

1. INTRODUCTION: HOW THIS PROJECT BEGAN

One of the most positive, and to outside observers most surprising, features of the Miners' Strike of 1984–5 was the emergence of the women and their support groups. This was all the more unexpected because some contemporary feminists, if they regarded the mining communities at all, saw them as one of the strongest surviving bastions of the dominant male. The miners, it was alleged, looked on themselves as archetypal working-class heroes, the harshness of their occupations making them tough and *macho*.¹ Therefore, by implication, it was assumed that their womenfolk must be subservient and submissive. Given these assumptions, it was a surprise, though a gratifying one, to see and to read about women on the picket lines, women collecting relief funds and organizing their distribution, women of their own accord setting up feeding centres and, most publicly, women speaking at rallies and other mass meetings. And, after it was all over, women publishing lively accounts of their experiences.

How was it that these women participated so prominently in the 'Great Strike'? What was it about the mining communities that produced such stalwart female champions of the beleaguered miners and their jobs? These were questions uppermost in my mind when, some years after it was all over, I began to think once again about the battling roles of these women and to search in their history for some of the sources of their strength. I started to look through the literature on mining communities, beginning with the massive, authoritative, semi-official series on the *History of the British Coal Industry*, only to find in Volume 4 (covering the years 1913 to 1946), which was published in 1987, that 'the detailed economic and social history of [the] women is still to be written'.² In the light of recent historical studies on women in various settings this absence of work on miners' wives seemed a major omission. Perhaps professional researchers, fully equipped with grants, computers, tape recorders and all the other tools of their trade have since 1987 begun to beaver away into the subject. While I can claim few of their analytical skills or resources and have only the dwindling energies of a pensioner, I have become absorbed in the task of searching out at least some of the historical factors which might throw light on the unusual strengths and capacities—and also the exceptional burdens—of miners' wives.

In order to reduce this essay to manageable proportions I have chosen to limit my researches to the period from 1900 up to the start of nationalization

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on 1 January 1947. Nationalization in itself did not mark for the women, any more than for the men, any sudden transformation in their lives but it was a part of the whole agglomeration of post-war reforms in health services, in education, in housing, in social security and, above all in the thirty-year elimination of mass unemployment which lifted working-class families, permanently it then seemed, out of the hardship and the poverty of the inter-war years. Women in the mining communities, who had even more than their husbands and children suffered from the deprivations of these years, shared in this general improvement in standards of living during the post-war era. They were also able, by use of public transport and later in their family cars, to get away for a time with their husbands from their often confining village environments to sample the experiences and life-styles of families elsewhere. For some, starting during the war and continuing in the 1950s and 1960s, the establishment of light industries on the fringes of many mining villages provided employment and a taste of the independence which earning confers. These developments, along with the increasing practice of the more effective means of contraception, tended to bring women in mining communities more into the mainstream of working-class economic and personal advancement. This partial assimilation over the last fifty years makes it more difficult to identify the unique influence of the mining environment on the women.

I have thus chosen to concentrate on the early half of the twentieth century, a period when the isolation of most mining villages was still almost complete. My credentials for undertaking this essay in social history are varied and perhaps unusual. For a start, I was brought up in the 1920s and 1930s in north Yorkshire in a Quaker household. Quakers, since their seventeenth-century origins, have always held a democratic belief in something of good in every man—and every woman—and have kept to the practice of treating women as the equals of men. The next strand in my upbringing was an early interest in socialism, 1930s style. My father, the manager of a family business, had (perhaps contrarily) joined in his student days the Independent Labour Party (ILP), and remained throughout his life committed to the left wing of the broader Labour Party. In my teens he introduced me to the Left Book Club and its publications and to Claud Cockburn's *The Week*, discussing their contents on Sunday afternoon walks along the cliffs near Scarborough. It was thus predictable that, going to college in October 1940 to study philosophy, politics and economics, I should join not only the Oxford University Labour Club but also the Communist Party. This introduction to Marxism has given me perspectives from which to view social forces and yielded insights into the significance of political and economic events in at least the capitalist world.

Towards the end of the war, caught up in the drive to help create a better planned and more equal society, I entered the budding profession of social research, assisting in town planning surveys in Middlesbrough and Bethnal Green, London, and later working on national studies of the maternity services and on demographic enquiries into marriage and family planning. Finding

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the processing and evaluation of statistical material somewhat arid, I simultaneously took on some extra-mural tutoring in modern British social history. For a few years in the mid-1960s I was a lecturer in Social Studies at Leeds University.

While at Leeds, and involved in the developing Peace Movement, I became a member of the Yorkshire District Committee of the Communist Party. It was in these circumstances that I met my future husband, Bill Carr, a miner. He had been recently widowed and was, at 57 years of age, still working underground, though as a National Union of Mineworkers' official at his pit and his branch's delegate to the Yorkshire Area Council of the NUM in Barnsley, he did not go underground every day. He was also one of the two Communist councillors on his local Thorne Rural District Council. We were married in March 1966 in the middle of the general election in which he stood as the Communist candidate for the local Goole constituency. We at first lived in his colliery house in Moorends, a pit village adjoining Thorne, eight miles north-east of Doncaster in south Yorkshire, and then moved to another house on the edge of the same village. For several years I continued part-time in social research work but found it increasingly difficult to integrate research activities twenty miles from home in a rarefied university atmosphere with the more down-to-earth demands of domestic life in Moorends. This dilemma became more acute after my husband was compelled, through ill-health, to retire prematurely from his pit and trade union work. Eventually I also retired and for a decade or more, which included the year of the Great Strike from 1984 to 1985, I stayed entirely within the setting of the mining village, learning through living more about the customs and personal histories of my relations, neighbours and friends.

After my husband's death in 1988, I embarked on this study. In doing so I have tried to bring together my belief in the equality of the sexes, my commitment to socialism and my experiences as a miner's wife. I have also used any skills I may still have in social research and social history. My documentary sources include the major histories of the coal industry, the miners' unions and some individual mining communities, also the chief studies of women's roles in working-class households. I have extracted some relevant material from statistical sources and, as Robert Colls has suggested, I have found it necessary to examine the impact of Poor Law, social security, housing and health policies on the women's lives.³ I do not claim to have trawled through all the appropriate documents, analytical, descriptive or statistical, on these subjects though I have attempted to examine the most important. While I have tried to observe some degree of academic objectivity, I intend to use only the minimum of pedantic paraphernalia which will be found in the list of references at the end of this book.

I have restricted my detailed historical inquiries into the mining communities of only two of the British coalfields, the north-east (i.e., Northumberland and Durham) and Yorkshire. This is because these are the areas in which my husband worked and for which I have in my memory much anecdotal

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and biographical material. He grew up in Newburn on the western outskirts of Newcastle and started at fourteen years of age in 1922 at the Maria Colliery at nearby Throckley. It was when he was seventeen years old that he and all his family and friends went through the ordeal of the General Strike and the miners' lock-out of 1926. He and some of his miner-relatives were black-listed and unable to return to their old jobs through having stayed out on their union's instructions for the whole of the seven months of the struggle. Most of the extended family moved to Yorkshire to find work and eventually he and several other relatives settled in Moorends, a pit village being built in the 1920s to house the incoming miners required to operate the newly-opened Thorne Colliery. Here, apart from a period of war service in the Royal Air Force followed by a year at Ruskin College, Oxford, he continued to work until the pit was closed in 1956 because of a very dangerous seepage of water into the shaft. Transferred to Bentley Colliery ten miles away on the northern outskirts of Doncaster, he continued to live, like many others similarly transferred, in the tightly knit community of Moorends. Following his retirement in 1969 he wrote a not yet published account of his life on Tyneside and in Yorkshire up to 1948. This manuscript has provided me with many insights into the pre-war years.

Of the older women in his family who lived through my period of study and into the 1960s, there were his aunt and his sister as well as cousins in Moorends and another aunt at Cudworth near Barnsley. The aunts and sisters of his first wife lived at Hemsworth near Wakefield. Nearly all of these women were married to miners. The same was true of his female relatives who remained in the north-east: one very favourite aunt lived at Ashington, a coal town near the Northumberland coast, and a half-sister lived at the village named Shotton Colliery near Durham City. Periodically, Bill and I visited these north-eastern relatives who welcomed us with that overwhelmingly warm and voluble hospitality which is as characteristic of the northerners as their lilting speech. On these visits it never crossed my mind to record their stories of earlier years. In the fullness of time most of these women have died but I have used many of their remembered experiences and anecdotes to flesh out and authenticate my study.

I have drawn too on the current efflorescence of older women's writings on their childhood and family circumstances in mining communities which have burgeoned in recent years. Examples from my chosen areas include Linda McCulloch Thew's *The Pit Village and the Store*, Adeline Hodges' *Up The Ladder* and Evelyn Haythorne's *On Earth to Make the Numbers Up*.⁴ These and other works like them help to illustrate the tribulations and triumphs I seek to understand. Nor are men's writings in a similar vein excluded!

I have found a remarkably fine model for the sensitive yet objective study which I have tried to undertake. This is Bill Williamson's *Class, Culture and Community*.⁵ Dubbed, I believe, by his Durham University colleagues 'his grandad project', it consists of an account of his miner-grandfather's life from 1872 to 1965 and the changing socio-economic forces which helped to

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shape it. Williamson has set his own and his relatives' recollections against the background of a Tyneside community and the Northumberland coal industry, drawing on diverse local reports and records to deepen his study. By a fortuitous coincidence the community it describes is Throckley, a part of the Urban District of Newburn where my husband grew up. Williamson's wide-ranging study has enormously helped me to devise my own researches. Another source of help and support has been Margaret Holderness. Her book, *The Changing Role of Women in South Yorkshire 1960-1980*,⁶ covers a period later than my own but her understanding of the subject has been invaluable. It was she who directed my attention to V. L. Allen's comment on the roles of women in mining communities. In his *Militancy of British Miners* he writes:

Mining families, centred around women, have functioned as vital elements in the organization of mining. In what might appear to be an incredibly uncanny fashion every detail of the immediate environment of the miners—their leisure, their homes, family relationships, wives and children—has served the structure of their existence, namely the provision of labour power with given skills in required quantities at the requisite times. Nothing and no one has been spared; no humanity has been allowed to intrude ... Wives have been adapted to meet the needs of mining as effectively as the miners themselves.⁷

This concept of women as an integral part of the mining industry (in spite of their exclusion from underground work since the 1840s) is the one which I intend to follow in this study. All I would question in the statement above is the phrase 'no humanity has been allowed to intrude'. In my experience and encounters the women in the coal communities have over the past century, against all the odds and despite the roles thrust upon them by a cruel industry, emerged time and again as some of the warmest and most valiant figures in an often desolate landscape. It is to their warmth, to their humanity and latterly to their continuing battle for a better life that I dedicate this book.