right to vote for members of Parliament. In anticipation of this, in 1883 the Conservatives founded the Primrose League, which rapidly became a well-oiled political machine and was by the end of the nineteenth century the largest political organisation in the country.

This article relates the national structure and policy to that in Newcastle, where the League saw rapid growth in all areas of the City, attracting both middle class aspirants and working class members. There were attractions in its social programme, including such events as picnics in the grounds of Lord Armstrong's home at Cragside, and the rank and file members also played important roles in registering the new voters, canvassing them, and bringing them out to vote at election times. The League's propaganda role, especially in advance of and during the Boer War when it put out a strong Imperialist message, should also not be underestimated. It is interesting to see, however, how many women were active within the League's hierarchy, particularly as middle-ranking officials or 'wardens', even though they had no vote and the majority of the Conservative Party was against giving them the franchise.

Description of League: establishment and structure

The Primrose Tory League was founded at the Carlton Club by a group of senior Tories in the autumn of 1883, with the aim of maintaining and promoting Conservatism. Named after Disraeli's supposed favourite flower, the word "Tory " was soon dropped from its title and it rapidly became a mass organisation covering all social classes, male and female.¹ On joining, every member signed a declaration:

I declare on my honour and faith that I will devote my best ability to the maintenance of religion, the estates of the realm, and the imperial ascendancy of the British Empire; and that consistently with my allegiance to the sovereign of these Realms, I will promote, with discretion and fidelity, the above objects being those of the Primrose League.²

The Primrose League, however, was not an official organisation of the Conservative Party, though it 'was and is a political machine'.³ It had a dual role, as both an autonomous social organisation, with a much wider

membership than the party, and a well-oiled political machine which 'offered...the strength of its widely recruited and well-organised body of workers' as well as presenting 'the Conservative slogans – a Great Empire, the safeguarding of existing institutions, the establishment of a true union of classes – shorn of the worn and shoddy trappings of ordinary party politics.'⁴ By broadening the Conservative Party's appeal amongst the newly widened electorate, as one member remarked, 'the League is an admirable organisation for disseminating political knowledge amongst the working classes who, now that they have votes, ought to be instructed how to use them.'⁵

The League's basic unit was the 'habitation', or local branch, which was largely financially self-supporting and administratively independent, although the central executive body, the Grand Council, had to authorise the setting up of new habitations as well as publishing the *Primrose League Gazette*, and advising on some aspects of habitation policy. Early in its history, the League developed a two-tier system of membership: Knights and Dames, who paid a subscription, and Associates, who joined free or paid much less. Once it was well established, the bulk of the League membership were associates, while the habitation's 'wardens' saw to its day-to-day running, recruitment, publicity etc and submitted monthly reports to the habitation's ruling Council. The crucial organising role of warden seems to have been mostly in the hands of men and women from the professional classes.⁶



Primrose League Knight's Full Dress Medal. A monogram of the letters PL, surrounded by primroses with the motto 'Imperium et Libertas' [Empire and Liberty]. Property of Rose Furlonger.

In Newcastle, by 1892, there were seven habitations with 3,000 members altogether, increasing to 6,000 by 1895, when both Newcastle seats were won by Conservatives. The habitations ranged from the poorer area of the West End, to the growing middle class 'villadom' of Jesmond, and included St Andrew's, the city habitation with a large business community. In 1900 the future MPs George Renwick and William Plummer were, respectively, President and Hon. Secretary for the 'very prosperous' St Andrew's habitation, whose membership stood at 1,130 Associates and 41 Knights and Dames.⁷

Another notable success on Tyneside was the Elswick habitation, which won the first prize for 'zeal and activity' at the national meeting in Covent Garden and was much admired by the *Primrose League Gazette*.⁸ In 1894, the Elswick habitation had over 1500 members, administered by some forty wardens who met fortnightly to coordinate their work, and double that number by 1900.⁹ Members came predominantly from the Armstrong Works, making this habitation a notable example of factory-based politics.¹⁰ The Elswick Works stretched over 30 acres, and employed over 25,000 workers, making the support of the Elswick workers, therefore, vital to Unionist success in Newcastle.¹¹ The Chairman of Whitworth Armstrong's at this time was Sir Andrew Noble, a staunch Unionist.¹² In 1898 the Dame President of the Elswick habitation was Miss Noble and the Treasurer was a Mr J N B Noble. The standing Unionist member, William Cruddas, was Chairman of the Elswick habitation, and William Plummer (one of the successful Tory candidates in 1900) was a Vice Chancellor. Lord Armstrong himself was a "pillar of the local League on Tyneside" and local habitations often had outings to Cragside, his country home. He had received his peerage in 1887 from Lord Salisbury, at least partly for his support of, and aid to, the Primrose League.¹³ The Armstrong family also extended their influence along the Tyne to Hexham where the President of the habitation was Mr Watson-Armstrong, the nephew and heir of Lord Armstrong.¹⁴

The extent of Conservative support in the industrial working classes has long been hotly debated, but the sizeable membership of the Primrose League in industrial areas such as Elswick suggests that there was at least a substantial base of potential support, and in the last decades of the nineteenth century the Primrose League was the largest political organisation in Britain.¹⁵

Primrose League activities

The Primrose League enabled individuals to become involved in a number of ways. As associates, they could merely attend functions as paying participants, or they could undertake more political roles like recruitment or canvassing. In this way the League appealed to a wide range of men and women, providing opportunities for those with social and political aspirations to socialise with the local luminaries and to demonstrate their shared support for the values of the Conservative party, of religion and the Empire.

Much of the time, the League's functions were social – tea and buns, picnics (like the ones at Cragside) in the grounds of local great houses, and social evenings. It was also gently educational, with talks and lantern lectures. One such meeting was described in some detail by the *Primrose League Gazette* in February 1893. It illustrates the role of local luminaries in the activities of the League:

Northumberland – Elswick Habitation (Newcastle upon Tyne No 2340) A very successful meeting and dance was held in the St Aidan's Parochial Hall at Elswick on the 19th ult. The Ruling Councillor (Mr D.D. Cruddas) presided. There were also on the platform – Miss Noble (Dame President and Hon Sec), Mrs Noble, Mr and Mrs Saxton Noble, Miss Ethel Noble, the Misses Cruddas, the Rev E. Arkless, Mr D Plummer, Mr Purvis, Mr C Hutchinson.... and others. The business of the evening, which was to

recommend for honours, was diversified by a concert, in which Mrs Saxton Noble, Miss E. Noble and Mr Purvis took part....the meeting would be asked to recommend to Grand Council a list of founders and successful workers, to be rewarded by the Honours of the Primrose League. In order to work the whole of the ground, the staff of Wardens must be largely increased. By systematic work on the part of old and new Wardens, it was hoped the Habitation might soon be able to claim and win the Championship Banner.¹⁶

The League also gave a chance for Parliamentary hopefuls to meet and talk to prospective constituents, and it was a training ground for prospective Tory candidates. The future Conservative MPs, Renwick and Plummer, were honoured guests at Elswick, making presentations on a regular basis before the election in 1900. In May 1898 Renwick spoke at Gosforth and Blyth, attacking Thomas Burt, whilst Plummer was at Byker and Heaton.¹⁷

As far as the more practical political roles like recruitment, canvassing or organising election campaigns that members undertook, the League soon proved its worth during the general election of 1885, 'when it was noted that the Tories scored conspicuous successes in those very areas where [it] was most active.'¹⁸

The crucial factor which seems to lie behind the League's success is the central ambiguity in its role. Its basic commitments were to the political principles of Disraelian Conservatism – the Church, the Crown and the Empire - but even at the Grand Habitation meeting practical politics were not the order of the day. As Pugh notes:

As far as policy was concerned, the League developed no pretensions whatever. It was possible to submit resolutions for debate at Grand Habitation, but the discussions actually centred on the League's own operations and business.

Meetings were crowned by an address from the Conservative leader, and motions of unbounded confidence in HM Government if Conservatives were in office. Political discussions clearly did take place at habitation level, but usually went no further. Detailed politics were simply regarded as out of bounds.¹⁹

The Conservatives were to some extent following the success of the working men's clubs which the Liberals had sponsored, and which had proved the utility of holding together a core of support in a social context. By 1900 they had not only the Primrose League habitations, but also a well established group of Conservative Working Men's Clubs on Tyneside. The All Saints Working Men's Club at Regents Terrace in Newcastle had a membership of nearly 500 and was the largest in the city with the exception of Byker. However, the Primrose League, with its involvement of women and children, its overtly crusading stance and its remarkable propaganda machinery was the most effective of such auxiliary organisations. The President of the All Saints Club, Mr S. H. Burn, paid tribute to the League; the great majority of 150 obtained at the last general election was 'in great measure due to the efforts of the various clubs and habitations of the Primrose League.'²⁰

After the 1883 Corrupt Practices Act, which was designed to stop bribery and corrupt treating at elections and limited the number of paid canvassers a party could employ, the existence of a body like the Primrose League gave the Unionists, for a while, a great advantage by supplying an organised pool of volunteer labour at election times. After the 1900 election the local Conservative agent at Stamford, Thomas Ablewhite, writing to the *Primrose League Gazette*, explained how the League's help had made the difference between an increased majority in his constituency and the loss of the neighbouring seat at Grantham, where League help had not been sought, writing:

At the last election in this division I had a separate committee room at which twenty-one ladies attended on and off for a period of fifteen days. They would think nothing of addressing a set of 10,000 envelopes, examining same, making the necessary corrections or removals, folding and enclosing circulars therein, and despatching the whole lot accurately in a couple of days. They also filled in and enclosed all my ballot cards, and were far more reliable than the class of 'catch-clerks' that you can only engage at election times ... and I can repeat that the help I got from the members of the Primrose League in clerical work saved me upwards of £50.²¹

Another important function of the League's members at this time was as foot soldiers in the great registration battles of the period. By the late nineteenth century the complexity of the parliamentary franchise rules was considerable. The 1884 Franchise Act had, in theory, created a uniform householder and lodger franchise, but this was not even universal adult male suffrage. Political parties had first to see that those of their supporters who were entitled to vote had registered, which was expensive and time-consuming. Thus the voluntary work in this area carried out by Primrose League members was a considerable part of its contribution to Conservative electoral successes. In the run up to the 1892 election on Tyneside, one of the senior Primrose League Dames, Mrs George Stephenson, Hon. Secretary of the Jesmond habitation, called the Executive Councillors to her home to 'arrange the revision of the parliamentary register, for the Conservative agent, Mr A Appleby'.²²

The Conservatives certainly appreciated their dependence upon League support. *The Gazette* had told its readers in August 1898 that 'the real utility of the Primrose League is to educate ... (and) seek to convert political sinners into saints, and then hand them over to the Conservative Party'.²³

'Mollitics': women and the Primrose League²⁴

League members, then, were invaluable as canvassers, as Ablewhite acknowledged, writing that '[t]he wardens are useful in personally delivering small handbills and personally inviting the voter and his wife to attend any political meeting that may be convened in the district.'²⁵ The inclusion of the voter's wife here is noteworthy, especially when combined with his praise of the work done at election time by the 'lady members' of the League. There was a longstanding tradition of political hostesses in Britain, and the important part that the wife of a politician could play was well known.²⁶ However, the position of women in the Primrose League, though not unique at that time, is very significant. Women were enrolled as full members of the League, though they could not sit on the Grand Council. Moreover, they were not just being asked to act as hostesses or patronesses, at one end of the scale, or as cheap labour at the other end, but also as crucial links in the organisational chain. Some female political opponents, such as the Liberal suffragist Lady Sandhurst, were however contemptuous of women's role in the League, which involved 'everything except politics, everything except political teaching, and everything except that which elevates and educates the people'.²⁷ What they did do, and in considerable numbers, for example, was to serve as wardens (the nearest modern analogy is that of the shop steward), which means that they were placed in positions which demanded commitment and responsibility.

The Primrose League was designed from the beginning to appeal to women, and in early 1899 George Lane Fox, National Secretary of the League, maintained that it had deliberately not been 'called the Tory League, because it appealed, not to the third estate of the realm, but to the thirty-five million of women and children who had no vote', his claim indicating a growing belief that women, even if they did not yet have the vote, were a part of the political nation.²⁸

Pugh argues that work such as that done by women in the Primrose League did much (possibly more than the radical activists) to make female suffrage inevitable.²⁹ Contemporary accounts bear out the idea

of the Primrose League (and other rival organisations) as important steps in the full enfranchisement of women. The (unsigned) article in the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* on the political position of women lists all the political rights then available to women (mainly in local government) but remarks wryly that 'the granting of parliamentary franchise to women was, however, still withheld in 1910.'³⁰ Most significantly, the author immediately goes on to comment on the role of women in political life.

It may be remarked that, with or without the possession of the vote on their own account, politics in England have in modern times been very considerably influenced by the work of women as speakers, canvassers and organisers. The great Conservative auxiliary political organisation, the Primrose League, owes its main success to women.³¹

Clearly there was a mutual benefit. The Conservative Party gained the work, enthusiasm and distinctive status of women, whilst the women in turn gained an important, but uncontroversial, part in the political life of the country. In 1886, Algernon Borthwick described 'the dames, armed with sweet influence and persuasive eloquence' who 'boldly came forward to take their share in the labour of the organisation. Their aid has proved invaluable.'³²

Patricia Hollis claims that, 'in the great port and dockyard towns [including] ... Newcastle ... women for long remained politically invisible.'³³ There seems, however, no reason to suppose that women in the Primrose League on Tyneside were less active than elsewhere, and indeed the successes of the Elswick and other habitations seems to indicate that they may have been more so. Of the wardens in Elswick in 1905 one quarter were women, while in middle class Jesmond, 19 out of 30 wardens were women.³⁴ An 1885 handbook for Liberal women workers warned against being dismissive of the League;

The existence of the Primrose League cannot be overlooked, nor can its subtle proselytism be set aside by a sneer. We may despise or condemn its ridiculous paraphernalia, its appeals to the ignorance and frivolous vanities of women, its prostitution of the sacred name of Charity and its persistent perversion of political principle and the facts of history. We may proclaim that, instead of seeking to redress the wrongs and secure the individual rights of women, it indulges in vague and delusive cries of 'The Church,' or 'The Empire,' or some other imaginary 'interest' being in danger, knowing well that this is only throwing dust in the eyes of the unthinking, or trying to divert attention from the real reforms which are needed.³⁵

Liberal Women's organisations, however, never achieved the membership numbers, revenue and enormous influence of the Primrose Dames.

The Primrose League also reached out to other members of the community not normally closely involved in the political processes. In 1890 children were admitted to the League and from its earliest times, Catholics were welcome members of the League; the Duke of Norfolk became President of his local habitation.³⁶

Class and the Primrose League

A prime aim of the Primrose League was to bring about the 'social mingling of the classes' but whether they really succeeded, or indeed desired this utopian claim is very doubtful.³⁷ However, they do seem to have been successful in involving working class and lower middle class men and women in large numbers. Many small shopkeepers, bank clerks and schoolteachers apparently joined the League. The complex honours system, with its pseudo-medieval trappings of Knights, Dames and Grand Stars, may have given an illusion of success and grandeur to otherwise rather drab lives, but it is also very likely that the social contact with the

professional, and even aristocratic, members of the same habitations, with the reassuring glow of achievement and importance which this brought must also have had a powerful pull. As Ostrogorski noted,

By paying a subscription of a shilling or sixpence, one becomes the colleague of titled or simply rich personages, one obtains access to their drawing-rooms and parks, which they place at the disposal of the League for its meetings, and there the humblest can rub up against the great ones of the earth.³⁸

There is also evidence of considerable working class involvement in the League – as for example in the size and importance of habitations like Elswick. This may, of course, represent a lack of other social facilities, or subtle pressure from employers. Pamphlet No. 237 sees the League's role as a means to 'instruct working men and women how to answer the arguments of the Radicals and the Socialists and the Atheists in the workshops and in the public-houses, and at the street corners.'³⁹

There is considerable interest in the question as to whether working class members joined because of a basic sympathy with the ideological commitments of the League. It could be argued that the immediate appeal of the Primrose League lay in the breadth and simplicity of its political, patriotic and religious messages, which were disseminated through highly effective leafleting campaigns, designed and distributed by League volunteers. Perhaps the lavish social entertainments were only part of the attraction of the League.

The Primrose League, Imperialism, and the Boer War

In 1898 readers of the *Gazette* were asked to devise a new motto, more in keeping with the times. One correspondent exemplified the almost crusading nature of their task when asking for a motto embodying the principles of the Primrose League ... 'For God, for Queen and

for Empire'.⁴⁰ There seems little doubt that a basic sympathy for the monarchy was common, but how far loyalty to the idea of the Empire which membership of the League denoted is open to debate. Consideration of this issue is complicated by an awareness among historians that to speak of 'the working class' is to conflate groups of people who would probably have fought hard to keep the subtle differences and demarcation badges which separated out the domestic servant from the miner, and the shipyard foreman from the street sweeper. Amongst the industrial artisan elite groups, consciousness of status and achievement was very high, and it did lead some to question and defy the political status quo or to try for self-improvement through institutions such as the working men's institutes. However, for many more the attractions of the Music Hall, the cigarette card with pictures of far flung colonies, and the Imperial Exhibition, seem to have been cultures with which they identified.⁴¹

Pugh asserts that the argument that imperialism – expressed as support for the Boer War - merely reflected the interests of the upper class, bolstered by a susceptible lower middle class, is 'difficult to reconcile' with the fact that between July 1899 and June 1900,

some 43,209 new recruits joined the League – a time when no one could have been in doubt about its imperialism.....
[T]o dismiss the spontaneous and typical patriotism of the mass of the people seems a little perverse; their behaviour was surely a sign that the working class families were well integrated into the ideas and values of British society at the time.⁴²

It is possible, however, to see the Primrose League not as just a reflection of imperial sentiment, but as part creator of it. Some members at least must have come for the 'tea and buns' and hobnobbing with the Duke of Northumberland, and been won over by the overt propaganda or the pro-imperial atmosphere of the League. For instance, at the monthly meeting

of the Blyth habitation in July 1899, Isaac Lyons, Hon. Secretary of the Northern Union of Conservatives, talked to members on the subject of "Our Imperial Policy and the Transvaal in Particular".⁴³

By 1900 the League was playing a significant part in defining public reactions to the War. On Tyneside, events in South Africa formed a new focus for working class attention. Even during the first winter of the War the usual round of tea and sports events continued. Winston Churchill, a prospective Unionist candidate at Oldham, and already a national figure after his exploits in South Africa, spoke to the members of the St. Nicholas habitation in the grounds of Warkworth Castle, 'kindly loaned for the occasion' by the Duke of Northumberland. Over 1,500 people were present.⁴⁴ On another occasion, an Imperial demonstration at Newcastle Town Hall supporting the Boer War was initiated by the Elswick branch of the Primrose League. At the beginning of the war, national membership of the League stood at 1,475,352. It was as part of the Government's policy of winning popular support for their South African campaign that the Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain first spoke at a League meeting in late 1899.⁴⁵

Liberal Reaction to the Primrose League

The Liberals were not unaware of the danger to their cause which the Primrose League represented. They tried various methods of combatting its achievement of drawing men and women to the Conservative cause. Many members of the League liked to see it as an extension of the party, but others preferred a less partisan line, stressing that, in theory at any rate, the aims of the League could be carried out by either political party. It was to this audience that, in June 1899, Campbell Bannerman addressed himself when he took the unusual step of speaking to the Ilford (Essex) habitation. The Gazette notes that the Liberal leader was 'listened to politely'.⁴⁶

Other Liberals, however, thought that the League should be met with a

more active resistance. Dr Spence Watson, the leading Newcastle Liberal and a respected national figure, told Liberal delegates at the National Liberal Association conference that 'your first duty is to counteract the corrupt influence of the Primrose League'.⁴⁷

This account of the League's activities only goes up to the beginning of the new century. The League remained powerful for several decades after this, though going into a slow decline as the focus of activity shifted to membership of the Conservative Party itself. It was only finally wound up, however, in December 2004.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The history of the Conservative Party's offshoot, the Primrose League, at grassroots level, remains largely unwritten. What research into the League's "habitations" on Tyneside and in Northumberland has shown is that they played an important role in the organisation of Conservative victories during the late nineteenth centuries. It did bring about the mingling of social classes which was one of its stated aims, but not on equal terms; employers such as the Armstrongs and the Nobles, and aristocrats such as the Duke of Northumberland, had dominant voices. Its propaganda role was undoubtedly effective; during the Boer War its membership nationally rose massively, and locally mass meetings and events were held in support of the imperialist cause.

One area where the League played what might seem a rather surprising role is in the political involvement of women, on Tyneside as elsewhere. They could be full members from the beginning, and hold any post except at the very top level. Contemporary accounts suggest that the work done by the women in the Primrose League did much to make female suffrage inevitable in the end, however long it might be withheld.

Notes

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See M. Blanch, 'British Society and the War', in Peter Warwick (ed), *The South African War: The Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1980), chapter 9; Pugh, p. 2.

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As above

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- 34 Pugh, p. 51.
35 Mrs H G Reid, 'Women Workers in the Liberal Cause', pp. 5-6, quoted in Robb, p. 9.
36 Pugh, p. 84.
37 Robb, p. 148; Pugh, pp. 139-158.
38 M. Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organisation of Political Parties* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1902), vol. 1, p. 344.
39 Quoted in Robb, p. 49.
40 *PLG*, May 1898.
41 J. Mackenzie, *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987). Mackenzie treats as open the question of whether 'popular imperialism' was the product of 'elite manipulation' or of 'pressure from below.'
42 Pugh, p. 88.
43 *PLG*, August 1899.
44 *PLG*, September 1900.
45 *PLG*, December 1899.
46 *PLG*, June 1899. See also C. Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party: The Road Back to Power, 1900-1984* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984), p. 31.
47 National Liberal Association Minutes for June 1899, quoted in Robert Spence Watson, *The National Liberal Federation, from its commencement to the General Election of 1906* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1907).
48 Daily Telegraph, 16 December 2004, as quoted in Wikipedia article on the Primrose League [accessed 18 May 2020].

Teaching Local ‘People’s History’ in Primary Schools: a case study.

Peter Sagar

Introduction

What is understood as history has long been a battleground within the school curriculum. Geography and history provide most youngsters with their political education and their sense of identity. Under pressure of an already overcrowded curriculum, most schools unwittingly present history as the transmission of an established view of the past and thereby deny pupils a view of history from below: a local, people’s history. In my experience of teaching in the North East for over 30 years, the history curriculum rarely explores the complex historical stories that exist within the pupils’ own communities nor does it draw upon their own life situations. Below is a case study of what happened when I was invited into seven primary schools in the region to work with teachers and their pupils to explore their local cultural heritage.

Methodology

In 2018 and 2019, four primary schools in North Tyneside and three in County Durham accepted my offer to teach a two-day course in local history to classes of Year 5 and Year 6 pupils. Using music and song, pupils worked in groups to explore the rich and complex lives of ordinary working people during the historical period when extensive mining, heavy industrialisation, and urbanisation transformed the region.

There were two main strands to what was taught. Firstly, there was

a musical and creative strand. In the North Tyneside school I taught in 2018, the pupils learned two Joe Wilson songs: ‘Sally Wheatley’ and ‘Keep Your feet Still Geordie Hinny’. In the three schools in County Durham, I used a Tommy Armstrong song: ‘The Skeul Board Man’. I felt this was a song that the pupils could easily relate to. It was so successful that I decided to use it in three North Tyneside schools in the summer of 2019. The second strand involved the teaching of songs from the Victorian era as a way of learning about life in coal mining villages and shipbuilding communities in North Tyneside, as well as the development of the cooperative movement, trade unions and other aspects of working class life.

Pupils were introduced to these songs either by me playing them on guitar, or through a selection of YouTube videos. They became interested in the lyrics to these songs, particularly the clever mix of dialect and Standard English that was used in order to make the songs rhyme. Following the introduction, there was a more formal presentation about the roots of these songs and their historical context. Despite my hesitation about this section of the course, I was always encouraged by how much pupils willingly engaged. Their intelligent questions revealed a genuine curiosity about their locality and how much their lives contrasted with lives in the past. After lunch, following a quick quiz, there was a discussion about the Geordie or Pitmatic dialect, (depending on which part of the region the school was situated in). It was quite revealing how many dialect words they did not know. This session provided an opportunity to discuss in what circumstances it is considered socially acceptable to use dialect rather than Standard English.

There were two types of group work. In the creative strand, some pupils worked with the class teacher on writing and performing a short play telling a story based upon the songs and history they had explored; another small group of pupils worked with me on a new song, examining one of the historical themes we had chosen to explore. In the research strand, the rest of the pupils were allocated an area of research from the following: the

local mine or shipyard; the lives of the two songwriters, Armstrong and Wilson; trade unions; the cooperative movement. This research was then turned into a short PowerPoint presentation. A significant aspect of the research was exploring the lives of women. Pupils were surprised to see how hard they worked, and the effort it took to balance the needs of the family and to try to keep a house clean, often on a meagre budget.

The Show

Given the title, The Great..... Show, the intention was for pupils to perform a show in the style of a northeast Victorian music hall. This would be presented at the end of the project to the rest of the school and to the parents of the pupils who produced it. The show would begin with a loquacious welcome by one of the pupils, mimicking the manner of the master of ceremony. The audience were told that they were to be entertained with some old songs, a new song, a play and some 'great presentations'. After each item was introduced, the pupils would respond with an exaggerated: 'oohh!' as if in an old time music hall. Some of the younger pupils in the audience were not always sure about this, but it often made the parents and teachers smile!

The rendition of 'The Skeul Board Man', would be followed by a short presentation by a pupil about the meaning of song and about Tommy Armstrong and his life. There were also presentations about life in either the coalmining village or the shipbuilding area where the school was located. This was followed by a short song, co-written by myself and the pupils, following a similar theme. Some examples of topics of songs were: a pit disaster; going to the local Co-op shop for a fair deal; some of the great ships built at Swan Hunter's. The highlight of the show was the play. This was always enthusiastically performed, bringing to life a part of local history they had researched. The play usually involved short extracts of day-to-day life in a pit village or a shipbuilding town. There followed a presentation about the life of Joe Wilson and a final short piece about the song 'Sally Wheatley'. The finale was a rendition of this song.

Feedback

The overall reception to this work was almost uniformly positive from parents, teachers and headteachers. The pupils appeared to enjoy learning about their own history - a history which, was in many cases, the history of their own families. This enthusiasm seems to run counter to the relative unimportance given to their own families local history in the National Curriculum. For example, the National Curriculum of 2013 mentions that the 'local' is an integral part of the history programme of study at key stage 2. It states that pupils

gain historical perspective by placing their growing knowledge into different contexts, understanding the connections between local, regional, national and international history; between cultural, economic, military, political, religious and social history; and between short- and long-term timescales.¹

Although local history is only a small part of what is required to be taught, it is at least encouraging to see the links between national and local history mentioned.

Local history meant a lot to the pupils I taught because it spoke to them about their cultural heritage. This is particularly seen in the relationship between language, locality and class. In the first school I went into, in North Shields, one pupil asked 'does that mean we can speak in our normal accents?' I responded by saying that not only they could do, but they must do! The pupils seemed to understand intuitively the relevance of this type of history to their own lives. They were often keen to tell stories about their grandparents or something else connected to their village or town. It was quite common for them to bring in items from home to 'show and tell'.

For history to be meaningful, it is important that the past is interpreted by young people in their own terms. It has been noted by Williamson that,

‘a sense of the past may be handed down from one generation to the next, but it is never merely given. The task of understanding it, interpreting it, centres on the need to relate it to the circumstances in which it is invoked and the reasons for doing so’.² Williamson continues, ‘the past is not just given. It is something to be recovered and reconstituted’.³ By developing their creative skills, the pupils were able to do just this. Their research work enabled them to give context to the songs. It was wonderful, for example, when a pupil told me something that I had not known - how Horden pit in East Durham still holds the all-time European record for the amount of coal mined in one day.

The teachers all said how much they had enjoyed the sessions and how interesting they had found them. What was particularly encouraging was the extent to which they felt confident enough to join in with the teaching, telling their own stories and offering their own ideas. The strong impression I gained was that there is a vast, largely untapped, reservoir of skills and knowledge in the primary teaching staff in our region, which could be utilised in any future schools’ local history projects. One headteacher remarked after the final show that the pupils had gone through a ‘rich learning experience’.

The history I taught in schools in North Tyneside and County Durham, was a history which gave dignity to the lives of ordinary working people. This is a model which can empower young people, enabling them to feel that great things were achieved by so-called ‘ordinary’ people in the towns and villages where they lived. An important reason for this type of study was to help pupils understand, and give due importance to, all human endeavour, whether down the mine or in shipyard, or in the home. Alison Twells in *Making History* points out that ‘a key feature of ‘peoples’ history’ is the belief that all histories should be acknowledged as History; that the life of a domestic servant or a factory worker is as important, as interesting and as indicative of wider national stories as the traditional elite subjects of history’.⁴

Reflections

The pupils in this project were enthusiastic about, and could easily relate well to, what was being taught. I would argue that grounding history in the lived experience of the pupils ought to be the starting point for all historical study. How, for example, does a young person really understand other cultures, if they don't know and understand their own? This point is made by Seth Chaiklin and Mariane Hedegard, discussing how it is possible to

show how one can conduct subject matter teaching that simultaneously draws from the participant's historical situation. We believe that helping children explore the historical and cultural conditions of the community in which they live can be relevant for this purpose. It is possible to select social studies subject matter content that is relevant to children's life situation and to investigate this content in a way that concurrently develops academic knowledge and skills typically associated with disciplinary traditions.⁵

The evidence of the work I have undertaken in schools in County Durham and North Tyneside would suggest that this is certainly possible.

Giving young people an idea of their own heritage and identity, which is positive and separate from any simplified nationalistic identity is surely a good thing. Simon Sharma explicitly challenges the re-emergence of the New Right's 'glorious heritage' version of English history. Instead of treating history as complex and controversial, he says, the teaching of history in schools has become an uncritical genealogy of national self-congratulation.⁶ Incorporating local people's history into the school curriculum might be an antidote to the far right's message, especially in areas which have seen a stagnation in economic life since the onset of deindustrialisation.

Indeed, another hugely important reason for doing this work was to enable pupils to gain a positive identity, one based on a realistic view

of their community's history and its place within the nation's history. Gemma Hargreaves notes that

Identity is a funny thing. Both a modern concept and deeply rooted in history, it can be complex to unfold - and never more so than for young people trying to understand who they are, or with which community they most identify. Local history may hold the key to unlocking these issues.⁷

This kind of history teaching can help to give the pupils a sense of place in two important respects. It helps them to make sense of their immediate surroundings, but also can help them to have a greater sense of their town or village in the context of the wider world. This point is made by Historic England; they say that 'local history allows us to look at what was happening in a particular area and to see the extent to which it mirrors or differs from what was happening elsewhere'.⁸ The unique nature of coalfield areas such as County Durham, or the number of world-famous ships built at Swan Hunter, are part of the nation's heritage but often marginalised or forgotten. A secondary aim of this project was to raise the self-esteem and aspirations of the pupils. We live in a region which has been in long term economic decline; a region which is sometimes viewed by outsiders as poor and backward. Young people in the North East should be proud yet realistic about their cultural heritage, but they cannot be proud of something they neither know nor understand.

It is not always easy to get into schools to teach People's History, but when opportunities do arise it can be a very enjoyable and productive. I am keen to work with others to try and get more People's History into our schools in this region. If you feel you may have the expertise and experience in this area and you would like to get together with others similarly interested in this type of project, please email me at peter0462@gmail.com.

Notes

- ¹ *History programmes of study: key stages 1 and 2. National Curriculum In England, September 2013*, p.2. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/239035/PRIMARY_national_curriculum_-_History.pdf [accessed 17 Mar 2020].
- ² B. Williamson, *Geordies*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), p. 156.
- ³ Williamson, p. 158.
- ⁴ A. Twells, 'Community History', article on the Institute of Historical Research *Making History* website, 2008, https://archives.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/community_history.html (accessed 3/3/2020)
- ⁵ M. Hedegaard and S. Chaiklin, *Radical-Local Teaching and Learning. A cultural-Historical Approach* (Aarhus University Press, 2005), p. 14
- ⁶ Speech given at the Hay Festival, 30 May 2013, and available now as a podcast, <http://www.hayfestival.com/p-6108-simon-schama-and-teachers.aspx>. It was reported in the Telegraph of 30 May 2013 under the headline 'Hay Festival 2013: Don't sign up to Gove's insulting curriculum, Schama urges'. T
- ⁷ Gemma Hargreaves, 2019, at <https://www.teachwire.net/news/use-local-history-to-give-students-a-sense-of-identity>.
- ⁸ Michael Maddison, in partnership with Historic England's Heritage Schools Team, *Planning Outstanding Local History and Heritage Projects at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3*, Historic England, August 2016, <https://historicengland.org.uk/content/docs/education/explorer/planning-outstanding-local-history-and-heritage-projects-pdf/>, p. 1 [accessed 3/3/2020].

North East Labour History Society



Appreciations

Peter Latham 1943-2018

Liz O'Donnell

Peter Latham, a long-standing member of our society, was my trade union mentor when we worked together at Newcastle College in the 1980s and 1990s. It was Peter who encouraged me to stand for our National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) branch committee and become, for a time, its treasurer and membership secretary. As chair of one of the largest college branches in the country and senior national negotiator on NATFHE's National Executive Committee (NEC), he led us through a period of extraordinary turbulence in the sector. He



*Image courtesy of
Judith McSwaine*

was also involved with an impressive array of organisations and campaigns on the left for over forty years. His activism was not tub-thumping or strident, but a dogged, lucidly reasoned insistence on upholding the rights of workers and people from less-advantaged communities. He was also great company, with a dry sense of humour and a sharp analytical mind, and a good friend to many.

Born and raised in the Thames Valley, Peter was a grammar school boy who went on to study French at Oxford University - not perhaps a usual route into radical politics. In an oral history interview recorded as part of this society's Popular Politics Project in 2012, he explained that his mother and step-father

held unusually radical views during his 1950s Home Counties formative years. One of his earliest political memories, he said, was of them giving accommodation to some of the Aldermaston marchers.¹ Whilst at Oxford, he found himself drawn to left-wing politics. During this period, Peter also spent a lot of time in France, initially studying there, then working. It is safe to describe him as a lifelong Francophile, with an enduring love of the culture and language.

Peter was determined not to belong to the group he described as ‘faux revolutionaries’ – comfortably-off students who he believed were only playing at left-wing politics. As a boy he had visited Luton and been impressed by its gritty ‘northern-ness’! Later as a young man he realised that his ideas about the working-classes were somewhat romanticised, nevertheless, ‘having decided I wanted to live out my beliefs’, he said, ‘I decided I wanted to move North.’ This impulse brought him to a teaching post in Newcastle upon Tyne’s College of Further Education and, having been recruited into the Communist Party (CP) by Pete Smith, a Glaswegian studying at Ruskin (they met when Peter was doing postgraduate studies at Oxford), he joined the West Newcastle CP branch, later becoming its secretary (he was later to leave the CP to join Labour).

In the early 1970s, the west end of Newcastle seemed a hot-bed of radicalism. Peter found himself ‘surrounded by activists’ – young, educated people who wanted to change society for the better, whether through providing free advice and building links with the immigrant community at Benwell’s Law Centre or by analysing the dynamics of a changing society as part of the Community Development Project. There were two left-wing book shops in Newcastle, one of which was run by the CP on Westgate Hill, the other called Days of Hope – or, he joked, ‘Haze of Dope’. Peter was soon a well-known figure in these radical circles. From 1972-80, he was a delegate to Newcastle’s Trades Council, then an influential and vigorous body, with lively meetings held upstairs in the Bridge Hotel. Large May Day demonstrations were held every year and support for those involved in industrial disputes (like the miners’ strikes of the early 1970s) organised. He joined picket lines and delivered food parcels. In the

late 1970s, the Trades Council founded the Centre Against Unemployment to campaign for full employment and provide advice to workers threatened with redundancy; in 1986 a building in the Cloth Market had been purchased, and this was opened by Yusuf Islam (better known as the singer Cat Stevens).

In the midst of all these activities, Peter was elected Branch Chair of NATFHE at Newcastle College, one of the largest branches in the country with over 400 members. He was to steer it through what he described (with typical understatement) as 'a fairly lively period.' The mid 1970s were a time of substantial improvements in the pay and conditions of staff in further education (FE) colleges. There were limits on the working year (no more than 38 weeks) and week (30 hours), length of terms, class contact hours, with locally negotiated remission of teaching hours for specific responsibilities (such as being an officer in the union), and at least six weeks of continuous summer vacation. These conditions were consolidated into a single document, the 'Silver Book'. But from the early 1980s, great changes were afoot in the sector, as central government sought to wrest power and influence over FE from local education authorities (LEAs), introducing competition



*Peter on picket duty,
Newcastle College 1989*

and developing a quasi-market.² This was to include a concerted attack on the status of FE lecturers, accusing them of a 'lack of flexibility', 'restrictive practices', and 'outdated attitudes and behaviour in industrial relations.'³ As a senior national negotiator during the ensuing disputes - which entailed spending a couple of days a week in London when union action was at its height - Peter also kept our branch acting together to resist the onslaught on

our pay and conditions. Because of his national profile, he was able, in packed branch meetings, to make sure that we knew exactly what was happening at every stage. He also offered an invaluable tip when we were on picket duty, which was to always wear thick socks and walking boots!

Despite Peter's best efforts, the union was no match for the Thatcher government's agenda, although its worst effects were staved off at Newcastle College for a time when compared to colleges elsewhere in the country. The 1988 Education Reform Act handed to governing bodies the responsibility for the finances and direction of college policy, with at least 50% of governors to be local employers and no more than 20% LEA appointees. Then the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act took colleges completely out of local control through a policy of incorporation, ending national pay and conditions and leading eventually to the imposition of new contracts which substantially worsened our conditions. Peter's outstanding leadership skills enabled us to slow down this erosion locally, not least because he was one of the two elected staff governors. This arrangement placed him in a difficult position: how could he lead the resistance to a new contract proposed by a governing body of which he was a part? Characteristically, Peter stood firm:

'I was called into the Principal's office, and I was told that as a governor I was subject to Cabinet responsibility. That's to say that if the governors took a decision, I had to support that decision... [b]ut my line was that I was elected by my members, I therefore have a mandate.⁴

The years following incorporation were filled with conflict between staff and employers. By 1997, aged only 54, he was suddenly given a once-and-for-all opportunity to take early retirement without losing out on his existing pension rights, which he took. In recognition of all his efforts to defend our pay and conditions, the branch unanimously elected Peter Honorary Life President (the only one to date). He then headed for his beloved France for the summer, but later said that 'after I had finished painting the fence, pruning the trees, I

began to think: “Who am I? I used to be a lecturer and a trade unionist, I knew who I was. Now I’m not really anybody”.⁵

Returning home, Peter was ready to embark on a new phase of political activism, as a Labour councillor in North Tyneside, where he served for six years. Although he chaired one of its select committees and spent a year as a member of the cabinet, he downplayed how effective he had been, talking instead of the endless meetings. Predictably, his involvement in community affairs did not begin and end with his council duties. He was involved with Wallsend People’s Centre for fourteen years and was especially proud of its work with immigrants and the unemployed. Later, he became an elected governor for Northumbria Healthcare Trust, joined the Management Committee of the Rising Sun Farm, served as a Governor at George Stephenson High School and played an influential role in the formation of North Tyneside Learning Trust. He became a humanist and represented a humanist perspective on the Council body which oversaw religious education in schools. He also did a stint as a humanist hospital chaplain, and had a longstanding association with the Alliance Francaise.

In case this makes him sound an impossibly worthy individual, Peter was also a very happy family man, sharing beliefs and activism with Judith McSwaine, his wife, and bestowing a sense of responsibility to society on his beloved daughter, Jo. He loved walking, with or without the dog, enjoyed travel and cultural pursuits, endured Newcastle United’s fortunes, and had a wide circle of friends from many different walks of life. He was always self-deprecating about the positive impact he had on so many people.

In 2015, Peter was diagnosed with myeloma, a type of blood cancer whose treatment involves cruel side effects. Despite a period of remission, the disease returned and he died on 13 June 2018. Attendance at his funeral was so large that mourners, who had flocked from near and far, filled both chapels at North Shields crematorium and overflowed into the lobby. The remarkable range of Peter’s political activities, which continued well past retirement, mean that his absence is a great loss to our region as well as a profound personal one to his family and friends.

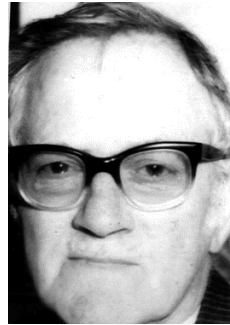
Notes

- ¹ A transcript of this interview can be found on the NELHS website: <http://nelh.net/resources-library/oral-history/oral-history-political-organisations/oral-history-political-organisations-peter-latham/> (henceforth Transcript) ([accessed 23 May 2020]
- ² A very useful account of the drive towards incorporation of the FE sector can be found in AB Webster, 'English Further Education Policy up to 1993: the changing roles of central and local government and local FE consequences', unpublished MPhil thesis (Coventry University in association with the University of Worcester, 2012), pp.167-200 https://eprints.worc.ac.uk/1607/1/A_B_Webster_MPhil_2012.pdf ([accessed 22 May 2020]
- ³ As above, p.172.
- ⁴ Transcript.
- ⁵ Transcript.

Terry MacDermott 1922-2020

Archie Potts

Terry MacDermott, who died on 29 January 2020 at the age of 77, was one of the four people who formed a steering committee that launched the North East Labour History Group in 1966. He was the organisation's first Treasurer and Business Manager from 1966 to 1977, and handled the distribution and sale of the new Society's Bulletin. He did this so well that the Bulletin made a profit, which was ploughed back into the Society's funds.



He then served as Chair from 1977 to 1982, and in 2017 was honoured for his services by being elected a Vice President of the Society.

A requiem mass for Terry was held at St Robert's Roman Catholic Church in Fenham, Newcastle, on 20 February 2020, followed by a wake at Tyneside Irish Centre in Gallowgate. Both were well attended, and included a number of relatives who had travelled from Northern Ireland to attend Terry's funeral.

Terry was born in the village of Draperstown, County Derry, in 1922, and attended local schools and technical college. After college he worked as a clerk for the Ulster Road Transport Board, and became an active trade unionist. He enrolled at Queen's University, Belfast as a mature student, and after graduating came to Tyneside in 1964 as a tutor-organiser for the

Workers' Education Association (WEA). He established close links with local trade unions and was commissioned by Newcastle and District Trades' Council to write a history of trade unionism on Tyneside published in 1965 as *Centuries of Conflict*, and in 1973 he co-authored (with J. F. Clarke) a centenary history of Newcastle and District Trades Council. After thirteen years with the WEA he was appointed to a lectureship in industrial relations at Newcastle Polytechnic, where he taught on courses for trade unionists and managers.

Terry was born into an Irish Nationalist family and never lost his desire to see a united Ireland. He was active in the Tyneside Irish Centre and was its Chair from 1986 to 1993. He registered for a higher degree at Newcastle University researching the topic of the Irish on Tyneside. However due to other commitments and declining health his thesis was never completed. The results of his research are to be deposited at the Tyneside Irish Centre. He was also active in the Newcastle Labour Party and served for several years as a magistrate.

After his retirement, Terry and his wife Eileen moved to the Irish Republic, but the lure of Newcastle proved too strong and they returned to live in Fenham. Terry underwent several major operations over the years but pulled through to reach the ripe old age of 97. He then suffered a series of strokes and died in hospital on 29 January 2020.

Terry MacDermott; a personal tribute

John Stirling

Like many others, I have a lot of reasons to be thankful to Terry McDermott. In my own case, Terry gave me a job and a new life in the North East. I came for an interview at Newcastle Poly in 1979, and Terry was on the panel. He was kind and thoughtful in his questioning of a young man who had never had a full-time teaching job in his life, and he took a chance on me. I joined the team he was creating space for at a time when trade union education took place in the Colleges not the Polys. Terry's commitment shone through. He'd make sure the doors were open to trade unionists where others thought they had no place.

There was also Jenny Beale - and Terry must have been one of the first in the country to appoint a woman trade union tutor. Doug Miller came next, and we all benefited from Terry's commitment to teaching and his good fellowship. He soon had us all in the Society of Industrial Tutors, and travelling off to conferences with him at the wheel. He made sure we learnt from what was going on nationally and helped us to meet the people who were writing the books we were using.

We had to teach managers too in those days, but for Terry this was not a chore but a challenge and an opportunity. Who better to go into those classrooms than committed trade unionists? Terry's achievement in creating a trade union studies group in a Polytechnic was a rare one, as was his far-sighted commitment to equal opportunities in practice as well as words. Most of all though, I shall remember his kindness and his nurturing

north east history

of a group of colleagues who, like me, benefited both from his commitment and his good company. Thanks from all of us, Terry Mac.

My Friend Jack Common 1903 – 1968

Keith Armstrong

Introduction

Jack Common was born in Heaton in 1901 the son of a railway worker. He is best known for two fine novels, *Kiddar's Luck* (1951) and *The Ampersand* (1954), both based on his early life. He had left Newcastle in the early 1930s to work on a literary magazine *The Adelphi*. He was befriended by George Orwell who after reading Common's books of essays, *The Freedom of the Streets and Seven Shifts* (both 1938) wrote that he was, 'the authentic voice of the ordinary working man, the man who might infuse a new decency into the control of affairs if only he could get there, but who in practice never seems to get much further than the trenches, the sweatshop and the jail'.

Jack died in 1961. Tyneside poet, Keith Armstrong researched Common's life for his PhD at Durham. In 2009, he published a biography of Jack, *Common Words and the Wandering Star*. (Available from Northern Voices Community Projects, 35, Hillsden Road, Whitley Bay, Tyne and Wear NE25 9XF, £10).

Ever since the sixth form,
when I found you,
a kindred Novocastrian
in a library book,
I seem to have followed in your steps,
stumbled after you
in rain soaked lanes,
knocked on doors
in search of your stories.
For over forty years,
I have tracked
the movement of your pen
in streets you walked
and on cross country trains
from your own Newcastle
to Warrington
Malvern,
Newport Pagnell,
Letchworth,
Yetminster,
Wallington
and back again.
I have given talks about you,
supped in your pubs,
strode along your paragraphs
and river paths
to try to find
that urge in you
to write
out of your veins
what you thought of things,
what made you tick

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and your loved ones
laugh and cry.
I tried to reach you in a thesis,
to see you as a lad in Heaton,
but I could never catch your breath
because I didn't get to meet you
face to face,
could only guess
that you were like me:
a kind of kindly
socialist writer
in a world
too cruel for words.

North East Labour History Society



Reviews - Secretary's Report -
Constitution and Membership Form -
The Sid Chaplin Labour History Trophy

Reviews

Sophie Scott-Brown, *The Histories of Raphael Samuel: A Portrait of a People's Historian* (Sydney, ANU Press 2017. Pbk, 265p, illus., £39) ISBN 9781760 460365

Raphael Samuel (1934-1996) is a major figure in British socialist and labour history writing. This is the first major study of his work and intellectual career and it is an important reflection too on historiography and the practice of history from the left. The author is an Australian academic working in Britain. She has provided a thorough study of Samuel's output as an historian, teacher, organiser and activist and alongside this uses formal interviews, correspondence and conversations with those who knew him through Ruskin teaching, the History Workshop movement or his many other activities.

She produces a detailed chronological examination of the factors driving what she calls 'the development of his historical imagination' over four decades. As a young Communist Samuel had an early association with the CP Historians' Group and its members - such as Thompson, Hill, Hobsbawm, and Dona Torr - were an important influence on him. Having left the CP in 1956 he emerged as an influential figure in the British New Left in the nineteen- sixties. He supported its rejection of reductionist explanations of the relations between social conditions and consciousness, be they from Marxism or from sociological modelling.

Samuel is well-known as the organising force behind the History Workshop movement initially based in Ruskin College. As history tutor there he sought to empower students to be producers of their own history, supporting them to research using primary sources instead of teaching the conventional courses he found there. Samuel constantly advocated

democratising the writing of history, building new constituencies for research outside the academy as an enactment of political principle. His former students from Ruskin include not only well-known academics and politicians but also trade union and community activists.

Scott-Brown traces the development of Samuel's own working methods through his publications at this time: his sifting and interpreting different sources of evidence, drawing oral history and living memory into wider networks of connections after substantial documentary research. *History Workshop: a journal for socialist historians* – later, in the political trajectory of the time, *a journal for socialist and feminist historians* – emerged from this in 1976. The book demonstrates what a broadly-based initiative this was before the journal was eventually taken down a purely academic path. It covers too what virtually became a 'culture war' as the methods and products of History Workshop came under critique from those adopting the structuralist Marxism associated with Louis Althusser in the later 1970s.

She has an interesting thesis about *Theatres of Memory*, the only solo-authored book Samuel was to publish during his lifetime. This collection of themes displays Samuel's fascination with popular life in all its aspects and not just the class struggle focus traditionally associated with socialist history. Her argument is that the absence of an explicit narrative line for these wide-ranging essays on aspects of popular memory is a tactic. It is intended to involve the reader as an active participant in how memory is shaped, and the historian as the enabler of a more democratic practice of history.

I found this a very stimulating book to read but a very awkward one to review. At every turn I found it very difficult to feel I could do justice to Sophie Scott-Brown's arguments, such are their scholarship, command of their subject and analytical focus. I can thoroughly recommend *The Histories of Raphael Samuel* to those interested in his work, the relations between left politics and historiography, and the practice of labour and social history from below.

Don Watson

Les Turnbull, ***The Railway Revolution. A Study of the Early Railways of the Great Northern Coalfield 1605-1830*** (NEIMME in association with The Newcastle upon Tyne Centre of the Stephenson Locomotive Society, 2019), 172pp. ISBN 978-0-9931151-5-8, £15.00 pbk, illus.

This well illustrated book, with no less than 165 figures, most of which are in colour, follows on from this author's previous volumes on the history of the Great Northern Coalfield: 'Coals from Newcastle (2009)', 'Railways Before George Stephenson' (2012), and 'The World of William Brown' (2016). Like these earlier books, this latest volume is well researched and offers much detailed analysis, as one might expect from someone with many years experience and knowledge of the archives and history of our regional coalfield.

Taking George Stephenson as his starting point, Les Turnbull sets out to demonstrate that any history of our region's pioneering role in giving railways to the world needs to recognize that railways were not a new technology in Stephenson's time, having been first developed as early as 1621 (Whickham), c1627 (Benwell), 1633 (Winlaton), and c1635 (Stella). These pioneering waggonways were driven by economic calculation and a desire to free the coal producers from reliance on the seasonal vagaries of local agriculture. Prior to the use of waggonways, coal transport had relied on carts and wains (4-wheeled wagons) drawn by horses and oxen, the latter especially important for acting as brakes during the steep descent to staiths on the Tyne, and often supplied by local farms, meaning that in certain months (harvest time, for example) they could be in short supply.

The adoption of 'the Waggon and the Way', the latter being the continuous length of timber rails on which wagons rode pulled by a horse, significantly reduced the costs associated with horses and drivers, whilst dispensing with the carts and wains previously hired from local farms. Turnbull illustrates the economics of this transport revolution through a detailed study of Whitley Colliery and its transport of coal to Cullercoats staith during the years it switched from wains to the waggonway, 1677/78

to 1690s. His detailed analysis of the number of contractors supplying carts and wains, and the volume of coal carried before and after the building of the waggonway c1680, convincingly demonstrates why collieries increasingly adopted this form of transport during these years.

Any volume about railways is inevitably a story of transport economics but Turnbull's book is much more than this, providing detailed examples of the labour required to operate these transport systems. Using evidence of maintenance contracts, the author details the numerous tasks involved in operating and maintaining these new waggonways, including the role of women employed as gatekeepers in controlling adjacent livestock. Thus, Widow Howborne on the Whickam Way and Widow Richardson on the Stella Grand Lease Way receive recognition alongside the waggoners, viewers, and colliery owners. Thomas Bewick's father, John, operated a landsale colliery on Mickley Moor in the early eighteenth century and Turnbull uses Bewick's memoirs to illustrate how the family unit assisted by local labourers was often typical of the numerous small mining enterprises throughout the Great Northern Coalfield in these early years. These case studies help to reveal aspects of life and labour in the early coal trade that tend to be overshadowed by studies of the larger, more permanent enterprises of the nineteenth century.

The staiths at Stella were a particularly important shipping point for the horse drawn waggonways. The Hedley Fell or Risemoor waggonway extended over eight miles to connect numerous pits to staiths at both Ryton and Stella. Where coal outcropped near the surface, the cost of sinking the pits was small, and thus carriage costs loomed much larger, given the distance inland from the Tyne. The author calculates the number of times per day that wagons would have travelled on the new permanent way during those months of the year when good weather allowed maximum use of the rails, concluding that in the early 1700s this could be 76 return trips each day that a coal train, loaded or empty used the rails, every five minutes for twelve hours! This was not a sleepy rural branch line but a busy industrial railway.

The book is divided into two parts; the first describing what Turnbull calls 'The First Railway Revolution' with case studies in the Newcastle area in addition to those already mentioned. The second part provides a directory of over eighty examples of early railways in the Northumberland and Durham region built between 1605 and 1830. The well preserved remains of the Willington Way, discovered in 2013, provides a useful appendix. The book is indexed and there are citations to original sources throughout.

Mike Greatbatch

Dan Jackson, *The Northumbrians: North-East England and Its People, A New History*, London, 2019, (264 pages), hb £20.

Several modern writers have attempted to tell the story of the northern region over time. Most have imposed their own restriction on this daunting task. The most scholarly attempt was Norman McCord's who started his account at 1000 AD leaving the previous millennium to other specialists. Others including Middlebrook, and the journalists, David Bean, Alistair Moffit and George Rosie restricted themselves to focussing on Newcastle upon Tyne with other parts of the region treated as satellites of the main town. They all have their merits with McCord's book inviting future scholars to build on his work to pursue their own interests. He came to his book towards the end of his career referencing his own previous big book and more than a dozen specialist articles.

In his first book Dan Jackson takes up the challenge of writing a one volume history of Northumbria starting his account before the Romans and closing with the implications of Brexit. No geographical area is left out and no topic falls beyond his remit. The expected role of the Percys sits alongside an account of Paul Gascoigne trying to act as intermediary with the police fugitive, Raoul Moat.

Dan seeks to create a portrait of an ideal Northumbrian shaped by the geographical space in which he or she lives tempered by conflict, climate, migration, language, gender and social class. He organises his material in five themed chapters and a concluding one which sums up the story. He is no outsider from another country but a participant observer. This comes out most strongly in the chapter entitled *The Sparta of the North*. I did wonder if this was a sly reference to Dan Smith's 1960s, motorway city, *The Venice of the North*. This point aside, Jackson is at his best taking us on an intimate journey from North Shields to Tynemouth and along the coast through Whitley Bay to Delaval Hall, Seaton Sluice and New Hartley. This was his childhood and teen-age playground. I find a degree of sentimentality easy to forgive because he writes with real knowledge, feeling and perception. These coastal settlements are treated as places of independence not, as is common, adjuncts of the big city. There are twenty pages here of fine writing, facts and dry humour. Here he puts the Duke of Northumberland in his place,

“First, the cheerfully Jacobean Master-Mariners’ Homes, put up in 1837 As a sort of retirement complex for grizzled matelots. ‘Northumberland knows no Prince but a Percy’, and the family are still the major landowners in these parts. As such the Mariners’ Homes are arranged obsequiously round a rather rum looking statue of its benefactor, the 4th Duke of Northumberland ---but it’s a great treat to observe that, on closer inspection, His Grace is wearing what can only be described as frilly hot-pants.”

At several points in the book Jackson deals with the more sober history of coal mining and pitmen the once firm base of the region. He reminds us of the wanton and often cruel power of the coal barons like Londonderry, the solid and largely conservative resistance fostered by the Northumberland and Durham Miners Associations and the shocking numbers of pitmen lost

below ground. Yet here at Earsdon church yard close to New Hartley, his own childhood home, he personalises it with a fragment of the list on the monument, 'Ts Wanless, aged 19; Jn Sharp, aged 13 Wm Liddle, aged 10 ---and its doleful inscription 'In the Midst of Life We Are in Death.'

Some readers might want to dispute part of Jackson's thesis. In locating his Northumbrian he perhaps places too much impact on the inheritance of the raw and climatic physical space and the centuries of border conflict across a shifting border, if usually along the river Tweed and between groups, families, tribes and factions on both sides. Apparently this fed directly into the role of military manners and practices in north east history. I am not entirely convinced that this made the region's people different from the people of South Wales, Lancashire and South Yorkshire. The people of each of these regions had similar histories at least from the emergence of the industrial age in the 18th Century. Each of them delivered thousands of young men into military service in war and pursuit of Empire, into factory and mine and latterly into a de-industrialised world. Each had their variations of popular culture and all arrived via cinema and TV into the bland digital age.

Having said that however nothing should detract from enjoying and savouring this book for its rich story telling backed up by an extraordinary culling of references. Dan Jackson seem to have read everything. He is happy with Latin inscriptions, pitmatic, popular song---ancient and modern, poetry, fiction, mass media and effortlessly enrolls them all to produce a book well worth reading.

The book has only 264 pages and is well written yet it takes a long time to read. A more generous font size would have helped. Otherwise it has an attractive cover which will certainly aid its sales. Mention should be made of the illustrations. There are over 70, some unfamiliar, some taken by the author himself including the excellent one of his great grandfather in his pit clothes opposite page 206.

John Charlton

Deborah Smith, *The James Losh Diaries 1802-1833: Life and Weather in Early Nineteenth Century Newcastle-upon-Tyne* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2019) xiii 320pp. ISBN 978-1-5275-314-7, illus., £64.99hbk.

James Losh should not be an unknown figure to most of the members of the North East Labour History Society, for his toga-clad statue stands at the head of the first flight of stairs leading up to the library at the Lit and Phil in Newcastle, an organisation of which he was a leading member and with which we have close connections. Selections from Losh's social and political diaries were published by the Surtees Society under the editorship of Edward Hughes as long ago as the 1950s. These throw light on his liberal stance on parliamentary reform and other contemporary issues and have been widely used by historians, but his weather diaries have largely escaped public notice until the present study.

James Losh was the second son of a large gentry family whose seat at Woodside near Carlisle is described by Welford in *Men of Mark* as 'a centre of exploration into agriculture and chemistry'. The maternal link to the Liddell family of Ravensworth and business association with the 9th Earl Dundonald brought three of the brothers over to industrial Tyneside, but James came to Newcastle as a lawyer.

The editor reproduces an early fragmentary weather diary, covering a few months in 1787, before Losh moved to Newcastle which shows that his interest was long standing. His regular records, however, only appear to start from the beginning of 1802 when he was settled in his long term home at the Grove in Jesmond, on an estate now part of Jesmond Dene.

Dr Smith is ideally placed to make scientific sense of what is mainly descriptive material, having been engaged in historic climate research as a geographer for the best part of forty years. This means that alongside accounts of snow storms or spring sunshine in places still recognisable on Tyneside today, there are tables and graphs putting the data into perspective. A comprehensive introduction and explanatory footnotes provide a useful context. Agricultural improvement and landscape gardening had been in

vogue among country gentlemen for much of the eighteenth century and the government-sponsored Board of Agriculture set up in 1793 published county-wide accounts of good farming practice, notably in 1805 a combined volume on Northumberland and Cumbria. Losh does not mention these, although he does note that agricultural improvement had enabled food production to keep pace with population increase.

The diaries cover both the later years of the war with France, when Napoleon tried to enforce a continental blockade and domestic food production was at a premium, and the immediate post-war years when an ineffectual government tried to cope with the unprecedented readjustments of the economy and society required after a quarter-century of war. This is reflected in the diaries by Losh's attention to the impact of the weather on food crops particularly cereals and forage for animals. Losh clearly had a well-stocked kitchen garden but also a small farm. Although he came of a landowning family, in his generation it had invested heavily - and not always successfully - in Tyneside industry. He knew that high food prices made for industrial unrest, and that the profits made by landowners during the war could not be sustained in peacetime once foodstuffs could be imported again. One of the few non-horticultural comments that he makes repeatedly is against the Corn Law, introduced in 1815 to protect the landed interest by banning the import of corn until the price reached 80s a quarter. Whether this is a reflection of his social conscience or of his awareness of his family's industrial interests is not clear. He and his brothers seem to have had some sympathy with the early aspirations of the French revolution and in James' case this was reflected in his espousal of Unitarianism, in many ways the British version of the rationalism that underpinned that movement. It is tantalising to wonder where this move to Unitarianism had its source for it does not seem to have been shared by the rest of the family but was very strong in the Lit. and Phil.

This diary offers a window on something that occupies our attention even more today than it did then. We know so much more about it and yet there is so much that we recognise about the vagaries of Tyneside weather

in these accounts. It is a sobering thought, however, that the industries that the Losh brothers and their successors embraced so enthusiastically can be at least partly blamed for our current climate plight.

Win Stokes

Sorry We Missed You a film directed by Ken Loach

Sorry We Missed You is an excellent film, well worthy to be part of the Ken Loach canon. It is well-made, well-acted, empathetic, full of insight and unremitting. By its end, it is clear that the gig economy is not only unfair and exploitative, but also inhuman and cruel. It follows the format that Ken Loach has used so well, that of gaining insight into an unfair issue or a system by following an individual or family as they experience it. From *Cathy Come Home* in 1966 to the present, Ken Loach has shown us the outcomes of so many issues by presenting them through the eyes of characters who are very human and, in many ways, ordinary. In *Sorry We Missed You*, the viewer follows the Turner family as they experience a life dominated by the gig economy. The hypocrisy of self-employment, the long, long hours, the punitive measures used by the masters of the gig economy and the struggle to get out of debt. What the film makes clear is that it is not only the workers who suffer under this system but their families as well and ultimately the community. Like most of the films made by Ken Loach you are left feeling angry or in some cases in tears.

As I was leaving the cinema I heard a woman in front of me say, 'That is such a powerful film, everyone should get to see it', which begs the question - why is it that the films by Ken Loach are not blockbusters, seen by most of the cinema audience? It is a similar question to the one posed by Martin Scorsese, who asked why the American cinema audience was faced with an unending assembly line of superhero or rom-com films while those with serious subjects struggle to find funding or audiences. For

Scorsese the answer lay with the mighty dollar and the drive for profits. A better answer can be found in Antonio Gramsci's ideas about the way that the economic base of society is held in place by a superstructure of thought which strengthens the values of the base, and that a society based on capitalism will have a structure of thought and culture which will bolster the capitalist economy. In societies which boast of being liberal democracies, dissidence is allowed and it is in this arena of dissidence that the films of Ken Loach survive. I would argue that Ken Loach is perhaps the greatest British filmmaker of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries but that in a world of celebrity, quick bucks and chewing gum culture he will always be relegated to being a niche producer. To finish on a cliché, he is 'preaching to the choir'.

Peter Brabban

Sylvia Topp, *Eileen: The Making of George Orwell*, (Unbound, 2020)
ISBN 978-1783527083, 560pp hbk £20

Eileen O'Shaughnessy was George Orwell's first wife. She was born in South Shields in 1905, and died in Newcastle upon Tyne after a botched hysterectomy. She is buried in West Jesmond Cemetery. Although she has a Wikipedia entry, she has not been the subject of a biography until this year.

Little of Orwell and Eileen's correspondence had survived which contributed to the difficulties of producing a biography of her. Topp spotted the potential in a cache of letters Eileen exchanged with a friend, Norah Myles discovered in 2005. Written between 1936 - 1941 they cover the period from her marriage to Orwell until her early death at the age of 39.

Topp had loved 'Keep the Aspidistra Flying' as a young woman. Learning that the character of Rose had probably been based on Eileen left her with an intense desire to know who this woman was.

The future Eileen Blair came originally from South Shields but spent

most of her adult life away from the North East. With a degree in English Literature and a Masters from London University (taken whilst she was running a Typewriting Bureau to earn a living), she was contemplating a career as a writer and an educational psychologist when she met Orwell at a party. Within the year she had decided to devote herself to the furtherance of his career, continuing to provide financial and intellectual support (as well as typing and editing services) to both Orwell and her beloved brother.

It was inevitable that a biography of Eileen O'Shaughnessy would also turn out to be a biography of Eric Blair, the man we mostly think of as George Orwell. In a way it's helpful to separate the two men: that way I might be able to hang onto my admiration for the latter. Sadly, the Orwell who emerges from this tale is not likeable in either of his identities: a sexual predator whose self-absorbed pursuit of his own agenda was only possible because of his wife's sacrifices.

'End of the Century, 1984' was the title of a poem she wrote in the early 30's as the shadow of fascism advanced. *'She feared that the world of scholarship and cultural life that she so loved – represented by some interesting choices of writers in the poem – was being destroyed by the designs of men she abhorred'* (p. 83). There is something familiar in that title. Sylvia Topp makes the point even more explicit when it comes to 'Homage to Catalonia'.

Orwell had originally written a more traditional essay criticising Stalin and totalitarianism, an unpopular subject at that moment, since Stalin was helping the Allies defeat Hitler. Doreen told her son Quentin that 'Eileen had suggested rewriting the work as an allegory when the issue of Stalin as an ally made it difficult for his publisher in the original format. (p. xvii)

One of the strengths of Topp's book is that she recognises that and is content to use her sources (letters between Eileen and her friends) to give us a rounded picture of the two protagonists and their relationship.

But there is one element missing from this ‘warts and all’ portrait of the Blairs and their time: politics. Both Orwell and Eileen come across as driven by moral rather than political imperatives. Which is odd because other sources tell us that this was an important and shared element of their life together. Eileen too went to Spain, for example, working as secretary to the ILP in Barcelona and running enormous risks when the crackdown on POUM occurred in June 1937.

Of course, Orwell was a great writer, albeit one whose viewpoint was sometimes limited. Eileen’s role is now hard to determine though Orwell himself did acknowledge it. And little of her own creative output survives. Her correspondence makes it clear that she was a willing partner in this writing enterprise. Sylvia Topps’s detailed research allows us now to see just how real that partnership was.

Rosie Serdiville

Steven King, ***Writing the Lives of the English Poor 1750s-1830s***
(McGill-Queens University Press 2019) ISBN 978-0-7735-5649-2
463pp.pbk £27. 99p

King is Professor of Economic and Social History at Leicester University. The foundation work for the book was his doctorate in 1989, when he found a set of pauper letters for the area around Calverley in West Yorkshire. Using almost 26,000 paupers’ and advocates’ letters and the correspondence of overseers in 48 counties, he now shows how the poor claimed, extended and defended their parochial allowances.

Under the Poor Law introduced from 1597, applicants had the right of appeal to the magistrates or the Quarter Sessions. The Settlement Acts reduced the ability of the poor to seek support in areas that were more generous. The system remained largely discretionary, and was ‘an essentially local system in which the looseness and ambiguity of the law created an

absolute necessity for negotiation' (p. 4). Claimants' letters show that 'Poor people knew the stipulations of the Old Poor Law, contested and disputed refusals to engage in negotiation, wrote in sustained fashion to develop their case and shape the support attached to it, and pulled every lever they could to gain and maintain relief' (p. 11).

However, under the new Poor Law from the 1830s the use of local negotiation faded, replaced by writing to the central authorities. The 1834 Poor Law generated a massive poor law union correspondence held at TNA in records series MH12 and brought to public notice by the Living the Poor Life Project (2008-10) headed by Paul Carter, which continues the story beyond the dates set by Professor King,

'The New Poor Law inherited a body of the poor with agency and the expectation of agency, with rights and the expectation of rights, with very considerable experience of shaping the system to which they were subject. This situation, above all, explains why its ideals were so quickly diluted in the 1840s. When those ideals were revived under the crusade against outdoor relief in the 1870s and 1880s, the deeply ingrained tradition of advocacy for the poor was also revived, and this last great experiment in poor law policy collapsed. Negotiation and malleability were, and were meant to be the central planks of poor law policy right up to the 1920s' (p. 353).

The pace of letter writing increased in the 1810s, which King links to growing migration, urbanisation, and industrial and agricultural change. Most letters were in an oral rather than a grammatical style. His work confirms the view that the 'labouring poor were probably much more literate than has often been supposed or researched' (p. 56). In support of this, he cites Lyons, 'Writing Upwards: How the Weak Wrote to the Powerful'.¹

Very few sources are cited from the North East. For Northumberland, King draws from the three of EP series of records at Northumberland Record Office: Ancroft St Anne overseers' correspondence, Tynemouth select vestry minutes 1827-33, and Tweedmouth overseers' correspondence. None are cited from the same series at Durham, County Record Office where there is surprisingly little relevant material.

Among the examples from the area, the Durham overseer wrote on behalf of the widowed Catherine Thompson to Berwick-upon-Tweed in May 1830 noting 'that she was "unable to maintain herself at her advanced age (70) and her son who is with her from the poor wages which are made here is scarcely able to Maintain himself.'

James Rutherford in Livenhope wrote (date not given) to Ancroft St Anne on behalf of Margaret Nelson aged 84/5, who was 'unable to Rise out of Bed or do the least Thing herself'. He said that 'you Cannot Expect her to be supported' by a 'Daughter having the Bondage to uphold' (p. 286). John Pratt Sr wrote from Durham to Tweedmouth (date not given) 'you will forgive my freedom in troubling you at this time - believe me its from real necessity- My helplessness and many infirmities increasing daily – and I am a greater burden to those I staywith – and theybeing much in the same circumstances Oblidges me too solicit your favours for a small addition to my Mite. In doing so you will much oblige Your Humble Petitioner' (p. 177).

There is clearly scope for a project to examine the lives of the poor in the Northumberland and Durham EP records. It could shed light on the political dynamics of the different parishes, and on whether there were differences in negotiating the system in the agricultural, industrial and fishing communities. As well as the extent of literacy.

Sean Creighton

¹ Journal of Social History 48(2), 2015

Secretary's Report

The Society's membership now stands at 161 with another 125 people on our mailing list. Unfortunately, our programme of meetings came to a halt with the lockdown engendered by the coronavirus crisis in the middle of March but until then the talks and events organised during the year were:

10 September – *Stephenson, Spence and Eldon: a fateful triangle. Did climate change start here?* John Charlton (at the Annual General Meeting)

1 October – *Nails, Chains & Revolution, Crowley's 'Semi-socialistic experiment' in 18th Century Winlaton*, Susan Lynn

5 November – *Foodbank Histories*, Silvie Fisch

17 November – *Rewinding the Welfare State*, a film show and discussion led by Ben Lamb of Teesside University at the Star and Shadow cinema in Heaton held in conjunction with the North East Film Archive

7 January – *William Parker: A Chartist Life*, Mike Greatbatch

4 February – *'Socialists and the Drama': The Dodds sisters and the Gateshead Progressive Players between the Wars*, Don Watson

3 March – *History of the NUT in the North East*, Peter Sagar

We subsequently held a Zoom meeting on The General Election of 1931: Local politics and society in the early Thirties led by John Charlton on 19 May and we expect to hold an online discussion with Nigel Todd on Back in '83: A General Election Revisited on 21 July.

The New Year social took place in Newcastle on 14 January with entertainment provided by Jack Burness and the annual history quiz set by Peter Brabban.

This issue of *North East History* has been produced by the Editorial Board who are Patrick Candon (Editor), Sue Ward, Liz O'Donnell, Win Stokes,

John Stirling, John Charlton and Peter Brabban. The Society wishes to record its thanks for their work in exceptional circumstances.

We are also grateful to Peter Nicklin for his continued work on the Society's website and to Liz O'Donnell for her promotion of the North East Labour History page on Facebook which now has over 800 followers.

The Sid Chaplin Essay Prize for 2019 was awarded to India Gerritsen, a student at Newcastle University, for her dissertation, *"Memory Lingers Here": Are Newcastle's Monuments Sites of Collective Memory?* with the presentation being made by Grahame Chaplin.

In February we expressed our concern at the proposed closure of the History Department and some Humanities courses at the University of Sunderland.

The Society has joined the British Association For Local History.

We note with sadness the death of Terry McDermott who was a founding member of the Society and one of our Vice-Presidents, an appreciation of his life appears in this Journal.

David Connolly

Officers:

President:	Archie Potts
Vice President:	Maureen Callcott
Chair:	John Creaby
Vice Chair:	Kath Connolly
Treasurer:	Judith McSwaine
Secretary:	David Connolly
Journal Editors:	Patrick Candon, Sue Ward, Liz O'Donnell, Win Stokes, John Stirling, John Charlton and Peter Brabban

Committee Members:

Brian Bennison (Gosforth)
Peter Brabban (Newcastle)
Patrick Candon (Tynemouth)
John Charlton (Newcastle)
Mike Greatbatch (Newcastle)
Steve Grinter (Wylam)
Lynda MacKenzie (Newcastle)
Peter Nicklin (Newcastle)
Liz O'Donnell (Gosforth)
John Stirling (Morpeth)
Win Stokes (Tynemouth)
Don Watson (North Shields)

How to contact the Society

Email: secretary@nelh.org

Write to: David Connolly, 1 Exeter Close, Great Lumley,
Chester-le-Street DH3 4L J

Constitution of The North East Labour History Society

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 AGM shall be held open to all members of the Society. Organisations that are members of the Society shall carry one vote only at the AGM

Subscriptions:

The annual subscription shall be determined at the AGM 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 AGM.

Dissolution

- a. If the members resolve to dissolve the Society the members of the Committee will remain in office as such and will be responsible for winding up the affairs of the Society.

- b. The Committee shall collect in all the assets of the Society and pay or provide for payment of all the liabilities of the Society.
- c. The Committee shall apply any remaining assets or money of the Society:
 - i. directly for the objects of the Society;
 - ii. by transfer to any other society having the same or similar to the objects of the Society;
- d. In no circumstances shall the net assets of the Society be paid to or distributed among the members of the Society.

Officers and committee:

The business of the Society shall be conducted by a Committee composed of 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 AGM. 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 AGM and not subject to re-election. There shall be one or more Vice Presidents elected at the AGM and not subject to re-election. The President and Vice President(s) shall be ex officio members of the Committee with full voting rights.

Journal:

The Society shall publish an annual journal, *North East History*. The Committee shall appoint the Editor/s of the Journal. The Editor/s shall report to the Committee on matters affecting the production of the Journal.

Changes to the Constitution:

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

The Sid Chaplin Labour History Trophy



Past winners

1988	Kit Pearce	2007	Candice Brockwell
1989	Elaine Knox	2008	Ruth Blower
1990	Sylvia Clark	2009	Rob Doherty
1991	Martin Searles	2010	David Reed
1992	David Ridley	2011	Deborah Smith
1993	Pauline Lynn	2012	James English
1994	Kathleen Smith	2013	Aidan Harper
1996	Reg Brown	2014	Molly Courtice
1997	Angela Goldsmith	2015	Adam Woolley
2000	Robert Hope	2016	Leanne Carr
2004	Craig Turnbull	2017	Leanne Smith
2005	Craig Armstrong	2018	Joel Wootten
2006	Elsbeth Gould	2019	India Gerritsen

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 30th 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 £100 book token.

North East Labour History Society

Membership Form

Please complete all sections, ticking appropriately ✓.

1) Your details

Name

Address

.....

Post Code: Email:

2) Annual Subscription rate

Individual: £15 ☐ Students, unwaged: £7.50 ☐

Institution: £25 ☐

Please add £5 if international postage is required.

3) Payment method:

☐ Standing Order: I have completed a Standing Order Mandate which I have sent to my bank/enclose with this form.

☐ Cheque: I have written a cheque made payable to: North East Labour History Society and attach it securely to this form.

Send this form (and cheque or Standing Order Mandate, or both) to:

Judith McSwaine

Treasurer

12 Whitfield Road

Forest Hall

Newcastle upon Tyne

NE12 7LJ

North East Labour History Society

Standing Order Mandate

To the Manager

Bank
Address

I/we hereby authorise and request you to debit my/our

Account Name:

Sort Code:

Account Number

Amount £

Frequency Annually

beginning date: .../.../..... and, there after on .../....., each year until
you receive further notice from me in writing.

And Credit

Beneficiary	North East Labour History Society
Bank	Unity Trust Bank, plc
	Birmingham
Sort Code	60-83-01
Account No.	58254950

Signed Date

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North East History Volume 51

- **1931 Labour's defeat and North East England**
- **Back in '83: A General Election Revisited**
- **'Memory Lingers Here': Are Newcastle's Monuments Sites of Collective Memory?**
- **A Time of Heroes: How we will be remembering the International Brigaders from Stockton**
- **'Socialists and the Drama': The Dodds sisters and the Gateshead Progressive Players between the wars**
- **The Scammells are coming, hoorah, hoorah**
- **A passion for miners' welfare: two generations of Ashington's Minoughan family, 1872-1969**
- **Crowley's Crew: From Royalists to Radicals**
- **Experiences of place and loss at Newcastle West End Foodbank**
- **The Primrose League on Tyneside, 1883-1901**
- **Schools & Labour History**

Cover: General Election campaign, 1983. Denis Healey eating strawberries and enjoying good natured banter on Northumberland Street, Newcastle upon Tyne. Photograph courtesy Peter Brabban.



The north east history society holds regular meetings on a wide variety of subjects. A calendar of forthcoming events are updated on its website: www.nelh.net. Back copies of of journal articles from 2005 can be viewed online at: bit.ly/PastJournals. The society welcomes new members.

Journal of the North East Labour History Society

<http://nelh.net/>